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**CULT AUTHOR VERSUS LITERARY CELEBRITY:
COMMENTARY OF AND ON JANET FRAME
AND MARGARET ATWOOD**

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**A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in English, The University of Auckland, 2011.**

ABSTRACT

‘Cult Author versus Literary Celebrity: Commentary of and on Janet Frame and Margaret Atwood’ is a comparative exploration of authorial commentary and the critical interaction with that commentary. The mythology that surrounds an author is a powerful force. It can affect and inform critical interpretations of their fiction. The way that authors participate in and attempt to shape their mythologies therefore has implications for the body of literary criticism that attaches to their work. This meta-critical study charts the nature and magnitude of the commentary produced by New Zealand author Janet Frame and Canadian author Margaret Atwood. It aims to investigate how each author has intervened as an active agent to mould the mythological discourse that surrounds them, and to examine the effect of each author’s commentary by ascertaining where it has influenced overarching critical narratives of their work. The use of the authors’ commentary as a critical tool is canvassed, as is critical reaction to the personae each author projects through their commentary.

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EPIGRAPH

I have designs on you, I'm plotting my sinister crime, my hands are reaching for your neck or perhaps, by mistake, your thigh. You can hear my footsteps approaching, I wear boots and carry a knife, or maybe it's a pearl-handled revolver, in any case I wear boots with very soft soles, you can see the cinematic glow of my cigarette, waxing and waning in the fog of the room, the street, the room, even though I don't smoke. Just remember this, when the scream at last has ended and you've turned on the lights: by the rules of the game, I must always lie.

Now: do you believe me?

— from 'Murder in the Dark', by Margaret Atwood.

INTRODUCTION

This study is a meta-critical investigation. It examines authorial commentary produced by Janet Frame and Margaret Atwood, and probes the impact of that commentary on critical renderings of their fiction. By commentary, I mean all forms of non-fiction; this includes book reviews, interviews and their transcripts, autobiographies, newspaper magazine and journal articles, open letters, critical texts, and any literary or critical theories the authors may have otherwise proffered. Co-operation with biographers will also be considered under this mantle. Specifically I am interested in how each author uses commentary as a tool to influence the mythology that surrounds them, and in the effectiveness of their attempts. I therefore investigate the personae that each author projects by way of their commentary, and evaluate how critics of their fiction respond to those personae, (if they respond at all). I also identify other significant critical reactions to the authors' commentary, particularly the use of the author's own terminology and concepts as frameworks for approaching their fiction. I am not looking at the effect of authorial commentary upon critical readings of particular fictional texts; my approach is broader, as I endeavour to locate influence upon overarching critical narratives or traditions. As a meta-critical project, this thesis is necessarily reference-heavy. In order to distil those overarching critical narratives it has been essential for me to canvass a large body of critical material: the very nature of an 'overarching narrative' or 'tradition' demands that the argument in question is recurrent or pervasive. The size of my footnotes is, therefore, testament to the existence of various patterns in the critical discourses pertaining to Frame and Atwood.

Further to considering the nature of authorial commentary and the impact of that commentary as it relates to critical accounts of each author's fiction, my project is also comparative in nature: it seeks to make connections and distinctions between the authors' attitudes and practices in respect of commentary, as well as between the respective critical engagements with that commentary. The value of this comparative approach is two-fold. The practice of one author and her critics provides context for the other, and as Atwood's seminal text *The Handmaid's Tale* shows us, 'Context is all'.¹ Context gives one the ability to elucidate authorial and critical practices. It is intended that examining each author in the context of the other will yield significant insights regarding the roles they cast for themselves, the way they

¹ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (USA: Anchor Books, 1998), p. 192.

position themselves, their interventions into the mythological discourse which surrounds them, and the critical response to all of these factors. Thus, for example, Atwood's prolific commentary (outlined in Chapter 1), which could otherwise be taken as standard for a writer, comes to bear that very label 'prolific' by way of contrasting it with Frame's lesser output. Likewise the confessional mode of Frame's autobiography highlights the absence of any real personal revelations in the autobiographical offerings of Atwood. Of course the inverse applies in each case: it is the contrast with Atwood's commentary that reveals Frame's commentary to be minimal, and intimate in nature. More general findings also emerge. For instance, in both Frame and Atwood studies, the critical insistence on reading each author's fiction in the terms provided by their own commentary (canvassed in Chapter 2) indicates a notable concern with the authority of the author, and even widespread deference to an author's critical voice. Further examples of the elucidation that results from using one author to contextualise the other will become apparent throughout the course of this thesis. This comparative approach can also strengthen or (conversely) pose challenges to accepted critical narratives pertaining to each author. For example, (as I will show in Chapter 2) there has been a tendency to set Frame apart from other authors, to view her as extraordinary and different; a comparative approach makes Frame less isolated. By considering connections between Frame's commentary and Atwood's commentary (especially regarding their views of themselves, and the personae that they project) and the effects that such commentary has upon critical accounts of their fiction, I am able to show that Frame is not the 'stream entire unto herself'² that some critics have taken her to be.

Janet Frame and Margaret Atwood are an irresistible pairing. Both are female authors whose fiction (novels, short stories and poetry) has appeared over the latter half of the 20th Century and the early years of the 21st Century. Both women hail from Western, predominantly white, settler societies. New Zealand and Canada are countries 'whose heritage is one of emigration and displacement':³ colonization forms an integral part of their history. This is reflected in the development of their literary criticism, which has followed a similar trajectory in both countries, moving towards a nationalist imperative in the earlier part of the 20th Century, and trafficking in postcolonial resistance in more recent decades.⁴ In terms of the place that

² Carole Ferrier, *The Janet Frame Reader* (London: The Women's Press Ltd, 1995), p. 11 (quoting Keri Hulme).

³ *Margaret Atwood, the essential guide*, ed. by Margaret Reynolds and Jonathan Noakes (London: Vintage, 2002), p. 9.

⁴ Lorna M. Irvine, *Critical Spaces: Margaret Laurence and Janet Frame* (USA: Camden House, 1995), p. xiii.

Frame and Atwood hold in the literary tradition of their respective countries, both women are generally considered to be among the founding, and preeminent, writers of fiction (especially of fiction by females). This is particularly notable given that 'both are women who established themselves as writers before the contemporary women's movement focused attention on women writers'.⁵ Looking to their fiction, both authors display an attention to artist figures, fairy-tales, folklore and mythology, and language, among other concerns. Moreover, both authors have produced experimental texts and conceptualise their fiction as exploratory: Frame's terming of her novels as 'explorations' is widely cited in Frame studies; less common (though not non-existent) is critical recognition of Atwood's view that 'writing is exploration'.⁶ Finally, both authors have (to their displeasure) had their texts read biographically. Such an approach may have grown out of the authors' shared strategy of filtering autobiographical details into their fiction, though other reasons for it exist (these are examined in Chapter 1).

Yet for all of the above (and especially despite their common status in their respective literary traditions) Frame and Atwood present a naturally intriguing juxtaposition of cult author and literary celebrity. Frame has an international reputation, and her name is well-known in New Zealand, yet actual readers of her fiction are relatively few. She is a 'writer for sophisticated literary readers',⁷ though even her appeal to such readers appears to be limited, as Frame studies is a relatively small academic field. Meanwhile the 'broader public has been more interested in her life than in the subtleties of her writing':⁸ Frame's personal story of incarceration and the surrounding mythology of the mad genius author, are what the general public know of her. Atwood, meanwhile, is firmly associated with her fiction: 'her name has become a rubric for what she has written, in the same way that Shakespeare and Austen stand for their canons more than for the man or woman behind them.'⁹ She is about as famous (both nationally and internationally) as a writer can get, attracting academic and general readers alike; Atwood studies is a large field, and her texts frequently appear on best-seller lists.

⁵ *Critical Spaces*, p. xiii.

⁶ 'A conversation: Margaret Atwood and Students. Moderated by Francis X. Gillen', in *Margaret Atwood, Visions and Forms*, ed. by Kathryn VanSpankeren and Jan Garden Castro (Carbondale/Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), pp. 233-246 (p.241). See also: *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*, ed. by Earl G. Ingersoll (New Jersey: Ontario Review Press, 1990), p. 195; Margaret Atwood, *Curious Pursuits: Occasional Writing* (London: Virago Press, 2006), p. 12.

⁷ C.K. Stead, *Book Self: The Reader as Writer and the Writer as Critic* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2008), p. 42.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁹ John Moss, 'Haunting Ourselves in Her Words', in *Margaret Atwood: The Open Eye*, ed. by John Moss and Tobi Kozakewich (Canada: University of Ottawa Press, 2006), pp. 1-7 (p. 5).

Atwood's celebrity status, and the existence of a narrative of Atwood as celebrity, is more fully explored in Chapter 2.

This compelling pairing of cult author Janet Frame and literary celebrity Margaret Atwood has been traversed in various ways by critics. Both Graham Huggan and Jenny Lawn have devoted whole articles to examining Frame and Atwood in a comparative framework.¹⁰ Unlike my current study, these critics concentrate on specific fictional texts: Huggan's article¹¹ looks at Atwood's *Surfacing* and Frame's *Scented Gardens for the Blind*, while Lawn's¹² analyses Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and Frame's *Intensive Care*. Arguing that in the aforementioned texts both authors oppose 'the stasis of definition',¹³ and present a 'radical distrust of verbal language as an agent of expression or communication',¹⁴ Huggan uses the comparative framework to locate literary trends and formulate broad theories pertaining to female writers in postcolonial contexts. For him, the 'similarities between the work of Margaret Atwood, in Canada, and Janet Frame, in New Zealand, are indicative of a *cross-cultural concern* for the position of the woman writer in the New World.¹⁵ Notably, Huggan's article includes a brief discussion of binaries in the work of both Frame and Atwood, and of the critical treatment thereof, which prefigures my own focus on this aspect of Frame and Atwood studies (visible in both Chapters 1 and 2). Lawn's article examines the operation of language (and numbers) in the apocalyptic settings created by each author. Her particular comparative focus is on the relationship between the respective author's characters. She uses Frame's characters as a foil for Atwood's, and vice versa, in order to elucidate the theories of language that are presented by each text. Lawn's comparative character analysis concludes that:

By comparing Milly [from *Intensive Care*] with Jimmy [from *Oryx and Crake*] we learn that words matter and that their destiny cannot be disentangled from that of the gross body. We learn something else by setting Milly next to Oryx, something that touches more upon the verbal aesthetic as a shifting, unstable force-field, rather than as crafted figurative play.¹⁶

¹⁰ Other such articles may exist, though I am not aware of any.

¹¹ Graham Huggan, 'Resisting the Map as Metaphor: A Comparison of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and Janet Frame's *Scented Gardens for the Blind*', *Kunapipi*, XI 3 (1989), 5-22.

¹² Jenny Lawn, 'The Word as Remnant. Margaret Atwood and Janet Frame', in *New Windows on a Woman's World: A Festschrift for Jocelyn Harris*, ed. by Colin Gibson and Lisa Marr (Dunedin: University of Otago, 2005), pp. 385-401.

¹³ 'Resisting the Map as Metaphor', p. 11.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5. My italics.

¹⁶ 'The Word as Remnant', p. 397.

In addition to these concentrated comparisons by Huggan and Lawn, several critics have made passing links between Frame and Atwood. Susan Ash, in her article “‘The Absolute, Distanced Image’: Janet Frame’s Autobiography’, briefly discusses Frame’s autobiography in the context of one of Atwood’s poems. Ash argues that the imagery in Atwood’s poem ‘Spelling’ provides a ‘powerful analogy for the kind of violence Frame endured psychically as well as physically for persisting in her choice to write’.¹⁷ She thus uses Atwood’s fiction as a supplementary tool to unpack and expound upon meaning in Frame’s commentary.¹⁸ Maria Wikse instead uses Atwood’s commentary as a framing device in her monograph *Materialisations of a Woman Writer: Investigating Janet Frame’s Biographical Legend*. Wikse opens her book with a quotation from Atwood’s *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing*.¹⁹ This epigraph establishes the perceived difference between ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ styles of writing and insists that writers are treated differently depending on their gender. Atwood grounds her decision to begin her publishing career as the gender neutral M. E. Atwood upon these considerations (an action that I explore in Chapter 1). With this epigraph Wikse sets up the terms of her study, the founding principle of which is that writers *are* approached differently depending on their gender: hers is a ‘feminist study that aims to critique and disrupt ethnocentric and gender-biased ways in which women artists and their texts are still often read’.²⁰ While Ash draws a link between the content of Atwood’s poetry and Frame’s autobiography, Wikse locates a nexus between Atwood’s general observations as to how literary criticism functions and the particular way in which Frame is approached by literary critics. Notably, both of these critics use Atwood to provide a context for Frame, a fact which may be tied back to Atwood’s status as a celebrity author in relation to Frame’s status as a cult author.

Of the material available within Frame studies, Wikse’s investigation into Frame’s biographical legend bears particular relevance to my current project. My study examines Frame’s attempts to shape the mythology which surrounds her, and the impact that these attempts have had upon critical accounts of her fiction. Wikse defines ‘biographical legend’

¹⁷ Susan Ash, “‘The Absolute, Distanced Image’: Janet Frame’s Autobiography’, *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 11 (1993), 21-40 (p. 37).

¹⁸ See also: Susan Ash, ‘Janet Frame: The Artist as Hero’, *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 6 (1988), 170-189. Whilst this article does not make direct mention of Atwood, it bears some striking similarities to Josie P. Campbell’s ‘The Woman as Hero in Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing*’, *Mosaic*, 11:3 (1978: Spring), 17-28.

¹⁹ Maria Wikse, *Materialisations of a Woman Writer: Investigating Janet Frame’s Biographical Legend* (Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2006), p. 5. Wikse also quotes Margaret Atwood, *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* (London: Virago Press, 2008) at p. 147.

²⁰ Wikse, p. 9.

as ‘the myths of his/her life that imbue reviews, biographies, and literary histories’²¹ [...] the public image of artists’.²² Her concept of a biographical legend is therefore very much at one with my understanding of a mythology. Indeed, the mythology that I identify in Chapter 1 as having attached to Frame approximates to Wikse’s description of Frame’s biographical legend. Wikse writes:

Frame was misdiagnosed as a schizophrenic, which has dominated and still haunts her biographical legend and reviews of her work. Also, Frame’s biographical legend describes her as someone who avoids public exposure, and who lives a reclusive life.²³

However, there are significant differences between Wikse’s study and my own. I consider Frame’s presentations of self in her commentary as active (conscious and deliberate) attempts to shape her mythology. Wikse, however, flags the concept of agency as problematic and declines to determine ‘the level of consciousness behind the written words or produced images’.²⁴ Furthermore, Wikse looks at ‘how “Janet Frame” appears, or materialises, in [...] different texts’.²⁵ those texts include fictional ones, whereas I consider only how ‘Janet Frame’ appears — how the writer consciously positions herself — in her non-fiction commentary. My examination of Frame’s presentation of self is therefore narrower in focus than Wikse’s. However, it is broader in another respect. While Wikse examines ‘how, why and to what extent [critics] let biographical information infiltrate their readings’,²⁶ my project is an investigation of how, why, and to what extent critics let Frame’s commentary infiltrate their readings. Biographical information forms only part of such commentary.

Each of my chapters is split in two, with the first half dedicated to Janet Frame, and the second to Margaret Atwood. Comparative observations and conclusions are most often presented in the second (Atwood) half of each chapter, once material pertaining to both authors has been covered. Chapter 1 canvasses both authors’ attitudes towards engaging in commentary, charts the extent of each author’s output, and considers the degree to which each author actively intervenes to shape the mythological discourse which surrounds them. I then investigate each author’s conception of their role and how each author positions and portrays herself; specifically, I identify and explore the authorial personae Frame and Atwood

²¹ Wikse, p. 10.

²² Ibid., p. 12. I am not aware of any critical text that investigates Atwood’s ‘biographical legend’ in a similar fashion.

²³ Ibid., p. 13.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 21.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 22.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 26.

project. Many parallels are found to exist between their conceptions of their roles and personae, the strongest common denominator being a portrait of self as trickster. Chapter 2 probes the effect of this authorial commentary upon overarching critical narratives of the authors' fiction. In particular, critical utilisation of authorial terminology and concepts is examined; and the influence of each author's trickster persona is analysed.

My goal is to forge an understanding of the nature, shape and influence of each author's commentary. While Frame passed away in 2004, Atwood continues to be productive on this front. Frame's major offerings in terms of commentary occurred (were granted or published) during the 1980s; ostensibly there has been a considerable length of time for their influence to be wrought on Frame studies. However, the enduring impact of Frame's 1965 essay 'Beginnings' (discussed in Chapter 2) asserts the need for continued examination of Frame's commentary and its influence. Atwood's commentary dates back as early as the 1970s, but she has released major critical texts (and granted numerous interviews) within the past ten years, the full force of which is undoubtedly yet to be felt. In both Frame and Atwood studies then, there is an on-going need for further critical investigations into authorial commentary and for meta-critical explorations of its effect.

CHAPTER 1

THE AUTHORS SPEAK...

THE COMMENTARY OF JANET FRAME AND MARGARET ATWOOD

Margaret Atwood has said that ‘the writer communicates with the page’,¹ which of course cannot be denied. But beyond the fictional text the writer also communicates with the interviewer and the biographer, as well as by way of any critical and autobiographical material they may choose to produce. It is through such commentary that authors advance versions of themselves, as well as various attitudes and ideas to which they are happy to attach their name (which is not necessarily the same as believing in, or subscribing to, such attitudes and ideas). From these sources, we may glean an understanding of how each of these writers view their role as author, how they position themselves as authors, and the writerly personae they project to critics and the wider public.

*

1.1 Janet Frame: Ordinary Trickster

The mythological discourse surrounding Janet Frame was aptly summarised by Valerie Baisnée when she wrote that Frame has been considered a:

‘Shy, self-effacing figure’ whose writing was profoundly affected by her eight years in mental institutions. Her [perceived] obsessions with death and insanity as well as her discontinuous narrative techniques were *supposed to be* the reflection of a ‘deranged’ mind.²

Frame has displayed an awareness of the existence of this mythology³ and her interventions in it have been chiefly by way of autobiography and cooperation with the Michael King’s biography. The volume of her critical work is minimal, likewise her direct engagement with her critics was limited and the number of interviews she submitted to was relatively small.

¹ Margaret Atwood, *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* (London: Virago Press, 2008), p.111.

² Valerie Baisnée, *Gendered Resistance: The Autobiographies of Simone de Beauvoir, Maya Angelou, Janet Frame and Marguerite Duras* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997), p. 93. My italics.

³ Janet Frame, *An Angel at my Table* (Auckland: Vintage Collector’s Edition, 1994), p. 277; Janet Frame, *The Envoy from Mirror City* (Auckland: Vintage Collector’s Edition, 1994), p. 414. See also: Tony Reid, ‘Visionary view of the “tapestry of words”/ ‘Author Disturbed by Myths and Legends’, *New Zealand Herald*, 12 February 1983, sec 2, pp. 1-2.

Beginning with her critical work, I note that she authored what appears to be her only book reviews for *Landfall* in 1954⁴ and *Parsons Packet* in 1955.⁵ For the *Listener* in 1964 she wrote a piece entitled ‘This Desirable Property’⁶ which paints art and creativity as a sort of lifeblood, a spiritual wealth. This was followed by ‘Memory and a Pocketful of Words’⁷ which again investigates literature as a treasure, a source of wealth, as well as charting some of the influences on Frame’s work. In 1968, along with others, she wrote an article for *Landfall*⁸ reflecting on her experience as a Burns Fellow, and in 1975 a short piece appeared in *Education* recollecting her childhood engagement with the Grimm brothers’ fairy-tales.⁹ Frame spoke at her first academic conference in 1977 and a transcript of her presentation — investigating cross-cultural encounters in literature — was later published among a collection of papers from that conference.¹⁰

Frame’s direct engagement with critics of her work appears to have been chiefly, though not solely, in the form of letters. She wrote to *The Listener* in 1957¹¹ replying to the letter of another reader who had commented on *Owls Do Cry*. She did meet with French Academic Victor Dupont in France in 1974, though she concluded this meeting by handing him a copy of a letter she had obtained from psychiatrist R.H. Cawley. The letter indicated that Frame had ‘never suffered from a mental illness in any formal sense’.¹² That same year Frame again employed this letter when communicating (by way of a letter of her own) with New Zealand’s own Patrick Evans,¹³ and Phoebe Meikle.¹⁴ It is difficult to read Frame’s actions as anything other than a deliberate intervention against the mythology of madness which surrounded her.

Frame appears to have submitted to fewer than twenty interviews, her rationale being that ‘some authors are articulate and some aren’t and I think it’s wise for the ones who aren’t just

⁴ Janet Frame, ‘Review of *Take my Tip* by Terence Journet’, *Landfall*, 8 (1954), 309-310.

⁵ Janet Frame, ‘Review of *A Fable* by William Faulkner’, *Parsons Packet*, 36 (Oct-Dec 1955), 12-13.

⁶ Janet Frame, ‘This Desirable Property’, *Listener*, 3 July 1964, pp.12-13.

⁷ Janet Frame, ‘Memory and a Pocketful of Words’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 4 June 1964, p. 487.

⁸ Janet Frame, et al, ‘The Burns Fellowship’, *Landfall*, 22 (1968), 237-248.

⁹ Janet Frame, ‘Janet Frame on *Tales from Grimm*’, *Education*, 24.9 (1975), 27.

¹⁰ Janet Frame, ‘Departures and Returns’, in *Writers in East-West Encounter: New Cultural Beginnings*, ed. by Guy Amirthanayagam (London: Macmillan, 1982), pp. 85-94.

¹¹ Janet Frame, ‘Reply to letter of WH Oliver’, *Listener*, 23 August 1957, p.11.

¹² Michael King, *Wrestling with the Angel: a life of Janet Frame* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 2001), p. 388 (quoting Cawley’s letter). Cawley’s letter was later published in a magazine edited by Dupont (Gina Mercer, *Janet Frame: Subversive Fictions* (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1994), p. 13).

¹³ King, p. 394.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 395.

to acknowledge it and not say anything, like me'.¹⁵ She was interviewed by: the *Oamaru Mail* in 1963,¹⁶ *The Herald* in 1963,¹⁷ Claire Henderson for the *Listener* in 1970,¹⁸ Jill McCracken (again for the *Listener*) in 1973,¹⁹ Michael Noonan for a video documentary in 1975,²⁰ the *North Shore Gazette* in 1975,²¹ Yvonne Dasler for the *Wanganui Chronicle* in 1980,²² Tony Reid for the *New Zealand Herald* in 1983,²³ Francis Levy for the *New Zealand Woman's Weekly* in 1983,²⁴ Rosemary Vincent for the *New Zealand Times* in 1983,²⁵ Stephanie Dowrick for *The Sydney Morning Herald* in 1985,²⁶ Cynthia Kee for *Harpers and Queen* (again in 1985),²⁷ Gina Mercer for radio in 1986,²⁸ Marion McLeod for the *Listener* in 1988,²⁹ Susan Chenery for *The Australian Magazine* in 1994,³⁰ and John Sellwood for *The Holmes Show* in 2000.³¹ Elizabeth Alley also interviewed Frame for radio in 1983 and again in 1988 — an edited transcript combining Frame's answers from both of these interviews (though not specifying which answer came from which interview) appeared in *Landfall* in 1991,³² and in a published collection of interviews with New Zealand writers in 1992.³³

By and large Frame's interviewers have presented her as a reluctant interviewee. They have done so in forewords to their interview transcripts, voiceovers (in the case of video

¹⁵ Michael Noonan, 'Three New Zealanders: Janet Frame', *NZONSCREEN* <www.nzonscreen.com/title/three-new-zealanders-janet-frame-1975> [accessed 20 July 2010].

¹⁶ 'Noted Author on Visit to Oamaru', *Oamaru Mail*, 1 November 1963, p. 4.

¹⁷ 'Noted NZ Writer is Inspired by People', *New Zealand Herald*, 22 October 1963, sec. 2, p. 1.

¹⁸ Claire Henderson, 'Artists' Retreats', *Listener*, 27 July 1970, p. 13.

¹⁹ Jill McCracken, 'It's Time for France', *Listener*, 27 October 1973, pp. 20-21.

²⁰ Noonan.

²¹ 'North Shore Notables: Janet Frame — Writer', *North Shore Gazette*, 22 January 1975, p. 4. See also King, p. 397.

²² Yvonne Dasler, 'Silence and Solitude are the Keys to Janet Frame's World', *Wanganui Chronicle*, 5 July 1980, p. 7.

²³ Reid, pp. 1-2. See also: King, p. 452.

²⁴ Frances Levy, 'Janet Frame...joy in a world of words', *New Zealand Woman's Weekly*, 21 March 1983, pp. 20-21.

²⁵ Rosemary Vincent, 'Alone on a River of Words', *New Zealand Times*, Wellington, New Zealand, 2 October 1983, p. 9.

²⁶ Stephanie Dowrick, 'Janet's Pen Triumphs over a Scalpel', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 November 1985, late edition, p.45.

²⁷ Cynthia Kee, 'Freeze Frame', *Harpers and Queen*, March 1985, pp. 196-197.

²⁸ Frame was interviewed by Gina Mercer for ABC Radio, Sydney, 5 February 1986. I have been unable to locate a recording or transcript of this interview.

²⁹ Marion McLeod, 'Janet Frame in Reality Mode', *New Zealand Listener*, 24 September 1988, pp. 24- 26.

³⁰ Susan Chenery, 'The Final Word', *Australian Magazine*, 6-7 August 1994, pp. 30, 33-34.

³¹ John Sellwood, 'Holmes Show Interview with Janet Frame', *NZONSCREEN* <<http://www.nzonscreen.com/title/holmes---janet-frame-2000>> [accessed 20 July 2010].

³² Elizabeth Alley, 'An Interview with Janet Frame', *Landfall*, 45.2 (1991), 154-168.

³³ *In The Same Room: Conversations with New Zealand Writers*, ed. by Elizabeth Alley and Mark Williams, (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1992). Note that in places the wording of Alley's questions vary slightly as compared to the *Landfall* transcript. However, Frame's answers appear to be presented identically. All further references to Alley's interviews with Frame, are to the *Landfall* transcript.

documentaries), and articles based on material gathered in their interview. We are repeatedly told that she is a ‘shy’³⁴ ‘intensely private’³⁵ person who ‘does not like giving interviews’.³⁶ Her desire for solitude is emphasised.³⁷ One cannot help but cynically wonder whether this is a deliberate tactic on the interviewer’s behalf to create interest in their subject; the portrayal of Frame as a recluse, and the interview as a coup, may have been intended to lure in more readers/buyers. It must be acknowledged that there is some foundation for this portrayal in Frame’s comments; she occasionally made remarks such as ‘I live like a hermit’.³⁸ Yet, most often her comments about her desire for solitude are firmly rooted in the conditions she feels are necessary for her working — writing — life (as opposed to her life in the broader sense): ‘I think a writer needs to lead a solitary life. When I say that, you have to be in isolation *to do your work*. After you’ve done your work, well that’s another matter. The work is the response.’³⁹ Frame explicitly separates a life alone, from writing alone: ‘there is a dreadful isolation, not to be confused with the necessary solitude, in working.’⁴⁰ It is this fact — that she wants to be alone when working, not all of the time — that interviewers often fail to accentuate, choosing instead to pounce upon the more enticing idea of Frame as recluse. For example, ‘Silence and solitude are the only ways *to get on with my work*’⁴¹ she says to Dasler. Yet Dasler translates this into ‘Silence and solitude are the keys to Janet Frame’s world’.⁴² Dasler does not distinguish between Frame’s writing life and the rest of Frame’s life; her title implies that Frame wishes to always live alone in silence, despite the fact that what Frame has really told her is that she needs silence and aloneness *when she is writing*, which she is obviously not doing all of the time. Likewise, Chenery places Frame within an utterly self-contained life rather than a solitary working environment:

As a traumatised young woman she retreated into the palaces and cathedrals of her own private city and has lived there as a recluse ever since; an outsider, famously, cripplingly shy; an aesthete, devoting her life *absolutely* to the solitude of writing; fleeing, quite literally, from the outside world.⁴³

³⁴ McLeod, p. 25; Vincent, p. 9; Reid, p. 1. See also: Dowrick, p. 45; and ‘Noted Author on Visit to Oamaru’, p. 4 (‘Efforts were made to get Miss Frame to talk about herself; but this quietly spoken woman refused to be drawn.’)

³⁵ Sellwood; Dasler, p. 7; Reid, p. 1.

³⁶ Levy, p. 20. See also Alley, p. 154; Sellwood; Dasler, p. 7; Dowrick, p. 45; Chenery, p. 33.

³⁷ See Dasler’s title. See also: Sellwood; Vincent; Levy, p.20; ‘Noted Author on Visit to Oamaru’, p. 4; Chenery pp. 32-33 (‘She has been described as having “one skin too few”, a woman who has never developed the carapace necessary to survive the daily cruelties of human interaction.’); and ‘North Shore Notables: Janet Frame – Writer’, p. 4 where the distraction of noise produced by other people is laboured.

³⁸ Dasler, p.7.

³⁹ Alley, p. 157. My italics.

⁴⁰ Henderson, p. 13.

⁴¹ Dasler, p. 7. My italics.

⁴² Ibid., title.

⁴³ Chenery, p. 30. My italics.

The skewed emphasis on Frame's reticence also fails to account for her enthusiasms about social interaction — to Henderson she explains that part of her enjoyment of time spent at writers colonies is the social aspect, 'living and working and playing'⁴⁴ with other artists. She also mentions her positive experiences at writers' colonies to Dasler where she explains 'we would work alone during the day and come together for dinner and to talk'.⁴⁵ This is another example of the distinction between a solitary life and a solitary working environment. To Reid, Frame states quite clearly: 'I take pleasure in the outside world and I venture out a great deal. In the right company I can be very bold.'⁴⁶ While these comments about Frame's social life do make it to print, they appear to become lost in the overarching narrative of the hermit.

These are of course generalisations, spanning the scope of the interviews granted by Frame, but I must acknowledge that in some cases the portrayal of a reclusive Frame is not so straightforward.⁴⁷ For example, Chenery clearly subscribes to the recluse idea as stated above, writing further that Frame's 'demeanour, it is true, is reticent, she is damaged'⁴⁸ and stressing Frame's desire for the interview to end.⁴⁹ However, she also notes that Frame surprises her by laughing during the interview ('A Janet Frame joking about her brilliant sensitivity is not the Janet Frame I had been led to expect')⁵⁰ and describes her as a 'sophisticated cerebral conversationalist, earthy, amusing, perfectly together'.⁵¹ Thus hers is a complicated portrait of Frame, one that suggests a mythology (shy recluse) which has overtaken the reality and is so strong that it continues to largely triumph over that reality even when one is confronted by it (i.e. when one actually meets Frame and converses with her). Tony Reid also complicates his representation of the shy artist who 'fiercely defends her privacy',⁵² by locking her door during the day to prevent intrusions upon her writing. Reid ends his article with a protracted quote from Frame wherein she is animated and speaking playfully. A vivacity (and a sense of trickiness) shines through Frame's words:

⁴⁴ Henderson, p 13.

⁴⁵ Dasler, p.7. See also King, p. 414 where Frame is quoted as enjoying the social element of the 1977 conference she attended.

⁴⁶ Reid, p. 1.

⁴⁷ The synopsis to Noonan's interview (provided by NZONSCREEN) is a notable exception to the portrait of a shy Frame, and will be discussed further in relation to Frame positioning herself as trickster (see: p. 25).

⁴⁸ Chenery, p. 33.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 34.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 33.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Reid, p. 1.

‘Oh, but should I say that? It is like saying that I don’t like dogs (which I don’t) or children (which I don’t much) or flowers (which I don’t as much as the characters in my books). If you say those things there could...’ she pauses, widens her eyes and wobbles her head with melodrama. ‘There could be “Certain Repercussions.”’⁵³

But Reid continues: ‘Then she notices the reporter waiting to change mood and get on with a serious interview with the alleged morbid genius.’⁵⁴ At this point Reid essentially acknowledges the pervasive mythology which surrounds Frame, and by way of juxtaposing that mythology with an outgoing Frame (the foregoing quotation), calls that mythology into question.

In that Frame makes the life/work distinction, offers comments about socialising, and indeed grants interviews at all, she shows some agency in terms of attempting to shape the reductive mythological discourse that surrounds her. Her comments as to the unreliability of her interview answers⁵⁵ (which will be further explored in relation to Frame positioning herself as trickster) also serve to potentially undermine any indications she does give of a solitary lifestyle; conversely, they may equally undermine any statements she makes that combat the hermit narrative. However, it is chiefly through her cooperation with Michael King’s biography, and the production of her own autobiography, that Frame intervenes to massage the aforementioned mythology; Jan Cronin writes that the ‘the repudiation of the madness myth is doubtlessly a prime motivation in the authorisation of the biography, just as it was in the genesis of the autobiographies’.⁵⁶ The Author’s Note at the beginning of King’s text indicates that Frame’s cooperation, while extensive, was reliant upon her ‘preference’ that King not produce a critical biography and that he refrain from quoting verbatim from his interviews with her.⁵⁷ It is these parameters that have prompted some to ‘perceive the biography [...] [as] yet another virtuoso act of ventriloquism’⁵⁸ by Frame. Thus while other interviewers disregarded Frame’s life/work distinction in order to label her a recluse, with King Frame gathers more traction, more control of the product and therefore how she is presented; indeed contrary to previous portraits, King notes that in some instances Frame

⁵³ Reid, p. 2.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Quoted later at pp. 23-24.

⁵⁶ Jan Cronin, ‘Review of *Wrestling with the Angel: a Life of Janet Frame*’, *Kotare*, 3.2 (2000) <<http://www.nzetc.org/tm/scholarly/tei-Whi032Kota-t1-g1-t8.html>> [accessed 22 July 2010].

⁵⁷ King, p. 8.

⁵⁸ ‘Review of *Wrestling with the Angel: a Life of Janet Frame*.’

actually enjoyed the interview experience.⁵⁹ However, Cronin observes that even King falls back upon the idea of a solitary Frame:

Perhaps the only flaw in the book lies in the very last line which depicts Frame sitting in front of her computer where, via the internet, 'she rediscovers the world and engages with it, without the burden of social contact.' This concluding image of Janet Frame seems to reinstate the notions which the book is so dedicated to dispelling, and demonstrates the potency of the mythology of Frame.⁶⁰

Thus while her authorisation of the biography is a serious attempt to control the presentation of herself, Frame's success in this regard is called into question.

With autobiographical material however, there were no fetters to Frame presenting herself as she wished. Her publication of such material chiefly consisted of a short essay entitled 'Beginnings'⁶¹ and three volumes of autobiography released in 1982, 1984 and 1985 respectively.⁶² She explicitly frames these three volumes in terms which display an acute awareness of the construction of a personal mythology, a narrative of one's life:

From the first place of liquid darkness, within the second place of air and light, I set down the following record with its mixture of fact and truths and memories of truths and its direction always towards the Third Place, where the starting point is myth.⁶³

Using the tool of autobiography Frame fashions an intimate account of her life both as a human (woman) and as a writer. Her revelations are at times intensely personal;⁶⁴ she charts the story of her development as a person offering much detail that is unconnected to her journey as a writer. Yet amongst that narrative she also weaves the story of her origins as a writer, of her relationship with literature (both that written by others and by herself), and of her creative process which necessitates the movement between 'this world' and the 'that world' of Mirror City.

The first reference to the 'this world'/'that world' distinction that I have been able to trace appears in her 1964 piece 'Memory and a Pocketful of Words' where she states that 'A writer

⁵⁹ King, p. 453. Specifically the Reid and Alley interviews.

⁶⁰ 'Review of *Wrestling with the Angel: a Life of Janet Frame*'.

⁶¹ Janet Frame, 'Beginnings', *Landfall*, 19.1 (1965), 40-47.

⁶² Janet Frame, *To the Is-Land* (Auckland: Vintage Collector's Edition, 1994); *An Angel at my Table*; *The Envoy from Mirror City*.

Her open tributes to Charles Brasch and Frank Sargeson also contain autobiographical material. See: Janet Frame, et al, 'A Letter to Frank Sargeson', *Landfall*, 7 (1953), p. 5; Janet Frame, et al, 'Charles Brasch 1909-1973: Tributes and Memories from his Friends', *Islands*, no 2 (1973), 233-253; Janet Frame, 'A Last Letter to Frank Sargeson', *Islands*, no 1 (1984), 17-22.

⁶³ *To the Is-Land*, p. 7. See also: *An Angel at my Table*, p 284, where Frame actually refers to herself as 'like a mythical character'.

⁶⁴ See, for example, references to menstruation: *To the Is-Land*, pp. 118, 133; *An Angel at my Table*, p. 156.

must go alone through the gateway entered or arrived at, out into the other “world”, with no luggage but memory and a pocketful of words’.⁶⁵ Frame expands upon the idea in ‘Beginnings’ where she writes that:

It was becoming impossible for me to reconcile ‘this’ and ‘that’ world, I decided to choose ‘that’ world, and one day when the Inspector was visiting my class at school I said, — Excuse me, and walked from the room and the school, from ‘this’ world to ‘that’ world where I have stayed, and where I live now.⁶⁶

When later interviewed by Reid, Frame complained of the reception of and reaction to this statement in ‘Beginnings’, for ‘that’ world was taken by many to mean ‘dream, disturbance or insanity’⁶⁷ and not ‘the realm of the imagination’⁶⁸ that she had intended it to mean. Consequently, she attempted to clarify the meaning of her statement by way of her three volumes of autobiography.

In volumes one and two Frame explores the meaning of the concept of ‘imagination’, and speaks of being ‘absorbed in the world of the imagination’⁶⁹ whilst also being ‘totally present in the “real” world’.⁷⁰ In the third volume the existence of ‘this world’ and ‘that world’ becomes the framing narrative of the autobiography. Here she comprehensively espouses upon the metaphor of Mirror City (‘the city of the imagination’⁷¹) as a way of explaining her creative process:

The self must be the container of the treasures of Mirror City, the Envoy as it were, and when the time comes to arrange and list those treasures for shaping into words, the self must be the worker, the bearer of the burden, the chooser, placer and polisher. And when the work is finished and the nothingness must be endured, the self may take a holiday, if only to reweave the used container that awaits the next visit to Mirror City. These are the processes of fiction.⁷²

Frame is clear that ‘this world’ and ‘that world’ are not entirely harshly dichotomous; rather she writes of ‘the closeness, the harmony, and not the separation of literature [...] and life’.⁷³

⁶⁵ Janet Frame, ‘Memory and a Pocketful of Words’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 4 June 1964, p. 487.

⁶⁶ ‘Beginnings’, p. 45. References to ‘an imaginative light’ (Henderson, p. 13) through which she views the world and her ‘double life [...] an inner and outer world’ (McCracken, p. 21) are also made in interviews in 1970 and 1973 respectively.

⁶⁷ Reid, p. 1. See also: King, p. 452.

⁶⁸ King, p. 452.

⁶⁹ *An Angel at my Table*, p. 196.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *The Envoy from Mirror City*, p. 336. See also: ‘the Mirror City where civilisations live their lives under the light of the imagination instead of the sun’ (p. 357). King describes Mirror City as ‘the mytho-poetic world to which her imagination sought access through her poems and fiction’ (King, p. 158).

⁷² *The Envoy from Mirror City*, p. 405.

⁷³ *To the Is-Land*, p. 130.

While the detailed exposition of Frame's life as a writer and concept of Mirror City appears to be a response to the misinterpretation of 'Beginnings', the autobiographical narrative dealing with her wider life is also ostensibly a reactive project, designed to reshape the mythology that had grown around her. To Alley Frame commented that she wanted to 'have her say'.⁷⁴ Many critics have accepted this as Frame's (prime) motivation in writing the autobiography:

Frame opted for a classic, mainstream form of autobiography chiefly for political reasons, in order to counteract her public image as an eccentric, 'mad' writer whose writing is a result of a deranged mind. It is these distortions of her image that the autobiography addresses.⁷⁵

However, Susan Ash explores a multifarious account of Frame's motivations, noting that Frame is not entirely clear that her reason for writing the autobiography was to influence her mythological discourse. Of the Alley interviews, Ash notes, 'where the first interview seemed to stress the autobiography as a response, as an answer to "other" voices, Frame adds in the later interview, "I just write for myself"'.⁷⁶ Thus Ash claims that it is unclear whether the autobiography was intended as an intervention in her mythological discourse, or a project of personal fulfilment. She argues that:

Both desires I have outlined are at work in the autobiography: both the desire to speak to the world, to respond to what has been said (as her first interview emphasises), and the desire to speak to the self, to anchor identity for the self (as the second interview seems to emphasise).⁷⁷

Frame was somewhat pragmatic about the ability to control her mythology, acknowledging that despite her best attempts she couldn't necessarily control all that was said about her: "I've gradually learned to accept everything that is said about me," she says wryly. "The inaccuracies sort of join the history."⁷⁸ Critical opinions have been divided regarding the influence of Frame's autobiographical endeavour upon her mythology. For example Vanessa Finney writes 'what an enormous difference the autobiographies have made to the public definition and reception of Janet Frame',⁷⁹ while Valerie Baisnée is of the view that:

⁷⁴ Alley, p. 161.

⁷⁵ Baisnée, pp.124, 93. See also: 'Review of *Wrestling with the Angel: a Life of Janet Frame*', quoted earlier at p. 13.

⁷⁶ Susan Ash, "'The Absolute, Distanced Image'": Janet Frame's Autobiography', *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 11 (1993), 21-40 (p. 23). I must pause at this point to draw attention to the conflicting nature of Frame's answers which prefigures my discussion of Frame as trickster later in this chapter.

⁷⁷ "'The Absolute, Distanced Image'", p. 25.

⁷⁸ Chenery, p. 33. See also: "All these myths" sighs Janet Frame. "I suppose it is too late to do anything about them" (Reid, p. 1).

⁷⁹ Vanessa Finney, 'What Does "Janet Frame" Mean?', *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 11 (1993), 193-205 (p. 193).

One can wonder, however, how far Frame's legend has been transformed in the public mind. An interview with Janet Frame published in *The Australian Magazine* (August 1994) seems to consolidate the Frame legend further. If she is no longer seen as the Mad Genius, her image is that of a writer whose life is 'elsewhere', which is, ironically, the very image that Frame tries to demystify in *To the Is-land*.⁸⁰

Margaret Atwood has wondered 'how many writers have put on other faces, or had other faces thrust upon them, and then been unable to get them off?',⁸¹ suggesting that Frame would not be alone in struggling to control the mythology that surrounds her. There is always the problem of any writing being read in a way that was not intended — such as the misinterpretation of 'Beginnings' discussed earlier. Regardless of the success of Frame's intervention (which will be discussed further in Chapter 2 when I explore the ways that Frame's commentary has affected critical narratives of her fiction), her autobiography was a significant *attempt* to actively shape her mythology, as was her cooperation with King's biography. Thus despite having been somewhat reluctant to engage with the public by means of critical writing and interviews, she has indeed been an active agent in drawing a particular public persona for herself beyond the protective veil of her fiction.⁸² The question then becomes: what authorial persona(e) has she projected in this attempt to shape her mythology? How has she positioned and portrayed herself? And how does she view her role as a writer?

Turning to the last question first, Frame's autobiographical and biographical material, along with her limited critical work and interviews, tell us a lot about how Frame views her role as an author, what her creative process is, how she works. She views herself as an 'everlasting observer [...] To be interested in writing novels, you have to have a passion for reading people and their behaviour and their lives.'⁸³ In *The Envoy from Mirror City* she writes:

As I watched and listened I comforted myself by trying to feel superior as I said to myself, 'Little do they know that I'm recording everything in my mind, that I can see through them, beneath their masks, right to the bottom of their heart, for if I'm to be and stay a writer I must follow all the signs in everything they say and do, and in the silence and inactivity, reading their faces and the faces and the eyes that are mapped with their private isobars and isotherms above the fertile lands, the swamps secret with marsh

⁸⁰ Baisnée, p. 93. Baisnée is referring to the interview with Susan Chenery, whose portrait of Frame — as I see it — is discussed earlier at pp. 11-12.

⁸¹ *Negotiating with the Dead*, p. 125.

⁸² On the fictional text as a protective entity Atwood writes: 'It is altogether too close for comfort as well when the reader confuses the writer with the text: such a reader wants to abolish the middle term, and to get hold of the text by getting hold of the writer, in the flesh. We assume too easily that a text exists to act as a communication between the writer and the reader. But doesn't it also act as a disguise, even a shield — a protection?' (*Negotiating with the Dead*, p. 119).

⁸³ Alley, p. 162. See also: Dasler, p. 7; Chenery, p. 33.

birds, the remote mountains sharp with rock formations, softened with snow. I must forever watch and listen.⁸⁴

She is then, an ‘eavesdropper’⁸⁵ like Alice Thumb from *Living in the Maniototo*, operating as a kind of translator, gathering the material of everyday life via observation and making word choices which re-present that material to her audience in an original way. Her life experiences are her ‘writer’s currency’⁸⁶ but they are not her fiction itself: ‘I *write*, you see. I don’t tell about my life.’⁸⁷ Adamant that biographical material should not underpin the critical analysis of her work, her position on this issue is clear: she writes *fiction*. While she may use details from her life (and/or, as per her role as observer, details from the lives of people that she knows) in her writing, ‘they’re not the *true* stories [...] my fiction is genuinely fiction’.⁸⁸ Frame explains, ‘naturally, I draw from what I’ve seen and observed and people I have seen, but it’s always a mixture [...] Fictional characters of course are a mixture of what I have observed and what I’ve imagined.’⁸⁹ As ‘a third person’⁹⁰ she sits outside the text itself; ‘she’ creates, but ‘she’ is not the subject of the creation. Nor are the views of the characters in her fiction the views of Frame herself:

Novelists are always confronted by a reading public that supposes all views are the writer’s views. I meet this constantly with critics who ought to know better, but who suppose that the character’s thoughts are my thoughts, but in reality of course they are the thoughts of the character.⁹¹

The mythology that has surrounded Frame has meant that this temptation to blur ‘the fine distinction between the writer’s work and the writer’s life’⁹² has tended to manifest as a perception that the suffering of Frame’s characters, in particular mental or psychological anguish, is a written depiction of Frame’s own personal suffering.⁹³ Clearly this is a view that she refutes.

⁸⁴ *The Envoy from Mirror City*, p. 298. See also: *An Angel at my Table*, p. 258.

⁸⁵ Janet Frame, *Living in the Maniototo* (Auckland: Random House New Zealand, 2006), p. 29.

⁸⁶ ‘The Burns Fellowship’, p. 241.

⁸⁷ Alley, p. 155. Alley’s italics.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* Alley’s italics.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 165. See also *Ibid.*, p. 163 (where Frame states that she mixes ‘real life’ on ‘a palette, you know, with other things’) and p. 164. This is a point that Frame labours in the Alley interview.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 164. Elsewhere Frame quotes John Keats: “‘I am always filling some other body, giving some other opinion’” (Reid, p. 2).

⁹² Alley, p. 158.

⁹³ See for example: ‘when the book [*Owls Do Cry*] was published, I was alarmed to find that it was believed to be autobiographical, with the characters actual members of my family, and myself the character Daphne upon whom a brain operation was performed. Confronted by a doctor who had read the book, I was obliged to demonstrate to him the absence of leucotomy scars on my temples. Not every aspiring writer has such a terrifying but convincing method of displaying to others “proof” that she has written fiction’ (*An Angel at my Table*, p. 251).

Despite such mis-readings of her fiction as autobiographical material, Frame does not feel restrained or ‘bound’⁹⁴ by readers’ expectations or reactions: ‘It is a kind of courtesy to readers that I don’t think I always indulge in. I just write for myself.’⁹⁵ This sense of freedom when writing extends beyond the bounds of readers’ expectations, for ‘nothing is barred [...] a writer has all the choice in the world’.⁹⁶ However, freedom of choice does not equate to intellectual chaos or lack of control. Frame feels she must be always ‘watching [her words] in case they either escape or in case they go in the wrong direction [...] It is essential to be in control of the writing because the words are the instrument’.⁹⁷ Writing for Frame is thus a process which requires measured decisions and a degree of self-reflexivity. It is also a process which is prone to being easily disrupted — Frame believes that as an author she inevitably faces numerous obstacles to the physical act of writing, such obstacles being likely to include noise, people (in the sense that they interrupt the writer), financial difficulties, health issues, and procrastination.⁹⁸ Generally then, it is practical difficulties that Frame sees as hampering her production, rather than creative ones — as a writer she is free to produce what she likes, provided dogs do not bark and jets do not fly overhead.⁹⁹

Besides providing these indications of how Frame views her role as author, her autobiographical and biographical material, critical work and interview answers also project several personae. These personae are not so much by-products of Frame’s commentary, as versions of her self that appear to be deliberately cultivated — this is how Frame chooses to portray herself to the public. Firstly, as discussed earlier, she presents herself as a writer that is solitary when working but otherwise social:

I felt that the link between the world of living and of writing resembled a high wire needing intense relaxed concentration for the barefoot journey (on knives or featherbeds) between. In such a life the presence of others is a resented intrusion and becomes a welcome joyous diversion only when the attention must be directed away from words.¹⁰⁰

Again as canvassed earlier, this is not a persona that has been readily endorsed, the mythology of the isolated mad author tended to prevail instead. The importance of Frame’s comments on her solitariness or otherwise, and the neglect of such comments by those

⁹⁴ Alley, p. 168 (quoting Alley).

⁹⁵ Alley, p. 168.

⁹⁶ McLeod, p. 25.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 166.

⁹⁸ ‘Beginnings’, p. 47.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ *The Envoy from Mirror City*, p. 340. See also: *An Angel at my Table*, pp. 247, 252, 262.

formulating a narrative of Frame, relates to the romantic stereotype of the writer, particularly to the stereotypical myth of the woman writer. Valerie Baisnée notes that:

Autobiographies and novels often portray the female artist as a lonely being whose creativity depends on human isolation [...] Women's writing is always seen as deviant and sub-verted in a male-dominated society.¹⁰¹

The stereotype of the isolated, doomed woman writer is a notion about which Margaret Atwood has commented at length. She vociferously reacts against this idea¹⁰² because it feeds into an aura of mystery, difference, and specialness surrounding the writer. Atwood points out that this stereotype also feeds into the idea that writer's life is more interesting than their work and leads to a focus on biography and biographical reading:

The point about these stereotypes is that attention is focused not on the actual achievements of the authors, but on their lives, which are distorted and romanticised; their work is then interpreted in the light of the distorted version. Stereotypes like these, even when the author cooperates in their formation and especially when the author becomes a *cult* object, do no service to anyone or anything, least of all the author's work. Behind them all is the notion that authors must be more special, peculiar or weird than other people, and that their lives are more interesting than their work.¹⁰³

These statements ring true in terms of Frame's mythology and critical approaches to her work: her biography has indeed been the focus of much attention, has been 'distorted and romanticised' so that a mythology of madness grew up around her; critical accounts of the 'schizophrenic' elements of Frame's work, and analysis of her fiction in terms of dual realities (which will be explored in Chapter 2) were consequent upon that focus on biography.

By revealing her social activities (and by making comments regarding her strength and survival)¹⁰⁴ Frame is therefore distancing herself from this stereotypical idea of the writer. Bearing in mind the applicability of Atwood's account of the stereotype's implications and consequences to Frame studies, Frame is also directing critics away from biographical readings, and asserting the *ordinariness* (as opposed to the specialness) of her life.¹⁰⁵ Doing so appears to be a conscious effort on Frame's part (I have already noted Frame's aversion to

¹⁰¹ Baisnée, p. 97.

¹⁰² See for example: Margaret Atwood, *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose* (Anansi: Toronto, 1982), pp. 199-200, 226; *Negotiating with the Dead*, pp. 78-79; Margaret Atwood: *Conversations*, ed. by Earl G. Ingersoll (New Jersey: Ontario Review Press, 1990), p. 10; Rosemary Sullivan, *The Red Shoes: Margaret Atwood Starting Out* (Canada: HarperFlamingo, 1998), pp. 4, 218-9, 309; Nathalie Cooke, *Margaret Atwood: A Biography* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1998), pp.16-17, 229-230, 328. Atwood's resistance to this notion of the woman writer seems to form the overarching narrative of both the Sullivan and Cooke biographies.

¹⁰³ *Second Words*, pp. 199-200. My italics.

¹⁰⁴ See for example: 'North Shore Notables: Janet Frame – Writer', p. 4; McCracken, p. 21.

¹⁰⁵ Wikse also notes that in her autobiographies Frame 'stresses the ordinariness of her life as a writer' (Maria Wikse, *Materialisations of a Woman Writer: Investigating Janet Frame's Biographical Legend* (Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2006), p. 136).

biographical readings of her work). Her autobiographies reveal an awareness of this stereotype of the isolated female author,¹⁰⁶ and appear to dissociate Frame from it.¹⁰⁷ She labours her grounded nature, juxtaposing herself, 'a practical person, even writing poems which were practical', with her classmate Shirley Grave, the 'dreamer [...] lost in [her] poetic world'.¹⁰⁸ While Grave was isolated by her imagination, Frame insists she was firmly in touch with reality, thus negating the stereotype of the lonely woman writer detached from the tangible world:

Daphne [from *Owls Do Cry*] resembled me in many ways except in her frailty and absorption in fantasy to the exclusion of 'reality'; I have always been strong and practical, even commonplace in my everyday life.¹⁰⁹

Yet one must bear in mind those instances referred to earlier where Frame makes comments such as 'I live like a hermit'.¹¹⁰ And there is also room to argue, based on her autobiographies, that she internalised the stereotype of the tortured artist to a certain degree, indeed 'longed'¹¹¹ to be perceived in such a fashion, and was somewhat comforted when at last she possessed 'a disease interesting enough to be my ally in my artistic efforts'.¹¹² While I am inclined to dismiss such notions as part of the process of maturing into adulthood and coming to terms with one's self-image, they do complicate Frame's portrayal of herself in relation to the stereotype of the doomed artist, and indicate that Frame's descriptions of self are *tricky* and never straightforward.

Frame's aforementioned trickiness and suggestion of ordinariness, are the two central personae which emerge from Frame's commentary. The latter of these contradictory notions of self, the idea of Frame as ordinary, emerges chiefly through her self-deprecating answers in interviews. She persistently asserts that she is ordinary, uninteresting, not extraordinarily

¹⁰⁶ See references to it at: *To the Is-Land*, pp. 79, 92, 132; *An Angel at my Table*, pp. 173, 174, 184, 201, 229, 277.

¹⁰⁷ Similarly, Wikse writes that in her autobiographies Frame is attempting to 'refigure her writer-self' in order to avoid being 'pigeonholed as a writer of "Ophelia Syndrome" fiction' (Wikse, p. 148).

¹⁰⁸ *To the Is-Land*, pp. 92-93.

¹⁰⁹ *An Angel at my Table*, p. 251. See also my discussion at p. 15: Frame argues she does not 'live' in one world to the exclusion of the other.

¹¹⁰ Dasler, p. 7.

¹¹¹ *To the Is-Land*, p. 79. Simone Oettli-van Delden includes an interesting discussion of this 'longing' in her monograph *Surfaces of Strangeness: Janet Frame and the Rhetoric of Madness* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2003), pp. 68-69.

¹¹² *An Angel at my Table*, p. 201.

talented, average.¹¹³ She even draws attention to the flaws in her writing,¹¹⁴ and insists upon her dissatisfaction with the quality of her work:

There are only about two sentences in my work which please me. I never read my books when they are finished. The only feeling I have about my past books is that I am ashamed of them. I really don't care for them because I feel that I see things more clearly now.¹¹⁵

These representations of herself as ordinary rally not only against the mythology of madness which has surrounded her, but also against the perceptions of greatness and difficulty which have amassed in relation to her fiction, the idea of her work as elitist. On this front Dowrick writes that her novels 'have been marvelled at by a faithful few, misunderstood by most critics and reckoned to be "too hard" for the general reading public'.¹¹⁶ Frame apparently admitted to Levy that 'she is aware of the reputation her books have of being difficult to read'¹¹⁷ and so her attempts to position herself as ordinary and thereby her writing as average are ostensibly a reaction to this knowledge.¹¹⁸

In portraying herself as ordinary, Frame's self-deprecating behaviour is expanded by her suggestions that she is not the 'ideal' writer, is not a 'real' writer. To Alley she expresses her alarm that she never kept notebooks as that is what the 'ideal writer'¹¹⁹ does, indeed was what her heroines Woolf and Mansfield did. Frame distances herself from such writers,¹²⁰ from their success and their reputations as masterful authors. And to McLeod she comments 'Real Writers say such clever things',¹²¹ speaking as though she is not in fact a real writer, but rather an imposter. Indeed 'imposter'¹²² is how she refers to herself when interviewed by McLeod, suggesting that she has 'a touch of'¹²³ the recognised psychological syndrome entitled 'the imposter syndrome'.¹²⁴ The implication here is that she is a fraud, is not really a

¹¹³ McCracken, p. 20; Levy pp. 20- 21; Dowrick, p. 45; Alley, pp. 156, 159, 161, 165, 168; Chenery, p. 34; Kee, p. 197. See also Frame's autobiographies, especially: *To the Is-Land*, p.132; *An Angel at my Table*, pp. 158, 193.

¹¹⁴ For example: 'I don't (and it looks as if I'm justified in saying this) think that I'm very successful at creating characters' (Alley, p. 161); 'My expression falls far short. I'm constantly embarrassed by my small vocabulary of vital words [...] I'm not a successful novelist' (Reid, pp. 1-2).

¹¹⁵ Chenery, p. 34.

¹¹⁶ Dowrick, p. 45. See also: Chenery, p. 33; Kee, p. 196; Levy, p. 20.

¹¹⁷ Levy, p. 21.

¹¹⁸ Note also her comment that: 'I want to write a work of art. I want to be accessible though' (Kee, p. 199).

¹¹⁹ Alley, p. 162. See also: 'Noted Author on Visit to Oamaru', p. 4.

¹²⁰ See also: 'I don't consider myself similar to Katherine Mansfield' ('North Shore Notables: Janet Frame — Writer', p. 4).

¹²¹ McLeod, p. 25.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ This is a psychological phenomenon in which people are unable to internalize their accomplishments. See: Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes, 'The Imposter Phenomenon in High Achieving Women: Dynamics and Therapeutic Intervention', *Psychotherapy Theory, Research and Practice*, 15.3 (Fall 1978) <<http://www>.

writer, or at the least that she is not a very good one, and that she does not deserve her success. Yet in the Alley interview Frame states that ‘the writer is an imposter’ in that they ‘demolish’ their selves and take on the personae of their characters.¹²⁵ Here Frame is using the word ‘imposter’ in a different sense, in a way that implies the existence of a particular writing ability (of a chameleon-like nature), as opposed to a deficit of writing ability, which is what is implied when she calls herself an imposter in the McLeod interview. Thus in her references to imposter, Frame simultaneously manages to undermine her writing talent (and therefore assert her ordinariness) and to highlight it. In doing so, Frame as trickster emerges, in several senses. In the first instance, she manipulates the subtleties of language. Secondly, this manipulation suggests conflicting ideas about herself (ordinary versus talented). Furthermore, consider that if Frame is an imposter novelist, and if the novelist is an imposter, then Frame is impersonating an imposter, and as such she must be the real thing.

Behind the persona of the trickster are the ideas that Frame is not to be trusted and that she is manipulating us. It is the idea that she is slippery, clever, playful, that she knows more than she lets on, and is somehow, somewhere, pulling the strings. Inherent in this persona is therefore a degree of power, which is at odds with the frequent popular depictions of Frame as vulnerable.¹²⁶ In addition to the aforementioned interview answers, Frame’s portrait of herself as trickster is variously accomplished by her other interview answers, her autobiographical writing, and her behaviour (both as reported to us, and as viewed by us via video footage).

During interviews spanning from 1970 through to 1994 Frame made numerous overt comments regarding the veracity of her interview answers. Such comments call into question the reliability of all of her answers to all of her interviewers; she destabilises the usual pattern of readers and critics being able to draw upon her interview answers in order to shed light on her work, for one cannot know if in fact that answer was ‘truthful’ or if it was designed to provoke a particular reaction or steer one in a particular direction. To Henderson, Frame describes writing as a ‘kind of acting’¹²⁷ and states that ‘The reader and the critic have to

paulinerooseclance.com/pdf/ip_high_achieving_women.pdf> [accessed 18 September 2010]. Frame explores the imposter syndrome in her novel *The Carpathians*.

¹²⁵ Alley, p. 165.

¹²⁶ She is frequently described by interviewers as poor and childlike. See for example: McCracken, p. 20; Kee, p. 196; McLeod, p. 26; Chenery, p. 30; Reid, p. 2.

¹²⁷ Henderson, p. 13.

remember all the time that the writer is an actor and a liar'.¹²⁸ This sense of Frame as actor is developed by Frame's comments to Reid (cited earlier) whereby she playfully suggests a manipulation of her answers in search of (or in avoidance of) a particular effect. To McLeod, Frame is blunt, saying, 'Yes, well, writers tell lies of course [...] The answers I would have given you yesterday or tomorrow are different from the ones I give today'.¹²⁹ This latter comment concretises the implications of a statement previously made to McCracken ('I ask myself these questions you ask me [...] and I haven't been able to answer them.'¹³⁰) whereby Frame suggests that, as she doesn't always have the answers to questions posed, sometimes she is forced into the position of having to make one up. The alternative of course is to say nothing, an option Frame frequently chose, based upon the relatively small number of interviews she granted. Finally, when interviewed by Chenery, Frame stated: 'One doesn't have to agree with everything one says.'¹³¹

Frame, with reference to her time in hospital, also commented to Chenery: 'I was trying to escape [...] So I chose the best way, which was to act peculiar. It was a con.'¹³² This positioning of one's self as manipulator is explored fairly extensively in her autobiographies, indeed Part One of *An Angel at my Table* is entitled 'Tricks of Desperation' (my italics). 'I was playing a game'¹³³ Frame writes, and goes on to explain the 'mask'¹³⁴ that she donned, the "schizophrenia" that she 'turned on'¹³⁵ when necessary. She positions herself as a master of pretence, a competent trickster, for her life up to that point had 'trained me to perform'.¹³⁶ Frame as trickster also emerges as she speaks of her construction of 'personality',¹³⁷ indicating her awareness of her appearance from without, and her ability to masquerade for effect.

In her autobiographies, Frame also draws attention to the instability of language (particularly in *To the Is-land*, as the title indicates),¹³⁸ the potential for multiple meanings to be drawn from a single word, and the slipperiness of language. The 'meaning' conveyed by her

¹²⁸ Henderson, p. 13.

¹²⁹ McLeod, p. 25.

¹³⁰ McCracken, p. 21.

¹³¹ Chenery, p. 34.

¹³² Ibid., 33.

¹³³ *An Angel at my Table*, p. 201.

¹³⁴ Ibid., p. 215.

¹³⁵ Ibid., p. 212.

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 203.

¹³⁷ *To the Is-Land*, p. 116.

¹³⁸ For example see Ibid., p. 48 where she investigates 'permanent waves.'

autobiography, fashioned from so many words, is thereby called into question, destabilised. So the reader is at the mercy of the master manipulator, unable to escape Frame's own slipperiness in order to draw a concrete understanding from the work. Her comment that 'I remember, as my earliest memory, something that could not have happened',¹³⁹ intensifies this unsteadiness in the reader, this sense of being deliberately toyed with. Susan Ash notes that Frame's interview comments also prompt us to question the veracity and reliability of her autobiographies. She highlights two separate quotes from Frame regarding the autobiographies, one which claims that they are a straightforward representation of herself, and the other which indicates that the texts have been constructed through a fictive lens:

How shall we regard this apparent contradiction: 'This ordinary me without fiction', and 'I look at everything from the point of view of fiction'? We are all [...] well aware of her propensity for paradoxical contradiction.¹⁴⁰

All of these overt indicators declare Frame as a master manipulator, though the trickster persona also emerges in more subtle ways. In her video-taped interview with Michael Noonan in 1975 Frame appears relaxed and self-assured — the synopsis to the video clip even comments that it 'presents a confident writer in her prime, and negates any stereotypes about Frame's inarticulacy or shyness'.¹⁴¹ As this articulate author is so at odds with the Frame depicted both by later and earlier interviewers, one cannot help but wonder whether the notion of Frame as shy is one cultivated by Frame, with the Noonan interview being a case of Frame letting her guard slip. Of particular note are the contrasting terms in which she describes to Noonan and to Alley her inclusion of a dentist character in *The Adaptable Man*. To Noonan she states with conviction: 'I did use, I did make up the character of a dentist.'¹⁴² However when speaking to Alley there is an element of hesitation as she refers to the same character: 'I did put a dentist in, *I think*.'¹⁴³ How are we to read the 'I think' in the latter comment? Why does Frame end her sentence in this way? It seems to plant a seed of doubt regarding Frame's confidence. Yet are we really to believe that she is unsure as to the inclusion of this character in her novel? Surely this hesitation is insincere, especially when contrasted with the way she discusses the character when speaking to Noonan? One cannot but conclude that this is another instance of Frame as trickster, manipulating — albeit subtly — her image and projecting a less confident self than that which really exists. Several of

¹³⁹ *To the Is-Land*, p. 12. See also: p. 131.

¹⁴⁰ "'The Absolute, Distanced Image'", p. 22.

¹⁴¹ Noonan. King makes a similar observation (King, p. 398).

¹⁴² Noonan.

¹⁴³ Alley, p. 161. My italics.

Frame's interviewers did in fact pick up on such 'cunning': Chenery writes that Frame's 'reclusiveness, say those who know her, has become a cover for a social life that is decided by her own rules and parameters',¹⁴⁴ while McCracken wonders if Frame's reticence towards answering her questions is 'just cunning, a way to fool'.¹⁴⁵

There is an inherent tension between that cunning and shrewdness which informs the trickster, and Frame's presentation of herself as ordinary. They are opposing personae, as the former implies a level of cleverness and manipulative ability beyond that of the ordinary. How indeed does one believe Frame when she says she is ordinary if she has told us not to believe what she is saying? Should we believe her *because* she's told us not to? Is *the trick* telling us not to believe her? Thus, as with her references to imposters, Frame traps us in a chicken and egg –esque circularity, whereby the ground is perpetually unstable. This utilisation of the Liar Paradox is the supreme indicator of Frame as trickster, though of course it does not solve the aforementioned tension and so we are left still struggling to reconcile these apparently mutually exclusive assertions of herself as ordinary and as trickster. This difficult position in which we find ourselves reminds us that Frame has donned the mantle of power and taken 'ownership of one's self',¹⁴⁶ actively intervening in the mythology that surrounds her in order to project the self (selves) by which she wishes to be known.

*

1.2 Another Trickster: Margaret Atwood

Margaret Atwood has made clear that she is aware of the multifarious mythologies which surround her, the popular and critical perceptions of her:

I could easily illustrate by reading from my own clipping file: I could tell you about Margaret the Magician, Margaret the Medusa, Margaret the Man-eater, clawing her way to success over the corpses of many hapless men. Margaret the powerhungry Hitler, with her megalomaniac plans to take over the entire field of Canadian Literature. This woman must be stopped! All these mythological creatures are inventions of critics; not all of them male. (No one has yet called me an angel, but Margaret the Martyr will surely not take long to appear, especially if I die young in a car accident).¹⁴⁷

Atwood has also stated that there is some value in the existence of such mythologies:

¹⁴⁴ Chenery, p. 33.

¹⁴⁵ McCracken, p. 20.

¹⁴⁶ *An Angel at my Table*, p. 282.

¹⁴⁷ *Second Words*, p. 227. See also: Sullivan, pp. 90, 216.

I don't believe that people should divest themselves of all their mythologies because I think, in a way, everybody needs one. It's just a question of getting one that is livable [sic] and not destructive to you.¹⁴⁸

How then, has Atwood attempted to shape her own mythology into one that is 'livable'?

Ostensibly Atwood has intervened heavily as an active agent in shaping her mythology. Her attitude towards being interviewed and engaging in critical commentary diverges markedly from Janet Frame's. While Frame chose to say little; Atwood said, and continues to say, a lot. Undoubtedly she is one of those 'articulate' authors to whom Frame grants licence to speak. Atwood has submitted readily to giving interviews, speeches, and lectures during the course of her writing career. She has also published numerous critical works. On average, Atwood estimates she writes twenty critical pieces a year.¹⁴⁹ Her willingness to engage in critical commentary arises, at least in part, out of obligation rather than enjoyment:

The kinds of pain [generated by engaging in critical work], and the reasons for doing it, vary from *genre* to *genre*, but I suppose you could sum both up under the general heading of that old Victorian chestnut, A Sense of Duty. I still believe, despite the Me Generation, that there can be reasons for doing a thing other than the fact that you may find it pleasurable or self-fulfilling. Book reviews seem to me one of the dues you pay for being a writer.¹⁵⁰

Elsewhere, Atwood states: 'I review anyway [despite disliking doing so], because those who are reviewed must review in their turn, or the principle of reciprocity fails.'¹⁵¹ From the outset then, Atwood's very attitude towards engaging in various forms of critical work reveals the community of which she perceives herself to be a part, and the responsibility she bears within that community.¹⁵²

Atwood has released no less than eight critical texts, the first being *Survival* in 1972.¹⁵³ *Survival* is perhaps the most controversial and notorious of Atwood's critical works: intended as 'an introductory guide to the subject [of Canadian Literature], for the average reader',¹⁵⁴ it drew reproach for its fiscal motivations (Anansi Press was reportedly in need of funds), its

¹⁴⁸ *Conversations*, p. 32.

¹⁴⁹ Margaret Atwood, *Curious Pursuits: Occasional Writing* (London: Virago Press, 2006), p. xi.

¹⁵⁰ *Second Words*, p.12. Atwood's italics.

¹⁵¹ *Curious Pursuits*, p. xiii. I cannot help but compare Atwood's many book reviews to Frame's two — it appears Frame did not share Atwood's sense of responsibility in this respect.

¹⁵² See also: Sullivan, p. 199 regarding Atwood's sense of responsibility to the literary community. Note that Atwood does not impose such a responsibility upon other writers — see the quotation from Atwood at p. 33 regarding the role of each author being different.

¹⁵³ Margaret Atwood, *Survival. A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972).

¹⁵⁴ *Second Words*, p. 385.

generalisations, and ‘reductive approach’.¹⁵⁵ Nevertheless the text still draws such labels as ‘seminal’ and ‘classic’.¹⁵⁶ After *Survival* was published Atwood entered into direct engagement with critics of the text. She rose to its defence where she felt necessary, scathingly combatting ‘problems’ raised by critics. For example, she responded to Robin Matthew’s review of *Survival* by suggesting that Matthews did not meet ‘the minimum qualification for a critic [...] the ability to read and write’.¹⁵⁷ Atwood also wrote about the work itself, defining and describing it.¹⁵⁸ Arguably such actions on her behalf were designed to alter how her work and her self were perceived.

Following *Survival* came *Days of the Rebels 1815-1840*¹⁵⁹ in 1977, a review of Canadian history between the specified dates. In 1982 *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose*¹⁶⁰ appeared, a collection which comprises book reviews, critical pieces on literary themes such as ‘audience’ and ‘humour’, responses to critiques of her fiction, critical essays with footnotes, and some without. *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature*,¹⁶¹ a book consisting of four lectures which Atwood delivered in 1991 at Oxford University as part of the Clarendon Lecture Series in English Literature, was published in 1995. *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing*,¹⁶² released in 2003, also arose out of a lecture series — the Empson Lectures, delivered by Atwood at the University of Cambridge in 2000. Whilst the subject of this text is writing itself, Atwood makes clear that it isn’t about her own writing.¹⁶³ The book poses a series of questions, such as ‘what is “a writer?”’¹⁶⁴ but Atwood does not necessarily answer her various questions directly. The book is more a rumination on these issues, a discussion of the various points of view available, rather than a definitive statement of her position: ‘As I’ve said, I have no answers. But I’ve indicated some of the possibilities.’¹⁶⁵ *Writing with Intent*,¹⁶⁶ and *Curious Pursuits: Occasional Writing*,¹⁶⁷ two further collections of critical prose in the style of *Second Words* followed in 2005 and

¹⁵⁵ Walter Pache, “‘A Certain Frivolity’: Margaret Atwood’s Literary Criticism”, in *Margaret Atwood, Works & Impact*, ed. by Reingard M. Nischik (New York: Camden House, 2000), pp. 120-136 (pp. 121- 122).

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ *Second Words*, p. 129. For further examples, see: pp. 129-150, 385-6.

¹⁵⁸ See for example: *Ibid.*, pp. 105, 385-6.

¹⁵⁹ Margaret Atwood, *Days of the Rebels: 1815-1840* (Canada: Natural Science of Canada, 1977).

¹⁶⁰ *Second Words*. Full citation appears at p. 20 of this chapter.

¹⁶¹ Margaret Atwood, *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

¹⁶² *Negotiating with the Dead*. Full citation appears at p. 8 of this chapter.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p.1.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

¹⁶⁶ Margaret Atwood, *Writing with Intent* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2005).

¹⁶⁷ *Curious Pursuits*. Full citation appears at p. 27 of this chapter.

2006 respectively. There is some overlap between the two collections, but each also contains individual pieces. Most recent is Atwood's meditation on debt in our society from a literary point of view, the 2008 text *Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth*.¹⁶⁸ In that Atwood has scripted such critical work, she has provided various potential critical frameworks for the interpretation of her own fictional works, the impact of which will be examined in Chapter 2.

In terms of interviews, a collection of twenty-one transcripts spanning the years 1972 to 1990 was released in 1990 under the title *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*. Various other transcripts of interviews exist in anthologies of critical work on Atwood,¹⁶⁹ and videoed interviews can be accessed by way of The Margaret Atwood Society's website,¹⁷⁰ and YouTube.¹⁷¹ Atwood also communicates with the public through her official website,¹⁷² a Twitter account,¹⁷³ and an online blog.¹⁷⁴ Furthermore, she has chosen to make her early drafts and correspondence accessible: the Margaret Atwood collection at the University of Toronto contains over many boxes of materials, the first of which was donated by Atwood in 1970.¹⁷⁵ Given how prolific she has been, this list of Atwood's critical material is doubtless incomplete, (ignoring as it does, singular articles and interviews in magazines and newspapers); however, it covers at the very least, Atwood's own publications (books and collections) and the bulk of reliable interview sources.

¹⁶⁸ Margaret Atwood, *Payback. Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth* (Bloomsbury: London/Berlin/New York, 2008).

¹⁶⁹ For example, see: *Margaret Atwood, Visions and Forms*, ed. by Kathryn Van Spanckeren and Jan Garden Castro (Carbondale/Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988); Hilde Staels, *Margaret Atwood's Novels: A Study of Narrative Discourse* (Germany: Francke Verlag Tübingen und Basel, 1995); *Works and Impact* ed. by Nischik; *Margaret Atwood, the essential guide*, ed. by Margaret Reynolds, and Jonathan Noakes (London: Vintage, 2002).

¹⁷⁰ *The Margaret Atwood Society* <<http://themargaretatwoodsociety.wordpress.com/>> [accessed 4 August 2010]. This society is endorsed by a link on Margaret Atwood's official website.

¹⁷¹ *YouTube* <<http://www.youtube.com/>> [accessed 4 August 2010]. I have avoided using any content available on YouTube for reasons of reliability, as the source of such clips and the extent to which they have been edited is undetermined. I have chosen instead to deal with those videos which bear an official link to Atwood, such as the ones available through The Margaret Atwood Society website, and those transcripts which are printed by reputable publishers.

¹⁷² Margaret Atwood, *Margaret Atwood (Official Website)* <<http://www.margaretatwood.ca/>> [accessed 4 August 2010].

¹⁷³ Margaret Atwood, '@MargaretAtwood', *Twitter* <<http://twitter.com/MargaretAtwood>> [accessed 4 August 2010]. Atwood has 130,535 followers as of 18 February 2011.

¹⁷⁴ Margaret Atwood, *The Year of the Flood (Official Blog)* <<http://marg09.wordpress.com/>> [accessed 4 August 2010]. Atwood's blog is updated around four times a month, on average.

¹⁷⁵ Robert McGill states there are over forty boxes. According to McGill 'the content of the archive, as well as the classification of that content, bespeaks an attempt to circumscribe the orientation of academic inquiry' (Robert McGill, 'Negotiations with the Living Archive' in *Margaret Atwood: The Open Eye*, ed. by John Moss and Tobi Kozakewich (Canada: University of Ottawa Press, 2006), pp. 95- 106 (p. 96)). Cf. Helmut Reichenbächer who states there are 286 boxes (Helmut Reichenbächer, 'Challenging the Reader: An Analysis of Margaret Atwood's Creative Technique in Her First Published Novel', in *Margaret Atwood: Works and Impact* ed. by Nischik, pp. 261-276 (p. 261)).

Atwood has indicated that in her early days as a writer she made some attempt to conceal her gender, using initials rather than her first name on published work.¹⁷⁶ Clearly this is an approach which she relinquished, however she has indicated — in her typical witty fashion — that should she have her time over, she would have made greater endeavours to protect her privacy (and thus to control the information from which her mythology is derived):

If I had suspected anything about the role I would be expected to fulfil, not just as a writer, but as a *female* writer — how irrevocably doomed! — I would have flung my leaky blue blob-making ballpoint pen across the room, or plastered myself over with an impenetrable *nom de plume*, like B. Traven, author of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, whose true identity has never been discovered. Or, like Thomas Pynchon, I would never have done any interviews, nor allowed my photo to appear on book jackets; but I was too young then to know about such ruses, and by now it is far too late.¹⁷⁷

Unlike Frame, Atwood has refrained from writing a definitive or comprehensive autobiography. She does appear to have written some short autobiographical pieces, however, and these have been lodged with her papers at the University of Toronto, rather than published in any form.¹⁷⁸ And while her critical work is peppered with autobiographical information,¹⁷⁹ the motivation for releasing such details appears to be that ‘Atwood wants the facts to be presented as accurately as possible. Ironically, then, she provides this autobiographical information in order to limit speculation and to protect her privacy.’¹⁸⁰ What is important to note is that the information which is presented is always intricately related to herself as a writer — unlike Frame, Atwood shies away from personal revelations and tells only her story *as a writer*. How she came to be a writer, how family and society impacted upon that journey,¹⁸¹ how her life as a writer negates the romantic notion of the doomed female artist.¹⁸² For example, of Atwood’s autobiographical revelations, Renée Hulan writes:

¹⁷⁶ *Negotiating with the Dead*, p. 18. See also *Margaret Atwood: A Biography*, p.65; Sullivan, pp. 19, 92. Atwood has also donned various aliases (*Margaret Atwood: A Biography*, pp. 66-67, 75, 78, 220, 240, 255).

¹⁷⁷ *Negotiating with the Dead*, p. 13. Atwood’s italics.

¹⁷⁸ See the following notes which appear to be references to autobiographical pieces stored among Atwood’s papers: Sullivan, ch. 3, n. 8, 12, 13, 15 (p. 335); ch.4, n. 14. (p. 336); n. 25 (p. 337); ch5, n. 13 (p. 337); ch. 6, n. 30 (p. 338); ch. 7, n. 25 (p. 339); ch. 11, n. 25 (p. 344); ch. 14, n. 2, 5 (p. 346).

¹⁷⁹ See for example: *Negotiating with the Dead*, Chapter 1; *Second Words*, pp. 108, 380, 215; *Curious Pursuits*, pp. 95, 245, 329; Margaret Atwood, ‘Great Unexpectations. An Autobiographical Foreword’, in *Margaret Atwood, Visions and Forms*, ed. by Van Spanckeren and Castro, p. xiii-xvi; Margaret Atwood, ‘Toronto: The City Rediscovered’, *The New York Times*, 8 August 1982, pp. 14, 16; Margaret Atwood, ‘Landfall: Nova Scotia’, *The New York Times*, 18 March 1984, p. SW89; Margaret Atwood, ‘Approximate Homes’, in *Writing Home: A PEN Canada Anthology* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1997).

¹⁸⁰ *Margaret Atwood: A Biography*, p. 319.

¹⁸¹ See especially: *Negotiating with the Dead*, Chapter 1.

¹⁸² See in particular: ‘Great Unexpectations. An Autobiographical Foreword.’

In *Negotiating with the Dead*, Atwood continues to fashion personae by reclaiming her biography, retelling well-known stories, deflating gossip, anecdote, and supposition, and scrupulously revisiting the most often-cited details: the Bohemian Embassy, the aunts, the walk across the football field, the exiled parents, the northern campsites, and even *The Red Shoes*.¹⁸³

Every one of these ‘most often-cited details’ is in some way integral to Atwood’s development as an author. The Bohemian Embassy is where Atwood, as a young writer in 1961, first read her poems publicly.¹⁸⁴ Atwood’s Aunt J (children’s book writer Joyce Barkhouse) took Atwood to her first writer’s conference and provided the example of a working writer.¹⁸⁵ Her Aunt K gave up the option to study for a PhD at Oxford in favour of having children, this sacrifice instilling in Atwood the desire for a full life which didn’t fall prey to the romantic notion of the isolated woman artist: ‘Which was better? To be brilliant and go to Oxford, or to have six children? Why couldn’t it be both?’¹⁸⁶ Atwood’s walk across the football field marked the day she became a poet.¹⁸⁷ And so on, as the pattern emerges of biographical details that inform Atwood’s life as an author, her ‘precarious and somewhat tatty Palace of Art’.¹⁸⁸ The distinction must be emphasised at this point, between Atwood’s limited autobiographical offerings, and Frame’s profusion of personal information which charts the story of her development as a person, not just as a writer.

While Frame cooperated extensively with King in the production of his biography of her life, Atwood — though not obstructive — has been more reticent towards her own biographers. To date, two biographies of Atwood have been published, one by Nathalie Cooke and the other by Rosemary Sullivan, both in 1998. On balance Sullivan appears to have received more cooperation from Atwood than Cooke. This is evident both in her references and the “‘ventriloquism” of sorts’¹⁸⁹ which Elizabeth Renzetti identifies in Sullivan’s text (the latter of which recalls Cronin’s comments regarding the perception of King’s biography of Janet Frame). Sullivan’s acknowledgements thank Atwood for responding to her questions and being generous with ‘permissions and with her trust’,¹⁹⁰ though there is no mention of Atwood officially authorizing the biography. Based upon the book’s Notes, it appears that

¹⁸³ Renée Hulan, ‘Eyes Wide Shut: Atwood, Bill C-32, and the Rights of the Author’, in *Margaret Atwood: The Open Eye*, ed. by Moss and Kozakewich, p. 51.

¹⁸⁴ See: *Negotiating with the Dead*, p. 21; Sullivan, pp. 102-103; *Margaret Atwood: A Biography*, pp. 70-74, 77.

¹⁸⁵ *Curious Pursuits*, p. 95.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

¹⁸⁷ Sullivan, pp. 66-67; *Margaret Atwood: A Biography*, pp. 18-19.

¹⁸⁸ *Negotiating with the Dead*, p. xxv. Atwood’s equivalent of Mirror City?

¹⁸⁹ Lorraine York, ‘Biography/Autobiography’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, ed. by Coral Ann Howells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 28-42 (p. 39).

¹⁹⁰ Sullivan, p. 351.

Sullivan interviewed Atwood four times between 1993 and 1997, and also corresponded with her in 1998.¹⁹¹ It is also worth noting that Sullivan received cooperation from Atwood's assistant at O.W. Toad (Atwood's office, 'O.W. Toad' being an anagram of Atwood's last name), and obtained interviews with many of Atwood's close friends and family, including her partner of 38 years, Graeme Gibson (Atwood's consent here is implied). Cooke states definitively that her biography was not 'authorized'.¹⁹² While she had 'broad access' to Atwood's papers at the University of Toronto, permission to quote from previously unpublished material was 'more limited'.¹⁹³ Cooke and Atwood did meet to discuss the biography twice and exchanged correspondence regarding it over a period of three years. Cooke draws upon this correspondence throughout, particularly those sources that Atwood drew her attention to. These sources highlight the 'impossibility of the biographical enterprise',¹⁹⁴ thus indicating Atwood's discomfort with the notion of biography. Atwood has elsewhere displayed her suspicion of biographies, particularly with reference to female writers:

There is, still, a sort of trained-dog fascination with the idea of women writers — not that the thing is done well, but that it is done at all, by a creature that is not supposed to possess such capabilities. And so a biographer may well focus on the woman, on gossip and sexual detail and domestic arrangements and political involvement, to the exclusion of the artist.¹⁹⁵

This comment offers some insight into the motivations behind tying all autobiographical information so closely to her role as author; it is an attempt to counter-balance what she perceives to be the common mode for constructing biographies of women writers, and in this sense it is an intervention to shape the mythology that surrounds her, an intervention designed to ensure that it is her work and not her life that is focused on. This is not to say that in providing personal details about her life to King and through her autobiographies Frame is encouraging a focus upon biography rather than fiction. Rather, she too appears to be trying to keep biography and fiction separate by directing readers towards her work rather than her life; as noted earlier her autobiography is a reactive one, it appears designed to purge the mystery — and thereby the allure — from her life story, thus redirecting us towards her fiction.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹¹ Sullivan, pp. 333-49. Cf. the extensive interview access which King had to Frame.

¹⁹² *Margaret Atwood: A Biography*, p. 13.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 335. Sullivan also notes Atwood's aversion to biography at p. 3.

¹⁹⁵ *Writing with Intent*, p. 86.

¹⁹⁶ As discussed earlier, Frame's apparent negation of the stereotype of the woman writer also discourages biographical readings of her work, as do her interview answers.

Based on this survey of Atwood's critical and autobiographical material, my initial impulse is to say that she has intervened heavily in the shaping of her mythology — she has made herself excessively available for public interaction by way of interviews, lectures, online forums, etc. She has also revealed some biographical detail and cooperated with biographical projects to a certain extent. Yet I cannot escape the fact that she has been far more guarded than Frame in terms of the personal information she has shared with the public — there is no mention of enemas or menstruation in *her* revelations. Rather Atwood's recounting of biographical information is centred around her journey as a writer, including her encounters with other writers, where she was when she was writing particular books, and so on. So whose strategy represents the greater effort to control their mythology? The author who reveals intimate details about their life but whose critical commentary is more limited, or the author who guards their privacy but is prepared to discuss their writing, their writing process, other people's writing, writing in general, ad nauseam? Ultimately it seems that Frame, ostensibly the more reticent of the pair, has been more concerned with shaping her mythology. Atwood's most intense engagement with the public (interviews and critical work) has been centred solely around her craft, whereas Frame's most intense engagement with the public (her autobiographies and her co-operation with King's biography) has centred around her *self*, both as author and as person.

Nevertheless, Atwood's prolific commentary extensively divulges her views regarding her role as author, and also projects a particular persona to critics and the wider public. As such, it should not by any means be discarded as an active shaping of her mythology. Atwood is adamant that she, and nobody else, defines her own role as an author: 'I very much object to other people telling me what my role is in any area of life whatsoever. I think people define their own roles, and my "role as a writer" may be entirely different from somebody else's.'¹⁹⁷ The fundamental idea at the centre of Atwood's definition of her 'role', her job as a writer, her writing process, is that she is necessarily an observer of society. Her views echo those of Frame¹⁹⁸ as she explains that 'The writer *bears witness*'.¹⁹⁹ 'Writers are lenses, condensers of

¹⁹⁷ *Conversations*, p.5.

¹⁹⁸ See my earlier discussion at pp. 17-18.

¹⁹⁹ *Second Words*, p. 348. Atwood's italics. See also: p. 394; Sullivan, p. 171; *Negotiating with the Dead*, p. 104. Atwood has also commented that the writer 'must look at everything. Then she must record' (*Negotiating with the Dead*, p. 108).

their society'²⁰⁰ and 'writing is not mere self-expression but a view of society and the world at large'.²⁰¹ Atwood continues:

This fictional world so lovingly delineated by the writer may bear a more obvious or a less obvious relation to the world we actually live in, but bearing no relation to it at all is not an option. We have to write out of who and where and when we are, whether we like it or not, and disguise it how we may.²⁰²

Atwood thus creates her fiction by mirroring and filtering the world in which she lives. She believes it is this aspect of her role that imbues her literature with value. Through such literature readers are able to gain knowledge of themselves, their country, and its place in the world.²⁰³

In *Negotiating with the Dead* Atwood poses the question:

Is it really your right as an artist to purloin Aunt Lila's wardrobe? Are you entitled to make off with the conversations you overhear in bus stations and stick them into some recondite construction of your own? Can everything and everyone be used by you — viewed as *material*.²⁰⁴

Her stance as observer necessitates a positive answer to this query. Because she derives her fiction from her surroundings, Atwood acts as 'pilferer'.²⁰⁵ 'We steal the shiny bits', she writes, 'and build them into the structures of our own disorderly nests'.²⁰⁶ Because she is an observer, details of real life are necessarily used in her work. There are many instances of recognisable features from Atwood's real life to be found in her fiction: her friend the poet Gwendolyn McEwan appears as the doomed Selena in 'Isis in Darkness';²⁰⁷ the double wedding of the narrator's mother in 'The Boys at the Lab'²⁰⁸ mirrors Atwood's own mother's double wedding;²⁰⁹ and the murder of fellow Canadian poet Pat Lowther infuses 'Weight',²¹⁰ to name just a few. And of course there are the recurring stories of isolated cabin life, a woodsy father and a stalwart mother.²¹¹ Atwood then, has drawn upon the details of the world

²⁰⁰ *Second Words*, p. 204.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 353. See also: pp.348, 353, 400; *Survival*, pp.12, 15; *Curious Pursuits*, pp.280, 209, 210; *Negotiating with the Dead*, p. xviii.

²⁰² *Curious Pursuits*, p. 210. Sullivan seems to confirm Atwood's view of herself: 'Everyone who met Margaret would describe her as observant, a listener' (p. 124). See also p. 132.

²⁰³ *Survival*, p. 15. See also: 'If writing novels — and reading them — have any redeeming social value, it's probably that they force you to imagine what it's like to be somebody else' (*Second Words*, p. 430).

²⁰⁴ *Negotiating with the Dead*, p.93. Atwood's italics.

²⁰⁵ *Second Words*, p. 400.

²⁰⁶ *Negotiating with the Dead*, p. xviii. Cf. to Frame's concept of mixing fiction and fact on a palette quoted earlier at p. 18.

²⁰⁷ Margaret Atwood, 'Isis in Darkness', in *Wilderness Tips* (London: Virago Press Limited, 1992), pp. 57-84.

²⁰⁸ Margaret Atwood, 'The Boys at the Lab', in *Moral Disorder* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), pp. 233-260 (p. 240).

²⁰⁹ *Curious Pursuits*, p. 101.

²¹⁰ Margaret Atwood, 'Weight', in *Wilderness Tips*, pp. 177-194.

²¹¹ Margaret Atwood, 'The Art of Cooking and Serving', in *Moral Disorder*, pp. 11-26; Margaret Atwood, 'Hurricane Hazel', in *Bluebeard's Egg* (London: Vintage, 1983), pp. 31-60; Margaret Atwood, 'Betty', in

around her in creating her fictional worlds. She freely acknowledges this fact,²¹² yet like Frame, Atwood is unwavering in the stance that these details pass through a fictional filter: 'Just because some of the points touch our lives doesn't mean it's autobiographical.'²¹³ Thus she protests against the alignment of herself with her characters and her characters' views:

You would think a literary critic would distinguish between an author and a character, especially when he doesn't know the author. You have to regard everything my heroine says as the utterance of a fictional character.²¹⁴

In a later interview, she continues:

I'm not in my novels [...] the characters in my novels have such diverse life histories I don't know how anyone could think I'm all of them. Some novelists do put themselves into their books a lot, but when I'm writing a novel, I'm consciously creating a character. I may use some things from my life, but I'm not the characters in the books.²¹⁵

Given this fictional filter Atwood, again like Frame, is of the opinion that biographical material should not underpin the critical analysis of her work. However, unlike Frame Atwood allows that when 'the work is unintelligible without it',²¹⁶ biographical material may be brought into play. While Atwood can perhaps afford such a stance, 'unintelligibility', or difficulty, has indeed been the very justification for recourse to biographical readings of Frame's works. Patrick Evans in particular writes: 'The nature of Janet Frame's art caused me certain difficulties in devising a critical framework in which it might be fairly contained.'²¹⁷ Out of this difficulty Evans (in 1977) resorted to building a 'biographical base for a discussion of her art'.²¹⁸ He thus instigated a critical tradition of approaching Frame's texts biographically, one that was to persist for some years.²¹⁹

In that Atwood views herself as an observer, and objects to biographical readings of her work, her concept of her role as author aligns closely with Janet Frame's, startlingly so in fact. However, in her myriad of critical commentary, Atwood takes this conception of her role further than Frame. Beyond the filtering of real life into fiction, Atwood explores another

Dancing Girls (London: Vintage, 1977), pp. 32-50; Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing* (London: Virago Press, 1997); Margaret Atwood, *Cat's Eye* (London: Virago Press, 1990). These are just a few examples.

²¹² See: *Negotiating with the Dead*, p. 136; *Curious Pursuits*, pp. 167, 280; *Conversations*, pp. 169-170.

²¹³ *Conversations*, p.170.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 44. Note the similarity to Frame's comments to Alley, quoted earlier at p. 18.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

²¹⁷ Patrick Evans, *Janet Frame* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1977), p.9. See also Patrick Evans, 'The Case of the Disappearing Author', *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 11 (1993), 11-20 (p. 13).

²¹⁸ Evans, *Janet Frame*, p. 8. See also Patrick Evans, "'Farthest From The Heart": The Autobiographical Parables of Janet Frame', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 27.1 (Spring 1981), 31-42 (p. 31).

²¹⁹ *Frameworks: Contemporary Criticism on Janet Frame*, ed. by Jan Cronin and Simone Drichel (Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi, 2009), p. xi.

consequence of positioning herself as observer: namely, that there is necessarily a moral and political element to her work. Because her material is her observable social world, the moral and political questions present in that world are inescapably translated into her fictional creation. Atwood's profuse commentary on this point, expounded throughout her critical text *Second Words*, can be condensed as follows:

I believe that fiction writing is the guardian of the moral and ethical sense of community [...] fiction is one of the few forms we have left through which we may examine our society not in its particular but in its typical aspects; through which we can see ourselves and the ways in which we behave towards each other, through which we can see others and judge them and ourselves. [...] There's no such thing as value-free novel writing. Creation does not exist in a vacuum, and a novelist is either depicting or exposing some of the values of the society in which he or she lives. [...] The novel is a moral instrument. *Moral* implies political, and traditionally the novel has been used not only as a vehicle for social commentary but as a vehicle for political commentary as well. [...] By 'politics' I do not mean how you voted in the last election, although that is included. I mean who is entitled to do what to whom, with impunity; who profits by it; and who therefore eats what. Such material enters a writer's work not because the writer is or is not consciously political but because a writer is an observer, a witness, and such observations are the air he breathes. They are the air all of us breathe; the only difference is that the author looks, and then writes down what he sees.²²⁰

Though her work is always political, Atwood does not mean that books are moral or political arguments per se, for 'literature transcends ideology'.²²¹ They explore moral political issues, rather than urging a particular moral or political perspective. She states: 'Social and political forms get translated into poetry. If you want to change the world, you do not choose poetry as the means of accomplishing it.'²²² In other words, while her writing necessarily contains a moral and political element, it isn't meant to achieve a moral or political end. Further, Atwood, suspicious of labels,²²³ is firmly against aligning herself with specific political movements — a stance she takes both in her general critical work and in practice when discussing her own work. As recently as 6 September 2010 Atwood has blogged that while she will sign a petition for a cause she believes in, 'I do not want to be the poster person for

²²⁰ *Second Words*, pp. 346, 346, 418, 353, 394. Atwood's italics. See also: p. 15; *Conversations*, pp. 137, 138, 204. See Sullivan, p. 139 as to the genesis of Atwood's belief that writing is a political act.

²²¹ *Writing with Intent*, p. 318.

²²² *Conversations*, p. 119. See also: pp. 5, 56, 107, 118. For Atwood's argument that books are not moral or political tracts see: *Second Words*, pp. 174, 175

²²³ *Conversations*, pp. 139, 150, 201.

it'.²²⁴ The writer's involvement in a political movement 'May be good for the movement, but it has yet to be demonstrated that it's good for the writer'.²²⁵ Atwood explains:

Writers, as writers, are not propagandists or examples of social trends or preachers or politicians [...] no good writer wants to be merely a transmitter of some else's ideology, no matter how fine that ideology may be. The aim of propaganda is to convince, and to spur people to action; the aim of writing is to create a plausible and moving imaginative world, and to create it from words.²²⁶

The political movement which critics and readers most often align Atwood with is feminism. Her response has always been to affirm her role as observer, and distance herself from feminism as a movement though her texts undeniably explore feminist issues:

Novelists works from observations of life. A lot of the things that one observes as a novelist looking at life indicate that women are not treated equally. But that comes from observation. It doesn't come from ideology [...] I think it's [the Women's Movement] been a very good thing and I was happy to see it. But it's very different from saying that what you write is embodying somebody's party line.²²⁷

In addition to Atwood's understanding of her role as author, a particular persona also emerges from her interventions into the mythology that surrounds her; that persona — like the one donned by Frame — is the trickster. Again the ideas behind this persona are those of slipperiness, duplicity, cleverness, playfulness, and ultimately manipulation. One cannot help but notice the appropriateness of such a persona for an author whose first critical text (*Survival*) was published by Anansi Press ('Anansi' being 'the West African spider god who'd created the world and then degenerated into a Trickster').²²⁸ The emergence of Atwood as trickster from her interviews and critical work is four-fold.

Firstly, Atwood (echoing Frame's comments to McLeod)²²⁹ destabilises the reliability of her interview answers by insisting that interviews themselves are fictions:

²²⁴ *The Year of the Flood (Official Blog)*, [accessed 19 September 2010]. Atwood's political intervention in the debate on copyright in Canada is perhaps an exception to this stance, though an understandable one given the effects of the issue upon her livelihood. Atwood appeared 'at the House of Commons before the federal Heritage Committee, representing the Writers Union of Canada and the League of Canadian Poets' to argue that 'reproducing intellectual property without permission from its owner amounts to theft' ('Eyes Wide Shut: Atwood, Bill C-32, and the Rights of the Author', p. 49).

²²⁵ *Second Words*, p. 190.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 203. See also: *Conversations*, p. 139.

²²⁷ *Conversations*, p. 140. See also p. 139; Sullivan, p. 247; 'No woman writer wants to be overlooked and undervalued for being a woman; but few, it seems, wish to be defined solely by gender, or constrained by loyalties to it alone' (*Writing with Intent*, p. 83).

Cf. Frame's response: 'asked in an interview how she felt about being taken up by feminists, she responded: "They have converted me..."' (Carole Ferrier, *The Janet Frame Reader* (London: The Women's Press Ltd, 1995), p. 16).

²²⁸ Sullivan, p. 199

²²⁹ Quoted earlier at p. 24. See also: Frame's comments to other interviewers quoted at p. 24.

Interviews are an art form in themselves. As such, they're fictional and arranged. The illusion that what you're getting is the straight truth from the writer and accurate in every detail is false. The fact is that most writers can't remember the answers to some of the questions they get asked during interviews, so they make up the answers. A lot of the questions are about things they don't usually think about, or if they do think about them, they don't think about them at the time of writing. Any memory you have of what you did at the moment of writing is just that, a memory. Like all memories, it's usually a revision, not the unadulterated experience itself.

Also, writers frequently conceal things. They either don't want them known, or they think of them as trade secrets they don't want to give away, or they are hooked on some sort of critical theory and they wish to make it appear that their work fits inside the perimeter of that theory. Let's just state at the beginning that interviews as the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth are suspect. They're fictions.²³⁰

Thus while Atwood will readily answer questions, she urges one to approach those answers with caution. Again, we have the Liar's Paradox. A veil of doubt necessarily descends upon her verbal commentary, as one suffers the uncertainty of wondering whether Atwood was simply 'making up' the answer to a question, or if indeed her answer was designed to conceal something.

Secondly, there are some subjects about which Atwood states she will *not* answer questions or write commentary, namely her own books. In 1994 she told interviewer Hilde Staels: 'If I did an analysis of my own book, that would be counterproductive too, because some people would take it as the word of God and other people would then quarrel with my interpretation of my own book.'²³¹ Yet while repeatedly and decisively claiming that 'I don't want to make myself the subject of my own criticism',²³² Atwood in fact *does* often give interview answers which provide analysis of her own texts and indeed do have the potential to become the definitive reading of that text. For example, in the same interview from which the preceding statement is taken, she goes on to give an analysis of the psyche and actions of the protagonist in *Surfacing*, she specifies and explains the genre within which she is working with that particular novel, and even applies her theories regarding 'the great Canadian victim complex' (which essentially forms the basis of her critical text *Survival*) to the protagonist. Atwood actually goes so far as to direct the interviewer away from their initial lines of inquiry and zero in on what is at the core of the text:

²³⁰ *Conversations*, p. 191. Note how these comments as to the author not having the answer and being forced to make one up echo Frame's comments to McCracken quoted at p. 24. See also: *Conversations*, p. 235; *Writing with Intent*, p. 81

²³¹ Staels, p. 207. See also: *Conversations*, pp. 11, 18, 39, 105.

²³² *Conversations*, p. 11.

All the things that you've been talking about are really just the jam on the sandwich, because the interesting thing in that book is the ghost, and that's what I like. And the other stuff is there, it's quite true, but it is a condition; it isn't what the book is about.²³³

Her actions form a pattern which is repeated throughout many other interviews: for instance in the interview with Hilde Staels, Atwood proceeds to give an analysis of one of the central characters in her novel *The Robber Bride* 'in Jungian terms'.²³⁴ Perhaps Atwood was right then, to warn us not to blindly trust in the veracity of her interview answers.

Thirdly and finally, Atwood employs a blanket 'opt out' by positioning herself as a novelist, not as a critic. Atwood persistently reminds us that she is 'not an academic',²³⁵ 'not a scholar or historian',²³⁶ 'not primarily a critic',²³⁷ 'not a [...] literary theoretician'.²³⁸ Indeed at times she deliberately steps outside of academic convention, and draws attention to this fact: 'It is usual for a critic to present some general conclusions at the end of an effusion such as this. I'm not sure that I have any to offer; as I noted, I'm a mere collector.'²³⁹ Her critical activities 'necessarily come second' to her fictional pursuits, hence the title of one critical collection, *Second Words*. Rather Atwood locates herself as 'writer of fiction and poetry',²⁴⁰ and professes that 'such people are notoriously subjective in their reading'.²⁴¹ Accept my work as a critic, she seems to be saying, but do not judge me by a critic's standards. Yet at times she seems at pains to point out that her work is in fact worthy of such standards; with somewhat scathing wit she points out her extensive academic training (at an Ivy League college no less), her mastery of language, and thereby her fierce intelligence:

My lack of respectability I have on good authority: the authority, in fact, of the male academics at the University of Victoria, in British Columbia [...] So I'm giving you advance warning that everything you are about to hear is not academically respectable. The point of view I'm presenting is that of a practising novelist, inhabitant of New Grub Street for many years, not that of the Victorianist I spent four years at

²³³ *Conversations*, p. 17. In later interviews Atwood further states that the narrator in *Surfacing* is unreliable, and again applies the principles from *Survival* to that fictional text (*Conversations*, pp. 212, 189).

²³⁴ Staels p. 208. Further examples of this gap are given in Chapter 2 at p. 70. Atwood's practice in this respect should be contrasted with Frame's — one will find very few instances of Frame discussing her own fiction in any specificity or depth, indeed I believe such instances are probably limited to the following: *An Angel at my Table*, pp. 250-251 (re: the genesis of the characters in *Owls Do Cry*); Dowrick (re: *Living in the Maniototo*); Alley (re: *The Carpathians*); McLeod (re: *The Carpathians*). Even then, Frame's comments are relatively short.

²³⁵ *Conversations*, p. 53.

²³⁶ *Curious Pursuits*, p. 71.

²³⁷ *Second Words*, p. 11. See also: Sullivan, p. 146.

²³⁸ *Negotiating with the Dead*, p. xviii. See also: *Strange Things*, pp. 1, 6, 10; Margaret Atwood, 'Survival, then and now', *Maclean's*, 112.26 (1 July 1999), 54-58.

²³⁹ *Second Words*, p. 251. Critic Walter Pache specifically acknowledges this fact: see my discussion at p. 86 of Chapter 2.

²⁴⁰ *Curious Pursuits*, p. 71. See also: *Strange Things*, p. 10; 'Survival, then and now'.

²⁴¹ *Curious Pursuits*, p. 71.

Harvard learning to be; though the Victorianism does creep in, as you can already see. So I will not even mention metonymy and synecdoche, except right now, just to impress you and let you know that I know they exist.²⁴²

Thus Atwood is a writer who refuses the label ‘critic’, but writes books of criticism, a writer who declares that she will not analyse her books, but in fact does so extensively. There is consequently a gap between Atwood’s stated principles and her actual practice, implying a degree of manipulation, of trickiness.

However while Frame’s persona as trickster appears to be deliberately cultivated by Frame — she wants to position herself as a trickster, wants us to realise that she’s a trickster — the emergence of Atwood’s trickster persona (at least in terms of these first three instances) is somewhat different. Atwood does want us to know that her interview answers are unreliable, but her motivation seems to be a desire to be unaccountable for her answers, a desire to be free of the need to justify them (which is peculiar given that she can carry a strong argument), rather than a desire to point out her un-trustworthiness in order to cultivate a particular image. Likewise her motivation in positioning herself as novelist and definitively not a critic appears to be the same; she chooses the freedom of ‘Novelist’ over the academic standards to which she could be held accountable as ‘Critic’. As Sullivan puts it, she is ‘wily, refusing to be cornered’.²⁴³ Meanwhile, the gap between her stated principle of not answering questions about her fiction, and her actual practice of doing so, appears to be a gap born of genuine intentions — she *appears* to genuinely wish to avoid commenting on her texts, and there are instances where she declines to answer questions about them,²⁴⁴ however in other cases she simply falls prey to the insistent questioning of the interviewer.²⁴⁵

This is not to say that Atwood as trickster is solely an unintended product of Atwood’s critical and non-fiction endeavours. In her repeated portrayal of herself as double,²⁴⁶ Atwood

²⁴² *Second Words*, p. 412. See also: p. 417. Atwood also makes her erudition plain in ‘Survival, then and now’.

²⁴³ Sullivan, p. 8. See also: ‘I learned to be adept at not being cornered’ (Sullivan, p. 52. Quoting a 1983 interview with Atwood).

²⁴⁴ For example, see: ‘I just can’t be that analytical about my own work [...] Make of it what you will’ (*Conversations*, p. 18).

²⁴⁵ For example, see: *Conversations*, p. 19. I must, however, pause to note my reluctance in referring to Atwood as ‘falling prey’ to anyone or anything: she is ferociously intelligent and — as previously detailed — acutely aware of her presentation of self. Though for all appearances it seems that her comments are authentic, the possibility that Atwood is manipulating her audience is always in the back of my mind.

²⁴⁶ See especially: *Negotiating with the Dead*, Chapter 2. For a playful rendering of Atwood as double see: ‘Interview with Margaret Atwood’, in *Margaret Atwood, the essential guide*, ed. by Reynolds and Noakes, pp. 11-25. Regarding the Peggy/Margaret dichotomy (Atwood, whose mother is also named Margaret, was always — and continues to be — known to friends and family as Peggy) see: *Margaret Atwood: A Biography*, pp. 19-

is deliberately engendering the trickster persona: she even refers to her double as 'slippery',²⁴⁷ thus owning her possession of trickster characteristics. Atwood states that 'The mere act of writing splits the self into two'.²⁴⁸ Elaborating, she continues:

By *two*, I mean the person who exists when no writing is going forward — the one who walks the dog, eats bran for regularity, takes the car in to be washed, and so forth — and that other, more shadowy and altogether more equivocal personage who shares the same body, and who, when no one is looking, takes it over and uses it to commit the actual writing. [...] The author is the name on the books. I'm the other one.²⁴⁹

Thus Atwood is at once, 'Little Red Ridinghood' and 'the wolf'.²⁵⁰ That Atwood makes this division between selves again highlights the fact that it is the story of the 'name on the books' (the writer Margaret Atwood) that she divulges in her autobiographical writings, not that of the person 'who walks the dog' (the private Peggy Atwood). Importantly, Atwood has referred to 'Tricksters and illusionists' as 'those who live in two realities',²⁵¹ thereby firmly (and intentionally) positioning her doubled self as trickster. When reviewing her own book *Second Words* for *The Globe and Mail* in 1982 (an overtly tricky act in itself), Atwood signed herself 'Margarets Atwood' and referred to herself as 'the Atwood committee',²⁵² thus emphasising and playing on her projected multiplicity of self. The genesis of this multiplicity of self dates back to Atwood's childhood:

When the family returned to Ottawa in the colder months of the winter, Margaret watched her mother put on 'a whole other identity than the one she wore in the north woods.' As a child in the forties she could see that, when her mother came to the city and put on dresses, she put on much more as well. 'And I suppose from that I got the idea that the thing wasn't set, wasn't determined, you could rearrange yourself, you could change your presentation. Nor did it have anything particularly life-threatening to do with your essence. You could do several things, be several things, have several appearances and remain the same person.'²⁵³

20, 327-328. See also: 'Early on, Margaret had made a distinction in her mind. She had two lives: her work and her personal life' (Sullivan, p. 161).

²⁴⁷ *Negotiating with the Dead*, p. 31.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 30, 32. Atwood's italics.

²⁵⁰ Sullivan, p. 330 (Quoting a 1996 interview with Atwood from *The New York Times*).

²⁵¹ *Strange Things*, p. 58.

²⁵² Margarets Atwood, 'Review of *Second Words*', in *Critical Essays on Margaret Atwood*, ed. by Judith McCombs (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1988), pp. 251-253 (pp. 251, 252). See also: *Margaret Atwood: A Biography*, pp. 265-266.

²⁵³ Sullivan, p. 37. Sullivan is quoting from a 1986 interview with Atwood that was published in *Vogue*. It is important to note that implicit in this quote, and in Atwood's presentation of herself as double, is the notion that there is no one 'true' self; Margaret Atwood is multiple selves, all at once. See also: 'I am a different person (not even slightly but radically different) with each person I know. It is hard when two of them are in the same room. I feel as though I am being pulled apart' (Sullivan, p. 221. Quoting a 1964 letter from Atwood to Al Purdy).

Atwood, having reviewed *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth and Art*,²⁵⁴ is well versed in the mythology of the trickster: 'What an ambiguous creature trickster is! He's cunning personified, a sleight-of-hand artist and a cheat.'²⁵⁵ By deliberately positioning herself as trickster she is therefore consciously locating herself within a particular tradition of artists:

Tricksters aren't the only kind of artists who exist, but there's a healthy population of trickster artists. Picasso and Marcel Duchamp — he of the urinal as found art — are just a couple [...] Such artists can be mere lightweight playful brats, but they can also be those who come along when a tradition has become too set in its ways, too orderly, too Apollonian, and shake it out of its rut. And artists of whatever sort need trickster's help from time to time: When you're blocked or stuck, take an aimless walk and let your mind off its leash and call on trickster. He's the opener of dreams, of roads, and of possibilities.²⁵⁶

With respect to her positioning of herself as double, Atwood not only deliberately cultivates the trickster image, but simultaneously uses the position as a further way to access a position of unaccountability. She as much as admits this: 'On the one hand this [notion of the writer as double] is a convenient way for a writer to wriggle out of responsibility, and you should pay no attention to it. Yet on the other hand, it is quite true.'²⁵⁷ Like Frame's confusing (tricky) circular constructions of herself (the imposter comments, the tension between ordinary and trickster Frame), Atwood therefore leaves us on unstable ground by undermining her own argument, then yet again reiterating it. She thus intensifies the level of uncertainty engendered by her insistence that interviews are fictions, as the question moves from 'can I trust what she is saying' to 'who is even saying that?'

Indeed the correlation between the constructions of self offered by Frame and Atwood are striking. Both position themselves as observers (and consequently share a view as to the use of biographical material in fiction). Both also position themselves as tricksters. And both project dualistic schemas with reference to their position as writers — Atwood is double, while Frame journeys between 'this world' and Mirror City.²⁵⁸ In Chapter 2 I will explore the effect that these versions of self, these interventions into the author's respective mythological discourses, have had upon the critical traditions and narratives pertaining to each author's fiction.

²⁵⁴ By Lewis Hyde. See: *Writing with Intent*, p 177.

²⁵⁵ *Writing with Intent*, p. 179.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

²⁵⁷ *Negotiating with the Dead*, p. 32.

²⁵⁸ See especially: Frame on living a 'double life', moving between her 'inner world and an outer world' (McCracken, p. 20).

CHAPTER 2

...BUT DO THE CRITICS LISTEN?

THE EFFECT OF AUTHORIAL COMMENTARY ON CRITICAL TRADITIONS

Over the years, the fiction of Janet Frame and Margaret Atwood work has been approached from many angles. With reference to Frame, Marc Delrez writes of the ‘multitude of critical articles approaching her work from every imaginable perspective’.¹ Similarly, Coral Ann Howells stresses that Atwood’s work has been examined ‘from a variety of perspectives and with very different emphases’.² In this chapter I will be examining the relationship between the authors’ commentary discussed in Chapter 1, and these varied critical approaches to their work. I will be identifying those critical perspectives which are affected by each author’s commentary, and investigating the nature of that effect. Are critical narratives of the author’s work influenced by, or reacting against, the commentary outlined in Chapter 1? Or is there some other relationship at play between the writer’s commentary and the critical readings of her work? My focus here will be on the effect of Frame’s commentary regarding her compositional processes, her concepts of ‘this world’ and ‘that world’, and *Mirror City*. I will also examine the influence of her representations of self as ordinary and trickster. Turning to Atwood, I will track the effect of *Survival* in particular, and identify an ensuing narrative of Atwood as success story. Finally I will interrogate the critical reaction to Atwood’s four-fold positioning of self as trickster.

It is important to reiterate at this point out that I am looking to the authors’ influence on overarching critical narratives and traditions, on “‘grand narratives’”,³ rather than examining very particular or individual approaches to their work. It is also important to note, as the editors of *Frameworks* have done, that there is an ‘inevitable discrepancy between the [...] over-arching narratives [...] and the polyvocal critical reality’ of Frame studies.⁴ Likewise, the very size of Atwood studies — ‘a huge international [...] academic critical industry’⁵ —

¹ Marc Delrez, *Manifold Utopia: The Novels of Janet Frame* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), p. x.

² Coral Ann Howells, ‘Introduction’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, ed. by Coral Ann Howells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp.1-11 (p. 1). Howells also notes ‘the variety of emphases in current Atwood scholarship’ (p. 2).

³ Jan Cronin and Simone Drichel, ‘Introduction’, in *Frameworks: Contemporary Criticism on Janet Frame*, ed. by Jan Cronin and Simone Drichel (Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi, 2009), pp. ix-xxvii (p. xi).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Howells, ‘Introduction’, p. 2.

ensures that it too demonstrates a polyvocal critical reality from which the overarching narratives identified here should be distinguished.

*

2.1 Reading Janet Frame

The first major account of Frame's work came with Patrick Evan's 1977 text *Janet Frame*;⁶ this was followed by a collection of critical essays on Frame in 1978, *Bird Hawk Bogie*.⁷ Both texts appeared after the publication of 'Beginnings' in 1965 and prior to the publication of Frame's three volumes of autobiography. She had granted some interviews by this stage (most notably to Claire Henderson in 1970), but it was during the 1980s that Frame was to give the bulk of her interviews (the Chenery, Sellwood, and King interviews being the major exceptions) and to publish her autobiographies. Yet it was only really in the 1990s (and beyond) that Frame criticism flourished.⁸ One might perhaps expect that criticism to be dominated by references to Frame's interviews and autobiographies, but as we shall see, that has not been the case. Overarching narratives indicate that while critics seemed to latch onto Frame's representations regarding her compositional processes, her representations of self — particularly of herself as ordinary — have been less influential. This disregard may evidence a backlash against the biographically inflected criticism pioneered by Evans in the 1970s. Or, more specifically, it may simply indicate that Frame's portrait of self as ordinary is not helpful in shedding light on her texts.

2.1.1 Haunting Binaries: The Legacy of 'This' and 'That' and Mirror City

'Beginnings' was published in 1965. The distinction between 'this' and 'that' world described therein prompted critical accounts of Frame's work which focused on binaries.⁹

⁶ Lorna M. Irvine, *Critical Spaces: Margaret Laurence and Janet Frame* (USA: Camden House, 1995), p. 25. Useful accounts of the development of Frame criticism are to be found in Irvine's text and the Introductions to *Manifold Utopia* and (most recently) *Frameworks*.

⁷ *Bird, Hawk, Bogie: Essays on Janet Frame*, ed. by Jeanne Delbaere (Denmark: Dungaroo Press, 1978). Updated and republished as: *The Ring of Fire: Essays on Janet Frame*, ed. by Jeanne Delbaere (Australia: Dungaroo Press, 1992).

⁸ Irvine notes the dearth of criticism to appear in the 1980s (Irvine, p. 53).

⁹ I am not alone in noticing a critical reliance on binaries. For example, Delrez notes 'the received distinction between "us" and "them", which is central in the standard reading of Frame's work' (*Manifold Utopia*, pp. xx).

The binary most frequently relied on has been the individual versus society: there is a 'popular conception of Frame's work as concerned with the plight of the artistic individual in a small-minded society'.¹⁰ Variations on this theme existed of course, such as the opposition between inner and outer worlds (the artistic individual, or marginalised visionary, being associated with the inner world of imagination, whilst society perpetuated a materialistic outlook). Such readings, which abounded in the 1970s, were rooted in the duality of Frame's schema; they tended towards the rigidly dichotomous, and had little time for any sense of fluidity between the two 'worlds'. For example, Laurence Jones's 1970 article, which investigates the 'basic dualism of Janet Frame's world'¹¹ in *Owls Do Cry*, states that 'The opposition of these two realms [...] is ultimately tragic [...] For the gap between the two cannot be bridged, there is no reconciliation possible'.¹² For Jones it is indeed a rigid dichotomy — Frame's characters live solely in one world or the other. Importantly, Jones quotes the relevant passage from 'Beginnings' and then infuses his account of Frame's fiction with the division drawn from that essay — the central character of Daphne, he writes, 'contrasts the values of "this" world and "that" one'.¹³ Lorna Irvine notes that Jones's piece is 'a convincing extension of Frame's own division between "this" and "that" world. [Jones shows how] Other divisions in the novel arise from this basic one'.¹⁴

Anna Rutherford's 1975 article also quotes the relevant passage from 'Beginnings' (as its epigraph), and proceeds to 'examine Janet Frame's two worlds'.¹⁵ Rutherford argues that Frame's work is 'concerned with the plight of the individual in a conformist society'.¹⁶ Utilising Frame's descriptors of 'this' and 'that', she extrapolates from this binary: 'In "this" world individuality is an affliction rather than a blessing [...] conform or be annihilated.'¹⁷ As with Jones's piece, there is a rigidity to her presentation of this binary — one cannot coexist in both 'this' and 'that' world, one conforms to 'this' world or is annihilated from it,

See also: Carole Ferrier, 'Dualities and differences revisited: recent books on Janet Frame', *Hecate*, 20.2 (1994), 251-258.

¹⁰ Jan Cronin, 'Owls Do Cry & Living in the Maniototo: Janet Frame', *New Zealand Herald*, 16 July 2007 <http://www.nzherald.co.nz/books/news/article.cfm?c_id=134&objectid=10445829> [accessed 22 July 2010].

¹¹ Laurence Jones, 'No Cowslip's Bell in Waimaru: the Personal Vision of *Owls Do Cry*', *Landfall*, 24 (1970), 280-296 (p. 281).

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 283.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 286.

¹⁴ Irvine, p. 20.

¹⁵ Anna Rutherford, 'Janet Frame's Divided and Distinguished Worlds', *World Literature Written in English*, 14.1 (1975), 51-68 (p. 52). Republished in: *Bird, Hawk, Bogie*, ed. by Delbaere, pp. 24-34; *The Ring of Fire*, ed. by Delbaere, pp. 41-54.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

banished to the realm of 'that' world. Two years after the appearance of Rutherford's article, Patrick Evans again evokes this rigidity when he echoes Rutherford's reference to annihilation: 'the persona of her writing is always the individual self besieged by a deadly, destructive world which has no other purpose than the annihilation of the individual.'¹⁸

Bird, Hawk, Bogie: Essays On Janet Frame shows a concentration of dualistic readings of Frame's work. Rutherford's essay is reprinted therein. The collection's Introduction, written by Jeanne Delbaere, positions Frame's work in terms of a 'dual reality'.¹⁹ Referencing 'this' and 'that' world from 'Beginnings', Delbaere states that an:

Early consciousness of a split world, with those who conform on the one side and those you venture beyond the agreed boundaries of society's conventions on the other, was to become a determining factor in Janet Frame's general outlook.²⁰

The collection also contains contributions from Robert Robertson, Victor Dupont and Patrick Evans, all of whom involve binaries in their approach to Frame's work. Robertson's essay picks up on an aspect of 'Beginnings' other than the obvious dualism of 'this' and 'that' world. He utilises Frame's story of the bird, the hawk, and the bogie as a vehicle for reading her fiction, proclaiming it to be a 'fable that would guide the development of her work':²¹

For Robertson the bird is the sensitive individual; the hawk is at once the unimaginative society and the external forces of nature that threaten him; the bogie is the 'art which eats up both for eating up the bird of inspiration or imagination.'²²

Whilst this is a tripartite structure, at its core is the binary of the individual versus society.

Dupont does not specifically quote from or refer to 'Beginnings', or to 'this' and 'that world' however, he does frame the text in question (*Intensive Care*) in terms of the binary of the individual versus society:

Modern society appears not only as a significant background but as a conditioning factor at work on the individual [...] the message of the fable: a protest against all abstract, restrictive definitions of the human norm, a plea for the individual and for non-conformity.²³

¹⁸ Patrick Evans, *Janet Frame* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1977), p. 168. Evans was also to use 'this' and 'that' world as a device for structuring his biography of Frame, a fact which is discussed further at p. 48 of this chapter.

¹⁹ Delbaere, 'Introduction', in *Bird, Hawk, Bogie*, p. 8.

²⁰ Ibid. See also: Irvine, p. 43; *Manifold Utopia*, p. xxvi.

²¹ Robert T. Roberson, 'Bird, Hawk, Bogie: Janet Frame, 1952-62', in *Bird, Hawk, Bogie*, ed. by Delbaere, pp. 15-23 (p. 17). Republished in: *The Ring of Fire*, ed. by Delbaere, pp. 31-40.

²² Delbaere, 'Introduction', in *Bird, Hawk, Bogie*, p. 7. See also: *Manifold Utopia*, p. xxvi.

²³ Victor Dupont, 'Janet Frame's Brave New World: *Intensive Care*', in *Bird, Hawk, Bogie*, ed. by Delbaere, pp. 104-114 (pp. 104, 113). Republished in: *The Ring of Fire*, ed. by Delbaere, pp. 149-160.

Similarly, Evans, does not explicitly refer to ‘this’ or ‘that’ world, but does so implicitly. Quoting from ‘Beginnings’ he reveals Frame’s reading habits and writes that:

These works belonged not to civilization and society (which had cast Grimm and Dowson onto the Oamaru rubbish tip), but to her world and her family’s beyond the pale of society [...] the artist began to see growing not simply weeds but words, utterance, the language of insight and truth.²⁴

He goes on to assert Frame’s personal ‘refusal to “enter” the everyday world that she writes about’,²⁵ implicit in which is the division between ‘this’ world and ‘that’. He also, in a more explicit fashion — and one which actually refers to Frame’s work rather than to her person — cites the ‘fundamental division of Janet Frame’s artistic vision’.²⁶

A conflation of dualistic and biographical approaches to both Frame’s life and to her fiction is evident in Evans’s essay from *Bird, Hawk, Bogie*. Indeed, in some cases these early dualistic readings of Frame’s work in terms of the individual versus society are also biographical readings.²⁷ Evan’s critical work is probably the most notable example of the blurring of these two approaches, although others such as Gina Mercer and Kenneth Bragan have to an extent adopted such an approach.²⁸ The conflation of these approaches situates Frame herself as the individual struggling against society — hers is ‘the vision of the outsider’²⁹ — and thereby associates Frame with the ‘outsider’ characters of her fiction. Lawrence Jones’s aforementioned essay is a key example: he writes of ‘Daphne, mad in society’s terms, but in the terms of the inner realm the pure in heart who is seeking after true treasure [...] a fate that could have been imposed on Janet Frame herself’.³⁰ He thus links the plight of Frame’s outsider character with Frame’s own life experience, citing ‘Beginnings’ as his source of biographical information.

The biographical nature of these readings — like the dualism they focus on — in part at least, originates from Frame’s ‘this’ and ‘that’ world distinction, and relies heavily upon that distinction in terms of formulating theories of her work. Maria Wikse notes:

²⁴ Patrick Evans, ‘At the Edge of the Alphabet’, in *Bird, Hawk, Bogie*, ed. by Delbaere, pp. 53-62 (p. 55). Republished in: *The Ring of Fire*, ed. by Delbaere, pp. 82-91.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

²⁷ I must note that Winston Rhodes’s 1972 article is an exception to the early biographical readings of Frame’s work. Rhodes specifically argues against reading her work biographically. H. Winston Rhodes, ‘Preludes and Parables: A Reading of Janet Frame’s Novels’, *Landfall*, 26 (1972), 135-146.

²⁸ See the discussion of critical accounts by these scholars later in this chapter at pp. 49, 51.

²⁹ Evans, *Janet Frame*, p. 205. See also: Gina Mercer, *Janet Frame: Subversive Fictions* (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1994), pp. 1, 8; Ken Bragan, ‘Survival after the Cold Touch of Death: The Resurrection Theme in the Writing of Janet Frame’, *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 11 (1993), 132-143.

³⁰ Jones, p. 288.

In biographical readings of Frame's novels, much was, and is, made of this division into 'this' and 'that' world [...] For instance, in *Janet Frame*, marking the importance of Frame's alleged madness, Evans calls his two biographical chapters 'Life in "This" World' and 'Life in "That" World' [...] Evans describes this division — that uses Frame's stay in mental asylums as a watershed — 'in which she moved from "this" world (the everyday world of society with its common values and mass culture) to "that" world (the private and possibly idiosyncratic world of the gifted, imaginative individual)'.³¹

Evan's biographical readings were propounded early on in the development of Frame criticism by his 1977 monograph *Janet Frame*. As noted in Chapter 1 he cites the difficulty of her work as his justification for this approach.³² Evans argues that biography provides 'context' for the work, that in light of her biography Frame's books become 'more easily understood'.³³ He continues to propound this biographical approach with later essays such as "'Farthest From The Heart": The Autobiographical Parables of Janet Frame',³⁴ 'The Muse as Rough Beast: The autobiography of Janet Frame',³⁵ 'The "Frame effect"',³⁶ 'Dr. Clutha's Book of the World: Janet Paterson Frame, 1924-2004',³⁷ and 'The Book of Frame'.³⁸

As discussed in Chapter 1, 'Mirror City' was expounded upon in *The Envoy to Mirror City* in 1985. In that text the 'this' and 'that' world distinction was developed by Frame into an explanation of her compositional process which stressed fluidity and movement between these two 'worlds'. As stated in Chapter 1, Frame makes it clear that 'this world' and 'that world' are not harshly dichotomous; rather she writes of 'the closeness, the harmony, and not the separation of literature [...] and life'.³⁹ Despite Frame's insistence upon the ability to be 'totally present'⁴⁰ in both worlds at once, readings of Frame's work which stressed binaries and dualism initially seemed to persist in various articles and texts after the publication of Frame's last volume of autobiography. In 1988 Carol MacLennan emphasises the individual versus society, examining the extent to which Frame's characters conform or deviate from a

³¹ Maria Wikse, *Materialisations of a Woman Writer: Investigating Janet Frame's Biographical Legend* (Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2006), p. 161. See also Irvine, p. 16.

³² An overarching narrative of difficulty in Frame studies is something which I explore later in this chapter in relation to the critical rejection of Frame's portrait of herself as ordinary, and the critical positioning of Frame as trickster. See: pp. 63-64.

³³ Evans, *Janet Frame*, p. 9.

³⁴ Patrick Evans, "'Farthest From The Heart": The Autobiographical Parables of Janet Frame', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 27.1 (Spring 1981), 31-42.

³⁵ Patrick Evans, 'The Muse as Rough Beast: The autobiography of Janet Frame', *Untold*, 6 (Spring 1986), 1-10.

³⁶ Patrick Evans, 'The "Frame effect"', *New Zealand Books*, (June 2004) 13-14.

³⁷ Patrick Evans, 'Dr. Clutha's Book of the World: Janet Paterson Frame, 1924-2004', *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 22 (2004), 15-30.

³⁸ Patrick Evans, 'The Book of Frame', *New Zealand Listener*, 5-11 May 2007.

³⁹ Janet Frame, *To the Is-Land* (Auckland: Vintage Collector's Edition, 1994), p. 130.

⁴⁰ Janet Frame, *An Angel at my Table* (Auckland: Vintage Collector's Edition, 1994), p. 196.

position of ‘normal’ in society.⁴¹ Mark Williams also employs the binary of individual versus society, writing: ‘In Frame’s work there is a profound sense of the spiritual bankruptcy of the many, the ordinary, coupled with a compulsion by her elect narrators to undertake journeys inwards in search of the “true reality.”’⁴² In 1992 *Bird, Hawk, Bogie* was republished as *The Ring of Fire*. The new edition included those dualistic narratives of Frame referred to earlier (Rutherford, Robertson, Dupont and Evans), as well as an article by Vincent O’Sullivan which had not appeared in the original publication. He too tapped into the perceived binary of the individual versus society in Frame’s work:

There are simply *us*, who know, [...] and *them*, which is everybody else who does not. This is what one might call the economy of the gifted victim [...] In almost a dozen books of fiction, then, there is that arguing for authenticity existing only outside society, the denial of any claim that impinges on the supremacy of those privileged and usually very similar central figures.⁴³

A year after the publication of *The Ring of Fire*, an article by Kenneth Bragan emphasising Frame’s own personal survival pits her as an individual confronting the destructive force of society and its institutions. He stresses that ‘an intense and vital inner world’⁴⁴ is what allowed Frame to survive her experiences in mental hospitals and the deaths of her sisters. Bragan’s argument that Frame retreated into her imagination to survive recalls the earlier rigidity of the ‘this’ and ‘that’ world distinction propounded by the likes of Rutherford, in whose account there is little or no sense of fluidity or movement between the two worlds, let alone an ability to straddle both worlds at once as Frame proclaims she does.

However, the fluidity promoted by Frame in her autobiographies was not entirely ignored by critics. W.S. Broughton’s contribution to *The Ring of Fire* (a new essay which had not appeared in *Bird, Hawk, Bogie*) identifies a spectrum or continuum to the ‘this’/‘that’ distinction and recognises Mirror City as a development upon the earlier division of ‘this’ and ‘that’ world:

Literature and life are no longer separated by a rift or a sense of absolute disjunction; rather the reader is invited to accompany the writer in her travels to both worlds, and to experience vicariously both the reminiscences of London and the meetings with the Envoy.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Carol MacLennan, ‘Conformity and Deviance in the Fiction of Janet Frame’, *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 6 (1988), 190-201.

⁴² Mark Williams, *Leaving the Highway: Six Contemporary New Zealand Novelists* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1990), p.54. See also: pp. 31, 34, 35.

⁴³ Vincent O’Sullivan, ‘Exiles of the Mind — The Fictions of Janet Frame’, in *The Ring of Fire*, ed. by Delbaere, pp. 24-30 (pp. 26-27). O’Sullivan’s italics.

⁴⁴ Bragan, p. 135.

⁴⁵ W.S., Broughton, ‘“With Myself as Myself”: A reading of Janet Frame’s Autobiography’, in *The Ring of Fire*, ed. by Delbaere, pp. 221-232 (p. 231).

Though it must be noted that Broughton takes the autobiographies themselves as the texts to be examined by his article, and so his acknowledgement that ‘this’ world and ‘that’ are not mutually exclusive does not go so far as to affect criticism of Frame’s fiction. Wikse also acknowledges that Frame’s ‘autobiographies continuously obscure the division between this world, “reality”, and that world, “fiction”’.⁴⁶ Yet, like Broughton, Wikse is analysing the autobiographies themselves (specifically the autobiographies in the context of Frame’s biographical legend), and not Frame’s fiction.

Further to Broughton’s and Wikse’s recognition of Frame’s revision of the original division between ‘this’ and ‘that’ world, an important event in the development of critical narratives of Frame’s work occurred in 1994 with the publication of Gina Mercer’s monograph *Subversive Fictions*. Mercer’s text is built upon emphasising fluidity in Frame’s work; she conceives of Frame’s ‘works as fluid, multifarious “explorations”’.⁴⁷ Mercer argues that Frame’s imagery in particular stresses fluidity and multiplicity: ‘In their fluid constructions of fictional worlds, their central images of “manifolds” (many folds), “positive chaos” and the many-petalled, seasonally shifting flowers of memory, they enact the multiple’,⁴⁸ and she stresses Frame’s ‘celebration of the fluid, multiple possibilities to be found in the feminine’.⁴⁹ However there is little evidence linking Mercer’s focus on fluidity with Frame’s revision of ‘this’ and ‘that’ world into the less dichotomous Mirror City concept. None of the references to the autobiographies in Mercer’s index reveal any discussion of Mirror City or Frame’s claims to existing in both worlds at once. Of particular note, is that there are no references to the autobiographies in Mercer’s Introduction, which is where she sets up her conception of this fluid Frame. Rather, aided by feminist literary theory, she draws that conception from the fiction itself, referring to every one of Frame’s novels within the Introduction. Even in the chapter that Mercer devotes to the autobiographies, there is no real reference to or discussion of ‘this’ and ‘that’ world, or Mirror City. In fact Mercer writes of her ‘lack of critical enthusiasm about Frame’s autobiographies’ and so gives ‘an account of some aspects of their reception, rather than an analysis or “interpretation” of them’.⁵⁰ It certainly does not seem then, that Frame’s autobiographies impelled Mercer to take a critical direction which

⁴⁶ Wikse, p. 161.

⁴⁷ Cronin and Drichel, ‘Introduction’, p. xv.

⁴⁸ *Subversive Fictions*, pp. 5-6.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* p. 225.

emphasises fluidity, or that they have been used to support her readings of Frame's fiction as fluid.

Though Mercer's focus is on multiplicity in Frame's work, her analysis stems from her conviction that Frame's writing's is a reaction against binaries. Mercer argues that rather than espousing binaries, Frame's texts are intended to 'pluralize (hence undo)',⁵¹ binary oppositions. As such, even Mercer's account considers binaries central to Frame's work. She writes that:

Each of [Frame's] works explores some aspect of the binding binary of oppressor and oppressed. In particular she laments, and simultaneously celebrates, all the richness which is destroyed or denied though such systematic oppression.⁵²

Mercer devotes space to examining how dichotomies operate in language,⁵³ and argues that 'Frame writes against the rigidity of such limited dichotomies from her first collection of fiction [...] onwards'.⁵⁴ Mercer's recourse to binaries is also evident as she touches upon the idea that Frame's fiction depicts the individual pitted against society. Relying on biographical information (like Evans before her), she locates Frame as outsider and uses this to inform, explain and fashion her overriding account of Frame's fiction:

Janet Frame has always written from the position of the other. Her perspective is that of the outsider, the marginalised, the oppressed and repressed [...] Frame's autobiographies depict a life in which being regarded as other is the predominant experience [...] it is not surprising, then, that her fiction should be concerned with the plight of the other, the outsider.⁵⁵

Thus even Mercer, for all of her arguments in favour of Frame's fluidity, still locates the author ('marked [...] as different in a society where conformity was crucial')⁵⁶ and her fiction in a position which is defined by dualism. Consequently binaries can be seen continuing to haunt Frame criticism in the early 1990s, indicating that Frame's endeavours in writing against the rigidity of separation between 'this' and 'that' world in her autobiographies have been less effectual than her initial descriptions of those worlds in 'Beginnings'.

A year after Mercer's monograph, the preface and afterword to Carole Ferrier's *The Janet Frame Reader* displays a similar pull between focusing on the newer fluid version of Frame, and the older dichotomous approach. In her biographical sketch Ferrier refers to 'Frame's

⁵¹ Cronin and Drichel, 'Introduction', p. xv.

⁵² *Subversive Fictions*, p. 1.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4. See also Cronin and Drichel, 'Introduction', p. xv.

⁵⁵ *Subversive Fictions*, pp. 1, 8.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

sense of alienation, both personal and literary, within New Zealand society',⁵⁷ invoking the idea of the individual versus society, and locating this approach in Frame's own life story. Yet later Ferrier writes:

To be able to pass *backwards and forwards* through the mirror, communicating about the dream city of the imagination, able to cross without fear from 'this' to 'that' world, can be important for the creative artist.⁵⁸

Here Ferrier, referencing the mirror, and the city of imagination, picks up on the fluidity portrayed in *The Envoy From Mirror City*: she accepts that 'this' and 'that' are not rigid dichotomies, but rather are two points on a spectrum.⁵⁹

Like Ferrier's compilation, Lorna Irvine's catalogue of Frame criticism also appeared in 1995. The latest of Irvine's 'Works Consulted' are dated 1993,⁶⁰ thus she was not cognisant of Mercer's and Ferrier's moves towards a critical approach informed by fluidity. It is perhaps not surprising then, that Irvine's account of the critical reliance on the 'this' and 'that' world dichotomy seems to validate and even endorse such an approach. She writes that:

Critics often mention this psychological division, partly because it points to some of Frame's fictional themes but also because it provides reasons for the author's 'schizophrenic' style of writing, in which the language of the imagination appears to struggle with more mundane language.⁶¹

This sentence, with its reference to schizophrenia and the associated ideas of withdrawal from reality positions Frame's entire approach to fiction as being founded upon a dualism (reality versus schizophrenia). It therefore indicates an acceptance of the existence of binaries in Frame's work. Thus Irvine, having reviewed all criticism available at that time, seems to have been persuaded by the dualistic accounts of Frame's fiction. Irvine, like myself, specifically links the critical observance of binaries in Frame's work back to Frame's own commentary, arguing that her 'comments have focused critical attention on her introverted fictional worlds and the schizophrenic splits apparent in her narrative structures and content'.⁶²

The next major text to be released on Frame's work was Marc Delrez's monograph which came out in 2002; it was the most significant publication in Frame studies since Mercer's

⁵⁷ Carole Ferrier, *The Janet Frame Reader* (London: The Women's Press Ltd, 1995), p. 15.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 221. My italics.

⁵⁹ This quote is also preceded by a reference to *To the Is-land* which invokes an autobiographical context for her comments, indicating that she is in fact responding to Frame's portrait of the ability to move between, and straddle, the two worlds of 'this' and 'that'.

⁶⁰ Irvine, p. 124.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁶² *Ibid.*

Subversive Fictions.⁶³ Delrez, to a greater degree than Mercer, perpetuates a concentration on binaries in Frame's work by using them as a framing device for his interpretation. Notably Delrez, unlike Mercer, explicitly moves away from a biographical approach.⁶⁴ So although he is aware of 'the received distinction between "us" and "them", which is central in the standard reading of Frame's work',⁶⁵ Delrez's recourse to binaries does not situate Frame as the individual pitted against society.⁶⁶ Rather Delrez's focus is on shifting criticism of Frame's work from a consideration of 'this' world (reality), to a concentration on 'that' world; Delrez aims to move away from a social realist approach and instead investigate the 'eclipsed dimensions'⁶⁷ of Frame's work. Referring to Frame's 'own distinction between real and imaginary',⁶⁸ as portrayed in 'Beginnings', Delrez states that:

There is a self-defeating quality about a tradition of commentary which invokes this dichotomy only to remain riveted to descriptions of 'this' world [the world of reality], from which Frame, if one is to trust the artist, departed long ago.⁶⁹

Thus Delrez argues that the focus on reality and realistic depiction to the exclusion of a focus on imagination as a gateway to the 'other dimension'⁷⁰ is what is wrong with Frame criticism, not the use of the dichotomy in the first place. In this way he reinvigorates critical use of the dichotomy presented in 'Beginnings'. While he maintains the existence of binaries in Frame's work, he shifts the focus: 'my suggestion is that it would be worthwhile attempting a deeper venture into "that" world.'⁷¹ Delrez then proceeds to contend that 'this other dimension in Frame's work [...] testifies to a form of utopianism'⁷² and to explore the parameters of that utopianism. Again displaying a critical approach informed by dualism, Delrez states that Frame's utopianism is one of two poles in her work: 'Frame's world is articulated upon a central polarity which constitutes its veritable backbone.'⁷³ He therefore structures his interpretation of Frame's fiction upon *two* sets of binaries — 'this' and 'that' world, and the poles of utopianism and satire.

⁶³ Simone Drichel, "'Signposts to a world that is not even mentioned': Janet Frame's Ethical Transcendence", in *Frameworks*, ed. by Cronin and Drichel, pp. 181-212 (p. 182).

⁶⁴ *Manifold Utopia*, p. viiii. Cf. *Subversive Fictions*, p.8.

⁶⁵ *Manifold Utopia*, p. xx.

⁶⁶ Though note Delrez's comment in an earlier article that 'From her earliest beginnings as a writer, Janet Frame has been preoccupied with [...] the individual in the contemporary world' (Marc Delrez, "'Boundaries and Beyond": Memory as Quest in *The Carpathians*', in *The Ring of Fire*, ed. by Delbaere, pp. 209-220 (p. 209)). See also: Marc Delrez, 'Forbidding Bodies: Avatars of the Physical World in the Work of Janet Frame', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 38.2 (2000), 70-79 (pp. 73, 74).

⁶⁷ 'Forbidding Bodies', p. 70. See also: *Manifold Utopia*, p. xxxi.

⁶⁸ *Manifold Utopia*, p. xiv.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. xv.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*

Thus the critical binaries first instigated by Frame's own commentary in 1965 have continued to inform Frame criticism as recently as within the last ten years. Indeed, Claire Bazin, writing in 2006 (and echoing Mercer's comments from 1994), emphasises Frame's position as outsider, which again recalls the critical narrative of the isolated visionary, the individual struggling against society: 'Frame claims the supremacy of parole (the sign of individuality) over langue (the collective). Her rebellion is through language.'⁷⁴ Accordingly binaries continue to haunt critical accounts of Frame's work. However, the most recent collection of critical essays on Frame's work, *Frameworks* (2009), seems to distance itself from 'the old distinction'⁷⁵ between 'this' world and 'that'. The collection hints at a developing negativity towards the distinction: Jan Cronin, for instance, notes the 'schematic' nature of the 'dichotomous version of Frame'.⁷⁶ Other critics publishing in *Frameworks* appear to have distanced themselves from the 'this'/'that' binary by not referring to it at all.⁷⁷ Time will tell whether this aversion to a dualistic approach to Frame's work will grow to the point that the language of binaries, dualism, and dichotomies is finally erased from Frame criticism altogether — thus far it has proved too tenacious. Janet Frame's earliest piece of commentary, it seems, set a course for critical attention to her work; and deviating from it has proved difficult. Even Frame's own revision of that early commentary, in the form of *Mirror City*, has proved ineffectual in exorcising the ghost of binaries which has haunted Frame studies from their inception.

2.1.2 Janet Frame: Extraordinary Trickster

While Frame's notion of 'this' world and 'that' world has had a major influence on the criticism of her work, her assertions of ordinariness have been resoundingly ignored and rejected by critics: neither Janet Frame, or her work, are viewed as ordinary by critics.

⁷⁴ Claire Bazin, "'From the Rim of the Farthest Circle'", *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 24 (2006), 115-121. (Accessed via University of Auckland Literature Online Database, which is not paginated).

⁷⁵ Cronin and Drichel, 'Introduction', p. xx.

⁷⁶ Jan Cronin, 'Through a Glass Darkly: Reading the Enigmatic Frame', in *Frameworks*, ed. by Cronin and Drichel, pp. 3-24 (p. 5).

⁷⁷ For example, despite Lydia Wevers's article being an account of Frame's 'narrative of self', and Anna Smaill's an examination of Frame's 'personal metaphysic', neither critic references the dichotomous worlds of 'this' and 'that'. See: Lydia Wevers, 'Self Possession: "Things" and Janet Frame's Autobiography', in *Frameworks*, ed. by Cronin and Drichel, pp. 51-66 (p. 53); Anna Smaill, 'Beyond Analogy: Janet Frame and Existential Thought', in *Frameworks*, ed. by Cronin and Drichel, pp. 67-88 (p. 68).

As noted previously, Evan's biographical approach was prompted not only by the material afforded him by 'Beginnings', but by the difficulty of Frame's texts.⁷⁸ Attendant upon this perception of Frame as difficult, is a perception of Frame as not ordinary; rather she is extraordinary and unique, her work needs a special approach, a bending of the rules. The main interviews in which Frame asserted her ordinariness took place in 1973, 1983, 1985, 1988 and 1994 (as cited in Chapter 1). Prior to the bulk of these interviews occurring, Evans was already establishing the critical position described.⁷⁹ Stressing her uniqueness, he pronounced her '*oeuvre* quite unlike any other in English'⁸⁰ as 'she is quite original'.⁸¹ For Evans it is this originality — this difference — that requires the unusual recourse to biographical readings. 'I have broken the rule', he announces, 'which states that a writer's life has nothing to do with a writer's art. I break it because it does not fit the writer: Janet Frame seems to me to dictate a different critical approach.'⁸² Frame's portrait of an ordinary self did little to sway Evans from his perception of Frame's work as extraordinary. Following the publication of the relevant interviews and her autobiographies, he continued to emphasise her originality and attendant greatness:

There just isn't anyone quite like her, and we value this as an expression of some kind of individuality as well as seeing in it a rebellion against the ordinariness of our lives here. [...] Janet Frame seems to me to have come closest to investing meaning in that complex and evanescent term, 'greatness'.⁸³

Evans then, firmly rejects Frame's claims to ordinariness. I have been unable to find evidence of him actually engaging with her claim, even to negate it. It thus appears that he simply ignored it.

Evan's response seems to have set the trend for most other critics of Frame's fiction. The amount of critical work which existed prior to Frame's representations of self is small. However, those critics,⁸⁴ like Evans, were already developing a view of Frame as other than ordinary. (Once more the possibility arises that Frame's portrait of herself as ordinary was

⁷⁸ See: Chapter 2, p. 48 and Chapter 1, p. 35.

⁷⁹ This raises the possibility that Frame's portrait of self as ordinary was in fact reactionary. I have already noted in Chapter 1 (p. 22) that Frame admitted to Levy that she knew of her work's reputation as 'difficult', and the possibility that Frame's portrait of self was a reaction to this knowledge.

⁸⁰ "'Farthest From The Heart'", p. 40. Evans's italics. See also: 'At the Edge of the Alphabet', p. 53; Evans, *Janet Frame*, p. 140.

⁸¹ Evans, *Janet Frame*, p. 195.

⁸² "'Farthest From The Heart'", p. 31. See also: p. 38. For a specific example see: Evans's statement that *The Adaptable Man* is 'an attempt at something which lies beyond the limits of traditional criticism' (Patrick Evans, 'Janet Frame and the Adaptable Novel', *Landfall*, 25 (1971), 448-455 (p. 451)).

⁸³ Patrick Evans, 'The Case of the Disappearing Author', *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 11 (1993), 11-20 (pp. 17, 20). See also: 'Dr. Clutha's Book of the World' pp. 16, 25; 'The "Frame effect"'; 'The Book of Frame'; Irvine, p. 42.

⁸⁴ For example, Jones, Rhodes, Dupont, Delbaere, and Robertson.

reactionary). Generally those critics maintained this view in later writing.⁸⁵ Those who first wrote on Frame after the occurrence of her relevant representations of self, seem to simply have ignored those representations and proceeded to position Frame as other than ordinary. Of the many critics who take this stance on Frame (including Evans), two strands of argument are visible. The first strand stresses Frame's difference, perhaps most famously and extremely articulated by Keri Hulme when she stated that 'Janet Frame is a stream entire unto herself'.⁸⁶ This strand insists that Frame's writing is different, unique, untraditional, individualistic, idiosyncratic, and unable to be labelled or pinned down to a particular theory. From Lawrence Jones's reference to Frame's 'idiosyncratic mode of regard'⁸⁷ in 1970, to Jan Cronin's statement in 2007 that 'Janet Frame is a writer who does not abide by conventions',⁸⁸ critical attention to Frame's originality has been wide-spread and recurrent.⁸⁹ Indeed, as Delrez notes, it 'has become *customary* for Frame's critics to assert that she is a deeply original writer'.⁹⁰

The second strand of argument stresses Frame's excellence. It revolves around the idea that Frame is extraordinarily talented: her work is great, and belongs to the elite realm of literature.⁹¹ Surveying early reviews of Frame's work, Irvine notes that all of the reviewers 'emphasize the gifts'⁹² that Frame's writing displays. This reception was to become a trend as Frame criticism developed, particularly evident in the 1970s when Victor Dupont proclaimed Frame to be one of the greatest writers of the twentieth century,⁹³ and the articles of *Bird Hawk Bogie* accentuated Frame's exceptional abilities.⁹⁴ Thus we again see a narrative of Frame as extraordinary emerging prior to her representations of self as ordinary. As with the critical insistence upon her originality which refused to pay heed to her representations, so

⁸⁵ For example, Delbaere reprinted her 1978 Introduction to *Bird, Hawk, Bogie* in the 1992 *Ring of Fire*.

⁸⁶ *The Janet Frame Reader*, p. 11.

⁸⁷ Jones, pp. 295, 296.

⁸⁸ Jan Cronin, 'Towards Another Summer by Janet Frame', *New Zealand Herald*, 5 October 2007 <http://www.nzherald.co.nz/books/news/article.cfm?c_id=134&objectid=10467882> [accessed 22 July 2010].

⁸⁹ See: Rhodes, pp. 137, 139; Irvine, pp. 43, 87; Robertson, 'Bird, Hawk, Bogie: Janet Frame, 1952-62', in *Bird, Hawk, Bogie*, ed. by Delbaere, p.16; Delbaere, 'Introduction' in *Bird, Hawk, Bogie*, p. 12 (reprinted in *The Ring of Fire*, p. 19); Williams, p. 42; *The Janet Frame Reader*, p. 19; *Subversive Fictions*, p. 10.

⁹⁰ 'Forbidding Bodies', p. 70. My italics.

⁹¹ I would be remiss if I did not note an off-shoot of this emphasis on Frame's extraordinary talent: namely the narrative of the 'mad genius'. See: Wikse, p. 12; *Subversive Fictions*, p. 13; Valerie Baisnée, *Gendered Resistance: The Autobiographies of Simone de Beauvoir, Maya Angelou, Janet Frame and Marguerite Duras* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997), pp. 93-94; Cronin and Drichel, 'Introduction', p. xvii.

⁹² Irvine, p. 12.

⁹³ Evans, *Janet Frame*, p. 202. Evans is quoting: Victor Dupont, 'Janet Frame and the Psychological Novel', *Commonwealth Literature Conference*, Aarhus, Denmark, 1971.

⁹⁴ Delbaere, 'Introduction' in *Bird, Hawk, Bogie*, p. 13. Reprinted in: *The Ring of Fire*, ed. by Delbaere, p. 19. See also: Irvine, p. 43.

too the focus on Frame's greatness transcends her portrait of self as ordinary: in 2003 for example, Simone Oettli-van Delden stated that 'Janet Paterson Frame is generally recognized as New Zealand's most distinguished contemporary writer'.⁹⁵

Ergo it seems that Frame's presentation of self as ordinary has been resoundingly ignored by critics of her fiction. While those critics who have engaged directly with the autobiographies (i.e. taken the autobiographies as their text) *have* acknowledged and interacted with Frame's representation of self as ordinary, they have specifically rejected it. Both Gina Mercer and Susan Ash have written journal articles which agree that Frame 'writes herself as an ordinary, clean-living, homely, shy woman'.⁹⁶ Mercer also devotes a chapter of *Subversive Fictions* to Frame's autobiographies. Both scholars disapprove of Frame's positioning of self. For Mercer the 'ordinary' Frame of the autobiographies does not provide the intellectual stimulation which she encounters when reading Frame's fiction. She describes the 'feeling akin to boredom'⁹⁷ which she experienced when tackling the autobiographies. Whilst Ash is just plain unconvinced by Frame's rendering of self:

Autobiography without invention? Janet Frame as 'ordinary'? That is about as likely as Elizabeth Jolley finding herself at a loss for words [...] I don't know how to read a text in which Frame claims she represents herself as ordinary and without invention. Is this irony or something else [...] Frame is not ordinary.⁹⁸

Ash's response is perhaps more vociferous than Mercer's, yet both display a similar reaction of consternation towards Frame's claim to ordinariness. While Mercer appears disappointed in the 'courteous and conservative narration',⁹⁹ Ash seems to be disconcerted by it. She seeks out Frame's interview answers as regards the autobiographies in order to locate the

⁹⁵ Simone Oettli-van Delden, *Surfaces of Strangeness: Janet Frame and the Rhetoric of Madness* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2003), p. 16. Evans's profusions of Frame's greatness in 1993 and 2004 have already been cited. See also: Evans's reference to the label of 'New Zealand's Greatest Living Writer' that has been applied to Frame ('The "Frame effect"', p. 13). For popular depictions of Frame as such, see the following interviews: Susan Dasler, 'Silence and Solitude are the Keys to Janet Frame's World', *Wanganui Chronicle*, 5 July 1980, p. 7; Michael Noonan, 'Three New Zealanders: Janet Frame', *NZONSCREEN* <www.nzonscreen.com/title/three-new-zealanders-janet-frame-1975> [accessed 20 July 2010]; John Sellwood, 'Holmes Show Interview with Janet Frame', *NZONSCREEN* <www.nzonscreen.com/title/holmes---janet-frame-2000> [accessed 20 July 2010].

⁹⁶ *Subversive Fictions*, p. 232.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 223.

⁹⁸ Susan Ash, "'The Absolute, Distanced Image": Janet Frame's Autobiography', *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 11 (1993), 21-40 (pp. 22, 22, 39). Tessa Barringer also responds directly to Frame's autobiographies. While she initially appears to accept (though dislike, in a similar fashion to Mercer) Frame's rendering of herself as ordinary, she, like Ash, ultimately concludes with a rejection of the veracity of Frame's positioning of self: Tessa Barringer, 'Frame[d]: The Autobiographies', *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 14 (1996), 90-106.

⁹⁹ *Subversive Fictions*, p. 227.

paradoxical, tricky, Frame that she is used to in Frame's fiction. As noted in Chapter 1,¹⁰⁰ she points to Frame's conflicting statements, posing the question:

How shall we regard this apparent contradiction: 'This ordinary me without fiction', and 'I look at everything from the point of view of fiction'? We are all readers of Frame's fiction here at this conference and well aware of her propensity for paradoxical contradiction.¹⁰¹

It is on this ground, where Frame again becomes unstable, multifarious, anything but ordinary, that Ash appears to become comfortable again.

In these rejections of Frame's presentation of self as ordinary, an overarching critical narrative of Frame as extraordinary emerges. So too, an overarching narrative of difficulty can be traced through Frame criticism from early to recent. I have already noted Evan's early reference to Frame's difficulty in 1977.¹⁰² Other Frame scholars who have noted the difficulty of her texts include Winston Rhodes,¹⁰³ Mark Williams,¹⁰⁴ Jeanne Delbaere,¹⁰⁵ Marc Delrez,¹⁰⁶ Carole Ferrier,¹⁰⁷ Norbert Platz,¹⁰⁸ and Simone Oettli-van Delden.¹⁰⁹ Most recently the back cover of *Frameworks* states that 'Janet Frame's work is notorious for the demands it makes on reader and critic', and in the first essay of that text Jan Cronin writes: 'Few people would dispute the claim that Janet Frame's work tends towards the enigmatic in the general sense — that her writing is elusive, ambiguous, and at times downright baffling.'¹¹⁰ The critical avoidance of Frame's work in the 1980s¹¹¹ could also indicate a critical perception of difficulty, and a paralysis born of not knowing how to approach Frame's fiction. The critical depiction of Frame as difficult is intricately linked to the critical narrative of Frame as extraordinary: because she is so out of the ordinary, critics struggle to know how to deal with her, how to approach her texts, and therefore view her as difficult.¹¹²

¹⁰⁰ See: p. 25.

¹⁰¹ "'The Absolute, Distanced Image'", p. 222.

¹⁰² See also: 'The Case of the Disappearing Author', p. 13; 'Dr. Clutha's Book of the World', p. 23.

¹⁰³ Rhodes, p. 138.

¹⁰⁴ Williams, p. 42.

¹⁰⁵ Delbaere, 'Introduction', in *Bird, Hawk, Bogie*, p. 13. Reprinted in: *The Ring of Fire*, p. 20.

¹⁰⁶ Marc Delrez, 'The Eye of the Storm: Vision and Survival in *A State of Siege*', in *The Ring of Fire*, ed. by Delbaere, pp. 126-138 (p. 126) (This essay did not appear in the original *Bird, Hawk, Bogie*); *Manifold Utopia*, pp. xvi, xvii.

¹⁰⁷ 'Dualities and differences revisited'.

¹⁰⁸ *Manifold Utopia*, p. xvi.

¹⁰⁹ Oettli-van Delden, p. 16.

¹¹⁰ Back cover, *Frameworks*, ed. by Cronin and Drichel; 'Through a Glass Darkly: Reading the Enigmatic Frame', p. 4.

¹¹¹ Irvine (p. 53) notes that no journal articles on Frame were published in the 1980s. There do not appear to have been any significant monographs or collections of essays either. See also: Lauris Edmond's comment that Janet Frame is 'revered and avoided' (*Subversive Fictions*, p. 9).

¹¹² We have already seen this at play in Patrick Evans's recourse to a biographical approach. Other critics that link Frame's originality and greatness (the two strands of Frame as extraordinary, discussed earlier) with her

Difficulty can imply trickiness (and by their very nature trickiness and trickery implies difficulty), and, as we shall see, many critics do resort to viewing Frame as such, to seeing her as trickster, someone in control of their confusion, sitting up above pulling the strings. Thus critical positionings of Frame as not ordinary, Frame as difficult, and Frame as trickster, are all tied together. While Frame's own representations of self as ordinary and as trickster did not fit well together (as detailed in Chapter 1), we shall see that the critical conception of her as extraordinary and as trickster do seem to complement each other.

I have cited Frame's first representation of herself as trickster occurring as early as 1970 in her interview with Claire Henderson, where she referred to writing as acting and stated that the writer is a liar.¹¹³ These comments predate the bulk of Frame criticism (very little critical work can be located that was produced prior to 1970. As such, unlike Frame's representation of herself as ordinary, the possibility that Frame's representation of self is reactionary does not arise here). Thus the questions must be posed — have critical renderings of Frame as trickster been influenced by the Henderson (and subsequent) interviews and the autobiographies? Where, and to what extent, do readings of Frame as trickster draw upon Frame's commentary as a source of their representation of the author and her work? Proceeding roughly chronologically, I will identify those critics who read Frame as trickster, and examine how (if at all) those readings intersect with Frame's commentary.

Critical references to Frame as trickster date back as early as 1972.¹¹⁴ But it is really with Patrick Evans's 1981 article, "'Farthest from the Heart": The Autobiographical Parables of Janet Frame', that we get the first substantial rendering of Frame as trickster, and her work as tricky (as in characterised by tricks). This initial account of Frame as trickster appears to have been formed free from the direct influence of Frame's commentary, as it does not cite any of the interviews which existed at that time. However, as we shall see, over time Evans appears to have found validation for his approach (and thereby encouragement) in Frame's commentary. As her autobiographies appear, Evans's account of Frame as trickster intensifies.

difficulty include Oettli-van Delden, MacLennan, and Ferrier. See: Oettli-van Delden, p. 16; Carol MacLennan, 'Conformity and Deviance in the Fiction of Janet Frame', *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 6 (1988), 190-201 (p. 190); 'Dualities and differences revisited'.

¹¹³ See: Chapter 1, pp. 23-24. Frame's other representations of self as trickster as outlined in Chapter 1 are dated 1982, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1988, 1994.

¹¹⁴ Rhodes, p. 138.

Evans establishes a threefold take on Frame as trickster, each aspect of which he develops in subsequent articles, seemingly in response to Frame's emerging commentary. All three aspects of his reading are premised on the idea that Frame is manipulative, her work inherently difficult. Firstly Evans identifies Frame's linguistic stunts, arguing that Frame plants puzzles within her fiction for the reader to decode. He states that Frame's work is 'full of deceits engineered to trick the reader',¹¹⁵ and refers to her 'game-playing [...] verbal tricks [...] tricks of language [...] [and] verbal puzzles'.¹¹⁶ Remembering the power inherent in the trickster figure, Evans's investigations of Frame's puzzles stress her position of control while he becomes 'a simple shrivelled fly struggling in her web of art'.¹¹⁷ The verbal trickery present in the autobiographies provides Evans with further material, which he extrapolates in 'The Muse as Rough Beast', 'Dr. Clutha's Book of the World', and 'The "Frame effect"'. His most prominent example is *Nora Bone*, one which he returns to repeatedly,¹¹⁸ indicating the escalation of his account of Frame as trickster.

The second aspect of Evans's reading of Frame as trickster is the 'aboriginal secret'¹¹⁹ which underlies Frame's texts, waiting to be discovered. This is a more general idea than the specific word games and puzzles already referenced; it casts Frame's texts themselves as puzzles of a sort. Evans's idea of a secret underlying Frame's work continues to simmer in his work after the publication of Frame's autobiographies,¹²⁰ but it is not until much later that he really develops this idea, and christens it the 'Frame effect'. This is 'the sense which dogs her writing that there is more to be told, that it conceals a larger secret or secrets which, if known, would somehow explain her work to us'.¹²¹ Evans outlines the 'Frame effect' in the context of potential links which he identifies between events in Frame's fiction and events in her life.¹²² As the events in Frame's life have been made available to Evans largely by the publication of her autobiographies (and King's biography), we again see the encouraging effect that Frame's commentary has had upon Evans's account of her as trickster.

¹¹⁵ "'Farthest From The Heart'", p. 31.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 38, 38, 40. For later examples see: 'The "Frame effect"', p. 14; 'Dr. Clutha's Book of the World', pp. 23, 26-27. The language of the trickster saturates these pages.

¹¹⁷ 'Dr. Clutha's Book of the World', p. 27. See also: 'The "Frame effect"', p. 13.

¹¹⁸ See: 'The "Frame effect"', p. 13; 'Dr. Clutha's Book of the World', p. 27.

¹¹⁹ "'Farthest From The Heart'", p. 38.

¹²⁰ See: 'The Case of the Disappearing Author', p. 18.

¹²¹ 'Dr. Clutha's Book of the World', p. 22. See also: 'The "Frame effect"', p. 13.

¹²² See: 'Dr. Clutha's Book of the World', p. 22.

Thirdly and finally, Evans's view of Frame's narrative method investigates the tricky relationship between biography and fiction present in her work. He emphasises her elusive, teasing style and the blurring of boundaries that exists. In "'Farthest from the Heart": The Autobiographical Parables of Janet Frame', he writes of 'a technique in which actual events [...] are turned into fiction, but in such a way that the reader is always made aware of the factiousness of the fiction'.¹²³ In subsequent articles, Evans develops and reinforces this argument, as Frame's autobiographies provide him the necessary material for identifying further possible autobiographical references in her work. In 'The Muse as Rough Beast' he concentrates on the blurring of the boundary between fiction and autobiography:

Sometimes almost teasingly, what seems like autobiographical reference pokes through her fiction [...] things that we read as fiction are in some way derived fairly directly from her experience.¹²⁴

Later, he consolidates the idea, emphasising Frame's manipulative ability:

The fix, where her reader is completely caught up between 'fact' and 'fiction', neither able to solve the puzzle nor able to put it down, is exactly where Frame wanted us. Her genius was to dissolve the boundary between Life and Art.¹²⁵

Thus, although Evans's earliest account of Frame as trickster does not appear to have been influenced by Frame's representations of herself in interviews,¹²⁶ his later readings have drawn heavily upon her autobiographies (all of the aforementioned articles that post-date the publication of the autobiographies specifically cite them), and also to a certain extent upon the King biography.¹²⁷ Having tracked the development of Evans's portrait of Frame as trickster, we have seen that her commentary *did* serve to reinforce and validate — and thereby to encourage — Evan's reading. Evans's critical work following the publication of the autobiographies shows an intensification of all three aspects of his account of Frame as trickster (presumably to Frame's displeasure given her view that biographical material should not underpin critical analysis, outlined in Chapter 1). As noted, we watch the reference to an 'aboriginal secret' develop into a full blown account of the solution to the difficulty of

¹²³ "'Farthest From The Heart'", p. 35.

¹²⁴ 'The Muse as Rough Beast', p. 3.

¹²⁵ 'The "Frame effect"', p. 14. See also: 'Dr. Clutha's Book of the World', p. 29. However, Evans's take on the blurring or dissolving of this boundary is not consistently positive: he writes that there can be 'very little sense of artistic transformation' ('Dr. Clutha's Book of the World', p. 21. See also: 'The Muse as Rough Beast', pp. 3, 4, where he states that biographical material is 'served up pretty much uncooked'). Such swipes at Frame's creative process are themselves puzzling, as they seem at odds with his claim to her 'genius' in dissolving the boundaries between fiction and art, and the fairly complicated investigation of her creative process set out in "'Farthest From The Heart"'.

¹²⁶ The only apparent reference to Frame's interview answers in Evans's critical work is at p. 28 of 'Dr. Clutha's Book of the World', where he quotes from the Alley interview.

¹²⁷ He particularly draws on the King biography in 'Dr. Clutha's Book of the World'.

Frame's work in 'The "Frame effect"', while his investigations into her tricky creative process culminate in him proclaiming her feat of the dissolution of the boundary between Life and Art. Meanwhile, Evans's focus on Frame's linguistic trickery becomes a fixation. The lexicon of puzzles and tricks pervades his work, and Nora Bone still haunts him:

I was reduced to *writing to every single family named Bone in the Oamaru phonebook to ask if they had a relative called Nora Bone* [...] I just had to know, I couldn't rest. I still don't know, I still can't rest, because not one of The Bone People replied.¹²⁸

Evans has not been alone in his critical accounts of Frame as trickster. In fact, readings of Janet Frame as trickster inform many critical accounts of her work, whether they specifically label her as such or not. Other meta-critical reviews of Frame studies have also noticed the recurrent positioning of her as trickster. In 1994 Gina Mercer referred to those who 'write of the "great scum of literary trickiness" in her early novels'.¹²⁹ She also described an interesting take on Frame's trickery present in less scholarly accounts of her work:

Another recurrent motif in reviews and articles on Janet Frame, both from New Zealand and elsewhere, is the use of terms of magic. She is described repeatedly as being a 'verbal conjurer ... linguistic sorcerer', of generating 'a kind of magnetic attraction that seizes and locks the reader's sensibility'.¹³⁰

This particular narrative of Frame as trickster is notable for being absent from critical investigations of her work. A year later, Lorna Irvine's comprehensive overview of Frame's criticism referred to reviewers of *The Reservoir* who 'attacked the writer for what they saw as her obsessive cleverness'.¹³¹ This observation is particularly interesting in that *The Reservoir* was published in 1963, and so pre-dates Frame's earliest representation of herself as trickster. Thus as with Evans's critical work, we see Frame being positioned as trickster by others without basing this view on Frame's commentary. Irvine also states that 'Most of the current essays on Frame draw attention to the author's creation of multiple voices in all her fiction',¹³² indicating a mid-90s critical trend towards focusing on Frame's predilection for multiplicity, her cleverness and slipperiness. Jennifer Lawn, in 1999, noted that 'reception analysis of Frame's work has identified [...] the secretive Frame, couched in "taboo", [who] speaks *teasingly, indirectly, in riddles, parables, secret gestures*'.¹³³ It is this prominent version of Frame that Lawn focuses her article upon, though she 'seek[s] to re-theorize and

¹²⁸ 'The "Frame effect"', p. 14. Evans's italics.

¹²⁹ *Subversive Fictions*, p. 10.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹³¹ Irvine, p. 11.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 90.

¹³³ Jennifer Lawn, 'Redemption, Secrecy, and the Hermeneutic Frame in Janet Frame's *Scented Gardens for the Blind*', *Ariel*, 30.3 (1999), 105-126 (p. 106). My italics.

reinvigorate' it, rather than subscribe to it. Finally, Maria Wikse's 2006 study of Frame's biographical legend identifies critical attention to the 'subversive traits of Frame's texts' and the writer figure who 'plays evasive games'.¹³⁴

My own 'reception analysis' of Frame criticism regarding readings of Frame as trickster, has identified the following. Most often critics don't apply the label trickster per se, but will recognise the *traits* of the trickster (slipperiness, power, cunning, playfulness, a penchant for manipulation, etc.) in Frame; those that don't shy away from the actual term, most often refer to Frame's linguistic 'tricks'¹³⁵ and her 'trickiness'.¹³⁶ Generally, three converging versions of Frame as trickster are visible throughout Frame criticism (though it is important to note that these do not align perfectly with Evan's three pronged version of Frame as trickster). Firstly, there are those critics who emphasise play, especially linguistic play, in Frame's work — for example, references to teasing, puzzles, games, etc. Postmodern readings, particularly those readings which look at metafiction, are another example. Attendant upon 'play' is a sense of unreliability, or multiplicity, in Frame's work. Critics who stress these elements of Frame's work include Evans (as detailed earlier), Mark Williams, Gina Mercer, Jan Cronin, and Carole Ferrier.¹³⁷ Secondly, there are those critics who emphasise Frame's power, her position of control (remembering, of course, the power inherent in the trickster figure). Such critics again include Williams, Mercer and Cronin, whose work exemplifies the intersection of these first two versions of Frame as trickster. Thirdly, there are those critics who emphasise difficulty (as discussed earlier). The difficulty of Frame's texts produce 'the sense of a mandarin Jamesian author standing above us watching our helpless struggles as she pares her nails'¹³⁸ and so is intricately linked with the aforementioned sense of Frame being in control. Thus these three strands of the depiction of Frame as trickster tend to overlap and intersect. The overarching narrative of difficulty, and its relationship to reading Frame as trickster has been canvassed earlier, so here I will focus on accounts of Frame's playfulness, accounts which stress Frame's position of control, and the links between the two.

These two particular narratives are often linked, such as when Williams writes that:

¹³⁴ Wikse, pp. 31, 131.

¹³⁵ For example: Williams, pp. 36-7; Barringer, p. 95; Cronin and Drichel, 'Introduction', p. xxiii.

¹³⁶ For example: *Subversive Fictions*, p. 10.

¹³⁷ For Ferrier see: *The Janet Frame Reader*, p. 17. Williams's, Mercer's and Cronin's work is discussed at pp. 64-65 of this chapter.

¹³⁸ 'The "Frame effect"', pp. 13-14. For an inverted fictional take on Frame as the subject (victim?) of such an authorial figure, see: Patrick Evans, *Gifted* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2010), p. 133.

What is important in the work of [...] Frame is the ubiquitous evidence of a *controlling* intelligence behind the 'schizophrenic' predilection for puns, linguistic tricks, errors, the taking apart of words into their constituent parts so as to wrest unexpected meanings from them.¹³⁹

Mercer echoes Williams when she states that Frame writes 'fictions which play games with the audience, fiction which reveals an acute awareness of how to control the reader'.¹⁴⁰ Both Williams and Mercer were writing (in 1990 and 1994 respectively) after the bulk (or in Mercer's case, all) of Frame's commentary representing herself as trickster had appeared. Although Williams draws quite heavily upon *To the Is-land* and *An Angel at my Table*, he does not appear to reference any of Frame's interviews, or the third volume of her autobiography. It is difficult then, to draw a link between Frame's commentary and Williams's focus on Frame as in control and as instigating linguistic play (i.e. Williams's bifocal view of Frame as trickster). This is particularly so when we examine the nature of his references to the first two volumes of autobiography, and see that his reliance on them is chiefly for the provision of detail about Frame's life and upbringing — her accounts of her mother's religion, for example, feature heavily in the first few pages of Williams's chapter on Frame. In contrast, the Notes to Mercer's text (and specifically to Chapter 14 from which the above quotation is drawn) reference the Alley, Dowrick and McLeod interviews, as well as Frame's autobiographies and 'Beginnings'. As discerned in Chapter 1, Frame positions herself as trickster in all but the Dowrick interview, as well as in the autobiographies, raising the possibility that Mercer's reading of Frame as trickster has in fact been prompted by Frame's representations of self. However, Mercer's cites Evans's articles, specifically 'The Muse as Rough Beast' which, as stated previously, is one of his earlier renderings of Frame as trickster. Also, again as mentioned previously, Mercer conducted her own review of critical traditions which identified a strand of criticism dealing with Janet Frame as trickster. It seems then, that while Mercer's reading of Frame as trickster may have been in some part influenced by, or validated by, Frame's commentary, the corresponding influence of other critical narratives upon Mercer's rendering cannot be discounted.

The most recent text to be published on Frame, *Frameworks*, also displays a predilection for Frame as trickster which emphasises game playing and control.¹⁴¹ Cronin's article notes that Evans's obituary for Frame ('Dr. Clutha's Book of the World: Janet Paterson Frame, 1924-

¹³⁹ Williams, pp. 36-37. Williams's italics.

¹⁴⁰ *Subversive Fictions*, p. 234.

¹⁴¹ As previously stated (see: p. 58), the back cover of *Frameworks* implies the difficulty of Frame's work; it also puts the reader on alert as to her game-playing (Back cover, *Frameworks*, ed. by Cronin and Driel).

2004') stressed the 'puzzle-like aspects of Frame's work'.¹⁴² She goes on to state that 'If pressed, Frame scholars might sheepishly admit that Patrick Evans's portrait of the reader of Frame's texts as "under her control [...] and required to perform — to *solve*" is uncomfortably accurate'.¹⁴³ It would seem that other links between the positions taken by Evans and Cronin as to Frame's trickiness may be established: Cronin's 2007 review of *Towards Another Summer* stated that the text 'confirms [...] her destabilisation of the boundaries between art and life',¹⁴⁴ a comment which recalls Evans's account of Frame's tricky narrative method.¹⁴⁵ While Cronin does not argue solely for a reading of Frame as trickster in her 2009 article,¹⁴⁶ naturally it is that part of her argument which most interests me. For Cronin, *The Adaptable Man* is:

Put together in ways that resemble the composition of a puzzle or riddle (it's worth noting that the term 'riddle' crops up in the text on numerous occasions), and [...] these elements of the novel can only be uncovered if one does adopt code-cracking strategies.¹⁴⁷

However, she intensifies our understanding of Frame as trickster by arguing that adopting such strategies will not always deliver answers for the reader: 'the reader still finds that, having played detective, unravelled all the strands, and followed all the clues, there is no definitive answer'.¹⁴⁸ Frame therefore maintains her position of power, while the reader struggles against the tide of possible meanings which arise from his/her detective work. Thus, like the accounts of aforementioned scholars Williams and Mercer, Cronin's version of the operation of Frame's riddles upon the reader stresses the control inherent therein: the reader emerges from the text having been 'manhandled or, rather, Frame-handled, by it'.¹⁴⁹ Cronin's article does not reference any of the Frame interviews relevant to positioning herself as trickster. Passing reference is made to the third volume of Frame's autobiographies,¹⁵⁰ but that is all. Thus it does not appear that Frame's commentary has played a role in the production of Cronin's reading of Frame as trickster. Rather, Cronin's citations of Evans's 'Dr. Clutha's Book of the World' and 'The "Frame effect"' reveal an engagement with Evans's focus on Frame's linguistic play, and so it seems Cronin's reading has come about

¹⁴² 'Through a Glass Darkly: Reading the Enigmatic Frame', p. 4.

¹⁴³ Ibid. Evans's italics.

¹⁴⁴ 'Towards Another Summer by Janet Frame'.

¹⁴⁵ See: p. 61.

¹⁴⁶ 'It is possible to state with equal validity that Frame's novels are "the fictive equivalent of a cryptic crossword" and that they are fluid explorations' ('Through a Glass Darkly: Reading the Enigmatic Frame', p. 5).

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 9.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 10. Note that Cronin does go on to propose an alternative strategy for the reader, but this falls outside the bounds of the narrative of Frame as trickster and so is not really relevant to the present discussion.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 22.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 15.

more as a development upon existing critical narratives than as a reaction to Frame's own positioning of self.

Finally, direct critical responses to Frame's autobiographies — i.e. articles that have taken the autobiographies as their 'text' — have tended to accept, and even to highlight, the trickster figure which emerges. Carole Ferrier, for example, warns against relying on autobiographies as a true account of Frame,¹⁵¹ while Wikse pronounces the central metaphor of the third volume — the envoy — to be evidence of Frame's trickster nature by virtue of the semantic possibilities inherent in the term 'envoy'.¹⁵² As discussed earlier, Gina Mercer, Susan Ash, and Tessa Barringer, all reject Frame's depiction of her ordinariness, emphasising Frame's manipulative ability in constructing the self of the autobiographies.¹⁵³ They note the discrepancy between the 'ordinary' self portrayed by the autobiographies and the self of Frame's fiction: 'While I admire the construction of this Janet Frame, it's not the Janet Frame I've studied.'¹⁵⁴ It is this latter version of Frame, Frame the trickster, that they prefer and accept.

Ergo, while Frame's representations of self as trickster may not have instigated criticism of her work which positions her as such, those representations have at least been accepted by critics, unlike her positioning of self as ordinary. And critics *have* read Frame as trickster, with Evans's account probably being the most thorough investigation to date into her trickiness. Although such readings haven't been prompted by Frame's commentary, they have been encouraged and intensified by it. If we are to find a source or inspiration for these readings of Frame as trickster, it appears that they have been provoked by the fictional texts themselves, and — in later cases — by the critical tradition which Evans has initiated.

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¹⁵¹ *The Janet Frame Reader*, p. 20.

¹⁵² 'An envoy is made up of "explanatory or commendatory concluding remarks to a poem, essay or book; specifically, a short, fixed final stanza of a poem [...] pointing to the moral" and was often used by for instance Geoffrey Chaucer and Robert Southey [...] It was also a messenger on a mission or errand [...] Thus, we have yet another example of how Frame plays with semantic and literary connotations' (Witse, p. 162).

¹⁵³ Gina Mercer "'A Simple Everyday Glass": The Autobiographies of Janet Frame', *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 11 (1993), 41-48; "'The Absolute, Distanced Image'".

¹⁵⁴ "'A Simple Everyday Glass'", p. 43. Mercer also recalls reviews of the autobiographies which embrace Frame's trickiness such as Peter Simpson's comment that "'we take it at face value at our peril...this is but the latest in a long sequence of masks of the self'" (p.45).

2.2 Reading Margaret Atwood

Atwood studies is a massive academic field: ‘scholarly works on Atwood — articles and books — [...] average over fifty per year.’¹⁵⁵ The strength of Margaret Atwood’s critical voice within this academic arena is undeniable and inescapable; and it is all the more notable for the size of the audience she influences. From the pervasive effect of *Survival* across nearly forty years of Atwood studies, to the confident manner of her written and spoken delivery, it is no wonder that an overarching narrative of Atwood as success story spans critical attention to her fiction. Extensive critical reliance upon Atwood’s interview answers is also evident amongst that attention. This reliance assumes the veracity of Atwood’s statements and so calls into question the existence of a critical narrative of the author as trickster. Such a narrative is not univocal or explicit in Atwood studies — rather than being immediately evident, it is subtle and must be gleaned. I may have been alerted to the narrative of Atwood as trickster by Atwood’s presentation of self in her commentary (irrespective of whether that commentary influenced the production of the narrative); yet, once recognised, it is apparent that it is a pervasive and thereby overarching narrative that can be deduced from a wide range of critical readings.

2.2.1 *Survival* and Success

‘If Margaret Atwood had never used the word “survival,” we would read her engagements with the geographies of Canada and community and self in quite different ways.’¹⁵⁶ *Survival* is to Atwood studies, what ‘Beginnings’ is to Frame studies: it is the most significant piece of commentary Atwood has produced in terms of the impact that it has had on critical narratives of her fiction. Like ‘Beginnings’, *Survival* was published early on in the author’s career, and so its influence can be traced across many years of critical accounts of Atwood’s fiction. It has repeatedly been used as a lens through which to read her fiction, and has provided a critical terminology for discussion of her fiction.

Generally critics who employ *Survival* in their discussion of Atwood’s fiction will uplift the arguments and theses from that piece of commentary and apply them to the fictional texts.

¹⁵⁵ Howells, ‘Introduction’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, p. 2.

¹⁵⁶ Robert Kroetsch, ‘Margaret Atwood in Statements by Fellow Writers’, in *Margaret Atwood, Works & Impact*, ed. by Reingard M. Nischik (New York: Camden House, 2000), p. 306.

Most commonly critics have applied Atwood's so-called 'victim theory' (encapsulated by the four 'Basic Victim Positions')¹⁵⁷ to her own fiction, and read her work as infused with the themes of victimhood¹⁵⁸ and survival¹⁵⁹ that are explored in *Survival*. This has especially been the case with *Surfacing*, which has repeatedly been read as 'an illustration of Atwood's critical stance in *Survival*'.¹⁶⁰ Such readings of Atwood's fiction were not simply a phenomenon of the time surrounding *Survival*'s publication, but have persisted throughout Atwood studies, and can be seen in both monographs and essay collections of the late 2000s.¹⁶¹ However, some more innovative critical engagements with *Survival* do exist, such as Janice Fiamengo's recent examination of animals in *Surfacing*. She notes Atwood's *Survival* thesis that animals in Canadian literature are 'a symbolic reading of the colonial predicament' but argues against it, stating instead that 'dead animals [in the novel] signify dead animals, and the national guilt for their slaughter'.¹⁶² Fiamengo acknowledges that Atwood's *Survival* 'to some extent pre-empts and invalidates the argument of [her] essay'.¹⁶³

¹⁵⁷ Margaret Atwood, *Survival. A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972), pp. 36-39.

¹⁵⁸ See for example: Keith Garebian, 'Surfacing: Apocalyptic Ghost Story', *Mosaic*, 3 (Spring 1976), 1-9 (p. 2); Rosemary Sweetapple, 'Margaret Atwood: Victims and Survivors', *Southern Review*, 9 (1976), 50; Frank Davey, *Margaret Atwood: A Feminist Poetics* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1984), Chapter 8; June Schlueter, 'Canlit/Victimlit', in *Margaret Atwood, Visions and Forms*, ed. by Kathryn VanSpanckeren and Jan Garden Castro (Carbondale/Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), pp. 1-11; Marge Piercy, 'Margaret Atwood: Beyond Victimhood', in *Critical Essays on Margaret Atwood*, ed. by Judith McCombs (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1988), pp. 53-65; Sharon Rose Wilson, *Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1993), p. 29; Hilde Staels, *Margaret Atwood's Novels: A Study of Narrative Discourse* (Germany: Francke Verlag Tübingen und Basel, 1995), p. 216; Karen F. Stein, *Margaret Atwood Revisited* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1999), pp. 5, 86, 99; Sharon Rose Wilson, 'Introduction', in *Margaret Atwood's Textual Assassinations: Recent Poetry and Fiction*, ed. by Sharon Rose Wilson (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2003), pp. xi-xv (p. xii); Carol L. Beran 'Strangers within the Gates: Margaret Atwood's *Wilderness Tips*', in *Textual Assassinations*, ed. by Wilson, pp. 74-87 (pp. 75-86); Karen F. Stein, 'Talking Back to Bluebeard: Atwood's Fictional Storytellers', in *Textual Assassinations*, ed. by Wilson, pp. 154-172 (p. 166); Sharon R. Wilson, 'Blindness and Survival in Margaret Atwood's major novels', in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, ed. by Howells, pp. 176-190.

¹⁵⁹ See for example: Wilson, 'Introduction', in *Textual Assassinations*, p. xiv; Sharon R. Wilson, 'Fiction Flashes: Genre and Intertexts in *Good Bones*', in *Textual Assassinations*, ed. by Wilson, pp. 18-41 (p. 27); Coral Ann Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, 2nd edn (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 187; 'Blindness and Survival in Margaret Atwood's major novels', pp. 176-190.

¹⁶⁰ Josie P., Campbell, 'The Woman as Hero in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*', *Mosaic*, 11:3 (1978: Spring), 17-28 (p. 17). See for example: Sherrill Grace, *Violent Duality: A Study of Margaret Atwood* (Montreal: Véhicule Press, c1980), p.3; George Woodcock, 'Margaret Atwood: Poet as Novelist', in *Critical Essays*, ed. by McCombs, pp. 90-103; George Woodcock, *Introducing Margaret Atwood's 'Surfacing'*, *Canadian Fiction Studies* 4 (Toronto: ECW Press, 1990), p. 42; *Margaret Atwood Revisited*, pp. 53-54, 147; Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, pp. 36-51. Such an approach to *Surfacing* has not received approval from all critics. McCombs notes that some 'found the victim thesis [...] constricting the novel' (Judith McCombs, 'Introduction', in *Critical Essays*, ed. by McCombs, pp. 1-28 (p. 6)).

¹⁶¹ For example: Tolan links *Surfacing* and *Survival* (Fiona Tolan, *Margaret Atwood: Feminism and Fiction*, (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2007), pp. 39-40). See also: 'Blindness and Survival in Margaret Atwood's major novels'.

¹⁶² Janice Fiamengo, "'It looked at me with its mashed eye': Animal and Human Suffering in *Surfacing*", in *Margaret Atwood: The Open Eye*, ed. by John Moss and Tobi Kozakewich (Canada: University of Ottawa Press, 2006), pp. 171-184 (pp. 171-172).

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 171-172.

Notably, some critics — writing after the publication of *Survival* — have read Atwood's fiction in terms of the theme of survival without directly referencing *Survival*.¹⁶⁴ Recalling Robert Kroetsch's sentiments, one cannot help but wonder whether this would have been the case had *Survival* not existed. However, there is at least one critical account that predates *Survival* but references the 'survival ethic' of Atwood's fiction.¹⁶⁵ This perhaps points to a thematic overlap between Atwood's commentary and her fiction, an overlap which is the most frequently cited reason for employing *Survival* in the analysis of her creative work. George Woodcock encapsulates the view of many Atwood scholars when he writes:

The capillary links between her poetry, her fiction, her criticism, are many and evident [...] the prime importance of *Survival* to the reader — if not necessarily to the writer — is [...] the fact that it develops in another form the themes and insights that have emerged from Atwood's practice of poetry.¹⁶⁶

Other critics stress the role of *Survival* in providing 'clues'¹⁶⁷ to Atwood's fiction, arguing that Atwood's foray into literary patterns and traditions helps to reveal 'specific tendencies in her own work'.¹⁶⁸ Beyond thematic links and the idea of *Survival* as a sort of personal guide-book to Atwood's fiction, some critics do provide more specialised justifications for the relevance of *Survival*. Carol Beran, for example, argues that rather than being 'derived from popular psychology', the Victim Positions are 'a reworking of the highly respected psychological stages outlined by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross in *On Death and Dying*'.¹⁶⁹ Beran's logic in applying these stages (to both the progression in the thinking of Atwood's characters and the process undergone by Atwood's readers), therefore stresses the legitimacy which may be derived from their professional psychological origins.

In her justification of the application of *Survival*, Marge Piercy goes so far as to:

Find in *Survival* a license to apply it to her [Atwood's] own work, as she [Atwood] argues that discovery of a writer's tradition [i.e. the literary tradition in which they are working, not their own back catalogue of fictional works] may be of use, in that it makes available a conscious choice of how to deal with that body of themes.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁴ See for example: 'Talking Back to Bluebeard'; Kathryn VanSpanckeren, 'Humanizing the Fox: Atwood's Poetic Tricksters and *Morning in the Burned House*', in *Textual Assassinations*, ed. by Wilson, pp. 102-120.

¹⁶⁵ See: McCombs, 'Introduction', p. 5.

¹⁶⁶ 'Margaret Atwood: Poet as Novelist', pp. 92, 99. See also: McCombs, 'Introduction', p. 1; *Introducing Margaret Atwood's 'Surfacing'*, p. 17; *Violent Duality*, p. 3.

¹⁶⁷ *A Feminist Poetics*, p. 156.

¹⁶⁸ *Violent Duality*, p. 6. See also *Margaret Atwood Revisited*, p. 147.

¹⁶⁹ Beran, p. 86.

¹⁷⁰ Piercy, pp. 53-54.

Atwood herself would probably deny the existence of any such license. Just as Frame expressed her frustration with critical use of the binaries from ‘Beginnings’ and so pluralised them in her autobiography,¹⁷¹ so too has Atwood responded to the critical application of her *Survival* theses to her fiction:

The people who think I wrote *Surfacing* to illustrate *Survival*? They should get their dates straight [...] It’s unfortunate that the two books were published around the same time, because people make that connection. But in fact, *Surfacing* was finished and at the publisher by the time I started working on *Survival*.¹⁷²

She continues:

People have taken *Survival* and applied it to my work. This can sometimes be bothersome because one doesn’t always like one’s insights as a critic being applied to one’s work, from which they weren’t drawn. They were drawn from reading books by other people.¹⁷³

These comments of Atwood’s tend towards negating a connection between her commentary and her fiction, specifically between *Survival* and *Surfacing*. However, Atwood, again displaying a gap between her stated theory and her actual practice, herself applies the literary theories espoused in her commentary to her own texts. Further to those cited in Chapter 1, examples include a 1985 interview where Atwood directs the interviewer to the four victim positions in answer to a question about the end of *Surfacing*;¹⁷⁴ and the final chapter of *Strange Things* where she applies her literary theories pertaining to ‘woman-in-the-woods novel[s]’ to *Surfacing*.¹⁷⁵ It is not surprising that critics pick up on links between her commentary and her fiction when Atwood herself explicitly points out that they exist. So just as the binary of ‘this’ and ‘that’ haunts Frame criticism, it is impossible to escape reference to ‘survival’ in critical accounts of Atwood’s work.

By comparison, the impact of Atwood’s other critical texts¹⁷⁶ has been minimal. This is not to say that they haven’t been influential, but rather to stress the disparity between the degree of critical reliance upon *Survival* and the extent to which critics cite these other texts. After

¹⁷¹ See: Chapter 1, p. 15.

¹⁷² Margaret Atwood: *Conversations*, ed. by Earl G. Ingersoll (New Jersey: Ontario Review Press, 1990), pp. 43, 52.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

¹⁷⁵ Margaret Atwood, *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 114-115. The ‘woman-in-the-woods’ theories are outlined earlier in Atwood’s chapter.

¹⁷⁶ Margaret Atwood, *Days of the Rebels: 1815-1840* (Canada: Natural Science of Canada, 1977); Margaret Atwood, *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose* (Anansi: Toronto, 1982); *Strange Things*; Margaret Atwood, *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* (London: Virago Press, 2008); Margaret Atwood, *Writing with Intent* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2005); Margaret Atwood, *Curious Pursuits: Occasional Writing* (London: Virago Press, 2006); Margaret Atwood, *Payback. Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth* (Bloomsbury: London/Berlin/New York, 2008).

Survival, the most frequently referenced of Atwood's books of commentary is *Second Words*.¹⁷⁷ Potentially this is due to the fact that it was published much earlier than most of Atwood's other critical works. However, even this second most cited of Atwood's critical works has been referred to as 'a minor book by a major writer'.¹⁷⁸ With time we will doubtless see more critical references to and engagement with the later books of commentary. In particular it is likely that the 2003 text *Negotiating with the Dead*, focusing as it does on the practice of writing, will be influential: multiple references to this text are certainly to be found in the most recent collections of critical essays on Atwood,¹⁷⁹ and in the latest edition of preeminent Atwood scholar Coral Ann Howell's monograph.¹⁸⁰ That said, none of these critical texts has produced the same furore upon their publication as *Survival*, which may indicate that their impact will never be as large as *Survival*'s.

Beyond its role in providing the terms of reference for dealing with Atwood's fiction, *Survival* has also contributed significantly towards generating a critical narrative which casts Atwood as a 'success story'. Despite the controversy which surrounded Atwood's theses in *Survival*, the text has been an important one in terms of the impact it has had on the *field* of literary criticism.¹⁸¹ *Survival* 'put Canadian literature on the map for the public and significantly contributed to a decade of thematic, self-centered criticism of Canadian literature in the Canadian academic world'.¹⁸² The expansive and profound impact of *Survival* has significantly enhanced Atwood's visibility and stature:

¹⁷⁷ For example see: *Visions and Forms*, ed. by VanSpanckeren and Castro, pp. xxi-xxii, 5-11, 230; *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, ed. by Howells, pp. 20, 44, 51-52; *Textual Assassinations*, ed. by Wilson, pp. 155, 169; *Works & Impact*, ed. by Nischik, pp. 5, 32, 121-124, 126-128, 130, 132-133, 163; *Critical Essays*, ed. by McCombs, pp. 1, 19, 251-253; *Introducing Margaret Atwood's 'Surfacing'*, p. 17, 28-29; *Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics*, pp. 5, 15, 63, 209, 299; Linda Wagner-Martin, "'Giving way to Bedrock": Atwood's Later Poems', in *Various Atwoods: Essays on the Later Poems, Short Fiction, and Novels*, ed. by Lorraine M. York, (Ontario: House of Anansi Press, 1995), pp. 71-88; *Margaret Atwood Revisited*, pp. 4-5, 145, 147; Staels, pp. 227, 228, 229, 231, 233.

Following *Second Words*, it appears that critics most commonly reference *Strange Things*. See for example: Faye Hammill, *Canadian Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), pp. 61-62; *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, ed. by Howells, pp. 74-75, 14, 24; *Margaret Atwood Revisited*, pp. xii, 140, 148-149, 151; *Works & Impact*, ed. by Nischik, pp. 5, 121, 124-125, 127, 176, 180, 196; *Textual Assassinations*, ed. by Wilson, pp. xii, 24-25, 54-73.

¹⁷⁸ McCombs, 'Introduction', p. 19.

¹⁷⁹ See essays by Moss, Bromberg, Perrakis, McGill and Grace in *The Open Eye*, ed. by Moss and Kozakewich; *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, ed. by Howells, pp. 16, 24-25, 37-38.

¹⁸⁰ Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, pp. 1, 158, 162-163, 166-167, 181-185, 190-191. Howells frames parts of her investigation (specifically her chapter on *The Blind Assassin*) in terms of questions that Atwood herself posed in *Negotiating with the Dead*. She also returns to these questions in her concluding chapter.

¹⁸¹ For clarity: here I mean literary criticism in a broader sense than criticism which pertains specifically to Atwood's own writing.

¹⁸² Reingard M. Nischik, "'Flagpoles and Entrance Doors': Introduction', in *Works & Impact*, ed. by Nischik, pp. 1-12 (p. 10). See also: Laura Moss, 'Margaret Atwood: Branding an Icon Abroad', in *The Open Eye* ed. by

Her celebrity increased exponentially in the seventies, but it was the ‘well-timed’ publication of her analysis of the national literature and its tradition in *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972) that effectively established her both as a Canadian and international writer and critic, and is the most obvious factor that brought her to the public’s attention.¹⁸³

Or, as another critic put it, *Survival* ‘catapulted Atwood to fame’.¹⁸⁴

The narrative of Atwood as success story¹⁸⁵ figures her as an ‘Icon’, a ‘Star’ and a ‘Literary Celebrity’. It is an overarching narrative of success which persistently appears in critical accounts of Atwood’s fiction. A pattern may be discerned whereby most critical investigations begin their account of Atwood’s fiction with a litany of her achievements.¹⁸⁶ The breadth of Atwood’s appeal is particularly emphasised — she attracts both scholarly and general readership, and is a bestseller.¹⁸⁷ Both of Atwood’s biographers also couch their

Moss and Kozakewich, pp. 19- 33 (p. 28); Hammill, pp. 61-62, 69; Walter Pache, “‘A Certain Frivolity’: Margaret Atwood’s Literary Criticism”, in *Works & Impact*, ed. by Nischik, pp. 120-136 (pp. 120, 132-133); Paul Goetsch, ‘Margaret Atwood: A Canadian Nationalist’, in *Works & Impact*, ed. by Nischik, pp. 166-179 (pp. 167, 175); Ronald B. Hatch, ‘Margaret Atwood, the Land, and Ecology’, in *Works & Impact*, ed. by Nischik, pp. 180-201 (pp. 180, 193); Graham Huggan, ‘Margaret Atwood, Inc., or, some thoughts on literary celebrity’, in *The Post-Colonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 209-227 (p.286).

¹⁸³ Lisa Hayden, ‘The Passage of Fame: Margaret Atwood, Carol Shields and Canadian Literary Celebrity’, in *The Politics and Poetics of Passage in Canadian and Australian Culture and Fiction*, ed. by Charlotte Sturgess (Nantes: Universite de Nantes, 2006), p. 61-62

¹⁸⁴ Kathryn VanSpanckeren, ‘Introduction’, in *Visions and Forms*, ed. by VanSpanckeren and Castro, pp. xix-xxix (p. xxi). See also: Robert Fulford, ‘Mythology, Politics and Atwood’, in *Best Seat in the House: Memoirs of a Lucky Man* (Toronto: Collins, 1988), pp. 185-205 (p. 192).

¹⁸⁵ See for example: Hammill, p. 159; W.H. New, *A History of Canadian Literature*, 2nd edn (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2003), p. 303; *The Cambridge Companion to Canadian Literature*, ed. by Eva-Marie Kröller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 189-90, 194, 201, 206; McCombs, ‘Introduction’, p. 1; VanSpanckeren, ‘Introduction’, pp. xix, xxi; Staels, pp. 1, 217; *Margaret Atwood Revisited*, p. 1; Nischik, “‘Flagpoles and Entrance Doors’”, p. 1; Caroline Rosenthal, ‘Canonizing Atwood: Her Impact on Teaching in the US, Canada, and Europe’, in *Works & Impact*, ed. by Nischik, pp. 41-56 (pp. 41, 43); Pache, pp. 123, 130, 133; Coral Ann Howells, ‘Transgressing Genre: A Generic Approach to Margaret Atwood’s Novels’, in *Works & Impact*, ed. by Nischik, pp.139-156 (pp. 306-307); ‘Margaret Atwood, Inc., or, some thoughts on literary celebrity’; Wilson, ‘Introduction’, in *Textual Assassinations*, pp. xi-xv (p. xi); Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, pp. 1, 13; Hayden, pp. 61-62; Nathalie Cooke, ‘Lions Tigers, and Pussycats: Margaret Atwood (Auto-)biographically’, in *Works & Impact*, ed. by Nischik, pp. 15-27 (pp. 16, 21); Susanne Becker, ‘Celebrity or a Disneyland of the Soul: Margaret Atwood and the Media’, in *Works & Impact*, ed. by Nischik, pp. 28-40 (pp. 30-32); Howells, ‘Introduction’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, pp. 1, 7; Lorraine York, ‘Biography/autobiography’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, ed. by Howells, pp. 28-42 (pp. 28-29, 32); John Moss, ‘Haunting Ourselves in Her Words’, in *The Open Eye*, ed. by Moss and Kozakewich, pp. 1-7 (pp. 1-2); Tobi Kozakewich, ‘Introduction’, in *The Open Eye*, ed. by Moss and Kozakewich, pp. 9-15 (pp. 9-10); ‘Margaret Atwood: Branding an Icon Abroad’; Lorraine York, “‘A Slightly Uneasy Eminence’: The Celebrity of Margaret Atwood’, in *The Open Eye*, ed. by Moss and Kozakewich, pp. 35-47; Lorraine M York, “‘Over All I Place a Glass Bell’: The Meta-Iconography of Margaret Atwood’, in *Various Atwoods*, ed. by York, pp. 229-252.

¹⁸⁶ Note how many of the page references in the preceding footnote are to page one of each critical text.

¹⁸⁷ See for example: Nathalie Cooke, *Margaret Atwood: A Critical Companion* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2004), Foreword; Howells, ‘Introduction’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, p. 1; ‘Margaret Atwood, Inc., or, some thoughts on literary celebrity’, pp. 215, 224; Rosenthal, p. 53; Pache, p. 120.

accounts of the trajectory of Atwood's life and career in terms of success.¹⁸⁸ Atwood herself has expressed discomfort with this narrative: 'I don't like being an icon [...] it invites iconoclasm.'¹⁸⁹

Noticeable among the critical accounts of Atwood's success are repeated instances of critics describing Atwood as 'extraordinary'.¹⁹⁰ However, instead of 'Atwood as extraordinary' being an overarching critical narrative as it is with Frame, it seems to be simply a frequently used adjective. Rather, the overarching narrative in Atwood studies is 'Atwood as success', inherent in which is a degree of extraordinariness. While critics emphasise Frame's difference, it is Atwood's popularity that draws critical attention: the inception of this focus may be traced right back to early readings of Atwood whereby 'Atwood's works were evaluated not as unique or peculiar artistic creations, but as voicing the hitherto-suppressed truths of women's and Canadians' lives'.¹⁹¹ Thus while the extraordinary Frame is depicted as intensely idiosyncratic, Atwood is taken to be representative.

Atwood herself has a somewhat more cynical view, citing her financial success (sales figures) rather than the representative quality of her voice as the reason for critical attention to her achievements:

We are willing to give a certain amount of attention to writers who have, as we say, made it, not necessarily because we admire the work they do, but because we feel that if they sell that many copies there must be something to it. It's not the writing but the making it we'll applaud.¹⁹²

There is some weight to Atwood's view, evidenced in terms of the link between *Survival* and critical accounts of Atwood's success: some critics will extrapolate the limitations of the content of *Survival* (a reductive approach, for example), yet they will usually point out that the text sold well and was popular.¹⁹³ However, other potential explanations for the critical

¹⁸⁸ Nathalie Cooke, *Margaret Atwood: A Biography* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1998); Rosemary Sullivan, *The Red Shoes: Margaret Atwood Starting Out* (Canada: HarperFlamingo, 1998).

¹⁸⁹ Robert McCrum, 'Margaret Atwood interview: "Go three days without water and you don't have any human rights. Why? Because you're dead."' *The Observer*, 28 November 2010 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/nov/28/margaret-atwood-interview>> [accessed 1 December 2010]. See also: *Conversations*, p.80. Though note Robert Fulford's negation of Atwood's claim, quoted at p. 84.

¹⁹⁰ Nischik, "'Flagpoles and Entrance Doors'", p. 1; Pache, p. 131; Hatch, p. 193; 'Lions Tigers, and Pussycats', p. 16.

¹⁹¹ McCombs, 'Introduction', p. 8.

¹⁹² Atwood, *Second Words*, p. 341.

¹⁹³ See for example: McCombs, 'Introduction', p. 7.

preoccupation with Atwood's success — the narrative of 'Atwood as success' — may be identified.¹⁹⁴

Firstly, the emphasis on Atwood's success may be linked to her self-assurance. Atwood's commentary exudes confidence. In particular, her interview answers are 'tart, aphoristic, defiant, confident [...] her style, when she deals with journalists, is imperious'.¹⁹⁵ Such confidence may encourage a critical focus on Atwood's success, for it makes her commentary convincing: Atwood's confidence projects authority, adding weight to her voice and making critics more inclined to be swayed by her arguments. Having been so swayed, critics are more likely to position Atwood as successful, for at the very least she has won them over, and this victory elevates Atwood to a position of power and success in the mind of the person convinced. Critics have noted Atwood's confidence, and both biographers stress her secure sense of self.¹⁹⁶ Yet few have made a connection between that confidence and their critical accounts of Atwood as successful. One of those few is Nathalie Cooke (also Atwood's biographer), who writes: 'Why is Atwood so successful? Because she was [...] not afraid to be the first one to speak up.'¹⁹⁷ Cooke thus positions Atwood in terms of courage of conviction, and leadership, and associates those traits with her success.

Attendant upon the confidence of Atwood's own critical voice is a narrative of Atwood as strong (confidence being an element of strength). In particular, the attention paid to Atwood's confidence by her biographers situates her as a figure of strength. As noted in Chapter 1, Atwood's resistance to the stereotype of the isolated, doomed woman writer seems to form the overarching narrative of both the Sullivan and Cooke biographies. Cooke focuses on Atwood's refusal to be a suffering artist, her belief that 'the artist is a responsible citizen and not a passive victim'.¹⁹⁸ Sullivan probes 'the mystery of artistic confidence'¹⁹⁹ in the context of Atwood's career, examining Atwood's tenacity in spite of the societal obstacles she

¹⁹⁴ Interestingly, while many critics engage in the narrative of Atwood as success story, and while some seek to explain the reasons for her success (particularly Huggan: 'Margaret Atwood, Inc., or, some thoughts on literary celebrity'), I have yet to find a comprehensive critical account of the reasons why her success attracts such a strong critical focus. Notably the critical attention to Atwood's success only perpetuates it, as many accounts of her success will refer to the academic industry which surrounds Atwood's fiction as a marker of her success (e.g. Howells, 'Introduction', in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, p. 1; Nischik, "'Flagpoles and Entrance Doors'", p. 1).

¹⁹⁵ Fulford, p. 200. See also: Becker, p. 29.

¹⁹⁶ See for example: Sullivan, pp. 3, 4, 159, 212; Pache, pp. 129, 133; Goetsch, p. 176; *Margaret Atwood: A Biography*, Introduction.

¹⁹⁷ 'Lions Tigers, and Pussycats', p. 21.

¹⁹⁸ *Margaret Atwood: A Biography*, p. 17.

¹⁹⁹ Sullivan, p. 3.

faced.²⁰⁰ Hence these narratives of Atwood's life and career are not only narratives of confidence and strength, but also of success. These three concepts overlap — Atwood is successful because she is confident and strong — so that the narrative of Atwood as strong is drawn not only from the confident voice of her own commentary but from the successful trajectory of her career, and indeed from the critical focus on that success.²⁰¹

As noted earlier, *Survival* itself has been posited as a reason for Atwood's success. It may also go some way towards explaining the critical concentration on that success. Arguably critics are (perhaps unconsciously?) positioning Atwood in the terms she set up in that text: Portraying her as successful and strong (particularly portraying her as successful over a long period of time)²⁰² is akin to portraying her as a survivor. Though while the self-assurance of Atwood's commentary and the critical narrative of Atwood as strong encapsulate the positive connotations of survival, they also generate a perception of Atwood as formidable. She is 'famously scary',²⁰³ and intimidating.²⁰⁴ Atwood's commentary thus generates narratives of her as confident, strong and formidable, which form a supportive suffix to the wider critical narrative of Atwood as success story. That narrative of 'Atwood as success story' is also associated with a further critical figuring of 'Atwood as prophet'.²⁰⁵ This narrative, generated mainly in relation to Atwood's earlier novels, situates Atwood as a seer who taps into or predicts social issues: it is the idea that Atwood is able to take or predict the 'pulse' of the nation (i.e. its vital issues), and translate them into fiction before or just as the nation is itself coming to identify and popularise those issues. As the issues are popularised so too are her

²⁰⁰ In particular Sullivan frames her account of Atwood with the anecdote of Atwood's childhood encounter with 'The Red Shoes', a movie whose message is 'if you are a girl, you cannot be an artist *and* a wife' (p.3. My italics). Sullivan writes: 'The question that fascinates me is: although she was upset by it, why was she not derailed? If this was the vision she was offered, why and how did she escape? Many young girls born in 1939 still took that message into their bones. How did this young girl, in pre-feminist days, evolve the instinctive capacity to believe, unequivocally, in herself?' (p.4). That Sullivan's biography is named *The Red Shoes: Margaret Atwood Starting Out*, is indicative of the centrality of the investigation of Atwood's 'confidence and courage' (p.4) to her narrative of Atwood's life.

²⁰¹ See also: Shannon Hengen, *Margaret Atwood's Power: Mirrors, Reflections and Images in Select Fiction and Poetry* (Toronto: Second Story Press, 1993). Hengen's monograph investigates Atwood's 'power': 'While attesting to her importance [i.e. her status as successful, as icon], Atwood's critics affirm that she is a powerful writer' (p. 15).

²⁰² See for example: New, p. 303.

²⁰³ McCrum.

²⁰⁴ See for example: 'Lions Tigers, and Pussycats', p. 18; Becker, pp. 28-29; Fulford, pp. 200-202; *Margaret Atwood: A Biography*, p. 336.

²⁰⁵ See for example: Becker, p. 33; Kröller, p. 201; Nischik, "'Flagpoles and Entrance Doors'", p. 1; Kroetsch, p. 306; 'Margaret Atwood, Inc., or, some thoughts on literary celebrity', p. 215; Sullivan, pp. 306, 310; *Margaret Atwood: A Biography*, p. 335; 'Margaret Atwood: Branding an Icon Abroad', p. 29; 'Haunting Ourselves in Her Words', p. 5; 'Lions Tigers, and Pussycats', p. 21; *Conversations*, pp. 40 (Sandler), 80 (Oates). For a version of Frame as prophet (albeit a fictional one), see *Gifted*, p. 174.

texts: Atwood is picked up as a ‘spokeswoman’, increasing her visibility and thereby her success. The narrative of Atwood as prophet thereby both helps to explain Atwood’s success (her popularity stems from the relevance of her topics/themes), and to perpetuate the critical attention to it.

The practice of critics situating Atwood as prophet is predicated upon her fictional timeline, most notably upon the publication of *Edible Woman* and *Surfacing* and the pre-emptive relationship of these texts to the issues of feminism, nationalism and environmentalism. For example, Huggan states that ‘the timing of Atwood’s work, particularly her early work, is important here, coinciding with the so-called “second wave” of North American liberationist feminism in the 1960s and 1970s’.²⁰⁶ Atwood has been taken to pre-empt or foresee each of these social ‘movements’ and has been adopted by each of them as spokeswoman (much to her displeasure — see Chapter 1).²⁰⁷ In critical accounts of Atwood’s fiction, these three themes are the most commonly focused upon.²⁰⁸ *Survival*, with its nationalist theme, has also played an important role in generating this narrative. More recently, *Payback*, Atwood’s book on debt, was published in 2008 and so coincided with the beginning of the most recent global recession. Atwood as prophet is thus a narrative which can be traced back to the themes and subject matter of both her commentary and her fictional texts. Notably some of Atwood’s own commentary pertaining to the reception of her subject matter seems to support, if not overtly, the trajectory of this narrative: ‘Some of my earlier concerns — gender issues, environmental worries — were considered lunatic fringe when I first voiced them, but have since moved to the centre of the opinion stage.’²⁰⁹ Yet other comments entirely negate any suggestion of prophetic power:

²⁰⁶ ‘Margaret Atwood, Inc., or, some thoughts on literary celebrity’, p. 215. Similarly see: ‘She wrote *The Edible Woman* before we had really come to identify or understand *anorexia nervosa*; she wrote *Alias Grace* before the O.J. Simpson and Paul Bernardo trials, so that its publication was simultaneous with media discussion of those issues’ (‘Lions Tigers, and Pussycats’, p. 21).

²⁰⁷ Notably both Lorraine York and Graeme Huggan attribute Atwood’s success, in part, to this fact. See: ‘Biography/autobiography’, p. 29; ‘Margaret Atwood, Inc., or, some thoughts on literary celebrity’, pp. 214–215.

²⁰⁸ Nathalie Cooke’s monograph, *Margaret Atwood: A Critical Companion*, is a particularly strong example of examining Atwood’s fiction in terms of these three approaches. See also: *Introducing Margaret Atwood’s ‘Surfacing’*, pp. 17, 21, 22; Pache; Hayden, p. 68; Becker, p. 32; Kröller, pp. 201–202; *A Feminist Poetics; Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics*, p. xv; Lorraine M. York, ‘Introduction’, in *Various Atwoods*, ed. by York, pp. 1–11; “‘Over All I Place a Glass Bell’: The Meta-Iconography of Margaret Atwood”, p. 229; *Margaret Atwood Revisited*, p. xi; Howells, *Margaret Atwood; The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, ed. by Howells, (especially Introduction, Chapters 1, 4, 5).

²⁰⁹ *Writing with Intent*, p. xv. See also: *Curious Pursuits*, p. xiii.

I don't have any special clairvoyant gifts. As 'prophecies,' reading my books is rather like going to the fortune teller. She peers into her crystal and she says 'Babble, babble, babble.' You forget most of it, but then you meet a dark stranger and you say, 'Gee, what clairvoyance!'²¹⁰

The contradictory nature of these various comments by Atwood brings to the fore her slippery shifting nature and capacity for pretence. Each comment destabilises the veracity of the other, appropriately so as the narrative of Atwood as prophet itself infers many of the qualities of the trickster. Inherent in the reading of Atwood as prophet (and the related iconization of Atwood as the champion of feminism, nationalism and environmentalism) is the idea of superiority: it implies that she holds superior knowledge, and a particularly clever ability not possessed by others. As such she is in a position of power, with the ability to control the direction of her readers. The narrative of Atwood as prophet can thus be seen to be feeding into a reading of Atwood as trickster, just as it feeds into the reading of Atwood as success story, detailed earlier.

2.2.2 Margaret Atwood as Trickster ... or Not?

The trickster is a manipulative and slippery figure who is not to be trusted. S/he is clever, playful, shifting, and inherently powerful. In Chapter 1 I located Atwood's presentation of her self as trickster in the gap between her professed theory and actual critical practice: this gap is not an overt or deliberate rendering of herself as trickster, rather it covertly implies the slippery and deceitful qualities of the trickster. Atwood's candid destabilisation of the reliability of her interview answers and her portrait of herself as double more obviously align her with the trickster figure, as they clearly exemplify her capacity for artifice and multiplicity. However, as we will see, the overwhelming critical reliance upon the authenticity of Atwood's interview answers presents the antithesis of a trickster reading, and so indicates that a critical narrative of Atwood as trickster is not easily found in engagement with the aforementioned gap, or with her confessions of falsehood. Rather, a critical narrative of Atwood as trickster, if it is to be found at all, emerges in a polyvocal fashion: it may be glimpsed in the description of Atwood as certain other figures whose qualities overlap with those of the trickster; it may be deduced from critical engagement with facets of her commentary other than her interview answers; and, finally, it may be seen in critical attention to her fiction itself.

²¹⁰ *Conversations*, pp. 42-43. See also Sullivan, p. 310.

The way that critics engage with Atwood's interview answers is indicative of whether or not they view Atwood as trickster. When critics take her word at face value and construct their argument upon it, or use her answer to support their argument, the implication is that they believe her answer to be truthful. This belief involves either ignoring or being unaware of Atwood's insistence upon the unreliable nature of her answers. As such they either fail to recognise Atwood's manipulative ability and capacity for deceit, or deliberately wish not to position Atwood as trickster. However, those critics who refute, negate, or challenge Atwood's answers, or who point out (as I have done) the gap between Atwood's stated intentions and her actual practice in terms of commenting on her texts, can be seen to be highlighting Atwood's capacity for manipulation and deceit, and therefore situating her as trickster. As such, critical reaction to Atwood's interview answers designates the existence (or lack thereof) of critical narratives of Atwood as trickster.

In this respect it appears that the more common form of critical engagement with Atwood's interview answers is the one that does not identify her as trickster. There is a critical tendency to rely on Atwood's interview answers in support of arguments pertaining to her fictional texts,²¹¹ even to use her interview answers as the frame or foundation for an argument.²¹² Notable examples of critics engaging in this practice include Coral Ann Howells, Hilde Staels, and Sharon Rose Wilson. Howells's engagement with Atwood's answers is important because of her pre-eminence as an Atwood scholar. Throughout her critical accounts of Atwood's fiction, she repeatedly relies upon the veracity of Atwood's statements and often uses them as the basis for her argument. She has a habit of quoting Atwood's interview answers at the beginning of her essays,²¹³ and in one case notes that the quotation 'might

²¹¹ See for example: 'The Woman as Hero in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*', p. 17 (Campbell overtly takes Atwood 'at her word'); *A Feminist Poetics*; McCombs, 'Introduction', p.14; *Margaret Atwood Revisited*; Klaus Peter Müller, 'Re-Constructions of Reality in Margaret Atwood's Literature: A Constructionist Approach', in *Works & Impact*, ed. by Nischik, pp. 229-258; *Textual Assassinations*, ed. by Wilson, p. 5 (n.5), 14 (n. 21), 99; *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, ed. by Howells, pp. 12- 27, 34, 43-57, 156, 161-175, 184; Hengen, (the Works Cited list of Hengen's monograph contains a page and a half specifically devoted to listing the Atwood interviews she consulted. It includes *Conversations*, which is itself a large collection of Atwood interviews. Hengen references these interviews periodically throughout her monograph); Sharon R. Wilson, 'Sexual Politics in Margaret Atwood's Visual Art', in *Visions and Forms*, ed. by VanSpanckeren and Castro, pp. 205-214.

²¹² For example: Rao opens her monograph with a quote from an Atwood interview to frame her discussion. She periodically references Atwood's interview answers throughout the monograph (Eleonora Rao, *Strategies for Identity: The Fiction of Margaret Atwood* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993)); Tolan also opens her monograph with a quote from an Atwood interview (Tolan). See particularly my discussion of Howells's engagement with Atwood's interview answers.

²¹³ See for example: 'Transgressing Genre: A Generic Approach to Margaret Atwood's Novels', p. 139; Coral Ann Howells, "'It all depends on where you stand in relation to the forest": Atwood and the Wilderness from *Surfacing* to *Wilderness Tips*', in *Various Atwoods*, ed. by York, pp. 47-70 (p. 47); Howells, *Margaret Atwood*,

serve as emblem for this essay'.²¹⁴ The representative nature of an emblem tends to imply that these quotations encapsulate the substance of Howell's argument and so indicate that her argument is in fact drawn from Atwood's own comment. Indeed in her monograph on Atwood, this does seem to be the case. Howells's reading of *Surfacing* in that text is predicated on an interview answer:²¹⁵ she quotes Atwood as saying 'As far as I'm concerned, life begins with geology, and with geography... look at a map of Canada' and then proceeds to argue that Atwood's treatment of wilderness landscape 'is the cornerstone in her representations of Canadianness up until the early 1990s'.²¹⁶ In her chapter on *Surfacing* alone, Howells relies upon Atwood's interview answers six times. She also quotes heavily from Atwood's interview answers in her Introduction.²¹⁷ Among those quotations is 'one of the most sensible comments that one is likely to see on the best way to read novels',²¹⁸ indicating that Howells is highly responsive to the directions Atwood gives. Howells's faith in the dependability of Atwood's answers denotes the absence of a trickster reading, indeed is quite contrary to a trickster reading.

The use of Atwood's interview answers by Hilde Staels (who interviewed Atwood herself) is notable for the explicit manner in which she states: 'The questions that I put to the author provided me with invaluable material that confirms my interpretation of *The Robber Bride* and of the other novels.'²¹⁹ More overtly than Howell's use of Atwood's interview answers, Staels's use of them as a stamp of approval on her reading of Atwood's fiction signifies the antithesis of a trickster reading. However, Staels's statement also poses the question of whether, had Atwood's answers not 'confirmed' her interpretation, she would have felt compelled to change her reading of the text. Or would she simply have omitted those answers from her monograph? Or would she have challenged them? The latter response would of course have had different implications in terms of casting Atwood as trickster.

Finally, Wilson's quotation of Atwood's interview answers in the Introduction to *Margaret Atwood's Fairy-tale Sexual Politics* is remarkable for it suggests that she finds greater

p. 36. Howells also opens her essay in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood* at p. 161 with a quote from Atwood's book of commentary *Curious Pursuits*.

²¹⁴ "'It all depends on where you stand in relation to the forest'", p. 47.

²¹⁵ See: Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, pp. 36-51.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

²¹⁷ 14 in-text references in 19 pages, and one end-note.

²¹⁸ Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, p. 7.

²¹⁹ Staels, p. 207.

authority in Atwood's commentary than in the actual fiction she is discussing. Wilson's opening sentence states that Atwood re-uses fairy tales in her fiction: she then references an interview answer where Atwood 'has admitted that fairy tales [...] have influenced her work'²²⁰ instead of directly pointing to the evidence within Atwood's fiction. Of course Wilson does go on to support her claims by referencing Atwood's fiction, but the point to note is that Atwood's commentary was her first choice. Wilson's engagement with Atwood's interview answers is therefore indicative of the weight that Atwood's critical voice carries in terms of influencing academic accounts of her fiction. It also attests to the perceived reliability of Atwood's answers and therefore to a critical positioning of Atwood as other than trickster.

The weight that Atwood's critical voice carries can be further seen by virtue of the position given to interview transcripts in several collections of essays and monographs. Most often when transcripts of interviews with Atwood are included in such books, they are placed at the back.²²¹ Kathryn VanSpanckeren, explaining the placement of the interview transcript in *Margaret Atwood, Visions and Forms*, writes that: 'It is fitting, in a book on a contemporary, to give the author herself the last word.'²²² Being situated at the back of a book, near to the Bibliography or Works Cited, also implies that the interview is a reference/source of validity, something to be drawn upon in support of one's argument. Other critics will choose to end their essay in a collection, or their monograph, with a quote from an Atwood interview or critical text.²²³ She is thus regularly given 'the last word' by critics, in what appears to be an act of deference to Atwood's authority, a vote of confidence in the truthfulness of her statements, and an acknowledgement of the utility value of Atwood's commentary as an academic 'resource'.

This critical reliance on Atwood's interview answers begs the question of whether these critics are adopting a deliberate critical blindness towards the unreliability of Atwood's interview answers. Are critics actively choosing to ignore Atwood's statements that

²²⁰ *Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics*, p. xi. Note that Wilson also references *Survival* and *Second Words* here.

²²¹ See for example: Staels; *Visions and Forms*, ed. by VanSpanckeren and Castro; Reingard M. Nischik, *Engendering Genre: The Works of Margaret Atwood* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2010). Note that, *Margaret Atwood, the essential guide*, ed. by Margaret Reynolds and Jonathan Noakes (London: Vintage, 2002) is an exception to this critical trend, as they place their interview transcript directly after their Introduction.

²²² VanSpanckeren, 'Introduction', pp. xxvi.

²²³ See for example: 'How better to end this study than with quotes from Atwood herself on reading and writing' (*Margaret Atwood Revisited*, p. 151). See also: "'A Slightly Uneasy Eminence": The Celebrity of Margaret Atwood', p. 46.

interviews are not to be trusted? In the case of Howells and Wilson, I believe that the answer to this question is yes. As we shall see, elsewhere in their critical accounts of Atwood's fiction, both Howells and Wilson cast the author as trickster.²²⁴ Both critics are respected academics who have a strong familiarity with and understanding of Atwood's fiction and commentary. It would seem unusual then, for these scholars to have identified other traits which cast Atwood as trickster, but not her comments destabilising the reliability of her interview answers. One cannot but conclude then, that Howells and Wilson have made the conscious choice to disregard those comments in order to utilise those interview answers which they believe pertain to and strengthen their arguments. Unfortunately the effect of this decision is to undermine the portraits of Atwood as trickster found elsewhere in their critical accounts; alternatively one might find that their portraits of Atwood as trickster undermine those arguments which draw upon Atwood's interview answers.

Sherrill Grace is another critic who deliberately turns a blind eye to the unreliable nature of Atwood's interview answers: however, she does so in a more pointed fashion than either Howells or Wilson. Grace writes:

In her interview with Gibson, Atwood called *Surfacing* 'a ghost story' in which she is examining among other things, 'the great Canadian victim complex.' Needless to say, Atwood is not providing a gloss on the novel in the interview; analysing her writing is uncongenial to her. Nevertheless, she does give us a number of useful clues that have been largely ignored.²²⁵

Here Grace notes that Atwood says she won't answer questions about her novel and appears to believe her, but she then identifies the existence of and proceeds to look at the 'clues' Atwood gives about her novel.²²⁶ In doing so she seems to show that — contrary to what Atwood has just said — Atwood *does* answer questions about her work. The investigation of these clues undermines the apparent sincerity of the preceding sentence whereby Grace acknowledges that 'analysing her writing is uncongenial to' Atwood. Yet, in drawing a distinction between a 'gloss' and 'clues', Grace acts deferentially towards Atwood, choosing not to explicitly contradict her or point out the gap which may be perceived between Atwood's answer and her actual practice. Her use of the word 'clues' is also particularly important in that it implies that the text is a puzzle, and charges its author with the power of superior knowledge. The word 'clues' therefore suggests a reading of Atwood as trickster (as

²²⁴ For Wilson, see my discussion at pp. 97-98. For Howells, see my discussion at pp. 93, 95 (Atwood as double), 96 (Atwood's postmodernism and generic hybridity).

²²⁵ *Violent Duality*, p. 97

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 97-99, 107. One must also bear in mind Grace's heavy reliance on *Survival* (outlined earlier) when reading Atwood's fiction, thus compounding the point.

well as recalls the accounts of Frame as trickster given by Evans and Cronin) without overtly labelling Atwood as such. Grace herself thus behaves as trickster, manipulating the material available to her. Through her pragmatic refusal to explicitly acknowledge the lack of reliability which surrounds Atwood's interview answers, Grace is able to make extensive use of Atwood's commentary to support her argument (in a way that she would not be able to if she had made such an explicit acknowledgement).

This critical practice of relying on Atwood's interview answers is dangerous because (as we have already seen) there are in fact inconsistencies in Atwood's answers (as per Atwood's warnings to that effect). Elizabeth Baer in *Margaret Atwood, Visions and Forms* falls victim to such irregularities in a way that ultimately serves to undermine her argument. Baer quotes Atwood as stating that 'I would say that *Grimm's Fairy Tales* was the most influential book I ever read'²²⁷ and proceeds to ground her investigations of fairy tale motifs in *Surfacing* upon this quote. However in the transcript of another Atwood interview, printed at the back of this essay collection, Atwood states that though 'Grimm's fairy tales are important', in fact there were also many other important influences upon her writing.²²⁸ Here we have two different answers from Atwood — one definitively cites Grimm's fairy tales as the major influence on her work, the other downplays the importance of Grimm's fairy tales in favour of other works. That Baer only acknowledges and relies upon one of these statements, serves to undercut the strength of her argument once the reader becomes aware of the opposing interview answer. As the reader becomes aware of the conflicting answers Atwood's trickster nature becomes apparent, which in turn sabotages the thrust of any argument that relies upon the veracity of her answers.

While the majority of critics, including some of the most prominent Atwood scholars, choose to engage with Atwood's interview answers in such a way that ignores their unreliable nature and so casts Atwood as other than trickster, there are instances of critics dealing with Atwood's answers in a manner which intimates their recognition of a slippery nature. Among such critical accounts there are a range of approaches, each of which indicates to varying degrees a reading of Atwood as trickster. At the lesser end of that scale, some critics acknowledge Atwood's answers but decline to use them as a supportive base for their

²²⁷ Elizabeth R. Baer, 'Pilgrimage Inward. Quest and Fairy Tale Motifs in *Surfacing*', in *Margaret Atwood, Visions and Forms*, ed. by VanSpanckeren and Castro, pp. 24-34 (p.24).

²²⁸ 'An Interview with Margaret Atwood', *Visions and Forms*, ed. by VanSpanckeren and Castro, pp. 215-232 (p. 215).

argument, finding other justifications for their approach instead. Theodore Sheckels, for instance, points to several critics who ‘cit[e] Atwood’s own assessment of the novel’s conclusion as ambiguous’²²⁹ as the basis for their reading of the end of *Surfacing*. While he shares a similar take on the novel’s ending as those critics, he declines to follow suit in citing Atwood’s interview answers as the foundation for his argument and instead chooses to offer a text-based reason for taking this position. Though not overtly stated, his refusal to rely upon Atwood’s answers may indicate a distrust of those answers. Alternatively there may be an ideological basis for his decision, a belief that the author is not the source of textual meaning.

Fiona Tolan’s approach is similar to Sheckels in that she acknowledges, but declines to follow or rely upon, Atwood’s interview answers. The difference between the two critics’ practices however, is that Sheckels declines to base his argument upon a comment of Atwood’s that he agrees with, while Tolan acknowledges, but does not feel bound or discouraged by, interview answers that negate her argument. Tolan quotes Atwood’s statements that she does not like the label feminist, but proceeds to apply feminist theory to Atwood’s fiction anyway:

This refusal to be drawn into the feminist camp characterises Atwood’s public discussion of her work. However, such denials do not preclude a feminist examination of her writing. Because feminism is not a bounded, monolithic theory, it is insupportable to claim that a novel may react and interact with feminist themes and still operate outside of feminism.²³⁰

While it appears at first that Tolan disagrees with Atwood’s statements, she tempers this by adding that ‘the feminism to be read in Atwood’s novels is not the feminism that is to be discovered in feminist textbooks [...] Atwood has generated a new and original contribution to feminist discourse’;²³¹ and at some points throughout the monograph Tolan does actually agree with comments made by Atwood.²³² Ultimately, Tolan’s analysis represents mixed signals regarding the reliability of Atwood’s interview answers and her view of Atwood’s capacity for trickery: ‘Where possible, authorial intention is considered. However, the analysis is also significantly anti-authorial, as it frequently works against Atwood’s much publicised disavowal of feminist intention.’²³³

²²⁹ Theodore F. Sheckels, *The Island Motif in the Fiction of L.M. Montgomery, Margaret Laurence, Margaret Atwood, and Other Canadian Women Novelists* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), p. 76.

²³⁰ Tolan, p. 2.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 3

²³² For example see: *Ibid.*, p. 8.

²³³ *Ibid.*, p. 4

Other critics do directly challenge or refute the veracity of Atwood's statements. Frank Davey explicitly disagrees with Atwood's interview answers pertaining to *Lady Oracle*.²³⁴ Yet he writes that Atwood '*unintentionally* misleads'²³⁵ us with her answers which implies an absence of manipulation and so does not really situate Atwood as trickster. Robert Fulford however, not only overtly refutes the truth of Atwood's interview answers, but also openly casts Atwood's answers as deceptive. Fulford quotes Atwood's declaration that she does not like being a celebrity, but dismisses it, saying 'this was nonsense [...] many a good and successful writer lives a private life, but Atwood chose a public one'. He continues: 'For all her insight, Atwood seems never to have understood her own love of celebrity.'²³⁶ He thus challenges the gap between Atwood's theory and her practice, but tempers this challenge with the possibility that Atwood is not only deceiving us, but is also embroiled in 'self-deception'.²³⁷ Nathalie Cooke goes further: she cites Fulford's statements with approval, and herself challenges the gap between Atwood's answers and her practice. Yet, unlike Fulford, Cooke does not moderate this challenge with an intimation of Atwood's self-deception. This suggests that she believes Atwood is consciously manipulating her readers. The specific gap Cooke probes is between Atwood's statements that her novels are not autobiographical and the actual use of biographical material in her fiction.²³⁸ She writes that Atwood is a 'seemingly (even though Atwood would deny it to the last ditch, angrily defensively, articulately) autobiographical writer'.²³⁹ While Cooke thus points out the discrepancy between her account of Atwood's fiction and Atwood's own account thereof, she declines to actually call Atwood a liar or to overtly state that Atwood's claims that her fiction is not autobiographical are lies. 'Seemingly' gives Cooke's statement an air of hesitance: it downgrades her meaning from a definitive pronouncement that Atwood's writing is autobiographical, to something less certain. As such she displays the aforementioned reverence for Atwood which defers to the strength of Atwood's critical voice. However, in her approving citation of Fulford's open challenge to Atwood's truthfulness, and in her own probing of the gap between Atwood's theory as to her fiction and the reality of that fiction,

²³⁴ Frank Davey, '*Lady Oracle's* Secret: Atwood's Comic Novels', *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 5.2 (Fall 1980), 209-221 (p. 211). See McCombs, 'Introduction', p.14.

²³⁵ '*Lady Oracle's* Secret', p. 211. My italics.

²³⁶ Fulford, p. 193.

²³⁷ Ibid., p. 193. Fulford also cites Atwood's interview answers stating that she is not a politician, and overtly disagrees with them (p. 187). Note that Fulford's book is a memoir, and not a critical account of Atwood's fiction; it is however cited and discussed in Nathalie Cooke's critical account of Atwood's fiction '*Lions Tigers, and Pussycats*', p. 19.

²³⁸ '*Lions Tigers, and Pussycats*', p. 17.

²³⁹ Ibid. Notably, Atwood's other biographer Rosemary Sullivan refers to some of Atwood's fiction as 'quasi-autobiographical' (Sullivan, pp. 33, 38, 72).

Cooke displays an awareness of Atwood's slippery capacity for deceit. Without actually labelling Atwood a 'trickster', Cooke's engagement with Atwood's interview answers thus situates her as one.

Finally, in perhaps the strongest characterisation of Atwood as trickster to arise from critical encounters with Atwood's interviews, Susanne Becker describes the cunning manner of Atwood's approach to interviews. Becker positions Atwood, as a master manipulator who always takes control to 'put interviewers in their place',²⁴⁰ and highlights Atwood's undermining of her own answers. She recounts the story of a particular literary journalist who interviewed Atwood in 1996, which serves as an allegory for this narrative of Atwood as trickster. When the interviewer met with the author, Atwood claimed to have a headache, though the interview reportedly lasted the afternoon. The next day a fax from Atwood appeared, 'apologising for the fact that, because of her throbbing head, she cannot remember a word she said the day before'.²⁴¹ The implication of this anecdote is that Atwood's headache was a ruse all along, designed from the beginning to be used to undercut or destabilise the reliability of her answers. While Becker recites this anecdote and thereby offers us its implication, she does not explain or expand upon that implication, or openly challenge the truth of Atwood's claim (though she does quote the interviewer who called Atwood's claim 'far-fetched'²⁴²). Again we see deference to Atwood in action, as Becker suggests, but does not state, that Atwood is a manipulator, a liar. One cannot help but wonder whether this recurring critical reverence is consequent upon — or supportive of — the aforementioned narrative of Atwood as formidable.

While Becker's and Cooke's interaction with Atwood's interview answers represent the most robust representations of Atwood's trickster qualities, they are but two critical accounts: a distinct minority. Evidenced not only by the multitude of scholars who rely upon Atwood's answers, but also by the dearth of those that challenge them, the critical habit seems overwhelmingly to be an acceptance of the veracity of her answers or a deliberate blindness towards any artifice. Therefore most critical uses of Atwood's answers tend away from positioning her as trickster. However, critical reactions to her written commentary are more forthcoming in terms of situating Atwood as trickster. In particular, critics have been

²⁴⁰ Becker, p. 29.

²⁴¹ Ibid., p. 39.

²⁴² Ibid.

disbelieving of Atwood's attempts to decline the title 'critic'. Most scholars simply disregard such statements from Atwood by referring to her as an academic²⁴³ or critic.²⁴⁴ Others discuss her critical work in a fashion which seems to take for granted that the author of critical writing is in fact a critic.²⁴⁵ The actions of these scholars implicitly highlight the space between Atwood's comments about herself, and the reality of herself as indicated by her writing practice. Some scholars, although they are few, go so far as to openly cite and disagree with Atwood's statements that she is not a critic. Walter Pache focuses explicitly on the way that Atwood cultivates an image of herself as 'not a critic'. In his negation of Atwood's positioning of self, he illustrates her manipulative ability and so points to Atwood as being not only very much a critic, but also a trickster:

Ever since the days of *Survival*, Atwood — an academic, a *poeta doctus*, [Pache's italics] if ever there was one — has *carefully cultivated* [my italics] the persona of non-academic, even anti-academic, critic. She continues to claim that whatever she writes does not aspire to scholarly status nor propound any critical theory.²⁴⁶

Pache does acknowledge that while Atwood is a critic, she is 'a critic *sui generis*',²⁴⁷ but even this point is made in the context of highlighting her capacity for manipulation: 'Behind the seeming casualness there lurks an acute analytical mind. Atwood's literary criticism quite deliberately sets out to occupy the gaps left by the professionals.'²⁴⁸ Pache's language in describing Atwood is infused by the shadiness of the trickster figure, it reveals both her slipperiness and her power: her casualness is constructed, a deliberate façade for her furtive (and ferocious) intelligence. Hence Pache's response to Atwood's opting out of the critic position proffers one of the stronger narratives of Atwood as trickster by stressing her controlling nature and manipulative tendencies.

Critical acceptance of Atwood as a critic herself, tends to be in the context of acknowledging the many faceted nature of her persona. Many critical accounts will identify Atwood as 'critic' among a list of other functions — 'novelist, essayist, short story writer, [...] poet,

²⁴³ See for example: Renee Hulan: 'Eyes Wide Shut: Atwood, Bill C-32, and the Rights of the Author', in *The Open Eye*, ed. by Moss and Kozakewich, pp. 49-64 (p. 50); McCrum.

²⁴⁴ See for example: New, p. 275; Kröller, p. 194; McCombs, 'Introduction', p. 1; Staels, p. 1; *Margaret Atwood Revisited*, p. 1; *Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics*, p. xiii; York, 'Introduction', p. 2; 'Margaret Atwood, Inc., or, some thoughts on literary celebrity', p. 8; VanSpankeren, 'Introduction', p. xxi; Hammill, p. 61.

²⁴⁵ See for example: Nischik, "'Flagpoles and Entrance Doors'", p. 1; Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, p. 1; David Staines, 'Margaret Atwood in her Canadian Context', in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, ed. by Howells, pp. 12-27 (p.12); Wilson, 'Introduction', in *Textual Assassinations*, p. xi.

²⁴⁶ Pache, p. 126.

²⁴⁷ Pache, p. 129. Pache's italics. The Latin means 'of her own kind' or 'unique': *Oxford Dictionaries Online* <<http://oxford.dictionaries.com>> [accessed 15 February 2011].

²⁴⁸ Pache, p. 127.

librettist, children's writer, anthologist, social activist, painter, cartoonist' are among the other titles she attracts.²⁴⁹ As such, Atwood's multiplicity is stressed.²⁵⁰ Theorists of stardom or celebrity also highlight Atwood's multiplicity. Generally:

One cannot ascribe a single 'meaning' to a star; since individual consumers or groups of consumers may read a star differently, it is more useful, instead, to think of 'star texts': a constellation of possible meanings and affects that audiences may attach to particular stars.²⁵¹

The recognition of Atwood as a star is therefore also a recognition of her as multiple. The most notable constellation of meanings which have attached to Atwood include nationalist, feminist, and environmentalist: these 'various elements work [...] together to affirm her authority as a representative Canadian and cultural commentator'.²⁵² Particular critical attention is paid to Atwood's *double* (cf. multiple) voice or perspective, which is important in light of Atwood's own commentary positioning herself as double and thereby as trickster. A survey of those critics who situate Atwood herself as double (cf. those critics who situate her characters as double, discussed on the following page) reveals a split between those that cite Atwood's own commentary,²⁵³ and those who do not.²⁵⁴ Those who cite Atwood's commentary, seem to mainly reference the later text *Negotiating with the Dead*. Given the chronology, it is difficult to contend that Atwood's positioning of herself as double has sparked critical attention to her as double and as trickster. She may well have influenced this stance, but critics have clearly also drawn upon the characteristics of her texts in formulating

²⁴⁹ New, p. 275. See also: Kröller, p. 194; McCombs, 'Introduction', p. 1; Staels, p. 1; *Margaret Atwood Revisited*, p. 1; York, 'Introduction', pp. 1-2; 'Margaret Atwood, Inc., or, some thoughts on literary celebrity', p. 214.

²⁵⁰ See also: Robert McGill, 'Negotiations with the Living Archive', in *The Open Eye*, ed. by Moss and Kozakewich, pp. 95-106 (pp. 103-104) (note that McGill cites *Negotiating with the Dead*); Becker, p. 32; Howells, 'Introduction', in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, p. 1.

²⁵¹ 'Biography/autobiography', p. 29. See also: Hayden, pp. 68-69. Note that both York and Hayden are drawing on the ideas of Richard Dyer who casts the star image as 'structured polysemy' (Hayden, p. 68).

²⁵² Hayden, p. 68.

²⁵³ 'Biography/autobiography', p. 35; *Margaret Atwood Revisited*, p. 6 (note that Stein cites an unpublished Atwood speech where she casts writers as trickster); Hulan, p. 51. Nathalie Cooke in 'Lions Tigers, and Pussycats' (p. 25) very clearly situates Atwood as double (Peggy the private individual versus Margaret the writer). While she does not cite Atwood's commentary in that article, her *Margaret Atwood: A Biography* also positions Atwood as double (p. 327-328) and elsewhere quotes a Globe article from 1982 (pp. 265-6) where Atwood positions herself as double, which indicates that she is obviously aware of Atwood's commentary in this respect. Further her monograph on Atwood, *Margaret Atwood: A Critical Companion*, also responds to Atwood as double and does in fact cite *Negotiating with the Dead* (p. 15).

²⁵⁴ McCombs, 'Introduction', p. 11 (McCombs cites two readings from 1981 and 1983 that state that the voice of Atwood's poetry as double. Atwood had really only made one reference to herself as double by that time so it is unlikely these critics are drawing on anything other than the poetry itself); 'Humanizing the Fox', p. 110; Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, pp. 18, 186 (note that elsewhere in her monograph Howells does refer to Atwood's discussion of doubles in *Negotiating with the Dead*, but she does so in the context of looking at doubled characters in Atwood's fiction rather than in terms of discussing Atwood herself. See: pp. 162-3, 177).

this theory. In fact, there is extensive critical attention to doubles and binaries in Atwood's fiction.²⁵⁵

These binaries most often involve doublings of characters — both the existence of doppelgängers, and of doubling *within* characters (i.e. split personalities such as Grace Marks in *Alias Grace*). While accounts of binaries in Atwood's fiction are critically widespread, Sherrill Grace may be identified as the main proponent of this approach. Her monograph *Violent Duality* appears to have been the first substantial (overt) investigation of binaries in Atwood's work. In that text she declares that her 'interpretation has been shaped by the sense of pervasive duality in [Atwood's] art'.²⁵⁶ Her examination ranges from the 'duplicitous structure' of Atwood's poems, to the 'double voice of the self' in Atwood's fiction.²⁵⁷ Grace has maintained a focus on duality across her subsequent critical publications.²⁵⁸ Judith McCombs writes that Grace finds 'Atwood's dualities valid, fluid, and a source of dynamic aesthetic tension'.²⁵⁹ Other critics have also emphasised that Atwood, while inclusive of binaries in her work, writes against their rigidity: 'Atwood's texts partake of a logic of "both/and" rather than "either/or." Oppositions that have been traditionally theorized in terms

²⁵⁵ For accounts of Atwood's characters as double (both split personalities and doppelgängers) see: 'Lady Oracle's Secret', pp. 218, 220; *A Feminist Poetics*, p. 25; Ildiko de Papp Carrington 'Demons, Doubles, and Dinosaurs: *Life Before Man*, The Origins of Consciousness, and "The Icicle"', in *Critical Essays*, ed. by McCombs, pp. 229-245; *Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics*, pp. 32, 42, 44, 45, 48, 49, 53; Sherrill E. Grace, "'Franklin Lives": Atwood's Northern Ghosts', in *Various Atwoods*, ed. by York, pp. 146-166; Staels, p. 10; *Margaret Atwood Revisited*, pp. 4, 86, 98, 103; 'Fiction Flashes', p. 26; Beran, p. 75; Sharon R. Wilson, 'Quilting as Narrative Art: Metafictional Construction in *Alias Grace*', in *Textual Assassinations*, ed. by Wilson, pp. 121-134 (p. 133); Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, pp. 146, 149-51, 162-3, 177.

For accounts of other/broader dualities in Atwood's fiction, see: Branko Gorjup, 'Margaret Atwood's Poetry and Poetics', in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, ed. by Howells, pp. 130-144 (p. 130); *Violent Duality*; *A Feminist Poetics*, pp. 16, 23, 25; Sherrill E. Grace, 'In Search of Demeter. The Lost, Silent Mother in *Surfacing*', in *Visions and Forms*, ed. by VanSpanckeren and Castro, pp. 35-47 (pp. 35-36); McCombs, 'Introduction', pp. 11, 16, 18; "'Franklin Lives": Atwood's Northern Ghosts', p. 148; *Margaret Atwood Revisited*, p. 4; Howells, 'Introduction', in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, p. 7; 'Fiction Flashes', pp. 22, 39; 'Blindness and Survival in Margaret Atwood's major novels', p. 180; Rao, pp. xviii, xxiv, Chapter 3.

Note also that, like Anna Rutherford's article on Frame, Reingard M. Nischik's article 'Margaret Atwood's short stories and shorter fictions', in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, ed. by Howells, pp. 145-160, looks at Atwood's work in terms of Laing's study on schizophrenia (p. 159). See also Carrington, p. 242; Staels, p. 10

²⁵⁶ *Violent Duality*, p. xiii.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 79, 82.

²⁵⁸ For example, see: "'Franklin Lives": Atwood's Northern Ghosts'; 'In Search of Demeter'.

²⁵⁹ McCombs, 'Introduction', p. 17. See also: Sherrill Grace, 'Gender as Genre: Atwood's autobiographical "I"', in *Margaret Atwood: Writing and Subjectivity. New Critical Essays*, ed. by Colin Nicholson (London: St. Martin's Press, 1994), pp. 189-205 (p. 190). Grace argues that Atwood is writing against 'the seductive, reductive simplicity of a monologic either/or'.

of mutual exclusion, of “either/or.” [...] find a relation that is not mutually exclusive.²⁶⁰ This recalls the fluidity-focused arguments of Gina Mercer who casts Frame’s writing as a reaction *against* binaries, rather than as texts which espouse binaries.

Notably, Grace’s *Violent Duality* preceded Atwood’s major commentary on the writer as double in *Negotiating with the Dead* by around twenty years. There does not seem to be a link between critical attention to doubles in Atwood’s fiction, and Atwood’s commentary: attention to binaries in Atwood’s fiction really does seem to derive from the content of the fiction itself. Therein lies the major difference between critical accounts of binaries in Atwood’s fiction versus Frame’s fiction. In Frame studies the inception of accounts of binaries in Frame’s work can be traced back to her commentary ‘Beginnings’; indeed ‘Beginnings’ provided the very terms (‘this world’ and ‘that world’) with which critics have so relentlessly investigated binaries within her fiction. One may argue, in a similar vein, that Atwood’s foundational *Survival* text sets up a binary of victim and victor that persists throughout Atwood studies, however, Atwood’s victim thesis is not so much predicated on a dualistic relationship between victim and victor as on *four* fluid positions (the Basic Victim Positions). These four positions act as a kind of sliding scale, along which characters may move back and forth, which is quite contrary to the idea of two distinct (mutually exclusive) categories of victim and victor.

Obviously it is of importance that many of these critical accounts of doubling in Atwood’s fiction predate Atwood’s substantial commentary on the point which is to be found in *Negotiating with the Dead*.²⁶¹ However, even those writing after the publication of *Negotiating with the Dead* do not rely on that text in their analysis.²⁶² The one exception to this statement is Coral Ann Howells, whose monograph does quote from *Negotiating with the Dead* in its analysis of doubled characters in *The Blind Assassin* and *Oryx and Crake*.²⁶³ Howells then, appears to consistently rely upon Atwood’s commentary — interview answers

²⁶⁰ Rao, p. xviii. See also: Graham Huggan, ‘Resisting the Map as Metaphor: A Comparison of Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing* and Janet Frame’s *Scented Gardens for the Blind*’, *Kunapipi*, XI 3 (1989), 5-22 (pp. 5-6).

²⁶¹ Of those critics referenced at my footnote 255, the accounts by Carrington, Davey, Grace, Stein, Staels, Beran, McCombs, and Wilson (*Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics*), and Rao all predate the publication of *Negotiating with the Dead*.

²⁶² Of those critics referenced at my footnote 255, the accounts by Nischik, Gorjup, Howells (‘Introduction’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*) and Wilson (‘Fiction Flashes’; ‘Blindness and Survival in Margaret Atwood’s major novels’) were all published after *Negotiating with the Dead*. None of these accounts reference *Negotiating with the Dead*.

²⁶³ See: Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, pp. 162-163, 177 (earlier cited at footnote 254).

and critical texts — in her interpretations of Atwood's fiction. Howells aside, the lack of influence exerted by *Negotiating with the Dead* upon critical accounts of binaries in Atwood's fiction is interesting given the aforementioned extent to which critics draw upon her interview answers and *Survival*. Perhaps it is due to the relatively recent date of publication; or perhaps it is simply the case that the narrative of binaries in Atwood's fiction was already so engrained and accepted in Atwood studies without having had recourse to Atwood's commentary, that once such commentary became available its utility as an evidential text was minimal.

Critical attention to doubles in Atwood's fiction reinforces the narrative of Atwood as double: critics move from identifying a recurring preoccupation with binaries in Atwood's fiction, to stating that Atwood has 'double vision'²⁶⁴ and so cast Atwood herself in terms of multiplicity. While it appears that this narrative is drawn more from analysis of Atwood's fiction than from her commentary, it very clearly situates Atwood as protean and therefore as trickster. Two further significant sources can also be identified as generating a narrative of Atwood as trickster: these too emanate from beyond the realm of Atwood's commentary

The first is the designation of Atwood as other figures who possess qualities in common with the trickster or that imply the qualities of the trickster. The prophet, with its implied power and superiority, has already been identified as one such figure. Repeated critical references to Atwood as Circe and as Medusa may also be identified in this respect.²⁶⁵ Circe is a goddess of magic, and labelling Atwood as such recognises her capacity for manipulation and control, as well the power attendant upon that capacity. Several other critics have also overtly referred to Atwood's abilities in terms of magic, heralding her 'creative wizardry'.²⁶⁶ A parallel may be drawn here with the narrative, identified by Gina Mercer, of Frame as a 'linguistic sorcerer'.²⁶⁷ Medusa is a monster figure 'whose glance turned men to stone'.²⁶⁸ The critical

²⁶⁴ See: Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, pp. 18, 86; *Margaret Atwood Revisited*, p. 6; McCombs, 'Introduction', p. 16.

²⁶⁵ McCombs, 'Introduction', pp. 9 (references Alan Pearson), 11 (references Frank Davey); Frank Davey, 'Atwood's Gorgon Touch', in *Critical Essays*, ed. by McCombs, pp. 134-153; *Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics*, p. xv; Sullivan, p. 252; 'Fiction Flashes', p. 19; Hulan, p. 53. See also: *Conversations*, pp. 40, 80, 118.

²⁶⁶ Nischik, "'Flagpoles and Entrance Doors'", p. 1; See also: 'Blindness and Survival in Margaret Atwood's major novels', p. 176; Wilson, 'Introduction', in *Textual Assassinations*, p. xii; Linda Rogers, 'Margaret the Magician', *Canadian Literature*, 60 (Spring 1974), 83-85.

²⁶⁷ See: Chapter 2, p. 62.

²⁶⁸ 'Atwood's Gorgon Touch', pp. 134-135.

rationale for the use of this moniker has included Atwood's 'forceful but icy'²⁶⁹ poetry. Atwood, however, cites out-dated sexist attitudes to language as the source of this title:

The attack being: here is a woman who doesn't use words in a soft, compliant way; therefore, she is an evil witch. And I'm tired of it; but it's impossible to educate them. You're getting someone who really has a tremendous fear of women.²⁷⁰

Whether born of legitimate critical concerns with Atwood's work, or a throw-back to nineteenth century perceptions of masculine versus feminine language, casting Atwood as a monster figure charges Atwood with power, a quality inherent in the trickster. (Atwood as frightening monster also plays into the narrative of Atwood as formidable).

The other significant source from which a narrative of Atwood as trickster develops, is the widespread critical identification of Atwood's fiction as postmodern.²⁷¹ In particular, Atwood's generic hybridity is frequently classified as a postmodern trait.²⁷² Metafiction, linguistic play, the destabilising of conventions, experimentation, gameplaying, and the breaking of boundaries, are all other aspects of Atwood's fiction used to support reading her texts as postmodern. As stated earlier,²⁷³ there is an obvious link between such traits and the trickster figure: they imply multiplicity, slipperiness, cleverness, and authorial power over their reader.

While the depiction of Atwood as Circe, Medusa, and postmodern therefore feed into narratives of Atwood as trickster, there are in fact few overt critical references to her as such.²⁷⁴ This absence mirrors the same trend in Frame studies. More common (echoing the manner of critical attention to doubles) are critical accounts of Atwood's *characters* as

²⁶⁹ McCombs, 'Introduction', p. 9.

²⁷⁰ *Conversations*, p. 118. See also: "'A Slightly Uneasy Eminence': The Celebrity of Margaret Atwood", p. 41.

²⁷¹ See for example: Hammill, p. 134; Kröller, p. 165; *Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics*, pp. 15-16, 26-28; *Margaret Atwood Revisited*, p. 1; Nischik, "'Flagpoles and Entrance Doors'", p. 5; Pache, p. 129; 'Margaret Atwood, Inc., or, some thoughts on literary celebrity', p. 223; 'Introduction', in *Textual Assassinations*, pp. xii-xiii, xv; 'Fiction Flashes', pp. 18, 27; 'Quilting as Narrative Art', p. 122; Beran, pp. 75, 85; Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, p. 189; Becker, p. 33 (references Linda Hutcheon); *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, ed. by Howells, pp. 6, 86-87, 91, 118, 153, 168, 179; *Violent Duality*, pp. 80, 83; Rao, pp. xii, xiii, xvi, Chapter 1; *Margaret Atwood: A Critical Companion*, pp. 19, 27, 29; 'Haunting Ourselves in Her Words', p. 4; Hengen, p. 13.

²⁷² See especially the accounts of Howells and Wilson in the preceding footnote.

²⁷³ See: p. 63.

²⁷⁴ Those I have been able to locate are limited to the following: York, 'Introduction', p. 5; Sullivan, p. 2; *Margaret Atwood Revisited*, pp. xi, 6, 42, 52; 'Fiction Flashes', p. 26; 'Humanizing the Fox', pp. 110, 114; 'Talking Back to Bluebeard', pp. 164, 169; Howells, 'Introduction', in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, pp. 2; 'Blindness and Survival in Margaret Atwood's major novels', p. 186.

tricksters²⁷⁵ and her texts as trickster texts.²⁷⁶ Karen Stein, Sharon Wilson and Kathryn VanSpanckeren can be identified as the three critics who pursue in any real depth both (relatively) overt readings of Atwood herself as trickster, and readings of Atwood's characters as tricksters. A shared strategy spans the narratives of Stein and Wilson: both critics reference statements from Atwood's commentary that position writers as trickster. Here these critics look not to Atwood's characters, but to her commentary, to justify labelling Atwood trickster. Stein repeatedly states that 'Atwood defines writers as tricksters',²⁷⁷ while Wilson cites Atwood's review of Lewis Hyde's *Trickster Makes This World*, which links artists and tricksters.²⁷⁸ One cannot help but notice the lapse in critical attention inherent in these scenarios whereby scholars rely upon the accuracy of a statement by someone whom they recognise as a trickster, especially when that statement is essentially a manifestation of the Liar Paradox. That is, Atwood says novelists are tricksters: it follows that as she is undoubtedly a novelist she is a trickster. If we believe that she is a trickster we cannot believe her statement, and so she is not a trickster; yet if we don't believe that she is a trickster then what she says is true, and she is a trickster.

Each of these three critics also draws the inference that Atwood herself is trickster from the identification of trickster characters and plots in her fiction. As Atwood would have to possess manipulative ability in order to instil such capacities in her protagonists and her narratives, the tricks of Atwood's fiction are therefore taken to denote her trickster self. The thrust of this argument is one that Atwood herself would probably disagree with. She (like Frame) has couched the imposition of features of her life upon her fiction in negative terms (see Chapter 1); logic would dictate that she would feel the same way about the inverse attribution of textual values to the author. Nevertheless, VanSpanckeren writes:

Trickster texts — works that implicate and trick the reader — have long been a hallmark of Atwood's writing. In trickster texts, *Atwood plays* on the reader's preconceptions, often exposing assumptions about power.²⁷⁹

²⁷⁵ See for example: Staels, p. 210; *Margaret Atwood Revisited*, pp. 6, 42, Chapter 5; Wilson, 'Introduction', in *Textual Assassinations*, pp. xii, xiv, xv; 'Fiction Flashes', pp. 19, 23-24, 26-27; 'Humanizing the Fox', p. 103; 'Quilting as Narrative Art', p. 134; 'Talking Back to Bluebeard', pp. 157, 163, 164, 169; Howells, 'Introduction', in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, p. 10; Davies, p. 69; 'Blindness and Survival in Margaret Atwood's major novels', pp. 176, 178, 183.

²⁷⁶ See for example: York, 'Introduction', p. 5; 'Humanizing the Fox', p. 103; 'Blindness and Survival in Margaret Atwood's major novels', pp. 186.

²⁷⁷ *Margaret Atwood Revisited*, pp. xi, 6; 'Talking Back to Bluebeard', p. 169.

²⁷⁸ 'Fiction Flashes', p. 26. See also: 'Humanizing the Fox', p. 114.

²⁷⁹ 'Humanizing the Fox', p. 103. My italics.

Here she takes the trickster qualities of Atwood's fiction as indicative of the nature of the author (Atwood is the perpetrator of the tricks in the texts and therefore is a trickster). Stein likewise identifies an overlap between Atwood's trickster characters and the persona of their author: it is an 'identity' that the author and her characters 'share'.²⁸⁰

In their attention to Atwood's trickster characters, Stein, Wilson and VanSpanckeren all draw a link between the traits of the trickster and a capacity for survival. This is notable not so much for the ire it would draw from Atwood (as is the case with the aforementioned argument), but for the fact that it once more displays the inescapable influence of *Survival*. Atwood's trickster storytelling protagonists are viewed as 'develop[ing] narrative strategies to further their own storytelling goals, to move from victimization to positions of power'.²⁸¹ 'Increasingly, Atwood's survivors are trickster creators, using their verbal "magic" to transform their worlds.'²⁸² These critics are therefore discussing Atwood's writing in a way that again illuminates the strength of Atwood's critical voice.

Although we have seen that there is not a robust link to be forged between that critical voice and the narrative of Atwood as trickster, a link is not precluded altogether. While critical responses to her interview answers and her positioning of herself as double fail to really recognise Atwood as trickster or generate a narrative of her as such, we must remember how critics have responded suspiciously to her insistence that she is not a 'critic'. The utilisation of Atwood's commentary by Wilson, Stein and VanSpanckeren in these overt discussions of Atwood as trickster also relates that narrative to her commentary (even if the manner in which they defer to Atwood's statements tends to undermine rather than support their reading). Perhaps more significant though, are the critical discussions of Atwood as figures that overlap with 'the trickster' (Circe, Medusa, prophet), the repeated attention to her as a postmodern author, and the focus on the trickster traits of her texts. This last source of the narrative of Atwood as trickster is akin to the generation of the narrative of Frame as trickster, whereby the major inspiration for that narrative appeared to come from Frame's fictional texts rather than from her commentary. While both authors are thus cast as tricksters by their critics, there is a notable disparity between the consequent positioning of each author. Frame as trickster is translated into her work being seen as 'difficult' and 'elusive'; it is a

²⁸⁰ *Margaret Atwood Revisited*, pp. 6, 42. See also: 'Fiction Flashes', p. 26.

²⁸¹ *Margaret Atwood Revisited*, pp. 169-170. See also p. 165.

²⁸² Wilson, 'Introduction', in *Textual Assassinations*, p. xii. See also: 'Blindness and Survival in Margaret Atwood's major novels', pp. 176, 178, 181; 'Humanizing the Fox', 104; Rao, p. xviii.

narrative which drives, and also feeds upon, the perception of difficulty which surrounds her work. The self-perpetuating nature of these two narratives thus sustains Frame's cult status, continuously situating her as an author whose difficult and tricky fiction attracts a small but elite readership. Yet, the narrative of Atwood as trickster overlaps with (and thereby reinforces) the casting of her as a prophet and a focus on her success. It therefore emphasises the breadth of her popular audience and entrenches Atwood's celebrity status.

Atwood has shown herself to be aware of the mythology generated by these critical accounts of her work, and (as shown in Chapter 1) to be an active agent in attempting to influence that mythology. Ever the pragmatist though, her failsafe appears to be urging readers — academic and general alike — to ignore considerations of this kind altogether. I end this chapter with Atwood's own words, not to give her the 'last word' in an act of deference as per the scholars referenced earlier, but to stress the pervasive nature of her critical voice in academic work:

The writer communicates with the page. The reader also communicates with the page. The writer and the reader communicate only through the page. This is one of the syllogisms of writing as such. Pay no attention to the facsimiles of the writer that appear on talkshows, in newspaper interviews, and the like — they ought not to have anything to do with what goes on between you, the reader, and the page you are reading, where an invisible hand has previously left some marks for you to decipher.²⁸³

But beware, she is a trickster: I wouldn't believe a word she says if I were you.

²⁸³ *Negotiating with the Dead*, p. 111.

CONCLUSION

Exploring the commentary of and on Janet Frame in the context of the commentary of and on Margaret Atwood (and vice versa) has elucidated authorial and critical attitudes and practices regarding the production and use of commentary. Chapter 1 looked at the way each author has used commentary to actively shape their mythology; Chapter 2 probed the effect of that commentary upon critical narratives of each author's fiction. In Chapter 1 I found that both authors characterise their role as that of observer and share an attendant attitude towards the use of biographical material in constructing their fiction. Both authors also project the persona of trickster. These striking similarities challenge the critical tradition (outlined in Chapter 2) that views Janet Frame as extraordinary or 'different'. These links between the authors' commentary also raise questions regarding the impact of an author's background on her critical choices: one wonders if both Frame and Atwood portray themselves as trickster because of their common gender and age. Is this presentation of self an assertion of power in reaction to the stereotype of the weak, doomed female artist which both authors rally against; is trickster — the wily survivor — a persona they necessarily adopted in order to succeed in that period 'before the contemporary women's movement focused attention on women writers'?¹

In Chapter 2 I identified the substantial and on-going impact of Frame's 'Beginnings' and Atwood's *Survival* upon critical accounts of the authors' fiction. Critical reliance upon Atwood's interview answers was also explored, and it was noted that Atwood's manner in delivering her (written and spoken) commentary has generated particular critical narratives. In the case of both authors I have therefore found that their commentary has been influential upon accounts of their fiction; though not always in the way that the author seemed to intend. Frame's attempts to soften the critical attention to binaries in her work (by way of her accounts of Mirror City and a claim to straddle both imagination and reality simultaneously) were found to have been largely unsuccessful. This is most likely testament to the potency of her mythology, a remnant of the now defunct madness myth and its dichotomous realms of reality and schizophrenia. Moreover, both authors' manifestations of the trickster persona were found to be surprisingly ineffectual. While Frame's portrait of self as ordinary has been resoundingly ignored and rejected, her representations of self as trickster have, at best,

¹ Lorna M. Irvine, *Critical Spaces: Margaret Laurence and Janet Frame* (USA: Camden House, 1995), p. xiii.

supported and encouraged an existing critical narrative of Frame as trickster. Atwood's representations of self as trickster received mainly unenthusiastic responses: critical narratives of Atwood as trickster are usually grounded in sources other than her commentary. Meanwhile the critical tendency towards relying on her interview answers promotes the antithesis of a trickster reading. Where critics do recognise Atwood as trickster it most often involves a subtle narrative that must be gleaned, rather than an obvious rendering of her as trickster.² Though the actual term 'trickster' is seldom used in either Frame or Atwood studies, overall, critical narratives of Frame as trickster are stronger and more overt than these various narratives of Atwood as trickster. In Atwood studies, Atwood as trickster is an end product derived from many sources (such as her fiction itself, the designation of Atwood as other figures whose qualities overlap with the trickster, and the rejection of Atwood's claim that she is not a critic) rather than a univocal narrative. In Frame studies, pioneer Patrick Evans spearheads a narrative of Frame as trickster which is far more explicit, comprehensive, cohesive, forceful, and sustained than any such reading of Atwood. Thus my claims throughout Chapter 2 that a given critic 'presents a strong reading of Atwood as trickster'³ must be read in context: the comparative nature of this project reveals that what appears to be a strong narrative of the author as trickster in Atwood studies, is in fact a lesser narrative when viewed in light of those which exist in Frame studies.

Critical disregard for, and rejection of, these aspects of the authors' commentary demonstrates that critics do not forgo their agency in favour of the author; yet the considerable influence of authorial commentary referenced at the start of the preceding paragraph indicates that critics do grant the author substantial authority. Critical reliance on terminology and concepts derived from the authors' commentary as frameworks for approaching the authors' fiction testifies to the weight and significance assigned to such commentary by scholars. This appears to be the case despite the differences in Frame's and Atwood's critical approaches (in Chapter 1 I argued that while Atwood's commentary is more plentiful, Frame's is more personal), and their respective statuses as cult author and literary celebrity. I must acknowledge that I too have found the authors' commentary influential and persuasive, though its influence has been upon my meta-critical investigations,

² Karen Stein, Sharon Wilson and Kathryn VanSpanckeren provide an exception to this statement, and to my intimation that critical narratives of Atwood as trickster are usually grounded in sources other than her commentary: as discussed in Chapter 2, theirs are the most overt readings of Atwood as a trickster, and they rely (in part) upon her commentary in reading her as such.

³ For example see my discussion of Susanne Becker's Atwood critique at p. 85 and my discussion of Walter Pache's Atwood critique at p. 86.

rather than on my reading of their fiction. In particular, Atwood's commentary has had a fundamental impact on my engagement with Atwood studies. My own investment in the narrative of Atwood as trickster has been evident in the preceding chapters. Both Frame and Atwood utilise the Liar's Paradox in their commentary, effectively projecting a trickster persona by declaring their possession of trickster traits: both destabilise their interview answers by calling themselves liars, Frame's autobiography casts her as a masterful actress, and Atwood's commentary positions herself as double. Yet it is the fundamental tension within Atwood's commentary that makes this authorial persona so compelling for me. Reading Atwood's commentary cumulatively and comparatively revealed a gap (outlined in Chapter 1) between her stated positions and her actual practices. She says she won't talk about her books, but she does; she says she is not a critic, but she writes critical works. This tension cements my investment in the narrative of Atwood (the author) as trickster for it exemplifies the shifting nature of the trickster and her manipulative profile.

When the authors utilise the Liar's Paradox they set a trap: as soon as the authors *say* they are liars, then the persona of trickster inevitably results (if they are telling the truth they are tricksters, and if they are lying they are also tricksters). While I recognise that both authors undoubtedly establish the authorial persona of trickster in this fashion, I am also wary of (and deterred from) succumbing to this explicit cultivation of the trickster persona simply because I do not want to feel I have fallen victim to their trap; I do not want to be 'a simple shrivelled fly struggling in her web'.⁴ The manifestation of a trickster persona which emerges from the tension in Atwood's commentary is more attractive to me for I feel more in control — this is a tension which I have discerned, not one that Atwood has told me exists. Ironically, of course, this sense of increased agency on my part indicates that the emergent trickster narrative is probably weaker than that established by the authors' aforementioned statements. Thus the very nature of the trickster figure dictates that engaging with these narratives is a complex, contradictory, and circular process. Frame's commentary is not so riddled with the tension that can be identified in Atwood's commentary. I can locate only one instance whereby reading her commentary cumulatively reflects such a fissure: in Chapter 1 I noted that the confident persona which Frame projected in the Noonan interview challenges the shy persona projected in other interviews and therefore suggests the emergence of a wily and manipulative figure. In light of the effect of each author's positioning of self on my

⁴ Patrick Evans, 'Dr. Clutha's Book of the World: Janet Paterson Frame, 1924-2004', *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 22 (2004), 15-30 (p. 27).

consideration of their commentary and meta-critical analysis, I find it perplexing that critical accounts of Frame as trickster are stronger than those of Atwood. A critical deference to Atwood was identified in Chapter 2, and may be at play here, discouraging critics from the potentially disrespectful act of casting Atwood in the role of the lying, cheating, manipulative trickster.

I have thus recognised the impact of authorial commentary on my own critical practice; I too have succumbed to the influence of the authors' commentary. In Chapter 2 I identified a deliberate critical blindness towards the implications of relying upon Atwood's interview answers in readings of her fiction, and the consequent dangers of such an approach. An unacknowledged deference to the critical voice of Margaret Atwood has also emerged. Meanwhile, Frame critics have displayed a dogged and insidious adherence to the terms of Frame's earliest commentary (now over forty years old); only comparatively recently have they begun to acknowledge the pitfalls of the resulting 'dichotomous version of Frame'.⁵ In the case of both authors, cult and celebrity alike, commentary is therefore relied upon as a critical tool. This study shows that the author, far from being 'dead', has a fundamental role to play in the way we read fiction; it is important that we are cognisant of that role, and aware of its ramifications. Maria Wikse ended her investigation of Janet Frame's biographical legend with the hope that her 'study and its findings will make Frame scholars wary of the way they use biographical information'.⁶ It is my hope, in concluding this examination of the authorial commentary of Janet Frame and Margaret Atwood, that it will promote critical self-reflexivity when it comes to the way authorial commentary is utilised and the implications of such use, among Frame and Atwood scholars alike.

⁵ Jan Cronin, 'Through a Glass Darkly: Reading the Enigmatic Frame', in *Frameworks*, ed. by Cronin and Drichel (Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi, 2009), pp. 3-24 (p. 5).

⁶ Maria Wikse, *Materialisations of a Woman Writer: Investigating Janet Frame's Biographical Legend* (Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2006), p. 205.

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