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# Janet Frame's Songs of Innocence and Experience: “A Note on the Russian War”

Ian RICHARDS

This paper examines New Zealand writer Janet Frame's short story, 'A Note on the Russian War', from her first collection of short fiction, 'The Lagoon and Other Stories.' It considers the story in relation to Frame's early interest in William Blake and Immanuel Kant, and it relates this to other stories in 'The Lagoon' and to Frame's later fiction, notably her late novel, 'Living in the Maniototo.'

## 1. Life and Early Work of Janet Frame.

Janet Frame (1924-2004) is widely judged to be New Zealand's most famous novelist and short story writer. In 2003 she was awarded one of the inaugural Prime Minister's Awards for Literary Achievement, and she was often considered a likely candidate for the Nobel Prize. Yet in 1952 Janet Frame was saved from the worst possible experience, a leucotomy operation, by the success of her first book. When *The Lagoon and Other Stories* won the Herbert Church Memorial Award, the operation was called off. But *The Lagoon* is so packed with precocious masterpieces that, even if the operation had gone ahead, Frame would today be classed among the top rank of New Zealand short-story writers on the basis of this early work alone. Despite this, however, there is a paucity of literary criticism about Frame's work, and almost none exists in detail on her short fiction.

Much of Frame's early writing seems imbued with William Blake's notions of innocence and experience, and these concepts are everywhere in *The Lagoon*. For Frame, as with Blake, innocence is allied with the active use of the imagination, and experience with the knowledge of death. Thus one feature of Frame's early writing, exemplified in 'Swans', is that experienced children often appear to behave like adults

and innocent adults behave like children.<sup>1)</sup> Characters in Frame's early writing aspire to the freedom of the imagination (as Jan does by securing a disturbingly Blakean gift in 'Tiger, Tiger') or are aware of the corrosive power of death (as Winnie is in her grief in 'Keel and Kool'), but characters with an artistic sensibility seek to maintain both positions at once. From this they suffer torments and even a fracture of identity. For *The Lagoon* also displays everywhere the signs of intense, artistic sensibilities in trouble, whether it be in 'Jan Godfrey', which Michael King's biography revealed to be frighteningly autobiographical and where the mysterious intrusion: 'hell me me me' reads aloud like 'help me,' or in the final words of 'My Last Story': 'I think I've got the wrong way of looking at Life.'

## 2. The Case of 'A Note on the Russian War'.

In the midst of all this 'A Note on the Russian War' reads as something incoherent, the product of a troubled author, though in 1983 Frame saw fit to include it in her volume of selected short stories, *You Are Now Entering the Human Heart*. Typically of much of Frame's short fiction, 'A Note on the Russian War' appears strange because it is organised spatially, more like a meditative lyric poem than a plot-driven story. And yet it is not quite a lyric poem either. Events happen and characters appear in a setting. Thus Frame labels it in her title not as a conventional story or poem but as a 'note'.

The basic action of 'A Note on the Russian War' is so simple that it can be outlined in a sentence: the narrator recalls her childhood on a New Zealand farm and how her mother, for a time, convinced the children of the family that they were all living in Russia. The mother manages this by taking advantage of some sunflowers growing on the property. Modern sunflowers come from Russia, the home of commercial sunflower cultivation, and this connection is the sole link between the children's belief that they are in Russia and the reality of their being in rural New Zealand.<sup>2)</sup> Thus, through the transforming power of the imagination, the normal field of relationships among an observer, an object and its background has been perverted. The children do not see a flower and conclude from their relationship with the surroundings that it exists in an unusual context, namely a New Zealand farm; rather, the children see a flower and from *its* relationship with the surroundings conclude that *they* exist in an unusual context: the Russian Steppes.

The opening sentence, which makes up the entire first paragraph, begins with a statement of capture, 'The sunflowers got us.' The flowers have caught the children's imaginations and transported them to another realm. Indeed, the sunflowers seem to have become bizarrely capable of action, as if reaching out with black seeds and somehow fertilizing the children's minds by getting stuck in their hair. But this almost-literal capture of the children has been essentially brought about through the persuasive efforts of the mother, who parades around repeating to the children: 'sunflowers, kiddies, ah sunflowers.' Her voice is described as 'high' – the epithet could mean childish, intoxicated or elevated – and it is compared to the wind, as if it were a force of nature.

The expression 'ah sunflowers' contains an obvious reference to Blake's poem of the same name in the *Songs of Experience*, a poem in which the sunflower, turning its head to follow the sun's movement in an apparent desire to leave behind its earthly existence, acts as a symbol for endless yearning.<sup>31</sup> However, beyond a somewhat facile connection with the mother's innocently imaginative aspirations, the allusion seems to lead nowhere. Yet the spirit of Blake does indeed pervade Frame's story: not only the Blake who thought of progress from childhood innocence to adult experience as a balance of growth and loss, but also the Blake who objected to John Locke's famous statement on empiricism in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, that the still fresh mind of a child is a *tabula rasa*. In contrast to Locke's view, Blake argued that 'Man Brings all that he has or Can have Into the World with him. Man is Born Like a Garden ready Planted & Sown.'<sup>41</sup> Thus when the educated reader registers the brief sense of a literary allusion at the opening of 'A Note on the Russian War', then, in the same way as Blake proposes, the reader's mind is no *tabula rasa* but is instead bringing something along to its first, fresh act of reading the story.

The next paragraph assumes the children's imaginative translation to Russia is an established fact, as it would appear from the children's point of view. But of everyone in the family it is the mother who lives on the Steppes 'mostly', because her conviction seems the strongest. The narrator, recollecting as a child, thus reasons that her mother 'was bigger than the rest,' referring to the magnitude of the mother's persuasive force of personality and also referring to her in the way that a child might speak of a group's leader – a leader who is also a child. For there is something of arrested development about the mother's eccentric and excited behaviour, standing in

the sun with the largest sunflower she can find and repeating her visionary expression, this time with the word 'kiddies' removed so as to blur her relationship with the children. To the reader, her behaviour seems childish precisely because it is the behaviour of an innocent.

What is the children's Russia like? In an extended sentence that makes up most of the next paragraph, the narrator offers some examples, although unsurprisingly her Russia seems more like a New Zealand farm than somewhere on the Steppes. She says that in the winter the children wear 'big high boots,' but these are plainly New Zealand gumboots. Next, in the summer the children wriggle their toes in the mud 'whenever it rained,' though a Steppe-like climate is characterised by its extreme dryness. Third, and finally, the narrator mentions going out under the trees to sing, although there are usually no trees on the grassy plains of the Steppes. With each new example the description of Russia has become less credible.

The narrator says the children sang a Russian song. Possession of the song here appears in the narrator's eyes to confirm proof of identity, much as James Joyce's infant Stephen Dedalus, establishing his identity at the opening of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, sings of a wild Irish rose and concludes: 'He sang that song. That was his song.' However, reproducing any of the Russian song will require displaying expert knowledge, both of a Russian melody and of the Russian language, and so the narrator offers an excuse for not doing so: 'I'm singing it to myself so you can't hear.' This is transparently childish – emphasised by the sense of immediacy in shifting to the present tense – as is the childish 'tra-tra-tra' which disguises the tune. Of course, any song about the narrator's Russian world must remain hermetically sealed if it is to stay true to the viewpoint of a credulous New Zealand child. In compensation the narrator attempts to supply an edited summary of the song's contents and even a possible reaction for listeners, that 'it was a very nice song.' The narrator's childish demand for the reader's trust concerning the song may mimic an artist's demand for the willing suspension of disbelief but it is, essentially, a failure. The reader is a grown-up and, as this paragraph's first sentence ('I shall never forget being in Russia') has made clear, this Russian world is also being remembered by a now grown-up narrator, so that it is impossible for her to recapture and convey completely the innocent wonder through which a child could see gumboots as Russian footwear and credit singing wordlessly under trees as cavorting on the Steppes. Significantly, the narrator's attempt to convey the nature of her imagined world fails

because of the narrator's own adult failure of imagination, just as the grown-up reader must also, ultimately, be shut out from imaginative empathy.

### 3. References to Immanuel Kant's Views of Human Perception.

The next paragraph consists of one short comment, 'In space and time.' It is made by the grown-up narrator, though the claim that these childhood fantasies took place within a spatio-temporal framework, with its clear reference to Immanuel Kant, has almost the cheekiness of an authorial intrusion. In his *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant argued that the human mind arranges its many confusing sense-experiences by observing the connections among them to make a sensory unity, which he called the 'synthesis of a manifold.'<sup>5)</sup> This sensory unity is perceived as located in space and time, 'pure forms of sensible intuition' that provide a framework for the human understanding of reality.<sup>6)</sup> But to the extent that the children perceive a sunflower and believe that they are in Russia, then with the aid of the imagination they have made nonsense of Kantian views of space, time and the manifold. Frame had a lifelong interest in Kant's philosophy, and the imaginative artist in her late novel, *Living in the Maniototo*, plainly reverses the mental processes outlined by Kant. On the one hand, Kant has normal human minds, by means of the sensory manifold, absorb discreet sensory stimuli and find connections to build a synthetic unity which is perceived as reality, located in space and time. An artist, on the other hand, like the novel's Mavis-Alice Thumb-Violet Pansy Proudlock character (herself a fascinatingly fractured identity), has instead a mental space she calls the 'manifold' from which *emerge* discreet sensory stimuli, freed from conventional connections, which then take on life of their own as they are reconfigured into autonomous creations that fend for themselves independently of space and time. As a result, to Frame, reality is merely a convenient social construct. Thus any grown-up artist figure, working imaginatively from a position of adult experience, is not simply getting in touch with the imaginative innocence of her inner child but is also playing dangerously destabilising games with the nature of perceived reality and even risking her own sense within it of a unified identity.

Kant's explanation of the field of relationships among a material object, the observer's mental manifold and the framework of space and time, which are reversed in Frame's work by the imaginative artist, corresponds roughly to the earlier-

mentioned relationships of object (sunflower), observer (children) and background context (New Zealand-Russia) which are perverted by the mother's persuasive imagination in 'A Note on the Russian War,' when she successfully argues that the family is living on the Steppes. How does the mother manage this remarkable feat of persuasion? Not in the liberating manner of a truly creative artist, like Mavis-Alice Thumb-Violet Pansy Proudlock, but through an appeal to solipsism. The next paragraph presents the mother emphasising the farming family's isolation, with her insistence that any notion of the outside world can exist only 'inside us', so that we form our own boundaries to existence.<sup>71</sup> Thus, concludes the mother, 'we are the world.' This essentially circular argument – we are everything because everything here is all we can see – is geographically disorienting. Certainly, the mother takes advantage of the children's natural naivety about their environment. Elsewhere V.S. Naipaul has written about his familial home in Trinidad and described this confusion over one's relationship to the wider world: 'One of my earliest ideas – when I was six or seven – was that there were two worlds: the world within, the world without. To go out of that gate was to be in a world quite different from the one in the house; to go back through that gate at the end of the school day was to shed the ideas of the world outside.' [Naipaul, 158.] But even more important than geography is the psychological disorientation all this entails, since the mother's ruthless logic also rejects the outside world's external stimuli by giving primacy to an inner, mental world. A similarly sophistic challenge to the spatio-temporal framework occurs in a Chekhov story where a man named Kovrin is visited by a hallucination in the form of a monk. When Kovrin asks the ghostly monk if he can really exist, the monk cleverly responds: "'Think as you like [...] I exist in your imagination, and your imagination is part of nature, which means that I, too, exist in nature.'" [Chekhov, 237.] Kovrin's case ends badly. Isolationism and ruthless argumentativeness are the techniques of cult-leaders, used to spell-bind their followers, and in the same fashion there is something unhealthy and even sinister about the mother's brand of imaginative innocence.

Finally, the mother's statement, 'we are Russian because we have this sunflower in our garden,' closes the first half of the story. It also supplies the reader, at last, with the necessary information to grasp what has been happening. Up until this point the story has been disorienting for the reader, too. It has been presented almost entirely from the innocent point of view of a credulous child who is deeply involved in being

in Russia, thus leading the reader to feel a little of the same wonder and surprise that characterised the child's view of her conjured environment. But the second half of the story is very much the distanced reminiscence of the narrator as an adult—it is a view based on experience.

#### 4. Versions of Blakean Experience in 'A Note on the Russian War'.

The second half begins by describing the sunflower as it was 'in those days near the cow-byre and the potato patch,' setting up the sunflower in space and time in the manner with which a more conventional story might actually commence. Indeed, the story's tone has altered from its opening paragraph's reverence and even fear of sunflowers to the narrator now presenting the plant in a lengthy sentence as only 'little' and —repeating the epithet— 'with a few little black seeds sometimes.' This descriptive sentence runs on and becomes judgemental, calling the flower 'scraggy' and noting that the seeds form an unpleasant 'black heart'. It then goes on further to describe the flower as an adult might, through comparison with prior experience, as 'like a big daisy only yellow and black.' Back in her childhood, the narrator says, she could not see the sunflower 'properly' because of its height, implying that her now belittling description of the flower is more accurate than anything earlier in the story. She claims the children used to concentrate on the daisies instead. In recollecting that 'the daisies were nearer our size,' moreover, the narrator focuses on how the children may have offered some resistance to the power of imaginative capture exercised by the mother and her Mammoth Russian.

Instead of hanging about the cow-byre and potato patch with the sunflower, or even singing Russian songs under trees, in the grown-up narrator's reminiscence the children spend all their days near the homestead on 'the lawn', playing at making chains with daisies and buttercups. Perhaps the daisies and buttercups first began to fascinate the children as necessarily smaller-scale substitutes for the grand sunflower, so that their stems taste 'bitter' with displaced aspirations. However, 'chains' made of flowers, in imitation of grown-up bracelets and necklaces, have a binding and acquisitive fascination of their own. Put in Blakean terms, the children as recollected here prefer the daisies of reality to the sunflowers of imagination. Thus if the children are bitter it is mostly because they are in a hurry to grow up and, for now, they can only play the part of adults. This mode of thinking, moreover, must place



them in some conflict with their mother, who feels the opposite.

The next paragraph also opens with 'All day on the lawn,' emphasising that the children are totally absorbed by the daisies and buttercups. The children smell the daisies and push their faces into them, enjoying a more direct and sensual relationship with nature than the essentially abstract, escapist pleasure offered by the sunflower as catalyst to the imagination. They play the game of putting a buttercup under one's chin to observe a possible yellow glow that indicates a love of butter. This game, which through the agency of a flower involves a transforming vision and its interpretation, is in fact a small-scale and materialist version of the mother's more fanciful behaviour with the sunflower—but in any case, the children soon reject this. They defer to their experience of reality, because they know objectively that 'you do love butter anyway so what's the use.' Next the children even appear to mock the simplistic, imaginative sense of belief offered by the buttercups' glow, suggesting, with a capitalization that supplies a distinct note of sarcasm, 'the yellow shadow is Real Proof.' And surrounded always by the sensual pleasures of the buttercups and daisies, the children move quickly from any displaced, romantic interest in the grown-up experience of love (such as loving butter), to a hunger for the most sensual, physical form of love among the 'wet painted' flowers.

From this sexualised mindset —Frame would have been aware that the French refer to an orgasm as 'the little death'— the narrator says 'the War came.' Indeed, the image of war was first mentioned and anticipated in the children's Russian song in the story's first half, more innocently and mysteriously then, as 'rolling through the grass.' War, the agent of death, appears in the high-growth seasons of spring and summer, traditionally associated with puberty and personal development. As an emblem of adolescence, and of the loss of childhood imaginative innocence and all the subsequent conflict this brings on, war is both 'ordinary' and a cataclysm which shatters the past. This was also the case with the famously bloody examples supplied by the narrator as comparisons from history: the Hundred Years War, the Wars of the Roses and the Great War (World War One). The first half the story described childhood innocence by focusing on the children's mother, and the second half of the story centres on the father. He has experienced war.<sup>8)</sup> Just as the children in their innocence asserted their Russian identity by singing a Russian song, in World War One the father and his comrades sang the popular marching song 'It's a Long Way to Tipperary' to bolster their courage and to feel the part as soldiers.

The narrator says her father and the others sang Tipperary 'to show they were getting somewhere.' Unfortunately, convincing oneself that one is a brave soldier is no easier than believing one is Russian, and so the father's Tipperary requires singing often and ever more loudly to feel sure 'about getting there.' But it is really a song of farewell, and feelings are not easily manufactured in the world of experience. Though the children's innocent Russian song may have supplied them with a sealed-off ignorance, the father's song of experience supplies him only with a terrible knowledge: the danger of death. Thus singing the song louder will not help. It can only expand this knowledge to the awful understanding that all movement in life is inevitably towards death. Singing actually intensifies the soldiers' natural fear and so 'the more scared they felt inside.' Significantly, the narrator then comments in a paragraph that she and the other children had no song of identity for themselves during her own 'Russian War', the period when both Russian innocence and War experience came together, like matter and anti-matter. The narrator does not elaborate further – this story is only a 'Note' – except to offer two more examples of songs that she and her siblings did not have: 'Pack up your troubles' (a song of refuge) and 'There's a long long trail a-winding' (a song of escape). The character Mavis-Alice Thumb-Violet Pansy Proudlock in *Living in the Maniototo* may have a fractured identity but she is serene in her acceptance of this as part and parcel of the role of a creative artist. No such comforting third way through art seems to exist for the narrator in 'A Note on the Russian War.'

Instead, the story ends with two paragraphs that describe forms of failure and loss: the first concerning the life of experience and the second concerning the life of innocence. In the first paragraph, the narrator as a grown-up recalls her childhood again with its 'sunflowers by the fence,' 'the fat white cow' and her 'big high boots in winter.' But is this an accurate picture? It has never really been clear in the story whether one or many sunflowers have been growing on the farm. In fact, it was at the start of the story's second half, linked with experience, that the narrator as an adult specifically recalled a single sunflower. This contradiction here suggests that she can no longer recall with any certainty. Furthermore, at the start of the story's second half the grown-up narrator described the location of the sunflower as 'near the cow-byre,' where several cows would be taken care of, but now she recalls only a fence where a single cow is milked. Thus the number of sunflowers the narrator remembers at the story's close has increased and the number of cows has decreased.

All she is really sure of is the 'big high boots', the gumboots which were the first and least convincing example of being in Russia from the child-narrator's list of examples in the story's third paragraph. Try as one might, one can only remember childhood as an adult. The grown-up mindset of experience cannot return completely to the childhood world of innocence.

But if problems of space and what-was-where and how-many defeat any remembrance by adult experience, then time is the enemy of childhood innocence. In the last paragraph the child-narrator returns to describe once more singing her hermetically sealed 'tra-tra-tra', and singing it 'quietly' to herself, though together with her siblings and parents. However, children must grow up and put away childish things, and even if one tries with a song to separate oneself from the real world, a 'war comes whatever you sing.' There is no refuge, there is no escape. This is a bleak vision from which, unlike the work of the later Frame, art offers no effective way out. In *The Lagoon's* 'My Last Story' the adult narrator laments that she 'must be frozen inside with no heart to speak of,' as she vainly attempts to think her way back into the warm feelings of innocent childhood and manages to write only the 'three dots' of an ellipsis. As a would-be artist she cannot stand the fatal knowledge of experience and it is impossible to recreate the imaginative freedom of innocence. 'A Note on the Russian War' is organised spatially precisely so that each option of innocence and experience can be explored and each closed off.

## 5. Conclusion.

In 1803 William Blake physically ejected a drunken soldier from his garden in Felpham and was later tried for treason because of it, causing him great distress before he was acquitted. A visionary, haunted by his brother Robert's early death and prone to what he called 'Nervous Fear,' Blake had problems with the intruding world and was much attracted by the appeal of the inner life. He was a suitable figure for the early Frame to attach herself to. In 1790 Blake famously wrote in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* that 'Without Contraries is no progression,' but until Frame's artistic life was to become sustainable in Frank Sargeson's garden hut in 1955, where her position as an artist was acknowledged by others, the dichotomy between innocence and experience could offer Janet Frame and her fictional creations only a universe of pain.

## 【Notes】

- 1) For this reading of 'Swans', see: Richards, Ian. *Dark Sneaks In: Essays on the Short Fiction of Janet Frame*. Lonely Arts Publishing, Auckland, 2004: 37-55. This is the only full-length work on Frame's short stories.
- 2) As is often the case with manipulators of the imagination, the children's mother is cavalier with the facts. Although modern sunflower seeds come from Russia, and the 'Mammoth Russian' sunflower was commonly grown outside Russia from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, sunflowers actually originated in North America. The Russian Orthodox Church accidentally started the commercialization of sunflower cultivation in Russia by banning most oil foods from being consumed during Lent. Sunflower seeds were not on the proscribed list and soon they became popular, and so Russian growers bred sunflowers of ever-larger size. The 'Mammoth Russian' is characterized by its straight trunk and single, massive flower. It seems to be the type held by the mother in Frame's story.
- 3) Blake, William. *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, 1794. Frame's mother was a Christadelphian, believing that 'when you died, you died, staying in your grave until the Second Coming and the Resurrection and Judgment Day.' [Frame. *To the Is-land: An Autobiography: Volume One*, 123.] The emphasis in the second stanza of 'Ah Sunflower' on physical resurrection may have given the poem a special attraction for Frame and brought it readily to mind.
- 4) Quoted in Ackroyd, 299. John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* was published in 1690.
- 5) Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*. (Analytic of Concepts. The Pure Concepts of the Understanding, or Categories.) 1781.
- 6) Kant, Immanuel. *Op. cit.* (Aesthetic. Transcendental Doctrine of Elements.)
- 7) In *Living in the Maniototo* a New Zealand boy, visiting his uncle in Baltimore complains of the house: 'there's no real *outside*,' suggesting that the imagination cannot operate in such an environment. [Frame. *Living in the Maniototo*, 100.]
- 8) During the First World War Frame's father, George Frame, served on the Western Front with the New Zealand engineers corps. [King, 16.]

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## ジャネット・フレイムの無垢と経験の歌： 『ロシア戦争覚書』

イアン・リチャーズ

この論文では、ニュージーランド出身の作家ジャネット・フレイム(Janet Frame)の処女短編小説集『ラゲーンとその他の物語』中の小説『ロシア戦争覚書』を考察する。この小説を、フレイムの初期の関心であったウィリアム・ブレイクとイマヌエル・カントに結びつけて考え、また、『ラゲーンとその他の物語』中の他の小説やフレイムのその後の小説、特にその中でも最も新しい小説『マニオトトに暮して』に結びつけ述べる。