In Splendid Isolation:
A Deconstructive Close-Reading of a Passage in Janet Frame's "The Lagoon"
Introduction

Texts are con-texts

According to deconstructive theory, oppositions are inherent in a text explicitly or implicitly (Texts and Contexts 77). This theory thus concerns itself more with what is going on between the lines than what is actually in them. Consequently, it is intimately connected with the literary tools and techniques by which the text is put together. In Of Grammatology (1967) Jacques Derrida states that "[t]here is no extra-text" (158). According to the Glasgow professor and deconstruction theorist Will Maley in "Ten Ways of Thinking About Deconstruction," this quote has often been wrongly interpreted to mean ""There is nothing outside - or beyond - the text"" (in Maley 1):

the impression of deconstruction . . . as a form of close reading that is blind to larger questions of history and politics, a sort of ultra-formalism.

But when Derrida used the phrase he had something else in mind, specifically a desire to undo the opposition between close readings and contextual ones. (1)

In dismantling the text, the theory of deconstruction does therefore not only disclose the delusiveness of language, but also its intrinsic cultural frame of reference which constitutes the living conditions of the text. Since the oppositional relations are also said to be hierarchical so that one of the binary opposites is culturally valued as favoured, deconstruction is "not a 'textualization' of politics but a politicization of text, of text as a system rather than as a book bound by covers" (1). In deconstruction linguistic, aesthetic, social and political norms and values are developed as an underlying basic screen of presuppositions that brings the text out in relief and makes it visible. To use a rough simile, as if a placard with the text “Peace” written on it would inevitably establish war as the ongoing, normal state of affairs. In "Living on: Border Lines" Derrida states that

What has happened . . . is a sort of overrun that spoils all these boundaries and divisions and forces us to extend the accredited concept, the dominant notion of a 'text' . . . that is no longer a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network, a
fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other
differential traces. (qtd in Maley 2)

In this sense, deconstruction theory could be said to mirror the paradigmatic shift that
has taken place within linguistics as well, where theory has oriented itself from
formalistic approaches towards contextual (functional) ones. Maley continues: "Derrida
is out to circumvent . . . the book/reality dichotomy. He is also out to subvert the
opposition between close reading (all the formalisms) and contextual reading (all the
sociologies of literature)" (2).

But since a text, like life itself, never can be free of its presuppositions, the theory
arrives at a result mathematically equal to nil. It seems to end up saying that our biases
are inherent in language itself. It is thus impossible to be liberated from them. Wherever
language is present, reality eludes us. Just like Magritte's panting of a pipe - itself a
human invention - "n'est pas une pipe," we are confined to the same story of
nothingness, told over and over again, repeatedly expressing the made-up structures
upon which we have built our languages and civilisations, changing nothing. In order to
avoid the void, we are constantly reinventing language, to make it say something, create
meaning - and change.

This suggests that deconstruction is basically a political project. To overcome
repetition through revolution, one has not only to reverse inherent oppositions but also
to expose them to displacement (3-4), bearing in mind the ghastly spectres of Marxist
genocidal revolutions all over the (post-colonial) world, surpassing by far in cruelty and
numbers of dead their overthrown preceding dictatorships. It would, however, lead too
far philosophically in this essay to explore how the deconstructive analytical process
differs from, and relates to, Hegelian/ Marxian dialectics and thus how the terms of
'reversal' and 'displacement' relate to the terms of 'thesis,' 'anti-thesis' and 'synthesis.'

The theory offers, though, an analytical perspective, which I will try to apply when
I close-read a passage from Janet Frame's title story in her collection of stories The
Lagoon (1951). Already in Derrida's etymologically radical, literal use of the word 'text'
as 'fabric' in "Living on - Border Lines," a significant common denominator is to be
found: "As much as the later Barthes, Frame treats a text as the word's Latin origin
invites, as something woven, with its meaning in the web," adds Vincent O'Sullivan in
his essay on Janet Frame's fictions, "Exiles of the Mind," in which he sets out quoting
one of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's letters to Robert Southey discussing the 'Coan'
transparent vest of allegory versus the opaquer wildness of metaphor (181).
In other words, this kind of etymologically literal approach to words, not only intercepting synchronic connotations and ambiguities of meaning but diachronic ones as well, characterizes also Frame's writings. As Elizabeth Alley puts it in "An Honest Record," comprising two radio interviews with Janet Frame from 1983 and 1988, "... the way that you always prefer to take the very literal meaning of words" (155). Frame's tenacious, iterative and sometimes also allegoric use of such an approach is one of her idiosyncrasies, not the least when it comes to proper names, as Karin Hansson points out in *The Unstable Manifold* (76). Naming of characters like, for instance, 'Thora Pattern' in *The Edge of the Alphabet* (1962) and 'Vera Glace' in *Scented Gardens for the Blind* (1963) could be put forth as typical examples.

So, when reading the abundant literary criticism on Janet Frame's works, a deconstructive approach proves to be neither incidental, nor original. As mentioned, it soon turns out that Frame herself was deconstructive even before the concept was invented. In this, as in many other senses, Janet Frame has been visionary. In several novels, among others *The Edge of the Alphabet*, published before the theory of deconstruction had been constructed, and written from an entirely different, existential point of view, Frame puts her piercing finger on inherent, destabilizing oppositions within language and its various, textual concepts forming people's identities, as displaced and fragile as they have proven to be, in a peripheral, New Zealand environment.

When signifiers /of English/ are placed in a remote geography without its signified, gaps of meaning arise, which can cause alienation. As formulated by Frame herself in *The Carpathians*,

> The imposture begins with the first germ of disbelief in being, in self, and this allied to the conviction of the 'unalterable certainty of truth,' produces the truth of disbelief, of deception of being, of self, of times, places, peoples, of all time and space. The existence of anything, of anywhere and anytime produces an instant denial only in graduates of imposture; in most others who remain unaware of such a state, particularly in themselves, there may be little or no knowledge of their reality, their nonentity. (qtd in Hansson 121)

Or as Patrick Evans phrases it in "The Case of the Disappearing Author," "[w]hat it means to be real, to feel real in a world that doesn't feel real, is to me what her art is about" (15). In Cecilie Lønn's article "Å Leve på Kanten av Alfabetet," ("Living on the
Edge of the Alphabet," \textit{my trans} which views Janet Frame's authorship from a postcolonial perspective, it is stated that Frame "long before the 'invention' of deconstruction [paid] attention to a limit of the words' coverage. Through the texts she shows how the constant displacement of meaning exposes the conceptual horizon of the speaker or writer" (\textit{my trans} 47). This is further developed by Marc Delrez in "Love in a Post-Cultural Ditch: Janet Frame" where he argues that "[l]ong before the 'invention' of deconstruction, Frame was aware of a cutting edge to the alphabet, of a limit to the words' coverage, apt to expose both the conceptual horizons of the speaker and the gaping silent hollowness beyond, which she calls 'eternity'" (108).

Often, when discussing Frame's awareness of the limited scope, critics put forth her imaging of language as a hawk - simultaneously the symbol of society, and death (\textit{The Unstable Manifold} 112) - circling endlessly above its enigmatic prey:

[Language] in its widest sense is the hawk suspended above eternity, feeding from it but not of its substance and not necessarily for its life and thus never able to be translated into it; only able by wing movement, so to speak, a cry, a shadow, to hint at what lies beneath it on the untouched, undescribed almost unknown plain. (qtd in Hansson 107)

The recurring theme of language and identity loss, revealing "vast surfaces of strangeness" (qtd in Hansson 83) connects her literature with such existentialist works of the Northern Hemisphere as Camus' \textit{L'Etranger} (1942). When discussing how the alienated state takes shape in Frame's works in "On the Edge: New Zealanders as Displaced Persons," Peter Alcock claims that "instead of his colonial Algeria, 'l 'étranger' could equally be in an Auckland or Sydney suburb . . . " (127). The question of the English-speaking New Zealanders' fragile identity progresses into fully developed questions about human identity in a post-industrial devastated world, thereby positioning herself as a (Western) 'world' author. The New Zealand predicament has become the 'human' predicament, as is pointed out by Alcock (127).

Languagewise she is strongly influenced by poetry: "I allied myself with the poets: I adopted extravagant beliefs" (qtd in Hansson 9). This was her primary concern in youth - to become a poet. Through precise imagery, loyal to the source of its vision, she is also continuously connected to poetry in her prose, not least with modernist traditions such as the sophisticated English imagism emanating from Mallarméan French symbolism and communicated via Baudelaire all the way to Elliot (\textit{The Unstable Manifold} 39). On the cover of the Bloomsbury Group's edition of \textit{The Lagoon a Times
Literary Supplement review is quoted: "Her prose has the sharpness of imagist poetry, but its purposefulness and irony preclude mere exquisiteness."

Not so much has been written about her early short fiction, though, which is why I feel motivated to study it further. Compared to the criticism of her novels, the commentary on her short fiction is sparse, even if reflections on gaps of meaning have been made in comments on The Lagoon too. When the English signifiers have been separated from their signified in a postcolonial context, you find yourself on the speechless edge of the alphabet, visualising mute strata of something that is not yet language. Either you impose on this speechless reality the traces of Englishness into a 'New' Zealand replica reality, or you are swallowed by the gap between unfit signifiers and signifieds, which opens up new realities. In "Falling Away from the Centre - Centrifugal and Centripetal Dynamics in Janet Frame's Short Fiction," Renata Casertano rejects, for example, a narrow feminist reading, such as Gina Mercer's in Janet Frame: Subversive Fictions (1994), in favour of problematising ones on the question of postcolonial Newzealandic identity:

To interpret the writer's image of the gap solely in terms of gynopoetics as in Gina Mercer's feminist reading of Frame's works, . . . seems to me a way of partly evading the author's powerful message. Instead, we are presented with the perspective of an artist writing out of the periphery of the world and not from it, since the message is not necessarily addressed by the provincial writer to the old continent-dominated centre, inasmuch as the centre is, in Janet Frame's fiction, a receding horizon to be shifted and permutated ad infinitum [sic]. (356)
Con-texts: To Be - Or Not To Be

The Sea of Englishness Floods the New Zealand Lagoon

I would like to explore the language level in the first passage of "The Lagoon" and consequently use it as an overall point of departure. In order to do that I will apply a general symbolic reading of the relation between the sea and the lagoon, connecting the analysis to my introductory section's deconstructive hypothesis on inherent oppositions within texts. The immediate reason why I chose to use deconstruction in my analysis of this passage in Janet Frame's title story in The Lagoon was that I perceived in the very title an echo of what might be seen as its opposite, the sea. In addition, this was confirmed in the very first sentence of "The Lagoon": "At low tide the water is sucked back into the harbour . . . "(3) Not only does the lagoon contain or even consist of the sea, but is furthermore a void without it, because the sentence continues "...and there is no lagoon . . .".(3)

In this way I will connect my deconstructive reading of "The Lagoon" to the question of New Zealandic identity, the problematising of which Frame's critics, as shown in the first section, claim to be pervasive in her authorship. This section will therefore be devoted to the relation between the sea and the lagoon, the dilemma of which is laid out in the first paragraph as a thematic platform wherefore I quote it in its entirety:

At low tide the water is sucked back into the harbour and there is no lagoon, only a stretch of dirty grey sand shaded with dark pools of sea water where you may find a baby octopus if you are lucky, or the spotted orange old house of a crab or the drowned wreckage of a child's toy boat. There is a bridge over the lagoon where you may look down into the little pools and see your image tangled up with sea water and rushes and bits of cloud. And sometimes at night there is an underwater moon, dim and secret. (3)
The topic of the story is thus the relation of existential dependency between the sea and the lagoon. It is not an interdependency in the sense that the sea ceases to exist without the lagoon, whereas that is the case of the lagoon, whose existence depends on the sea. In this sense, the sea has supremacy. On the other hand, the lagoon is a reservoir for the sea waves to flow into, as a container of its overflow when the tide is high.

According to Derrida, all texts are on some level about language. As Hansson highlights in her book on Frame's fiction, *The Unstable Manifold*, this is yet another trait that Janet Frame has in common with the theory of deconstruction. Frame's language is self-commenting and, due to its inherent contradictory ambiguities, her fictions "deal with the loss and manipulation" of language "to a large extent" (104). She describes "words as 'cruel deceivers' and language as lethally dangerous while at the same time our only means of salvation" (107). Therefore, "the new language must grow from silence" (106).

Normally, we speak of language isles but, in this case, I would like to speak of language in terms of a fluid imagery, and instead picture it as the transporting waters between the separate areas of firm ground. Thus I regard the sea in "The Lagoon" as an image of the great sea of English literary/cultural reference and the lagoon as an image of the vulnerably interdependent, peripheral pool of it, in the form of New Zealand literary/cultural reference.

It is emphasized by Evans in the above mentioned article on the disappearing author, that by the time Frame first appeared as a writer in 1951, a self-conscious New Zealand literature had started to develop, and, since *The Lagoon* is Frame's literary début, I find this relevant to mention. "Because of the work of this generation, Frame's generation was the first to have the dual sense of belonging to something called New Zealand Literature at the same time as belonging to something called English Literature" (14).

The feelings of a blurred, alienated cultural identity are expressed in the rest of the first paragraph of the story. What is left of the New Zealand lagoon when the colonial sea retracts is only nothingness and different traces from the sea of Englishness:

- only a stretch of dirty grey sand shaded with dark pools of sea water where you may find a baby octopus if you are lucky, or the spotted orange old house of a crab or the drowned wreckage of a child's toy boat. There is a bridge over the lagoon where you may look down into the little pools and see your image tangled up with sea water and rushes and bits of cloud. (3)
The first sentence conveys uncanny feelings of desertion, emotions of loss and nostalgia, emphasized by the phrasings: "only a stretch of dirty grey sand," "shaded with dark pools of sea water," "... find a baby octopus if you are lucky...," "... drowned wreckage of a child's toy boat" (my italics). The postcolonial settler's state is seemingly gloomy. As expressed in the beginning of the very first sentence of the short story, the sea grants both the existence and the non-existence of the lagoon. The sea turns the lagoon into what it is - a lagoon, and without it, there is no lagoon, that is, according to the symbolic, oppositional reading, without England, there is no 'New Zealand. And what makes you recognizable at all in the postcolonial lagoon at low tide are the "little pools" left of colonial sea water in which you can see "your image tangled up with sea water and rushes and bits of cloud." The retracted sea of Englishness blurs, reduces to fragment and complicates the identifying of yourself, but if these remaining pools of sea water were not there at all, you would not see yourself at all. Just as the lagoon is existentially dependent on the sea, the New Zealander's feeling of identity is.

Textual Con-texts

To start with, I would like to study the thematic dichotomy between the sea and the lagoon paradigmatically, by a sort of semantic definition chain of the two words. Is the oppositional relation irreversible and is the supremacy of the sea etymologically, denotatively and connotatively valid? First I will define the components constituting the main dichotomy; the lagoon and the sea, denotatively/etymologically and then connotatively. In Elof Hellquist's Svensk Etymologisk Ordbok, the etymology of the Germanic word 'sea' shows, that this word is in fact the same word as the Swedish word for 'lake'; 'sjö,' whereas the word 'lagoon' emanates from the word 'lake' via the latin words "lacuna, pöl, puss, grop, fördjupning" ('pool,' 'puddle,' 'cavity,' 'hollow' my trans) and "lacus, sjö" (555), which means 'lake.' The Swedish word 'sjö,' although meaning 'lake' is the same word as the English word 'sea.' Apart from meaning 'pool,' 'hollow' or 'cavity,' the Latin word 'lacuna' /from which the word lagoon emanates/ also means 'liquid.' The original denotation should thus be something like a water-filled cavity.

It is only in English that the word 'sea' has the restricted meaning 'ocean' whereas in Swedish and other Germanic languages it also means the same as 'lake' (919) '/sea' - sw. 'sjö/'. So, denotatively/etymologically there is no opposition between the 'sea' and the
'lagoon' since the word 'sea' means the same as 'lake' - from which the word 'lagoon' originates. When it comes to the origin there is thus no contradiction between them, in English /which would have been the case if the stem for 'sea' had instead been connected, as in the English word 'mere,' to the Latin word 'mare' (628) or the Swedish word 'hav,' for example/. Furthermore, we may ask, when it comes to connotations, if there is anything to possibly invert the superiority of the sea as representing (postnatal) openness, freedom, life - as opposed to the lagoon's confinement, whose (womb-like) enclosure in isolation could eventually mean death? First of all, is the sea 'open,' 'free'?

The connotative definition will consequently be performed as follows: in order to find inherent contradictions in each component I will present a separate pro/con-scheme on each of them. On the plus side I will put positive (favoured) aspects of the word, and on the minus side negative aspects. The positive lagoon connotation of 'security' will be set against the negative one of 'confinement.' The positive sea connotation of 'freedom' will be set against the negative of 'danger' or even 'monotony.' When I have filled the list sufficiently with connotative possibilities, a discussion will follow which may lead to a reversal of the basic hierarchic dichotomy of lagoon and sea. For this reason, the list does by no means claim completeness due not least to the delusiveness of language. The purpose is only to identify some conceivable oppositions between the sea and the lagoon and clarify some correspondingly conceivable reversals. I have italicized possible reversals, to make them appear distinct.
The sea is a very powerful cultural image in our minds. Myriads of travel and real estate agent prospects give evidence of that. At a quick glance it may seem easy to associate the sea with freedom, liberty, openness, freshness, health, adventure, life et cetera, at least if you stand watching it on solid ground. But when you are out there? In stormy weather? Or when there is no wind or when it is foggy and you are on a sailing-boat? Then it could well be that some of the lagoon connotations such as 'isolation,' 'confinement,' 'death' very quickly reverse into being valid for the sea as well, adding actually any one of the conceivable connotations of 'musty,' 'stale,' 'stuffy,' 'standstill,' 'stagnation' qualities of the lagoon also to the sea, and in perspective simultaneously changing these negative lagoon qualities into positive ones of 'security,' 'seclusion,' 'shelter' and even 'home.' The positive sea connotations of 'life' and 'adventurousness' could then also very easily be reversed into ones of 'endless wandering,' 'homelessness' and 'death' via the negative ones of 'monotony' or 'danger' and 'uncertainty.'

Intertextual Con-texts

In this first passage, "The Lagoon" is left with traces and withering waste from the sea: "a baby octopus," "old house of a crab," "seawater," "rushes" (3) and its existence is constantly threatened with disappearing, when the flood from the distanced centre
retracts. What kind of support for the symbolic reading of the "sea" as a sea of occidentally English literary/cultural/colonial reference is there to find in the text? Since Janet Frame had sensed that

New Zealand literature . . . belonged to her mother, . . . all she could do was to populate her childhood landscape with 'characters and dreams from the poetic world of another hemisphere and with [her] own imaginings'. The rich store of allusions and quotations in her writing testifies to her acquaintance with the English classics such as Matthew Arnold, Dylan Thomas, the Romantics, Milton, Donne and Shakespeare, and of course the Bible. Alienated from social life she identifies with the world of literature . . . . (The Unstable Manifold 9)

In knowing that Janet Frame was well read in, for instance, Milton, I would like to comment specifically on one of the traces left by the sea floating ashore into the lagoon, and becoming visible on the "stretch of dirty grey sand shaded with dark pools of sea water": "the spotted orange old house of a crab" (3). This is the kind of rubbish children treasure, pick up and bring home to keep in a paper box treasure chest. Sometimes it is well hidden from adults so as to preserve its secret, personal and even magical meaning. In New Zealand, poetry was the kind of thing that people threw on the rubbish dump, while Janet Frame, by contrast, treated it as a treasure. Alcock quotes Frame in "On the Edge: New Zealanders as Displaced Persons":

In my family words were revered as instruments of magic . . . our bookshelf had Grimm's Fairy Tales with its dark small print enhancing the terror of many of the tales, and with occasional pages stiffened and curled as if they had been exposed to the weather, as they had been, for Grimm's Fairy Tales and Ernest Dawson's Poems and George Macdonald's At the Back of the North Wind had been found in the town rubbish dump. (Alcock 136)

Since "the image of 'treasure' is recurrent in [Frame's] writing" (The Unstable Manifold 13) as is the treasure/rubbish dichotomy and its reversal (83), it would be interesting to see whether my symbolic reading of the cultural sea/lagoon dichotomy is strengthened by an intertextual reading of this "old house of a crab," and furthermore, whether such a reading could confirm both the existence and reversal of a dichotomy between treasure and rubbish also in "The Lagoon," as a parallel to the 'textual' reversal
between the dichotomy of the sea and the lagoon accounted for in the previous subsection.

In an electronic edition of The Dictionary of the History of Ideas under the entry of "Hierarchy and Order," C. A. Patrides notes that Milton uses the phrase 'The Scale of Nature' (2) in Paradise Lost (1667) referring to widespread conceptions of a divine hierarchy between all beings in God's creation, from 'low lives' like sea shells all the way up to the arch angels, which were equally ordered in this "Great Chain of Being" (BSL: entry "scala naturae") hierarchy of God's reign over his creation. When Man disobeys this order, it causes his Fall. Although Charles Darwin was an atheist and meant to break with all such kinds of normative and hierarchical notions on the order of nature when he wrote On The Origin of Species by Natural Selection (1859) (BSL: entry "Charles Darwin"), it is still claimed to be a fact that his ideas are deeply rooted in the normative and religious thinking of ancient times. Under the entry of "The Theory of Evolution" in The Big Dig Project site it is emphasized that his ideas on the species' evolutionary development predates Charles Darwin by nearly 2,500 years, dating back to the Greek roots of western philosophy and culture. The early Greeks proposed mainly metaphysical ideas for the origins of the universe and life . . . . Aristotle (ca. 350 B.C.E.) stated that divine forces caused life to advance toward perfection on a ladder of nature, or scala naturae. In his view, each organism was initially created as a lowly mineral, and then advanced up the ladder to become ooze, fungus, a plant, a coral, a sea shell, a fish, an amphibian, a whale, a land mammal, a mortal human, and finally, in some cases, an immortal hero and Olympian god . . . . This scala naturae was popular in ancient Greece and Rome, and later again popular in Europe during the revival of classical literature (2)

According to C. A. Patrides and Lia Formigari in The Dictionary of the History of Ideas, this idea of a 'scala naturae' or, as it was also called, 'the Great Chain of Being,' survived during the decentralised feudal 'Middle Ages' between centralist systems via catholic scholastic ideas of "Jacob's Ladder," (under the entries of "Hierarchy and Order" and "The Chain of Being"). The idea of central rule had thus fallen with the Roman Empire but re-emerged with the divinely sovereign monarchies of the 16th century in connection with the 'Renaissance,' when the Aristotelian thinking containing
this hierarchical concept of a natural order was revived along with the idea of a divine ruler.

My reflection is that these ideas of a hierarchical 'Chain of Being' might have even older transcontinental roots, and may thus have been linguistically transported to the West with the Indo-European languages as vehicles all the way from Sanskrit, which, by the way, means just 'Order.' The idea of a 'Scala Naturae' or 'Chain of Being' is reminiscent of the Hinduistic thought of reincarnation into higher existences based on spiritual and moral growth leading to a developmental transcendence towards the highest state of existence; that is Nirvana, which is, in fact, a final state of non-existence, since it means not to be born again at all, and thus break the orbit of suffering under low life sentence payments of the congenital debt for the evil deeds of bad karma.

In conclusion, these philosophical ideas might have influenced Plato and Aristotle via the Indo-European waves of language inherent with hinduistic thought on the Brahma's, or the world spirit's, manifestation of wisdom into different shapes via caste and karma, the latters of which connect to Christian beliefs in original sin. The 'lower' the creature the worse the karma, and the punishment is to be reborn, for example, a crab, or perhaps a "baby octopus if you’re lucky." The highest goal is Nirvana, though, to morally release yourself by good deeds from 'the chain of being' and thus free yourself from all guilt of which your position in the hierarchy between God's beings is a proof.

So, although the history of "Hierarchy and Order" in the Dictionary of the History of Ideas is thought to be "the history of Occidental thought," (2) it is possible that the transparency of its deepest historical roots has been obscured by time. Maybe this is why Janet Frame's critique of the Darwinist theory of evolution with its key words of adaptation and survival is subtitled her "challenge to determinism" by Hansson. The technological and scientific applications of the theory of evolution are noted by Frame as having become deterministic towards an ascendant Fall into Destruction, to which we will all succumb. In terms of karma, destruction would then be a happy ending, hence the ever-present positivist optimism. The determined and accelerating pace of these scientific applications in a post-modern and highly technological world might then be due to the theory's strong historical and, as it were, ineradicable roots in normative and religious thinking, although Darwin himself by no means agreed with such Spencerian determination:
Janet Frame's books evoke the following questions which can be said to be at the core of all her writing:

- Is survival always 'good'?
- Is evolution, and subsequent progress, to be considered a law of nature?
- Is a survivor[superior to] those who succumb?
- Is the accumulation of what is usually termed 'knowledge' . . . what humankind should always strive for?
- Did the industrial revolution give significant and sufficient evidence of the natural progress of mankind?

All of these questions lead up to one central issue: How should one define progress, and at what cost can it be obtained? Frame's novels make us consider whether 'progress' from other than utilitarian and Darwinian aspects - moral ones for instance - could not rather be regarded as deterioration and regression? As her total oeuvre indicates, her answer to the initial questions would be a determined 'no' and as readers we are asked to consider the last one seriously. (The Unstable Manifold 88)

"The spotted orange old house of a crab" is thus a splendidly colourful, albeit empty, reminder of a deterministic, hierarchical view on all beings, turning the theory of evolution into the theory of devolution. The colonially imported ideas of its "old house" of a 'low life' crab into the postcolony from the sea of Englishness with its ideational traditions are, like the theory of evolution, not what they give themselves out to be: a progressive step towards perfection, rather ancient reminiscences of one of the most deterministic, static and pessimistic perspectives on life that exist - that you are predictably born into a hierarchical position from which it is impossible to liberate yourself, since it follows you, like the caste mark, from the cradle to the grave, and especially, beyond it.

In the lagoon, the dead meat of the crab is replaced with void. The caste-marked shell could thus also be said to mirror the emptiness of language, sheltering Nothingness. Although colourful, it is stained, "spotted" with blots of shame for being a low-life crab. The "shell" is still there, though. Like language, it is an empty
reminiscence of an ancient "occidental" theory of a minutely graded division of beings into 'low lives' and higher existences, applied to human societies. But, it could be argued that even if the 'low life's' shell is empty, it is still a shelter, a trace from the colonial sea, which in turn is necessary to enable any identification of yourself at all. It is left ashore along with a "baby octopus," which in this bi-cultural dichotomy might be read as an embryonic 'New' Zealand replica of a neo-empire "since the countries of the Asia-Pacific have all been deeply influenced, one way or another by the long arms of Empire," as Bruce Bennett puts it in his introduction to *A Sense of Exile* (2), reminding us of the long, suffocating and vastly embracing arms of a fully grown octopus. Thus, the essentials are left intact; diminished or emptied. In the shape of a shell, it is still a shelter round the void of dissolved identity. Being a requisite for the ability to survive - as a nation - you cannot just put the cultural inheritance on the rubbish dump, Frame seems to say. Although it is a void, she still preserves its language inheritance as treasure/rubbish to shape from, as to say that the language tools are not guilty of what is done with them, or what they are used for. Why has Darwinism, on whose ideas our scientific and technological development is founded become so deterministic? That was not Darwin's purpose. On the contrary, he wanted to break with this normative inheritance, since it was not 'scientific' and instead create a theory of evolution devoid of value judgements. The suggestion is that the ideational background of Englishness is adding to the inert sluggishness of the lagoon. And Frame's conclusion seems to be, that although the sea of language is as delusively empty and full of prejudice as are its ideational shells, the "little pools" of water from the colonial sea are the only means you have of catching a glimpse of yourself, although blurred by lagoonly rotting sea inheritance, as you "look into the little pools and see your image tangled up with sea water and rushes and bits of cloud" (3).

Biographical Con-texts

The oppositional duality between sea and lagoon could, however, in the case of Janet Frame, be said to reflect not only the duality between English literature/centre/empire/British and New Zealand literature/periphery/(post)colony/Pakeha, but seemingly also biographical traits of duality between life and death in her personal history. Although deconstruction, according to Maley, "problematises the notion of author, the author is
[still] included in the text - because there's nothing outside the text - but as text, to be read, not as a governing presence"(4). " . . . A limiting . . . of authorship - [should] by no means . . . be taken to infer that [Derrida] is not interested in biography, but first and foremost as text - biographies. His[sic] life, like any life, is a text" (4). In "That Strange Institution Called Literature" Derrida writes that "In a minimal autobiographical trait can be gathered the greatest potentiality of historical, theoretical, linguistic, philosophical culture - that's really what interests me" (qtd in Maley 4).

In her essay on Frame's short fiction, "Janet Frame," in A Reader's Companion to the Short Story in English, Susan Rochette-Crawley mentions that Janet Frame was born a twin, and that "Her twin, who died a few days after birth, remains present in much of her work" (162). On the other hand, two of her sisters, Isabel and Myrtle, drowned in the sea (The Unstable Manifold 10). Therefore, it could be argued that, to Frame, the roaring "sea" and the womb-like stale "lagoon" are equally dangerous leading to disasters both, disasters that accelerated her state of anxiety culminating in her own nervous breakdown. This might have led her into sensing that it was the flow of water itself that was as "lethally dangerous" as the English words coming out of it.

Whether energizing itself as a flow of alienating language waves from a distant 'home' of imperial English, or existing as luke amniotic fluid in the womb of the domestic lagoon, giving stillbirth and guilty survival simultaneously, or being transformable into, for example, electricity, water eradicates both identity and life. In New Zealand, electricity is derived from water power plants (Energy Resources 1) and, ironically enough, it was finally from that water-derived electricity Frame was exposed to the perilous powers of water herself, by receiving shock treatment during her eight years of confinement as a misdiagnosed schizophrenic in the mental institution of Seacliff ("Janet Frame" 162). Hansson elaborates:

Janet's years of isolation and poverty at the teachers' training college were disastrous and caused her consciousness to split into two mutually exclusive spheres, 'this' world and 'that' world . . . . The dramatic event, a central one in Campion's film, when she left her class, including the visiting school inspector, never to return again to a teaching career, was followed by attempted suicide and no less than eight years in mental hospitals of notoriously bad reputation, involving more than 200 electric shock treatments. (The Unstable Manifold 10)
In *A Sense of Exile* Meenakshi Mukherje comments on the alienating effects of the educational systems in post-colonies:

In post-colonial societies, there is another dimension which also needs examination - how without any physical dislocation the writers and intellectuals can become outsiders in their community . . . through a system of education that superimposes an alien grid of perception on immediate reality . . . this . . . category of exile, which is not of the body, but of the mind . . . Formal education is an important channel through which a planned transmission of values is possible . . . Education thus becomes a continuous process of distancing. (11-12)

Frame's own choosing of the impressive waves from the distant sea of English literary inheritance, defying her mother's domestic literature, smashed, just like the waves of the sea, against the seacliff, turning into cloudy fragrances of water drops, mirroring miniatures of irrecognizable worlds constructing the galactic waves of glossolalia from outer consciousness, which found imaginative expression in the multipersonal characters in her later novels. On the bottom of the postcolonial dried-up lagoon is thus finally left behind the shed skin of a crashed childhood identity; "the drowned wreckage of a child's toy boat." As Derrida claims, "Every sign . . . can . . . break with every given context, is absolutely illimitable. This does not imply that the mark is valid outside of a context, but on the contrary that there are only contexts without any centre or absolute anchoring" (qtd in Maley 3).
Conclusion

Cultural displacement

And sometimes at night there is an underwater moon,
dim and secret.

The moon is interesting here since it governs tidal water and thus regulates the influences of flux and reflux from the sea to the lagoon. If it had not been for the tidals, the lagoon might have had a more permanent existence or not existed at all. But here, it is not the actual moon that is spoken of, but the "underwater moon," thus a reflection of the moon left in the pools of sea water at low tide. All the same, in the compound "underwater moon," the sense of having a strange sort of autonomous existence is conveyed, which to me seems to be a reference to our conscious and unconscious notions of the moon. The opposite is, of course, our notions of the sun, as an intratextual, non-outspoken dichotomy. In Western mythologies the moon is the female principle of night-time passivity, darkness, superstition, cyclicity, decay and death; it is the ruler of time which puts an end to our existence. The sun is the male principle of day-time activity, light of wisdom and knowledge, duration, eternity, it is the generator of life. But in Frame's text it is said, that the "underwater moon" is "dim and secret," as if these well-known facts of mythology were unheard of. And in fact, in Cooper's An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols it is pointed out that in Maori symbolism the moon stands for the male fertilizing principle instead (128-129). The moon is the motor of the flow and ebb so to speak, and, as such, it can change the whole relation between the sea and the lagoon, from daily routines of monotonous waves into cyclic changes, into changes of longer duration, turning day into night, and night into day, male into female, and female into male. Maybe it can also displace centre(s) and periphery(ies), not only turning empires into colonies, and colonies into empires, but change the system of thinking altogether so as not to relate subordinate fringes to superior centres but rather develop other sorts of co-operation, between vicinity regions.
In "Intertextual Strategies: Reinventing the Myths of Aotearoa in Contemporary New Zealand Fiction" Janet Wilson uses a quote from The Carpathians where possibilities for new sorts of intercontinental interaction are hinted at:

. . . there was still the flowing colonial wave from 'elsewhere' - even casting up visitors like Mattina herself who came to 'study' the distant foreigners. There was now, however, another wave . . . visible in the land itself, flowing from the land and having been there for centuries concealed often by the more visible waves from elsewhere. It was now flowing in its own power, inwards and outwards, reaching the shores of the Northern Hemisphere (qtd in Wilson 288)

This, in turn, hints at other cultural changes that took place in New Zealand by the time The Lagoon was published in 1951. The industrialization of New Zealand did not really start until after World War II, which was also when urbanization led to closer connections between the white and the native population for the first time (Teaching Indigenous Languages 206-213). The reversal of the sun-male-active/moon-female-passive dichotomy accounted for above could therefore be connected to an equal reversal of stagnation/standstill/monotony as lagoon qualities. It is, in fact, the lagoon that changes radically, by the tides - even to such an extent that it can cease to exist, at least as a sea-interdependent lagoon - and such changes are motored by the moon, which, like the empty house of the crab can show itself to be a trace from something completely opposite of what it pretends to be, namely Maori, active and fertilizing instead of Western and passively 'receiving.' So, instead of stagnated, the lagoon is dynamic, before (re)turning into just a "stretch of dirty grey sand," uninscribed by any culture and its notions that ideationally motor developmental cultural changes.

In the rest of the short story, the writer explores the thematic relation between the sea and the lagoon in paragraph-structured chunks of repetitiously braided, minimalistically changed variations of perspectives as to how the nature of the lagoon and the life lived on its fringes will be defined or told. The text develops into a detective story of what the "real" story of the lagoon is, to be distinguished from its "proper" story of which it is devoid. Round the enigmatic kernel of a childhood memory echo short, seemingly enlightening passages with a narrative rhythm and musicality like the one in verses of a popular ballad, grim nursery rhyme or tale, celebrating also the 'low lives' of literary genres.
"See the lagoon, my grandmother would say. The dirty lagoon, full of drifting wood and seaweed and crabs' claws. It is dirty and sandy and smelly in summer" (4). The second passage starts out by letting the reader know that the introductory one was actually a telling from the past to the narrator by a grandmother with a supposedly Maori ancestry, thus the new dichotomy is skin-shed out of the former into one between the postcolonial settler's lagoon and the supposedly Maori perspective on it - what the sea has done and repeatedly does to the lagoon's "stretch of dirty grey sand." This ancestral commenting - on the smelly rotten mess the sea turns it into with its incoming overflow - is recurring, like a refraining burden throughout the story. Whether this new dichotomy - or even thrichotomy - is about a possible recovery of the native voice or about a nativization of the settler's voice by a post-colonial inscribing of the stretch of sand, remains therefore to be found out. Penelope Ingram reflects in her essay "Can the Settler Speak?":

In the case of either the native or the settler, perhaps the most immediate concern is whether or not a 'lost origin' or an 'authentic' voice is indeed recoverable. The first part of this essay will examine the question of the subaltern's silence or voice. Is there a position outside the history of colonization where the native exists in absolute difference, as the truly 'authentic' Other? Is this difference/authenticity, if established recoverable? (79)

For further studies it would be interesting to pursue these variations, which are interwoven with ironic descriptions of what replicas of /English/ seaside resort pleasures "people" indulge in at the /New Zealand/ Picton beach:

I went for picnics with summery people in floral frocks and sun hats, and kids in print frocks, or khaki shorts if they were boys, especially if they were boys with fathers in the army. We took baskets with fruit and sandwiches . . . and threepences in the pocket for ice-creams. There were races for the kiddies and some for the men and women, and afterwards a man walked round the grounds throwing lollies in the air. They were great days out picknicking in the Sounds with the Maoris singing and playing their ukuleles, but they didn't sing the real Maori songs, they sang You are my sunshine and South of the Border . . . The Main Trunk Line brings more tourists, my aunt said. There were people everywhere, lying on the beach being burned or browned by the sun and sea, people whizzing round
the harbour in motor-boats like the pop-pop boats we used to whizz round
in the bath on Christmas morning. People surf-riding, playing tennis,
fishing in the Straits, practising in skiffs for the Regatta . . . And the
lagoon was dirtier than ever. See the lagoon, said my aunt. Full of drifting
wood and seaweed and crab's claws. (5-6)

In-between these ironic descriptions, the narrator is in syntagmatic search for the "real,"
"proper" or even "true" story of the lagoon. Which it is, we never get to know, but a
thorough close-reading trying to hint at inherent hierarchical dichotomies, their
reversals and, ideally, ending displacements of the oppositions related to the thematic
opposition between the sea and the lagoon discussed in this essay might perhaps shed
light on what actually lies hidden or bare in the "stretch of dirty grey sand." Another
possibility, suggested by Ingram, is that such studies would require other theoretical
tools:

If we agree with Spivak's formulation that the subaltern has a voice,
though one that can never be heard, and certainly never recovered except
as a silent mark, an 'inaccessible blankness,' and that it is the absence of the
voice and not the voice itself that is able to be witnessed, we might - in an
obvious departure from the lesson of deconstruction that teaches that the
trace itself is the mark of the absence of loss of origin - posit this place of
unsignifiability as the site of pure 'consciousness' and hence of authentic
origin. If we view this silence, this blankness, as the mark of authenticity
and absolute alterity, because it resists colonization and/or inscription,
then it can be argued that this silence represents not merely the trace of
origin but the origin itself. (93)

My ambition has not been, however, to accomplish fullness by applying deconstructive theory
on this text flow, just to surf a while on one of its waves to see if I could lay bare some of its
"traces" of "opposition," "reversal" and "displacement" in "The Lagoon"'s "fabric of traces."
Reference list

Primary sources:


Secondary sources:


