

Janet Frame Memorial Lecture, 2008

reflections on New Zealand arts and letters
dedicated to the memory of Robin Dudding

The past

There's a Maori proverb which translates as: 'Go back to the past and walk into the future'—a useful piece of advice for writers, as well as for people generally. In a literary world which at times seems driven by marketing departments, the past is a good place to go to for direction, energy and a sense of perspective. The past is so much bigger than the present for a start, as poet Joseph Brodsky used to say, and is 'the source of standards, higher standards than the present affords. One should write to please not one's contemporaries but one's predecessors.'

I remember the Auckland University Press pre-Christmas drinks, 1984, when the press's editor Dennis McEldowney introduced me to fiction-writer Roderick Finlayson—I recall the great humility of him—the poet Kendrick Smithyman—a fizzing fusebox of a man, filled to the brim with history and literature—the high and certainly very mighty Allen Curnow, and the man whom Maurice Shadbolt described as New Zealand's 'most imaginative and sensitive essayist', Eric McCormick. *Islands* editor Robin Dudding I met a few months later and, before I knew it, was being regularly thrashed on the table tennis table of his Torbay living room--another necessary part of a literary education at that time.

As a writer, it is a great, empowering thing to have a thriving tradition behind you, and, for me, aged 23, this roomful of characters provided that. Aspiring writers, like Catholic youngsters, need what the Jesuits used to call some kind of 'formation'—the quality of the soil in which their roots are embedded determining, to a large extent, what comes after. A few years later, working with photographer Robert Cross on a book of profiles of writers, *Moments of Invention*, I travelled around the country, visiting writers including Karl Stead, Janet Frame, Keri Hulme at Okarito, Witi Ihimaera (temporarily back from New York), Fiona Kidman, Patricia Grace, Hone Tuwhare and Margaret Mahy.

Ezra Pound once said to the young critic Hugh Kenner, ‘You have an obligation to visit the great men [and women] of your own time.’ Those years of being youngish and very curious were, for me, the beginning of a dialogue with the past which is something I think all serious writers are involved in. I never thought of those authors as the Establishment—they were living ingredients that Literature had passed down to my generation. ‘You invent your own ancestors,’ poet Jonathan Williams used to say—and so I found mine, in the world and on the page.

It must have been Eric McCormick who first encouraged me to explore the permeable border between literature and art—the title of his 1940 study *Letters and Art in New Zealand* hit a resonant note, as did Robin Dudding’s journal *Islands*, with its subtitle *Arts and Letters*. In July 1988, Eric McCormick, then in his eighties, invited Chrissy Hemming from AUP and me out to his house in the West Auckland suburb of Green Bay, where we sat in the sunroom while his sister Myra made pots of tea, and Eric carried in boxes of books from his library, encouraging us to take all the titles we would like to keep. Such quiet generosity strikes me as a physical embodiment of a process of handing down and continuity--another kind of literary inheritance.

For better and for worse, New Zealand literature has changed hugely over the past 20 years. These days what once was a small shop has become a bigger one, and rather than being the ‘closed shop’ it might have appeared from some angles, it now tends to be open all hours. Less happily, our notion of ‘literature’ and ‘the literary’ is these days in danger of being swamped by an attitude to writing—and to creativity generally—which equates it increasingly with the marketplace. I would assert that literature, in its truest, purest sense, cannot and should not be thought of as a marketplace—even if it does almost invariably have to leave home and go off to market, hopefully to contribute something to the upkeep of its maker.

If literature is not a marketplace, then what is it? you might ask. Literature, from my vantage point, is a laboratory in which language and life are processed—and another key element in this laboratory is a notion of literary tradition--tradition being the past in its most vital manifestation--an energy pushing us towards the future. When I began as a writer I was aware of those generations

of New Zealand writers looking over my shoulder—the same way I find myself imagining Eliot and Curnow peering over C. K. Stead’s shoulder as he sits at his desk writing; the same way Horace and Neruda hover over Ian Wedde; and the benevolent spirits of Tuwhare and Baxter linger in Glenn Colquhoun’s workroom, probably giving him little rest. Similarly, Robin Hyde and Ursula Bethell watch over Michele Leggott and Bernadette Hall... As the Maori proverb suggests, we should look to the past, readers and writers alike—and, in doing so, we soon discover that the past is, the whole time, looking back at us.

What I saw in McCormick, Finlayson and the others was independence, idealism and tenacity. Writing, for them, was a manner of being, of seeing and of—to use a Janet Frame word—*giving*. Of course they could all, at times, be argumentative, cross and competitive. Those pioneering generations of writers may have been idealists, but let’s not idealise them all too much. My favourite story about the wise, humble McCormick is one Iain Sharp told me, which dated back to the mid-1980s, when Sharp was secretary of the Auckland branch of the writers’ organisation PEN. He recalled one PEN meeting ‘when Stead, Sinclair and Shadbolt were all going at one another hammer and tongs in Alpha male ego mode over some funding issue or other. Eric piped up with the comment, "What we must not lose sight of is that we're a crowd of mediocrities. I do not exclude myself."’

While, for a brief moment in the 1980s literature was in danger of being swamped with academic theory, these days it is far more likely to be devoured by bureaucratic and commercial jargon. I’m told that, Creative New Zealand grants to writers are now being referred to as strategic investments. In the present era, we visit the most toxic bureaucratic language upon all of the arts—shovel-loads of radioactive, poisonous muck—and then expect them to grow. Writers are the custodians of language so they have every right to be furious about this. Literature does not revolve around the kind of flashy ‘innovation’ touted by commercial and funding agencies. That said, true art must keep moving into new territory, but its most radical ploys are those most deeply rooted in its language, its tradition—‘renovation’ is a better word than ‘innovation’, although not so sexy.

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The good news is that literature as a process of thought rather than a commodity is alive and well, even if its best manifestations have a habit of going under the career-fixated, success-driven, prize-giving apparatus of the art-as-business brigade. There are writers out there on what the German poet Holderlin would have described admiringly as their own ‘eccentric orbits’ (a genuine astronomical term, I’m told).

Poetry is definitely the point at which literature is most overtly and visibly a laboratory— real poetry that is, with ‘its thrills and flushes and pangs’. This is played out in recent collections such as Anna Jackson’s expressionistic bricolage *The gas leak*, Amy Brown’s *The Propaganda Poster Girl* and in the dazzling yet dirge-like verse of Geoff Cochrane. I’m also thinking of the dramatic monologues of Tusiata Avia and Jo Randerson; and the atomised verbal structures of Kate Camp, James McNaughton, Janis Freegard, Airini Beauvais, Cliff Fell, Michele Amas and other newer writers, all of whom seem to have happily adopted Cilla McQueen’s maxim that writing should aim at ‘kicking the habit of 100 per cent corrected vision’.

In a world of speedier entertainments and cheaper thrills, you might wonder what poetry’s chances of survival are like. I’m pleased to report there is cause for optimism. The best younger poets manifest an abundant curiosity, self awareness and an alertness to the music and craft of what they do. Andrew Johnston’s 2007 collection *Sol*, plays out the ancient description of poetic craft as a means of ‘getting all of the wine into the bowl’—the richness of life contained in poetic form. So do recent books by the senior yet, at their best, ever-youthful O’Sullivan, Smither, Manhire, Turner, Stead, Michael Harlow and Bernadette Hall.

Poetry is more mobile than prose so it migrates far more easily into the air- and ground-space of other art forms. It can be set to music—remember the Tuwhare and Baxter anthologies in song which did the festival circuit in recent years. I hope Nigel Beckford and rock band The Inhalers are still performing their blistering pop interpretation of the classic R. A. K. Mason poem, ‘Our love was a grim citadel’. Poetry has certainly colonised this country’s paintings—Ralph Hotere’s assimilation of Bill Manhire’s poetry being a notable instance. More recently John Reynolds has spun hundreds of phrases by Anne Kennedy along a gallery wall and subsequently across dozens of pages of a book entitled *Certain*

Words Drawn. Narrative poems and oral histories thread their way through John Pule's taipo-inspired canvases and drawings. Dinah Hawken recently completed a suite of poems to accompany the New Zealand String Quartet's performance of Haydn's *Seven Last Words of Christ*, scheduled for Easter 2009... Poetry on buses. Poetry on the waterfront. Poetry on the pavement. On it goes.

Poetry is able to keep some distance from the marketplace because no one ever really expects it be saleable produce. Its inwardness and prevalent melancholy probably don't advance its sale-ability. Yet, even if you think that poetry is, at heart, a melancholic art, enthusiasm and euphoria are surprisingly major ingredients in recent New Zealand verse.

'An enthusiast,' wrote poet Jonathan Williams, is 'one who is possessed by a god. James Brown, in *Year of the Bicycle*, is possessed by the great god of cycling—his book is a hymn in praise of peddling off and on the roads. Just as ecstatic are Emily Dobson's musings on apiary in *A box of bees* and the agitated girl power of Jo Aitchison's *A long girl ago*. Ian Wedde has lately returned to writing odes, singing songs in praise of dogs, Mount Victoria, the neighbourhood, ever the fortunate man who 'Free from cares on cool mornings / Praises the commonplace world'. The modern world is, against the odds, shaping up as a grand laboratory of exhilarating poetic possibilities (and so is Antarctic history if you're Chris Orsman, or memories of 1950s Wellington if you're Alistair Campbell).

The most laboratory-like of recent collections, Charlotte Simmonds' *The World's Fastest Flower* indulges the kind of artistic disorientation Mallarme would have adored. As inquiring of the world as they are of their language, these are poems in which 'two strands of DNA have never looked so in love'. In the hopeless details of the hopeless lives of the young, there is hope—or so Simmonds' poems would have us believe.

One of the most intellectually charged recent poetry publications is Sam Sampson's *Everything Talks*, hot off the press. On the back cover blurb, Waitakere City Mayor Bob Harvey, heralds Sam as 'a son of the west', his work 'imbued with the salt air of the roaring Tasman Sea and the mists of the Waitakere Ranges'. If this book is anything to go by, then maybe West Auckland is set to become a civically sanctioned city-sized laboratory of experimental writing.

Before we know it, poetry laboratories will be replacing P-Labs around the outskirts, all of them part of that grand laboratory that is New Zealand Literature.

Arts, letters and non-non-fiction

Back in 1987, while I was interviewing the poet Lauris Edmond for *Moments of Invention*, Lauris told me in no uncertain terms that poetry and art were separate and distinct things. And, very particularly, she said the visual arts were not a topic for poetry because they constituted, in her words, ‘secondary forms of experience’ and poetry needed to arise from ‘primary experience’. Poetry had to go directly to life itself, and one’s experience of an art work could, she believed, never be more than ‘an experience of someone else’s experience’.

I was bothered for years by this remark. It seemed to me that if we were to purge poetry of its occasional reliance on, or interface with, visual arts wouldn’t we lose some very great poems, among them W. H. Auden’s ‘Musee des Beaux Arts’ (inspired by Brueghel’s *Fall of Icarus*), Wallace Stevens’ ‘The man with the blue guitar’ and Bill Manhire’s ‘Picnic at Woodhaugh’, for a start. For better or worse, I have spent most of the last twenty years happily sitting on the fence between visual arts and writing, trying to keep up with the traffic both ways.

As an art-writer, I certainly took my cue from Charles Baudelaire, who wrote in his review of the 1846 Paris Salon: ‘the best criticism is that which is amusing and poetic, not that cold and algebraic kind which, under the pretext of explaining everything, displays neither love nor hate... Thus the best account of a painting can well be a sonnet or an elegy.’ If art writing in this country ran into the doldrums in the 1980s and early 90s, over the past decade it has bounced back with Justin Paton and the poet-critics Ian Wedde and David Eggleton rating particularly honourable mentions. The recent return of the great and very grumpy Hamish Keith has been a timely blast from the past. But why isn’t Gordon H. Brown a part of the present art-publishing boom?

A counterbalance to the art historicising inclinations of the hefty art survey, the Sally Blundell-edited *Look This Way, NZ writers on NZ artists* is a multi-faceted gem of a book and nicely in accord with Jorge Luis Borges’ prescription that creativity, in whatever medium, should embody ‘the active aesthetics of the prism’ rather than ‘the passive aesthetics of the mirror’.

Not only can literature engage with the visual arts, it can also relate to music in a primary and very searching manner. Rock on, in this respect, Grant Smithies in *Soundtrack*, a plugged-in and personal exploration of New Zealand rock music. Smithies' book is also an example of what Susan Sontag called 'that exemplary instrument in the career of consciousness, the writer's journal'. Smithies offers a portrait of a nation which is also a self portrait.

The film-maker Andrey Tarkovsky has written of the writer's journal as essentially a 'laboratory' in which ideas and observations are processed. Tarkovsky stressed how, as a reader, he was 'strongly affected by diaries and archives and "laboratories" of every kind.' Diaries, archives, laboratories—some of the best recent writing in this country has fitted that description.

The judges of this year's Montana New Zealand Book Awards commented on the lack of experimentalism in the fiction submitted, suggesting that possibly some the restlessness, imagination and energy usually found in fiction might, in recent years, have migrated to the non-fiction sector. Recent prose works by Anna Sanderson, Chris Price and Martin Edmond step gingerly over the boundary between fiction, non-fiction, memoir and poetry. So too does Stephanie de Montalk's masterpiece of personal essay-writing, *Unquiet World* (2001)—a book which appeared in Polish translation and was subsequently made into a Polish television documentary--but met, inexplicably, with a sleepy almost-silence at home.

Creative non-fiction is one label for this kind of writing, although I would propose another term: non-non-fiction. We are talking here about writing that is essayistic, that maintains some kind of hold on the objective world, but which is intensely subjective by design—these books offer a viewpoint which is partial, provisional, sometimes improvisatory and elliptical, often playful or poetic, and occasionally fantastical.

Martin Edmond's two remarkable books of the early 1990s, *The Autobiography of my Father* and *The Resurrection of Philip Clairmont* were a loosening up of the national non-fiction mode, a broadening of that particular horizon. Lloyd Jones's controversial *Biografi* was another, albeit more problematic, incursion into the

territory of non-non-fiction. Later in that decade, the series of Four Winds Press essay-books (produced and edited by Lloyd Jones) dispelled the myth that the essay form, for some obscure reason, did not suit the New Zealand temperament.

These recent publications have often mixed up genres—history, art history, cultural studies, science, autobiography. They sit on a great many fences and ask that we, the readers, sit there as well. If you hold with the traditional national self-image, then New Zealanders prefer their literature, as they do their lives, straightforward and to the point, tidily packaged, with neatly cropped edges, recognisable and relatable. We also like things to be divided up: Old and New, North and South, Us and Them, Ladies a Plate, Men a Crate... There has been a national propensity to shy away from that which is complex and layered—and this probably accounts, in part, for the predominance of realism in our literary past. Yet Realism has always struck me as a problematic term. I'm reminded of my son Jack-Marcel's comments, at age ten, after attending the birth of his baby sister. 'The amazing thing,' he said, 'was it was so *realistic*.'

Realism, a provisional term at best, must expand to encompass the many realities of life in the contemporary world. Bringing a myriad of viewpoints with it, the memoir, the literary recreation of a life, has been having a heyday of late—from Dennis McEldowney's quietly voiced books to the obstreperous Jacqui Fahey's *Something for the birds* to Craig Sherbourne's *Muck*—a book which exceeds even the high expectations of its title. Dinah Hawken's mix of diary extracts and poetry, *One shapely thing* presents another kind of non-non-fiction, as does Richard Von Sturmer's collection of Zen poetry and prose *Suchness*, a book of almost hallucinogenic clarity. Fiona Farrell's *The Pop-up Book of Invasions* enlists poetry to carry the usual burdens and exhilarations of memoir, travel and history writing.

If Borges is at all right in saying that 'the dead become their books' then not only are the late Nigel Cox's novels standing their author in good stead, but the posthumous essay collection *Phone Home Berlin* tells us that Nigel, in the afterlife, is in rude, boisterous, eloquent good health. Among other notable instances of literary non-fiction are Geoff Park's eco-literary peregrinations, choreographer Douglas Wright's two essay-memoirs; and, in a country where sporting prowess far exceeds our ability to write

about sport, at least we have Harry Rickett's instant classic, *How to catch a game of cricket*.

If you are internet-compatible, then you can follow the non-fiction trail in the direction of the blogs of Martin Edmond, Paula Morris, Rachael King and others. But if, like me, you prefer to remain in the book-realm, you'll find Karl Stead offering a rambling blog-like first person entertainment in his splendid collection of essays *Book Self*.

All of the books I have just mentioned suggest that the world can still be a surprising place—as real or as unreal as we deem it to be—and that our ideas about New Zealand aren't set in concrete. I write in praise of such inspired irregularity, insecurity and unpredictability—virtues not much valued by the marketplace but at the heart of the literary laboratory.

The present

New Zealand Literature craves an intelligent critical environment far more than it craves a Montana book award. Literature, without a responsive critical climate, is like rugby without a referee. That said, we don't want the critics and historians to be too intrusive and meddling—or we may well end up as frustrated as the narrator in Hinemoana Baker's poem 'referee', which I quote here in full:

he needs to let the game go
he needs to go back to Townsville
he needs to know we didn't drive seven hours
to listen to him play his whistle

With a minimum of whistle blowing, referee-critics should make the game flow, and maybe wind the players up a bit, send them off if necessary, or bring them back on. They should be heeded and, of course, they should be ignored. Prolific abuse should be coming at them from the sidelines at every stage of proceedings.

Am I alone in wondering if we are presently witnessing a collapse in literary criticism in this country, at least as it is presented in the popular press. The *Dominion* has nose-dived after two decades of being the benchmark. The other papers are embarrassing. After an inspired decade under the editorship of Chris Price and then Justin Paton, *Landfall* is now sporadic in its attentions; *New Zealand Books* is worthwhile but not enough; the *Listener* is sometimes good. It is a lukewarm critical climate, to say the best of it.

Looking back to mid-late 1980s, it seemed to me there was a sense of palpable enthusiasm and excitement *around* as well as within the world of arts and letters. Oxford University Press and Penguin New Zealand were producing anthologies. *Landfall* reviewed just about everything worth reviewing. Arguments were being formed. Mark Williams's brilliant study of the novel, *Leaving the Highway* appeared; so did Patrick Evans's crotchety history of New Zealand literature. It felt to me like a deliciously overheated discussion—and something worth paying attention to.

Anything resembling intelligent discussion appears to have quietened down since then—or am I just, in hindsight, just ascribing some of my own youthful enthusiasm back in the 1980s

to the culture at large at that time. I probably need to remind myself, as well as you, that the 1980s were a time when I was so excited the day I bought Ian Wedde's *Earthly* that I had the book open and wedged on the petrol tank of my motorcycle as I rode across town, pulling over from time to time to read a sonnet.

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Much is made, in the current arts and literature climate, of 'excellence'—but what are we talking about here? Is excellence always immediate and apparent? Isn't there a propensity, at the present time, to equate excellence with palpable success, prizes, 'strategic outcomes' – yet isn't literature something which, by definition, exists beyond those objectives. As Robert Duncan wrote, literature is 'an adventure not an achievement'. We should beware 'the triumphant mediocrity' J. C. Reid once observed in New Zealand cultural life.

Brilliant failures are more desirable than sedate successes. Far better that writers aim for largeness of vision, dynamism and risk, and then fall short, rather than adhering to some prevailing, complacent notion of excellence. Baxter's late poetry is a great example of a writer pulling back from achieved and recognised excellence, pushing poetry into rough, uncharted territory. His greatest poems are, you could argue, his least excellent ones. There's something virtuous about failure anyway, as George Oppen points out: 'the idea of being hovers over the face of failure... hovers more clearly over the face of failure than over the brilliance of success'. Most of Frame's oeuvre is flawed and unsatisfactory when judged within conservative definitions of the novel or poem—but therein lies its magnificence. The argument continues to this day whether *the bone people* is a novel par excellence or a dog's breakfast. David Beach's poetry isn't 100% satisfactory as poetry, yet his syllabics and sonneting confounds reading his books purely as prose—out of this emerges a particular flavour, an elusive nature, *character* in the deepest sense. The same could be said of Hone Tuwhare's poetry—and long may all of this continue.

Maybe we should bear in mind painter Jean Dubuffet's assertion that 'art never thrives except under a cloud. With recognition and honours it vanishes and is replaced by a fake.' I guess that makes it pretty hard for Lloyd Jones, after the mega-success of *Mr Pip*—

certainly the most celebrated novel since *the bone people*, and part of a burgeoning fiction scene which includes, alongside the genre's elder statespersons, writers like Charlotte Grimshaw, Emily Perkins, Laurence Fearnley, Tim Corballis and Sue Orr, to name a few. The novel I am currently reading, Eleanor Catton's *The Rehearsal* is like a bolt of lightning hitting a rattly old shack—a sassy, outrageously brilliant book. My only worry about the book is that it commits the cardinal sin, in this bipolar, Manichean land, of being simultaneously intellectual and emotional. As if we're going to let her get away with that!

Let's not forget the energy that also exists in writing for children and young people. When Robert Cross and I put together *Moments of Invention* back in 1987, there were a few eyebrows lifted at the inclusion of Margaret Mahy, on account of the fact she wrote for children. In the 20 years since then, there has been significant change for the better. Deserved recognition and respect is now afforded writers for children and young adults, such as Mahy, Joy Cowley, Jack Lasenby, Tessa Duder, Kate di Goldi, Paula Boock, Penelope Todd and many others. Elizabeth Knox's *Dreamhunter* and *Dreamquake* have been instrumental in blurring the boundary between adult and young adult literature, increasing the catchment of both. Dylan Horrock's graphic novel *Hicksville* has brilliantly led a good many novel-reading grown-ups like myself back into the delicious, dreamy realm of comics.

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If writers are nourished, challenged and shaped by the past, then it's also true that, as readers, our reading is enriched by the past. Ian Wedde's 21st century interpolation into the classic New Zealand landscape, *The Viewing Platform*, is an echo chamber of local and imported texts. In the midst of it all, I discern the shadowy form of John Mulgan's *Man Alone*--only in this case the singular male has been replaced by a tour bus filled with tourism professionals. (From another angle, Lewis Carroll's 'The Hunting of the Snark' might reside somewhere in the belly of Wedde's very hungry book.) Robert Sullivan's *Star Waka* is enhanced if you know Curnow's 'Landfall in Unknown Seas' or if you've ever dipped into the history of paddling and sailing in Western literature—from Homer to Wordsworth and Coleridge to Hopkins and D'Arcy Cresswell's 'The Voyage of the Hurinui' then onwards to Bob Orr and the sculptor-poet Denis O'Connor.

The present owes a lot to the past and the appearance of a marvellous array of biographies in recent years has enriched and consolidated the thriving tradition we are all heir to. I'm thinking of Philip Norman's *Douglas Lilburn* and Jill Trevelyan's breezy yet deeply wrought *Rita Angus; an artist's life*; Michael King's lives of Sargeson and then Frame, Roger Horrock's great life of Len Lye, Ian Richard's under-rated Maurice Duggan, O'Sullivan's Mulgan, Barrowman's Mason, to name only some of them. Taking an entirely different tack, Michele Leggott's *Dia*, Jo Thorpe's *Len* and Paula Green's *Making Lists for Frances Hodgkins* embody a different manner of reinhabiting and reconstituting the past, bringing it into the present as an act of love and homage—something poetry is particularly suited to.

Unpublishing

Having questioned the commodity culture at the outset of this lecture, I have inadvertently commended to you a great many buyable things. Next, I would like you to consider for a moment, the business of *unpublishing*—the great gaps, silences and absences in New Zealand book production which, I believe, also tell us something about the nature of creativity.

Let's ponder for a moment the case of Janet Frame. After the appearance of *The Carpathians* in 1989, nothing new appeared from her during her life. Did she stop being a writer; did she retire from the laboratory of New Zealand arts and letters? Firstly, let's consider Frame's perception of her own work. She referred to all of her books as 'explorations... One day I hope to write *a novel*. One day I would like to write *a poem*'. Here she was stating her allegiance to the vocation of being a writer, rather than the career of being an author.

As Roland Barthes, in a rare lucid moment, wrote: 'The author performs a function, the writer an activity,' and while literature is 'the body of the projects and decisions which lead a man to fulfil himself in language alone; an author is a man who wants to be an author.' I would suggest that after *The Carpathians* she retired from the role of author, but remained a writer.

She was 65 at the time so she had every right to retire. That said, she did have a number of books more-or-less completed at the time. One morning in 2002 I visited Janet Frame and we talked about a book of poems which various publishers had been trying to wrestle from her. She showed me a manuscript which she had completed but wouldn't let go. She said it was a very North American book in which there was an unusually large quantity of ice—and it was a different kind of ice and a different kind of coldness to that experienced by New Zealanders. Accordingly, she was keeping it to herself.—we wouldn't be getting it.

Regarding another book finished by that time, the posthumously published novel, *Towards Another Summer*, she is quoted as saying that she didn't want the book to appear during her lifetime because it might upset some of the characters in it, people still alive.

I think Janet Frame was not quite telling the truth in these two instances—that of the wintry poetry book and the summery novel. She was making up excuses so that she would not have to enter the publishing mill again. Earlier in her life, publishing books had been a necessity. But, at this point she didn't need to produce new books to make a living—and publication had ceased to matter to her. She had always wanted the books to lead her public life for her—which they did to some degree, but never entirely. Tellingly, there is a passage in *Towards Another Summer* where she writes of the trauma of being a published author:

Being a writer, and returning home tired after every venture, you are so surprised to find on yourself a slowly spreading stain of publisher, critic, agent. You turn in panic to the household hints in Pears Cyclopaedia; running your finger down the list of stains—acid, blacklead, blood, candle grease, green ink, marking ink, Indian ink, nailpolish, nicotine rust scorch sealing wax... Then you realise there's nothing, you can neither identify the stain nor remove it. Feeling resigned, depressed, you set out on your new venture...

It all comes back to writing itself. Writing, of course, is the great subject of Janet Frame's writing—and it was the process, the venture, rather than the product that mattered most.

Where did her book of icy poems end up? I was re-reading *The Goose Bath* last Thursday and it dawned on me that a good number of them found their way into the ice- and snow-encrusted Section IV of that book. Janet's niece Pamela Gordon assures me none of the poems met the same fate as another book Janet spoke to me about, her novel set in Menton—published, indeed it was, but only as smoke in the icy blue sky above late morning St Kilda, Dunedin.

The inwardness of Frame's silence is in direct opposition to the noise and display of the arts marketplace with its huge lust for outcomes and strategic objectives. But what of all the other silences, the other instances of *unpublishing*—most notably Keri Hulme's silence as a novelist since *the bone people* appeared in 1984. We should respect her silence (and in Keri's case, savour her output as poet and story writer). Silence is as important as noise and as intrinsic to the literary life: Allen Curnow had a famous 12 year 'silence' between 1960 and 1972—although you could argue that was just a sensible gap between books, and time for some artistic regrouping. With writers at the present time having careers in the literary marketplace, there is a grim imperative to produce a

stream of books, of consumables. In a world of stellar career trajectories, I return to the words of John Ruskin: 'It does a bullet no good to go fast; and a man, if he be truly a man, no harm to go slow; for his glory is not at all in going, but in being.'

But lest I be seen to be favouring quietism and literary seclusion, I also write here in praise of noise, or at least the joyous music of great writing. James K. Baxter was never silent during his life and, much to our good fortune, hasn't been in the afterlife. Over a dozen slim volumes, selections and collections have appeared since his death in 1972, not to mention two biographies and various recordings and television documentaries. Between the outwardness of Baxter and Frame's very productive inwardness, we have a yardstick for all subsequent writers in this country. In their different ways they underline the fact that literature is neither a job nor a profession -- it is an all-encompassing vocation. Being a writer is having a vision, then stepping into that vision and living there.

The future

Having drawn up some laboratory-like architecture in which to house this country's creative writing, I will conclude by proposing, for future generations, that New Zealand Literature should also remain our shack, our bach, our retreat in the midst of things, our lean-to—structures, all of them, that are provisional, incomplete, in a state of constant adjustment. New Zealand Literature might also be our marae, our camping ground, our pup-tent in the bush or our overnight accommodation on the edge of town, as in Geoff Cochrane's poem, 'Motel':

The blue lights of the Airport Motor Lodge:
they cobalt me; they penetrate and stain;
they send me, yes, and bring me back again.

However, New Zealand Literature will never be our beachfront mansion nor our condominium, as long as enough of us care about it. Let's allow Literature its humble, anarchic, independent life, and its very real relationship to the place in which it is made. Let's not be *developers* in the worst sense of the word. Let's ignore the Stalinist imperatives of governmental or commercial interests-- literature will never be our shopping mall or multiplex. Let's bear in mind the words of Tarkovsky: 'Art was always man's weapon against the material things which threatened to devour his spirit.' This is a far cry from recent governmental pronouncements that would have us believe that the what New Zealand Arts and Letters needs most is 'strong creative industries which provide rewarding employment, opportunities for creative entrepreneurs, and good economic returns'.

While denying that literature can ever be a marketplace, I hasten to add that we should love, respect and cherish booksellers, particularly the independent ones—they remind me of windsurfers wending their way between the steely corporate hulls. (The same could be said of independent publishers.) We need booksellers as they need us, but let us not talk about books as saleable units. Book chains would love us all to be buying the same book or one of a very small number of books—hence their enthusiasm for book awards, top 20 lists, anything that narrows the field, making their job and that of their distributors easier. We should look far wider. In Book Month, let's also acknowledge and celebrate the other outlets: the second hand bookstores, remainder tables, Salvation

Army shops, not to mention the public and school libraries—all part of the reading universe. Let's acknowledge the dusty bookshelves in baches and in the spare bedrooms of grandmothers. In these dimly lit places, we find a particularly rich seam of the marvellous, transformative literary past awaits us.

Varioussness is New Zealand literature's greatest virtue, even if it does bring with it some degree of quarrelling over what direction the cart should be pointed. Those who have committed to this strange, impractical vocation constitute something of a family—hence the tiffs and patch-ups, the sibling rivalry and the teenaged rebellion which are all part of family life.' Literature is not a track event. Everyone is not running in the same direction—nor should they be. If literature is a race then it is one where, when the starting gun is fired, the participants run off each in their own direction. It is only arts funders and prize-givers who line writers up on some invented racetrack, facing the same ribbon.

I have already mentioned many remarkable books that never quite made the splash they deserved in this country—to which I'll add: Peter Whiteford's selection of Mary Ursula Bethell's letters, *Vibrant with words*, a powerhouse of a book which should be required reading for anyone interested in 'arts and letters'. A bigger splash I'd also bestow upon Damien Wilkins' crisp, incisive, and very accessible stories in *For everyone concerned*; the melding of poetry and art in Cilla McQueen's *Axis*, Claire Beynon's *Open Book* and Tom Weston's poetry collection *Naming the Mind like Trees*, illustrated by Joanna Braithwaite... Ian Wedde's *The Commonplace Odes* is the kind of book that makes you feel fortunate to be alive at a particular time in a particular place. And the publication day of Bill Manhire's *Collected Poems* in 2001 should have been declared a national holiday.

Critical silence or a mumbled non-reception shouldn't be given the same respect I have, earlier in this lecture, given to the silence of writers like Janet Frame. Don't believe the silence that sometimes surrounds the most remarkable books of an era. Don't expect that great ineffable thing, Literature, to always offer itself readily. Like writers, readers have to keep looking in all directions. We should all collectively obey the road-sign outside the Shelly Bay military base on the far side of Evan's Bay, instructing us DO NOT STOP. That sign appears in Lauris Edmond's poem 'Not Far', which ends

with the stern directive, KEEP MOVING. Good advice for all of us.

Literature does not arrive at a state of excellence and then retire. It struggles and adjusts and heads off, yet again, into the dark. Great writing needs to be—and here I will invoke Janet Frame—obsessive, restless, dissatisfied, argumentative, uncompromising with equal parts self-assurance and self-doubt. We need to be, as Eric McCormick would say, ‘absurdly ambitious’.

When you think about it, the books we read and write won’t be around forever—although the good ones will last a lot longer than the Book Month that’s coming up. In 1200 or, maybe, 12 million years no one will have heard of any of us. There will come a time when not one word anyone here today has written will survive. Yet I don’t find this a depressing thought. Literature was never about producing and selling books, nor is it about immortality—it is, at heart, about the handing down of an attitude, an energy which links the past with the future. Writers—and readers too—are charged with the task of keeping a flow of energy and intelligence running through a community, a culture, a world. What will have mattered, in the end, is that we kept this pulse alive and moving—this tremor at the very heart of human life.

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I return to Eric McCormick’s sun-porch at Green Bay twenty years ago. The book he gave me that I treasure most is a copy of the Caxton Press first edition of James K. Baxter’s *Blow, wind of fruitfulness*, 1948. The title of that book is the perfect place to finish this lecture--a hope for future unfoldings, a fruitful uncertainty and unpredictability. And I would like you to take the title of that book with you as a charm. As Thomas Merton wrote, ‘the pessimistic outlook does nothing to change the future’, and we have much to be getting well along with. I address you all, as men and women of letters, with this thriving tradition behind you--all of you going back to the past, walking into the future, with a gentle wind of fruitfulness behind you—a summer breeze to alleviate any staleness and to reawaken the habitually drowsy. A wind to blow all of us--visitors to, as well as workers in, the literature laboratory--each in their own direction. I felt that breeze on Eric McCormick’s sun-porch in 1988, as indeed I feel it today.

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If I have learnt anything in the last 20 years it is this:

That New Zealand Literature is our collective work in progress

That literature is a laboratory

*That Literature is a prism through which we see the world—and
not a mirror held up to the world*

Literature is a beach house

Literature is a pulse

Literature is a field of electrical energy

Literature is a wind of fruitfulness

Literature is a life lived

*And I acknowledge the lives of Eric McCormick, Dennis
McEldowney, Janet Frame, Michael King, Robin Dudding.*

Gregory O'Brien, Wellington, 31 August 2008