

Of Beauty and Its Other: Janet Frame's Ethical Aesthetics

Samuel Hume

A Thesis Submitted in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

Department of English and Linguistics
University of Otago
June 2016

Abstract

In this thesis, I argue that Janet Frame's experimental aesthetics are the manifestation of an ethical impulse that runs throughout her oeuvre. In making such an argument, I contribute to the recent scholarship that places her work in relation to the thought of Emmanuel Levinas. Read within this theoretical context, Frame's aversion to traditional modes of representation reveals an ethical engagement with the elusiveness of the human subject. However, after examining Levinas's writings on art, I suggest that the invocation of his philosophy vis-à-vis literature is not without problems of its own. For Levinas, all art is an instance of the beautiful, with the beautiful fostering a ludic form of social disengagement. It is therefore necessary to move both with and beyond Levinas's thought for an account of how Frame's fiction might operate ethically. To this end, I turn to Theodor W. Adorno's aesthetic theory. Adorno questions the ethical capacity of traditionally beautiful and realist art because he considers it to preclude the singularity of its subject matter; conventionally ugly aesthetics, by contrast, offer an ethical alternative to the extent that they stem from an engagement with alterity. I propose that Frame intimates this ethical alternative in *A State of Siege* (1966). Although Frame's realism in this novel seems to belie an aesthetics of ugliness, her performative critique of the beautiful—the way that the text calls its own aesthetics into question—points to the limits of the beautiful and thereby allows an ethical impulse to appear through the fabric of a realist aesthetics. Extending my reading of this earlier novel to the last of Frame's novels to be published in her lifetime, I claim that Frame's commitment to the ethical capacity of the ugly finds its most mature expression in *The Carpathians* (1988). Through the employment of formal fragmentation, this novel is able to evoke the uniqueness of its characters. By consistently manifesting an ethical concern, albeit in markedly different aesthetic registers, Frame models a sociality that embraces alterity, gesturing toward a more peaceful mode of being with others.

In memory of Jack and Nora Hume and Gordon Piesse

Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful to Simone Drichel, who introduced me to the intricacies of Janet Frame's novels and whose guidance and support has made this work possible. I thank the University of Otago, which allowed me to undertake this project with the financial assistance of a Research Master's Scholarship. I am thankful to Paul Knox for the practical advice that has been integral to the completion of this work. Finally, I express my gratitude to Emma Cullen, whose companionship I value most dearly.

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Introduction

Janet Frame's Ethical Aesthetics

New Zealand author Janet Frame consistently populates her novels with artist figures and creative individuals who eschew conventional notions of realist representation. Throughout Frame's oeuvre, creative characters repeatedly employ alternative modes of expression. Such alternative modes of expression manifest, for instance, in the lyrical songs and dance of psychiatric patient Daphne Withers in *Owls Do Cry* (1957) and in the paper sculpture of a silver forest by former teacher Zoe Bryce in *The Edge of the Alphabet* (1962). They also appear in the single painting that retired art teacher Malfred Signal creates as part of her so-called New View in *A State of Siege* (1966) and in the resolutely non-factual manuscript written by amateur novelist Dinny Wheatstone in *The Carpathians* (1988). Many of Frame's alternative aesthetics assume a metafictional quality, taking the shape of the novels in which they appear. Thus, fictional author Thora Pattern traces the increasing elusiveness of her characters in *The Edge of the Alphabet*, while the unreliable and self-conscious narration of author figure Mavis Furness undermines the representational capacity of *Living in the Maniototo* (1979). Such metafictional experimentation culminates in the complete destruction of the logic of denotative language by John Henry Brecon, the ostensible author of *The Carpathians*. What is clear therefore is that Frame's creative characters are employed in service of a sustained aversion to realist aesthetics. What is perhaps less clear, however, is what motivates this aversion.

Simone Drichel argues that what motivates Frame's aversion to realist aesthetics is an "ethical impulse" in the specific terms of French-Lithuanian philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (2009, 185). The basis of Drichel's argument stems from the fact that the denotative language upon which realist narration relies is the manifestation of what Levinas calls ontology: the establishment of knowledge about an object via the application of a totalising concept (Drichel 2009, 194–95). Drichel explains that Levinas writes against ontology because it is necessarily reductive. To represent an object with a concept, she observes, is to negate what makes an object unique and therefore unrepresentable (2009, 193–96). This reductionism leads Levinas to consider ontology to be inherently violent. By denying the idiosyncrasy of

an object, ontological thought “sacrifices the singular, the unique, on the altar of abstract universality” (Drichel 2009, 186). According to Drichel, Levinas argues that the only experience that disrupts this process is an encounter with another human being. The alterity encountered in the expressive capacity of the Other¹ eludes all conceptualisation, halting the ontological processes of the knowing subject (Drichel 2009, 197–200). Drichel proposes that this formulation of the ethical “finds formal expression in [Frame’s] deep commitment to experimental forms of writing” (2009, 186). Frame’s eschewal of realism emerges as an effort to avoid the ontological reductionism from which denotative language derives; her experimental aesthetics constitute an ethical response to the singularity of the Other.

This argument that Frame’s experimental aesthetics constitute an ethical response to the singularity of the Other is affirmed by Josephine Carter. She suggests that experimental forms of literature emerge in *The Carpathians* as a medium through which one might “respond ethically to another person’s trauma” (2013, 1). The trauma in this novel upon which Carter focuses is the fantastical event called the midnight rain, which results in the unexplained disappearance of many of the residents of Kowhai Street in the small New Zealand town of Puamahara. One of the few survivors of this event is Mattina Brecon, a wealthy American tourist and the mother of fictional author John Henry. Responding to the traumatic experience of her temporary neighbours, Mattina assumes responsibility for their memorialisation. What makes this response ethical, for Carter, is that Mattina eschews the notion of a factual account and advocates a form of self-reflexive fiction, which persistently calls attention to its non-factual status and therefore operates as an ethical response to the idiosyncrasy of the victims to whom it refers (2013, 9–10). Carter argues further that this “ethical form of remembrance” presents via John Henry’s fictional authorship of *The Carpathians* (2013, 9). In the novel’s final note, John Henry calls into question the veracity of the novel’s events, presenting the text as a fictional attempt to learn about his parents, who actually died when he was a child. Carter suggests that by existing in service of the memory of his parents, whilst eschewing a factual account, John Henry’s novel constitutes an “ethical response to other people” (2013, 2). Carter’s reading of *The Carpathians* therefore reinforces the notion that Frame’s experimental aesthetics are the manifestation of an ethical impulse.

¹ Throughout this thesis, I follow the convention common among Levinas scholars to capitalise the Other in specific reference to a human being.

The focus of Drichel and Carter upon the way in which an ethical impulse manifests in Frame's aesthetics presents partly as a response to the scholarship of one of the key Frame scholars, Marc Delrez. In fact, Drichel explicitly positions her argument as such. She does so because Delrez considers Frame's employment of alternative aesthetics to be an attempt to establish a representational "totality" (2000, 76), or to articulate an "ideal of wholeness" (2002, 221). Delrez considers Frame's abandonment of a "a limiting form of realism" to be not solely a response to that which is "ineffable," but an effort to apprehend it (2002, xv). This perceived attempt to apprehend the ineffable leads Delrez to suggest that Frame's fiction involves an "exploration of alternative ontologies" (2002, xxx). However, as Drichel's explication of Levinas's critique of ontology makes clear, this view of Frame's aesthetics is contradictory: one cannot apprehend the ineffable within a representational totality without negating what makes it ineffable in the process. Delrez's argument therefore presents Frame's fiction as a reiteration of the conceptual violence against which she apparently writes. This violence is inherent in Delrez's description of the Framean artist as an "agent of transformation" (2002, 211). As an agent of transformation, the Framean artist does not apprehend the ineffable, but transforms it into something that can be apprehended. In the context of Delrez's argument, Frame's novels do not engage with that which eludes conceptualisation, but subsume it under a process of aesthetic "reconceptualization" (Delrez 2002, 215). This view of Frame's aesthetics is clearly antithetical to the ethical impulse that Drichel and Carter observe in her work.

And yet, ironically, Delrez's view of Frame's aesthetics is remarkably consistent with Levinas's writings on art. The pursuit of totality that Delrez observes in Frame's aesthetics is considered by Levinas to be a fundamental trait of all works of art. Levinas makes this claim because he aligns the totalising quality of an artwork with its completion: "The artist stops because the work refuses to accept anything more, appears saturated" (1948, 131). As a completed totality, an artwork does not respond to the uniqueness of the Other, as Drichel and Carter propose that Frame's fiction does. Rather, it remains "essentially disengaged" from the social context in which it exists (Levinas 1948, 131). This view of an artwork as a disengaged totality anticipates Delrez's reading of Frame further in that Levinas considers art to share the reductive function of ontology. In the act of representation, Levinas argues, an artist offers a distorted representation as a substitute for a represented object, so that "the consciousness of the representation lies in knowing that the object is not there" (1948,

136). This disengagement from the world leads Levinas to suggest that an aesthetic work shares the ontological state of other luxury objects. Artworks are simply “playthings,” which can be enjoyable but cannot be ethical (Levinas 1961, 140). The enjoyable element of an artwork signals the most significant barrier that Levinas places between ethics and aesthetics: his alignment of all art with the beautiful. This term does not refer to the appearance of an artwork, but to the capacity of all art to foster a ludic form of social disengagement: the act of attending to a work of art involves the disavowal of one’s responsibilities to other people. The capacity of the beautiful to exert this influence leads Levinas to assert that “there is something wicked and cowardly in artistic enjoyment. There are times when one can be ashamed of it, as of feasting during a plague” (1948, 142). This explicit antagonism toward the ethical capacity of art necessitates that one move both with and beyond Levinas’s thought in order to understand the ethical impulse that Drichel and Carter observe in Frame’s aesthetics. To this end, I turn to the aesthetic theory of German philosopher Theodor W. Adorno.

Adorno shares Levinas’s negative view of the ethical capacity of the beautiful, but his use of the term differs from Levinas’s because it only applies to traditionally beautiful and realist artworks. Adorno questions the ethical capacity of such artworks because he considers them to be a manifestation of identity thinking, a term that is commensurate with Levinas’s ontology in that it denotes any mode of thought that seeks reductively to subsume a particular under a universal. “Identifying thought,” Adorno writes, “depreciates a thing to a mere sample of its kind or species” (1966, 146). Adorno suggests that traditionally beautiful art is complicit in this process because it overwrites the uniqueness of an object in service of the harmony and unity of a work as a whole. He therefore writes that “works become beautiful by the force of their opposition to what simply exists” (1970, 51). Particularly relevant to Frame’s aesthetics, Adorno’s critique of the reductionism of the beautiful extends to realist artworks because he considers their denotative quality to substitute a representation in favour of an object and thereby to establish a “counterfeit reality” (1970, 322). This disengagement from reality that Adorno observes in the beautiful echoes Levinas to the extent that it presents as a form of play, which distracts individuals from the duties of responsible citizenship, an effect that is epitomised by the use of the beautiful as Nazi propaganda (Adorno 1970, 49). Adorno thus reinforces Levinas’s argument that

the beautiful is unethical, but his isolation of the term to traditionally beautiful and realist artworks presents the possibility for an ethical alternative.

This ethical alternative to the beautiful appears in Adorno's formulation of the ugly. For Adorno, conventionally ugly artworks are ethical because they operate as a refuge for mimetic comportment. Importantly, Adorno's notion of mimesis does not refer to the representational element of an artwork. Instead, it refers to the unconscious act of imitation that an artist undergoes during the process of artistic creation. In this state, Adorno suggests, an artist becomes assimilated to an object (such as another person) without identity thinking, maintaining a "nonconceptual affinity" with an "unposited other" (1970, 54). This mimetic state results in an artwork that gives voice to the singularity of an object, acting as a "mediated plenipotentiary of immediacy" (Adorno 1970, 62). Adorno proposes that the singularity of an object manifests in a mimetic artwork through two modes of aesthetic ugliness: formal fragmentation and content that is suppressed by the ideals of a given society, especially the expression of human suffering (1970, 46–48). Thus, by eschewing the identitarian reductionism of beautiful aesthetics, a mimetic ugly artwork is able to give voice to the vulnerable. The ethical implications of this function are evident in Adorno's assertion that the ugly offers an experience of the sublime: the alterity encountered in the ugly calls into question the identity thinking of the knowing subject, so that "the I [...] perceives its own limitedness and finitude" (1970, 245). By offering a sublime encounter with alterity, the ugly returns to Frame's experimental aesthetics the capacity to operate ethically.

In fact, Frame's experimental aesthetics consistently present as an instance of the ugly, deriving from a form of mimetic comportment and serving to give voice to the vulnerable. For instance, Daphne's songs in *Owls Do Cry* operate as a non-ontological engagement with the suffering of her family members, as she alludes to the childhood death of her sister Francie in a rubbish fire and the daily struggles of her epileptic brother, Toby (Frame 1957, 66, 122). Further, Daphne's dance presents as a mimetic response to the memory of her deceased mother. Frame writes that, upon hearing the news of her mother's death, "Daphne smiled gently, and danced the foxtrot, or was it the destiny or maxina that Francie said you dance with your heartbeats matching?" (1957, 265–66). By comporting herself mimetically in this way, Daphne allows the memory of her mother to dictate and speak through the movements of her body. The mimetic capacity of an ugly artwork to give voice to the

vulnerable continues to manifest in Zoe's silver forest in *The Edge of the Alphabet*. Daydreaming about her acquaintance's occupation as a prostitute, Zoe considers the primary goal of her art to be the traversal of interpersonal boundaries: "Let me lie down with you in pretence. Let us be empty shapes of people" (Frame 1962, 475). This mimetic state precipitates the creation of her silver forest, which expresses the suffering of unknown Others: "it is the loneliest shape I have ever seen, that little dent, this twist at the top of the dead silver branch, the eyes in the silver faces of the dead people" (Frame 1962, 476). Such ethical mimetic ugliness reappears in the single painting that Malfred makes as part of her New View in *A State of Siege*. Responding to a dream about the death of her mother, Malfred combines her paint with the lanolin that she associates with her mother's care. The painting thereby gives voice to the final moments of her mother's life: "the lanolin blossomed as death had blossomed in the last hour of Mrs Signal's dying" (Frame 1966, 79). Echoing Malfred's assimilation of herself to the memory of her mother, Dinny describes her manuscript in *The Carpathians* as the product of a way of being in which "one inhabits all worlds except the world of oneself" (Frame 1988, 84). This mimetic mode of social engagement enables Dinny to give a "point of view" to her "unmoneied and unprivileged" neighbours (Frame 1988, 85, 117).

The ethical capacity of a mimetic ugly artwork to give voice to the vulnerable extends to Frame's metafictional texts. This ethical function is not immediately apparent in *The Edge of the Alphabet* because Thora initially treats her characters as conceptual tools to be used in the pursuit of knowledge: "I made a journey of discovery through the lives of three people—Toby, Zoe, Pat" (Frame 1962, 253). But Thora ultimately eschews this ontological quest, eventually revealing her hope that the text will act as a medium through which her characters might find expression: "One day we who live at the edge of the alphabet will find our speech" (Frame 1962, 503). Thora thereby reverses her ontological pursuit by allowing her novel to communicate the loneliness of "the lonely ones—the Zoes and Tobys and Pats" (Frame 1962, 354). The capacity of Frame's vulnerable characters to find expression through the mimetic comportment of a fictional author continues to present in *Living in the Maniototo*. The mimetic element of Mavis's fiction appears when she outlines her artistic process in relation to Immanuel Kant's formulation of the manifold, which denotes one's sense impressions prior to the application of concepts (Kant 1781, 210). "It was only since I began writing," Mavis says, "that I identified my own

collection—the Manifold itself and all it contains” (Frame 1979, 128). The way in which this mode of being is able to give voice to those in need appears most explicitly in what Mavis later calls the Great Californian Confession. During this event, Mavis’s four principal characters alternately interrupt her narration in order to express their own “private unhappiness” (Frame 1979, 184). Finally, the vulnerable characters in *The Carpathians* find a voice via the mimetic comportment of John Henry. John Henry outlines the role that such mimesis plays in his writing process in the novel’s introductory note: “Writing this, my second novel, I became absorbed not in my power of choice but in the urgency with which each character equated survival with point of view, indeed with *being* as a point of view” (Frame 1988, 25). Assimilating himself to the needs of his characters, John Henry allows his novel to operate as a vehicle for the expression of their unique points of view, thereby ensuring their fictional survival. By evoking the uniqueness of her vulnerable characters, Frame’s myriad experimental aesthetics maintain an ethical impulse.

The extent to which Frame’s myriad experimental aesthetics maintain an ethical impulse is evident in the capacity of her fiction to suspend the reader’s ontological processes. This capacity is one to which numerous Frame scholars attest. An early observation of the elusive nature of Frame’s fiction appears in Jeanne Delbaere’s assertion that it “refuses to keep within the boundaries of rational analysis, logical ordering of plot, regular chronology, clear characterisation” (1978, 12). Gina Mercer affirms the interpretative difficulty posed by Frame’s novels when she writes that “the critical heritage for Frame is one of confusion, inconsistency and paradox” (1994, 14). More recently, Delrez has called attention to a critical “cloud of unknowing which hangs over aspects of Frame’s work” (2002, xvii), and Jan Cronin has located Frame’s novels in the “shadowy realm of the enigma” because they perpetually elude any definitive explanation (2009, 6). The ethical effect of this enigmaticalness² presents most explicitly in Norbert H. Platz’s assertion that Frame’s fiction precipitates in its reader an experience of “intellectual and emotional discomposure” to the extent that “the reader at times has to free himself from textual control in order to preserve his identity” (1993, 204–5). This assertion highlights the way in which the alterity that is evinced in Frame’s fiction calls into question the identity thinking of the reader in a manner that is commensurate with the Adornian

² My use of this term follows that of Adorno, which is exemplified in a quote from his work on page 30 of this thesis.

sublime. By eluding any conclusive interpretation in this way, Frame's experimental aesthetics maintain an ethical impulse.

The way in which this ethical impulse manifests in Frame's experimental aesthetics is the focus of the present thesis. Because this focus stems from the scholarship of Drichel and Carter, I begin Chapter One by analysing Levinas's writings on art in the context of his ethical philosophy. However, this analysis reveals that any attempt to consider the ethics of Frame's writing in strictly Levinasian terms is fundamentally problematic: Levinas's consideration of all art as a disengaged instance of the beautiful negates the ethical capacity of Frame's aesthetics. In order to understand how an ethical impulse manifests in Frame's work, I turn to Adorno's aesthetic theory, which locates an ethical alternative to typically beautiful and realist art in its ugly contrariety. The result of this development is that Levinas becomes less central to the theoretical focus of the subsequent chapters, whilst Adorno assumes greater significance.

In Chapter Two, I build upon Chapter One by examining Frame's complicitous critique of beauty in *A State of Siege*. I begin this chapter by arguing that Malfred's pursuit of a New View constitutes an ethical attempt to abandon a beautiful realist form of painting and to develop an ugly non-realist aesthetic. In turn, I claim that Malfred's failure to do so in any sustained way stems from her hesitance to abandon her habitual identity thinking, demonstrating the incompatibility of ethics and the beautiful. I conclude the chapter by proposing that this incompatibility presents in the realist form of *A State of Siege* itself, as the novel orchestrates Malfred's sudden death when her final moments of mimetic comportment begin to elude the text's representational capacity. The novel therefore operates ethically by performing the limitations of its own aesthetic.

Frame's destruction of these limitations to ethics via the ugly aesthetic of *The Carpathians* is my focus in Chapter Three. I begin this chapter by arguing that the capacity of an ugly artwork to mediate an encounter with alterity presents in Dinny's manuscript, which interrupts Mattina's attempts at realist representation and offers her an encounter with the uniqueness of her vulnerable neighbours, who appear within it. Drawing upon the example set by Dinny's manuscript, I argue that the non-realist form of fictional memorialisation to which Mattina contributes following the disappearance of her neighbours is an ethical ugly artwork. I end the chapter by proposing that Frame's metafictional strategies enable this ethical ugly artwork to

constitute *The Carpathians* itself. The text's ugly logical impossibilities therefore serve to give voice to the vulnerable characters to which they refer. Frame's increasing employment of the ugly from *A State of Siege* to *The Carpathians* means that her aesthetics become increasingly ethical.

Chapter One

Toward an Ethics of the Ugly

As I have discussed in the introduction to this thesis, the ethical impulse that Drichel and Carter observe in Frame's fiction is at odds with Levinas's writings on art. Levinas's sustained criticism of all art as an instance of disengaged beauty necessitates that one look elsewhere for an account of how Frame's aesthetics might operate ethically. I have proposed that such an account presents in Adorno's differentiation between the beautiful and the ugly. Although Adorno shares Levinas's antagonism toward the apparent disengagement of traditionally beautiful and realist aesthetics, he perceives an ethical alternative in ugly art. This capacity of Adorno's aesthetic theory to return to art its ethical potential is the focus of the present chapter. By placing Adorno's aesthetic theory in conversation with Levinas's ethics, this chapter establishes the theoretical context in which a case for the ethical value of Frame's fiction can subsequently be made.

Levinas's Ethics

Levinas's ethics develops as an attempt to break with the ontological tradition of Western philosophy. In his early essay "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity" (1957), Levinas draws on Plato's concept of the Same (*le Même, to auton*), which denotes the thinking subject and its thoughts (Plato 1961, 162), when he argues that Western philosophy is a primarily narcissistic practice because it is concerned with "reducing to the same all that is opposed to it as *other*" (Levinas 1957, 48). This reduction occurs via the application of the concept to the object, or the subsumption of the particular under the universal, which reduces "things" to "ideas" and treats them as extensions of the perceiving ego (Levinas 1957, 49). During the process of cognition, that which is other is "grasped and conceived" via conceptuality, and its alterity is "dissolved" (Levinas 1957, 50). Levinas extends this interrogation of the reductive function of Western thought in his first major work, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (1961). In this text, maintaining his earlier engagement with Plato, Levinas claims that "Western philosophy has most often been an ontology: a reduction of the other to the same by interposition of a middle and neutral term that

ensures the comprehension of being” (1961, 43). Although Levinas’s focus is the domain of philosophy, this reductionism applies to all forms of knowledge. As Simon Critchley notes, the term ontology includes “any relation to otherness that is reducible to comprehension or understanding” (2002, 11). Because ontological comprehension cannot accommodate the uniqueness of the particular, Levinas considers it to be a form of violence. He suggests that, in its effort to establish an autonomous domain over that which is other, to contain it within the totality of the concept, ontological thought is a manifestation of “power” and “injustice” (1961, 46).

In his earlier texts, Levinas argues that the only experience which disrupts ontology is a face-to-face encounter with another person because the Other exists beyond one’s cognitive grasp. As John Wild writes in his introduction to *Totality and Infinity*, the Other has the capacity to be “essentially different from me” and to inhabit “a world that is basically other than mine” (1969, 13). As a result, for Levinas, the Other is a completely foreign being, who perpetually eludes the ontological attempts of the knowing subject (Levinas 1961, 39). Levinas frames this unknowability in terms of René Descartes’ concept of an infinite God, which is inaccessible to the subject’s thought (Descartes 1996, 32). For Levinas, this notion exemplifies the way in which a thought can paradoxically exceed the concept that denotes it: “the idea of infinity is exceptional in that its *ideatum* surpasses its idea” (1961, 49). As Hilary Putnam explains, Levinas reformulates Descartes’ concept “by substituting the other for God” (2002, 42). Thus, to encounter the Other is to encounter infinity; it is to approach that which is absolutely exterior to the self. Levinas grounds this experience of the ideatum of the Other in the face: “the way in which the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*, we here name face” (1961, 50). As an analogue of the Cartesian infinite, the Other’s alterity exceeds the physiognomic form in which it appears, eluding any attempt at ontological thematisation. The Other “destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me” (Levinas 1961, 51). An encounter with the Other thus interrogates the capacity of the knowing subject: “Consciousness is put into question by a face” (Levinas 1963, 352). This experience of the Other, in which “the same takes the irreducible Other into account,” constitutes a Levinasian ethics (Levinas 1961, 47).

Levinas asserts the importance of the face in this encounter because of its function as the Other’s pre-eminent mode of expression. What prevents the Other’s face from “congealing into a plastic form” is that it “speaks” (Levinas 1961, 66).

Thus, crucially, the self-expression of the Other via language makes possible the ethical encounter: “language institutes a relation irreducible to the subject-object relation” (Levinas 1961, 73). As Critchley observes, although Levinas commonly identifies verbal discourse as this ethical medium of communication, he also considers non-verbal language to have an ethical potential (1992, 178–79). In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas argues that the eyes of the Other speak a language that is “impossible to dissemble” (1961, 66). Similarly, in “Language and Proximity,” he writes that the Other speaks through the “original language” of “human skin and face” (1967, 116). What these ethical forms of language have in common is that the I and the Other communicate in a literal face-to-face relation. Language is ethical as a medium of corporeal approach, and the ethical encounter therefore necessitates the corporeal presence of an interlocutor.

However, in his later work, Levinas increasingly moves away from the face as the locus of the ethical relation. As Critchley explains (2002, 17), this development occurs at least partly in response to Jacques Derrida’s critique of *Totality and Infinity* in his influential essay “Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas” (1967). Derrida’s key criticism in this essay is that Levinas’s designation of the ethical moment to the physical form of the Other’s face is itself a form of ontology, which subverts his effort to establish an ethical metaphysics. “By radicalizing the theme of the exteriority of the other,” Derrida writes, “Levinas thereby assumes the aim which has more or less secretly animated all the philosophical gestures which have been called *empiricisms* in the history of philosophy” (1967, 151). The extent to which this critique influenced Levinas’s thought is exemplified in his 1988 interview with three graduate students: “*Totality and Infinity* was my first book. I find it very difficult to tell you, in a few words, in what way it is different from what I’ve said afterwards. There is the ontological terminology [...]. I have since tried to get away from that language” (Levinas 1988, 170–71).

In his second major work, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (1974), Levinas attempts to eschew this “ontological terminology” by formulating a kind of ethical comportment that does not rest upon the empirical face of the Other as the locus of a conversation. Rather, as Edith Wyschogrod suggests, he engages with the ethical operation of “language itself” (1982, 150). This effort presents in Levinas’s formulation of the Saying (*le Dire*), the ethical act of addressing another person,

which interrupts the Said (*le Dit*), the necessarily denotative content of one's language. For Levinas, the Saying is an antecedent to the Said: it is "a forward preceding languages, it is the proximity of one to the other, the commitment of an approach" (1974, 5). Echoing his earlier assertion that the alterity of the Other is irreducible to the face in which it appears, in *Otherwise than Being*, the Saying manifests within the Said, but the Said cannot contain the Saying. The Saying thus presents as an interruption of the ontological language to which it inevitably leads and in which it appears: it "goes *beyond* the being thematized or totalized," and the denotative operation of the Said only "permits us to utter, be it by betrayal, this *outside of being*" (Levinas 1974, 18, 6). Like the face-to-face encounter, an experience of the Other's proximity within this language is ethical in that it calls the knowing subject into question (Levinas 1974, 78). As Levinas writes in "God and Philosophy," it is a form of "trauma" which induces a "shudder" as the "nucleus of the subject is uprooted, undone" (1975, 180–82).

Unlike the face-to-face encounter, however, the Saying presents the possibility of an ethical text. The ethical moment is no longer a strictly corporeal event. Levinas models this possibility in the poetic language of *Otherwise than Being* itself. As Critchley writes, the text's language "maintains an ambiguity, or oscillation, between differing registers of language, that ensures the interruption of ontology" (1992, 8). However, as I demonstrate below, Levinas does not extend the ethical potential of language works to literary texts, or to art more generally; rather, he argues that the disregard for the Other which art affirms means that it "supports Western ontology" (1974, 40).

Levinas and Art

In the 1948 essay "Reality and Its Shadow," Levinas sets out the negative position on aesthetics to which he returns throughout his oeuvre. In this essay, which focuses on classically beautiful and representational visual art such as Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, Levinas argues that the completed aspect of the artwork means that it is a totality which is closed off from the Other, unable to function as an ethical form of communication: the work of art "is completed *in spite of* the social or material causes that interrupt it. It does not give itself out as the beginning of a dialogue" (1948, 131). As a totality, Levinas proposes, art shares the reductive impulse of ontology. Like the concept, the artistic representation precludes the particularity of that which it

represents, as if “the represented object died, were degraded, were disincarnated in its own reflection” (Levinas 1948, 136). This degradation extends to the temporality of the artwork’s subject matter. In securing the object within the totality of the artwork, the artist freezes the time in which it exists, creating an “impersonal and anonymous instant” called the *entre-temps*, or meanwhile (Levinas 1948, 137–38). Within this state, Levinas writes, “the smile of the Mona Lisa about to broaden will not broaden,” the “statue realizes the paradox of an instant that endures without a future,” and characters “are committed to the infinite repetition of the same acts and the same thoughts” as though they are “prisoners” of the text to which they belong (1948, 138–39). Levinas suggests that “philosophical exegesis” is responsible for bringing the disengaged work of art into relation with the Other (1948, 142). By placing the artwork into a broader cultural context, criticism “integrates the inhuman work of the artist into the human world” (Levinas 1948, 142). Thus, as Jolanta Nowak explains, in making the distinction between the aesthetic and the critical or philosophical work, “Levinas asks the reader of ‘Reality and Its Shadow’ to choose between art and ethics” (2010, 267).

Levinas continues to nuance this disjunction between ethics and aesthetics in *Totality and Infinity*, where he maintains that the artwork cannot function as a medium of intersubjectivity. Although an artwork’s creation requires “labor,” the artist’s “will” remains absent from the completed object, so that it does not operate as an ethical mode of communication: “In contrast with the transcendence of expression, in which the being that expresses himself personally attends the work of expression, production attests the author of the work in his absence, as a plastic form” (Levinas 1961, 227). While the face of the Other speaks, eluding cognition, the artwork remains “mute,” allowing itself to be thematised through interpretation and valuation: “The work does not defend itself against the Other’s *Sinngebung*,” or sense-bestowal (Levinas 1961, 226–27). Unable to resist the totalising gaze of the knowing subject, the artwork cannot interrupt ontology.

The relation between the subject and the artwork is thus reducible to the “subject-object relation”: the artwork is merely a “thing” (Levinas 1961, 73, 140). Like other “enjoyable” objects, the artwork provides pleasure, but it does not offer an encounter with the “infinity” of the Other. Like the “fine cigarette lighter” and “the fine car,” aesthetic objects are superficial in that they are “adorned by the decorative arts” (Levinas 1961, 140). While the ethical relation leads “beyond the given reality,”

beyond the totalising function of ontology, in the artwork, “every going beyond enjoyment reverts to enjoyment” (Levinas 1961, 140). Thus, as Robert Eaglestone explains, for Levinas, art “is something with which we fill our lives, and is dear to us, but does not represent the breaking of the totality that the face does” (1997, 115).

Levinas maintains this antagonism toward art in *Otherwise than Being*, despite the text’s pronounced poetic style. As in “Reality and Its Shadow,” he suggests that the work of art exists in the *entre-temps*, disconnected from the temporal realm of the Other. The artist freezes the “irrecuperable” and “unrepresentable” time of that which it depicts, turning it into a totality to be apprehended: “the diachrony of time is synchronised into a time that is recallable, and becomes a theme” (Levinas 1974, 37–38). As a result of this function, art belongs to the order of the Said. It is unable to gesture toward an ethical infinity. Because an artwork’s components only ever signify themselves, Levinas, echoing his argument in *Totality and Infinity*, considers the artwork to belong to the realm of “things.” “In painting,” he claims, “red reddens and green greens [...]. In music sounds resound; in poems vocables, material of the said, no longer yield before what they evoke” (1974, 40). The aesthetic work is thus simply a medium for the novel experience of its constitutive materials. Referring to French-Greek composer Iannis Xenakis’s solo cello work *Nomos Alpha* (1966), Levinas writes: “Every quiddity becomes modality, the strings and wood turn into sonority [...]. The cello *is* a cello in the sonority that vibrates in its strings and wood” (1974, 41). To consider the artwork to be anything more than the sum of its parts, to argue that it functions as an ethical vehicle of the Saying in which the “soul” might find expression, is, he argues, a “misleading anthropomorphism” (1974, 41). In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas also sustains his earlier assertion that the “inhuman work of the artist” requires criticism to move into the ethical sphere (1948, 142). Only the philosophical language of exegesis, which maintains the Saying within the Said, can bring the art object into relation with the Other. Without this interpretation, Levinas writes, art remains “in isolation: every work of art is in this sense exotic, without a world” (1974, 41).

The most significant obstacle between art and ethics is Levinas’s assertion that all art belongs to the realm of the beautiful. This term does not refer to the appearance of an artwork, but to the influence that an artwork has upon the psychological state of an audience. Thus, he considers Modernist artworks that eschew conventional notions of beauty to be “sad” manifestations of the beautiful, whilst classically beautiful

artworks constitute “happy” forms of the beautiful (1948, 141). Levinas’s argument that the influence of the beautiful is unethical takes shape in relation to Plato, who in the *Republic* banishes artists from his ideal society because he considers art to be a form of “sorcery,” which “establishes a bad system of government in people’s minds by gratifying their irrational side” (Plato 1993, 355, 359). Drawing on Plato, Levinas argues in “Reality and Its Shadow” that the beautiful is unethical because its “magic” fosters in its audience a ludic disengagement from reality: art “especially brings the irresponsibility that charms as a lightness and grace. It frees [...]. Do not speak, do not reflect, admire in silence and in peace—such are the counsels of wisdom satisfied before the beautiful” (1948, 141). The magic or playful quality of the beautiful is particularly negative because it forces itself upon its audience via rhythm. Artworks, Levinas suggests, “impose themselves on us [...]. Rhythm represents a unique situation where we cannot speak of consent [...] because the subject is caught up and carried away by it” (1948, 132). Captivated by the playfulness of the beautiful, one’s “consciousness” becomes “paralysed [...], totally absorbed in its playing” (Levinas 1948, 133). In this state of play, one is unable to engage with the Other, an effect which gives rise to Jill Robbins’ observation that play is “one of the most negatively charged terms in [Levinas’s] work” (1999, 86). Maintaining his substitution of the Other for God, Levinas argues that, because aesthetic play substitutes the finite artwork for the infinite human Other, it constitutes a form of idolatry (1948, 141). As an unethical agent of idolatrous play, the artist eschews responsibilities to the Other and thus figuratively “exiles himself from the city” (Levinas 1948, 142). The extent to which Levinas’s alignment of all art with the beautiful prevents an artwork from being ethical is evident in his later essay on the writings of German-Jewish poet Paul Celan, “Paul Celan: From Being to the Other” (1972). As I argue below, this text demonstrates how even when an artwork avoids many of the characteristics with which Levinas takes issue, he only considers it to be ethical when he removes it from the aesthetic realm of the beautiful.

Levinas considers the fragmented quality of Celan’s poetry to have an ethical dimension. The dis-integration of Celan’s work is said to counteract its state as an isolated whole. Levinas anticipates this claim in *Existence and Existence* (1947). In this text, he suggests that the fragmentation of Modernist artworks criticises the totalising function of traditionally beautiful or realist modes of artistic representation. “In contemporary painting,” Levinas argues, “things no longer count as elements of a

universal order [...]. On all sides fissures appear in the continuity of the universe. The particular stands out in the nakedness of its being” (1947, 56). The dis-integrated artwork thus constitutes a “revolt” against the ontological impulse of verisimilitude (Levinas 1947, 56). In such styles as Cubism, Gerald L. Bruns explains, the artwork is totally exterior to the I: “the spectator can no longer objectify what he or she sees” (2002, 212). However, in line with his description of the artwork as a “thing” which is reducible to the subject-object relation, Levinas suggests that this exteriority is only temporary. The particular is ultimately reduced to its function within the totality of the artwork: “in being destined for a use, in forming part of a setting,” the particular is “clothed with a form which conceals its nakedness” (Levinas 1947, 57). Importantly, Levinas considers Celan’s writing to be exceptional in this regard: the particulars to which his work gives expression are not merely objects but voices, modes of ethical expression. Focusing on *The Meridian*, the speech that Celan gave upon receiving the Georg Büchner Prize in 1960, Levinas argues that these voices ceaselessly interrupt themselves, “as if two or more discourses were on top of one other” (1972, 41). As Robbins explains, Levinas considers this self-interruption to be an ethical form of discourse because “the interruption is not reabsorbed into thematization and totality,” and the text therefore “*performs* its own putting into question” (1999, 145). In contrast to the disengaged harmony and unity of the traditional realist artwork, Celan’s poetry is “pre-syntactic,” “pre-logical,” and “pre-disclosing”: its “breathless meditation [...] obeys no norm” (Levinas 1972, 41–42).

The ethical character of Celan’s work leads Levinas to assert that it “goes toward the other” (1972, 41). This ethical movement is evident in the essay’s opening lines, in which Levinas quotes Celan’s 1960 letter to Hans Bender: “I cannot see any difference [...] between a handshake and a poem” (Levinas 1972, 40).³ Like a handshake with the Other, Levinas proposes, Celan’s poetry occurs at “the moment of pure touching, pure contact, grasping, squeezing—which is, perhaps, a way of giving, right up to and including the hand that gives” (1972, 41). He continues to assert that Celan’s poetry “becomes dialogue,” and that it offers “a gesture of recognition of the other, a handshake, a saying without a said” (1972, 42–43). Like the ethical moment when one encounters infinity, Levinas claims, Celan’s work is primarily concerned with “transcendence,” with the “*conversion into the infinite of pure mortality and the*

³ For the complete letter, see Celan (1960).

dead letter” (1972, 42).⁴ Thus, as Hill explains, Levinas’s assertion of the transcendent quality of Celan’s poetry highlights the way in which he considers the poet’s work to present “the possibility of an encounter” with that which is beyond the self (2005, 992).

Levinas’s praise for the ethical qualities of Celan’s work has led several scholars to argue that the essay demonstrates a positive shift in Levinas’s view on art. For instance, Seán Hand situates Levinas’s essay on “the opposite pole from the moralizing certainties of ‘Reality and Its Shadow’” (2009, 75). Similarly, Matthew Sharpe describes the text as “deeply symptomatic testimony to the unsustainability of his earlier programmatic disavowals of art” (2005, 42). Levinas’s affirmation of artworks that eschew traditional notions of realism and beauty also leads Bruns to argue that the former’s view of Modern art “opens up what one might call the ‘non-aesthetic’ dimension of the work of art,” or “an aesthetics of darkness rather than of light” (2002, 213–14).

However, Bruns’ notion of a “‘non-aesthetic’ dimension” is precisely the issue when considering art’s ethical potential; ultimately, Levinas only considers an artwork to be ethical when he removes it from the aesthetic sphere. He asserts that the ethical quality of Celan’s work only occurs *in spite of* its beautiful, or aesthetic, character: it manifests “*beyond* the mere strangeness of art,” as an “*interruption* in the playful order of the beautiful” (Levinas 1972, 44, 46; my italics). Levinas reiterates this argument in an interview with Wyschogrod, published ten years later. In response to her question of whether “art, especially contemporary art, places ontology in question,” Levinas answers in the negative. Referring to his reformulation of Plato’s Good beyond Being, the ethical trace of infinity that one encounters in the face of the Other,⁵ Levinas asserts that “the beautiful must be distinguished from the Good [...]. There is goodness in beauty, and there is certainly an idolatrous moment in art [...]. Or, if you will, in the end the good that is in it is absorbed by the form” (1982, 293). The aesthetic form’s absorption of the Good means that, for Levinas, art does not lead beyond ontology. Maintaining this separation of ethics and aesthetics, Levinas considers Celan’s work to be ethical not as a work of art, but as a form of prayer. He

⁴ Levinas is quoting Celan’s *The Meridian* (1961). The translation of Levinas’s quote, originally written in French, differs from the cited translation of Celan’s speech. For a discussion of the difficulties in translating the phrase, see Leslie Hill (2005, 996–1000).

⁵ As B. C. Hutchens writes, “the Good is discernable in the face of the other person, and it is *only there* that one comes into contact with it” (2004, 80).

thereby upholds his substitution of the Other for God. “For Celan,” he concludes, “the poem is the spiritual act *par excellence*”; in his poetry, “a chant rises” (1972, 46).

Levinas’s strict appreciation of Celan’s poetry for its religious character extends to his view of the literary realm more broadly. In the interview with Wyschogrod, Levinas asserts that what distinguishes the writings of such authors as “Molière or Shakespeare or Dostoyevsky or Pushkin” is that they “are not absolutely separate from sacred language” (1982, 292). However, this point is perhaps most explicit in one of Levinas’s essays on the work of Maurice Blanchot, “The Servant and Her Master” (1966). In an endnote to this text, Levinas aligns the ethical potential of poetic language with a work’s religious rather than its aesthetic status:

The word poetry, to me, means the rupture of immanence to which language is condemned, imprisoning itself. I do not think that this rupture is a purely esthetic event. But the word poetry does not, after all, designate a species, the genus of which would be art. Inseparable from the verb, it overflows with prophetic meaning. (1966, 185; original spelling)

Levinas’s transfer of the aesthetic object to the religious sphere also applies to visual art. One of his most positive evaluations of this form appears in an interview with Françoise Armengaud, where Levinas agrees that there is an “ethical dimension” in French-Jewish sculptor Sacha Sosno’s dis-integrated “art of obliteration,” in which geometric shapes obstruct or remove the artwork’s subject matter, such as the figure of a human face (Levinas 1989, 32). However, this ethical capacity ultimately hinges upon the work’s adherence to the strictures of Judaism. Drawing on Jean-Luc Marion’s phenomenology of the icon in *God without Being: Hors-Texte* (1982), Nowak argues that what appeals to Levinas in Sosno’s work is that it observes the Mosaic prohibition of images by interrupting its own representation, thereby functioning as a religious icon, rather than as an “idolatrous” work of art which distracts from one’s responsibilities to the Other (2010, 270–76). Only as an icon, which does “not cease to refer to an other than itself,” which gestures toward “infinity,” can Sosno’s work be ethical (Marion 1982, 18). This divide between the beautiful and the ethical object means that any attempt to consider the ethics of art in strictly Levinasian terms is fundamentally problematic. However, reading Adorno

alongside Levinas offers an account of how art has the capacity to be ethical whilst retaining its aesthetic character.

Adorno's Identity Thinking and the Beautiful

Adorno shares Levinas's antagonism toward the totalising function of traditional Western thought. Like Levinas, Adorno considers this tradition to be inherently reductive because it forcefully subsumes a particular under a universal. "Ever since Plato," Adorno writes in *Negative Dialectics*, "nonconceptuality, individuality, and particularity" have been dismissed as "transitory and insignificant" (1966, 8). He argues that by asserting the primacy of the concept, philosophy "downgrades" the singular object to being a "*quantité négligeable*" (1966, 8). Western philosophy is thus an example of what Adorno calls identity thinking, an equivalent of Levinas's ontology, as it is based upon the conviction that an object can be totally identified with a corresponding concept. Identity thinking groups particulars together on the basis of their shared characteristics, and it thereby "says what something comes under, what it exemplifies or represents" (Adorno 1966, 149). In apprehending the world in this way, the knowing subject aims to reduce that which is other to the Same, to bring the "non-I" into the cognitive domain of the "I" (Adorno 1966, 148). For Adorno, any such attempt is "*hubris*": there is always an element of the conceptualised that eludes conceptualisation, remains non-identical (1966, 149). "No philosophy," Adorno proposes, "not even extreme empiricism, can drag the *facta bruta* and present them like cases in anatomy or experiments in physics" (1966, 11). Like Levinas, Adorno claims that this failure reveals identity thinking to be a form of narcissistic idealism, which not only fails to apprehend that which it represents, but makes it less accessible to the knowing subject: "The more relentlessly our identitarian thinking besets its object, the farther will it take us from the identity of the object" (1966, 149).

The reductive function of identity thinking presents in its developmental history, which is the focus of Adorno's earlier work *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), co-authored with Max Horkheimer.⁶ In this text, the authors argue that identity thinking emerges in response to an innate intolerance of that which is other.

⁶ J. M. Bernstein notes that, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer refer to "identity thinking" as the "principle of immanence" (2001, 87). The two terms are interchangeable, but I solely employ the former for the sake of clarity.

For the identitarian subject, the vastness of the natural world is a source of dread to be countered with explanation. “Nothing at all may remain outside,” the authors argue, “because the mere idea of outsideness is the very source of fear” (1944, 16). Adorno and Horkheimer claim that this attempt at explanation first appeared as myth. The Olympic deities function as the “quintessential concepts” of the “material elements” which they signify: “In Homer, Zeus represents the sky and the weather, Apollo controls the sun, and Helios and Eos are already shifting to an allegorical function” (Adorno and Horkheimer 1944, 8). However, as Simon Jarvis explains, Adorno and Horkheimer view the history of Western thought as an “ever-increasing scepticism” toward such mythical explanation: myth’s recourse to transcendental deities in order to understand the world comes to be seen as an anthropomorphic projection, which does not reduce that which is other to the Same, but reinforces its exteriority (1998, 25). This scepticism towards myth is the impetus of thought’s “enlightenment,” a term which denotes any attempt to demythologise the world through the establishment of rational knowledge (Jarvis 1998, 24). In practice, however, this effort increases thought’s solipsistic character. In its attempt to gain an entirely objective understanding of the world, Adorno and Horkheimer claim, enlightened thought understands an object only in terms of its typicality, as an instance of “repetition” (1944, 12). For example, a laboratory rabbit becomes a “a mere example” of the species as a whole (Adorno and Horkheimer 1944, 10). The authors suggest that the end point of such reductive conceptualisation would see the world forcefully subsumed under “a gigantic analytic judgment” (1944, 27). The identitarian subject’s intolerance of all that is “outside” thus results in a history of escalating domination.

This conceptual violence is not limited to the intellectual realm, but is rather always instrumental. Adorno and Horkheimer claim that the subject “only knows things in so far as he can manipulate them” (1944, 9). “The universality of ideas,” they argue, rests upon the world’s “actual domination” (1944, 14). For the identitarian subject, nature is thus simply a “material mass” to be used, and conceptuality functions as the “ideal tool,” which is “fit to do service for everything, wherever it can be applied” (Adorno and Horkheimer 1944, 99, 39). Adorno and Horkheimer suggest that this domination of the natural world extends to human beings: “What men want to learn about nature is how to use it in order wholly to dominate it and other men” (1944, 4). In this way, “power and knowledge are synonymous” (Adorno and Horkheimer 1944, 4). As Deborah Cook notes, this pattern of domination also

necessitates the suppression of one's human nature, or biological impulses (2011, 46–47). Humankind's manipulation of “non-human nature and other men,” Adorno and Horkheimer write, is “paid for by a denial of nature in man” (1944, 54). This self-repression is self-destructive: “As soon as man discards his awareness that he is himself nature, all the aims for which he keeps himself alive [...] are nullified” (Adorno and Horkheimer 1944, 54). Identity thinking thus gives rise to an ever-increasing inhumanity. In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno suggests that identity thinking ultimately finds expression in Auschwitz, which reduced the “individual” to the “specimen” and confirmed “the philosopheme of pure identity as death” (1966, 362).

Adorno suggests that traditionally beautiful art is inextricably linked to this dialectic of fear and domination because it is a form of identity thinking. Like conceptuality, he suggests in *Aesthetic Theory*, “the image of beauty as that of a single and differentiated something originates with the emancipation from fear of the overpowering wholeness and undifferentiatedness of nature” (1970, 51). The beautiful stems from a fearful desire to “hold” that which is other “at bay,” to exclude all that is “heterogeneous” to the knowing subject (Adorno 1970, 52–53). Artworks thus become beautiful by overwriting the irreducible particular in favour of the cohesion of the totality. As Bernstein explains, beauty's “harmonious integration of parts to whole” necessitates the “utter pacification and subjugation of its constituent elements” (1992, 237). Like Levinas, Adorno considers the reductionism inherent in the beautiful to do violence to that which it represents. “The course toward the artwork's integration,” Adorno writes, “is the death of the particular elements in the whole” (1970, 52). The identitarian character of traditionally beautiful art is a form of cruelty. In art, Adorno suggests, “something is excised from the living, from the body of language, from tones, from visual experience. The purer the form [...] of the works, the more cruel they are” (1970, 50). For Adorno, the reductive cruelty of the beautiful is “the original sin of art” (1970, 50).

Importantly for my discussion of Frame in the following two chapters, Adorno's antagonism toward the reductive function of beauty extends to art that aims primarily for empirical verisimilitude. Responding to Walter Benjamin's essays on the artistic value of photography, “A Small History of Photography” (1931) and “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936), Adorno claims that art which takes “photography as its model” is “barbaric” in its complicity with identity thinking (1970, 56). He considers such art to fail, Brian O'Connor explains, because it

does not move beyond the identitarian impulse of “mere representation” (2013, 156). Adorno stresses this point with particular reference to fiction in his earlier essay “The Position of the Narrator in the Contemporary Novel”: “the more strictly the novel adheres to realism in external things, to the gesture that says ‘this is how it was,’ the more every word becomes a mere ‘as if,’ and the greater becomes the contradiction between his claim and the fact that it was not so” (1954, 33). Accordingly, to reiterate Adorno’s assertion in *Negative Dialectics*, the extent of an artwork’s effort empirically to apprehend that which it represents corresponds to the extent of its identitarianism. Ethical empirical realism is impossible because it is “almost absolutely opposed” to “the primacy of the object” (Adorno 1970, 322).

The relationship of the beautiful with identity thinking also pertains to its instrumentality, a characteristic that stems from its complicity with what in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Adorno and Horkheimer call the culture industry. The authors consider this industry to be a manifestation of identity thinking. Concept-like, it functions to propagate the homogeneity of society as a totality: “culture now impresses the same stamp on everything. Films, radio and magazines make up a system which is uniform as a whole and in every part” (Adorno and Horkheimer 1944, 120). As with other modes of identity thinking, the rationale behind the culture industry is that of “domination itself”: it upholds the power of the powerful through the establishment and maintenance of a marketable society (Adorno and Horkheimer 1944, 121). As Bernstein notes, for Adorno and Horkheimer, the beautiful is part of this process of domination (1991, 8). The ideology of the culture industry represses any artworks that might function as a “protest” against its integration: “it crushes their insubordination and makes them subserve the formula” through a “prearranged harmony” in which “the whole and the parts are alike” (Adorno and Horkheimer 1944, 126). For Adorno and Horkheimer (echoing Levinas’s description of the ludic character of the beautiful), such artworks are a form of “fun”; they are a playful palliative which distracts individuals from the powers under which they live whilst reinforcing society’s totalitarian ideology (1944, 140). In this way, recalling Socrates’ consideration of beauty in a text tentatively attributed to Plato, *Greater Hippias* (1997a), Adorno and Horkheimer suggest ironically that “the beautiful is the useful” (1944, 156). The beautiful is a propagandistic tool of the culture industry.

The complicity of the beautiful in the ideology of its time leads the authors of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to associate it with “the graveyard stillness” of Nazi

Germany (1944, 126). Adorno maintains this argument in *Aesthetic Theory*, where he juxtaposes the “aesthetic avant-garde” with “politically avant-garde zealotry” (1970, 24). He claims that Adolf Hitler perceived a threat in art which is not traditionally realist or beautiful, such as the work of “im- and expressionists” and cubists such as Pablo Picasso (1970, 24). In turn, Adorno aligns classically beautiful art with the advancement of “Hitler’s empire” (1970, 49). “The more torture went on in the basement,” he writes, “the more insistently they made sure that the roof rested on columns” (1970, 49). If art is going to criticise totalitarian society, it must do so by repudiating the ideals that support it. This argument appears implicitly in the essay “Cultural Criticism and Society” when Adorno asserts that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (1951, 34). This ugly barbarism differs from the barbarism of beauty. The former appears as such precisely because it resists the latter’s reductive impulses, thereby expressing the barbaric conditions of life under “absolute reification” (Adorno 1951, 34). Adorno affirms the capacity of ugly art to operate in this way in his essay “Commitment,” writing that the goal of art after the barbaric identitarianism of Auschwitz should be to eschew such reductive modes of thought in order to give voice to the victims of the oppressive mechanisms of society: “it is now virtually in art alone that suffering can still find its own voice, consolation, without immediately being betrayed by it. The most important artists of the age have realised this” (1962, 312). By eschewing the identitarianism of the beautiful, an artwork might express the suffering of those who live under its violent political manifestations. “To write a poem of ethical and political engagement,” Robert Kaufman explains, “casts itself as necessarily barbaric” (2010, 161).

Adorno thus shares Levinas’s conviction that the beautiful is unethical. Both thinkers describe beautiful art as a totality, which fails to engage with the Other and does violence to that which it represents. Further, they both equate the beautiful with the promotion of a ludic disengagement from one’s responsibilities to other people, and they acknowledge the ethical potential of art that resists such disengaged idealism. In contrast to Levinas, however, Adorno does not remove so-called ugly artworks from the aesthetic sphere. Stemming from a non-ontological engagement with the world, conventionally ugly aesthetics operate as a privileged medium for the expression of alterity. The next section will draw on this point to examine how Adorno’s aesthetic theory presents the possibility for the artwork to function ethically.

Adorno's Negative Dialectics and the Ugly

Adorno's assertion of the ethical potential of ugly art is closely related to its origin in the so-called archaic period of human history, prior to the development of identity thinking and its beautiful counterpart, when people related to nature via mimesis rather than conceptualisation. As Ross Wilson notes, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer use the term mimesis neither in the Platonic sense of an accurate representation of an object, nor in the Aristotelian sense of a representation of something that might exist, both of which are forms of identity thinking (2007, 20).⁷ Rather, they use the term to denote an unconscious embodied imitation, in which the subject models itself upon the phenomenon in question.⁸ "Mimetic behavior," Morton Schoolman explains, "is the assimilation of the subject to the object, of identity to difference, an orientation leaving intact and unharmed the being of the object" (1997, 64). Adorno and Horkheimer propose that this way of being is evident in the magic of a "shaman," who responded to the fear of nature by mimicking that which was feared: "The magician imitates demons; in order to frighten them or to appease them, he behaves frighteningly or makes gestures of appeasement" (1944, 9). However, unlike the concept, the magician was never taken to be "the image of the invisible power," and this way of relating with the world was therefore not one of domination, but of "relatedness" (Adorno and Horkheimer 1944, 10–11). Indeed, later in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer compare mimesis with direct human contact, such as "touch, soothing, snuggling up, coaxing" (1944, 182). Thus, as their associate Jürgen Habermas writes, mimesis

designates a relation between persons in which the one accommodates to the other [...]. There is an allusion here to a relation in which the surrender of the one to the example of the other does not mean a loss of self but a gain and an enrichment. (1981, 390)

In Adorno's and Horkheimer's mimesis, the subject is driven by a desire to interact with the Other in a pre-conceptual manner, which does not set out to establish mastery

⁷ For their respective accounts of mimesis, see Plato's *Ion* (1997b) and *Republic* (1993), and Aristotle's *Poetics* (1984b).

⁸ The unconscious aspect of mimesis is particularly relevant to my discussion of Malfred's aesthetic quest in Chapter Two.

via thought. In contrast to identity thinking, which sees the perceiving subject apply meaning to the world, the Other constitutes the subject.

The way in which mimesis reverses the cognitive processes of the knowing subject does not mean, however, that it is totally distinct from identity thinking. In the application of a concept to an object, the knowing subject maintains an element of mimetic comportment. But such thought does not imitate the object in question. Rather, it imitates the act of domination itself: “The *ratio* which supplants mimesis is not simply its counterpart. It is itself mimesis: mimesis unto death” (Adorno and Horkheimer 1944, 57). Identity thinking negates the ethical potential inherent in mimetic comportment.

Adorno advocates a partial return to a non-identitarian mimetic way of engaging with the world. In one of his 1959 lectures on Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), Adorno states, “it is not the case that I despise conceptual clarity—by no means! [...] But philosophy is really a matter of ‘thinking on thinking,’ as Aristotle defined it, and so the thought processes of logic and the positive sciences have to be subjected to a second critical scrutiny” (1995, 82).⁹ As Cook notes, *Negative Dialectics* constitutes Adorno’s attempt to do so (2008, 10). In this text, Adorno attempts to formulate a way of thinking which retains a mimetic relationship with an object, an approach that he calls negative dialectics, or non-identity thinking. This method resists the solipsism of traditional Western thought by establishing a more equitable interplay between universal and particular, by revealing the “non-identical element” in the “identifying judgment” (Adorno 1966, 150). Echoing Levinas, Adorno attempts to allow for the way in which an object can never be brought under a concept without surplus: non-identity thinking “leads to [the particular’s] otherness without absorbing that otherness. It is defined by that which is outside it” (Adorno 1966, 157). By claiming that there is always more to an object than what identity thinking prescribes, non-identity thinking asserts an object’s potentiality and is therefore utopian: “the means employed in negative dialectics for the penetration of its hardened objects is possibility—the possibility of which their reality has cheated the objects and which is nonetheless visible in each one” (Adorno 1966, 52). For Adorno, Bernstein argues, the aesthetic ugliness of Modernist artworks is the artistic equivalent of this utopian negative dialectic (2010, 213–14). As I

⁹ Adorno is quoting Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* (1984a, 1698).

demonstrate below, like its philosophical counterpart, ugly art criticises the reductionism of identity thinking and beautiful art, giving a voice to that which it represents as a plenipotentiary and thereby conveying alterity.

Like non-identity thinking, the ugly derives from the mimesis of the archaic period, before the development of conceptuality and traditional notions of beauty. Aesthetic conceptions of ugliness, Adorno writes in *Aesthetic Theory*, originate in the pre-aesthetic rites of the shaman: “archaic ugliness, the cannibalistically threatening cult masks and grimaces, was the substantive imitation of fear” (1970, 47). Bernstein notes that, for Adorno, these masks are “primitive mimetic forms, art before there was art, art as still submerged in magic” (2010, 224). Adorno claims that such forms were only viewed as ugly following humankind’s progressive displacement of mimetic comportment via identity thinking and beauty, so that “what appears ugly is in the first place what is historically older” (1970, 47). Ugly art thus emerges for Adorno as a privileged refuge for mimetic comportment. It presents when “not every relation of the *peinture* to the object has been severed” (Adorno 1970, 287). By retaining an element of the ugly mimesis of the magician, an artwork gives voice to that which beautiful art condemns: the non-identical.

One way in which the non-identical appears in ugly art is through formal fragmentation.¹⁰ In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno aligns ugliness with “the incompletely formed, the raw,” and with any element that “opposes the work’s ruling law of form” (1970, 46). By resisting closure in this way, the dis-integrated work of art criticises the totalitarian quality of beauty; it opposes the “annihilation” of the particular through its submersion in the whole (1970, 303). By refusing to neutralise that which is other, Adorno claims, fragmentary artworks adopt an ethical stance: “The disintegration of the materials is the triumph of their being-for-other” (1970, 16). Adorno anticipates this assertion in his essay on Austrian composer Arnold Schoenberg in *Philosophy of New Music*, arguing that “only in the fragmentary work [...] is the critical content liberated” (1949, 97). Only by resisting the reductionism of formal integration can the artwork give voice to the Other. In fact, any attempt on behalf of the artist to create an ethical work will result in formal fragmentation: “What compels the artwork to go beyond itself, beyond its own particularity, seeks its own demise, the quintessence of which is the totality of the work” (Adorno 1970, 52). Enacting a negative dialectic,

¹⁰ I will return to this aesthetic primarily with reference to *The Carpathians* in Chapter Three.

the fragmentary artwork accommodates the particular in a tension with its necessary state as a totality, so that “the whole in truth exists only for the sake of its parts” (Adorno 1970, 187).

In addition to formal fragmentation, the particular finds expression in a mimetic artwork through the inclusion of content (*Inhalt*), which is judged to be ugly by the ideals of a given society. It appears via the inclusion of content that is repressed by a social totality. Ugly content includes, for instance, “the anatomical horror” in the work of Arthur Rimbaud and Gottfried Benn, the “physically revolting and repellent” in that of Samuel Beckett, the “scatological traits of many contemporary dramas,” “anal pleasure,” and “polymorphous sexuality” (Adorno 1970, 46–47). Particularly relevant to the epoch of the Anthropocene, it can also reflect humankind’s destructive relationship with nature by depicting “the ugliness of technology and industrial landscapes” (Adorno 1970, 46). Importantly for any consideration of the ethical potential of art that includes such content, the ugly is primarily socially oriented.¹¹ It originates, Adorno claims, in the depiction of “peasants,” of the “lumpenproletariat” without a voice (1970, 48). By giving voice to the ugly particular, he suggests, art adopts a critical relationship with the “barbaric” mechanisms of repression, with which the beautiful is implicated: “art must denounce the world that creates and reproduces the ugly in its own image” (1970, 48–49). In Adornian notions of art, Lambert Zuidervaart explains, “the truth to be disclosed is primarily social [...]. What needs to be expressed is the suffering of socialized individuals” (1991, 204). Adorno claims that ugly content “decries domination” on behalf of “those who foot the bill for culture” with their “human rights”; such an aesthetic operates as an “expression of suffering under subjugation” (1970, 48–52). Thus, for Adorno, an ugly artwork is not a disengaged object of play which requires interpretation to enter the ethical sphere, as all artworks are for Levinas. Rather, the ugly acts as an ethical medium of critique by making the invisible parts of society visible.

By giving a voice to the non-identical particular, especially the repressed Other, the ugly artwork offers an ethical experience of the sublime, an idea that Adorno formulates in relation to Kant. Like Adorno, Kant, in *The Critique of Judgement*, considers the beautiful and the sublime to be antithetical (1790, 90–93).

¹¹ As I demonstrate in Chapters Two and Three, this is also the case for Frame.

As Emily Brady explains, Kant describes the beautiful as a pleasurable experience associated with the closed form of an object, a totality; in contrast, the sublime occurs during an encounter with the apparent limitlessness of a natural phenomenon, such as a sunrise (2013, 56–57). The latter consists of two moments. First, it occurs when a phenomenon initially exists beyond one’s cognitive grasp. This experience is pleasurable, but it also contains an element of displeasure when the knowing subject is unable to apprehend that which it perceives. Kant describes this feeling in his later book *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* as a “shudder” and a “horror” (1798, 45–46). Second, in response to this initial feeling, the subject regains cognitive control of the phenomenon through the application of the all-encompassing concept of infinity (Brady 2013, 59–60). Kant’s sublime thus demonstrates the limitations of the knowing subject but subsequently reasserts its cognitive domination.

As Stephanie Belmer observes, Adorno’s reformulation of Kant’s sublime stems from his critique of its second moment (2014, 147–53). This part of the sublime exemplifies the tradition of domination inherent in Western thought with which Adorno takes issue: “Kant faithfully presented the power of the subject as the precondition of the sublime” (Adorno 1970, 245). Moreover, Adorno claims that the instrumental domination of nature to which this tradition leads means that nature is no longer accessible to the knowing subject in the way that it was for Kant, thereby precluding the possibility of the sublime experience. As Tom Huhn explains, for Adorno, the sublime “was never just sheer power and complicity with domination”; it was also “the primary means of subjective resistance to nature” (1997, 246). Although Adorno agrees that nature may once have inspired terror when it was “untamed,” the apparent establishment of humankind’s mastery means that this is no longer the case, even though this mastery is only illusory (1970, 65).¹² Because human beings have reduced nature merely to matter to be used, it is no longer experienced as nature. Adorno suggests that what humankind calls nature “does not yet exist” (1970, 74). For Adorno, this domination has become more pronounced with the development of the culture industry, which turns nature into a “nature reserve” and reduces it to a commodity (1970, 68). The domination inherent in Kant’s sublime thus leads to its impossibility.

¹² “The progress of civilization,” Adorno claims, “easily deceives human beings as to how vulnerable they remain even now” (1970, 65).

However, Adorno claims that art enables nature to appear by functioning as a repository for mimetic comportment. “Wholly artifactual,” Adorno writes, “the artwork seems to be the opposite of what is not made, nature. As pure antitheses, however, each refers to the other: nature to the experience of a mediated and objectified world, the artwork to nature as the mediated plenipotentiary of immediacy” (1970, 62). As a result of its mimetic relationship with the world, Adorno suggests, the potential for an experience of the sublime now resides in art: “The sublime, which Kant reserved exclusively for nature, later became the historical constituent of art itself. The sublime draws the demarcation line between art and what was later called arts and crafts” (1970, 196–97). Art offers an experience of the sublime via an aesthetic of negativity, or ugliness. It gives expression to the non-identical by refusing to render it intelligible through the reductionism of beauty, and the “legacy of the sublime” is therefore one of “unassuaged negativity” (Adorno 1970, 199). Ugliness enables art to become “the historical voice of repressed nature, ultimately critical of the principle of the I, that internal agent of repression” (Adorno 1970, 246). Importantly, this relationship with nature extends to human beings. Bernstein notes that, “when arguing for the rescue of a language of nature, it is human suffering Adorno has most in mind” (2004, 154). Adorno’s reformulation of Kant’s sublime stems therefore primarily from an ethical impulse. The Adornian sublime occurs in an ugly Modernist artwork which exists in service of an elusive and oppressed Other, operating as “the echo of suffering” in order to diminish it (Adorno 1970, 39).

The ethical capacity of Adorno’s notion of the ugly is commensurate with Levinas’s formulation of the face. Indeed, because the ugly artwork acts as a medium of expression for the Other, Adorno repeatedly aligns the two phenomena. For instance, he writes that “enigmaticalness peers out of every artwork with a different face,” and that, “by speaking, [an artwork] becomes something that moves in itself” (1970, 127, 176). While the Levinasian face offers an encounter with the infinite alterity of the Other, which overflows its delineated form, the Adornian ugly artwork acts as a site of limitlessness, which exceeds its state as a totality. In bearing the “scars of damage and disruption,” Adorno claims, the ugly Modernist artwork “desperately negates the closed confines of the ever-same; explosion is one of its variants” (1970, 23). Thus, as Bernstein explains, Modern art

bring[s] together in each work a moment of beauty (with its association of closure, harmony, perfection) and a moment of sublimity (the appearing of what exceeds or destroys form), the latter moment revealing the illusory character of the former moment, so that the moment of sublimity or dissonance in the modernist work is the moment in which even the claims of aesthetic subjectivity are relinquished before and for the sake of the object. (2004, 156–57)

Paradoxically, the sublime (formless) aspect of an ugly artwork depends upon its beautiful (formal) counterpart. An artwork exceeds the sum of its material parts, Jarvis explains, because its aesthetic value also depends upon the relations between those parts (1998, 103). Adorno considers this function in relation to a dissonant chord in Ludwig van Beethoven's 1805 *Violin Sonata No. 9*, or *Kreutzer Sonata*, which the former describes in *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music* as “placed most threateningly in the bass register” (1993, 185). Discussing the effect of this chord in *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno writes, “just before the beginning of the reprise of the first movement [...], the secondary subdominant produces an immense effect [...]. The passage only gains significance through its place and function in the movement” (1970, 87–88). As a result of its specific placement within the whole, the ugly chord is akin to Levinas's notion of the face: it “points beyond itself” (Adorno 1970, 88).

As a medium for that which is infinitely other, the ugly artwork calls the knowing subject into question in a manner that recalls Levinas's ethics. Like an ethical experience of the Other's proximity, the ugly work of art follows the initial moment of the Kantian sublime by inducing in its audience a “shudder,” which occurs in response to “being touched by the other” (Adorno 1970, 331). Most importantly, this shudder accompanies the interrogation of the knowing subject, which is the prerequisite for an ethical experience. “In the face of art,” Adorno writes, the viewer undergoes “the annihilation of the I” (1970, 245). During this experience, he suggests, the subject “perceives its own limitedness and finitude” (1970, 245). Hence, Albrecht Wellmer explains that the Adornian sublime is a “shocking, shattering, moving, overpowering” experience, which “loosen[s] the confines of the experiencing ego” (1997, 119). By bringing that which is other into a non-reductive relation, the ugly artwork becomes a medium for an ethical encounter. As Belmer writes, “when understood with respect to Adorno's reformulation of the aesthetic sublime, the

experience of ethics described by Levinas can be extended to include the experience of modern works of art” (2014, 22).

Like Levinas, Adorno considers Celan’s poetry to offer this ethical experience of the sublime. Eschewing the reductive ideology of the beautiful, which aims to violently identify the non-identical, the ugliness of Celan’s poetry tries to speak for the victims of the *Shoah*: “His poetry is permeated by the shame of art in the face of suffering that escapes both experience and sublimation. Celan’s poems want to speak of the most extreme horror through silence” (Adorno 1970, 322). For Adorno, Bernstein explains, the “shame of art” renounced in Celan’s work is “in miniature the shame of reason,” the mode of thought that manifests in Auschwitz (2004, 155). In a manner which recalls Levinas’s assertion that Celan’s poetry is ethical in that its “pre-syntactic,” “pre-logical,” and “pre-disclosing” language eschews the violence of ontology (1972, 41), Adorno considers Celan’s interrogation of “reified consciousness” to present as the dis-integration of its linguistic medium (1970, 321). In Celan’s poetry, Bernstein suggests, “a broken word or an enjambed one interrupts communicative meaning” in order to function as “the agent of the thing spoken about” (2004, 156). In mimicking the fate of the victims to whom it attempts to offer expression, Celan’s poetry renders “organic” language “inorganic” (Adorno 1970, 322). Through its mimesis of “a language beneath the helpless language of human beings,” of “the dead speaking of stones and stars,” Celan’s poetry “becomes the last possible comfort for a death that is deprived of all meaning” (Adorno 1970, 322). For Adorno, as for Levinas, Celan’s poetry involves an encounter with a work that interrupts identity thinking through its concern for, not representation of, the Other. In contrast to Levinas, Adorno maintains that this interruption is an aesthetic rather than a religious experience.

Adorno’s theory of ugliness presents the possibility for an artwork to function ethically in a manner that Levinas does not acknowledge. For Levinas, all art belongs to the realm of the beautiful, the defining characteristic of which is the affirmation of an unethical disregard for the Other. In contrast, Adorno distinguishes between traditional notions of beauty and ugliness. Although Adorno shares Levinas’s antagonism toward the beautiful, considering it to be a manifestation of identity thinking, he distinguishes the ugly artwork as a privileged medium of the ethical. By functioning as a repository for mimetic comportment, in which the artist becomes

assimilated to that which is other, the ugly artwork acts as a medium of expression for the particulars to which it refers, adopting the role of plenipotentiary. This role is primarily socially oriented: the ugly artwork aims to give voice to the vulnerable and thereby to protest the conditions which result in their vulnerability. This act is, in turn, what causes the form and content of an artwork to appear ugly, as it criticises and undermines the identitarian ideals of a given society. Significantly, the role of the ugly as a plenipotentiary of alterity enables it to offer an experience of the sublime, traumatically destabilising the knowing subject and thereby orchestrating an ethical encounter. Adorno's theory of the ugly thus returns to art the capacity to be ethical. The following two chapters will consider Frame's increasing engagement with the ethical potential that such ugliness affords.

Chapter Two

The Beautiful Critique of Beauty in *A State of Siege*

Reading Adorno alongside Levinas, I have argued in the previous chapter that an aesthetics of ugliness presents an ethical alternative to an aesthetics of beauty. For Adorno, the unity and cohesion of traditionally beautiful art—which, in formal terms, frequently finds expression in realism—effects an ontological disengagement from and domination of the human Other. However, Adorno also suggests that an ugly work of art can resist such unethical disengagement. In contrast to the beautiful, the ugly acts a repository for mimetic comportment, wherein the artist becomes assimilated to an object without the utilisation of concepts, acting as its plenipotentiary. This state of being enables the singularity of an object to find expression within an artwork, which manifests through formal fragmentation and the inclusion of content that is repressed by the ideals of a given society, especially human suffering. As a medium for the expression of the vulnerable, the ugly artwork orchestrates an ethical encounter with alterity.

In *A State of Siege*, Frame maintains this ethical distinction between traditional notions of beauty and ugliness. The novel follows retired art teacher Malfred Signal in her attempts to institute an ugly aesthetic, which she calls her “New View,” in the place of the beautiful realist mode of representation that defines her artistic practice (Frame 1966, 46). Echoing Adorno, Malfred acknowledges that her realist aesthetic is a manifestation of the reductive processes of identity thinking. Although she faithfully attempts to replicate the world around her on canvas, she is haunted by her inability to do so. She remains unable to apprehend the uniqueness, to “identif[y] the strangeness,” of that which she represents (Frame 1966, 46). This identitarian approach to art is a reflection of Malfred’s life in her town of origin: Matuatangi, in the South Island of New Zealand. The oppressive influence of her family in this town causes Malfred to lead what Mercer describes as “a grim existence of stasis and rigidity” (1994, 104). Frame presents the success of Malfred’s New View as necessitating an escape from this reified way of being.

Malfred’s relocation to Karemoana, a small island near Auckland, constitutes this escape. Away from her “entanglements with the human family,” Mattina aims to

relate with the world without identity thinking (Frame 1966, 54). She aims to adopt a form of mimetic comportment, which is responsive to the way in which an object may “surge closer to express a need,” and to convey this state on canvas via a New View, which shares much with Adorno’s ugly aesthetic (Frame 1966, 62). For the most part, Malfred is only able to do so unconsciously, dreaming of a non-conceptual relationship with the world that she is unable to maintain upon waking. Only when she is “lying asleep dreaming” does her New View unfold “without hindrance” (Frame 1966, 182). However, by recalling a dream about her recently-deceased mother, Malfred is able to create a single painting that achieves the aims of her New View. Eschewing the obsessive realism of her earlier paintings, this ugly work of art gives voice to her mother’s final moments of life. Following this glimpse of artistic success, Malfred quickly reverts to her previous conceptual mediation of the world, affirming the way in which her “age had put up so many barriers” (Frame 1966, 83). Maintaining her aversion to difference, Malfred eventually disavows any relationship with other people on the island, negating the ethical capacity of her painting.

At the end of the novel, during the final moments of her life, Malfred once more overcomes her identity thinking, beginning to relate with the world mimetically. This development begins when a stone wrapped in verse is thrown through her window, literally and figuratively penetrating her barriers against the outside world. Significantly, this verse presents as an unintelligible ugly work of art, which expresses the suffering of an unknown Other. Similarly, the stone resists Malfred’s cognitive processes, eluding her attempts to name it. By mediating an encounter with absolute difference, the stone and the verse orchestrate a powerful experience of the sublime, shattering Malfred’s powers of cognition to the extent that it results in her death shortly afterward. Malfred’s death means that she is unable to utilise her newly-adopted mimetic comportment in the development of her New View, justifying Delrez’s description of *A State of Siege* as a “record of an imaginative failure” (2002, 150). Significantly, this failure acts as a synecdoche of the realist form of the novel itself. As an artwork that is founded upon the logic of identity thinking, the novel is unable to accommodate the alterity which Malfred’s non-identity thinking begins to make manifest, resulting in the text’s sudden conclusion. Frame thus performs the ethical limitations of her own aesthetic, carrying out what might be described as a beautiful critique of beauty.

Malfred's Beautiful Realism

Malfred's beautiful realist aesthetic presents as a form of identity thinking. Her approach to painting is based upon the dictum that "the eye has laws" and that one must "keep them" (Frame 1966, 89). The extent to which her goal is primarily that of empirical verisimilitude is evident when, considering her artistic method, Malfred recalls, "I study the scene. I am so careful in painting to make the blue blue, the green green. I need so much to have my scenes 'lifelike.' I paint stolidly, faithfully, until I have preserved the river on my canvas" (Frame 1966, 240). Reflecting upon this realist impulse, Malfred notes that her paintings are prized in Matuatangi "for their water-colour likeness to the original scenes" (Frame 1966, 35). Similarly, she recalls "how satisfied she had felt at the Art Society's Exhibition when a visitor, seeing her work, exclaimed, 'But it's *exactly* like the—(river or mountain or picnic scene). I'd recognize the spot *anywhere!*'" (Frame 1966, 78). Hence, to use Adorno's phrase, Malfred's aesthetic takes "photography as its model": it constitutes an ontological attempt to apprehend that which is other within the reductive confines of the artwork (1970, 56).

As a manifestation of identity thinking, Malfred's beautiful aesthetic fails to apprehend the uniqueness of its subject matter. Like Levinas and Adorno, who argue that realist aesthetics are inherently reductive, Malfred observes that her paintings fail to apprehend the essence of the phenomena that they represent:

She'd painted the plains, from sight and from memory, and people had admired her paintings. Yet she knew, now, that in none of her paintings had she ever described the way in which the plains submitted, a world without walls save for the western, dark blue rim of distance, to the invasion of light and air and snow-coloured water.

(Frame 1966, 46)

Echoing Levinas's claim that the beautiful suppresses that which it represents and so "does not give itself out as the beginning of a dialogue" (1948, 131), as well as Adorno's argument that such aesthetic integration causes "the death of the particular elements in the whole" (1970, 52), Malfred's realist paintings are only "*lifelike*" (Frame 1966, 240; my italics). She asserts later in the novel: "still life was my passion, though I never thought, until now, of the incompatibility of the two words.

How can *life* be *still*? Or how can anything which is *still* be *alive* [...]?” (Frame 1966, 157–58). Consonant with Levinas’s assertion that the beautiful cannot lead beyond the materials of which it is made, that “red” only ever “reddens” and “green” only ever “greens” (1974, 40), Malfred acknowledges that, despite her efforts to “make the blue blue” and the “green green,” her paintings fail to amount to more than their constitutive parts; they do not interrupt the knowing subject by operating as a means of expression for the non-identical phenomena upon which they are based (Frame 1966, 240).

Malfred understands this failure to apprehend that which she represents aesthetically in terms of a reformulation of Plato’s ontological allegory of the cave. In the *Republic*, Socrates describes a group of prisoners who are chained facing a cave wall. Behind them, people project images upon the wall using the light from a fire. Unable to move their heads in order to achieve an objective understanding of their surroundings, the prisoners consider these images to constitute reality. If released from the cave, a prisoner would be able to see the real phenomena of the external world, “the actual things themselves” (Plato 1993, 242). In this allegory, the shadows in the cave represent objects in the empirical sphere, while the external world signifies the realm of the Forms, the original phenomena of which objects in the empirical realm are derivative. Socrates claims that access is attained to the realm of the Forms only through the establishment of rational knowledge (Plato 1993, 244). In *A State of Siege*, Malfred attempts to gain access to the external world via art, a practice which, as noted in Chapter One of this thesis, Plato disparaged for its irrationality. However, Malfred’s realist aesthetic fails to achieve this aim. When she is deciding which paintings to take to Karemoana, Malfred, “the champion of shadows,” realises “how sentimental, colourless, were the images she had made of the scenes that were dearest to her” (Frame 1966, 189, 37). Her paintings reveal the extent to which “the fire shovels” of Plato’s cave are “well in command of her life” (1966, 127). Malfred’s reference to this allegory thus links her realist aesthetic to identitarian modes of knowledge, and it suggests that neither practice is able to lead beyond the limitations of the knowing subject to the actual things themselves. As Malfred notes, “you can encircle [the shadow of a tree] with a boundary of chalk, but it will escape, and watching it grow or diminish, you are envious of its intimacy with light” (1966, 133).

Malfred's image of a chalk outline that is unable to contain the thing itself also evokes that traced around a dead body, linking the representational function of Malfred's beautiful aesthetic with violence. In an effort to apprehend her subject matter on canvas, Malfred substitutes her own idealistic conception of an object for the object itself, depriving the latter of its individuality: "I raise my hand to paint; I may end by striking; I fancy that I can wield well a paint brush, a pencil, crayons, that I may be able to brand, as painters do, my individual vision of the world" (Frame 1966, 218–19). Malfred's pedagogy as an art teacher reflects this evidently unimaginative and violent approach to art. She recalls that she spent her teaching years "pouncing on faulty 'shadowers,' trying to instil the 'sense of proportion' that in her probationary years meant persuading schoolgirls to 'match' the sides of shovels and vases, to make distant mountains distant, near faces near" (Frame 1966, 37). Similarly, she describes the paintings which her students make about a recent trip to Wellington as "so uninspired, so lacking in colour and originality, that it seemed as if the visit [...] had had the effect of an application of DDT" (Frame 1966, 45). Such images are the products of Malfred's identitarian "habit of dutiful looking, of seeing what was there, and what others agreed was there" (Frame 1966, 45). The aesthetic violence which Malfred fosters in her students is accompanied by physical violence against the students themselves:

She remembered rapping a little girl over her knuckles because the outline of the sketched autumn sycamore leaf and seed had been broken. She remembered, now, the fear she had known at the sight of the leaf and seed not completely imprisoned in a firmly defined BB boundary. (Frame 1966, 91)

This passage reveals the Adornian relationship between the violence of Malfred's beautiful aesthetic and her "old fear of the unknown" (Frame 1966, 84). Malfred expresses this impulse explicitly when, listening to the sounds of the ocean at her new home on Karemoana, she asserts, "I must make something rational, eternal from this animal screaming" (Frame 1966, 82). As Delrez explains, Malfred's realist aesthetic arises from her "need to tame the darkness besieging the world by wielding power over [it]" (1992, 133). Her realist paintings emerge as an attempt to dominate that which is other.

Malfred's suppression of that which is other is a product of her life in Matuatangi, where she is continually subject to the identity thinking of others, leading her to feel as if she is "bound in someone else's dream" (Frame 1966, 41). As Delrez notes, much of this repression is the result of "the overbearing personality of her late father" (2002, 137). For Malfred, the "legend" of her father is omnipresent:

Drinking fountains, seats, gates, foundation stones, trees, all had been named after Francis Henry Signal. He was on the Mayoral Roll in the Town Hall, in the records of past Library Committees (Athenaeum and Mechanics Institute) and the Boys' High Honours Board [...]. He'd climbed mountains, too, named peaks in the Southern Alps, had been mentioned in the country's history. (Frame 1966, 35)

A caricatural "Apollo-like" bronze statue, which reflects the town's notions of the heroic male at the expense of Francis Henry's actual appearance, perpetuates this legend (Frame 1966, 35). While Malfred remembers her father as a "slight, shy, brown-eyed man," whose body "did not seem to have the right shape," the statue features a firm chin, an erect head, and a determined, "almost regal" stance (Frame 1966, 35). Paul Matthew St. Pierre suggests that this legend provides Matuatangi with an identity, and that such objects as the "drinking fountains, seats, gates, foundation stones, and trees" function as "biosemiotic signifiers" of Malfred's father (2011, 170). As a result of Francis Henry's pervasive reputation, Malfred is reduced to being her "father's daughter," a "verdict" from which she feels unable to escape for as long as she lives in Matuatangi (Frame 1966, 34).

Malfred also experiences this sense of imprisonment in relation to her dying mother, Mary Signal. When the matter of her mother's care arises, Malfred's siblings coerce her into assuming the responsibility on the basis that "here, there and everywhere, the unmarried eldest daughter cares for the aging parents" (Frame 1966, 216). In a manner that recalls Adorno's and Levinas's alignment of identity thinking with Nazi Germany, Malfred hyperbolically compares this "wordless" family arrangement to a "dictatorship" and a "judgment without jury or appeal" (Frame 1966, 217). The extent to which this responsibility limits Malfred's life is evident in her assertion that "an invalid is a whole world, sheets are sky and cloud, lanolin is swamp, face and body are quarter-acre sections that mustn't be abandoned" (Frame

1966, 217). Mary's personality also exerts a considerable influence upon Malfred's art. The former's repeated "stocktaking" of her medical equipment, such as "the bed cradle, the commode, the bed pan," and "the liniments, pills, injections," is an antecedent to Malfred's denotative approach to painting, in which she obeys "all the laws of seeing" to ensure that "distance is blue. Snow is white. Sunsets are pink. The sun rises in the east and sets in the west" (Frame 1966, 41, 175). As for Malfred, Mary's denotative stocktaking stems from a desire to eradicate that which is outside of the self. Malfred describes her as being "enclosed, not in a space capsule in preparation for a voyage that would give her a wonderful view of the stars, of eternity, but in one of those medical capsules, the skin of which is dissolved, digested, by those who swallow them" (Frame 1966, 43).

Malfred claims that her restricted life in Matuatangi contributes to her becoming a "walking cliché" (Frame 1966, 130). Her responsibilities to Mary result in her seeing herself merely as a repetition of historical figures. In order to come to terms with the burden, Malfred "live[s] her own autobiography, consoling herself that so-and-so, in history, had cared for her mother" (Frame 1966, 180). This mediation of her identity leads Malfred to assert that "her role had become fictional" (Frame 1966, 180). Malfred expresses her frustration at this repression of her identity, noting,

sometimes when she saw a woman passing who seemed to be the same age as herself, to wear similar clothes, who might, in other circumstances, have been her, Malfred had the impulse to call out to her, "Wait! Wait!" as if she were calling to herself or some part of herself. (Frame 1966, 180)

Malfred's typicality reflects Frame's continued engagement with the ontology of Plato and the tradition of Western philosophy to which it belongs. As I have mentioned, for Plato, empirical phenomena derive from "the actual things themselves" in the original intelligible realm. Plato's ontology thus exemplifies the reductionism of identity thinking in that it reduces an individual object to being an inferior derivation of a universal ideal. Considering this function in relation to Frame's 1970 novel, *Intensive Care*, Drichel notes that one can consider the murder of three significant female characters, who are linked by their violet-coloured eyes (Frame 1970, 30, 208, 266), to epitomise the implications of such ontological

reductionism, as they are treated as lesser versions of an ideal, original woman (Drichel 2009, 195). Although no one actually murders Malfred, the identity thinking of Matuatangi represses her personality to the extent that she is almost interchangeable with other women of similar appearance. This way of thinking can be read as the result of what Adorno calls the culture industry, which denotes the capacity of consumer culture to propagate the homogeneity of society as it “integrates its consumers from above” (Adorno 1963, 231). Observing the effect of this force upon herself, Malfred admits that “the creased, brown shot-silk torn lining of her handbag” reveals “her conformity [...]. *Handbag, gloves, shoes to match*. The creed, so faithfully learned and followed” (Frame 1966, 51–52). Similarly, during a dream in which she observes a woman that closely resembles herself, Malfred expresses her desire to “break free” from her “brown costume,” which “has stolen her shape as its rightful possession” (Frame 1966, 221–22).

Malfred’s attainment of a New View that eschews the reductionism of her beautiful realism therefore requires that she escape from her reified way of life in Matuatangi. In order to create an artwork that conveys more than an inferior shadow of an object and thereby offers more than the sum of its material parts, she must cease her ontological mediation of the world which is induced by her town of origin. To use Delrez’s words, Malfred’s eschewal of “the rigidities of realistic representation” necessitates an escape from “fifty-three years of caged experience” (2002, 143, 137). Malfred’s relocation to Karemoana represents an attempt to relate with the world without identity thinking, the artistic limitations of which are evident in the comparison of her mind to a “prison ‘two inches behind the eyes’” (Frame 1966, 63).

An Ugly New View

Malfred’s aesthetic quest to relate with the world without ontological barriers is commensurate with that of an earlier Framean artist figure: Zoe Bryce, in *The Edge of the Alphabet* (1962). Considering her acquaintance’s occupation as a prostitute, Zoe frames her aesthetic goal as a traversal of the boundaries between self and Other: “Let me lie down with you in pretence. Let us be empty shapes of people, like those negatives of photographs and all that remain are shadows enclosed in a boundary of frothing light” (Frame 1962, 475). As Cindy Gabrielle explains, for Zoe, such “empty shapes” enable a “free circulation between inside and outside, the living and the dead, the self and the world” (2011, 280). Gabrielle maintains that communion with that

which is outside of the self is a prerequisite for an “authentic condition of both being and memory” because it enables Zoe to “commemorate the dead” (2011, 280). The aesthetic relevance of such authenticity is evident in the fact that Zoe’s sole work of art, a “silver forest” made from the “conventional paper shape” of the lining of a cigarette packet, exists in remembrance of the suffering of those who cannot speak for themselves: “it is the loneliest shape I have ever seen, that little dent, this twist at the top of the dead silver branch, the eyes in the faces of the dead people, the layers of snow on their faces, their clothes bunched, hiding the loneliness of their body” (Frame 1962, 476–77). Zoe’s silver forest demonstrates the extent to which the creation of an artwork that moves beyond mere representation necessitates a non-conceptual engagement with alterity.

Extending this reading to *A State of Siege*, I suggest that Malfred’s quest for a New View constitutes an effort to achieve an Adornian form of mimetic comportment and to convey this state via the totality of the artwork as a negative dialectic. Malfred repeatedly expresses her artistic goal in these terms. Referring again to her reformulation of Plato’s allegory of the cave, wherein shadows represent ontology, she expresses her desire to unite the conceptual and the non-conceptual, the universal and the particular, when she dreams of “the earliest most vivid kind of writing,” which folds “the shadow within the object itself” (Frame 1966, 174). Malfred affirms this desire to accommodate the particular within an artwork as a whole when she recites John Clare’s 1848 poem “I Am”:

untroubling and untroubled here I lie
the grass beneath, above the vaulted sky. (Frame 1966, 181)¹³

As Sara Guyer explains, Clare’s poem demonstrates the destabilisation of the Kantian I. That the poem ends with the speaker lying down indicates, for Guyer, the extent to which the knowing subject is “too weak to maintain the order of things” (2015, 54).¹⁴ The poem also orchestrates this destabilisation through the amphibology of the final line (one can consider the “grass” to be “above the vaulted sky”). As Guyer explains,

¹³ Frame misquotes this poem slightly. The original lines read: “Untroubling and untroubled where I lie / The grass below—above, the vaulted sky” (Clare 1848).

¹⁴ As Guyer notes, the subject’s horizontal placement is further reinforced in the original text through the use of an em dash rather than a comma in the final line (2015, 54).

this amphibology is a “catastrophe” for the stability of the knowing subject because it implies that the world may be “turned upside down” (2015, 55). Thus, Guyer proposes that the poem orchestrates an ethical form of “depersonalification” (2015, 55). Malfred’s recitation of these lines highlights the extent to which the success of her aesthetic quest depends upon the interruption of the ontological barriers which keep her metaphysically upright as a knowing subject. To give voice to the non-identical particular via the totality of an artwork, to allow the sun’s light to “splash onto her paper or canvas,” Malfred must adopt a mimetic state; she must live “in communion with mountains and rivers and shrubs and valleys” (Frame 1966, 173, 237–38).

In keeping with the ethical capacity of mimetic art to give voice to the voiceless, Malfred aligns her New View with Adornian notions of ugly content. Her intention to paint on an island, a place which is separated from the country’s mainland, is commensurate with Adorno’s assertion that the ugly particular is that which “established culture has repressed” in response to a fear of the unknown (Adorno 1970, 19). That is, the latter is split off from consciousness in the way that the former is split off from the mainland. Malfred, herself an ugly peculiarity as a retired female schoolteacher,¹⁵ makes this point on her way to Karemoana:

Malfred could not help thinking of all the small islands she had known or read about, that had been used throughout the centuries to confine the vicious, the unloved, the diseased. The natural exiling power of islands had never been forgotten, and never would be, as long as man had the desperate need to put out of his sight the living embodiment of those things in himself that he most hated and feared. (Frame 1966, 58)

Affirming this affinity with that which is exiled by mainstream society, Malfred expresses a desire to paint that which “haunt[s]” her: “the mangrove in its sordid, calm, sinister bed of grey mud; its harsh dusty leaves; [...] the scene, twice a day when the tide came in, of the almost submerged plants, like sinister evidence of a drowned miniature forest” (Frame 1966, 80). As Cronin notes, such objects present as ugly because of their resistance to Malfred’s identity thinking: “The menace of the mangroves lies in their residual autonomy. They are immune to Malfred’s attempts to

¹⁵ Maria Wikse writes that, as a retired, single woman, Malfred “upholds a negative identity position in the heteronormative system” (2006, 63).

impose interpretations upon them” (2011, 44). Most importantly, however, the ugliness of the mangroves is social. Malfred associates the plants with “two families of children, Maori and Pakeha,” with “ragged patched clothes” and “thin faces and limbs,” who play nearby (Frame 1966, 81). For Malfred, the elusive mangroves thus function as the embodiment of human poverty; to paint them is to give expression to those with whom they are associated whilst eschewing the ontological reductionism of the beautiful. Malfred explicitly expresses her desire to create such ethical art when she asserts, “I have this dream of a vast imaginative force [...] that quells prejudice, suspicion, that acts as a beam to draw distant countries close, so that each sees, with instinctive vision, the needs of the other” (Frame 1966, 89).

Frame aligns such ugly art with the possibility of an ethical experience of the Adornian sublime. To recall my discussion in Chapter One, the Adornian sublime is a reformulation of the Kantian sublime. Whereas Kant’s sublime occurs during an encounter with nature, ending when the knowing subject apprehends the phenomenon via the idea of the infinite, the Adornian sublime occurs during an encounter with mimetic ugly art, which acts as the plenipotentiary of human and non-human nature whilst refusing to render it intelligible.

Malfred’s opportunity to create an artwork which offers an experience of the Adornian sublime presents during her encounter with an elusive “element” that besieges her new home. Like the source of the Adornian sublime, which includes nature and human beings, the element on Karemoana constitutes human and non-human nature. As Cronin writes, it is “a social, human element” and “an elemental force” (2011, 45).¹⁶ This duality is conveyed by Malfred’s repeated “indulgence in pathetic fallacies” (Frame 1966, 236). For instance, she expresses a fear that the “chaos” of a storm “will emit life” as “a human beginning thrust from the inhuman natural scene,” and she wishes to “deny” the light that is “battering, hammering, pleading” to enter her home (Frame 1966, 82, 191). Like Levinas’s notion of the human being, who perpetually remains “absolutely other” (Levinas 1961, 39), this element remains resistant to Malfred’s cognitive processes. When the heart of the storm passes over the island, it creates a silence which Malfred is unable to apprehend: “She struggled to ally it to her past experience—to death, tiredness, soundlessness; but it was no use” (Frame 1966, 169). Echoing Adorno’s assertion that identity

¹⁶ Anna Smaill notes that, throughout her oeuvre, Frame conveys otherness via “images of sky and sea”: i.e. elemental forces (2009, 78).

thinking increases the knowing subject's ignorance of an object (1966, 149), Malfred's attempt to cognise the silence instead overwrites it with sound: "The silence could not last, Malfred knew. Already it was collapsing at its boundaries, settler noises were making their way into the lonely, fertile place where they could make their homes, breed their sounds" (Frame 1966, 170). The potential that this experience holds for the creation of a sublime work of art is evident in Malfred's observation that "there was some action she should have taken while she had been alone in the silence" (Frame 1966, 170). Arguably, what she should have done is to have engaged with the silence mimetically. Discussing this apparent missed opportunity, Cronin describes Malfred's identitarian approach to the silence as "a failed reading practice," and she asserts that "where Malfred focuses on the pursuit of essences, Frame emphasises the interaction between the perceiving consciousness and the perceived object" (2011, 43). Were Malfred able to engage mimetically with the alterity of the element that besieges her, she might transport this sublime experience into a work of art.

One of Malfred's previous students, Lettice Bradley, exemplifies this mimetic state of being. Lettice is an Adornian ugly particular: Malfred describes Lettice's home as a "rough-cast, flat-roofed bungalow," and she associates her with "the Maori who 'knew' the land" (even though she is Pakeha), linking her to a culture that is repressed by the country's dominant colonial ideology (Frame 1966, 136, 138).¹⁷ Recalling a rare class in which she asked her students "to illustrate a Maori legend," Malfred describes her shock at the quality of Lettice's "unusual painting of Maui's fishing" (Frame 1966, 135). For Malfred, the picture demonstrates the extent to which Lettice "'knew' the legend, with the biblical force of the word 'knew'" (Frame 1966, 135). Malfred, who is unable to lower her ontological barriers against the world, is "awed" by Lettice's ability to do so, to "absorb, as a mindless sponge absorbs food from the sea, the myths and legends of her own country" (Frame 1966, 135–36). By linking Lettice's pre-conceptual interaction with the world as a "mindless sponge" to the quality of her illustration, Frame demonstrates the important role that mimesis plays in artistic creation. By allowing herself to be "apprehended by the soul of her own country," Lettice is able to give it a voice via the unconventional portrayal of a suppressed legend (Frame 1966, 136).

¹⁷ As Gabrielle notes, Lettice appears as "a white indigene of sorts" (2010, 218).

Echoing Adorno's alignment of mimetic comportment with the unconscious, Malfred, for the majority of the novel, is only able to relate with the world like Lettice in her dreams. This limitation is evident in the two versions of her sexual encounter with her "unofficial" fiancé, Wilfred (who later dies during World War II), in the fernhouse of the Matuatangi gardens near her home (Frame 1966, 86). In her first account of the event, responding to the damp coldness of the environment, Malfred suggests that they should leave, and Wilfred responds by kissing her. However, Wilfred then engages in a form of "narcissism" instead of interpersonal encounter:

Wilfred, a deep flush spreading under his skin, said, "Excuse me," and went behind the wet, black-barked treefern, and she thought as they linked arms, easily now, and walked out of the fernhouse that the white specks and spatters on the fern looked like a new kind of mildew, a disease that the ferns had caught through being there, in the fernhouse, at that moment. (Frame 1966, 150)

Later in the novel, Malfred revisits this experience in a dream. This iteration of the event includes a more significant encounter, which she describes as "the physical invasion of love," and the "fusing" of "identities" (Frame 1966, 72, 209). Envisioning this event, Malfred asserts, "I did not, as I need to remember that I did, turn Wilfred away or mock him but I loved him with my body and with my thoughts" (Frame 1966, 209).

The veracity of either account is perhaps of lesser importance than what they reveal about the relationship between Malfred's unconscious and her capacity to relate with the world mimetically. Only in a dream is she able to accommodate a version of the event that involves the literal "invasion" of otherness, the ethical implications of which she highlights:

however much I may distort it or dream it, we gave ourselves to each other, without thinking of the consequences—I do not mean the looming physical consequences, but those ruled by the deeper, more frightening facts of arithmetic: I have myself. I give myself. Therefore, I have nothing left. (Frame 1966, 210)

Engaging with each other mimetically, Malfred and Wilfred assimilate themselves to the needs of the Other. Further, in her dream, Malfred aligns this mimetic state with the eschewal of her usual mode of realist representation, noting that such aesthetics only do violence to the event itself: “I could say, ‘We made love,’ but that is too swift and general a statement, it robs me of my essence, of my having been myself, and of his having been himself, Wilfred. Therefore, I will not try to describe it” (Frame 1966, 209). Instead of using language primarily denotatively, Malfred conveys the event using a form of free association: “Its place among the ferns and bush was right. It is elements—earth, air, fire, water—each time with a particular element in ascendance. There, it was water—creeks, drains, dew, stagnant pools, waterfalls, and finally, sea, sea bed” (Frame 1966, 209). Malfred’s dream version of her experience with Wilfred demonstrates the extent to which a non-conceptual interaction with alterity, and its expression via an ugly aesthetic, is “an act of courage” that she can only carry out unconsciously (Frame 1966, 210).

Maintaining her unconscious mimetic comportment, Malfred creates a painting which employs her New View in her dreams prior to doing so in waking life. “If Malfred fails to couch her vision on canvas,” Delrez writes, “it nonetheless finds oneiric expression in sleep,” when she comes closest “to a post-individualistic conception of the human person” (2002, 145, 147). Before she leaves Matuatangi, Malfred dreams of the sole painting that she will eventually create in Karemoana:

The night her mother died Malfred dreamed that she walked in a room carpeted with tubes of lanolin with their caps dislodged so that the stuff squirmed in a greasy mess over her best shoes; then the blue tubes of lanolin changed to tubes of oil paint [...]. She smiled in her sleep. “I’m painting mother,” she said. But in the morning when she woke she did not remember her dream. (Frame 1966, 43)

Obviously, this dream painting is not traditionally beautiful. It is a “greasy mess,” which Malfred makes by standing on tubes of lanolin and paint. It also eschews Malfred’s aesthetic of empirical verisimilitude by referring to her mother without the employment of any obvious figural quality. Enacting a form of mimetic comportment, which originates with the subject becoming assimilated to the unknown, Malfred imitates her mother’s death in order to convey it on canvas, an act which leaves her

with “bad breath” and “a nasty taste in her mouth” from “the tide of death that had come in” (Frame 1966, 43). By engaging with that which is other, Malfred successfully orchestrates her New View, albeit in a dream. Even though Malfred is unable to recall this dream upon waking, it is the source of the only painting that she makes on Karemoana.

Prior to making the real version of this artwork, Malfred is tempted to employ her previous realist aesthetic, taking photography as her model:

Her first impulse that came easily along its well-worn track was to look out of the window, to look from sea to paper to sea, to paint the sea, blinking her eye, like the shutter of a camera, capturing its agreed appearance, shape, form, texture. (Frame 1966, 78)

A desire to touch the paint with her fingers, to eschew the paintbrush and to contact the work directly, accompanies this realist impulse. However, Malfred ultimately aligns the act of touching the artwork with the reductionism of her realist aesthetic. In making direct contact with a painting, Malfred believes, the artist takes “something from his work rather than giving to it” (Frame 1966, 78). In an effort to allow the painting to be more than a projection of her identity thinking, to be more than an extension of the I, Malfred chooses to paint “by proxy, using a brush or pencil,” thereby maintaining an element of distance between herself and the artwork (Frame 1966, 78).

When Malfred prepares her paints, she notes that the names of the colours are “enough to set her dreaming again,” demonstrating the way in which mimetic comportment is closely linked to the unconscious (Frame 1966, 78). Re-enacting her creation of the “greasy mess” in her dream, Malfred mixes lanolin into her paint and commences an artwork that is based upon her mother’s death:

The sickly smell of the lanolin made her shut her eyes with remembered horror. There was no foam on the real sea like that which frothed its creamy sweetness, smelling of death, on those blue and green waves flowing in from the wide oceans of the world. The lanolin blossomed as death had blossomed in the last hour of old Mrs Signal’s dying. (Frame 1966, 79)

By lowering her conscious ontological barriers against the world, Malfred is able to create an artwork that eschews her beautiful realist aesthetic: it refers to her mother, yet it is based upon the waters that surround Karemoana. Unlike her earlier paintings, which function to distance that which is other, this ugly artwork acts as a repository for Malfred's mimetic engagement with the memory of Mary's death, blossoming as Mary's death blossomed in her final hour and thereby giving a voice to a person who is unable to speak for herself. The extent to which this artwork mediates an encounter with an Other is evident in Malfred's subsequent description of the lanolin in the painting as a "storm," linking it to the elemental other to whom she denies entry into her home (Frame 1966, 80). Moreover, unlike her earlier realist paintings, which she considers to be lifeless representations, this ugly piece gives Malfred cause to consider the way in which an artwork is comparable to a living thing, noting that it "can rise more accusingly than any child who cries, 'You conceived me!' to say, 'You painted me; you wrote, composed me!' An artist must always live always with this accusation" (Frame 1966, 79). By lowering her ontological barriers and allowing herself to become a "mindless sponge" like Lettice, Malfred is able to create a painting in line with her new aesthetic vision of ugliness. But this mimetic state does not last.

Malfred's Reversion to Identity Thinking

Immediately following her completion of the painting, Malfred returns to her previous identitarianism. Attempting to regain cognitive control over the process of the artwork's creation, Malfred outlines the afternoon's events denotatively, attaching a name to the work (as a means to identify it) in the process: "I went to the bathroom, and from the shelf [...] I took tubes of lanolin which I mixed with tempera paint. Then I painted the sea. I have called my painting *My Last Days in Matuatangi*" (Frame 1966, 79). Reverting to her appreciation of the beautiful, Malfred attempts to disavow her role in the creation of the ugly painting, telling herself that the lanolin, which "ooze[s]" out of the work, is only "a substance in the paper" (Frame 1966, 79). Accompanying this rejection of the ugly is her rejection of the artwork's ethical capacity, as Malfred denies the painting's relationship to the death of her mother: "No one could make out in this foam of lanolin the arm of someone being drawn under by the waves [...]. There are no people in my painting. *No people*" (Frame 1966, 79–80).

Malfred's renouncement of the ugly thus corresponds with her renouncement of the Other, resulting in her failure to develop an ethical New View.

To some extent, this failure is unsurprising, given the fact that Malfred ultimately premises her artistic quest upon a desire for solitude. She expresses this hermetic aim during a stop in Auckland on her way to Karemoana, describing the latter as being "far from the vulgar crowd" and noting her approval that the island's small population means that there will be "no intrusion of people" into her paintings (Frame 1966, 53). This pursuit of isolation manifests in Malfred's new life in Karemoana when she establishes multiple "barriers" between herself and the world: her layers of skin and clothing take refuge within the small room of a small house, which is built at the top of a hill on an island (Frame 1966, 83, 61). Malfred constructs these defensive barriers deliberately, a fact which is apparent in her description of the ocean surrounding Karemoana as a "lovely wall of sea" and in her comparison of the exterior of her house to a "defensive inviolable membrane" (Frame 1966, 118, 96). In turn, Delrez notes that Malfred is displeased with a gap in her ceiling because it constitutes a flaw in her defence system (2002, 144). Such an exclusion of the Other, Levinas argues, precludes ethics:

The separated being can close itself up in its egoism [...]. And this possibility of forgetting the transcendence of the Other—of banishing with impunity all hospitality (that is, all language) from one's home [...] evinces the absolute truth [...] of separation. (1961, 172–73)

For Levinas, this separation is the "reverse" of "transcendence" (1961, 173). It is also the reverse of that which Malfred seeks to achieve in her New View: the transcendence of the self through a mimetic relation with the Other.

This solipsistic existence occurs despite Malfred's natural desire to relate with other people. As I have argued, Malfred's effort to create ugly art is inextricably linked to its ethical function of engaging with and giving a voice to the Other. Malfred maintains this desire for intersubjective relationships even as she erects the aforementioned barriers against them. For instance, upon her arrival on the island, "delaying the moment when she would walk into her new home," Malfred goes to a phonebox to enquire about the transportation of her belongings (Frame 1966, 59). Similarly, when Malfred finally arrives at her home, she immediately begins to take

actions which facilitate communication, walking to a post office to buy stamps despite not having any letters to send, and contacting the telephone exchange in order to connect her home phone (Frame 1966, 76–77). Observing these paradoxical acts of connection, she notes, “for someone [...] who has retired, to contemplate the natural scene, I’m going to extraordinary lengths to make sure I’m in touch with people” (Frame 1966, 77). Malfred’s social impulse also appears when she expresses a wish that the “walls” of her house would “break apart,” and that her “door” would “open” (Frame 1966, 190). As a result of this tension between sociality and asociality, “Malfred,” Isabel Michell writes, “fails to incorporate any other elements (even as she claims to desire those elements)” (2009, 101).

Malfred’s suppression of her own social impulses exemplifies the way in which the identitarian subject necessarily turns upon itself. In order to dominate that which is other via conceptuality, Adorno and Horkheimer claim, the thinking subject must repress its own innate human nature. As Cook explains, “if we have demonized the natural world by turning it into an alien Other, something similar can be said about our relations to our own internal nature” (2011, 46). In *A State of Siege*, Malfred’s identity thinking suppresses her own internal nature in the context of a Platonic ontology, reifying the typicality of her “fictional” Matuatangi identity from which she attempts to escape. Malfred learns that her new home in Karemoana was previously owned by another “elderly woman” who had “retired from teaching” (Frame 1966, 122). Similarly, the photographs that this woman leaves behind reveal that, like Malfred, her father was a mountaineer, her fiancé was a soldier, and she had helped to “bathe” one in need (Frame 1966, 160–61, 167). Such similarities lead Malfred to feel that “perhaps now there was no one to whom she was closer than the former owner of the house” (Frame 1966, 167). Moreover, Malfred believes that another version of herself will move in when she is gone: “I could be the woman who died in this house, or the one who will follow when I die” (Frame 1966, 130–31). Thus, pre-empting *Intensive Care*’s violet-eyed women, Malfred sees herself as one link in a chain of ontologically defined and reduced particulars; she is one more example of an “off-the-peg personality,” whom one can find “here, there and everywhere” (Frame 1966, 130, 216). Her withdrawal from society contributes to the further erasure of her individuality in much the same way that the apparently tyrannical author of *Living in the Maniototo*, who wields a “powerful cleanser” called the “Blue Fury,” erases one of the novel’s characters in a “flash” (Frame 1979, 56–

57). Like the Blue Fury, which, Daria Tunca proposes, demonstrates the way in which the ontological function of language can be abused as a tool of enforced “cultural assimilation,” Malfred’s identity thinking threatens to “sweep” her own selfhood “away” (Tunca 2006, 38).

An Ethical Encounter

Although Malfred fails to orchestrate her New View in any sustained way, the final moments of her life involve an ethical disruption of her cognitive processes and her adoption of a form of mimetic comportment. As Cronin suggests, the end of the novel involves “a rupturing of Malfred’s interpretative system” (2011, 46). This process is precipitated by a Framean *deus ex machina*: a stone wrapped in text, thrown by an unidentified Other, crashes through her window. With the penetration of the building’s “inviolable membrane,” Malfred’s carefully attended identitarian barriers against the unknown begin to disappear: “the domestic, everyday, conventional armour wears thin” (Frame 1966, 242). The element, which Malfred personifies throughout the novel, follows the stone into her house: “The wind, waiting at the window, leapt through the ragged gap, flapping wildly at the curtains; and, in a moment, the storm had entered the room, the wind was whistling through the house, all the curtains were dancing wildly” (Frame 1966, 242–43).

The stone’s ethical role in precipitating the destruction of Malfred’s ontological barriers is reinforced by the verse in which it is wrapped. Ruth Brown describes this text as a “Jabberwockian poem” (1993, 55). Attempting to read the work, Malfred finds that it is an unknown language:

*Soltrin, carmew, desse puniform wingering brime
commern in durmp, a farom a ferinwise lumner,
sturph, wolpe [...].* (Frame 1966, 243)

As an unreadable medium of encounter between Malfred and an unknown author, the poem carries out an ethical disruption of her identity thinking. Although Monique Malterre discusses the symbol’s relation to passages from the *Book of Revelation* (1978, 90–91), and Mark Williams begins to draw meaning from the verse phonetically (1990, 42–43), Cronin observes that any attempt to transcribe the verse into symbolic language merely re-enacts Malfred’s ontological apprehension of the

world, making “the object knowable by reducing it to the known” (2011, 49). The poem’s ethical quality is pronounced further by the fact that, scrawled across the text, “in red crayon, [are] the words, *Help Help*” (Frame 1966, 243). This plea for help recalls one of Frame’s earliest artist figures: Daphne Withers, in *Owls Do Cry* (1957). Daphne’s sister Francie dies in a fire at a rubbish dump as a child, while the “Council man” who attempts to save her cries, “help, help, or get a doctor, or help!” (Frame 1957, 98). Thinking at least partly of this event, Daphne “sings from the dead room” of the psychiatric hospital where she is a patient as an adult about people who “cry inside themselves, *Help, Help*” (Frame 1957, 65). Daphne recalls this plea for help once more when she returns a letter from her wealthy but repressed sister, Chicks, “with the words Help help help” written at the end (Frame 1957, 193). The words thus signify the suffering of Daphne and those with whom she empathises. This intertextual relationship between *Owls Do Cry* and *A State of Siege* reinforces the way in which the plea for help in Malfred’s Jabberwockian poem functions to give voice to the suffering of an Other.

Following her encounter with this poem, Malfred observes the stone around which it was wrapped, noting that it also resists identity thinking. Perhaps the stone is an aesthetic counterpart to the verse, constituting an art object? As with her engagement with the memory of her mother, which she conveys in *My Last Days in Matuatangi*, Malfred anticipates her non-conceptual encounter with this stone in a dream: “I study the stones, picking up those that appeal in their shape and colour, pocketing some, thinking how smooth stones are, how accomplished in their being” (Frame 1966, 240). Malfred’s dream encounter with these stones is primarily sensory. As a result, she is able to experience the individuality of the stones rather than reducing them to exemplars of a type, as derivations of a Platonic ideal in the intelligible realm. Malfred maintains this assertion of an object’s particularity when she picks up the stone that is thrown through her window, noting that “she wanted it to be a river stone but she knew it was not. She could not name it [...]. Yet she held it fast in her hand until it seemed that it lost its chill and grew warm with promise of sun” (Frame 1966, 244). Like her encounter with the Jabberwockian poem, Malfred’s encounter with the stone involves an unmediated engagement with difference, with a non-identical thing-in-itself.

By disrupting Malfred’s ontological mediation of the world, the stone and the verse orchestrate the literal dis-integration of her identity. Echoing Levinas’s

description of an encounter with the Other as a form of trauma, during which “one can no longer say what the ego or I is” (1974, 82), as well as Adorno’s formulation of the sublime, which triggers “the annihilation of the I” (1970, 245), Malfred dies following this experience, before she has the chance to utilise her mimetic engagement with the world as part of her New View.

I want to propose that Malfred’s failure fully to develop an ugly New View stems from the realist form of the novel itself. Throughout *A State of Siege*, Frame provides a plausible explanation of events, whilst those that are implausible occur, as St. Pierre notes, in Malfred’s imagination (2011, 165). For instance, Frame foreshadows Malfred’s sudden death, perhaps the most “unrealistic” event that occurs outside the confines of Malfred’s mind, with references to the warning signs of a heart attack. Early in the novel, afraid of the element’s knocking, Malfred’s heart “thud[s] against her breast, hitting and hurting, as if it were a shape of cast iron,” and pain travels “down her arm, extending itself like an iron rod” (Frame 1966, 97). Similarly, when Malfred wakes from a dream, she experiences “a sudden pain over her heart,” and her face turns “pale” (Frame 1966, 234). Hence, without directly contradicting Delrez’s suggestion that Malfred “dies [...] with the onset of her quest,” and that *A State of Siege* depicts a point in her journey in the “afterlife” (1992, 130), or Gabrielle’s development of this premise in her reading of the novel alongside the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Gabrielle 2011, 279), the novel makes sense in purely realist terms.

Malfred’s failure to relate with the world mimetically and to convey this state on canvas is thus in keeping with the realist logic of the novel in which she appears. Were she to survive her encounter with absolute alterity and to continue to relate with the world without concepts, and were Frame to attempt to convey this way of being, the novel would necessarily engage in a performative contradiction. Frame would be faced with the paradoxical task of identifying that which is non-identical, of representing the unrepresentable. Maintaining “the gesture that says ‘this is how it was,’” the realist form of *A State of Siege* is unable to include that which eludes cognition (Adorno 1954, 33). The novel must end when Mattina begins to engage with the non-identical particular without the mediation of identity thinking, inviting difference into the ontological fiction in which she exists. The text thus concludes when the laws of realism allow it to go no further. To convey the success of Malfred’s quest necessitates an accommodation of the non-conceptual within the conceptual

whole of the text. In other words, it necessitates an aesthetic of non-realist ugliness rather than realist beauty.

In *A State of Siege*, Frame critiques the ethical limitations of the beautiful complicitously. Her portrayal of Malfred's artistic quest demonstrates the way in which a beautiful realist aesthetic presents as a manifestation of identity thinking. Emerging in response to a fundamental intolerance of difference, Malfred's realist paintings serve to violently reduce that which is other to the Same, stripping an object of its alterity. In contrast, through her portrayal of Malfred's attempt to develop a New View, Frame shows the reader how an ethical aesthetic can appear when an artist adopts a form of mimetic comportment, becoming like an object rather than forcing an object to conform to the processes of cognition. Enacting this way of being would allow Malfred to engage with a particular on its own terms, acting as an object's plenipotentiary and allowing its singularity to manifest within the totality of an artwork. Frame aligns this mimetic engagement with the world with Adornian notions of ugliness. Malfred's New View would give voice to the Other who is repressed by the ideals of her society via a dis-integrated aesthetic, which resists the reductionism of the beautiful. By aligning Malfred's tendency to exclude difference with the eventual failure of her quest for an ugly New View, Frame highlights the incompatibility of ethics and the beautiful. *A State of Siege* affirms this incompatibility by ceasing to accommodate Malfred when her final moments of mimetic comportment begin to contradict its realist logic. Frame thereby explores the ethical restrictions of her own mode of artistic representation, ending the novel at the cognitive impasse at which Malfred herself arrives: the non-identical particular. Appropriately, in a discussion that involves Adorno, the ethics of the novel's aesthetic might be said to operate dialectically: it becomes ethical by revealing the extent to which it is unethical. Frame's later novel *The Carpathians*, to which I will now turn, shares this concern for the ethics of artistic representation. But while *A State of Siege* critiques the beautiful from the inside, *The Carpathians* orchestrates its explosion, demonstrating the way in which an ugly work of art might function ethically. The ethical ugliness of *The Carpathians* is the focus of the following chapter.

Chapter Three

The Ethical Ugliness of *The Carpathians*

If someone were to write “a book on Ethics,” Ludwig Wittgenstein suggests, “this book would, with an explosion, destroy all the other books in the world [...]. Ethics, if it is anything, is supernatural and our words will only express facts” (1965, 7). For Wittgenstein, as for Levinas and Adorno, ethics is beyond the denotative capacity of language. It lies outside the necessary reductionism of identity thinking, with which the enclosed form of the beautiful is associated. As I have argued in the previous chapter, *A State of Siege* demonstrates this ethical limitation. Malfred cannot sustain an ethical aesthetic because she is unable to engage with the world consistently without the mediation of conceptuality. The non-identical particular with which she wishes to relate exists outside the bounds of her ontological mode of knowing and representing the world. The success of her quest to create an ethical artwork thus requires the destruction of the identity thinking upon which her art is based, and the adoption of a form of mimetic comportment, wherein she engages with and gives voice to the non-identical.

Frame orchestrates this destruction of identity thinking in *The Carpathians*, offering a vision of where Malfred might have taken her aesthetic, had she been able to move beyond her cognitive limitations. The later novel follows wealthy New Yorker Mattina Brecon, who travels to the small New Zealand town of Puamahara. As in *A State of Siege*, Frame presents Mattina’s journey as a critique of the identitarian function of beautiful realist representation. Driven by a desire to gather knowledge about other countries and their inhabitants, Mattina attempts to create a cohesive set of facts to represent her neighbours living on Kowhai Street. Like Malfred, Mattina ultimately finds, however, that such empiricism is unable to contain the individuality of her neighbours, so that any attempt to do so ultimately presents as a violent act of cognitive appropriation.

Frame interrupts Mattina’s quest to create a beautiful collation of facts with an artwork that resists such identitarian impulses. Upon beginning to read a manuscript by her neighbour, Dinny Wheatstone, Mattina becomes a character in the story. The text thus reverses Mattina’s ontological attempts to represent the world by causing her

to become a representation herself. But there is more to Dinny's manuscript than mere representation. Engaging with the world mimetically, her story expresses that which is outside the limitations of knowledge: the singularity of the vulnerable inhabitants of Kowhai Street. By eschewing the beautiful unity of aesthetic identitarianism and giving voice to the Other in need, Dinny's manuscript appears as an ethical ugly artwork. The story enables Mattina, as a reader, to suspend her own identity thinking and to encounter her neighbours at the level of their particularity.

Mattina resolves to contribute to an artwork that maintains Dinny's ugly aesthetic when her neighbours vanish as a result of the cataclysmic effects of the Gravity Star. Causing the explosion of the logic upon which conceptuality is based, this phenomenon highlights the vulnerability of Mattina's neighbours by depriving them of any known language and causing their subsequent disappearance. Despite its destructive function, the loss of logical conceptuality enables a more ethical state of being, beyond the limitations of factuality; it presents the possibility for "a new language, a new people, a new world," and "perhaps the end of known civilisation as human cognition" (Frame 1988, 173). Mattina aims to employ this ethical engagement with the world in a work of fiction which gives voice to her lost neighbours, so that her relationship with the town comes to be "founded on love" rather than ontological domination (Frame 1988, 189). Dying of cancer, Mattina is unable to complete this artwork. But, upon her return to New York, Mattina passes on her memory of Kowhai Street's residents to her author husband, Jake. Continuing Mattina's ethical quest to return to her lost neighbours a means of expression, Jake travels to Puamahara himself, resolving to pass on his experiences of the town, along with Mattina's notes, to their novelist son, John Henry. Should the effects of the Gravity Star extend to New York, Jake believes, his son might write the novel that Jake "never could have written" (Frame 1988, 278). In the novel's final paragraph, the reader discovers that the novel John Henry writes about these experiences is actually *The Carpathians* itself. Utilising the ethical conditions brought about by the Gravity Star, John Henry bases the novel upon a series of logical impossibilities concerning the circumstances of its authorship, so that the novel itself perpetually eludes comprehension. *The Carpathians* therefore constitutes a "book on Ethics," conveying the voices of its elusive characters and thereby offering the reader a sublime encounter with alterity.

Mattina's Quest for Beauty

Echoing Malfred's journey to Karemoana in *A State of Siege*, Mattina's trip to Puamahara presents as an artistic quest. Possessed of an "urgency" to "'know' how the rest of the world live[s]," Mattina travels to Puamahara on the basis of the legend of the Memory Flower, which tells of "a young woman, chosen by the gods as collector of the memory of her land" (Frame 1988, 39, 29). The woman releases this memory when she eats a "ripe fruit from a tree growing in the bush," and, in doing so, she paradoxically "taste[s] the yesterday within the tomorrow" (Frame 1988, 29). Following this experience, the woman becomes a storyteller, perpetuating the presence of the past through the narration of memory. She eventually disappears, leaving a tree with a single blossom called the Memory Flower. By travelling to Puamahara, Mattina aims to learn about this legend and the town in which it is set. Maintaining this interest in the importance of storytelling, Mattina hopes to pass on the details of her trip to Jake, who is struggling with a severe case of writer's block. The notes that she makes on her journey, Delrez suggests, function as a literal "pre-text" for Jake's fiction (2002, 204). Thus, while Mattina is not strictly an artist, her trip to Puamahara serves primarily aesthetic ends.

In her attempts to gather and convey information about Puamahara, Mattina's mode of representation is initially one of beautiful verisimilitude. She aims to collect information about the town, and to collate this data into a "clean collection of facts" (Frame 1988, 139). To this end, Mattina begins to observe Kowhai Street under the guise of a visiting researcher and author, telling her neighbours that her goals are "study, research, and so on," and describing herself as a writer, "more or less" (Frame 1988, 48, 68). She subsequently carries out a form of "sociological survey," as she attempts to apprehend the "*truth*" about the town: "She walked up and down Kowhai Street [...]. She examined everything and everyone, filling her exercise books with notes, her cassettes with recorded sounds (Frame 1988, 33, 116, 120).¹⁸ Mattina's realist knowledge gathering is highly comprehensive. For instance, she takes note of individual pieces of rubbish, the sounds of the radio that issue from her neighbour's window, and the smells of a cooked lunch at a nearby retirement home (Frame 1988,

¹⁸ All citations of *The Carpathians* from pages 83 to 169 come from Dinny's narrative. However, a preliminary effect of the Gravity Star's subversion of logic is that Mattina's experiences within Dinny's manuscript also occur in her objective realm. It is therefore justified to treat Mattina's experiences within Dinny's manuscript as independent occurrences.

120). In gathering this information, Mattina hopes to “make a collection of people whose lives and ‘truth’ she had discovered and *knew*” (Frame 1988, 117). The impulse of Mattina’s quest is thus toward the establishment of an identitarian totality. As Dorothy F. Lane notes, by creating a sociological representation of Kowhai Street, Mattina attempts “to contain it” (1995, 124). By unifying disparate particulars into a cohesive body of knowledge, Mattina aims to “take from Puamahara an image of beauty” (Frame 1988, 142).

Mattina’s quest to retrieve a totalising “image of beauty” is part of a broader trend of travelling to “foreign” countries and attempting to gather information about their inhabitants (Frame 1988, 116). As Alison Lambert suggests, in *The Carpathians*, Kowhai Street “serves metonymically for all strange places” (1993, 105). Mattina makes her first journey to Nova Scotia in an effort to escape the debilitating effects of Jake’s writer’s block. In Canada, she purchases land and lives in “a small fishing village,” where, she claims, she “got to know the people, really got to *know* them” (Frame 1988, 198). Similarly, following her “next serious rift” with Jake, Mattina travels to the Bahamas and buys an island called “Cloud Cay” (Frame 1988, 200). This trip also sees Mattina attempt to “get to know (and possess) the people,” a possession which becomes uncomfortably literal in that Cloud Cay is home to “a handful of Bahamans who for three generations had cooked, cleaned and waited on the household of the owner of the island” (Frame 1988, 179, 200). Following her visit to Cloud Cay, Mattina believes, by “asking numerous questions,” and by writing “cheques for thousands of dollars for the needy and the sick,” that “she had again acquired knowledge of life in a foreign land” (Frame 1988, 201). Departing the Bahamas for New York City, Mattina asserts, “with a furious sense of possession, I *know* them, I *know* them” (Frame 1988, 202). The harmful effect of this “sense of possession” becomes apparent when it forms the basis of Mattina’s excuse for accidentally poisoning the sea life of a nearby lagoon by washing her hair with detergent: “It’s *my* island, she thought. I bought it, paid for it” (Frame 1988, 202). Mattina’s travels thus constitute a process of intellectual and physical mastery. As Lane suggests, Mattina’s wealth acts as “the justification for domination and ownership” of the objects which she attempts to cognise (1995, 125).

Her processes of domination notwithstanding, Mattina’s travels arise from an ethical desire to encounter horizons beyond her own. Paradoxically, her journeys to secluded communities around the world are, at least in part, attempts to escape the

isolation that she experiences as a wealthy person in New York. Mattina highlights the way in which the city's busy nature leads her to feel disconnected from the external world as she grows accustomed to the quietness of Kowhai Street:

Here, in Puamahara, the absence of noise that in New York acted as a sound barrier, resulted in isolated sounds rushing in bringing the flotsam and jetsam of discord, with each sound insistent, forcing her to trace its origin. (Frame 1988, 63)

The absence of noise in Puamahara brings Mattina into a closer relationship with that which is other. In accordance with Adorno's assertion that the non-identical particular exists in opposition to the beautiful universal, Mattina experiences the town's unidentifiable "isolated sounds" as an ugly form of "discord." In feeling forced to "trace" their origins, she temporarily engages with these ugly sounds via a form of Adornian mimesis, accepting the irreducibility of the particular rather than subjecting it to the processes of cognition. As a result of her mimetic engagement with these sounds, Mattina claims that there is "more noise" in Puamahara "than she'd ever heard from their apartment in Manhattan" (Frame 1988, 62). The town thus offers Mattina an encounter with the unknown, causing her to feel on the "verge of darkness," and to note that "if you dig the thin skins of your garden you may stare down at the spinning earth and the stars" (Frame 1988, 36).

Mattina's desire to encounter difference by travelling to foreign countries extends to her relations with other people. Recalling her isolated life in New York, Mattina notes that she would often gaze from her "tightly closed" apartment windows "at the distant traffic and crowds or across to the screened offices in the buildings across the street—upstairs warehouses with more furniture and appliances than people" (Frame 1988, 153). Her sense of aloneness is exacerbated by her wealth, which "buy[s] perfection in others, total efficiency," and which causes those around her to "smooth the sharp edge of their honesty" (Frame 1988, 38). Because of her privileged status, Mattina is "untroubled" by any "invasion" of the Other; at the price of developing real relationships, she remains "unread by glancing eyes" (Frame 1988, 75). A desire to escape this sense of isolation, to reach out to the Other by learning about a different way of life, partly motivates Mattina's overseas sojourns. Described in an introductory chapter of the novel as "a thriving New Zealand town of English,

Scottish, Welsh, Central European, Chinese, Pacific Island immigrants,” as well “the original dwellers, the Maoris,” Puamahara seems to offer such an encounter (Frame 1988, 33–34). As Gerardo Rodríguez Salas suggests, Puamahara appears to hold the “potential for otherness and the coexistence of difference” (2013, 161).

However, Mattina’s knowledge gathering ultimately has the opposite effect: it distances her from those with whom she wishes to relate. Mostly limiting her travels to Kowhai Street, Mattina only encounters a small segment of the cultures that purportedly live in the town. Further, although she spends two weeks questioning them, Kowhai Street’s residents remain elusive. Mattina is never able to “capture the human force” of those whom she questions, conceding,

I have shared conversations, drunk coffee, eaten meals, gathered facts.
I have discovered few secrets [...]. I know they have not accepted me.
It might seem so, but I am merely the American researcher, the visiting
would-be expert to whom they have fed their information. (Frame
1988, 143, 140)

To recall, Adorno proposes that “the more relentlessly our identitarian thinking besets its object, the farther will it take us from the identity of the object” (1966, 149). An increase in an ontological method of knowing the world, which forcefully subsumes a particular under a universal, further alienates the knowing subject from the singularity of an object. In *The Carpathians*, Mattina’s identitarian quest for beauty does not bring her closer to Kowhai Street’s inhabitants, but reinforces her own foreign status as a “visiting would-be expert,” increasing her alienation from the objects of her attention. The interpersonal distance which Mattina’s quest brings about leads her to admit later in the novel that she “did not really live among” her neighbours and to compare other people to “sheer cliffs” with no “clinging-place for her fingers or toes” (Frame 1988, 222, 116). Recalling Malfred’s ontological barriers in *A State of Siege*, Mattina begins to believe that people are “unable to look beyond their Waitara stone cladding” (Frame 1988, 228).

Frame thus presents Mattina’s quest for beauty as a form of narcissism, which is antithetical to an ethical relation with the Other. By attempting to “break the distance between herself and ‘the others’” through the establishment of knowledge, Mattina aims to become “the dreamed-of centre of the circle” (Frame 1988, 119–20).

Frame hints at the narcissistic aspect of Mattina's identity thinking when, among the flowers that are beside her letterbox in Puamahara, Mattina sees "narcissi" (1988, 43). This association of narcissism with Mattina's attempt to communicate with others presents again when she imagines making a phone call home to Jake: "She decided that if she phoned Jake in New York he might be too far away to understand the drift of her conversation; besides, overseas calls were full of echoes: you spoke and it was you who answered" (Frame 1988, 122–23).

Frame aligns Mattina's narcissistic attempts to apprehend her neighbours with violence. Her attempts to reduce the Other to the Same via ontology constitute an effort to remove their alterity, a function which is evident in Mattina's affirmation of Jake's comment that "words covered everything" (Frame 1988, 65). Similarly, the novel's narrator claims that identity thinking can "destroy and declare not to exist what [one] does not know" (Frame 1988, 36). The "penultimate Madge," a Kowhai Street resident who is murdered in a home invasion prior to Mattina's arrival, also evokes the violence of identity thinking in a conversation with her niece Olga. Responding to the elderly Madge's claim that she speaks "the language of another age," Olga says, "even *I* use words that are out of date. And where have all the *creeks* gone, and the *paddocks*?" (Frame 1988, 56). By asking this question, Olga implicitly enacts the role of the identitarian subject: either an object appears solely on the ego's terms, or it is considered not to exist. This exclusionary capacity defines Mattina's quest for beauty. As Delrez explains, Mattina's beautiful realism "restricts the scope of her research," so that it proves to be "an inadequate medium of representation" (2002, 205).

Dinny's Interruption of the Beautiful

Mattina's quest to create a realist "image of beauty" is interrupted by a work of fiction which resists such identitarian impulses. This interruption begins when Mattina's neighbour Dinny, a self-described "imposter novelist," leaves a manuscript of her third unpublished novel in the letterbox of Mattina's new home (Frame 1988, 73). As Mattina begins to read the manuscript, her ontological attempts to apprehend the world are reversed, and she is reduced to being a character in her own story. This *mise en abyme*, titled *Wheatstone Imposter*, constitutes one of the four sections of *The Carpathians*. Through her manuscript, Dinny aims to engage with the world rather than to apprehend it as a unified form of knowledge, and she believes that such realist

aesthetics as Mattina's are unsuited to this task. Echoing Adorno's assertion that empirical verisimilitude is "almost absolutely opposed" to that which it represents (1970, 322), Dinny suggests that an artist's effort to achieve cognitive "closeness" with an object can actually "obliterate" it (Frame 1988, 72). To some extent, Dinny proposes, this obliteration is unavoidable: even non-linguistic mediums, such as "music," "painting," and "dancing," dress a phenomenon in conceptuality, "in words" (Frame 1988, 84). But by eschewing the urge to identify that is inherent in realism, Dinny aims to engage more intimately with the non-identical particular, which one encounters "only through the listening, watching heart, the language of feeling" (Frame 1988, 84). To this end, Dinny asserts from the outset of her manuscript that her story about the residents of Kowhai Street is to be mostly nonfactual and unrealistic. There is to be "no guarantee of truth" in her fiction: "I do not claim it is an accurate perception but it is wholly presented as a vision. I know you all, I know your past, your present and future, yet I have not created you, I have merely 'seen' you" (Frame 1988, 83). Frame thus orchestrates the interruption of Mattina's ontological quest with an artwork that aims to interact with a phenomenon on its own terms.

This aesthetic engagement with alterity necessitates a form of mimetic comportment; it requires the subject to make itself like an object rather than to subsume it under a reductive universal. The extent to which Dinny's manuscript functions as a repository for this way of being is evident in her assertion that it stems from a form of "imposture," in which "one inhabits all worlds except the world of oneself" (Frame 1988, 84). Her mimetic fiction gives her "leave to occupy all points of view," whilst she remains "nothing and no-one" (Frame 1988, 74, 83). Like Zoe in *The Edge of the Alphabet* and Malfred in *A State of Siege*, Dinny aims to become like an empty shape, relating to the world without ontological boundaries and accommodating difference. She thus rejects what Valerie Sutherland describes as the "unique and unified perspective of the author" (1993, 110). To recall, by interacting with an object mimetically, an artist is able to give it a voice, functioning as its emissary. This ethical engagement with a phenomenon is also integral to *Wheatstone Imposter*. By occupying "other people's points of view" in her art, Dinny aims to give a "point of view to others" (Frame 1988, 74, 85). In doing so, her fiction operates as a refuge for the Other's fictional survival. "Although the inevitable deceit [...] of language has built for us a world of imposture," Dinny asserts, "we do survive within

it” (Frame 1988, 84). In Levinas’s words, Dinny’s fiction is ethical in that it “maintains the Other” whom it “invokes” (1961, 73).

I have argued in Chapter One that the particular appears in a mimetic artwork through two forms of aesthetic ugliness: formal fragmentation and the inclusion of content that is excluded by the ideals of a given society (especially the suffering of the oppressed). Such ugliness criticises the reductive processes of identity thinking and beautiful art, which forcefully subsumes a particular under a cohesive and harmonious whole in an attempt to eradicate otherness. As I demonstrate below, Dinny’s mimetic manuscript mobilises both forms of ugliness by giving a point of view (thereby fracturing any unified projection of the author) to many of the vulnerable inhabitants of Kowhai Street (the manuscript’s ugly content). In doing so, she enables Mattina, as a reader of the text, to develop a relationship with her neighbours that previously eludes her.

Isabella Maria Zoppi writes that “the inhabitants of Kowhai Street offer a specimen of the marginalized side of the New Zealand population” (1999, 153). One such inhabitant to whom *Wheatstone Imposter* gives voice is Hercus Millow, a “retired sergeant major” (Frame 1988, 101). As an ex-soldier, Hercus is preoccupied with his memories of World War II, spending “several hours of each day and night” living “in the German camp” (Frame 1988, 102). Following the death of his wife and friends, as well as a recent stroke, Hercus leads a solitary life. The danger of this isolation becomes evident when he is unable to rouse help following a fall: “he’d banged and yelled and thumped the ground, but nobody heard him” (Frame 1988, 105). Having once considered himself to be “a great reader,” Hercus is now unable to muster the concentration that he requires to read, resulting in a “sense of loss” which brings him to the point of tears (Frame 1988, 106–7). Deprived of agency, Hercus resorts to listening to whatever music the radio station offers, while he waits for a death that he expects to occur “sooner rather than later” (Frame 1988, 105).

The way in which *Wheatstone Imposter* gives voice to Hercus’s vulnerability extends to that of another Kowhai Street resident, Connie Grant. Following the death of her second husband, Connie relocates from England to Puamahara on the encouragement of her son’s family, the Townsends. However, upon her arrival, Connie feels persecuted by the standards of cleanliness of her daughter-in-law, Dorothy, and by the apparent lack of affection from her grandchildren, Hugh and Sylvia. Expressing her worries to Mattina (in Dinny’s fiction) she says, “I’ll never

have the place clean by the time Dorothy comes home. She's so fussy. And the children don't understand. They don't want a grandmother" (Frame 1988, 138). Having sold her house and belongings in England, Dorothy feels displaced: "I'll never get used to living here. They won't let me go home. And now they tell me they've bought me a flat, with my own money, mind you, and I'm moving in, two days from now, and I've got no things" (Frame 1988, 138). As a result of her sense of precariousness, she says, "I'm so lonely I cry myself to sleep in my little room. I've no-one and nothing left" (Frame 1988, 139).

Dinny's manuscript shows that, like Hercus and Connie, retired poultry farmer and Navy wireless operator George Coker leads a solitary life. In Dinny's story, he tells Mattina that his wife died shortly after they moved to Puamahara to retire, and that she has been gone for "a good few years now" (Frame 1988, 145). Of his three children and fifteen grandchildren, only one daughter visits him. Most of his friends have passed away, leading him to be "more or less alone in the world" (Frame 1988, 145). George's vulnerability becomes most evident when he dies suddenly a day after Mattina's visit, and his home is sold immediately, without regard for his wishes: "He'd want the place sold at once,' a voice said, engineering the usual takeover of the wishes of the dead who, no matter what their legal power might be, have relinquished their say, their point of view" (Frame 1988, 146).

The vulnerability of Kowhai Street's older residents extends to the younger Shannon family, an observation which Mattina makes prior to Dinny's imposture. Upon meeting Mattina for the first time, mother Renée Shannon immediately hints at the sense of inferiority that she feels for living in a small New Zealand town. After learning that Mattina is American, she says, "you must come over and tell us about Miami. I've always wanted to go to Miami. The Everglades" (Frame 1988, 71). Renée's husband, Ed, repeats this expression of cultural veneration. Meeting Mattina in the computer store where he works, he asks her, "what do you think of this set-up? I suppose you see plenty of this in New York?" (Frame 1988, 77). For Mattina, the remarks of Ed and Renée equate to a "cultural doffing of the cap to the Master," and they irritate her with their "exposure of the sense of inferiority that she'd heard had gone from New Zealand" (Frame 1988, 77).

Mattina learns much more about the Shannons' vulnerability through *Wheatstone Imposter*, in which she visits the family twice for a meal. During one of these visits, Renée reiterates her frustration at living in a small town in a small

country, complaining that she feels “so far away” in Puamahara (Frame 1988, 95). Similarly, she tells Mattina that she would “give the earth to be living in Auckland,” which she later compares to New York (Frame 1988, 100, 164). This desire to be closer to a Western cultural centre is also evident in the Shannons’ possessions. For instance, as the narrator of the story, Dinny highlights the value that the Shannons attribute to their computer when she describes it as “the remaining member of the Shannon family” (Frame 1988, 88). Ed reinforces this description when he says that he would like to add another room to the house because its equipment requires so much space (Frame 1988, 88). A significant reason for the Shannons’ interest in the computer is the warning by “experts [...] from overseas” against being “computer-illiterate” (Frame 1988, 90). The family’s attachment to the device therefore emerges in response to a fear of inadequacy in relation to the values of Western society. Dinny observes that, as a symbol of such cultural oppression, the computer functions as a “drug,” which causes Ed and his son, Peter, to become “pale” and to develop “dark circles under their eyes” (Frame 1988, 91). Like their computer, the appliances in the family’s “modern kitchen” function as an expression of their socio-economic anxieties rather than sources of pleasure (Frame 1988, 93). Dinny describes this part of the house as a source of “unease,” suggesting that “the sense of rest denied by the clean surfaces of the kitchen whiteware” is evident in the family’s “used eyes and lips and hands” (Frame 1988, 93). Dinny’s manuscript thus reveals the oppression of the Shannons by Western society’s ontological definitions of success.

This cultural vulnerability is not limited to the town’s settler identity, but includes the Maori community to which Hene and Hare Hanuere belong. As with the Shannons, Mattina encounters this vulnerability prior to Dinny’s imposture, when she meets Hene at the local convenience store where she works. When Mattina assumes that Hene knows about the legend of the Memory Flower “in the Maori language,” Hene says that she must “get by with English” (Frame 1988, 49). Although there is a renewed investment in Maoritanga, Hene explains, the effects of colonialism cast a long shadow: “It’s the younger generation that are speaking Maori. I’m learning, you know, it’s not so easy when you’ve been brought up Pakeha, but it’s coming back. The trouble is, it’s been away so long” (Frame 1988, 49). The cultural repression of which Hene is a victim presents again when, as Mattina leaves the store, Hene says, “arrivederci,” a phrase that Mattina describes as “the universal television goodbye supplanting all other languages” (Frame 1988, 50).

Hene's displacement becomes most evident via Dinny's fiction, in which Mattina accompanies Hene to her community's marae, which is tellingly located "out of town" (Frame 1988, 33). Recalling Lettice Bradley's "rough-cast, flat-roofed bungalow" in *A State of Siege* (Frame 1966, 136), the "small village" to which the marae belongs speaks of financial hardship: "the land [...] held about six dwellings, old, with corrugated iron roofs and weatherboards from which the paint had long ago faded and peeled. The houses were bare bones, unclad, untiled, with old-fashioned sash windows, the cords having broken" (Frame 1988, 127). Discussing the community's difficulties, Hene says that they have "rescued" many of their young people from "the Court" and "from prison" (Frame 1988, 127). Similarly, they retrieved Hene's cousin, Riki, from "a mental hospital," where he was a patient for thirty years (Frame 1988, 131). Hene compares their state as an at-risk indigenous community to that of "the tribes of the far south on that TV programme *The Beautiful World*," who are "distant enough from the rest of the world to be thought not to have feelings and lives of [their] own" (Frame 1988, 128). Hene's community thus emerges as a victim of the identity thinking of New Zealand's colonial powers, which represses Maori culture as an unwanted form of otherness.

Despite the community's vulnerability and oppression, *Wheatstone Imposter* shows how it acts as a site of resistance to such identity thinking. This resistance stems from the mimetic comportment of Hene's cousin Rua, who possesses, Dinny writes, "a wisdom that could not be ignored" (Frame 1988, 132). As she teaches Mattina about flax weaving, Rua stresses the importance of relating and working with a phenomenon on its own terms rather than attempting to master it. "First," she begins, "you must *know* flax. I know flax and flax knows me. You understand the sort of knowing I mean?" (Frame 1988, 131). Rua's reference to knowledge piques Mattina's interest, and the latter responds affirmatively, "with rising excitement at the recognition that here was *her* kind of knowing" (Frame 1988, 131). However, Rua's notion of knowledge turns out to be the opposite of Mattina's. Reversing the knowing subject's application of concepts to the world in order to make it knowable, Rua's way of knowing necessitates the constitution of the subject by the world:

flax *knows* about you, your life, your secrets, and when you plant it, it's there watching you, knowing you; you can hide nothing from it [...]. Yes, you must have a special feeling about flax to be able to grow

it, cut it without making it bleed, scrape it without hurting it, and weave it without going against its wishes. (Frame 1988, 131–32)

Engaging with the flax mimetically, the weaver must adapt itself to the object's individuality, instead of exploiting it as an example of the species as a whole. Rather than replicating the homogenising identity thinking of the dominant culture under which she and her community live, Rua opposes it by presenting an ethical alternative. Hence, while Penelope Ingram is correct in suggesting that the Hanueres' attempts to revive Maoritanga do not offer "a return to authenticity," the community does not merely "negotiate their culture in [an] already-colonized space" (1999, 96). Rua's mimetic comportment acts as a site of resistance to the oppressive processes of colonisation. To use Adorno's words, Dinny's manuscript "decries domination" by giving voice to the oppressed (1970, 49).

Perhaps the most vulnerable character to whom Dinny's fiction gives voice is the near-mute autistic girl, Decima James, who is unable to express herself in an established language. In *Wheatstone Imposter*, Mattina learns of the isolation caused by Decima's struggle with language when she visits her parents, Gloria and Joseph James. Discussing Decima's condition, Gloria says,

she hears everything, she sees everything, and if I say "Sit down," she sits down, but she's lost to us, she could be thousands of miles away [...]. She knows her name. Decima. But she doesn't seem to know where she is or who she is or that what she's doing is called living. And she has no words. No word from her, not a word. (Frame 1988, 157–58)

Confirming Hene's suggestion later in Dinny's manuscript that "the further away you are, the less you are known, the more easily you may lose your state of being human," Decima's linguistic isolation results in her dehumanisation (Frame 1988, 128). The people responsible for her care are unable to tolerate her alterity. Because there is no apparent cure for Decima's autism, Gloria claims, doctors have ceased to "busy themselves" with her care (Frame 1988, 113). Her doctors thus enact Adorno's and Horkheimer's claim that the identitarian subject knows things only "in so far as he can manipulate them" (1944, 9). When Decima's condition eludes the manipulation of

her doctors, she loses her status as their patient. Despite making such complaints about those charged with Decima's medical care, Gloria and James appear to be guilty of the same neglect. Unable to bear "the burden of their daughter," Gloria and James send Decima away to the Manuka Hospital, which is situated "on the edge of town" (much like the Hanueres' marae), only bringing her home for one hour every two months (Frame 1988, 114, 160). *Wheatstone Imposter* thus highlights the way in which Decima's exclusion from society stems from an intolerance of difference.

However, much like Rua, Decima acts as a site of resistance to this identitarian dehumanisation. Although she is unable to express herself in any dominant mode of communication, Decima is not without language. Her communicative capacity presents most clearly at the end of *The Carpathians*, when Jake visits her at Manuka Hospital. During his conversation with a hospital employee,¹⁹ Jake learns that Decima has "gestures, cries, movements of her body—an incredible range of communication—but no words. She'll never say, 'I remember'" (Frame 1988, 270). Significantly, the employee's description of Decima's language focuses on her eschewal of an ontological I: her language operates as a medium of ethical expression and interaction rather than identitarian denotation. Free of the "castle and keep of spoken language," Jake suggests, Decima engages with the non-identical, the "infinite silence" of the "buffeting, battling, hurting world" (Frame 1988, 263). In other words, like Rua, Decima relates with the world mimetically. In *Wheatstone Imposter*, Dinny presents Decima's body as literally reflecting such interaction, as Mattina compares her face to a "used cast," which is "scarred, probably from numerous encounters with furniture, falls from heights she insisted on climbing" (Frame 1988, 159). Jake's observation of Decima at the end of *The Carpathians* highlights the ethical potential of this way of being in the world. Pulling Decima and her friends along on a cart, he notes that the children show "no anger or argument about possession and 'rights'" (Frame 1988, 271). As a result of Decima's non-conceptual and non-possessive character, Jake believes that people such as her function as "special touchstones, gauges set with diamonds, to measure human possibilities and impossibilities" (Frame 1988, 263). As Delrez argues, Decima is the "human embodiment" of "repressed dimensions of individual experience," and

¹⁹ The woman's position at the hospital is ambiguous. Frame simply describes her as wearing "a white overall" and associates her with the hospital's "administration building" (1988, 268, 270).

Manuka Hospital is thus a “repository of disowned sensibilities” (2002, 207).

Although the ethical capacity of Decima’s mimetic comportment mostly appears outside the confines of *Wheatstone Imposter*, by giving voice to the character, Dinny endorses her non-identitarian mode of being.

Dinny’s advocacy of a mimetic interaction with the world extends to her engagement with Mattina’s aesthetic quest. *Wheatstone Imposter* stages Mattina’s encounter with a non-identical particular beyond the limits of her ontological pursuit of beauty: “passing from the obvious sights and sounds and scents, the movements of grass, of branches, stalks, traffic, people, animals, of gates and doors, Mattina arrived at the sensation lying beyond those identified and recorded” (Frame 1988, 121). Upon waking in the middle of the night, Mattina describes the source of this non-identical sensation as an “animal of long ago and far away,” which paradoxically breathes “near her in the dark” (Frame 1988, 121). Its disruption of the logic of conceptuality leads Mattina to believe that it creates an “invisible gap in the fabric of space and time” (Frame 1988, 135). The way in which this presence eludes Mattina’s identity thinking leads Jeanne Delbaere-Garant to suggest that the experience is a “synecdoche for any possible encounter between Self and Other” (1995, 258). Significantly, rather than attempting to incorporate this non-identical phenomenon into an ontological “image of beauty,” Mattina begins to engage with it mimetically: “She accepted the presence of the thing although she could not see it or explain it” (Frame 1988, 122). She allows its “strangeness” to settle within her, “as if it had always been there” (Frame 1988, 135). Like Adorno, Dinny presents the work of art as a refuge for this state of being. The way in which an Adornian artwork accommodates the non-identical particular within its inevitable state as a totality is, Huhn explains, akin to an “intellectual mimetic tracing of the object,” which avoids reducing it “to thoughts alone” (2004, 5). Mattina carries out this aesthetic engagement with alterity when she envisions drawing a map of her bedroom, acknowledging the presence’s irreducibility by leaving a “blank two-dimensional triangular space” (Frame 1988, 150). Dinny’s manuscript thus models the mimetic engagement with alterity required for Mattina’s aesthetic quest to move beyond mere representation.

Mattina maintains this mimetic interaction with the world when she finishes reading *Wheatstone Imposter*. Reflecting her non-ontological engagement with the breathing presence, Mattina emerges from Dinny’s fiction with the feeling that “her hold on the passing time has been lost” (Frame 1988, 169). Her experience of the

manuscript interrupts her identitarian control over the temporal realm of her reality, anticipating the destruction of such logic by the Gravity Star:

It is now almost two months since I 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 [...]? (Frame 1988, 169)

Mattina's newfound accommodation of paradox, her newly non-conceptual way of being, extends to her relationship with the residents of Kowhai Street: "Mattina, unable to deny or confirm her fictional experiences of almost two months, forced herself to weave them into her memory, as Dinny Wheatstone's typescript had done, as a form of truth composed of the real and the unreal" (Frame 1988, 176). Eschewing her identity thinking and adopting a form of mimetic comportment, Mattina "precariously" shares the vulnerability of the irreducible characters to whom *Wheatstone Imposter* gives expression:

when she thought of George Coker and the auction of his goods and chattels, and the remembrance of his many grandchildren who never visited him, she accepted his reality [...]. She thought of the Shannons [...], of Joseph and Gloria James and the child Decima living without speech in the unknown and known world, of Hercus Millow languishing [...] in the prison camp, [...] of Hare, Hene and Piki, and their new-old life up river; of Rex Townsend, [...] of Dorothy, Hugh and Sylvia and of the mother, Connie, who had lost everything and could find nothing. (Frame 1988, 176)

As a plenipotentiary of Kowhai Street's precarious residents, Dinny's ugly fiction enables Mattina to encounter her neighbours at the level of their particularity. Recalling Rua's mimetic "knowledge," in which the subject engages with an object without overwriting its uniqueness, Mattina believes that Dinny's manuscript enables her to encounter and accept those who speak within it: "Whether through her two-

dimensional or three dimensional living, in print or in ‘reality,’ Mattina felt she had achieved her ambition, the ideal of all her travels—to know the people of other lands [...]” (Frame 1988, 176–77). The ethical capacity of *Wheatstone Imposter* enables Mattina to experience the Other beyond the solipsistic limitations of her identity thinking. For Mattina, Susan Ash suggests, Dinny’s manuscript makes that which it depicts “real” (1991, 2).

An Ugly Aesthetic

Mattina begins to create her own ugly artwork following the climactic consequences of the Gravity Star. This phenomenon undermines the logical notions of space and time and thereby “annihilates the concept of near as near and far as far” (Frame 1988, 85). In doing so, it orchestrates “the bursting of the iron bands that once made rigid the container of knowledge [...]. Near and far, then and now, here and there, the homely words of the language of space and time appear useless, heaps of rubble” (Frame 1988, 34). Thus, the Gravity Star overturns the logic upon which the denotative language of identity thinking rests.

This destruction of denotative language occurs during what Mattina later describes as the “midnight rain” (Frame 1988, 188). Following her completion of *Wheatstone Imposter*, Mattina wakes in the middle of the night to a “chorus of screams, shrieks, wailings from Kowhai Street” (Frame 1988, 180). Making her way outside, Mattina sees her neighbours standing “at their gates or in their driveway, screaming and shrieking” (Frame 1988, 181). These screams do not include any “recognisable language”; rather, they are “primitive, like the first cries of those who had never known or spoken words” (Frame 1988, 181). During this event, “apostrophes, notes of music, letters of alphabets of all languages” fall from the sky in the form of rain (Frame 1988, 183). When Mattina tries to communicate with her neighbour Hercus, she discovers that he can neither understand her nor make himself understood: Mattina’s words are “foreign to him,” and the sounds that he is able to make are limited to “grunt, moan and, finally, scream” (Frame 1988, 184). Observing the extent of the effects of the Gravity Star, Mattina notes that “the residents of Kowhai Street [...] had each suffered a loss of all the words they had ever known, all the concepts that had supported and charged the words, all the processes of thinking and feeling that once lived within the now shattered world of their words” (Frame 1988, 186).

By removing the known language of Mattina's neighbours, the midnight rain brings their pre-existing ugly vulnerability into focus. This vulnerability is expressed not only in the suffering evident in their "horrific human cries," but in their appearance: their clothes are torn into "shreds as if each person had been attacked," and their faces hold expressions of "hopelessness" (Frame 1988, 181–83). The residents' precariousness is also evident when Mattina turns on the radio, hoping to be advised as during an emergency, but hears only "the same old talkback show," which advocates the abuse of the repressed: "beat them, whip them, hang them, put them on an offshore island out of sight, they're cheating us, they're bludgers, love is what the world needs, more and more love; and castrate them" (Frame 1988, 185). Maintaining this inhumane sentiment, the residents' loss of any known language and the enigmaticalness to which this leads results in their total exclusion from society. Echoing the banishment of the Hanueres and of Decima in extremis, the residents disappear completely. Venturing outside the following day, Mattina observes figures who are "dressed in white," as they transport the bodies of her neighbours on stretchers into a series of "dark vans" (Frame 1988, 211). The extent to which the authorities are connected to this disappearance is uncertain: Mattina is unable to discern whether her neighbours had died due to the loss of their known language, or whether the stretcher-bearers are responsible, reasoning that "a people without a language" is "a lost people, a burden on the state" (Frame 1988, 213). Mattina's neighbours thus become the quintessential ugly particular: representing the unrepresentable, they disappear.

Despite causing this disappearance, the midnight rain's subversion of conceptuality has an ethical capacity. It enables Kowhai Street's residents to function like Rua and Decima: as mimetic sites of resistance to a society based upon identity thinking. In this way, the midnight rain actualises the mimetic comportment modelled in Dinny's narrative. Like the unintelligible verse at the end of *A State of Siege*, as well as Decima's predominantly non-conceptual mode of expression, the indecipherable cries of Mattina's neighbours contain tacit meaning. In their "chorus," Mattina apprehends "a hint, an inkling of order, a small strain recognisable as music" (Frame 1988, 182). Similarly, she observes that those undergoing the effects of the midnight rain gradually become accustomed to employing a new language: "having found their new voice, they accepted it and soon began to control it" (Frame 1988, 184). This new medium of expression does not simply replace the residents' previous

language. Rather, it enables a form of negative dialectic, in which Mattina and her neighbours are able to maintain the consonance of concept and particular, “the coexistence of dream and reality” (Frame 1988, 188–89). Frame asserts this ethical possibility in an interview with Elizabeth Alley: “Everything was to be renewed, rebuilt, selves, thought, language, everything. It was a death but only in the sense that death is a horizon to be travelled beyond, it wasn’t hopeless” (Frame 1991, 163). By orchestrating the destruction of ontological barriers, the midnight rain presents the possibility of a more ethical world.

This ethical world is to appear in the ugly fiction to which Mattina contributes. Following the disappearance of her neighbours, Mattina becomes their plenipotentiary, re-enacting the ethical function of *Wheatstone Imposter* by ensuring their survival within a work of fiction. Mattina anticipates her decision to assume this responsibility when she expresses her belief that “in future someone who knew and remembered the people of Kowhai Street, a relative perhaps or a friend, [...] would use persistence of memory to uncover the story, and perhaps rebuild, in fiction, the individual residents of the street” (Frame 1988, 217). Contributing to this aesthetic cause upon her return to New York, Mattina passes on her memory of Kowhai Street’s residents to the novelist Jake. To “preserve the memory of Kowhai Street,” she decides to “pour her memories, like a potion, in Jake’s ear” (Frame 1988, 235, 222). Mimetically engaging with the vanished residents of whom she speaks, Mattina enacts this process of memorialisation while she is dying from cancer, so that her “point of view” shifts “almost imperceptively to Jake,” and she too becomes “like a character in fiction” (Frame 1988, 235). Significantly, Mattina insists that this aesthetic memorial is not to be a work of beautiful realism, “deifying the novelist” in that the street “vanishe[s] to reappear only in fiction” (Frame 1988, 217). Instead, it is to involve the utilisation of “whatever materials” the artist has available to “forever ensure new versions of Puamahara with the Gravity Star, the light of unreasonable reason, shining on the petals of the Memory Flower” (Frame 1988, 217). Mattina proffers an ugly aesthetic, which maintains the unreasonable within the reasonable, the particular within the totality, to offer a means of expression to the Other whose voice cannot be heard.

Jake maintains this aesthetic advocacy by travelling to Puamahara following Mattina’s death. The latter’s mimetic relationship with the town thus extends to the former: “Mattina had linked her life with Kowhai Street and Puamahara, and therefore

Jake felt that his own life and memory had also become part of the property of Puamahara, while Puamahara had become his life-property and memory-property” (Frame 1988, 262). Having spent his life battling writer’s block and struggling to express himself in language (and being vulnerable as a result), Jake feels particularly connected to the near-mute Decima, who is one of the midnight rain’s sole survivors.²⁰ Even prior to meeting her, Jake describes Decima as his “kin” (Frame 1988, 263). This connection causes Jake to resolve to act as her emissary: “I shall visit the Manuka Home and see the residents, many of whom will never be *spoken for*” (Frame 1988, 263). For Jake, as for Dinny and Mattina, this process of memorialisation is to occur through “words, spoken and written language” (Frame 1988, 278). Jake also shares their doubt that denotative modes of representation will be able to achieve this end. In *Living in the Maniototo*, the narrator describes language as a “hawk suspended above eternity, [...] only able by a wing movement [...] to hint at what lies beneath it on the untouched almost unknown plain” (Frame 1979, 62). Jake reiterates this metaphor, asking, “why am I constantly hovering over my theme, my characters, unable to land, to settle, to swoop with accuracy and mastery upon my quarry?” (Frame 1988, 266). This question reveals Jake’s conviction that an attempt to apprehend a phenomenon via identitarian language is a reductive act of mastery, which is bound to fail. He implies that a more effective mode of memorialisation would function as a repository for mimetic comportment, wherein the artist engages with and gives voice to an object on its own irreducible terms: “a writer’s remembering is never quite merged with everyday life, [...] but is set upon a stage [...]; the memory is then set in its own drama” (Frame 1988, 256). By eschewing the solipsistic urge to reduce that which is other to the Same via realist identification, and instead setting an object “in its own drama,” the artist might create an ethical artwork, in which “the whole in truth exists only for the sake of its parts” (Adorno 1970, 187).

Jake hopes that John Henry might write this ethical fiction, resolving to encourage his son to make a pilgrimage to Kowhai Street, and to pass on his and Mattina’s memories of the town: “Yes, John Henry would surely visit Puamahara and the source of the Memory Flower. I shall tell him the full story, Jake thought, of

²⁰ Dorothy is the event’s other survivor, but the reason for the pair’s survival is unclear. As Cronin suggests, considering the midnight rain’s subversion of logical thought, this ambiguity is probably the point (2011, 152–53).

Kowhai Street and Mattina's knowledge of the residents, their ordinary, extraordinary, daily lives" (Frame 1988, 278). Jake expresses the belief that "New York City may suffer the same fate of Kowhai Street; there may be a new world, a new language for all; new people turned out of their old minds and hearts" (Frame 1988, 278). He states that if this ethical interruption of ontology occurs, John Henry might utilise its effects to create a mimetic work of ugly fiction, which draws upon his own experiences and the memories of his parents to give expression to those connected to the events of Kowhai Street (including Mattina and Jake), ensuring their fictional survival.

The Carpathians constitutes this ugly artwork. In the novel's final paragraph, John Henry reveals that he is the author of *The Carpathians*, the work that Jake envisions: "Yes, he told me. And I travelled to Puamahara. And what I have just written is the novel he spoke of" (Frame 1988, 278). Implicit in this eventuality is that the midnight rain extends to New York City. Maintaining the effects of the Gravity Star by eschewing logical thought, Jake subsequently makes a series of contradictory assertions regarding his authorship of *The Carpathians*:

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, and so I did not know them. (Frame 1988, 278)

These contradictions continue to proliferate when the reader returns to the note at the beginning of the novel, written by "J. H. B.," now revealed to be John Henry. Here, he claims that the novel's "characters and happenings [...] are all invented and bear no relation to actual persons living or dead" (Frame 1988, 25). But John Henry then claims, "I have been greatly influenced by my mother (recently dead) and by my father. My mother's short visit to New Zealand and my father's life-long marriage with words have inspired this book" (Frame 1988, 25). Frame thus bases *The Carpathians* upon a series of logical impossibilities, which elude any attempt by the reader to make sense of the text. To use Cronin's words, John Henry's final revelations orchestrate a Wittgensteinian "detonation of solid ground" (2011, 154). The novel's accommodation of paradox enables it to give voice to its elusive Others, who exist beyond the domain of factual representation, without reducing them to a

cohesive “image of beauty.” In doing so, the text ensures their fictional survival. “What exists,” John Henry claims, “is the memory of events known or imagined, and the use of words to continue the memory through centuries” (Frame 1988, 278). *The Carpathians* thus offers an experience of the Adornian sublime. Mediating an encounter with unknown, vulnerable Others via an ugly irrational aesthetic, it orchestrates the “annihilation” of the cognitive “I” (Adorno 1970, 245).

The Carpathians demonstrates how an ugly artwork can function ethically. Through the suspension of the logic of identity thinking at multiple narrative levels, the text gives voice to the unknown vulnerable Others to whom it refers. At the first level, interrupting Mattina’s quest to create an empirical image of beauty, Dinny’s ugly manuscript models the way in which an artwork can move beyond mere representation. By offering a medium of expression to the vulnerable inhabitants of Kowhai Street, her manuscript enables Mattina to encounter the singularity of her neighbours in a manner that previously eludes her. Second, following the destructive but ethical consequences of the midnight rain, Mattina decides to re-enact Dinny’s aesthetic advocacy by creating her own work of ugly fiction to maintain the memory of her neighbours in Puamahara. Third, following Mattina’s death, Jake continues her aesthetic quest, aiming to contribute to a fiction which is able to give voice to the residents of Kowhai Street, as well as Mattina and himself, following his death. Fourth, John Henry employs Mattina’s and Jake’s recollections of the town, as well as his own first hand experiences, to offer a means of expression to the novel’s characters. Further interrupting any cohesive “image of beauty,” each subjective level operates under the illogical effects of the midnight rain. Although this event occurs at a specific point in Mattina’s narrative, the novel itself exists because these effects extend to John Henry in New York. As a result, the suspension of logic is itself paradoxical: it occurs following Mattina’s emergence from *Wheatstone Imposter*, but it has also always already occurred via John Henry’s narrative realm. Importantly, these layers of incomprehensibility serve a pre-eminent purpose: to give voice to the vulnerable. Through the explosion of logic, *The Carpathians* exemplifies the Adornian sublime, calling the knowing subject into question as the plenipotentiary of an unknown Other.

Conclusion

Art for the Sake of the Other

In this thesis, I have argued that Frame's fiction calls into question all forms of totalising language in order to facilitate an encounter with the singularity of its characters. Undermining any ontological mode of representation, her work constitutes an ethical engagement with alterity. By way of a conclusion, I want to examine what is at stake in this claim. What are the tangible consequences of a form of sociality that is incapable of tolerating difference? And what, if anything, does Frame seek to achieve by writing fiction that intervenes in such a form of sociality?

In order to begin to answer these questions, let me recall Frame's 1970 dystopian novel, *Intensive Care*, which depicts a society in which individuals overlook the uniqueness of other people in an attempt to apprehend a social ideal. Rather than leading to the establishment of a perfect society, this mode of being results in its opposite in the novel. In the name of a social utopia, individuals murder those who are deemed to betray it, a pattern that culminates in genocide. Against the foil of the dynamics at work in *Intensive Care*, Frame's oeuvre, I propose, can productively be read as a sustained attempt to intervene in this pattern of escalating physical violence. Drawing upon Adorno's suggestion that an artwork has the capacity to instigate ethical praxis, I contend that Frame's novels constitute a challenge to totalitarian mechanisms of oppression—such as they are most acutely under display in *Intensive Care*—by gesturing toward a more humane society.

Intensive Care warrants some discussion at this point because it illustrates negatively the ethical intent of Frame's aesthetics. The novel does so by specifically framing the violent pursuit of ideal forms of sociality in philosophical, specifically Platonic, terms: the very terms that serve as a target for Levinas and Adorno. To recall, Plato's allegory of the cave presents objects in the empirical realm as being inferior derivations of an ideal counterpart in the realm of the Forms. "For Plato," Drichel explains, "the realm of the Forms is the realm of true being. It is here that we encounter not a beautiful object, but Beauty Itself, not a kind person, but Kindness Itself" (2009, 190). Drichel suggests that Frame's engagement with this paradigm in *Intensive Care* is most immediately apparent in the title of Part One: "Kindness Itself,

Happiness Itself, and Delphiniums” (Frame 1970, n.p.). For Drichel, this title indicates the extent to which the reader is “plunged into a scenario where what is pursued by characters is not everyday acts of kindness and happiness, but Kindness Itself and Happiness Itself: i.e. Plato’s realm of Forms” (2009, 191). This ontological pursuit of perfect forms of sociality manifests in Part One through New Zealand World War I veteran Tom Livingstone, who formulates an idealised version of his former nurse and “first and only love,” Ciss Everest (Frame 1970, 35). The quest continues in Part Two via Tom’s grandson Colin Torrance, who attempts to apprehend “his own dream images” of an ideal romantic companion during an affair with a colleague at his accounting firm, Lorna Kimberley (Frame 1970, 221), and it culminates in Part Three as mathematician Colin Monk contributes to the orchestration of the so-called Human Delineation Act, which employs such information as “borderline percentages, physical data, I.Q. results” to define the characteristics of an ideal human being (Frame 1970, 259). Thus, in *Intensive Care*, Frame plays out the increasing efforts of characters to subsume Others under an ontological formulation of a social ideal.

Drichel observes that this increasing effort to subsume Others under an ontological formulation of a social ideal is the basis of the novel’s pattern of escalating violence: “The roots of the novel’s conflictual foundation of sociality, paradoxically, lie in the utopian dream of ideal forms of sociality itself” (2009, 191). She makes this claim because the central characters of *Intensive Care* commit violence against individuals whose uniqueness eludes the containment of the ideal that they seek to apprehend. Tom initiates this pattern of violence when he returns to London following the death of his wife in order to recommence his wartime romance with Ciss. It is forty-seven years since their initial relationship, and Tom finds Ciss dying of cancer in a hospital, unable to recognise him. Refusing to accept the extent to which she has apparently “failed him,” Tom suffocates Ciss with a sheet from her hospital bed (Frame 1970, 60). Colin continues this pattern of violence when Lorna responds to the advice of her parents by deciding to separate from him. Colin considers this development to be “so removed from his own sense of actuality” that he eventually shoots the Kimberley family to death before committing suicide (Frame 1970, 211). This pattern of violence culminates in the implementation of the Human Delineation Act, which classifies as “animal” every person who does not correspond to the specifications of an ideal human being (Frame 1970, 257). These people are

subsequently murdered in order to establish “the roots of a new humanity” (Frame 1970, 263). One of the victims of this massacre is the mentally-disabled twenty-five year old Milly Galbraith, whose fate, I have observed in Chapter Two, Frame links to that of Ciss and Lorna by giving each woman violet-coloured eyes. Frame thereby extrapolates the isolated murders of the first two parts of the novel to the mass murder of the third, demonstrating explicitly the violent consequences of a form of sociality that begins with a reductive attempt to force the Other to correspond to a given concept.

The demonstration that *Intensive Care* offers us of the fact that any attempt to force the Other to correspond to a given concept ultimately leads to violence means that Frame is faced with the task of employing aesthetics that eschew such reductive processes. In order to avoid replicating the totalising forms of representation that are criticised in *Intensive Care*, she must use language in a manner that allows the uniqueness of the Other to remain intact. Building upon the existing scholarship of Drichel and Carter, I have followed their example in exploring this effort in relation to Levinas’s ethical philosophy. However, while recognising the significance of this philosophy vis-à-vis Frame, my sense is that any attempt to consider the ethics of Frame’s fiction in strictly Levinasian terms leads to an impasse: Levinas’s view of all art as a socially-disengaged form of beauty negates its capacity to maintain an ethical impulse. The present thesis testifies to this impasse by allowing his thought to move to the background in subsequent chapters while simultaneously bringing Adorno’s formulations of the beautiful and the ugly to the fore. Adorno writes against traditionally beautiful and realist art because he considers it to be a manifestation of ontology, or what he terms identity thinking. Ugly art, by contrast, offers an ethical alternative because it stems from a non-conceptual form of mimetic comportment, in which the artist unconsciously becomes like an object rather than mediating it with concepts, thereby accommodating difference. As a medium for the irreducible voice of that to which it refers, the ugly returns to Frame’s fiction the capacity to operate ethically, allowing it to intervene in the pattern of violence that appears in *Intensive Care*.

Frame stages this intervention in *A State of Siege* by criticising the ontological basis of traditionally beautiful and realist art. Anticipating the efforts of Tom, Colin, and the agents of the Human Delineation Act to subsume the Other under a totalising concept, Malfred’s realist paintings constitute an attempt to integrate an object into a

representational whole. Like the central male characters in *Intensive Care*, however, Malfred is unable to do so: the uniqueness of that which she represents eludes the representational capacity of her paintings. The failure of Malfred's realist aesthetic to accommodate the uniqueness of an object leads her to describe the act of painting as a form of violence. Frame offers an alternative to this violent way of engaging with the world in Malfred's New View. This non-realist mode of painting would renounce the reductionism of ontology by stemming from a form of mimetic comportment. The ethical potential of this aesthetic is evident in the single painting that Malfred creates as part of her New View. Assimilating herself to the memory of her deceased mother, Malfred creates an ugly work of art that gives voice to her final moments of life. However, Malfred is unable to maintain a mimetic way of being in any sustained way, ultimately disavowing the engagement with difference that her New View requires. By aligning Malfred's exclusion of difference with her inability to develop an ugly aesthetic, Frame demonstrates the incompatibility of ethics and the beautiful. The realist aesthetic of *A State of Siege* itself performs this critique, orchestrating Malfred's sudden death when her final moments of mimetic comportment threaten to undermine the novel's conceptual basis. The text therefore becomes ugly by criticising its own beauty; it becomes ethical by denouncing its own identitarianism.

Frame's denunciation of the identitarian basis of the beautiful in *A State of Siege* culminates in her orchestration of its destruction in the ugly aesthetic of *The Carpathians*. The first significant manifestation of this aesthetic appears in the form of Dinny's manuscript. Interrupting Mattina's ontological attempts to gather knowledge about Kowhai Street, this work of fiction stems from a mimetic engagement with its vulnerable residents. As a repository for mimetic comportment, Dinny's story employs a fragmented and non-factual aesthetic in which the suffering of her neighbours finds expression. When these neighbours vanish as a result of the effects of the Gravity Star, which overturns the logic of conceptuality and thereby causes the destruction of all known language, Mattina resolves to contribute to an artwork that maintains Dinny's ugly aesthetic, offering a voice to those who are no longer present. Dying of cancer, Mattina is unable to complete this artwork, but she passes on her memory of Kowhai Street to her author husband, Jake. Responding to Mattina's prompting, Jake makes his own journey to Puamahara, subsequently passing on his memories of the town, along with Mattina's notes, to their novelist son, John Henry. If the effects of the Gravity Star extend to their home in New York City,

Jake reasons, John Henry may utilise its effects to complete this work of fiction. In a metafictional turn, this work of fiction turns out to be *The Carpathians* itself. Writing under the effects of the Gravity Star, John Henry bases this novel on a series of logical impossibilities regarding the work's authorship, so that the novel perpetually eschews any form of ontological representation. This ugly aesthetic allows *The Carpathians* to function ethically, conveying the irreducible voices of its vulnerable characters.

Frame's aesthetic development, from the self-critical beauty of *A State of Siege* to the self-conscious ugliness of *The Carpathians*, testifies to an ethical impulse that manifests throughout her oeuvre. The extent to which this ethical impulse influences Frame's writing becomes evident in a consideration of what is commonly regarded as her most traditionally beautiful and realist novel, *The Adaptable Man* (1965). Even in this novel, Frame engages with the ethical capacity of fiction, critiquing the realist conventions that she employs. Patrick Evans makes this point as early as 1971, writing that Frame utilises "the plot conventions of the traditional novel" precisely in order "to show up the limitations of the traditional conventions" (1971, 31). More recently, Delrez has extended this observation, arguing that fictional author Unity Foreman's occupation as a journalist causes the novel to appear as "a straightforward newspaper article," which the narrator's "indictment" of unimaginative forms of writing proceeds to undermine (2002, 154). He proposes that this metafictional strategy means that the novel "openly advertises its own paralysis [...] of the imagination," so that it functions as "a critique of fiction seen as mere mimesis" (2002, 155).²¹ This form of complicitous critique makes *The Adaptable Man* a natural antecedent to *A State of Siege*. The earlier novel therefore affirms the fact that Frame's ethical impulse is not initially limited by realism, only finding expression in her later experimental aesthetics; rather, an ethical impulse presents consistently throughout her work, guiding her aesthetic development and finding its most mature articulation in the ugliness of *The Carpathians*. Frame's oeuvre constitutes a sustained attempt to intervene in the violence that is inherent in all totalising modes of representation. In order to address my question of what is at stake in this intervention—how Frame's ethical aesthetics might have positive practical

²¹ Delrez is using the term mimesis here in a non-Adornian sense. That is, he is using it specifically to refer to realist forms of artistic representation.

consequences—let me return once more to the thought of Adorno by supplementing my discussion of the ugly with that of the *autonomy* of the work of art.

Adorno proposes that ugly artworks such as Frame's are able to effect positive practical change because they are socio-politically autonomous. This notion of autonomy does not situate an artwork outside of its socio-political context, which would affirm Levinas's claim that aesthetic experience is an unethical mode of social disengagement. Rather, the autonomous element of an ugly work of art inheres within its state as a repository for a non-conceptual form of mimetic comportment. By operating as the site of a mimetic engagement with the world, an ugly artwork exists independently of the identitarian modes of thought that manifest as oppressive societal conditions, exemplified by the implementation of the Human Delineation Act in *Intensive Care*. Such mimetic art, O'Connor explains, "is autonomous from the processes of reification that [...] disfigures [*sic*] the social world" (2013, 173). Importantly, for Adorno, only an artwork that begins with a non-conceptual form of mimesis can operate autonomously. For instance, an aesthetic work that aims for absolute independence from the society in which it exists, as expressed in the nineteenth-century bourgeois slogan *l'art pour l'art* (art for art's sake), inevitably becomes implicated in the ideology of the society in which it is made. "If art remains strictly for-itself," Adorno writes in *Aesthetic Theory*, "it nonetheless submits to integration as one harmless domain among others" (1970, 237). Conversely, a work of art that deliberately takes political change as its starting point becomes invalid because it acts as a form of propaganda: "the political positions deliberately adopted by artworks are epiphenomena and usually impinge on the elaboration of works and thus, ultimately, on their social truth content" (Adorno 1970, 232). Only by maintaining a non-conceptual mimetic engagement with the social world can an ugly artwork exert a positive influence upon it.

An autonomous work of ugly art exerts this positive influence by modelling the way in which a social whole might be responsive to the needs of its constituents. By maintaining the irreducible voice of an object within its unavoidable state as a totality, the fragmented form of an ugly artwork demonstrates the way in which a social whole might respect the autonomy of those who live within it, appearing as "the counterimage of enchained forces" (Adorno 1970, 226). By privileging the voice of the vulnerable in this process, an ugly work of art illustrates how a society might principally come to the aid of those who are most in need, presenting as an image of

“transformed humanity” (Adorno 1970, 241). Thus, Espen Hammer explains that an ugly autonomous artwork is able to model “a genuine sociality,” which primarily addresses the interests of “those whose voices are stifled and repressed” (2006, 137–38). Such an artwork operates as “the model of a possible praxis in which something on the order of a collective subject is constituted” (Adorno 1970, 242).

This model of a possible praxis is actualised through an artwork’s capacity to influence the attitudes of its audience. “Artworks exercise a practical effect,” Adorno suggests, to the extent that they precipitate a “scarcely apprehensible transformation of consciousness” (1970, 243). He argues that this transformation of consciousness occurs when the ethical mode of sociality that presents in an artwork contrasts explicitly with the unethical mode of sociality that appears in reality: “The element of objective praxis in art is transformed into subjective intention when [...] art’s antithesis to society becomes irreconcilable” (1970, 246). This transformation of subjective intention manifests in action that would contribute to the establishment of the ethical mode of sociality to which the artwork gestures. An autonomous artwork is able to induce in an audience member as a “ζῶον πολιτικόν,” or so-called political animal, the will to labour toward the creation of a peaceful society (Adorno 1970, 243). Adorno therefore offers a paradigm in which Frame’s fiction operates as an ethical model of a possible praxis that would counteract the violent modes of sociality that are exemplified in *Intensive Care*.

The capacity of Frame’s fiction to counteract the violent modes of sociality that are exemplified in *Intensive Care* means that it potentially constitutes a practical contribution toward a more peaceful mode of being with others. Far from fostering an unethical disregard for other people, as Levinas claims that all artworks do, Frame’s fiction exhorts the reader to respond positively to the social context in which they live. At the risk of betraying the ethical basis of my argument by categorising a body of work as broad and as diverse as Frame’s, one might say that her oeuvre is not a disengaged instance of the production of art for the sake of art, but instead the manifestation of a sustained commitment to creating art for the sake of the Other. This commitment is where the social import of her work begins.

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