

## 9 “Signposts to a world that is not even mentioned”

— ◀ ▶ — Janet Frame’s Ethical Transcendence

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You have to have courage to write [...] the proper use of imagination is a form of courage, daring to explore beyond horizons.<sup>1</sup>

If transcendence has meaning, it can only signify the fact that the *event of being*, the *esse*, the *essence*, passes over to what is other than being. [...] Transcendence is passing over to being’s *other*, otherwise than being. Not *to be otherwise*, but *otherwise than being*.<sup>2</sup>

**C**RITICALLY ENGAGING with what Mark Delrez, in his 2002 monograph *Manifold Utopia: The Novels of Janet Frame*, calls Frame’s “utopian vision,”<sup>3</sup> Lydia Wevers asks, “Can utopia lie in the absence confronted by many of [Frame’s] characters reaching for a new view?”<sup>4</sup> She observes that, for Delrez, Frame’s “most prescient and

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<sup>1</sup> Janet Frame, “Traces of Honey: Janet Frame Talks to Elizabeth Alley” (sound recording; Wellington: Radio New Zealand [Replay Radio], 1988).

<sup>2</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, tr. Alphonso Lingis (1974; tr. 1978; Pittsburgh PA: Duquesne UP, 1998): 3.

<sup>3</sup> Marc Delrez, *Manifold Utopia: The Novels of Janet Frame* (Cross/Cultures 55; Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2002): xv.

<sup>4</sup> Lydia Wevers, “A Review of *Manifold Utopia: The Novels of Janet Frame*, by Marc Delrez,” *Utopian Studies* 14.1 (2003): 184.

visionary characters are those who retreat from the world and its languages and communicate in other ways.”<sup>5</sup> However, since most of these characters eventually “become speechless, or die,” the question for her is whether “this [is] utopianism.”<sup>6</sup> Clearly, Wevers is not convinced that it is. Not finding the ‘utopia’ label very helpful in relation to Frame, she instead embraces “Delrez’s linking (and linked) argument about Frame’s fiction, which is that her fiction resists containment in all possible ways,” and concludes her review by suggesting: “What is marvellous about [Frame’s] fiction is that it doesn’t let you rest, not that it offers up the promise of something better and beyond.”<sup>7</sup>

I recall Wevers’ engagement with *Manifold Utopia* here because I think her palpable discomfort about the notion of a “utopian Frame” raises some interesting and important questions for contemporary Frame scholarship, questions I want to begin to explore in this essay. *Manifold Utopia* is undoubtedly the most significant single extended contribution to Frame research in recent years – but does its central thesis regarding Frame’s ‘utopian vision’ stand up to critical scrutiny? Does Frame’s “determination to use language as a vehicle of (un)consciousness, permeable to whatever may lie on the other side of accepted knowledge,”<sup>8</sup> indeed point to “a form of utopianism,”<sup>9</sup> as Delrez suggests? In Chapter 7 of the present volume, Delrez implicitly links such utopianism to a liberation from violence when he argues that “violence emerges [...] as the foundational principle on which our present reality is constructed”<sup>10</sup> and that only a “gash,”<sup>11</sup> or “scarred surfaces,”<sup>12</sup> can alert us to another dimension not already violently subsumed under our shared sense of reality. The question remains, however, whether the persistent struggle against totalizing forms of language and being that is observable in Frame’s work should be called ‘utopian’. Can a breach in the totalizing

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<sup>5</sup> Wevers, “Review of *Manifold Utopia*,” 183.

<sup>6</sup> “Review of *Manifold Utopia*,” 183.

<sup>7</sup> “Review of *Manifold Utopia*,” 184.

<sup>8</sup> Delrez, *Manifold Utopia*, xv.

<sup>9</sup> *Manifold Utopia*, xv.

<sup>10</sup> See Marc Delrez, “‘Conquest of surfaces’: Aesthetic and Political Violence in the Work of Janet Frame,” above, 142.

<sup>11</sup> Janet Frame, *The Adaptable Man* (1965; Auckland: Vintage, 1993): 15.

<sup>12</sup> Delrez, “‘Conquest of surfaces’,” above, 142.

structures of ‘reality’ really liberate a character such as Mavis Furness, who, in *Living in the Maniototo*, is “caught in the general pattern of the world?”<sup>13</sup> It seems unlikely, for, in *The Carpathians*, to draw on another example, this recurring phenomenon (or, rather, *non*-phenomenon) of an “invisible gap in the fabric of space and time,” rather than offering metaphysical comfort, places Mattina “in danger of falling beyond the fabric” towards an unknown and frightening “where?”<sup>14</sup> Thus, if the inevitable result of the struggles of Frame’s characters is emptiness, silence or death, rather than freedom, happiness, and comfort, this certainly does not seem as though “something better and beyond” is achieved. Is Delrez right, then, in calling such rips and holes in the fabric of reality ‘utopian’? Or, if not utopian, what else are we to call Frame’s seemingly insatiable desire for a *beyond*?

Although perhaps not always recognizable as such, this question has (in one form or another) animated Frame criticism from the outset, with different critical approaches attaching markedly different meanings to this *beyond*. Where, for the early social-realist readings, for example, it is the imagination of the artist or creative individual that lies beyond the rigid structures of a conformist society, later feminist and postcolonial readings highlight the eclipsed female or indigenous dimensions beyond the dominant patriarchal settler society. Marc Delrez’s suggestion of a utopian *beyond* in Frame’s work is thus perhaps only the latest incarnation of an ongoing critical quest to endow the *beyond* in Frame with significance. What is novel in his approach, however, is the investment of this *beyond* with a metaphysical dimension. In an important essay which predates *Manifold Utopia* by two years, Delrez makes this novelty explicit, distinguishing his own approach from those – such as postcolonialism – that read Frame in purely political terms:

while this concern with the retrieval of eclipsed experience makes Frame’s work open to post-colonial reclamation, my impression is that her primary impulse is not political so much as existential, philosophical, and possibly even religious.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Janet Frame, *Living in the Maniototo* (1979; London: Women’s Press, 1996): 67.

<sup>14</sup> Janet Frame, *The Carpathians* (Auckland: Century Hutchinson, 1988): 89.

<sup>15</sup> Marc Delrez, “Forbidding Bodies: Avatars of the Physical in the Work of Janet Frame,” *World Literature Written in English* 38.2 (2000): 79.

Reading Delrez's work, I am struck both by how utterly attuned he is to what he rightly calls "the transcendent urge perceptible in Frame's work"<sup>16</sup> and by how much he struggles to give this urge a name, to embed it in some larger explanatory framework. Is this urge existential *or* philosophical *or* religious? Can it be all three simultaneously? In the same essay, Delrez acknowledges some of his difficulty in situating Frame in a given cultural or religious framework, adding yet another term – 'spiritual' – to his growing list:

To an irreligious person like myself it is not easy to determine whether Frame's intimations of immortality can be related to any established religious orthodoxy, but it is safe to say at any rate that her pursuit of totality is spiritual in essence [...].<sup>17</sup>

In the assumed 'safety' of this assertion (which, as will become obvious below, I do not believe is very safe at all), he further aligns himself with Mark Williams's argument that Frame's work shares a certain affinity with Platonic idealism, "inasmuch as her created reality constantly gestures towards a realm that is felt to be 'prior and superior to things'."<sup>18</sup> And in *Manifold Utopia*, as we have already seen, he offers yet another label to pin on this "transcendent urge," calling it now not existential, philosophical, religious, spiritual or Platonic but "utopian."

One could, of course, argue – and it has, indeed, become common-  
place in Frame studies to argue along these or similar lines – that such a proliferation of critical labels, rather than reflecting an attempt on Delrez's part to find 'just the right one', instead simply points to the manifold nature of Frame's work, which no single label could ever hope to capture. While such an argument is not without power of conviction, I do have a sense that Delrez is genuinely struggling with the question of how Frame's "transcendent urge" should best be described. Adding yet another descriptor to that growing list, as I propose here, might seem a less than original move, yet I propose that calling Frame's transcendent urge 'ethical' – in the specific sense given to that word by Emmanuel

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<sup>16</sup> Delrez, "Forbidding Bodies," 77.

<sup>17</sup> "Forbidding Bodies," 76.

<sup>18</sup> "Forbidding Bodies," 76. Delrez is citing from Mark Williams, *Leaving the Highway: Six Contemporary New Zealand Novelists* (Auckland: Auckland UP, 1990): 47.

Levinas – both encompasses and surpasses Delrez’s multiple suggestions.

What Delrez seeks to capture with his various labels is his sense that there is a “coherent vision of eclipsed reality/humanity” to be found in Frame’s work, which leads him to read her transcendent aspirations as, variously, an expression of a “pursuit of totality,”<sup>19</sup> an “ideal of wholeness,”<sup>20</sup> a “utopian whole”<sup>21</sup> or a “utopian totality.”<sup>22</sup> Despite agreeing with Delrez that Frame’s work is informed by a transcendent urge that continuously points beyond the fictional worlds she constructs, I am deeply troubled by Delrez’s framing of this urge as a desire for *totality*. Such framing, I suggest, collapses the transcendent *beyond* back into immanence and as such defuses its radical power. Only as a *beyond* that remains beyond, that is not reclaimed for the totality of all that *is*, can the transcendent ever be truly transcendent. And only as truly transcendent can the *beyond* offer the radically new vision of humanity Delrez attributes to Frame. It is thus vital to insist – as a Levinasian ethics of transcendence does – that the *beyond* transcends the ontological structures of totality and, crucially, that it must retain this absolute exteriority. It cannot ever be reclaimed for totality without being betrayed. It is for this reason that the *beyond* cannot be expressed or represented as, in Wevers’ words, “something better and beyond,” for as soon as it becomes some-*thing* it is no longer truly beyond. The *beyond* can therefore only ever be intimated. It is in this sense, then, that we must understand Janet Frame’s claim that her works are “signposts to a world that is not even mentioned”<sup>23</sup> as driven by an ethical impulse not to betray this other world, for to mention this world would be to deaden its ethical impact.

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<sup>19</sup> Delrez, “Forbidding Bodies,” 76.

<sup>20</sup> Delrez, *Manifold Utopia*, 221.

<sup>21</sup> Marc Delrez, “The Missing Chapter in Janet Frame’s *Living in the Maniototo*,” *Journal of New Zealand Literature* 24.1 (2006): 79.

<sup>22</sup> Delrez, “The Missing Chapter,” 81. Such a view is further echoed in the work of his student Daria Tunca, who argues that “the narrator’s final lines [in *Living in the Maniototo*] seem to reflect a willingness to transcend facades and work towards a *more complete* view of the world” (“Paying Attention,” 42, emphasis added).

<sup>23</sup> Janet Frame, “Alone on a River of Words: Interview with Rosemary Vincent,” *New Zealand Times* (2 October 1983): 9.

Clearly, in calling Frame's transcendent urge 'ethical', as I propose here, I run the risk of entering a performative contradiction, for such conceptual framing immediately pulls the enigmatic *beyond* back into our rational structures of meaning. To minimize this unavoidable risk, we must therefore at all times retain critical vigilance vis-à-vis precisely the ethical reframing I propose here and, tempting though it may be, resist accepting ethics as the miraculous key that can unlock what remains – and *must remain* – enigmatically (fore)closed in Frame's work. I therefore hasten to add that I do not seek to offer a new 'master key' to Frame studies with which to unlock her enigmatic fabrications once and for all – this would not only be presumptuous but would also stand altogether counter to the ethical impulse I am attributing to Frame's work, for it would, in the useful distinction Jan Cronin introduces in Chapter 1 of the present volume, reduce an enigma to a puzzle and thus make 'solvable' what – to retain its ethical impulse – must remain infinitely *beyond* the power of Reason to solve (and thus dissolve) everything within its reach. The enigma, but not the puzzle, escapes such rational dissolution. As such, it points to the *beyond* of Reason as the place or, rather, the non-place of ethical transcendence from where Reason is called into question. What this essay therefore struggles with – perhaps even more acutely than the other contributions to this collection – is that, to preserve its methodological integrity, it must resist the very interpretative closure it invites: reading Frame's work as 'ethical' already betrays its ethical impulse.

With this proviso regarding the methodological limitations of the 'ethical' firmly in place, my aim is to reveal that behind all of Frame's pushing towards a *beyond*, which finds formal expression in her deep commitment to experimental forms of writing, stands such an ethical impulse, the likes of which we find most fully developed in the work of the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. Frame, I suggest, shares Levinas' conviction that ontology is a philosophy of violence that sacrifices the singular, the unique, on the altar of abstract universality. As a writer, she, like Levinas, the philosopher, thus faces the difficult task of expressing the singular in a medium – language – that is inevitably tied to the abstractions of concepts. Frame's 'solution' to this difficult task, I suggest, is to use words not representationally but indexically, as "sign-posts to a world that is not even mentioned," for to name this other

‘world’ would be to replicate the very violations she struggles to gesture beyond.

So as to not stray too far from the work already undertaken by Delrez, to which this chapter is clearly deeply indebted, I would like to situate my exploration of an ‘ethical Frame’ within the parameters of Delrez’s own ‘reframing’ of Frame. That is to say, I want to revisit the vexed question of Frame’s utopianism here and repeat the questions Lydia Wevers raised in her review of *Manifold Utopia*: “Can utopia lie in the absence confronted by many of [Frame’s] characters reaching for a new view?” Does her characters’ “retreat from the world and its languages,” their ability to “communicate in other ways,” constitute utopianism? I will argue that it does, but only if we, like Frame (and Levinas), “think utopia otherwise.”<sup>24</sup>

Although I will loosely base my discussion of Frame’s utopianism on the novel of hers which most directly stands in that tradition, *Intensive Care*, my primary concern in this chapter – and this much will be clear from my rather lengthy exposition of the problem – lies not primarily in the intricate fabrications that are Frame’s novels and that have been analyzed so ably in other contributions to this volume. Instead, I am concerned to identify the ethical impulse that allows her to “think utopia otherwise” in this particular novel and that, I suggest, implicitly informs her oeuvre.

### To Think Utopia

Casting our mental eye back over some of the landmark narratives in the Western utopian tradition – the biblical Garden of Eden, Plato’s *Republic*, and, most famously, the text which coined the term itself, Thomas More’s *Utopia* – we struggle to read Frame’s absences and gaps as a natural continuation of her predecessors’ glorious evocations of ideal societies: perfect states of being. What Frame seems to offer is not a fully realized ideal presence, not ‘some-thing’ “better and beyond,” but instead simply ‘no-thing beyond’. Instead of presence, Frame gives us absence or, rather, a disrupted presence, a gash in the fabric of worldly ‘there-ness’ through

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<sup>24</sup> Miguel Abensour, “To Think Utopia Otherwise,” *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 20.2–21.1 (1998): 252.

which the *beyond* makes itself felt without ever settling into the ontological structures of a 'some-thing'. The *beyond*, in other words, functions as trace in Frame's work, an absence that is not the opposite of presence, that is not completely nothing, but instead is an enigmatically present 'no-thing' beyond being.

But Wevers' question still stands: can this be called utopianism? If utopianism trades on idealized forms of being, on perfecting a 'some-thing', can a 'no-thing' ever be utopian? I want to suggest that, contrary to popular conceptions of utopias as perfect 'some-things', it is, strictly speaking, *only* the 'no-thing' that is utopian. The term 'utopia' began its life as a neologism in Thomas More's 1516 book of the same title. Combining the two Greek words *ou* (no, not) and *topos* (place), *ou topia* literally means 'no place', or 'nowhere'. In addition to this first meaning, More's neologism *utopia* simultaneously evokes the *eu topos*, the good place. *Utopia* is thus the good nowhere or no-place, which is usually taken to mean the good place that does not actually exist anywhere but is purely imagined.

Perhaps unfortunately for utopia, the term has frequently gone from signifying the non-existent good place to evoking the good place that *should* exist, giving rise to a long line of blueprint utopias promising "something better and beyond" the current state of affairs. In other words, in these blueprint utopias, which have come to dominate the genre, utopia goes from being a good place that *categorically* does not exist to a good place that could potentially be created in another time and place. As projection of a potentially realizable ideal – Justice, the Ideal Society, the Good Life, etc. – utopia creates a distinction between two worlds: the world we currently live in, with all its contradictions and imperfections, and the 'other world' that is ideal and perfect and therefore superior to our everyday world. Problematically, in their attempts to realize this vision of perfection, blueprint utopias run the risk of superimposing the ideal of perfection on our imperfect everyday reality, which effectively means that reality becomes less, not more, perfect in the process. Thus Henryk Siewierski, for example, observes that "it too frequently happens that the utopia is an escape from freedom, that future perfection is guaranteed by



means of terror and coercion.”<sup>25</sup> That such “terror and coercion” are the omni-present undercurrent in any blueprint utopia is, of course, most explicitly highlighted in dystopian narratives – of which *Intensive Care* is one. What Frame’s novel illustrates is precisely the violence that is unleashed upon the world in utopian attempts to realize an ideal of “something better and beyond,” making the injunction to “think utopia otherwise” mandatory.<sup>26</sup>

### Plato

To address the question of how Frame allows us to “think utopia otherwise,” I want to begin by investigating Frame’s relationship to one of the *Ur*-texts of the utopian tradition: Plato’s *Republic*. That Plato (particularly the *Republic*) functions as an important intertext for Frame generally, and *Intensive Care* in particular, is increasingly recognized in Frame scholarship.<sup>27</sup> On the face of it, it should be somewhat surprising that Frame – a

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<sup>25</sup> Henryk Siewierski, “Utopia and Anthropophagy: Europe Beyond Its Frontiers,” *Third Text* 21.5 (2007): 499.

<sup>26</sup> Delrez goes some way towards rethinking utopia when he acknowledges that Frame’s utopianism cannot be said “to conform to type(s)” and that, “quite apart from any societal blueprint, she conducts an exploration of alternative ontologies” (Delrez, *Manifold Utopia*, xxx). In contradistinction to his reading, I want to insist, however, that “to think utopia otherwise” in Frame means not just exploring “alternative ontologies” but pushing beyond ontology *tout court*, be it “alternative” or not. As will become clear in my discussion of Levinasian ethics below, I contend that Frame’s attempt to “think utopia otherwise” involves a complete (metaphysical) transcendence of ontology.

<sup>27</sup> Among the first brief references to Plato in relation to Frame’s work is Mark Williams’s chapter on Frame in *Leaving the Highway* (esp. 47–48). For more recent mentions of Plato with reference to Frame’s work, see also Daria Tunca, “Paying Attention to Language, Replicas and the Role of the Artist in Janet Frame’s *Living in the Maniototo*,” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 42.1 (2006), and Jan Cronin’s essay in the present volume. Victor Dupont’s contribution to *The Ring of Fire* is, to my knowledge, the first to mention Plato with specific reference to *Intensive Care*; see Dupont, “Janet Frame’s Brave New World: *Intensive Care*,” in *The Ring of Fire: Essays on Janet Frame*, ed. Jeanne Delbaere (Sydney: Dangaroo, 1992): 160n5. More extended discussions of Frame’s engagement with Plato’s philosophy in *Intensive Care* can be found in Jennifer Lawn, “Trauma and Recovery in Janet Frame’s Fiction” (doctoral dissertation, University of British Columbia, 1997), and Jan Cronin, “Attending and

writer – is drawn to the work of a philosopher who banned the poets from his ideal city in the *Republic*. I would like to emphasize right at the outset that it is *this* Plato, the ‘ontological Plato’ of Forms, ideals, true worlds, and highest goods, of whom Frame is indeed intensely critical, though for reasons less petty than the fact that Plato did not like artists. And yet there is another Plato – a ‘metaphysical Plato’ less frequently recognized in the history of Western philosophy – that is attractive to Frame. This other Plato inaugurates a philosophy of transcendence that breaks with ontology by placing the Good not within Being (as the highest good) but *beyond* being. It is to this Plato, the Plato of the Good *beyond* being, that Frame urges us to return. My argument, in brief, is that, in *Intensive Care*, Frame takes us to the limits of Platonism as conventionally understood, only to reveal from the edges of those limits something else beyond, another Plato than the one typically taken to stand at the beginning of Western philosophy. Concretely, I want to suggest that the endlessly repeated cycles of ever-increasing violence in *Intensive Care* are a result of the misguided attempt to make reality match an ideal such as it is encountered in Plato’s philosophy of the Forms. As such, Frame strikes at the heart of classic idealist thought and the blueprint utopias that are informed by such idealism.

As is well known, Plato’s parable of the cave distinguished between two realms of being, the realm of shadows inside the cave (our ordinary existence) and the realm of the Forms (the ‘real’ world) as it is revealed by the sun outside the cave. In his vision, only people of higher intellect, such as philosophers and mathematicians, can ever make the journey out of the cave and see the world as it really is, as opposed to how it appears to the majority of people, who live in ignorance of the truth of Being. For Plato, the world of the Forms is the realm of true Being. It is here that we encounter not a beautiful object, but Beauty Itself, not a kind person, but Kindness Itself. Our everyday world of appearances partakes of this realm of the Forms but is only ever an inferior copy (or shadow). It is because only the people of higher intellect can, with training, gain access to this realm of truth that they should become rulers, or Guardians, of Plato’s

ideal city. The ideal city reflects the structure of the Forms to which the rulers have privileged access.

That *Intensive Care* stands in direct conversation with the *Republic* is obvious from the first page of part 1, which is entitled “Kindness Itself, Happiness Itself, and Delphiniums.”<sup>28</sup> Clearly, we are plunged into a scenario where what is pursued by the characters is not everyday acts of kindness and happiness, but Kindness Itself and Happiness Itself: i.e. Plato’s realm of Forms or essences. Yet, as the novel makes clear early on, “All dreams lead back to the nightmare garden” (12). What this means, most immediately, is, of course, that, after the Fall of Man, all attempts to return to the biblical Garden of Eden (as the first and perhaps most powerful utopia in the Western tradition) are doomed: paradise is permanently lost to humans. What it also reveals, by implication, is that all human attempts to find “Kindness Itself, Happiness Itself” – all human attempts to gain access to the Forms and the utopian idea of perfect sociality – lead not to goodness but to its inversion. This is most pointedly expressed in the novel by the characters’ inability to dissociate caring from violent forms of sociality – as Gina Mercer puts it: “At the beginning of *Intensive Care* Tom has fallen so far from his ‘Innocence’ that he has confused ‘Love and War,’ and is now in love with war.”<sup>29</sup> The world of *Intensive Care* is a world where loving and caring relationships between people are rendered impossible; at the basis of all relating to others stands conflict, even if it is formally expressed as ‘love’ or ‘care’.

The roots of the novel’s conflictual foundation of sociality, paradoxically, lie in the utopian dream of ideal forms of sociality itself. Both Tom Livingstone, in part 1, and Tom’s grandson Colin Torrance, in part 2, pursue dreams of perfect love relationships and end up murdering their loved ones. In part 3, the pursuit of the dream of perfection takes on genocidal dimensions, with Colin Monk acting as an agent of the Human Delineation Act. Helping to sort Humans from Animals on “Classification Day” (175), Colin cleanses society of its “numerous freaks” and so helps to realize the Act’s desire for a “new humanity” (176). Among the first to recognize that such dreams find expression as totalitarian violence in *Intensive Care* was Patrick Evans, who suggested, as far back as 1977, that “The

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<sup>28</sup> Janet Frame, *Intensive Care* (1970; Auckland: Vintage, 1995): n.p.

<sup>29</sup> Gina Mercer, *Janet Frame: Subversive Fictions* (Dunedin: U of Otago P, 1994): 153.

dream creates violence whenever it strikes against the reality it tries to deny.”<sup>30</sup> More recently, Jennifer Lawn has read this particular pattern very productively as narcissism.<sup>31</sup> In this reading, Narcissus’s inability to separate himself from himself results, at best, in a solipsism that “‘unbinds’ social relations.”<sup>32</sup> At worst, such “unbound” social relations lead to physical violence and murder.

Frame makes it abundantly clear that the Livingstones indeed have “a family history” (162) of “controlling things and people” (157) through the narcissistic projection of ideals. Thus, Tom Livingstone murders his ideal love object when it no longer resembles the ideal and so no longer faithfully reflects his dream (self), just as his grandson Colin Torrance, in a delayed echo of Tom’s murder, kills the woman he loves after she refuses to continue to “bear witness” (145) to him. As with Tom’s refusal to accept the aged and cancer-ridden Ciss Everest instead of his idealized (mirror-) image, Colin is blind to the ‘real’ Lorna and, seeing “nothing but his own dream images” (145), kills her in a futile attempt to preserve the dream. Ciss, Lorna, and later in part 3 of the novel Milly Galbraith, all have to die because they are ‘faulty mirrors’ that stand in the way of Narcissus’ perfect self-reflection.

Extending Lawn’s observation of the novel’s critique of narcissism, I suggest that what lies at the heart of *Intensive Care*’s “mirror-structuring”<sup>33</sup> is a critique of a Cartesian model of subjectivity that itself can be readily understood as a modern re-figuration of Plato’s allegory of the cave. Where for Plato the Forms are the originals of which the elements in our everyday world are only the shadows, for Descartes it is the subject that is the primary and ‘real’ substance, while the external world, or object, is its secondary and derivative reflection. Cartesian philosophy is therefore commonly and appropriately described as a philosophy of reflection where, in Leela Gandhi’s apt phrase, “the world is rendered into a

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<sup>30</sup> Patrick Evans, *Janet Frame* (Boston MA: Twayne, 1977): 176.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Jennifer Lawn, “Playing with Freud: Radical Narcissism and Intertextuality in Frame’s *Intensive Care* and *Daughter Buffalo*,” 39–45 above. For an extended discussion, see also Lawn, “Trauma and Recovery in Janet Frame’s Fiction,” passim.

<sup>32</sup> Lawn, “Playing with Freud,” above, 34.

<sup>33</sup> Lawn, “Trauma and Recovery in Janet Frame’s Fiction,” 98.

giant mirror”<sup>34</sup> of the self-founding and all-knowing subject. One of the main objections to Cartesian epistemology (and, by implication, Platonic idealism) – an objection which Frame clearly shares – is that it is “pre-mised upon an ethically unsustainable omission of the Other.” It is a philosophy, then, where “the all-knowing and self-sufficient Cartesian subject violently negates material and historical alterity/Otherness in its narcissistic desire to always see the world in its own image.”<sup>35</sup>

### Levinas’ Ethical Critique

It is against the backdrop of such a diagnosis of Western philosophy as a philosophy of narcissistic reflection which cannot tolerate any otherness outside that of its own projections that the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas takes shape. In a subsection of his important early essay “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity” (1957), entitled “Narcissism, or the Primacy of the Same,” he argues:

Autonomy, the philosophy which aims to ensure the freedom, or the identity, of beings, presupposes that freedom itself is sure of its right, is justified without recourse to anything further, is complacent in itself, like Narcissus. When, in the philosophical life that realizes this freedom, there arises a term foreign to the philosophical life, other – the land that supports us and disappoints our efforts, the sky that elevates and ignores us, the forces of nature that aid us and kill us, things that encumber us or serve us, men who love us and enslave us – it becomes an obstacle; it has to be surmounted and integrated into this life.<sup>36</sup>

In other words, like Frame’s characters Tom and Colin, and later in the novel the engineers of the Human Delineation Act, traditional Western philosophy cannot tolerate any otherness that is truly other and thus escapes the categories (ideals, dreams) of the self-same subject. Western philosophy is therefore a philosophy “engaged in reducing to the same all

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<sup>34</sup> Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* (St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1998): 35.

<sup>35</sup> Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory*, 39.

<sup>36</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, tr. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht, Boston MA & Lancaster: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987): 49.

that is opposed to it as *other*.<sup>37</sup> “The same” – a term Levinas borrows from Plato – refers to both the self-identity of the narcissistic subject and the abstraction of concepts that this subject utilizes to reduce the singularity of the actual existent to a universal structure: a process which buffers the impact of any true foreignness of the other.

In his first major work, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (1961), Levinas develops and extends the critique articulated in “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity” and launches an attack on the primacy of ontology in Western philosophy since Plato. In an oft-repeated statement, Levinas observes that “Western philosophy has most often been an ontology: a reduction of the other to the same by interposition of a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being.”<sup>38</sup> “To know ontologically,” according to Levinas, is not disinterested peaceful knowing; instead, because knowledge necessarily relies on “a middle and neutral term” – the concept – it manipulates otherness so as “to surprise in an existent confronted that by which it is not this existent, this stranger, that by which it is somehow betrayed.” Through the mediation of the *Begriff* (concept) which grasps it, this existent, or stranger, “surrenders, is given in the horizon<sup>39</sup> in which it loses itself and appears, lays itself open to the

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<sup>37</sup> Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 48.

<sup>38</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, tr. Alphonso Lingis (1961; Pittsburgh PA: Duquesne UP, 1969): 43.

<sup>39</sup> Note the use of the word ‘horizon’ here. Levinas draws an explicit connection between ‘horizon’ and ‘concept’ – both of which rely on a metaphysics of presence that sacrifices singularity on the altar of an idealized presence – when he says that “Since Husserl the whole of phenomenology is the promotion of the idea of *horizon*, which for it plays a role equivalent to that of the *concept* in classical idealism; an existent arises upon a ground that extends beyond it, as an individual arises from a concept” (*Totality and Infinity*, 44–45). In his long essay on *Totality and Infinity*, “Violence and Metaphysics,” Jacques Derrida similarly links the two terms and asserts that alterity, the absolute other, escapes both: “The infinitely-other cannot be bound by a concept, cannot be thought on the basis of a horizon; for a horizon is always a horizon of the same, the elementary unity within which eruptions and surprises are always welcomed by understanding and recognized” (Jacques Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas,” in *Writing and Difference* [1967; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978]: 95.) It is in this sense, then, that Frame’s declaration – cited as an epigraph for this essay – that “the proper use of imagination is a form of courage, daring to explore beyond horizons” takes on its decidedly ethical meaning.

grasp, becomes a concept.”<sup>40</sup> What Levinas alludes to here (in his most idiosyncratic way) is that the concept functions as a ‘middle term’ which mediates between the same and the other by way of bringing incomprehensible otherness within reach, and under control of, the same. He asserts:

This mode of depriving the known being of its alterity can be accomplished only if it is aimed at through a third term, a neutral term, which itself is not a being; in it the shock of the encounter of the same with the other is deadened. This third term may appear as a concept thought. The individual that exists abdicates into the general that is thought.<sup>41</sup>

Importantly, this critique of the concept is also, as Stella Sandford points out, “a critique of the Platonic interposition of the Ideas or Forms as the mediating third term through which the knower knows the known.”<sup>42</sup> For Plato, she continues,

Each particular thing *is* only insofar as it refers to or is a more or less imperfect copy of the perfect Idea of that thing, which is its universal form. The particular is never known in its particularity, but only in its correspondence to the universal.”<sup>43</sup>

That *Intensive Care* engages in a very similar critique of Platonic idealism is particularly obvious in the linking of so many of the female characters through their “violet-coloured eyes.” Just as “all wars have fused” (28), the women blur into one – to the extent that at one point Tom cannot tell apart his former lover and his daughter:

He watched Ciss Everest’s face. She did not recognise him. He saw that the clear violet eyes had grown an opaque film, like pondweed. [...] she resembled his own daughter Naomi, she *was* Naomi. (24)

Clearly, the violet-eyed women are drawn together as a category, in terms of their ‘doll essence’. Within this category, their singularity is stripped from them and they are rendered interchangeable playthings, objects of

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<sup>40</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 43–44.

<sup>41</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, 42.

<sup>42</sup> Stella Sandford, *The Metaphysics of Love* (London: Athlone, 2000): 19.

<sup>43</sup> Sandford, *The Metaphysics of Love*, 19.

possession, to the narcissistic men who, in ‘loving’ them, seek only to know themselves.

Levinas dates such “ontological imperialism”<sup>44</sup> as far back as Socrates and, in particular, Socrates’ idea of freedom, which is essentially a narcissistic freedom from otherness: “to receive nothing of the Other but what is in me, as though from eternity I was in possession of what comes to me from the outside – to receive nothing, or to be free.”<sup>45</sup> The ‘shock of externality’ can be buffered only by translating alterity into the categories of the same which receives it – the third term of the concept. Jeffrey Dudiak notes that for the “neutral third to do its job, for mediation to be effective, the other must surrender, must cease to be genuinely other.”<sup>46</sup> Seen through the Levinasian lens, Western philosophy – and this essentially means philosophy in the wake of Plato – thus emerges as a philosophy of violence. This violence is, above all, conceived of as conceptual violence which denies the alterity – the singularity – of the other.

What is under attack in *Intensive Care*, then, more than just a theory of narcissism, is an entire tradition of Western philosophy of ontology as it unfolds from Plato’s philosophy of the Forms. Western philosophy, as it begins with Plato and as it is seen through the Levinasian lens, is a philosophy of power that seeks to dominate and possess all alterity so as to assure itself of its own freedom and autonomy:

The surrender of exterior things to human freedom through their generality does not only mean, in all innocence, their comprehension, but also their being taken in hand, their domestication, their possession.<sup>47</sup>

That which, for Levinas, “reduces the other” – Reason – therefore “is appropriation and power.”<sup>48</sup>

In the light of this Levinasian understanding of Reason as an instrument of power and violence, Frame’s persistent critique of (mathema-

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<sup>44</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 44.

<sup>45</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, 43.

<sup>46</sup> Jeffrey M. Dudiak, “Structures of Violence, Structures of Peace: Levinasian Reflections on Just War and Pacifism,” in *Knowing Other-Wise: Philosophy at the Threshold of Spirituality*, ed. James H. Olthuis (New York: Fordham UP, 1997): 161.

<sup>47</sup> Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 50.

<sup>48</sup> *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 50.



tical) Reason – encountered again and again in her novels – also takes on new significance. It is not just that the accountants and mathematicians of this world are dull individuals bereft of artistic imagination. Rather, because, for Plato, these individuals have the intellectual capacity to come closest to the Forms and therefore become Guardians of the utopian ideal city, they are also (in Levinas’ reading) the handmaidens of Reason’s violence, complicit with Reason’s power to solve every puzzle and make everything add up. As in many of her novels, mathematical metaphors play a structuring role in *Intensive Care*, and are directly linked to violence. Thus, the closer Frame’s three main male characters come to the realm of Forms, or Reason, the greater the violence unleashed upon their ‘others’: Tom, the guardian of the Platonic flame burning in the cave, kills the woman he once loved; Colin Torrance, the accountant who “care[s] for reason” (141), murders an entire family, and Colin Monk, “loyal mathematician” (171) in charge of the “aristocrat of the machines” (175) that decides upon people’s extermination or survival, is, if not responsible for, then at least complicit in, a grand-scale exercise of genocide. Plato’s utopia thus finds its realization – and extreme perversion – in part 3 of the novel, where, rather than the purity of goodness, the characters experience unrestrained violence and murder in the name of ‘the larger good’. Does that mean, then, that there is no room for utopia in Frame’s work? That the good no-place is simply not translatable into an actual place – is not realizable – without turning into its exact opposite? If this were the case, might this utter disillusionment with traditional blueprint utopias not perhaps point to an attempt to “think utopia otherwise”?

### Ethical Transcendence

From what I have said so far, it should be clear that such a ‘thinking utopia otherwise’ must begin by making a radical break with ontology – Western thought’s privileged form of philosophy since Plato. In his essay “To Think Utopia Otherwise,” Miguel Abensour argues that what “invites us to think utopia otherwise,” in Levinas, is a “new idea of the human community.”<sup>49</sup> In other words, it is a fundamentally altered understanding

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<sup>49</sup> Abensour, “To Think Utopia Otherwise,” 258.

of subjectivity and sociality that enables a different kind of utopia: “In utopia, another adventure of human subjectivity is inaugurated.”<sup>50</sup> From what we have established so far regarding Levinas’ view on the relationship between conceptual thought, ontology, and violence, it is not surprising that the central task of *Totality and Infinity* should therefore be, as Simon Critchley notes, “to describe a relation irreducible to comprehension, that is, irreducible to what Levinas sees as the *ontological* relation to others.”<sup>51</sup> It is a task to imagine a different mode of being with others that, I suggest, Frame shares with Levinas. The aim for both of them is to locate a point of absolute exteriority to ontology, a *beyond* of totality that cannot be reappropriated by the narcissistic subject.

For Levinas, such a *beyond* is encountered in “the metaphysical term,”<sup>52</sup> and he is adamant that such a metaphysical *beyond* must not be collapsed back into ontological totality. Such a ‘reduction’ of the metaphysical to the ontological, or the transcendent to the immanent, is, of course, Western philosophy’s ardent ambition, and reveals exactly the structure we have been tracing so far: the *ou topos* becomes *topos* and in the process loses its *eu topic* quality. Keith Jenkins suggests, however, that while Western philosophy might aim for such a reduction, there are “always remainders, always something outside that should have been inside, a necessary surplus, an excess.”<sup>53</sup> It is this “outside,” this “surplus,” or “excess,” that, for Levinas, constitutes the metaphysical *beyond*. The desire for this *beyond* is a desire directed toward “*something else entirely*, toward the *absolutely other*,”<sup>54</sup> and gives rise to a relationship of proximity with the other. Such proximity “implies relations with what is not given, of which there is no idea.”<sup>55</sup>

To say that there is “no idea” of the other might be overstating his case, however, for only a few pages later Levinas uses the example of “perfection” – a highly apposite example for our discussion of *Intensive Care* – to

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<sup>50</sup> Abensour, “To Think Utopia Otherwise,” 260.

<sup>51</sup> Simon Critchley, “Introduction” to *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, ed. Simon Critchley & Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002): 11.

<sup>52</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 35.

<sup>53</sup> Keith Jenkins, *Why History? Ethics and Postmodernity* (London & New York: Routledge, 1999): 13.

<sup>54</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 33.

<sup>55</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, 34.

specify that the absolutely other emerges from the vantage-point of an idealization which “overflows the concept.” This suggests that there is, after all, an ‘idea(l)’ or a ‘concept’ of the other, but that the other “exceeds conception.” For Levinas, the idealization that makes a concept of the other possible is consequently also “a passage to the limit, that is, a transcendence, a passage to the other absolutely other,”<sup>56</sup> just as, I want to suggest, *Intensive Care* – as a “signpost to a world that is not even mentioned” – is a passage to the limit. Exploring utopian ideas of perfection, the novel shows both the violence of such ideas and their ethical transcendence. In other words, *Intensive Care* offers a passage to the limits of utopianism beyond which another kind of utopia is intuited.

The movement of transcendence Levinas describes here is repeated throughout *Totality and Infinity*. It is captured – here and throughout – by the idea of infinity. Levinas draws on Descartes to provide an example of a situation where thought, paradoxically, thinks more than it can think. Whereas concepts can usually contain their idealized objects, “the idea of infinity is exceptional in that its *ideatum* surpasses its idea.”<sup>57</sup> In other words, though there is a concept, or an idea, of infinity, its ideal signified is necessarily (infinitely) greater than the (totalized) boundaries of the concept itself. This idea of an *ideatum* overflowing an idea thus serves Levinas as a model for the kind of non-totalizable encounter with the absolutely other he envisions:

Infinity is characteristic of a transcendent being as transcendent; the infinite is the absolutely other. The transcendent is the sole *ideatum* of which there can be only an idea in us; it is infinitely removed from its idea, that is, exterior, because it is infinite.<sup>58</sup>

What is important for Levinas here is that the infinite, like the other, cannot be ‘compromised’ – grasped and contained – in the conceptuality of ontology and thereby maintains its exteriority and integrity:

The Cartesian notion of the idea of the Infinite designates a relation with a being that maintains its total exteriority with respect to him who thinks

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<sup>56</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 41.

<sup>57</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, 49.

<sup>58</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, 49.

it. It designates the contact with the intangible, a contact that does not compromise the integrity of what is touched.<sup>59</sup>

This contact in which the ‘I’ engages with the infinite other for Levinas is “a non-allergic relation, an ethical relation”<sup>60</sup> that touches the other without grasping him or her. The (ontological) relationship of power over the other, where the ‘I’ could re-present the other to itself in its own categories, hence gives way to a metaphysical relationship where the other, as absolutely other, is a (metaphysical) existent preceding, or overflowing, ontology. In this metaphysical relationship, the self is called into question through its encounter – or what Levinas calls the face-to-face situation – with the other. The face of the other here functions as the ‘concrete’ equivalent of the Cartesian infinite. As in the case of infinity, the face overflows its concept:

The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*, we here name face. This *mode* does not consist in figuring as a theme under my gaze, in spreading itself forth as a set of qualities forming an image. The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me, the idea existing to my own measure and to the measure of its *ideatum* – the adequate idea. It does not manifest itself by these qualities, but *καθ’ αὐτό*. It *expresses itself*.<sup>61</sup>

In its association with infinity, the face of the other breaks with its “plastic form” and thus “puts a stop to the irresistible imperialism of the same and the I.”<sup>62</sup>

### Returning to Platonism in a New Way: The Good Beyond Being

Clearly, what we have at this point is the complete inversion of a Platonic philosophy that reduces every other to its (plastic) Form. And yet, there is an impulse in Plato that makes Levinas want to “return to Platonism in a

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<sup>59</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 50.

<sup>60</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, 51.

<sup>61</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, 50–51, emphases in the original.

<sup>62</sup> Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 55.

new way,”<sup>63</sup> and that would make him suggest that this inversion of Platonic philosophy he is tracing lies within Platonic philosophy itself. What this “return to Platonism in a new way” involves is sketched in the opening passages of “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity,” where Levinas suggests that we can “distinguish two ways the philosophical spirit takes”<sup>64</sup> in its search for truth. One – the path of ontology and propositional truth inaugurated by Plato – we have already traced. Paradoxically, the second path – the path of metaphysics – also finds its roots in Plato’s philosophy. Here, truth “designate[s] the outcome of a movement that leaves a world that is intimate and familiar, even if we have not yet explored it completely, and goes towards the stranger, toward a *beyond*, as Plato puts it.”<sup>65</sup> This second way, then, is the path of transcendence that leads us beyond being. In Levinas’ famous opening words of *Otherwise Than Being, or, Beyond Essence*:

If transcendence has meaning, it can only signify the fact that the *event of being*, the *esse*, the *essence*, passes over to what is other than being. [...] Transcendence is passing over to being’s *other*, otherwise than being. Not to be otherwise, but otherwise than being.<sup>66</sup>

Importantly, this beyond being is associated with goodness: “Passing beyond being: this is the supreme goodness that would belie itself if it proclaimed itself!”<sup>67</sup> Levinas draws this sense of a “Good beyond being” from Plato, for what makes the ideal city ideal not just in ontological but also in ethical terms, for Plato, is that the Forms stand in an intimate relationship with the Good as higher principle beyond the Forms. Plato introduces his idea of the Good beyond being by drawing on a simile, likening

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<sup>63</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan Peperzak, Simon Critchley & Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1996): 58.

<sup>64</sup> Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 47.

<sup>65</sup> *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 47.

<sup>66</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, 3.

<sup>67</sup> Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 74. See also: “Arising at the apex of essence, goodness is other than being. It no longer keeps accounts; it is not like negativity, which conserves what it negates, in its history. [...] The exceptional, extra-ordinary, transcendent character of goodness is due to just this break with being and history. To reduce the good to being, to its calculations and its history, is to nullify goodness”; *Otherwise Than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, 18.

the Good to the sun. “The sun is the child of goodness,”<sup>68</sup> he says, thus equating visibility (granted by the sun) and intelligibility (granted by the Good). Both the sun and the Good function as the source of the truth of Being. As source, they stand above or beyond Being and should not be confused with Being:

what I’m saying is that it’s goodness which gives the things we know their truth and makes it possible for people to have knowledge. It is responsible for knowledge and truth [...] but you shouldn’t identify it with knowledge and truth, otherwise you’ll be wrong: for all their value, it is even more valuable.<sup>69</sup>

A little further on, Socrates explicitly dissociates the Good from the realm of Being, saying: “goodness isn’t actually the state of being, but surpasses being in majesty and might,” to which Glaucon responds: “It’s way beyond human comprehension, all right,”<sup>70</sup> referring to the absolute inaccessibility of the Good (and to Socrates’ enigmatic explanation thereof).

It is from *this* Platonism, the Platonism of the Good beyond being, that Levinas’ philosophy derives its impulse, and it is to this Platonism that he wishes us to “return in a new way.” Although Frame, I suggest, shares this impulse, her novels also reveal the utter difficulty of staying true to it. Again and again the characters in her novels “fix a makeshift sun in the sky”<sup>71</sup> in an attempt to reach the transcendent Good (or God), only to find that their “notions of God are invented, and that what [they are] seeing are reflections of [their] own representations,”<sup>72</sup> as Jan Cronin has argued with reference to *The Adaptable Man*’s clergyman Aisley Maude. Whether it is Aisley Maude in *The Adaptable Man*, or Malfred Signal in *A State of Siege* and Tom Livingstone’s dream daughter May in *Intensive Care*, both of whom end up clutching a stone when they should have been holding the Platonic sun,<sup>73</sup> transcendent goodness proves elusive in her fictional worlds. Instead of transcendent goodness, Frame’s characters again and

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<sup>68</sup> Plato, *Republic*, tr. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993): 508b.

<sup>69</sup> *Republic*, 508e.

<sup>70</sup> *Republic*, 509b–c.

<sup>71</sup> Janet Frame, *The Adaptable Man* (1965; Auckland: Vintage, 1993): 3.

<sup>72</sup> Jan Cronin, “Through a Glass Darkly: Reading the Enigmatic Frame,” above, 16.

<sup>73</sup> See Cronin, “Attending and Avoiding the ‘Explorations’ of Janet Frame,” 183.

again encounter a goodness that is little more than a narcissistic reflection of their own desires and that is thus ultimately immanent rather than transcendent goodness. As such, it is not truly good, for, as Levinas has so powerfully suggested, “To reduce the good to being, to its calculations and its history, is to nullify goodness.”<sup>74</sup>

What seems to underpin such a failure to reach the Good beyond being in Frame’s work is once again an inability to break with dominant Western patterns of thought. Frame’s characters frequently seek ‘the Good’ as an alternative to the violence or misery they experience, and yet do not realize that ‘the Good’ is precisely not a good to be found and held. The Good, as Brian Schroeder points out,

is not a mere object for cognition, nor is it a form among the other forms. Any attempt to grasp its essence in a comprehensive manner ultimately fails as it is beyond being in ‘dignity and surpassing power.’<sup>75</sup>

Schroeder further argues that it is not actually Plato himself but Aristotle “who inaugurates the tradition of logocentric metaphysics, of Platonism, as it is he who first *totalizes* the Good *within* being as the highest of ideals.”<sup>76</sup> According to this reading,

Aristotle’s reduction in the *Ethics* of the transcendence of the Good to merely the highest concept of Being, and his interpretation of λογος as *ratio*, begins the ontology of totality, the dominant philosophical tendency of Western thought. This move, combined with Augustine’s definition of God as the conflation of the Good and Being, constitutes the actual beginning of onto-theological metaphysics.<sup>77</sup>

What this means is that we have inherited a theological interpretation of Plato that draws Plato’s *beyond* back within our own horizons: our God is *our* God. In a statement which lucidly summarizes the core of his critique, Levinas suggests that even the transcendence offered by religion is thus not true transcendence:

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<sup>74</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, 18.

<sup>75</sup> Brian Schroeder, *Altared Ground: Levinas, History, and Violence* (London & New York: Routledge, 1996): 34. The citation refers to *Republic* 509b.

<sup>76</sup> Schroeder, *Altared Ground*, 35.

<sup>77</sup> *Altared Ground*, 22.

Western philosophy coincides with the disclosure of the other where the other, in manifesting itself as a being, loses its alterity. From its infancy philosophy has been struck with a horror of the other that remains other – with an insurmountable allergy. It is for this reason that it is essentially a philosophy of being, that the comprehension of being is its last word, and the fundamental structure of man. It is for this reason that it becomes philosophy of immanence and of autonomy, or atheism. The God of the philosophers, from Aristotle to Leibniz, by way of the God of the scholastics, is a god adequate to reason, a comprehended god who could not trouble the autonomy of consciousness [...].<sup>78</sup>

Levinas' *beyond*, like Plato's, "is not 'another world' behind the world"; instead, "the *beyond* is precisely beyond the 'world,' that is, beyond every disclosure, like the One of the first hypothesis of the *Parmenides*, transcending all cognition, be it symbolic or signified."<sup>79</sup>

#### Frame's "Transcendent Urge"

It is because it collapses the transcendent back into being, into immanence, that I ultimately do not agree with Marc Delrez that Frame's primary impulse is "spiritual" or "perhaps even religious." Her primary impulse, I suggest, is ethical. While the reasons for my earlier insistence on calling Frame's "transcendent urge" ethical rather than spiritual or religious may have seemed obscure, I hope to have shown that these terms call up very different forms of transcendence: one leads back to the totality of immanence – as the sum total of all that *is*, the totality of beings – whereas the other leads *beyond*. Importantly, only the latter leads to the Good as the place, or rather the non-place, of ethics.

It is for these reasons that I am troubled by Marc Delrez's interpretation of Frame's transcendent aspirations as a "pursuit of totality."<sup>80</sup> Frame's transcendence, I suggest, does not lead us back to totality. Instead, her transcendence leads us beyond the totality of what *is* towards Plato's enig-

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<sup>78</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "The Trace of the Other" tr. (1963) Alphonso Lingis, in *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986): 346.

<sup>79</sup> Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 59.

<sup>80</sup> Delrez, "Forbidding Bodies," 76.



matic Good beyond being. Totality, I suggest, is the very last thing Frame desires; instead, it is “infinity,” to use Levinas’ “overflowing concept.” Totality is associated with violence, conflict, and war, whereas infinity signals a mode of relating to the other informed by love and care. If *Intensive Care* issues perhaps but one warning, it must be that the conflictual understanding of sociality that connects all three parts of the novel, an understanding where the distinction between love and war has broken down and all love is experienced as an act of violation, must be replaced with a form of sociality – a form of being human – that understands the proper meaning of love. Thus Sandy Monk, “hero” and “first experimental man” (196), reminds Milly that “love” is the one word she must spell like everyone else so as not to lose the meaning of it:

I said to Milly, “There is a word that I want you to spell as the rest of the world spells it because if you do not, or forget how to spell it, it might mean that you lose the word altogether, that it falls down the cracks in the world and can never be found again, so you mustn’t lose it because no one will even have time to find it or realise it is lost. (197)

“Love,” for Levinas, “is only possible through the idea of the Infinite.”<sup>81</sup> As such, love is not confused with war but, rather, signals “the true messianic peace which is that of the disinterested love of one human being for another, a love carried and inhabited by the idea of the Infinite in us, a love dedicated to that Infinity which the defenceless face of the neighbor already reveals.”<sup>82</sup> Interestingly, Delrez at one point echoes Levinas’ phrasings almost verbatim, when he observes that

the work of the creative artist [...] alone is capable of pushing back the limits of the knowable. The novelist, then, is given the responsibility of accounting for other people – a vocation often represented as a burden to carry [...]. The object of the artist’s imaginative attention may then be entirely secular since the challenge of infinity can be wholly contained in one’s next-door neighbour.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 139.

<sup>82</sup> Catherine Chalier, “The Messianic Utopia,” *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 20.2–21.1 (1998): 291.

<sup>83</sup> Delrez, “Forbidding Bodies,” 78.

For Levinas, unlike Delrez, however, the challenge of infinity brought to us by the “next-door neighbour” is not (solely) secular; instead, as John Caputo comments, it is the face of the neighbour that ultimately leads us to God:

in Levinas, every time we attempt to direct our glance to God on high it is “deflected” by God to the face of the neighbor here below. The pragmatic meaning of the transcendence of the *tout autre* in Levinas is service to the neighbor. [...] The very transcendence of God as *tout autre* [...] is *transcribed* into neighbourly love: it is precisely because the face of God is transcendent that the only form in which you will ever find the face of God is the face of the neighbor, which is where you should direct all your attention.<sup>84</sup>

Levinas calls this “the latent birth of religion in the other,”<sup>85</sup> which is not ‘religious’ as conventionally understood, because it does not settle on any ‘object’ of religious attention. Levinas is adamant that ‘God’ is only ever experienced in the human encounter – that is to say, God is not an abstract Being; rather, God expresses himself in the enigmatic face of the other person who calls me into question and to responsibility. What is at stake in Frame’s fiction is thus not so much an attempt to return to religion as an attempt to rethink ‘the good society’, or peaceful sociality. As the nightmare scheme of *Intensive Care* reveals, such peaceful sociality is not to be found by chasing an abstract dream of perfection. Nor is it found by turning to God, which would immediately make of God yet another “makeshift sun” and translate the ineffable back into our conceptual universe. Instead, peaceful sociality is found by turning to the needs of the neighbour. Metaphysical transcendence – the Good – can only be achieved if the neighbour is approached with open hands: hands that do not grasp to possess but instead offer the self to the other. It is thus in this qualified sense that Delrez’s suggestion that Frame’s transcendent urge might be religious could indeed be justified. Frame, that is to say, perhaps teaches us to ‘view religion otherwise’, just as she shows us how to “think utopia otherwise.”

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<sup>84</sup> John D. Caputo, *After the Death of God/John D. Caputo and Gianni Vattimo*, ed. Jeffrey W. Robbins (New York: Columbia UP, 2007): 78–79.

<sup>85</sup> Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 143.

## To Think Utopia Otherwise

How can transcendence withdraw from *esse* while being signalled in it?<sup>86</sup>

Can utopia lie in a gap or absence? Despite Lydia Wevers’ scepticism, I want to suggest that it can, but only if we think utopia not as the good place to be aimed for and realized at some point in the future, but as a principle of transcendence that persistently unpicks the fabric of totality. Thus, when Wevers argues that what “is marvellous about [Frame’s] fiction is that it doesn’t let you rest, not that it offers up the promise of something better and beyond,”<sup>87</sup> I want to agree with her but suggest that it is precisely in the former, not the latter, that Frame’s utopianism lies. In other words, it is not because Frame dreams up perfect worlds to be realized in another place and time but because her work resists full closure that we can talk about a utopian dimension in her work. The “transcendent urge” that Delrez first identified in Frame’s work therefore does not so much aim for the whole as emerge from the hole that prevents full closure – the irritant in the system, the enigma that does not ‘add up’ and cannot be solved.

In concurrence with Jan Cronin’s essay in this volume, I therefore believe – though perhaps for slightly different reasons – that Frame’s texts are indeed very productively read not as puzzles to be solved but as irreducible enigmas. As such, I suggest, Frame’s enigmas have a transcendent ethical dimension that cannot be reduced to any form of totality, be it utopian or not. The Good can never be realized, can never find a place, without betraying itself. This ‘places’ the Good firmly on the side of critique rather than the creation of ideal blueprints:

The Good belongs on the side of novelty, of producing new ways to be (*renovatio*), putting on a new life, in indefinitely many ways. This is tied in with dissent, with the right of the individual to produce a new and different and even discordant discourse, rather than melting into the One or being amalgamated into the Whole.<sup>88</sup>

<sup>86</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, 10.

<sup>87</sup> Wevers, “Review of *Manifold Utopia*,” 184.

<sup>88</sup> John D. Caputo, *Against Ethics: Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1993): 41.

For Levinas, the enigma – a trace of the transcendent Good in the immanent – disturbs the propositional language of philosophical truth (and, by implication, realist narration) and instead aligns itself with the modality of the ‘perhaps’. As he argues in his important essay “Phenomenon and Enigma,” the enigma opens up the dimension of infinity and is linked to “transcendence itself”:

Phenomena, apparition in the full light, the relationship with being, ensure immanence as a totality and philosophy as atheism. The enigma, the intervention of a meaning which disturbs phenomena but is quite ready to withdraw like an undesirable stranger, unless one harkens to those footsteps that depart, is transcendence itself, the proximity of the other as other.<sup>89</sup>

Taking seriously Frame’s claim that “the contents of a book are signposts to a world that is not even mentioned,” I propose that we read *Intensive Care*, and perhaps more generally her oeuvre, as a gesturing towards a *beyond* – the Good beyond being – that cannot be comprehended or expressed in propositional language without betraying the Good. As Levinas suggests, “Passing beyond being, this is the supreme goodness that would belie itself if it proclaimed itself!”<sup>90</sup> What this means is that, if I am right in reading Frame’s transcendent urge as motivated by an ethical impulse, she can only ever express a utopian dimension in an absence, a gap, or a disturbance – a trace, and not a full presence, of the Good beyond being. Frame’s utopia is thus indeed not an expression of “something better and beyond”; instead, it is a signpost to this *beyond*. What we get instead of an expression of this *beyond* is the presentation of a fictional world – the signposts, as it were – that has lost access to this Good beyond being and seeks to realize the Good within being. In this translation of the *ou topos* into the realized *eu topos*, utopia takes on decidedly dystopian dimensions and presents itself as what Emmanuel Levinas would call a violent (totalitarian) adequation of the unique otherness of the other person to the conceptual categories of the self.

And yet, if we indeed “harke[n] to those footsteps that depart,” as Levinas asks us to, we might get a glimmer of this never fully present and

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<sup>89</sup> Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 70.

<sup>90</sup> *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 70.

ever-receding *beyond*. What is at stake, for Levinas, is ultimately a different form of sociality. Unlike the “new humanity” dreamed up by the Human Delineation Act, which does not alter a narcissistic subjectivity so much as in fact allow Narcissus to “gover[n] a totalitarian regime,”<sup>91</sup> Levinas’ different form of sociality is enabled by a new conception of being human. As Miguel Abensour suggests, the word ‘human’, in intimating a *beyond*, has a powerful utopian resonance in Levinas’ work:

Something moves, trembles, vacillates, vibrates with another significance in Levinas’s text when he utters the word human, as if this word succeeded in making perceptible, beyond forms of knowledge, this dislocation of being, this ‘ontological interruption,’ and this *uneveling*. As if it were proper to this word to have succeeded – against the crushing evidence of these ‘dark times’ – in awakening the *utopian* resonance of the human.<sup>92</sup>

It is in this sense, then, that we might want to understand Frame’s work in general, and *Intensive Care* in particular, as utopian narratives that gesture towards a new way of being human. This new way of being human is not so much represented as “something better and beyond” as it is intuited from the very edges of meaning and representation – from the enigmatic “holes” in the text that allow for a vision of a “new humanity” to puncture the totalitarian weave of violent relating.

In *Intensive Care*, we find such a glimmer in a brief moment of textual disruption when, in a rare moment of half-insight – a moment that points to a “world that is not even mentioned” – Colin Torrance moves towards a new understanding of what it is to be human just before he kills the Kimberley family: “The light of what reason remained in him was beginning to illuminate the idea that nothing is truly possessed that has life or the promise of life” (155). The glimmer of insight that speaks from these lines – not strong enough to prevent murder and still articulated in the negative – suggests that Colin might indeed have started on a path towards a truly “new humanity” that is marked by loving rather than violent sociality. Rather than all the utopian dreams of ‘the good society’ that, as the novel shows so insistently, cannot be realized without losing the very element of

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<sup>91</sup> Lawn, “Playing with Freud,” above, 34.

<sup>92</sup> Abensour, “To Think Utopia Otherwise,” 259, emphases in the original.

goodness that may have animated them, it is this glimmer of insight, then, that alerts us to the departing footsteps of the Good beyond being in *Intensive Care*.

By offering us a decidedly dystopian narrative, Frame reminds us of utopia's original meaning as the good place (*eu topos*) that *categorically* does not exist (*ou topos*) – that must not exist if it is to retain its goodness. But Frame not only takes us to the limits of utopia as conventionally understood; she also challenges us to think utopia otherwise. As a “signpost to a world that is not even mentioned,” *Intensive Care* evokes the ‘good no-place’ without betraying it. Daring “to explore beyond horizons,” *Intensive Care* thus not only testifies to Frame's ‘infinite’ courage as a writer but also offers an answer to Levinas' difficult question: “How can transcendence withdraw from *esse* while being signalled in it?” Offering us the *beyond* as a trace – as a “gap” or “gash” in the fabric of the wor(l)d – rather than as a fully realized presence, the novel preserves the very *beyondness* of the “beyond horizons.” Signalling, rather than representing, the *beyond*, *Intensive Care* thus manages to stay true to its ethical impulse. Further, and perhaps more importantly, by withdrawing the *beyond* from our reading eyes and refusing to relinquish it to our conceptual grasp, the novel challenges us to attend to this trace or, in Levinasian terms, to “harke[n] to those footsteps that depart.” As such, it effectively compels the reader into enacting the novel's projected vision of ethical subjectivity, thus offering hope that *Intensive Care* may “succeed[d] – against the crushing evidence of these ‘dark times’ – in awakening the *utopian* resonance of the human.”<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Abensour, “To Think Utopia Otherwise,” 259, emphasis in the original.

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