



Written and Over-written: Investigating Metafictional Strategies in Janet Frame’s *The Carpathians*”

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Unlike several movements in literature, postmodernism lacked a specific manifesto and often varied in its concerns depending on the media that it engaged with. However, on the whole, postmodernist fiction is generally characterized as being playfully (and highly) self-reflexive and self-conscious of its status as artifice, dominantly leaning towards the ‘creation’ of reality in language rather than the reflection of reality in language, celebrating the multiplicity of voices and narratives over (humanistic) faith in metanarratives (as famously stated by Jean-François Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition*), indulging in intertextuality, and highlighting the discursive nature of the text, the reader, and the writer. Linda Hutcheon states that postmodernism is a cultural activity that incorporates what it contests, centralizes what is decentralized, and is, thus, a “both/and” rather than an “either/or” movement. These aspects make pastiche and parody fundamental to understanding postmodernist fiction (Hutcheon 3). All in all, postmodernist fiction revels in its status as fiction and is greatly concerned with matters of textuality, and the conflation of language and reality (within and without the fictional world). In addition to these features, the term ‘metafiction’ is conspicuously attached to the idea of a postmodern novel.

Metafiction, or self-conscious fiction, is a commentary on the act and art of fictionalizing within the bounds of the fictional world; thereby, a postmodernist text exhibits how the fictional world is created where the instructions or method of creation come as part of the finished product. That is, a metafictional text systematically addresses itself as a fiction or a construct within the framework of the fictional narrative itself. Metafiction can also be understood as the practice of exploring a “theory” of fiction—or what fiction means and how it is related to the real world—through the “practice” of fiction (Waugh 2, 4). Waugh suggests that in deliberately exposing itself as an act of artifice, metafiction is able to problematize the presumed certainties that realist representations (in fiction) claim to present. John Barth, whose *Lost in the Funhouse* (1963) is a salient instance of metafiction, de-

fines metafictional novels as those that “imitate” novels more than they do the real world (qtd. in Currie, 161).

Like metalanguage and metanarrative, metafiction is symbolic of the general interest in the construction of realities and in the ways we (outside the fictional realm) mediate our experiences in the world. “Meta” implies a level of discourse, an extra level, as it were. Using “meta” terms, we are able “...to explore the relationship between this arbitrary linguistic system and the world to which it *apparently* refers” (Waugh 3). In fiction, it means to be able to explore the relationship “...between the world *of* the fiction and the world *outside* the fiction” (3). It could also be understood as a “...tendency within the novel which operates through exaggeration of the tensions and oppositions inherent in all novels: of frame and frame-break, of technique and counter-technique, of construction and deconstruction of illusion” (14). That is, the opposition is set from *within* the form of the work of fiction itself. Like the postmodernist principle of Hutcheon’s both/and, metafictional novels both construct a fictional illusion (as in traditional realism) and simultaneously lay bare the act of construction. This leads to foregrounding interpretation and deconstruction at the expense of creation and criticism (6). It is, quite clearly, a symptom of the formal and ontological insecurities typical of postmodernism, and suggests that the world itself is arguably constructed by discourses and language systems.

Janet Frame’s novel *The Carpathians* (1988) exemplifies several postmodernist techniques as well as the ontological concerns that underlie the deployment of metafiction. Among others, the novel makes use of the embedded Chinese box narrative structure, self-aware, unreliable and interrupting narrators, and metafictional utterances exposing the underlying *make* of the work of fiction. The novel in question also explores the *trace*-like nature of fictional characters and their existence as wholly dependent on language (i.e. as textual beings), and plays up the struggles of multiple narrators and characters to capture narrative space as well as to solidify themselves through linguistic records, while being highly aware of the discursive nature of language and memory’s precarious status within language.

Frame’s *The Carpathians*, in its basic plot, is the story of an American woman named Mattina Brecon, her stay in a fictional town in New Zealand, the events that occur during her stay, and her return to, and eventual death in, New York. However, the way these events unfold, the narrators and narratives which unfold these events, and the events themselves, render this novel squarely in postmodernist sensibilities. Mattina Brecon, a middle-aged American millionaire heiress,

lives with her husband, Jake Brecon, and their son, John Henry, in New York. Mattina is a patron of the arts while Jake is a writer. After his first novel, published while he was still a young man, Jake finds himself suffering from a writer's block that has lasted almost thirty years, contiguous with their marriage. Partly in order to feed him stories, insights, and memories so that he can write again,¹ partly for her personal quest to "know" unfamiliar people in their national, regional, and cultural contexts, and partly because she senses a deep lack in spite of living a privileged and comfortable life, Mattina travels to distant, strange places (as unlike New York as possible in her imagination) on a quest to understand and observe the *Other*, to collect stories and record memories, and to fill the gaps in her own life. These encounters are not always as profound as she expects them to be and her quest to record the lives of others is gently mocked through the narrator(s)'s interventions every now and then. She is also simultaneously very conscious of her own existential ephemerality, and this anxiety produces in her the feeling that she must buy land in these places, as if trying to plant herself—or her identity—in solid ground. This desire also betrays an underlying anxiety of being erased or disappearing or being rendered invisible, and this fear is often articulated via her stream of consciousness as well as the comments of the omniscient narrator. She often believes herself to be a character composed of mere words, the loss of which will also mean complete obliteration of self. Other characters in the novel, unable to come to terms with their status as only a part of the narrative, also share this anxiety.

One of her journeys to explore the *Other* and to record first-hand experiences is to Puamahara, a fictional town in New Zealand popularized through travel brochures as the site of folkloric legend of the Memory Flower.² Mattina is put up in Number Twenty-Four, Kowhai Street. The ostensible aim of her two month stay is to document, record, and understand the lives and personalities of her

¹The readers are told that Jake Brecon's first novel, *The Battlefields of New York*, was a huge success but has since left him unable to create a fictional work of similar depth. However, he is suspicious of Mattina's help: "[t]here had been times when, overcome with crippling shame at his inability to write his second novel, Jake had the wild suspicion that Mattina, realising his anguish, may have been deliberately 'feeding him' characters and stories that might inspire his writing" (Frame 175). Suspicion of "truthful" accounts, stories, and memories, as well as authorial anxieties, run deep at all narrative levels in *The Carpathians*.

²In the Maori language, the novel explains, "pua" is flower and "mahara" is memory. The legend of the Memory Flower is also called the Legend of the Memory Land, or Maharawhenua—"whenua" means both land and placenta. It is ironic that the place that means 'the birth site' is, in the actual world of the novel, a popular place for retirees to live out their last years, and eventually becomes the site of the obliteration of language.

neighbors as well as to study the legend in its native context. She poses as a novelist to her neighbors and there are several instances wherein the people (characters) around her respond to her questions because they too express anxiety about being forgotten; any form of representation that may preserve them and keep them alive would be preferable to being erased altogether. In a manner, this showcases an awareness of their own representative nature, not as three dimensional people but as characters reduced to the two dimensional reality of words on paper. For instance, one of her neighbors, Ed, presses Mattina (and through her, Jake) to write about them, as if “Ed’s only existence now might depend on the flat pages of a book with his human essence converted into words and he himself closed forever unless someone chanced to open the book and read it, meeting Ed, with Ed now existing also in the reader’s mind but nowhere else, not in any living dimension” (Frame 109). Brian McHale explains this feature of postmodernist narratives: “Not only are presented objects and worlds partly indeterminate and potentially ambiguous, they are also...lacking the plenitude and density of real objects in the real world” (32). The belief that language constitutes, rather than represents, reality is essential to metafiction. Metafiction relies on the idea that language creates reality and, therefore, we (the people in the real world, as reflected by people in fictional worlds) are inhabiting roles rather than selves (Waugh 3).

One night in Puamahara, Mattina senses that the space of her bedroom has become filled with an invisible, primitive, and heavy animal-like presence. This “animal of long ago” may be thought of as a representation of the essence of memory, conflating past and present, here and now, and there and then, that has crossed over from memory and folkloric legend into the physical world. In other words, a story (with all the history and mini-stories embedded in it) has acquired a breathing, spatial form. Mattina feels as though it is causing the “...reduction of the room, Mattina, the house, the street and its people...to a two-dimensional existence...a world-scape without volume, with their present image of themselves an illusion only” (100–101). The relationship between three-dimensional reality and two-dimensional textual existence is closely entwined in the ruminations of all characters in the novel. A few weeks after this, another inexplicable and incomprehensible event befalls Kowhai Street and its residents, and only Mattina and Dinny Wheatstone (one of the other residents) are spared. A “quasar” called the Gravity Star (mentioned in the opening pages of the novel) exerts its effect on this little street, causing all known languages to disappear and the speakers of those languages to become animal-like after being robbed of their language. A deluge of alphabets, fecal matter, and diamond dust causes a catastrophe with terrible repercussions for the residents.

Both Mattina and Jake (who eventually becomes the recipient of Mattina's testimony) are shocked to find out that the event is not recalled by anyone (except an old woman, Connie Townsend, who lost her family but is believed to be senile and, therefore, untrustworthy) nor does anyone want an explanation as to what transpired that night. Banal explanations such as mounting debts or personal problems are accepted as truthful causation for an entire street of people disappearing overnight. This lack of curiosity can be interpreted as disbelief in the extraordinary, but more accurately as a comment on the nature of historiography as itself a product of, and in, language. The folkloric land of memory is parodied as the modern site of forgetting, while also highlighting how local (or *petit*, as Lyotard terms them) histories are often erased in larger arcs of history making—in this case, the desire to normalize the history of a region must perforce erase an inexplicable event. Lyotard asserts that postmodernism "...refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable" (xxv)—something that the residents of city of Puamahara are unable to do.

Mattina returns to New York a few days after the event after having purchased all the houses on Kowhai Street to preserve the memory of those who have disappeared. However, in a week's time, she is diagnosed with cancer (in the pages leading up to this, there is mention of some latent symptoms that Mattina had been ignoring). In the months before she dies, she relates all her memories of Kowhai Street to Jake, especially the night of the rain of the alphabet as "something strange" or "terrible" or "marvellous" (Frame 166). However, she is unable to put her finger on what exactly had transpired in those two months, and Jake believes much of her recollections to be confused ramblings. She eventually succumbs to her illness, "...surrendering at last her *point of view*" (170, emphasis added). Mattina is not alone in being equated to a "point of view"; Dinny, the other characters on Kowhai Street, and even John Henry (presumably the omniscient narrator) project themselves as constructed in and through language, and thus can only offer points of view as opposed to rightfully occupying the narrative space bestowed on characters of conventionally realist novels. Patricia Waugh suggests that postmodernist characters do not inhabit a world of "...eternal verities but a series of constructions, artifices, impermanent structures" (7), much like the characters in *The Carpathians*. This novel, John Henry states at the very beginning, is not just about "maintaining point of view" as a matter of survival but rather, "with *being* a point of view" (Frame n.pag.). Jake visits Puamahara after Mattina's death, as she had requested, and finds that the entire street is still empty, as are the memories of those outside of the street. For instance, the real estate agent, Albion Cook,

betrays some vaguely worded worry about an unnamed event but claims to have no memory of who inhabited the street or what transpired that night. Jake, in turn, expresses the desire that John Henry (also a novelist) turn his parents' memories of Puamahara, the existence of the residents of Kowhai Street, and the Legend of the Memory Flower into an (immortalizing) novel—ostensibly the one the reader is in the process of reading. As is expected of a metafictional world, the novel is peopled with multiple authors (and the implications of this technique are underscored as well): Mattina—the pretend novelist, Jake—the flash-in-the-pan novelist with writer's block, John Henry—the unexpected novelist, and Dinny Wheatstone, by her own admission—an “imposter” novelist “with leave to occupy all *points of view*” (Frame 44, emphasis added). Accordingly, there is much meditation on language as well as the fictional status of the novel. Early in the novel, the omniscient narrator puts forth the manifesto: “Let me then use the old-fashioned words in their old-fashioned meanings...to tell the story...” effectively forewarning a loss of language in the latter part of the narrative (16–17). In another place in the novel, the preface to the story of a murdered woman (Madge McMurtrie) is thus articulated: “In the town of the Memory Flower she deserves a chapter written in the course of daily work among memories” (27). The murdered woman herself is referred to as “penultimate Madge”; even in death, she is not completely erased because she exists in the world of the novel and lives through the words in which she is captured.

The novel's plot is framed with narratives nestled within other narratives, percolating narrative levels, and unreliable narrators. The novel, printed and bound as a physical object, is authored by Janet Frame, as is indicated on the cover page, copyright and publication details, and by a note of acknowledgement at the beginning. This is the first level of framing. Moreover, a preface at the opening of the novel is signed by a “J. H. B.,” and the ending is a postscript note³ signed by “John Henry Brecon” (the very same J. H. B.). John Henry is a fictional character: Mattina's and Jake's son. His parenthetical notes state that what conspires between these two notes is a work of fiction with possible roots in his “reality.” In the sandwiched pages lies the entire fictional world, along with John Henry himself as a character (not in first person but rather through the voice of the omniscient narrator, likely himself). The opening note provides a parodic disclaimer proclaiming the fictional status of the novel: “[t]he characters and happen-

³The opening and closing notes follow several commonplace conventions. The opening note ends with a line of acknowledgements: J. H. B.'s mother's trip to New Zealand and his father's love for books that are the inspirations behind the present work. The endnote carries a date—1987. The novel, *The Carpathians*, was published in 1988.

ings in this book are all invented and bear no relation to actual persons living or dead” (n. pag.). On the other hand, the postscript informs the reader that the novel was not just a figment of John Henry Brecon’s imagination but a novel gleaned from what his father narrated and what his mother experienced. In other words, it simultaneously reinstates the “reality” and the fictionality of the story. .

Yes, he [Jake] told me. And I travelled to Puamahara. And what I have just written is the novel he spoke of; or perhaps it is merely notes for a novel? And perhaps the town of Puamahara, which I in my turn visited, never existed? Nor did my mother and father in the way they are portrayed, for they died when I was seven years old...What exists, though, is the memory of events *known and imagined*.... (Frame 196, emphasis added)

What the reader has just read, John Henry says in the postscript, is his second novel.⁴ Unreliability abounds in his statements: he claims that the narrative is completely fictional because his parents died when he was seven years old; however, in the novel itself, his character develops until he is around thirty years of age. The events in the novel, as per John Henry, are simultaneously (or partly) real and imagined, and memory (oral and written) is perhaps a source but these questions are never properly settled. As is typical of metafiction, this is self-reflexive act of fictionalizing, and the reader is constantly reminded that the text in front of her, while ostensibly reflecting the real world, is a deliberate act of imagination and creation carried out by the narrator and the author.

Either an omniscient narrator or John Henry⁵ occupies the space of narration in the text. And within this narrative centered on Mattina, there is another manuscript (about Mattina) written by the “imposter novelist” Dinny Wheatstone. Dinny’s manuscript occupies many hours and pages of Mattina’s textual existence while she is in Puamahara. Nestled within Dinny’s hypodiegetic and episodic narra-

⁴John Henry’s first novel is also mentioned in the last quarter of the novel. It is titled *The Diviner*, presumably about someone who can intuit or foretell events. Dinny Wheatstone also claims that she does not create but “divines” the lives and thoughts of those around her (Frame 57). Dinny is presented in the novel much before the reader is informed of John Henry’s novel. In this manner, John Henry’s novel (and protagonist) mirrors the imposter novelist Dinny (who may or may not also be John Henry’s creation). This creates one more instance of confusion for the reader, because it highlights the unreliability of narrators.

⁵The distinction needs to be maintained since John Henry is also a character in the narrative, and does not necessarily match the impressions a reader would gather from the pre- and post-script.

tion are mini-histories of the residents of Kowhai Street. Such a Chinese box structure—wherein recursiveness occurs for its own sake (McHale 115)—further throws narrative stability into confusion. So, while a regular realist narrative posits distinct roles for the narrator, the protagonist, and the other characters, this postmodernist text mixes up these roles and confuses the boundaries that define these functions (115). This is especially so in the case of John Henry and Dinny, who are both characters as well as narrators, and who also usurp each other's voices as well as Mattina's inner world, time, and narrative space. Mark Currie points out that postmodernist fictional worlds revel in highlighting their own artifice through a variety of means including allowing the apparent author/narrator to interrupt the fabric of fictional reality so as to expose themselves as the creators or arbitrators of this reality. Like other postmodernist fiction, *The Carpathians* also creates what Currie calls "surrogate author(s)" who occupy the role of, or reflect on, the function of the real-world author (*Postmodern Narrative Theory* 3).

By conventional definition, Mattina Brecon is the protagonist of the novel and her stay in Puamahara is the focal point of the novel. Yet from pages 51 to 115 of the novel, encompassing a large part of her two month stay there, it is not her account or that of the conventionally reliable omniscient narrator that is presented. Instead, it is in Dinny Wheatstone's manuscript that Mattina's life in Puamahara is predicted, or unfolds as her life is unfolding, or simply supplants her life (an intertextual nod, perhaps, to Melquíades's script in García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*). This confusion is never directly addressed, but becomes part of the storytelling. It is also primarily in this manuscript that the reader is introduced to the residents of Kowhai Street. The manuscript lays out their individual thoughts and concerns, interpersonal conversations, interaction with Mattina, and impressions of her. As such, Dinny's intervention and her explanations of her imposter-ism lay bare the mechanism of the novel—her manuscript "imitates" a novel more than it does the real world, akin to what John Barth describes as the hallmark of postmodernist fiction (Currie, *Metafiction* 161). Dinny also announces, within her manuscript, that Mattina "is reading my typescript" (Frame 95), conflating the character outside her manuscript with the one inside, and also the character's time (Mattina's supposed future in terms of her stay in Puamahara is confused with her present moment of reading the manuscript). Mattina is set up as the reader here: the text unfolds with words and in the present time and act of reading, but the events have already occurred. She is also the protagonist of the event and the question of whether (and when) these actions occurred or are simply imagined by the author is left unanswered.

On the surface, the section titled “Wheatstone Imposter” appears to be no different than a typical realist narrative where the omniscient author has complete control over the characters’ lives and thoughts, and provides a bird’s eye view from the standpoint of a logocentric creator. However, Dinny proclaims the artifice of this section by calling herself the official imposter, with the uncanny “leave to occupy all points of view” like all realist novelists do (44). She asserts that she has no subjectivity and can occupy the space of all characters, their innermost thoughts, past experiences, and futures. She also claims that she is not creating fiction because these characters are “real” (in the world of the novel) and she appears to be *divining* their inner beings rather than creating them. Isabella Zoppi suggests that in this manuscript, Mattina “...recognizes herself (as she was both before and after settling down in Kowhai Street) in the thoughts and actions of a character in the typescript Dinny has put in her letterbox” (157). Even though the character of Mattina in the manuscript is fictional but it also resembles Mattina, the real character. Of course, the real world reader has no yardstick by which to judge how “fictional” this assessment of Mattina’s life is. It must be kept in mind that if Dinny claims to be a diviner and not a creator, then it is a likelier interpretation that the manuscript is about Mattina, not someone like her, and therefore is predicting her life rather than creating it. Dinny’s manuscript highlights its fictional status within its own parentheses by remarks such as: “[t]hat evening Mattina opened the typescript left by Dinny Wheatstone, and began to read” (Frame 51). Her manuscript, predicting the actions of her reader Mattina (and mirroring the real-world reader as well), ends thus:

Mattina closed Dinny Wheatstone’s typescript and set it on the bed-table. Her emergence from the typescript confused her... It is now almost two months since I [Mattina] came to Puamahara, yet it is true that I have just arrived here. Is it possible that I have lived here for both spans of time, both within reality, that after my first week, when I began to read this manuscript, my three-dimensional existence became two-dimensional but no less real within the pages of Dinny Wheatstone’s narrative while she, writing her story, also moved within the present and future?... ‘I have been in parentheses,’... ‘And emerging from this typescript, I leave in a few days for New York and my home.’ (115)

As Brian McHale pointed out, the postmodernist fictional world becomes “less the mirror of nature” and more visibly an “artifact” or “made thing” (30). For instance, the reader cannot define whose point of view is being presented. If one keeps in mind the various narrators

and narratives embedded in this text, it is impossible to determine the 'true' nature of this manuscript, and if it is an unmediated (i.e. unedited) insertion, a partial insertion (rather than the entire manuscript which is supposed to be novel-length), an (interpreted) summary, or a complete 'fiction' produced by John Henry or by Mattina, or even by Jake; neither can it clearly be articulated what truth, if any, has been made available.

The next section of the novel, in John Henry's/the omniscient narrator's voice, begins as an affirmation of the passing of time: "It was indeed so: in three days Mattina would be on the plane to New York" (Frame 119). This raises questions about the truth of the events that have occurred. Considering Mattina's mission was to meet and record her interactions with her neighbors, it is unsettling that as readers, we know nothing about what she did for most of the duration of her stay except through Dinny's scripting of Mattina's life. The descriptions of Mattina taking notes, recording her thoughts, and pondering over the truth of the Gravity Star, and the presence in her room can no longer be clearly slotted as her actions or as those divined or created by Dinny. Matters are not helped by Dinny's own interruptions announcing her status as the "author of this imposter record" (57) who is "intent on manipulating points of view," and has the freedom to "...choose from daily life the commonplace facts of weather, accidents, quarrels, deaths, losses, gains, delights" (95). This also serves as a comment on authorship (in the real world): authors of realist texts, while appearing to present a holistic picture and keeping themselves absent from the text, are nevertheless already implicated in the act of choosing or creating events, characters, characteristics, place and time, and the words that bring these to life in the imagination. The postmodernist writer/narrator has simply acquired a degree of comfort with their existence as such, and of their fictional worlds as fiction. On the one hand, Mattina is worried about the fate of the residents who have become so close to her and who confided their deepest concerns to her and believes she could walk into any house in her neighbourhood and be welcomed. On the other hand, she (as a usurped character) is not able to answer whether she actually ever met any of them except briefly before Dinny's manuscript takes over: "Mattina, unable to deny or confirm her fictional experiences of almost two months, forced herself to weave them into her memory...as a form of truth composed of the real and the unreal" (121). The only solution offered to this conundrum is: "Anything is or will be possible" (123). The reader knows that Dinny Wheatstone is a resident on Kowhai Street because Mattina meets her in the first part of the novel, outside of the manuscript. Dinny tells her that she has put her fourth novel in Mattina's letterbox the day Mattina first meets her, implying that she had divined Mat-

tina's visit and her purpose. The matter is further complicated by Mattina's ability to see herself distinctly as a character in Dinny's novel, as the reader of this novel, as well as a person in her own right. Her inner thoughts—"I seem to have fallen under the spell of Kowhai Street, Mattina thought" (101)—are offset by her appearing to free herself of the imposter novelist creating her within the manuscript: "At least I'm not at risk of losing substance. For the moment, I'm the observer, the holder of the point of view, and even Dinny Wheatstone's presence can't erase my work" (76). Obviously, there is no way of ascertaining if Mattina has indeed broken free or if Dinny is only mocking her (and us). To add to the unreliability, Mattina and Dinny have a conversation about the manuscript after Mattina has read and returned it. Dinny asks: "You read about the winter world, in my typescript," to which Mattina reacts thus: "'Surely,' Mattina said hastily, trying to remember. Wasn't there mention of a graveyard, mute Miltons, undiscovered Hampdens?" (123). There is no such mention, at least not for novel's reader. There is, thus, a constant reiteration of the fictional status of everything that has occurred—or not occurred—in the world of the novel.

Thus, there are several narrative levels embedded within each other in the novel: Frame's novel, John Henry's narrative, Dinny's manuscript, and Mattina within Dinny's manuscript fighting her way out. It is possible that the manuscript is actually John Henry's creation or the manuscript is genuine, was found among Mattina's effects, and inserted verbatim by John Henry. Has the imposter novelist taken over Mattina's life in Puamahara, or has another novelist (John Henry) her entire life? While Mattina is a creation of Frame, is she also a creation of John Henry, and partially of Dinny (who are of course both created by Frame)? Through the creation and imposition of the "imposter" novelist on, and within, the narrative, the reader is also confronted with the question—whose point of view are we exposed to? In view of Mattina's objective to record experiences, we must perforce confront the artificiality of documentation and the unreliability of the project of gathering knowledge. It also, like much postmodernist fiction, destabilizes the veneer of trustworthy reality that realist fiction has traditionally posed. Rather than present a 'truth' that can be accepted, the novel now exhibits narratives vying with each other for legitimacy, and highlights the discursive nature of 'truth' itself. It appears to posit that the voice that grabs the narrative space becomes the source of truth, and thus highlights the provisional nature of its creation and sustainment in language. This also has implications for the reader in the real world. We are forced to grapple with the unreliability of the narratives laid out before us, the simulation in words of a seemingly realist world, and of linear time and space. Waugh explains that metafiction has "...not

only provided novelists and their readers with a better understanding of the fundamental structures of narrative; it has also offered extremely accurate models for understanding the contemporary experience of the world as a construction, an artifice, a web of interdependent semiotic systems” (9). The implications that metafictional strategies have on the real world reader’s understanding of her own world, of truth, and of language, are mirrored in Mattina’s engagement with Dinny’s manuscript as well as John Henry’s role in the novel.

In the opening chapter of *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987), Brian McHale arrives at what he sees as a shift of the “dominant” (a term borrowed from Roman Jakobson) from epistemological to ontological, coterminous with modernist and postmodernist fiction’s concerns through a comprehensive analysis of Euro-American literary fiction spanning the 21st century. He also states that the two dominants are not watertight compartments; rather, they are always overlapping, but one may see a higher preponderance of one over the other in the two styles/modes of fictionalizing (modernist and postmodernist). Questions of an epistemological nature related to circulation and accessibility of knowledge such as: “What is there to be known?; Who knows it?; How do they know it, and with what degree of certainty?; How is knowledge transmitted from one knower to another, and with what degree of reliability?...” are asked by modernists (McHale 9). In the postmodernist, “post-cognitive,” ontological phase, questions such as these are foregrounded: “What is a world?; What kinds of worlds are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of worlds are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?...” (10). Such ontological concerns of postmodernism in *The Carpathians* are voiced in the alteration of the “being” of the characters, effected through two (fictitious) poles: an indigenous legend (of the memory flower) and a scientific discovery (the Gravity Star). The latter is directly germane to postmodernist tendencies. The novel describes it is a “quasar” called the Gravity Star. It is mentioned in the opening note and recurs frequently in Mattina’s ruminations. The opening note quotes from a “Press Association Report” which defines the Gravity Star as a galaxy, simultaneously—and implausibly—close and several billion light years away from the earth: “the paradox is interpreted as being caused by the focusing of light from a distant quasar (starlike object) by the gravity of an intervening galaxy” (Frame n. pag.). If the Gravity Star were to affect any part of the earth, it would—being the paradox itself—abolish the all-too-familiar binaries of distance and time as we know them by destroying language since such concepts exist in language and language—and subsequently the world—is constructed

from such binaries. The Gravity Star, therefore, is the harbinger of a new reality that will collapse dualities to give rise to a new reality.

The Gravity Star is also another example of postmodernist fiction's primary identifiers, as per McHale, which is the use of science fiction tropes (McHale 65). The difference, though, is that unlike most science fiction, postmodernist fiction is more likely to focus on the social, historical, and political implications of technological or other types of interventions, rather than the intervention itself (66). The Gravity Star functions as what Darko Suvin would call a "novum." Suvin avers that a science fiction text is defined by the novum it employs, "...which is usually science or technology and which renders the difference a material rather than just a conceptual or imaginative one" (Roberts 7). The Gravity Star's very physical effects on the characters in the novel are crucial to its meditation on the existence in language.

Mattina estimates, after witnessing the rain of alphabets one night (which is the Gravity Star exerting an effect on one part of the planet), that the Gravity Star will eventually lead to the birth of new concepts to re-configure the world, and a new language, commensurate with the new reality, will be fashioned. Until then, the world, suddenly "...deprived of its standards of sanity moulded within its written and spoken languages," would have to remain suspended in a phase of chaos due to the collapse of boundaries between naturalized binaries that order normative reality (Frame 119). The novel posits that the influence of the Gravity Star is not superfluous. Rather, it is necessary in order to rescue the world, "...plunged into a swamp of absurdity, [and] contradiction," to re-form perspective and language, and make people "once again whole, meaningful, new" (101). Binaries⁶ like "...near and far, then and now, here and there, the homely words of the lan-

⁶For Jacques Derrida, binary oppositions such as presence/absence, speech/writing, logos/mythos, literal/metaphorical, and central/marginal, that form the basis of Western philosophy, need to be deconstructed, but not in order to create a "monism" in which only the heretofore secondary term (absence, writing, mythos, metaphor, and the marginal) remains. Rather, deconstruction tries to show that the opposition is a metaphysical and ideological imposition, and one must try to expose the presuppositions that underlie it, as well as the metaphysical values invested in these oppositions. At the same time, it does not aim to simply neutralize the binary. Rather, its focus is on the act of exposing the constructed status of the binary. By questioning hierarchical oppositions, deconstruction also critiques supposedly scientific "metalanguages" (Culler 199). A metalanguage is a set of terms or concepts that is used to analyze a domain but is regarded as external to that domain, and therefore not affected by the objects it describes. One of the aims of deconstruction is to study how the supposedly external, and hence neutral, metalanguage is affected by the very phenomenon it is trying to structure.

guage of space and time” become useless, essentially causing an alienation of humans and language (14).

The night of the rain of the alphabet is described in detail in the novel (125–131). Mattina is woken up by the abrupt departure of the primitive breathing presence from her room, and hears horrifying wails, screams, and shrieks in a chorus of languages unheard of: a cacophonous and incomprehensible mixture of consonants and vowels. There is a shower of a mixture of clay, mud, feces, and bright flakes like diamonds, and this mixture falls in the shapes of punctuation marks, musical notes, and letters of the alphabet of all languages. The neighbors are outside their houses with confusion and hopeless anger written across their faces as they realize that their language has failed them (or, they have failed language). They stand rooted to their spots, their eyes shining like nocturnal animals. Like the Biblical flood, this deluge washes away the cumulative being of the whole street. Meanwhile, noises on other streets continue as if nothing has changed. But on Kowhai Street, Mattina witnesses the residents turning into primitive beings with their clothes shredded, unable to produce anything except basic speech sounds as if they have been forced to return to a pre-lingual stage in a sudden and cruel sleight of rain that glitters on the street and on roofs.⁷ However, this is the inaugural moment of the new paradigm and knowledge which is simultaneously, and paradoxically, ancient as well as utterly new. Even amid the primitive sounds that betray the futile attempts of the residents to communicate, Mattina detects “...a hint, an inkling of order, a small strain recognizable as music,” which is “...not a replacement of what had been lost” but a new language, and thus new concepts (126). Thus, language, being in language, and the order of the world are washed away (or deconstructed) through the Gravity Star’s effect but a new order has yet to come about. Only Dinny (the imposter) and Mattina (the foreigner) are spared this “disaster of unbeing, unknowing” (129). Mattina returns to the safety of her house after the affected have given up trying to make sense of the situation and returned to their houses, and finds a residual drop on her hand that looks like a “small cluster like a healed sore.”

⁷It can be extrapolated that the effects of the Gravity Star are also akin to those of the aftermath of chemical warfare, a holocaust, or the explosion of an atom bomb. As is often the case with new-age technology-driven genocides in the real world, there is mute agony, incomprehensible pain, efficient covering up by governmental agencies, and attempts to obliterate the memory of such an event in dominant historiography (here, among the other people in the town and the media). These aspects closely resemble the event described in the novel. However much the reader wishes to place faith in the record of the event from an ordinary witness, it must be kept in mind that her record is also greatly usurped by the various narrators. The very availability of the ‘truth’ of historical events is thus problematized.

She picks at it, and the scab crumbles. Upon examining it, she finds it is "...a pile of minute letters of the alphabet, some forming minute words, some as punctuation marks; and not all [are] English letters..." (129). She discovers that each speck which rained is a microcosm of all languages known to humans. However, instead of replenishing those that received it, it has washed away all traces of the alphabet from them. McHale terms such a literary motif the "cancelled character strategy" wherein "...narrated events...can be un-narrated...projected existents—locales, objects, characters, and so on—can have their existences revoked" (McHale 103).

The next morning, all those affected are removed in government vans quietly and efficiently; their possessions or physical traces (of memory) are erased as well. In this incident, the residents lose their language and thus their ability to remember themselves or cement their place in history. Their removal, spatially and historically, points to their existence only in language. The novel itself is ambiguous not only about what happened that altered reality, but also the exact nature of this alteration, suggesting that Mattina's inability to fully articulate it in adequate language is the same as the narrator's/author's.

Juxtaposed with the catastrophe of forgetting is the second fictive pole of the novel: the legend of the Memory Land, or "Maharawhenua." According to an ancient Maori legend (as presented in the novel), a young woman was chosen by divine beings to collect the memory of her land and rescue it from oblivion. She travelled its length and breadth in search of memory, amply aided by other creatures, nature, and people. Eventually, she picked and tasted a ripe fruit from a tree and thus released the memory that she had collected into the very air and nature of her land. This is a clear reversal of the Biblical myth of Eve tasting the fruit of knowledge and being banished from paradise. The woman of the Memory Legend is an exonerated and venerated Eve: "...where Eve tasted her and Adam's tomorrow, the woman of Maharawhenua tasted the yesterday within the tomorrow" (11). The woman became the wise storyteller of the land and turned the memories she had retrieved into stories that people listened to. One day, however, when they came to hear her, she had—in the manner of the mythic Daphne—vanished but in her place grew a tree with a single blossom. This blossom was named the Memory Flower.⁸ According to this legend, history is composed of memory and memory

⁸Mattina is similar to this woman from the legend. Mattina also gathers memories which she then "releases" to her husband and, subsequently, to her son. The woman in the legend disappears and a tree appears in her stead; Mattina's death is her disappearance, and instead of an eternal bloom, we have John Henry's immortal(izing) novel.

is a set of stories. A scientific discovery and a folkloric legend are *invented* to carry forward the narrative. These are not passive creations as part of the backdrop for the protagonists; rather, they actively and profoundly shape the characters and the plot. While the truth value of these constructs is to be taken for granted in the world of the novel, it provides the reader with three ontologically disparate worlds: Mattina's realist world of New York and Puamahara, the effects of the Gravity Star causing a collapse of binaries and human languages, and the hold of the legend of the memory flower (simultaneously perceived as gimmicky and profound)—pressing against each other and, as the novel progresses, interrupting each other as well. The co-existence of the ontological dominant through the metafictional mode and the different kinds of worlds juxtaposed and interrupting one another, and Mattina's epistemological quest for first-hand (and implicitly, for her, more reliable) knowledge and truth begs the question: is Mattina a postmodern character or a modern one caught in a postmodernist world? This paper argues that she is, indeed, anxious of her fate, her stories, and her quests, and thus betrays several anxieties when confronted with the postmodernist realities in her world.

A discussion of modernism that does justice to the literary period is beyond the scope of this paper. However, very briefly, postmodernism's concerns diverged greatly in some respects from modernism. The modernist literary imagination, seeking to provide structure to its fractured present,⁹ tended towards myths and traditions, while postmodernism's emphasis is on the notion of the construct of history and representation. While modernism sought to find new ways of representing reality in art, postmodernism claimed that there is no such reality that lies beyond representation itself. Modernism remains true to the finished art object, and does not put on display the artifice or the construction of art. Postmodernism, on the other hand, highlights the motivations underlying the status of an object and the modes of construction of the art object. While modernism is deeply disappointed with the real world and sees art as the source of civilizational salvation, postmodernism deliberates over the specific (cultural, social, political) contexts that make societies accept an object as art. Moreover, postmodernism treats art and language as simply cultural and social constructs that must be treated with liberal amounts of suspicion.

⁹Peter Childs suggests that modernism "...tends to associate notions of the artist's freedom from realism, materialism, traditional genre and form, with notions of cultural apocalypse and disaster" (2). Frank Kermode also states that the moment of "crisis" and the constant "sense of an ending" are defining characteristics of modernism (93, 98).

In line with the “incredulity towards metanarratives” such as History, Science, Marxism and so on (as outlined by Lyotard), Linda Hutcheon states that postmodernists operate from a “decentered” perspective, which facilitates the existence of multiple truths, realities, and worlds. In effect, in the postmodernist ethos, “historical plurality replaces atemporal eternal essence” (58). Postmodernism also promotes the view that things lack inherent and overarching truth value that can be discovered by reaching back to some pristine origins. Truth, in fact, could be defined as whatever satisfies the rules of the discourse. Therefore, truths are plural, relative, transient, and only contextually relevant. Hutcheon states that there is no “transcendental, timeless meaning” out there (19). And yet, *Mattina* is precisely on the path to try and discover the truth of other people and places, to know these and record them.

The ontological dominant expects the readers to think of fiction as being beyond questions of true and false. Through the “ontological perspective,” readers see fictional worlds capable of violating the rules of logic. Characters and events can be outrageously transformed in an ontologically pluralist world. Positions become relative and unstable. The boundaries of fiction and the real world are rendered porous, and boundaries between the various kinds of fictional worlds (fantastical, real, historical) erode as they are nestled within one text. It is not uncommon to find these varied worlds intruding into the worlds of other texts. Both the matter and manner of construction are interrogated, and postmodernist novels lead us to question the nature of representation outside the world of the novel as well. Therefore, in a truly ontological imagination even social reality is seen as a loosely held collection of sub-universes of meanings, positions, roles, and discourses. Inevitably, the overtly constructed nature of fictional worlds leads us to question the construction of the “real” world as well (McHale 90). The germane inquiry is not whether truth obtains, but how truth is made, and for whom it is true.

In such a destabilized postmodernist world, the protagonist is on the modernist-epistemological quest to *know*, not *be*. At one point, *Mattina* bemoans that the people of Puamahara are “...stick figures, accepting as truth an habitual arrangement of words” (48). *Mattina*, thus, appears to believe that reality and truth somehow exist outside of language, and must be more than simply an arrangement of words. She also believes that she was spared the horrible fate the night of the Gravity Star because “...she had removed herself, her real being, to New York City, that is, to Memory,” and decides that in order for people to beat death “they must remain within the Memory Flower” (Frame 151). As a celebration of the privilege of memory, the novel, in

a long flashback, takes the readers through Mattina's life leading up to the moment of her arrival in Puamahara. However, while Mattina realizes that this power of memory is lost to those who experienced the deluge and the loss of language, even this epiphany is half-hearted and futile. While the novel emphasizes the role of language as the home of memory (exemplified in the expunging of those that are robbed of language and therefore have no space in public memory), she is unable to accept her own ephemerality and existence in language. All her life, she has desired to witness and gather the "real essence" of things and beings, and to discover the core of language and memory (Zoppi 162). She accepts that "...most of her life had been spent on the trail of *really* and its parent noun" evidently without much success (Frame 48). Like a turn-of-the-century anthropologist, she wants to examine, interview, observe, record, and understand the people she meets on her voyages. From these, she wishes to build up a conclusive story. Moreover, she believes that she is well equipped to deal with the world as it has been presented to her given her status in society, wealth, and most of all, her access to knowledge, art, and language.

An urgency within her demanded that she 'know' how the rest of the world lived, how they felt, and behaved, what they said to one another, what they rejoiced in, despaired of, and dreamed about; and so whenever she travelled, she sought the company of the 'natives', listened to their stories...and often, recklessly, felt the satisfaction of giving cheques towards needs that could not recognise or be fed by money. (Frame 19)

However, when faced with the unprecedented and the extraordinary, Mattina's knowledge of both the legend and the scientific discovery fails her. The primitive animal-ish presence in her room is beyond her linguistic limits, as is the new world (dis)order that the Gravity Star causes. When she returns to New York, she finds herself terribly unsure of how to articulate what really happened—not only because memory is fickle but also because the reality of that night is inexplicable in familiar idiom. Mattina is aware that her story is already lost on the night of the rain of alphabets. She says to herself: "If I were writing this story...the words might have begun already to burn, and though still legible they would sink into the flames as if they desired their own oblivion" (125). She is, therefore, a protagonist on a quest to know, but caught in a postmodernist world where several worlds and narrators jostle and interrupt each other, and where failed language implies an absence of memory and being. She is thwarted in her well-meaning attempts to know the "real" at every step—by the imposter novelist Dinny Wheatstone usurping her voice and supplanting her experience, by her death (i.e. surrendering her point of view), and finally

by her own fictional status, as exposed in the preface and postscript by another fictional character, John Henry.

Janet Frame's *The Carpathians*, is therefore, an exemplar of several postmodernist modes of fiction, most significantly of metafiction. It uses competing and interrupting narrators and narrative levels to tell the story of the protagonist who fails in her quest to know, record, and articulate the observed truth. This fictional world is full of authors but also characters anxious about their existence and about being remembered. Characters are rendered as traces in language, and a catastrophic event serves to show that once people are robbed of language, they have no presence. The Memory Flower, a legend, suggests that memory itself lives only in stories, and thus in language. In highlighting the role of narratives and language, and in the unreliability of truth and points of view, the novel revels in the postmodernist dismantling of the distinction between reality and language, and also suggests the futility of the quest to *know*, rather than *be*.



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