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The Narrative Technique of Plumb

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Introduction

Prior to the publication of Plumb in 1978, Maurice Gee had published four novels and some short stories which had been collected and published under the title A Glorious Morning, Comrade (Auckland University/Oxford, 1976). The novels show Gee experimenting with various techniques. In My Father's Den (Faber, 1972) has two significant narrative levels. Paul Prior is involved in the police inquiry into the death of Celia Inverarity. The emotional shock of these events leads him on a search of his past, to discover that the forces which shaped his personality are also responsible for the destruction of Celia. In Games of Choice (Faber, 1976) Gee uses a more straightforward narrative form. Kingsley Pratt, the novel's central character, is driven to brief reminiscences, but the novel is entirely dominated by the action of 1970, as the Pratt marriage breaks up. We are told enough about Kingsley's childhood to give us an idea of his background, but the action of the past never achieves the status of a significant narrative in its own right.

When he came to write a novel based upon the life of his grandfather, James Chapple, Gee developed a highly complex narrative form and a very distinctive narrative style. In terms of narrative technique, Plumb is different from anything Gee had tried before, although it makes use of two narratives separated by time, as did In My Father's Den. The narrative structure and

style of Plumb are suited to its narrator, a man of education, who is capable of great insight and of great blindness. In the course of this study I will examine the structure and style of Plumb, as well as the nature of Plumb himself, as character, narrator and artist.

I will also study the relationship of Plumb and its sequel Meg (Faber, 1981), narrated by one of Plumb's daughters. The narrators of these two novels provide commentaries upon each other, and so add to our understanding of the novels themselves. Meg's role in relation to her father's narrative, is to give an external perspective upon him, and upon his beliefs and actions. Plumb acts as a commentator upon Meg's narrative before it is even written. It is largely because of the importance of the interplay between the two novels, that I have chosen to include in this study both of the parts of Gee's proposed trilogy which have been published to date. I do not suggest that either Plumb or Meg is incapable of standing alone.

It is worth noting the position of Plumb within the larger context of New Zealand fiction, before proceeding to an examination of the novel itself.

Robert Chapman, in his essay "Fiction and the Social Pattern"¹, relates the dominant mood and themes of contemporary fiction (that is, fiction written up to and including the early 1950s) to the sociological pattern which had clearly emerged in New

Zealand. Chapman describes the pattern as one of sexual polarization, with men and women having little real understanding of or communication with each other. He claims that Puritanism, with its emphasis upon the virtues of work, thrift and abstinence, lost its dominance in spiritual terms, and was transformed into materialism and a desire for outward respectability. Society remained patriarchal in theory, expecting the male to provide leadership for the entire family. But, more and more frequently, father was an office worker - subordinate to other men at work, and away from his children for most of the day. The mother therefore became the chief dispenser of instruction and discipline. The values and expectations of the pioneers remained, but the reality had changed for most people.

Chapman argues that writers such as Frank Sargeson have been influenced by the tensions resulting from the discrepancy between a professed belief in pioneering roles and what amounted to a near-reversal of those roles in actuality, and from the descent of Puritan virtues from expressions of a sincere faith to a practical means of climbing the social ladder. He claims that: "The writer in New Zealand meets his childhood with adult rebellion, not with the knife of indifference"².

This comment does seem very appropriate to Sargeson's fiction, particularly to the short stories of the 1930s, and we in fact know enough of his background to assert with some confidence that

he was indeed in rebellion against his childhood and against his parents, and that this fact had some effect upon the world he created in the short stories. His writing reveals a strong aversion to both Puritanism and conventional marriage. And his refusal to subscribe to the values associated with his childhood (those of hard work and thrift leading to an accumulation of material possessions) certainly continued throughout his adult life.

Chapman also comments upon the tendency among New Zealand writers to use the first-person, or autobiographical, form as a basic approach to the experiences of their central characters:

The technique of the participating 'I' draws on the homogeneity of experience in New Zealand in solving the problem of drawing in the reader, who will have felt with the 'I', thus allowing identification with the hero to occur³.

Chapman's observations are, obviously enough, general in nature, but they have been recognized as having a high degree of validity in relation to the literature which was published up to, and even beyond, the early 1950s, when the article was written. However, literary critics of the 1980s can hardly ignore the fact that "Fiction and the Social Pattern" is now nearly thirty years old, and that certain important changes have occurred, both in society and in literature. Plumb is a novel which has broken away from the old literary pattern, and as such will serve to point these

differences.

Chapman, as we have discovered, sees New Zealand writers as being in rebellion against the values associated with their childhood. Although the claim is well-founded in relation to writers like Frank Sargeson, and although it can be seen to have a certain relevance to Gee's early novels, particularly to In My Father's Den, it does not seem to have much application to Plumb and Meg. In Plumb, Gee shows himself to be surprisingly free from the interest in childhood which borders on obsession with so many New Zealand writers, to the extent that we learn practically nothing about Plumb's own childhood. There are a number of complaints from which children in New Zealand literature traditionally suffer. Peter Herlihy experiences total emotional neglect, in Bill Pearson's Coal Flat⁴. The central character in Maurice Duggan's short story "Along Rideout Road That Summer"⁵ has been subjected to over-regimentation, with little genuine affection. Plumb's children do not experience these problems, but they do suffer in various ways. Some suffer emotionally, some psychologically, some spiritually. Perhaps the most obvious adversity they experience is poverty: during the Depression, Plumb ate his chop and eggs in his study, while the rest of the family ate porridge. To Oliver, this is a source of great bitterness; to Felicity it is not of such importance; to Willis it does not matter in the least. Gee is not simply attacking Plumb for having failed his children, nor is he rebelling against the set of social values represented by Oliver. He is portraying

the complexity of a human situation, in which easy moral judgement is not possible, because of the individual nature of human perception.

Nor does Gee's use of the first-person correspond to the reasons Chapman gives for its use. Chapman sees it as a way of limiting the authorial voice so that it does not become too overtly sociological or didactic. But in the context of the reader's relationship with the narrator, he sees the first-person as a straightforward way of allowing the reader to identify with the central character, or "hero" of the novel or short story. The first-person narrative can indeed function in this way if used in its most simple form. But the complexity of the narrative structure in Plumb, and the many ironic recognitions which inform it, prevent the extent of our identification with Plumb from being a constant factor. There are many possible positions between the extremes of complete identification and complete detachment, and in this respect the reader's relationship with Plumb is always shifting. I intend to discuss this issue at greater length in the main body of the essay, but at this stage I merely want to point to the way in which "the technique of the participating 'I'" can be used in such a way as to achieve a more subtle effect than simple identification with that 'I'.

Gee's most recent novels reveal a shift away from commentary upon or rebellion against the social pattern in New Zealand. This may be partly because New Zealand is no longer subject to that

"homogeneity of experience" which Chapman saw as such an obstacle to the writer, thirty years ago. I do not feel myself to be competent to decide whether or not the basic social pattern identified by Chapman has changed. But I do feel that it is, at least, no longer so all-dominating, so much "of a piece"⁶ as it seemed in 1953. The growth of the feminist movement, for example, has prompted much public debate and private thought on the question of sexual stereotyping. More people are escaping from the pattern: because it is less pervasive, and because there are increasing numbers of 'outsiders' to challenge it in various spheres, the writers have perhaps been able to feel less restricted and less defensive about their own position outside the pattern. They can therefore turn their attention elsewhere. Thus, the moral universe of Plumb is totally unlike that which Chapman claims to be the norm of New Zealand fiction. Gee is dealing ultimately with the vagaries and ambiguities of human experience, rather than with the difficulties particular to existence in New Zealand. This change of approach can be seen as a natural movement of maturation in our writing. Sociological observation is not art, but observations and perceptions about specific reality may lead the writer to those recognitions which we call universal: recognitions about human beings and the nature of their experience.

In an essay entitled "New Zealand Literature: the Case for a Working Definition"⁷, Dr Allen Curnow gives a definition of New Zealand literature with which few people, perhaps, would quarrel:

work of some value, or some promise of permanence written by one of ourselves and in which we recognize ... something of ourselves⁸.

I believe that Plumb fits that description well. Yet, what is that "something of ourselves" which we find in Gee's novel? A man is revealed to us - a man with great faults, who often recognizes his mistakes, but recognizes them too late; a man who is egotistical and frequently arrogant, but who is occasionally led by events to moments of humility; a man attempting to give some meaning to his life. That "something" which we as New Zealanders see of ourselves in Plumb is, I contend, the same as the "something" which Americans or Pakistanis or Germans would see in it of themselves, if they were to read it. This is what I take the word 'universality' to mean, within the literary context, and I see the achievement of this quality as a very proper concern of the writer of serious fiction. Our writers will achieve universality when, rather than using literature as a means of examining some aspect of the New Zealand experience, they use it to explore some aspect of the human experience⁹.

We are fascinated by Plumb as a human being, not as a New Zealander. And powerful as his personality and intellect are, it is Gee's narrative technique that enables us to appreciate to the full the 'ambiguities and the complexity of George Plumb. In the ensuing chapters, I intend to demonstrate the extent to which narrative structure and style control our reading experience of Plumb.

Narrative Structure

David Young has claimed that Joyce Cary's novel To Be A Pilgrim (London: Joseph, 1942) "gave a guide for the flashes back and forward in time which Gee employs in Plumb"¹⁰. Flashback and flashforward are, of course, standard techniques of narration, but the similarities between the two novels actually go far deeper than Young suggests. A comparison between the narrative structures of Plumb and To Be A Pilgrim reveals the extent to which Gee was influenced by Cary's novel.

Both novels are written in the first-person, and both have, as their central character, an old man who is looking back on his life. They are divided into very short chapters which alternate, often in groups of three or four, between the narrative of the distant past and the narrative of more recent action.

Both Wilcher and Plumb perform a physical and metaphorical journey within the narrative of their old age: Wilcher escapes from the care of his niece and nephew and goes to London, where he plans to marry his former housekeeper, Sara Jimson, and Plumb travels to Wellington, visiting his children and, at the same time, his past. At a climactic moment of their lives, both suffer an emotional defeat: Sara Jimson calls Ann and Robert to take Wilcher back to Tolbrook, and Plumb's reunion with his homosexual son Alfred is a fiasco. Both men are repudiated, but

claim to have learnt something from their defeat, and so turn it into a muted triumph. This leads them to conclude on a note of peace and harmony, which contrasts sharply with the conflict and passion of their earlier years.

In both novels, objects from his surroundings direct the narrator's thoughts backwards and forwards in time. Wilcher says: "when living and dead inhabit the same house, then the dead live"¹¹. Plumb, less attached to his family home, says: "If I love the place now it is because I loved Edie"¹². For both men, a house is redolent with associations and memories, so that when certain objects are encountered, they recall people and scenes from their youth and middle-age.

Cary's novel has another important structural similarity to Plumb. Neither narrative is written from a single point in the narrator's life. The writing of each is interrupted by further action, which is then described. In fact, it is obvious that Wilcher records his experiences and thoughts very frequently, making the narrative of To Be A Pilgrim very broken. For instance, Chapter 6 begins with the words "Robert came today" (Pilgrim, p. 16), but the remainder of the novel has a time-span of several years. Although the fact that the narrative is being written in stages is not obtrusive, there are several such comments which seem to suggest that Wilcher is writing a journal or diary. The story of Wilcher's eventual escape from Tolbrook is also told in stages, as a close examination of the relevant

chapters reveals. In Chapter 133 he tells us: "This morning I dreamed that Tolbrook itself was growing smaller and smaller". Chapter 134 begins: "I waked up, streaming with cold sweat, in the saloon" (Pilgrim, p. 299), and the description of the events of the day of escape follows, concluding at the end of Chapter 135. It is thereby established that Wilcher writes of these events on the day that they occur. Chapters 136-138 describe the moral and spiritual degeneration which afflicted Wilcher in the years before he met Sara Jimson, and could well have been written on the day he left Tolbrook. But Chapter 139 describes the events of his second day in London, and so must have been written at least one day later than Chapters 133-135.

The most important piece of evidence that Plumb's narrative is also written in stages is the exchange between Plumb and his eldest daughter, Felicity, at the beginning of Chapter 52 (Plumb, p. 138). Felicity sees the notebook in which Plumb has been writing his narrative, and questions him about it. She comments upon the sentence: "They measure things by the marriages they made", which originally appeared in Chapter 12 (p. 32). The notebook she sees contains the narrative up to some point no later than the end of Chapter 51. At the time of the conversation, Plumb has not written any further. At some time after the conversation he continues writing, recording Felicity's interest, and his own desire to hide his "reminiscences" from her.

Both Cary and Gee have clearly established the broken nature of the writing of the narrative. In To Be A Pilgrim this unusual structure is helpful in allowing Cary to portray the abrupt changes in attitude which characterize the elderly Wilcher. In the case of Plumb the technique functions in the opposite way. Rather than revealing the erratic nature of the narrator, it allows the reader to see him making steady moral progress in a particular direction. Moral improvement is therefore not only associated with Plumb as a character, but also with him as an elderly narrator.

In terms of the form of the novel, Gee certainly seems to have been strongly influenced by To Be A Pilgrim. It has been seen that several of Cary's techniques can be found in Plumb. It is interesting, however, that Gee has not so much adopted these techniques as adapted them. Having sketched out the broad characteristics of the narrative structure, it is now necessary to examine some of those characteristics in greater detail, in order to see how Gee uses them to achieve the specific effects that he wanted for Plumb.

Both Wilcher and Plumb take a great deal of pleasure from recalling their past. But Wilcher's recollections go right back to his early childhood, while Plumb looks back no further than the beginning of his search for spiritual and social truth, at the time of his meeting and courtship of Edie, and their move away from Anglicanism to Presbyterianism. The different values

of the two men are responsible for this difference in approach. Wilcher's family are of vital importance to him - indeed, his family not only directs his actions, but, by their contemptuous affection and their reliance upon his practical qualities, they define his identity. Plumb is less concerned with his early years, and we learn nothing of his background except for the brief description of his parents in Chapter 7. In fact, we are told more of Edie's childhood and family background, surprisingly. But Mrs Hamer is significant because she is responsible for Edie's gentility and also because she represents the shallow, respectable world that Plumb and Edie leave. She is the first obstacle they must overcome in their conversion from Anglicanism to Presbyterianism.

In sharp contrast to Wilcher, Plumb defines himself within the context of his own beliefs. This means that, unlike Wilcher, he does not need to recall his childhood in order to trace the origins of his identity. He evidently feels that he did not begin the process of creating a recognizably separate identity until the point at which he began to reject Anglicanism:

... this foretaste of a dark night of the soul, this devastation of spirit, marks the point of my beginning (p. 23).

This rejection of Anglicanism is not only important in spiritual terms. It marks the beginning of Plumb's rejection of convention and authority, and of his attempt to find his own path through

life. Plumb's own sense of identity is not defined in social terms; indeed, he sees himself as an isolated and unique individual, rather than as a member of society. His quest is both an intellectual and a spiritual endeavour, and it is these two qualities - spirit and intellect - which are most important to Plumb's sense of himself.

Plumb sees himself as someone who has always moved away from comfortable, complacent positions to positions that involve striving and hardship, and this is a very important aspect of his identity. In Chapter 1, he declares:

I have never wished for comfort, but for thorns, for battle in the soul's arena ... Along that other way, where I found so few to accompany me, and for distances so short, I reached my goal (p. 11).

This attitude allows him to see his imprisonment for conscientious objection, during World War I, as a vindication of his rightness. He takes some satisfaction from the knowledge that society repudiated him, and even that some of his children repudiated him, because it allows him to see himself as a lone battler, defending the cause of Good, fighting on against difficult odds. This is not only an honourable interpretation of his life, but one which confers upon him the status of an entirely unique individual. Those people who accompanied him upon his way did so for only a short distance: they interpreted his progress as a betrayal. Plumb tells us that his old Marxist friend Andrew Collie "was full of bitterness at [his] defection"

(p. 257). Plumb does not see himself as a traitor to the Socialist idealism of his days in Thorpe. He still believes in the ideal, but sees the imperfections of the practical application. People like Andrew are static in their moral, religious and political beliefs, but Plumb's beliefs are constantly changing, as he searches for the source of goodness and truth. This search is the defining characteristic of his life, and of his self, so the days prior to its commencement are of no real significance to him.

The presentation of the narrative in 102 chapters, and the brevity of these chapters, are important factors in determining the form and impact of the novel. In his review of Plumb, David Dowling claims that:

The very form of the novel, a series of annoyingly numbered sections, betrays Gee's dilemma - to pay his debt to Grandpa Chapple, or to write a novel?¹³

Dowling was unable to find any overall pattern in the novel, in that the division into sections is apparently unrelated to both action and theme. This lack of any obvious cumulative shape suggested to him that the bulk of resource material relating to James Chapple, and Gee's desire to honour that material, prevented Gee from fashioning it into an elegant, well-shaped novel. He was unable to create a shaped plot while remaining faithful to history, history being notoriously intractable in this respect¹⁴.

This raises two important points relating to the narrative structure of the novel: firstly, the reason for Gee's use of so many short chapters, and secondly, the question of whether or not the novel has a pattern, in the aesthetic sense.

Frequently, the chapter divisions can be explained in terms of a movement in time. Sometimes this involves an obvious shift from the action of the recent past to the action of the distant past (as from Chapter 3 to Chapter 4) or from Plumb's recollections of his youth or middle-age back to his old age in the 1940s (as from Chapter 10 to Chapter 11). The structural break emphasises the movement from one narrative to another, increasing the reader's awareness of Plumb's conscious control of the material provided by his memory, into two narrative lines. At other times, a chapter division within one narrative thread indicates a shorter passage of time. For instance, Chapter 58 describes Plumb's lecture, at which two policemen are taking notes of his seditious utterances. Chapter 59 begins: "It took the police two weeks to prepare their charges" (p. 153). Perhaps the need for a division because of the passing of time is not so obvious in cases like this, within one narrative line, but the beginning of a new chapter serves another purpose here, which is even more important. Chapter 58 ends with Plumb's description of Felicity and Dan Peabody in the lecture hall, happy and in love. The change in atmosphere between this scene of happiness and idealism and the harsh reality of the summons which comes in the first paragraph of Chapter 59, is pointed and reinforced by the

structural break which divides them.

Another example in which emotion is heightened by an otherwise arbitrary division occurs in Chapter 67. This chapter, just four paragraphs in length, describes Plumb's reaction to the death of his daughter Rebecca. In the previous chapter he has been told of her death. Chapter 67 is devoted entirely to his personal mourning, and to his memory of Rebecca. That memory is an intensely private one: "she came sometimes, saying no word, and put her cheek on my sleeve" (p. 176). Not only is Plumb's memory of his daughter private in nature, but his grief, too, is very personal. It is appropriate, therefore, that it should be structurally isolated from the reactions of others and from the events which follow it.

Chapter divisions are used to heighten and isolate emotion, and to reinforce the reader's sense of the existence of two narrative lines, and of Plumb's movement between them. At times, they serve yet another purpose. In Chapter 70 we are shown Robert's calm acceptance of other people, followed by Felicity's derisive observation: "he looks like the village idiot" (p. 190). Plumb responds by telling her she is stupid and malicious. There is no break in time, but between Felicity's caustic comment and Plumb's indignant response, there is a chapter division. The chapter break here brings Felicity's comment into prominence, giving it a climactic effect. It allows her dismissal of Robert to take on something of the same significance to the reader as it has for

Plumb himself. So in this case, the structural division is helping to create a climax within an important scene, and also allowing the reader to share Plumb's reaction more fully than would otherwise be possible.

The power of structural divisions to bring elements into prominence, or to reinforce them in the reader's mind explains Gee's decision to use so many brief chapters.

The brevity of these chapters also constitutes an interesting commentary upon Plumb's attitude to his own life. He recalls Edie's comment upon their decision to move to California: "Another shake of the kaleidoscope" (p. 142). A kaleidoscope has many small surfaces, and consists of angles, or facets, which make a pattern. A mere shake is enough to alter the arrangement of the surfaces, and, therefore, to change the entire pattern.

This is a good image for Plumb's life as he describes it, with his frequent changing from one intellectual, spiritual or political position to another. It also suggests a lack of continuity in his life, because each of a kaleidoscope's patterns is independent of the pattern which preceded it. Plumb betrays this attitude towards certain parts of his life, such as his years as a Presbyterian minister. His use of the third person in his description of "Mr Plumb" at the parish picnic, creates a distancing effect by enabling Plumb to view himself from an external position. He sees himself as a successful actor who was

able to deceive others with impunity. There is also a sense of dismay and even disgust that he could behave in such a way:

I have forgiven this man his duplicity. But I will never make him my close friend (p. 79).

Not only is the narrating Plumb unwilling to befriend his younger self, but he avoids accepting this "Mr Plumb" as himself.

Plumb has divided his life into compartments, and does not seem to associate his earlier selves with his present, narrating self. This allows him to absolve himself from any real blame for his earlier behaviour.

The importance of the kaleidoscope image is suggested both by Plumb's repetition of it (p. 248), and by the fact that Gee has borrowed it almost directly from Cary:

'Security,' Ann said. 'Well, I've always got my job,' and these unexpected words threw me into confusion and despair, they were like that little shake to a kaleidoscope which produces in an instant a completely new and unexpected pattern (To Be A Pilgrim, p. 181).

Wilcher uses the image in much the same way as Plumb does, to suggest the fluctuating nature of his experience, with an emphasis upon the lack of continuity between its successive stages.

Edie's image of a kaleidoscope being shaken frequently, is a very apt description of the constantly changing lives of herself and her family. The structure of Plumb imitates a kaleidoscope, too, with its many, brief chapters each presenting a facet of Plumb's life.

The brevity of the chapters can therefore be seen as a reflection of Plumb's consciousness. He views his life as a single unit containing a multitude of facets. The novel's formal structure is intimately related to Plumb's view of his life. However, if we are looking for the novel's pattern, we should not expect to find it integrally related to the chapter divisions.

The pattern of Plumb is to be found in the cycle associated with Plumb's spiritual and moral progress - the fact that, at several points in his life, he thinks he has actually reached spiritual truth or attained great moral insight, but is then confronted by his own evil or the evil of others. Whenever Plumb comes to believe that evil can be conquered, something happens to force him to a recognition of its pervasiveness and intransigence.

This first occurs in Plumb's early days in the Presbyterian church - at the end of his time in Kumara, before his ordination. When Matthew Willis tells him the story of Joseph Sullivan, the Maungatapu murderer, Plumb experiences "a feeling of dread, a sense of things abominable" (p. 37). His reaction to "the stink of evil" is extreme - not only a psychological revulsion, but a

physical faintness as well. However, the sight of Edie cradling the baby Oliver in her arms acts as a sane reminder of the existence of good, and he recovers himself. He then claims that his religious faith kept his sense of evil at bay:

I saw clearly that I was a soul lost and damned the moment my foot strayed an inch from His path (p. 38).

But when he actually meets Sullivan and is called upon to hear his confession, Plumb finds no such comfort in his religion:

I had no sense of having won this man's soul to Christ. I had felt evil but not its defeat, I had known ... the corruption that can feed and flourish in a human heart, but I had not felt the redeeming Blood of Christ. Why? I asked myself in a kind of torture (p. 55).

Only when Scroggie repeats the liturgy of the funeral service does Plumb begin to have "some knowledge" of the "sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life" (p. 56). For somebody who is about to be ordained as a Minister of the Presbyterian church, Plumb's lack of faith is astonishing. He has a strong sense of evil, and a correspondingly strong need of the church, which should not only explain the evil, but also offer atonement for it. Plumb's problem is that he is aware of the evil, but not of the atonement. He submerges his doubt in the activity surrounding his ordination and his work in Emslie, but from this time on, we are aware that Presbyterianism cannot fully satisfy him. It is several years before the young Plumb becomes consciously aware of this fact, but the narrator is able

to build in his awareness by such comments as: "for many months I had no time for thought" (p. 56), with its implication that analysis of his situation will force a reconsideration of it. The young Plumb is drawn in a different moral direction, without immediately realizing that this is happening.

For some time, Plumb remains in the church while turning more and more to man as the source of the goodness he needs to counterbalance the evil of which he is so aware. When Plumb preaches against the practice of making children work long hours on farms, Cheeseman calls the sermon "a piece of socialist rabble-rousing" (p. 65), and accuses Plumb of advocating good works as a means to salvation. Although Plumb is scathing of this argument, he admits "doctrinally [Cheeseman] was on safe ground. It was mine that was shaky" (p. 66). He knows that, in advocating good works as a necessary corollary of Christianity, he is coming perilously close to proclaiming good works as a "road to salvation" (pp. 66-7), which would be a direct contradiction of the Presbyterian doctrine that salvation comes from faith alone.

When summing up his experiences in Kumara and Emslie, Plumb gives further evidence that his awareness of evil is an integral part of his perception of human life:

There are holes and corners in the mind, lidded tight.
 I had prised loose some of the lids and seen spring
 out ... things whose names are ordinary enough, greed,
 envy, cruelty, race hatred, class hatred, lust, sloth,
 hatred of man, of God, and of the self; but whose
 shapes can shrivel the mind (p. 70).

He remembers expecting to find, in Thorpe, people "whose minds were open to the light" (p. 71), then immediately tells of his joining the Socialist Party and the Eugenics Education Society. These things are thereby implicitly associated with "the light", although this term is normally used to describe special vision in a specifically religious context.

An important stage in Plumb's shift from Presbyterianism to Socialism is represented by the strike of the Thorpe waterside workers. Plumb decides to preach Socialism from his pulpit:

I chose as my text James 5:4 ... It was the first piece of text-hunting I had enjoyed in years (p. 83).

The Bible is no longer primarily a source of knowledge about God, to Plumb. It has become a useful tool for fulfilling what he now conceives as his moral obligation - propagating Socialism. But it is in acting as chairman at McCabe's lecture entitled "The Present Conflict Between Science and Theology" that Plumb finally exceeds the limits of the tolerance of the Presbyterian authorities. It has taken years for his socialist beliefs to lead him completely away from the church, but his movement in that particular direction began before his ordination, with the

failure of Presbyterian doctrine to ward off the dreadful evil associated with Sullivan. Plumb has discovered that although Presbyterianism accounts for the presence of evil, by stressing the fallen nature of Man, it cannot dispel that evil.

It is clearly important that although he moves away from the church, Plumb never loses his belief in the existence of God. Edie joins him in his spiritual change, and they are both looking for reason in faith: "What we sought was a form of worship that would not cripple us as rational beings" (p. 98). It is this which leads to the eventual repudiation of religious orthodoxy, but there is no repudiation of religion itself, nor of God. In fact, Plumb claims: "To find God I had to leave the Church!" (p. 136).

His belief in Socialism, Rationalism and Eugenics ultimately leads to his imprisonment for seditious utterance, and it is in Lyttelton jail that Plumb's belief in man is seriously shaken:

I could not pray. I could not find God or Man ... I heard the trapdoor crash. I felt the noose choking me. And the bullets Eggers fired smashing into spine and heart. And bayonets cutting my flesh, gas burning my lungs. The hell and the despair of the world were in my cell (p. 174).

Whereas the evil he sensed upon hearing the story of Sullivan was expressed in terms of the cosmic struggle between God and the Devil, evil is now the cruelty of man towards man. Evil no longer results in eternal suffering for the guilty soul in Hell,

but in physical and psychological suffering for men on earth. This shift in Plumb's conception of the nature of evil is in keeping with his changing priorities: the spiritual aspect of religion is less important to him at this stage of his life than the injunction to social justice found in Christianity.

Plumb's belief in politics and social man is finally destroyed by Dan Peabody, whose political career has caused him to cease to care about other people. Plumb is shocked by Dan's indifference to Bluey:

I turned away from him, shied away almost, as though from a suddenly incarnate dark angel (p. 238).

Plumb's new goal from this time is increasingly one of mystical illumination and union, as his Commentary upon Whitman's "The Song of Myself" reveals. His letters to Andrew Collie show how his priorities have changed again. He had once agreed with the Marxist belief that evil social conditions breed evil in people, and that the establishment of a just society would create a loving, brotherly attitude of people towards each other. Plumb has come to believe that "man's salvation lay in another direction" (p. 258). Although he still wants social justice and equality, he believes that a just society will never be a reality until some change in individual man has been effected - until we achieve a "higher consciousness" (p. 258).

From the time of his imprisonment, Plumb moves increasingly towards an intensely personal religion, in which he sees salvation as lying in man - not in social man but in the individual spirit. He experiences his epiphany at Esther's wedding. His momentary glimpse of the divine involves a complete recognition that "love is Life" (p. 205). The perfection that he sees and adores in his imperfect self is his capacity for love. And it is this recognition which brings Plumb what he knows to be the finest moment of his life. In the months that follow he does a great deal of intense reading, and comes to believe that he may experience a second "illumination":

Man's dual nature was shown me clearly; soon I would be free of the lower part (p. 212).

But there is a great irony in that confident use of the word 'soon', for instead of illumination, he moves into another dark period of oppression, and this one lasts for several years. For Plumb discovers that Alfred and John Willis are engaging in a homosexual relationship. And his reaction to this discovery shows just how fragile is his own understanding, and how limited his own capacity for love.

Plumb views the whole incident as proof of the evil of those around him. His immediate reaction is one of "Old Testament bloodiness" (p. 214), and his thoughts revolve around Chapter 19 of Genesis, in which the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah, and God's punishment of the sinners, are described. This analogy

automatically casts Alfred and John as the sinners deserving of dire punishment, while allowing Plumb to view himself as a latterday Lot - the virtuous man, acting in accordance with the will of God. As the years pass he is gradually able to understand what happened in the orchard from a different perspective. His understanding of it at the time of writing is explained in Chapter 96:

I was deep in the pit of my own evil nature. This was my dark night of the soul. I had been close to the Light; and blind to the flaws in my nature. I had believed I was Chosen. And at the point of victory I fell ... Paradise was no more than a pinprick of light at the end of a long tunnel I would never pass through. How could I move in any direction but down while my black hatred of my son Alfred endured? (p. 255).

This passage, with its allusion to a Satanic fall, constitutes a conscious recognition of his own evil, and of how his own limitations have kept him from truth.

In these words we also find the repetition of an image which Plumb used to describe his early struggle from his sense of Mankind's alienation from God towards a more hopeful and orthodox Christian belief:

My sense was of evil ... The point of light upon which I somehow managed to keep my eye was simply that, a point of light, without warmth, without content, and further off than I believed I could travel in a dozen lives (p. 23).

The image of Plumb's life goal as nothing more than a "pinprick" or a "point" of light at the end of a long, dark tunnel is used to describe his quest both in his youth and in his late middle-age. Whether Plumb's repetition of this image is deliberate or not, it reveals his own sense of the recurring pattern to which his quest is subject. Each time he succeeds in working his way out of moral darkness into the full blaze of the Light, he is confronted with evil, and once again surrounded by darkness. The light at the end of the tunnel then represents some slightly different goal, his former ideal having apparently failed.

During his meeting with Alfred, Plumb learns something new about the nature of evil. Seeing Alfred cup a hand to his ear, Plumb says:

At this I felt a shock of pain at our common blood, and terror at the blind progressions of life. I had given Alfred my deafness (p. 267).

But Plumb has given more than his deafness to Alfred. The evil hatred he has felt for his son has been passed on too, and is revealed with great ferocity during the interview. Plumb had hoped to heal the breach caused by his failure to love, but finds that hatred is a sickness which has proved contagious, and that he who has struggled all his adult life against evil as he perceived it, has contributed to the perpetration of evil in the world.

The pattern associated with Plumb's quest is not reasserted at the end of the novel. He sets himself no new goal, but concludes that his life is nearly over. This confirms what the reader has suspected all along, that no-one other than Plumb himself can gain anything from his life's work, and that the quest is therefore as finite as Plumb's existence. There is nobody to continue his work after his death so, at this late stage of his life, no new "light" appears to guide Plumb's future progress. There is nothing to suggest the continuation of the search for truth as Plumb understands it, into the future. This is not to say that the quest has been useless. Plumb has gained perhaps only one thing from his life's quest, but it is something of value. He has attained the self-knowledge which enables him to recognize that the evil he has always seen in others has also resided within himself. He finally emerges, then, into the "light" of self-knowledge. This particular knowledge has never been his goal, and brings him no great joy, but it is all that he discovers from a life-time of searching for truth.

There are in fact two major activities in Plumb's life: one is the quest, which has a controlling influence on his life, the other is the act of narration, which is an attempt to describe and characterize that life. I have already examined the pattern of the quest, but the narrative has its own pattern, which arises directly from the three-level narrative structure of the novel. The three levels are the story of Plumb's youth and middle-age (which I shall refer to as the distant past), the events of his

old age, including the injuring of his hand and the visits to his children (the recent past), and the time at which the narration is taking place. The latter is, of course, always implicit in first-person narration, but Plumb makes it explicit by the use of present-tense remarks and observations. The broken nature of the narrative increases the discrepancy between the chronological and narrative sequences.

This complex structure gives a special significance to the elements of repetition, contrast and comparison which are important in many novels. Plumb recalls events from his distant past and events from his recent past, and records those events - but the process is not as simple as it sounds. Because the narrative frequently switches from the distant to the recent past, Plumb's constantly-changing beliefs are presented out of their chronological order, which gives the reader an ironic perspective upon Plumb's opinions. For instance, within the narrative of the recent past Plumb visits Parliament, where the sight of Dan Peabody sets him musing upon his earlier belief in eugenics:

I thought with a painful amusement of my old faith in the 'science' of eugenics. Eugenic betterment, eugenic sense, the eugenic ideal ... Well, I would have said that Felicity, my daughter, intelligent girl, and Dan Peabody, Socialist, man of courage, would have a child who must carry on God's work. And I thought of that child: ordinary-minded, pleasure-seeking Peter, blank in the eye at the great old causes, but lighting up at news of a football score (p. 149).

- Plumb is recognizing that eugenics has failed. Peter is the child of two promising young people, but is "ordinary". Eugenics is not really a science at all, but only part of the scientific rationalism with which Plumb is now so disillusioned.

However, the next chapter returns to the distant past, with Plumb's lecture tour of 1918, and his great excitement at the news of the Russian Revolution. This, of course, is the period during which Plumb's faith in eugenics (and in Socialism) was at its height. He describes the idealism of his belief about Woman and Love:

She might select her man and have her babe and know that her act served the true morality (p. 152).

The "true morality" is the morality of human love, and, specifically, of love which conforms to the ideal of eugenic betterment. This "true morality" stands in contrast to bourgeois morality, which would insist on marriage as the necessary precondition to childbirth. This is Plumb's attitude to the affair between Felicity and Dan, in 1918. It contrasts sharply with his disillusioned attitude of the late 1940s which has been presented to us just three pages earlier in the novel. The effect of this foreknowledge on the reader is to prevent him from identifying with Plumb in his enthusiasm for the "true morality". Because we already know that eugenics has failed both society as a whole and Plumb personally, we view ironically Plumb's ardent belief in it.

The subject of eugenics arises again in a conversation between Plumb and Felicity in the car, on the way from Wellington and Auckland:

'Poor Dad. You thought I was something special. Woman of the twentieth century. Mother of the new race. And all I really wanted was poor silly Dan. A house and babies.'

'I don't believe that.'

'I wanted him to divorce his wife and make an honest woman out of me. So much for the New Woman.' (p. 171)

Felicity's cynicism towards her father's former eugenic beliefs is obvious. But, although this conversation takes place at a later date than Plumb's recognition of the failure of eugenics as represented by Peter, Plumb's reaction is equivocal. He is not prepared to accept that Felicity's professed beliefs were merely a deception on her part, nor does he express any doubts of his own about the value of eugenics. He is less equivocal later, however, when Robert introduces the ugly woman whom Plumb suspects of being mentally retarded, as his wife: "The eugenicist in me was revolted" (p. 184). Even in his old age, as he travels around the North Island visiting his children, there are aspects of Plumb's character which still fit with the old beliefs of his Socialist days. From a structural point of view, it is very important that we observe the younger Plumb at the height of his faith in eugenics or socialism after we have had his later, disillusioned view. The resulting double-focus gives a distinctive pattern to the narrative - an ironic pattern. The irony is reinforced by our discovery that Plumb has not

progressed from complete faith to complete repudiation of that faith, as he claims. Although Plumb has recognized the folly underlying eugenics, part of him is still a "eugenicist". He is still influenced by old beliefs which, in his most rational moments, he ruefully accepts as inadequate. In this way, both Plumb's belief and his disillusionment are undermined.

The structure of the novel frequently undermines any sense of the absolute nature of Plumb's beliefs. The reader never forgets that they are constantly changing, because the earlier views are presented in juxtaposition with the later views.

I have pointed to two patterns in the novel. One is associated with the events of Plumb's life, which form a cycle of faith and its frustration; the other is associated with the narration of those events, which is characterized by irony. While it is possible to isolate these patterns for the purpose of discussion, they are, of course, intimately related. They both relate to Plumb's quest for spiritual, moral and social truth. Plumb is periodically plunged into spiritual darkness because of the inadequacy of his current beliefs in explaining and counteracting the evil in the world, and must then find some new approach to his quest. This is pertinent to Plumb's life, of course, but it also constitutes an ironic comment upon him and his chances of success.

It would seem, from this, that the narrative structure works completely against Plumb, because it creates and reinforces ironies which negate any sense of moral progress in his life. However, it is another aspect of the novel's structure which reveals his most important moral progress being made near the end of his life. The broken narrative form is one of the structural similarities that have been pointed to between Plumb and To Be A Pilgrim. The conversation between Plumb and Felicity at the beginning of Chapter 52 is proof that the narrative is being written in stages, and in providing us with this proof, Gee is inviting us to discover the significance of this technique. Very early in the novel, it becomes obvious that its significance lies in the changing of Plumb's attitude to Alfred, which takes place during the time of writing the narrative.

This changing attitude can be seen in the last paragraphs of Chapter 2:

Edie, I do not criticize you. I would not have had one hair of your head different. I understand the approval you felt for [Oliver]; as I understand your love for that other, the one I do not name. Who died to me on that morning long ago (p. 13).

Just a few lines later, he writes:

I do not judge you. I understand your love for the person, your son. Alfred. My hand does the work. I pray that one day I may speak his name (p. 13).

In the space of just seven lines, Plumb has progressed from being unable to write Alfred's name, to writing it but being unable to speak it. The last sentence of the chapter is even more revealing:

Along these paths I may travel to the Light that shines
in my life in every place but this (p. 13).

Despite his continuing repudiation of Alfred, Plumb expresses not only a desire for reconciliation, but also his recognition that it is he that must grow morally in order that this reconciliation may take place. His relationship with Alfred is already recognized as the darkest part of his life.

Progress does not come quickly. Although Plumb has recognized his own need for a reconciliation with Alfred, he seems incapable of effecting it himself. However, he is altered by his visit to Robert, on Parminter's farm:

Something had passed from the boy to me and I thanked him for it. Part of his goodness? Why should that quality not be transmittable by touch? and meeting no unbelief, why should it not heal body as well as mind? (p. 191).

From an earlier description, we know that Robert's "goodness" lies largely in his willingness to accept people:

He made no judgements on people. People were in nature. He did not question the shapes they had grown into (p. 181).

In banishing Alfred, Plumb has revealed a spectacular failure to accept others. And it is this quality of loving acceptance of other people which Plumb believes Robert has passed on to him, and its effect is a healing of the wounds that have caused him so much pain - wounds both physical and psychological.

Having reached this point in the moral progression towards acceptance of Alfred, Plumb reaches the point in his narrative at which he must recount the events of that summer morning when the breach occurred. Because he records his discovery of John Willis and Alfred in the orchard after he has visited Robert, a double-narrative effect is achieved. Plumb describes the "Old Testament bloodiness" of his reaction to his discovery, but he brings another perspective to that description, as the elderly narrator whose mind has begun to heal under the influence of Robert's touch. The amended narrator views his earlier self before describing the scene:

There I stood. To the couple in the grass I must have risen like some frightful beast from their most hideous dreams (p. 214).

Ostensibly, this is the view of John and Alfred, but the narrator is sympathetically projecting himself into their minds and recognizing that their "white and bestial" faces (p. 214) were

matched by his own bestiality. After describing how he threw the money at Alfred, Plumb recalls:

And I fled again, for I saw the danger of his face becoming human (p. 215).

This, too, is a recognition that belongs to the time of his narration. It reveals the way Plumb's consciousness imposes on his experience the order he wishes it to take. John and Alfred are the objectification of Plumb's own evil, and so the description moves from the bestiality of Plumb to the bestiality of the lovers. Plumb now consciously realizes, as he did not at the time, that if he had allowed himself to look at Alfred he would have understood the harm he was doing to his son. By refusing to look at Alfred, Plumb enables himself to preserve his image of the lovers as beasts:

It was my right to kill him, kill the beast, as God had killed those creatures of filth long ago.

So in my mind I killed him; and killed him again (p. 215).

Killing Alfred is first described as a right: then the justifications drop away, making the repetition stark and brutal. Its starkness is reinforced by the monosyllabic vocabulary and simple rhythm, and a sense of the blind rage which motivated Plumb is conveyed.

The idea of Plumb's evil and his bestiality (as opposed to that of John and Alfred) comes from the later perspective of the narrator. The disgust and rage that he felt in the orchard can no longer be expressed without building in a recognition of his own failings, because of his experiences since he began writing.

The next chapter dealing with the recent past shows the extent to which Plumb's own description of the scene in the orchard has effected him. He reflects more openly upon his own inadequacy:

[Edie] saw both of us as outside nature. Alfred because of his practices - equally with me she believed them unnatural - and me because my love had proved insufficient. Hers was sufficient (p. 224).

He suggests that his identity as "preacher, teacher, moralist" (p. 224) prevented him from achieving true acceptance of his own humanity and of that of others. His ensuing statement that he is now able to accept everything human, suggests that he no longer identifies himself so completely in that role of "preacher, teacher, moralist":

But now, I thought, resting in the summer-house, now I can do it. I can love Alfred. I can forgive myself. I am a man. Nothing human is alien to me (p. 224).

At this stage, Plumb is interpreting these words of Terence as meaning that, as a human being, he should accept and tolerate everything human, just as Robert "did not question the shapes" people had grown into. The words actually mean more than this,

as he discovers when he meets Alfred. It is not enough for Plumb to tolerate evil on the grounds that it exists in other people. Evil is not alien to Plumb because it is as much a part of himself as of Alfred. This is the lesson that Plumb still has to learn. He announces to Felicity and Meg that he would like to see Alfred again, and, in response to Felicity's harsh attitude, acknowledges his own fault to his daughters:

'My dear, I've been cruel,' I said to Felicity, 'but is there any need for you to be?' (p. 226).

By this stage of the narrative, Plumb's sense of his own guilt is very strong, and this gives a tone of self-accusation to his description of the final years of Edie's life. His own failure in love is consciously understood:

She was not afraid. Perfect love casteth out fear. But I was afraid. I was afraid to be without her. I was afraid to see her go before I had knowledge of the thing she knew. She had perfect love. And I did not (p. 228).

When Plumb meets Alfred again, he does indeed seem to have shed his role as "preacher, teacher, moralist". In fact, he tries to convince Alfred that Robert could more successfully fill at least the role of teacher. Robert's strength is the ability to love - not an intellectual strength, but a human one. After the reunion with Alfred fails, Plumb's final attitude continues his repudiation of his old identity:

I thought, I'm ready to die, or live, or understand, or love, or whatever it is (p. 271).

He claims no special knowledge of a meaning or purpose in life. He is humbled, but not defeated.

The fact that the narrative is not written from a single point in Plumb's development, allows us to see him in the process of making steady moral progress in the act of narration. Furthermore, the act of narration actually assists this process by forcing Plumb to confront his own behaviour and re-live his own attitudes. For instance, he recalls his use of Old Testament language and analogies with some shame.

However, perhaps the most important factors in bringing about the moral change in the narrator are his own sense of the need for "light" in the sphere of his relationship with Alfred (which he explores in the course of the narration), and the meeting with Robert (which occurs after he has begun that exploration). The impetus for moral progress exists before the narrative is begun, but receives an important reinforcement while the narrative is being written. It is ironic that Plumb should claim in the first chapter that "the striving is done" (p. 11), when the only real result of his "striving" is yet to be achieved. The moral progress that Plumb makes as an elderly narrator, in the last year of his life, is the only moral progress he makes which is not ironically undermined in any way by the narrative.

Judgement - Ironical and Moral

The distinction between telling and showing is important to understanding narrative technique. Plumb both shows and tells: he describes incidents directly, but also makes extensive use of commentary. Commentary is frequently used to convey facts, to clarify the reader's understanding of Plumb's emotional experience or to give us a summary of events, but we are always aware that everything is being viewed and filtered through the consciousness of George Plumb himself before being delivered to us. Plumb's language, for instance, constantly reflects his spiritual and intellectual interests, through Biblical references and literary allusions. But although we are reading Plumb's interpretation of his life, the first-person form does not constitute a tight restriction. Maurice Gee has created, in Plumb, a broad-minded man genuinely attempting an honest appraisal of his life. Furthermore, the novel is not limited to the scope of his understanding: Gee has built in many ironies which allow the reader to move beyond the boundaries of Plumb's comprehension.

The problem of 'aesthetic distance' is most acute when the narration is in the form of the first-person, because there is a danger of the reader becoming over-involved with the narrator, or even identifying with him. However, problems lie in the other direction, too, as Wayne Booth points out, in The Rhetoric of

Fiction:

In 1912 Edward Bullough formulated the problem of what he called 'psychic distance' as that of making sure a work is neither 'over-distanced' nor 'under-distanced'. If it is over-distanced it will seem, he said, improbable, empty, artificial or absurd, and we will not respond to it. Yet if it is under-distanced the work becomes too personal and cannot be enjoyed as art¹⁵.

A certain distance is necessary if the reader is to apprehend the aesthetic shape of the work. In the case of Plumb, that shape is, of course, an ironic one. In fact, irony is the chief means by which Gee prevents the reader from becoming too involved in the novel.

It is possible for an author to achieve distancing effects in a variety of areas - between narrator and characters, narrator and reader, author and characters, narrator and author. This latter is the most relevant to Plumb, whose narrator is fallible and unreliable, at times. He is reliable when he speaks for the norms of the work (that is, for the standards endorsed by the author), unreliable when he fails to comply with them. For example, his assessment of Fred Meggett's personality, although highly subjective, seems basically sound, to the reader:

Fred Meggett hums like an electric motor. It's a fearful energy that possesses him, driving him on to what he calls success and I damnation (p. 56).

But Plumb's attitude to Fergus is less likely to win the reader's approval:

His tough man's-man face had an anxious look. But he was too proud to say what was on his mind - something, I guessed, about Alfred displacing the Soles at Peacehaven, or in my will (p. 249).

While the narrator's understanding of Fred is supported by everything the reader knows about Fred, the belief that Fergus cares only about Plumb's money seems unjust. The reader glimpses Fergus as the nervous boy who must fortify himself with alcohol before meeting Plumb, and as the generous young man who brings Plumb gifts and takes him to cricket matches. Gee allows us to see aspects of Fergus's character which Plumb seems to ignore. Plumb can therefore be said to be reliable in his description of Fred, and unreliable in his understanding of Fergus.

The gap between the author and the narrator leads to dramatic irony, which depends upon the author and reader sharing some knowledge of which the central character or characters are ignorant. Irony is a device of exclusion: it excludes those who do not have the knowledge or insight to understand some point which others see very clearly. Plumb is a novel in which the narrator is sometimes the butt of the ironic point. Frequently, a collusion develops between the reader and the author from which Plumb himself is excluded, because he does not understand all the ironies of his narrative.

This is demonstrated very well by his relationship with Alfred. Plumb is a character who is admirable for his integrity. He is not always honest, it is true; for several years he remains a Minister of the Presbyterian Church while no longer believing in some of the most important aspects of its dogma. But the overall movement of his life is away from self-deceit to more rigorously honest positions - that is, until his repudiation of Alfred. His reaction to Alfred's 'sin' is his gravest failure. He has preached love and felt a deep personal need for the goodness associated with love, but it is many years before he can acknowledge that there has been a failure of love on his part. Throughout the novel, then, Plumb's assertions of the supreme value of love are unconsciously ironic.

However, Plumb is capable of making ironic comments upon his younger self. After having announced to Mrs Hamer that Edie and he intend to become Presbyterians, he recalls: "And being young, I began to preach ..." (p. 26). In cases such as this, the narrator and reader share some knowledge of which the character (the narrator's younger self) is unaware. 'Psychic distance' exists between the elderly Plumb who is narrating, and the young Plumb, who is seen as over-enthusiastic, and even arrogant, in his piety.

There are, then, two main types of irony identifiable in Plumb: that which excludes the narrator and operates at his expense, and that which the narrator deliberately employs against his earlier

self.

However, irony is not all-pervasive in the narrative. Plumb's observations are often perceptive and wittily expressed, so that there is no gap between his point of view and that of the reader. His argument with Cheeseman is one example:

'Works,' he roared from his bull's throat. 'You ask us to seek salvation through our works.' And from some Calvinist hole in his mind dug out the tag:

'Doing is deadly thing.
Doing ends in death.'

The enemy, I thought. But doctrinally he was on safe ground. It was mine that was shaky. I contented myself with saying, 'Good works are good works, Mr Cheeseman. They're no road to salvation, as we know. I would hope we do them not to be saved but because we are saved' (pp. 66-67).

Not only does Plumb reject the unenlightened "back-blocks Presbyterianism" (p. 67) of Cheeseman and Hay, but he also recognizes that, in terms of Presbyterian dogma, his position is basically unsound. He sees that Cheeseman is right, according to Church doctrine. The assumption of moral superiority over Cheeseman co-exists with Plumb's recognition of his intellectual sleight-of-hand in answering Cheeseman.

The reader's level of involvement fluctuates in the course of the novel. At times we join with Plumb in condoning his behaviour; at other times we join with him in recognizing the faults in his actions; and there are also occasions when our understanding of

a situation is entirely different from the narrator's understanding.

The question of our fluctuating involvement is linked to Gee's problem of maintaining sympathy for Plumb despite his faults. The narrative viewpoint neatly and convincingly achieves what large amounts of authorial commentary could only achieve at the expense of realism and simplicity if Plumb's life was viewed through any eyes other than his own. Not only does Plumb provide evidence of his many redeeming qualities in the course of his narrative, but the sustained inside view encourages us to take Plumb's part, because, although we can disagree with Plumb or see further than he does on some matters, we are influenced by Plumb's values - by his belief in intellectual endeavour and personal integrity, for example. Furthermore, because Plumb writes the narrative in stages, he can be seen to be making significant moral progress as a narrator, as I have shown. All of these factors contribute to make him a more sympathetic figure than he could otherwise be, considering that Plumb himself acknowledges his own fault regarding his treatment of Alfred, of Oliver (and, indeed, of all his children) and of Edie, and admits having caused irreparable damage to the lives of other people outside his family, such as Wendy Philson.

In many novels, the reader allows his judgement to merge with that of the author, or, alternatively, he may suspend judgement where the text is ambiguous. 'Judgement' is a term that needs to

be considered carefully in relation to this novel, partly because it is difficult to stand in judgement upon a character when our relationship with him is constantly fluctuating, and partly because Plumb himself claims, in the final pages of the novel, that "the time for judgements had gone" (p. 270). Is this simply a convenient way of avoiding unpleasant recognitions about himself, or does Gee endorse this plea for acceptance?

As a narrator, Plumb reveals a high degree of honesty with himself and with his life. An important step on the way to accepting Alfred occurs when Plumb rejects the self-deception he has been under:

On that night in the train I thought of him as Chatterton, dead at seventeen. Marvellous boy. But dead. And then became aware of my self-deception. I have noticed many times that I turn to some example or case from literature when I want to evade a clear sight of my behaviour. It will not do. And for the first time in twenty years I saw that Alfred's life had carried on (p. 96).

Plumb consciously recognizes the way in which he has been sub-consciously deceiving himself, and re-adjusts his moral and emotional approach to the problem of Alfred's life, as a result. He is capable of criticizing his younger self, also. When Plumb summarizes the content of his sermon during the strike of the Thorpe waterside workers, the early and later perspectives contrast sharply:

What was it, the teaching of Jesus? Why, I said (for I had wound them tight enough), it was socialism (p. 84).

He is proud of the oratorical skill and control that he demonstrated by holding back the vital word "socialism" until his audience had been "wound ... tight enough", but at the same time, the narrator knows he doesn't like his own behaviour. The cynical tone of the narrator's comment in parentheses is very different from the persuasive rhetoric used by the younger Plumb.

Plumb gains important self-knowledge as he comes to realize that much of the evil which surfaced on that summer's morning in the orchard was his own. When Emerson informs him that Alfred and Edie met regularly in the orchard, his understanding of the suffering he has caused his wife is reinforced:

The way, I thought, he had come to meet John Willis. I felt a tremor in my universe, and thought for a moment things would fall apart. But then felt a settling, and looked with a sharp eye at the new conformations. I did not like them. Edie had walked in the orchard, deceiving me; I had put her to this torment. So, in concealment, she had met the needs of her life. I did not like the part I played in this (p. 247).

He has fought off the threat of losing his new moral perspective, by honest self-appraisal. His anger which was on the point of being directed at Edie and Alfred, is turned instead upon himself.

When he first discovered Alfred and John in the orchard, Plumb saw himself as the righteous Lot who was forced to abandon the sinners of Sodom and Gomorrah. But, in analysing Wendy Philson's reaction to his repudiation of Alfred, Plumb is able to see himself in a totally different way:

She withdrew from me in horror when I sent him away ... She had believed me a good man. I showed her a gross imperfection that led her on to views of human nature that almost cost her her reason. Evil was a force that battered on the doors of her sanity (p. 254).

Plumb recognizes that at this stage he represented to Wendy the same force that Sullivan had represented to him, years earlier - evil. He is now capable of casting himself in the role of evil.

In the last chapter of Plumb, the narrator, further chastened by the disastrous meeting with Alfred, attempts to analyse the nature of his own evil:

Yes, evil worked in me. I had thought of him as mine, as my achievement. His glory belonged to me. So when he showed his nature I destroyed him (p. 270).

Plumb's egocentricity is now specifically linked to evil. His tendency to view his children as extensions of himself is no longer a mere foible, but a dangerous arrogance which has resulted in a great deal of suffering.

As a narrator, Plumb moves towards greater honesty and self-knowledge. He makes genuine attempts to discover the truth about his own past and, because he is prepared to acknowledge his own faults, is remarkably successful in this. This progress towards painful self-knowledge influences the reader to withhold harsh judgement on Plumb's blindness.

It is also very significant that, although his certainties are ironically undermined, Plumb's certainty is an attractive characteristic. Chapter 35 recounts a conversation between Plumb and 14-year-old Felicity, on the subject of atheism. People have been scandalized by Plumb's socialist leanings, which they interpret as signalling his atheism:

I took her hand and asked her to recite me The Ode to the West Wind. I told her the man who wrote that need not fear the judgement of the Brockies (p. 97).

The implication behind this statement is, of course, that Shelley will be judged favourably by greater minds than the Brockies' - minds like Plumb's own. Stated like this, it sounds very arrogant, but the little the reader knows of the Brockies suggests that they are petty and unpleasant people. Plumb's confidence that his own judgement is more valid than theirs, is therefore likely to win the reader's sympathy.

The narrative suggests both the dangers and the value of the ego, and so does not openly support any judgement upon Plumb's life.

Judgements based upon conventional moral standards have been rejected as inappropriate to works of art by many modern writers and critics¹⁶. One of the characteristics of much twentieth-century fiction has been the artist's endeavour to obtain affection, or at least respect, for individuals who, viewed 'objectively' without the selective presentation or special emphasis made possible by art, would arouse strong feelings of disgust, scorn and dislike. For example, the Rev. Bohun in Frank Sargeson's Joy of the Worm is a selfish, arrogant old man, who does immense harm to anyone unfortunate enough to spend much time in his company. The reader's attitude towards him is nevertheless likely to remain affectionate: the Rev. Bohun, as he appears in the novel, is a lovable eccentric. His redeeming qualities, such as his comic use of language, are all tainted with the sins of selfishness and pride, yet they are sufficient to alter radically the reader's judgement of him. Sargeson chooses to present the old man in this way in order to heighten the selfishness, hypocrisy and inhumanity of Bohun's son Jeremy, who is the real 'villain' of the novel. The Rev. Bohun's behaviour stems from a nature which is basically well-intentioned towards others: Jeremy's behaviour reveals only indifference towards other people. This is the axis of values which Sargeson establishes for this novel, and his presentation of the characters - one morally reprehensible, the other causing

the same amount of damage to the lives of others, but made morally acceptable by his good intentions and by the comedy he generates - makes it most likely that the reader will accept the author's values, if only while he is reading the novel.

Similarly, Gee establishes the values we need in order to appreciate the complexity of his novel, while steering us away from the kind of moral judgements which Sargeson encourages us to make. To take what is the most important example, Gee's ambivalence towards the question of the morality of Plumb continuing his quest for Truth at the expense of his family leaves each reader free to draw his own conclusions. Depending on his personal values, he may choose to admire Plumb for his single-minded attention to reaching his elusive goal, and for the way in which he is able to give meaning to his life by pursuing it, or he may believe that Plumb's failure to arrive at the source of truth, and the degree of suffering that it causes Edie and the children, reduces Plumb's insistence upon continuing it to arrogant insensitivity. But whichever view the reader takes, he is almost certain to be aware - and sympathetically aware - of the other view. Even if he thinks the family's suffering (both physical and psychological) outweighs any arguments that might justify the quest, he cannot help but have some sense of the quest's intrinsic value as an intellectual endeavour, even if it is only because he sees Plumb's struggles through the narrator's own eyes. If, on the other hand, the reader respects Plumb's constant attempts to move forward towards his life's goal, he is

nevertheless unlikely to believe that the deprivations suffered by the children and the drudgery of Edie's life are of no significance at all. Gee does not ignore the plight of the family, nor does he forget the high idealism and worthy aspirations involved in Plumb's search for spiritual and social enlightenment. Gee gives the reader a sense of the merits of both cases; it is for the reader to decide upon their relative merits, if his predispositions lead him to make a judgemental conclusion.

The reader may find himself unable to make any moral judgement on this issue, the complexity of which has been so emphasised. Gee's own ambivalence confirms Plumb's rejection of judgements, and indicates that we do not need to make any final judgements on Plumb's life as a whole. But it is clear that the values of the author affect the way the novel is read: indeed, it is Gee's combination of intellectual and humanitarian concerns which determines our own ambivalence.

We are ambivalent because Gee's art enables us to know much more than any single character in the novel can ever know. Plumb contains no character who can stand as a wise, generous adviser and commentator upon the central character's faults. All the characters who criticize Plumb are flawed people offering subjective opinions. This is not to say that Felicity and Oliver are wrong in their complaints against their father. Their views are true, but they do not constitute the whole truth. This is a

world of imperfect, damaged people, most of whom can see only one side of the argument. All of Plumb's children reject intellectual inquiry, because they have suffered from their father's commitment to intellectual activity, and are deeply aware of the harm it can do. This subjectivity effects everyone in the novel, of course, and the fact that the reader can escape it at least to the extent of recognizing the partial truth in each character's attitude, results from the artifice of the reader's position. Only very rarely can someone who is involved in events gain the kind of insight that Gee allows the reader to gain of Plumb's life. This is true of many novels, of course, and indicates that many writers have been concerned to increase our understanding of and sympathy for the world and the people in it, rather than to confirm prejudices or to condemn. In allowing us to see the merits and the limitations in so many conflicting attitudes to life, Gee suggests that judgements are inappropriate. Plumb gives so many examples of judgements which are misguided and unjust - the court's decision to imprison Plumb for 'seditious utterance', Felicity's derisive dismissal of Robert as "the village idiot" (p. 190), Plumb's condemnation of Alfred - that Plumb's final rejection of judgements is in keeping with the novel's evidence against judgemental attitudes.

Plumb as an Artist

It has already been seen that Plumb is a narrator with a great desire to appraise his life honestly. However, his role as a man engaged in rigorous self-scrutiny conflicts with his role as a writer. His acquaintance with much of the world's finest literature shows that he is interested in literary art. Indeed, the breadth of literary references made by the narrator is remarkable, and the significance which he attributes to it is suggested by the fact that he calls literature his "wider bible" (p. 68). Allusions to literary, theological and even scientific works occur throughout the narrative. For example, in Chapter 86, when describing the adventures of Emerson, he comments:

But soon we had too many details; the magic went out of Emerson. For me it was as if Theseus, arriving from the north, had recounted his adventures in Frazerian terms (p. 229).

Frazer was an anthropologist who wrote a book called The Golden Bough, in which he searched for an anthropological basis for myth. Plumb evidently feels that all the details of Emerson's adventures took the magic out of something he preferred to regard as myth. The passing reference to Frazer is just one of many such references which suggest the extent of his literary, theological and scientific knowledge.

Sitting in Oliver's court listening to details of an adulterous affair, he recalls Browning's words: "the unlit lamp and the ungirt loin" (p. 164). But his disgust at the sordidness of the affair causes him to add: "The words were too good".

For Plumb, literature represents an ideal, and he is frequently disappointed to discover that others do not live up to that ideal. Browning's words describe a furtive sexual encounter, but the literary context distances the reader from the reality of such relationships. When Plumb learns of a similar relationship between real people, he describes their affair as a "squalid event" (p. 164).

Throughout the narrative, Plumb frequently provides evidence of the tremendous breadth of his literary knowledge. What is perhaps most significant about his erudition is that he regards the lofty standards of literary and theological works as standards for behaviour in everyday life. He expects his own life, and the lives of others, to be in accordance with literary archetypes. That Plumb's interest in literature influences his approach to his narrative can be seen not only in his articulate style, but also in his use of symbols.

Plumb's narrative establishes some symbols of which he is unconscious. These are evidence not of Plumb's artistry, but of Gee's. The most obvious example is Plumb's ear-trumpet, which is associated with his deafness, and so becomes a symbol of his

imperviousness to the needs of others. This is obviously how Alfred sees it, when it infuriates him so much that he is driven to destroy it. Plumb has claimed that his deafness "sharpens [his] other senses, especially [his] sense of otherness" (p. 9). The senses are usually ways of communicating with other people, but the "sense" to which Plumb attaches so much importance is his isolation. This isolation is responsible for his lack of understanding of his family's needs, and his failure to respond to them. The ear-trumpet symbolises Plumb's isolation, both to Alfred and to the reader.

Plumb is cut off from the present, as his ignorance about the working of electricity shows. He trusts his trumpet because it belongs to the past:

My trumpet I see as companion to Edie's coal range.
Neither will ever bite me (p. 10).

This trust is ironically misplaced, for Plumb's trumpet does eventually "bite" him, as Meg's new electric stove has bitten him. The separation that his deafness has allowed is the cause of Alfred's suffering, and Plumb has to acknowledge, finally, that he has been responsible for this evil. Alfred's frenzied destruction of the trumpet constitutes a rejection of both Plumb's imperviousness to others, and of their "common blood" (p. 267) - the deafness from which they both suffer.

Plumb's own ears are useless for understanding other people, and he clearly has little interest in communicating with others:

I brought my sons to her by their ears; and then got out of the way into my study or into my deafness. She set their hands upon the ivory keys. Their fingers thumbed out tuneless sound (p. 13).

He does not use his sons' ears to communicate with them, but as a means of physical coercion. As a narrator, Plumb stresses the fact that his sons were tone-deaf and that this distanced them from Edie. The reader can also see that Plumb's general deafness distances him from his children. In this case, Plumb is only partially aware of the significance of the symbol. Because they are a means of communication, ears become symbolic for understanding between people. Plumb sees that the failure of his sons' ears (their tone-deafness) prevented them from truly understanding their mother; but he does not realize that the failure of his own ears has prevented him from understanding his children. He is consciously applying the symbol only to his sons, but the reader knows that it applies to Plumb, too.

However, Plumb is often fully conscious of the symbolic significance which objects take on in the course of his narrative. He draws a specific parallel between the eels in the creek and the force of evil:

Slimy and snake-like, they drive themselves through the water like thoughts better not admitted (p. 11).

His own overwhelming conviction of the presence of evil causes him to see the eels as manifestations of that evil. He suggests that he takes pleasure in calling the eels up because he has conquered evil in his own life. On the final page of the novel, he comments again upon the eels:

I saw why people found them sinister. Dead mouth, snake's body. And they rose from dark holes in the slime. But I did not pursue it. They were God's creatures. And looking for symbols a game (p. 271).

This final acceptance of the eels fits in with his later belief in the complementary nature of good and evil. It also constitutes a recognition that attaching symbolic weight to objects is a highly personal and subjective process. Having discovered his own evil, Plumb can now say that it is only others who find the eels sinister. Looking for symbols is a "game" because it is a painless short-cut to understanding the world, and results in a shallow, naive comprehension. The true understanding that Plumb has finally attained is not achieved simply by assigning particular qualities to their symbolic representatives, but by recognizing those qualities wherever they exist, including their existence within himself. Although he here rejects the artist's ploy of "looking for symbols", Plumb has been endowing objects with symbolic meaning throughout the narrative.

The quince tree is a very important example. It is first mentioned near the end of Chapter 2, after the first suggestion of a separation between Plumb and Alfred:

In the hollow past the quince stump bracken grows,
young pine trees raise their heads. This is a lesson
to me (p. 13).

The scene of destruction and death is now sending forth new, young life. Plumb interprets this natural growth as a "lesson" about his need for personal growth after his long period of moral decay. The reader's introduction to the quince tree itself, is as a rotting stump. It soon recurs, in a different form and setting, when Plumb describes his courtship of Edie:

Our favourite place was a wooden seat under the quince tree in what Mr Hamer had called his fruit garden ... From there we looked down through the trees, cherry and white heart and pear, greengage plum and prune and almond, and over the patch of gooseberries and black and red currants, to the vegetable garden, the woodshed and potting shed, and the house, overgrown with scarlet japonica and jessamine and rambling roses (p. 19).

The courtship scene is paradisaical: the peace and ordered harmony of their surroundings reflects the nature of Plumb and Edie's developing relationship, as Plumb remembers it. The quince tree is a symbol of their union, at this stage. The scene in which he discovers Alfred and John beneath the quince tree is distinctly anti-paradisaical, with its emphasis upon sin and divine retribution. This leads to the alienation of Plumb and Edie, and

so the quince tree becomes a symbol of their disunion.

Plumb believes that a loving relationship between husband and wife is part of the natural order, and he uses a tree as a symbol of a good marriage:

My life and Edie's together was a tree that bore fruit in its season. In every sense what came from it was natural and blessed (p. 58).

From the tree, particularly the quince tree, Plumb consciously creates a symbol, which represents the various stages of his relationship with Edie.

Plumb uses his injured hand as another symbol. The physical healing process becomes a yard-stick for measuring his moral progress. When he visits Robert on Parminter's farm, Plumb's hand seems not to be healing at all:

Half my palm and my fingertips were raw and red and damp. They had an unhealthy look that alarmed me. Robert straightened out my fingers a little. He slanted my palm at the sun. 'Let the sun get at it,' he yelled (p. 183).

The hand then begins to heal, and this can be explained prosaically, by Robert's decision to expose the burned skin to the sun. Robert himself prefers this kind of explanation to the Messianic role assigned to him by Parminter and, increasingly, by his father:

'How does your hand feel?' 'Better. Parminter says you heal people.' He grinned evasively. 'I make them look after themselves' (p. 189).

Plumb describes Robert as "Parminter's saviour in the mundane sphere" (p. 188), ascribing to him at this stage nothing more than those qualities of practicality and agricultural skill which he says enabled Robert to "save Peacehaven with his hands" (p. 231), during the Depression.

However, he later attributes qualities to Robert which go far beyond the mundane:

Something had passed from the boy to me and I thanked him for it. Part of his goodness? Why should that quality not be transmittable by touch? and meeting no unbelief, why should it not heal body as well as mind? ... A week later ... my palm had grown a new skin (p. 191).

Plumb equates the healing of his hand with the healing of his mind, seeing Robert as responsible for curing him of his hatred of Alfred, which has caused so much unhappiness to him and to his family. It is after visiting Robert that he decides to see Alfred, and seeing the hatred on the face of his homosexual son, he says:

I just wanted to tell you about Robert. He touched my hand and now it's healed up. Why don't you go and see Robert? (p. 269).

He believes that Robert would cure Alfred, not of his homosexuality, but of his hatred.

Plumb creates a symbolic figure of Robert, his saviour not just in the "mundane sphere" but also in the emotional and moral spheres. He attempts to explain Robert's effect upon him to Meg, after announcing that he wishes to see Alfred:

He healed my hand Meg, see. But it's more than that. I've been possessed. For twenty-five years. And after seeing Robert the madness has gone. Nothing human is strange to me any more. He showed me love (p. 226).

Plumb is attributing a great deal of power to his youngest son, suggesting that the moral change in himself was wrought entirely by Robert. He seems to be claiming that his "madness" was undiminished before his meeting with Robert and that Robert was therefore solely responsible for his new-found attitude of acceptance and love.

Plumb is certainly mistaken in this view of events, succumbing perhaps to an artist's desire for symbolic representation of important forces (in Robert's case, the forces of Goodness and Love). His concern to see his moral reform as a sudden occurrence also allows him to create a neat climax from his low-key meeting with Robert, making Robert a pivotal figure and their meeting a pivotal event in his life story.

The reader knows that Plumb has been in the process of shedding his "madness" at least since he began writing his narrative, if not before. In the second chapter, Plumb writes of Alfred: "I pray that one day I may speak his name" (p. 13). He already sees his relationship with Alfred as the darkest area of his life:

Along these paths I may travel to the Light that shines
in my life in every place but this (p. 13).

The use of the metaphor of light representing moral and spiritual enlightenment shows that Plumb's concerns are at least partly artistic. But this passage is even more important because it reveals Plumb's sense of his own moral failing regarding Alfred. While still a long way from accepting his homosexual son, Plumb has made the important step of recognizing his own immorality.

In the train on the way down to Wellington, Plumb thinks again of Alfred:

... for the first time in twenty years I saw that Alfred's life had carried on. I felt the pain of his loss. Somewhere in the world Alfred was living; journeying as I was journeying. He would be forty-two: middle-aged. I could no longer feel that he was evil. I felt tears on my cheeks for the brilliant boy (p. 96).

In Chapter 2, Plumb's prayer that he might learn to accept Alfred seems to be motivated not by any concern for Alfred, but by a desire for his own moral betterment. Certainly, the narrator's emphasis is upon himself: he is thinking of the light that

shines on his life. In the later passage, he is more concerned for Alfred, as a man whose "life had carried on". He sees the individual humanity of his son who, like so many of his children, had been viewed as an extension of himself.

Before meeting Robert, Plumb has made significant progress in his attitude to Alfred. Robert acts as a catalyst, certainly, in facilitating Plumb's decision to meet Alfred. Robert accepts the madness of Parminster without criticism, and this reminder of the virtue in tolerance enables Plumb to make the next important step in his moral progress. But Plumb had already taken some vital steps in that direction on his own. Robert could never have helped Plumb, unless his father had previously recognized both his own failing and Alfred's humanity.

Plumb imposes a symbolic significance upon Robert, seeing him as his saviour. Robert's qualities are not Messianic. He does not change Plumb's nature, but simply enables his father to take another step towards a goal which Plumb has already recognized and towards which he has already begun to move.

The narrator's conscious use of symbols is evidence of his artistry, but because they occur only sporadically through the narrative these symbols do not in themselves constitute proof that Plumb has any overall artistic vision.

In addition to giving symbolic status to certain objects and to Robert, Plumb develops a metaphor which dominates all three levels of narrative - the distant past, the recent past and the present. This is the metaphor of the journey. When Plumb thinks of Alfred "journeying as I was journeying" (p. 96), he is clearly not referring to a trip to Wellington. Plumb sees life as a journey, and characterises his own life, particularly, in this way. He writes that Meg's eyes and hands remind him of Edie:

They start in me a pleasurable pain. It prompts me to my journey, my gathering in of my children; prompts me to a searching of my past (p. 9).

The journey of the recent past is his trip to Wellington and his visits to his children: it is a literal journey. The "searching of [his] past" is a metaphorical journey, made at the time of writing by a narrator travelling back through the years, in his memory, to review his life.

The journey of the distant past is the journey of Plumb's life. This, too, is a metaphorical journey. His move from Anglicanism to Presbyterianism is described in terms of a physical movement from one place to another:

... I had embarked on a harsher way and trod now the path between Bozez and Seneh (p. 24).

This is really a movement from Anglicanism to Philistinism, in the eyes of the narrator, but the metaphor applies equally well, however the allusion is interpreted. This is a direct reference to a metaphorical journey in his life.

This is just an isolated example, but Plumb's life contains several such changes in belief. The metaphor of travelling towards a goal is frequently used to describe his life, which has been so dominated by his search for spiritual, social and moral truth. The metaphor most often appears in the context of the image of Plumb in a long, dark tunnel, plodding towards the light at the end - a light which represents spiritual and emotional enlightenment:

The point of light on which somehow I managed to keep my eye was simply that, a point of light, without warmth, without content, and further off than I believed I could travel in a dozen lives. But I kept my eye on it: and slowly worked my way out of the darkness towards it ... (p. 23).

Plumb's life journey towards enlightenment is not completed until, as an elderly man, he attempts a reconciliation with the son he repudiated twenty-five years earlier. In the first chapter of the novel he asserts that he has reached his goal: "The striving is done" (p. 11). But this statement is disproved, since it is only after he has made it that he makes any major progress towards a reconciliation with Alfred.

The literal and metaphorical journeys are central to Plumb's narrative, as they dominate each of the three levels of narration. They provide a common factor in each of those three levels. Plumb is given psychological unity by the centrality of Plumb himself: it is given artistic unity by the pervasiveness of the journey metaphor, which Plumb uses consciously to describe his life. This explains the fact, noted earlier, that Plumb is content to structure his life as a series of unrelated, fragmented moments. The journey metaphor provides the unifying principle of his self-conception, so Plumb is not attempting to discover any continuity between the moments themselves. He finds the continuity in his motivation - his constant attempt to arrive at spiritual and social truth.

There is other evidence, too, that Plumb is creating a work of art, in writing his narrative. In Chapter 2, after a digression about the symbology of modern poetry, he consciously redirects his thoughts to the events of the morning of his departure: "Enough. This is not to my purpose" (p. 12). The discussion of modern poetry reappears much later in the novel, when Alfred's enthusiasm for Eliot is revealed. But the narrator feels that it is inappropriate to his "purpose" in Chapter 2. Plumb is exercising a careful narrative control over his material, organising it in a way which is evidently pre-determined. This reference to the narrator's "purpose" draws the reader's attention to Plumb as a conscious and intrusive narrator.

The material that he is controlling is largely supplied by his memory, and this makes the functioning and treatment of memory very important within the narrative. Plumb suggests the nature of his memory in Chapter 84, when he describes his first visit to a Presbyterian church in eighteen years:

I had not read Proust in 1928. But that day I stood for a time in one of his 'true paradises' (p. 227).

A La Recherche du Temps Perdu is a work which describes the re-creative power of memory, and demonstrates its creative power. Plumb's reaction to the church demonstrates the power of memory, in terms very like those of Proust:

... the place set up echoes, a haunting moan, inside me. From some things there is no escape. Remembrance of this kind is another sense (p. 227).

For Plumb, as for Proust, there is no escape from the past.

Plumb tells us in the second paragraph of the novel, that this systematic remembering of his past is prompted by Meg's resemblance to Edie. His memory is a "searching of [his] past" (p. 9). This suggests that he has a firm control of his memory, but it soon becomes clear that this is not always the case:

Contraptions, engines, have no interest for me, but they have the habitual effect of bringing Emerson to mind (p. 9).

Plumb is evidently the victim of his own past, in some matters, at least. He cannot look at a machine without remembering Emerson, and so, it seems, falls prey to the associative nature of his memory.

When consciously describing the process of his own memory, Plumb stresses its disciplined nature:

Memory with me is an active thing, not an undisciplined dreaming ... I get a hold on acts, words, gestures, worry them out of the corners they've got themselves lost in, and brush the dust away. And yet because they come from far away, from lost realms, and because their shapes are refined and mysterious, they have a visionary force. The processes of memory are religious. Each image I contemplate is an answered prayer (p. 140).

While insisting that he has an unusual degree of control over his memory, Plumb is also claiming that it is a mysterious force with the power to bring joy and hope. His description of the way in which he retrieves the past from the corners of his mind recalls the "searching of [his] past" which he mentioned in the first chapter. Plumb does not treat the process of memory casually: his approach to the past is not haphazard, but purposeful. It is this conscious and direct way of looking at the past which allows Plumb to control two narrative threads, presenting both in an ordered way, moving backwards and forwards between the distant past and the recent past, without losing the sense of purpose which directs his writing.

Furthermore, Plumb tells us quite explicitly that he believes the processes of memory to be linked with literary art:

Memory ... can be, and was now, an acceptable substitute for reading and writing (p. 140).

Memory, which is the foundation of the narrative, is an artistic activity to Plumb. It is for this reason that every aspect of the narrative is influenced by artistic concerns. The grammatical tense in which the narrative is written is not the past tense of historical description, but the past tense of narrative fiction, the 'epic preterite'. Consider the passage quoted above: "Memory ... can be, and was now, an acceptable substitute ..." (p. 140). There are several similar uses of the epic preterite at intervals through the narrative: "Now I had the task of knowing God" (p. 136), and "It pleased me now ..." (p. 242) are two more examples. In conventional grammar, deictic adverbs such as yesterday, now and tomorrow, can only be used to modify verbs in the past, present and future tenses respectively. When the word 'now' is used, as in the examples above, to modify verbs in the past tense, a particular effect is created. Such constructions indicate neither a recognizable past nor a recognizable present, but suggest a fictional world, unrelated to real time. Plumb is deeply involved in both the past and the present, and his use of the epic preterite shows how past and present are conflated in his mind. The world of which Plumb writes is taking on, for him, many of the qualities of a fictional world.

I have suggested that Plumb wants to give order and form to his work, in that he makes of Robert a symbolic Messiah in order to give his own moral reform a recognizable pattern. Plumb is concerned with pattern and form as they can be seen in his life:

I remembered Edie's phrase, another shake of the kaleidoscope. I had shaken it, and now my children were jostling at my shoulder to see the new pattern. I had a more intimate sense of them than I'd had in years; ... I even had dead Rebecca in my mind. And banished Alfred. I had Edie (p. 248).

Plumb is still engaged in the "gathering in of [his] children" (p. 9). He is attempting to see his family whole and to comprehend a pattern in his life.

Plumb is engaged in shaping his work, and this involves shaping his life. This artistic process allows a 'self' to emerge from the narrative, but, because it is largely a creative process, the 'self' that results may be largely fictional.

Creating A Self

Plumb's discussion of the power of memory, which occurs in Chapter 52, contains the important statement that for him, memory is "an acceptable substitute for reading and writing" (p. 140). Although Plumb is emphasising the re-creative power of memory, these words also suggest its creative power. Memory is the basis of much of Plumb's narrative, and the implication that it is to some extent a creative process is significant for our understanding of the novel.

Plumb is a narrator with a strong desire for self-knowledge and self-scrutiny. He attempts to discover the truth about himself, and has moments of great insight into himself and his faults. Despite his attempt at honesty, the self he reveals in his narrative is one which he creates. It is not an entirely fictitious figure, of course, but Plumb shapes his life and shapes a self in the course of his narrative. One of the ways in which he can be seen to do this is through the use of Biblical language and direct Biblical references:

We lay in our iron bed listening to the Coast rain
thunder on the roof. With my body I thee worship. It
was so (p. 40).

The words from the traditional wedding service are followed by an unequivocal statement - a sentence of such simplicity that it recalls the words of the Creation story, where the commandments of God are recorded, and followed by the words "and it was so" (Genesis, 1:7).

Biblical quotations are occasionally used to create a deliberate parallel between Plumb and a Biblical character, usually from the Old Testament. For instance, upon being accepted by the Rev Geddes as a candidate for the Presbyterian ministry, Plumb tells us:

I thought of Jeremiah, whose life was a prolonged martyrdom. He served forty years of ministry, this man so full of shrinkings, and prophesied with invincible perseverance ... and I said over several times, 'For thou shalt go to all that I shall send thee, and whatsoever I shall command thee thou shalt speak.'
(p. 36)

The use of Biblical language and quotation functions, in both of these examples, to give an epic tone to the narrative. His roles of husband and preacher are elevated by the archaic and specifically Biblical terminology.

In other cases, Old Testament references not only impart a near-epic status to Plumb's actions, but also create a judgemental tone. The most obvious example of this is Plumb's denunciation of John Willis and Alfred in Chapter 79. He himself describes his reaction as "Old Testament bloodiness" (p. 214).

The description of his escape through the orchard is filled with the language of Genesis 19, when the Archangels destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. He makes two references to the story of Lot's wife, who was turned into a pillar of salt in retribution for disobeying God's command that no-one should demonstrate sympathy for the cities' sinners by turning to look at them: "I remember thinking Edie would become a pillar of salt" (p. 214). Before he has seen Edie's reaction to the sins of her son, Plumb is sure that his wife will suffer for Alfred. He is unprepared, however, for her refusal to obey his order that she should never see Alfred again. She leaves the house every week to visit Alfred:

She smiled at me like a stranger. And I thought, Edie has become a pillar of salt (p. 216).

But now the judgement, established in the first sentence, is on Plumb and not on Edie. Characteristically, he sees her as transformed, but the text ironically indicates that he is the one rendered inanimate by the experience. Plumb's later understanding is insinuating itself into his attempt to reconstruct his feelings about Edie at the time of Alfred's banishment. The recognition that the inhumanity was his own, in putting Alfred, Edie and, indeed, the whole family in such a difficult position, belongs to his later years.

Another example of a Biblical reference being used in such a way as to demonstrate the fusing of perspectives, occurs in Chapter 8:

For a time I kept up a form of worship in the church of my fathers, but I no longer took communion for I had embarked on a harsher way and trod now the path between Bozez and Seneh (p. 24).

This refers to 1 Samuel, 14:iv:

And between the passages by which Jonathan sought to go over unto the Philistine's garrison, there was a sharp rock on the one side, and a sharp rock on the other side: and the name of the one was Bozez, and the name of the other Seneh.

For the young Plumb, the image of the "sharp rock" is appropriate, because it indicates both the spiritual uneasiness associated with his last months as an Anglican, and the harsher, but apparently more rewarding conditions associated with the Presbyterianism to which he was moving. The perspective of the narrating Plumb is contained in the words "unto the Philistine's garrison". The move from Anglicanism to Presbyterianism did involve hardship, but the narrator now believes he was travelling to the stronghold of the Philistines. In his old age, Plumb associates Presbyterianism with philistinism - philistinism in the sense of an overweening concern with material and commonplace things; but, at the time, he thought he was making the right spiritual choice.

Biblical language and Biblical references play a special part in the narrative: they elevate Plumb's status, create a judgemental tone and often demonstrate the double-perspective of the narrative, thereby revealing the narrator's view of the beliefs and actions of his younger self.

However, perhaps the most interesting aspect of Plumb's frequent Biblical allusions is his practice of comparing himself to Old Testament figures. He is variously likened to Jonathan travelling from Bozez to Seneh, to David fighting the Goliath of the Presbytery, to Lot fleeing from the evil of Sodom and Gomorrah and to Jeremiah, God's prophet.

The comparison with Jeremiah actually goes far further than the simple fact that, like Plumb, he interpreted God's word for the misguided people. Plumb, too, is a man "full of shrinkings". He uses the same expression to describe his state of mind as he moved away from Presbyterianism to socialism: "... elated mostly, uplifted, but sometimes, I admit, shrinking and nervous" (p. 72).

Plumb sees the similarities between himself and Jeremiah applying throughout his life, not only to his time as a Presbyterian minister. This is because of Jeremiah's role in society:

Therefore thus saith the Lord, If thou return, then will I bring thee again, and thou shalt stand before me: and if thou take forth the precious from the vile, thou shalt be as my mouth: let them return unto thee; but return not thou unto them.

And I will make thee unto this people a fenced brasen wall: and they shall fight against thee, but they shall not prevail against thee: for I am with thee to save thee and to deliver thee, saith the Lord (Jeremiah 15: 19-20).

Jeremiah had to face hostility because he preached God's word; he was an isolated figure, representing Good in a wicked society; he also suffered periodically from bouts of fear and self-doubt. Above all, he had God's assurance of eventual triumph. By seeing himself as a Jeremiah figure, Plumb provides a vindication of his stand against society. For instance, when speaking against the war, Plumb constantly insists that he is interpreting God's will for people on earth:

It is the will of God that his children of the Spirit, extend their horizons and cultivate the true Patriotism - Loyalty to Humanity - and the Communal Consciousness of the New Age ... (p. 141).

The language is not Biblical, but Plumb finds that his words are received with as little favour as were those of Jeremiah:

And stones fly. He tastes his own blood on his lips ... Half a dozen stones, two or three shouts of 'Judas', 'Traitor', two or three threats of death ... (p. 142).

In the first chapter of the novel, Plumb tells us that, on his life's journey, he has had "so few to accompany [him], and for distances so short" (p. 11). The comparison with Jeremiah allows him to discover a meaning in his isolation, because it suggests the lone, righteous individual battling against evil, in the name of God, and with God's promise of final success.

The comparisons with figures from the Old Testament endow Plumb with mythic stature. This stature is undermined by Plumb's recognition of Chapter 34:

I have noticed many times that I turn to some example or case from literature when I want to evade a clear sight of my behaviour (p. 96).

This deflates the mythic illusion and ironically undermines all Plumb's attempts to portray his life through literary and biblical comparisons, by allowing the reader to see Plumb's real reason for using them. They are a form of sub-conscious dishonesty, enabling the narrator to interpret events in a way which, he admits, often distorts his behaviour. Plumb's recognition suggests that the myth is undermined not only for the reader, but for the narrator also.

Plumb's use of the journey metaphor to characterize his life is another important example of the way in which the fictional context allows him to create a distinctive self. He claims that he did not come into existence as an individual until he began

challenging the conventions of society:

... this foretaste of a dark night of the soul, this devastation of spirit, marks the point of my beginning (p. 23).

Plumb excludes from his narrative that part of his life in which he did not behave in accordance with the principles which he sees as making him a distinctive individual. His childhood and adolescence are, apparently, erased from his memory. His "beginning" is marked not by his birth and the beginning of his life, but by the beginning of his search for spiritual truth.

The pervasive nature of the journey metaphor in the narrative, conveys Plumb's sense of his life as a pilgrimage. The goal of this pilgrimage is Truth, and, although his understanding of the exact source of truth varies, it is always associated with the Divine. Even during his Socialist phase, when Plumb believes that Mankind's only hope lies in science and in a new rational social organisation, he does not lose his belief in God:

One thing we never questioned - our vision of life was religious. What we sought was a form of worship that would not cripple us as rational beings (p. 98).

Plumb's understanding of 'God' changes and assumes the shape of his changing beliefs. Firstly, He is the God of wrath associated with Presbyterianism; during his Socialist phase God becomes a rational ideal; near the end of his life, he sees the Divine as

a mystical Being. Throughout his life, Plumb finds that he must re-define his concept of God to suit his own ability to perceive. He can therefore be said to create God in his own image. However, even when Plumb is most concerned with social justice and other earthly matters, his pilgrimage is a spiritual one, in that he believes that he is attempting to enact God's will for the world. So, like the comparisons between himself and Old Testament figures such as Jeremiah, Plumb's use of the journey metaphor suggests that his life has been dominated by spiritual struggle.

The idea of spiritual struggle not only characterizes Plumb's life and allows him to emerge as a unique individual, but it also vindicates his life. He is engaged in fighting "the good fight", dedicating his life to the difficult but valuable and courageous attempt to discover the means to Mankind's spiritual and social salvation. Plumb's emphasis upon those aspects of his life which suggest hardship, dedication and pilgrimage is a highly selective process. Plumb slips lightly over sections of his life that are not vital to his pilgrimage: "this brings into small compass ten years of searching ... (p. 98). Having explained the intellectual activity of that decade, Plumb feels that it has been adequately described. And, of course, the most obvious example of his self-conception causing him to leave certain events from his narrative, is his failure to describe his youth.

The artistic context of the narrative not only allows this selectivity; it actually necessitates it, since it is obviously impossible for any narrator to record everything. But in the case of Plumb, this selective process is so marked as to make his self-conception obvious to the reader. Plumb sees himself, primarily, as a pilgrim, who has dedicated his life to his great spiritual quest. As a narrator, he puts a lot of emphasis upon the events in his life which support this interpretation of it. Thus, the Plumb who emerges from the narrative is Plumb as he sees himself, rather than as others see him. Occasionally, Gee allows the reader a brief glimpse of Plumb from the viewpoint of others: Plumb recalls that the men with whom he played cricket called him "the steady little trundler" (p. 16). This is a rather comical view of Plumb as a sportsman, and contrasts with Plumb's own serious attitude towards physical exercise, which he believes brings "a rare conjoining of our mental and physical being" (p. 16). But such outside views are rare, in this narrative. Plumb's view of himself is dominant.

This point may seem self-evident, but it is important to our understanding of the interpretive nature of Plumb's view of his life. Plumb is able to portray the years of his hypocritically remaining a Minister of the Presbyterian Church despite his developing belief in socialism, as an anomaly within the context of his life:

I have forgiven this man his duplicity. But I will never make him my close friend (p. 79).

And later he writes:

I still kept Sunday in its box and entered it with the better part of my being held in check. I marvel that it went on for so long (p. 98).

The fact that Plumb later changed course, and abandoned his dishonest conduct, allows him to see it as a strange irregularity in his behaviour; as an event which is out of place in the pattern of his life. He presents it as an anomaly, as something which does not belong in his life, but in fact it is just as real as any of the other periods of his life. In any objective analysis of Plumb's life, his time as a Presbyterian Minister should be as important as any other time to our final understanding of his character. But because it does not fit Plumb's later self-conception, he presents it in such a way as to make it seem only a brief digression from the mainstream of his life's direction. Plumb is able to shed his former selves very readily. He seems capable of dissociating himself from those aspects of his past which do not reinforce his sense of identity.

I have already commented on the way in which Plumb's frequent references to literature demonstrate the breadth of his reading. However, Plumb's use of these fictions sometimes displays more about his nature than his erudition alone. For instance, he briefly compares his son Emerson to Theseus:

For me it was as if Theseus, arriving from the north, had recounted his adventures in Frazerian terms (p. 229).

If Plumb is seeing Emerson as a Theseus figure, he is implicitly casting himself in the role of Aegeus, Theseus's father. The relationship of these two characters is very interesting. When informed that his son would soon be departing by ship on yet another adventure, Aegeus instructed him to see that his ship used white sails for the return journey if Theseus were still alive, and black sails if he had died during the journey. Aegeus watched and waited anxiously, and when the ship finally sailed into sight, its sails were black. In his anguish, Aegeus threw himself off the cliff, and was dashed to pieces. Theseus, however, was alive: he had simply forgotten the details of his father's instructions.

Several important characteristics of Theseus emerge from this story. He lives for his daring adventures, and is totally engrossed in them, to the point of being impervious to what is happening around him. He is eccentric, although not deliberately cruel. These traits fit Emerson very well:

He came in to tea in greasy overalls; and ate dreaming. He did not see his brothers and sisters or hear what they said to him. He was blind and deaf. He dreamed his future: pistons and petrol, goggles and floating scarf (p. 179).

Like Theseus, Emerson is absent-minded, and absorbed in his adventures. Plumb's comparison of Emerson with Theseus constitutes an implicit reflection upon himself and his relationship with Emerson. Aegeus is a loving, caring father, who suffers from his son's absent-mindedness. Theseus may be quite fond of his father, but he is too absorbed in his own life to devote much time or thought to Aegeus. Plumb's view of himself as a father emerges, in an entirely implicit manner, from his brief comment upon Emerson as a Theseus figure. This suggests Plumb's self-centredness, and, indeed, the narrator is central to many of the allusions he uses.

Plumb uses Whitman's "The Song of Myself" in a similar way, although more self-consciously. Those sections of the poem that Plumb found so difficult (33-37) describe Whitman's dark night of the soul - Plumb applies this phrase to Whitman's life as he has applied it to his own darkest times. Whitman helps Plumb to accept the evil in his own nature because, according to Whitman, the mystical state must comprehend everything. A true understanding of the nature of human existence necessitates an awareness of evil as well as an awareness of good. Plumb, who has always battled against his strong sense of evil in the world and in human nature, can accept it, after reading and studying Whitman's poem.

Plumb consciously compares Whitman's experiences, as described in "The Song of Myself", with his own experiences:

Briefly, the Song is the record of Whitman's entry into, journey through, and emergence from the mystical state (p. 256).

He claims that examining the poem enabled him to reach a greater understanding of life:

What I must say is that the lessons of those dreadful sections 33-37 were the hardest to learn. Many a time beaten I cried with the poet, 'Enough! enough! enough!' But I learned. In the end I was able to say along with him, 'Do you see O my brothers and sisters? It is not chaos or death - it is form, union, plan - it is eternal life - it is Happiness' (p. 256-7).

Plumb is using "The Song of Myself" in a totally conscious way, while his reference to the Theseus myth is so brief that its implications about his relationship with Emerson are probably sub-conscious, but nevertheless, both are being used to the same effect. The narrator uses these fictions to express facets of his identity, as he sees it, and, thereby, to create his own myth. It is not only literary fictions which Plumb sees as reflecting back upon himself. His attitude towards his children suggests that he sees them as part of himself. In Chapter 2, he writes of Robert:

He took the one part of my way his understanding made open to him and spent the war behind spiked wire as I spent part of that other war in Lyttelton jail (p. 12).

Plumb's only point of contact with Robert's life is their shared pacifism. And of Emerson, he says:

Of all my children he is the strangest to me; although I recognize and hail in him enthusiasm, faith (p. 9).

Plumb can only make his children intelligible to him by seeing them as extensions of himself. In Chapter 1 he claims that those he loves are "in a state of exile" (p. 11). He believes that his children are cut off from him, and he wants to bring them from their state of exile to the centre - that is, to himself. Their exile gives them pain, he claims, and that gives him pain. His words also suggest an exile from truth, not just from his conception of it, but from its pursuit. Oliver, Felicity, Esther, Alfred, Meg, are all static and trapped. Because Plumb associates human worth with the pursuit of truth, he sees them as being exiled from their own potentiality by their failure to seek and attain moral progress. He has been disappointed in his expectations that they will live as he has. Central to his understanding of the lives of his offspring is Plumb himself - his values, his beliefs.

When he discovers that since his banishment of his homosexual son, Willis has kept in contact with Alfred, Plumb observes:

I have seen myself as the centre of the universe, around which everything revolves. My children surprise me with their independent lives (p. 265).

This is a conscious recognition on the part of the narrator that his offspring are not extensions of himself. Throughout his life, and his narrative, his children have often been seen as reflections upon himself. He has used them in the narrative as he has used literary fictions - to reinforce his own interpretation of himself and of his life.

The 'self' which can be seen in Plumb's narration is a fictional one, because it is the result of so many devices which belong to fiction - Biblical allusions, literary references, metaphors. This self is not completely fictitious, of course. Plumb's narrative is based upon events which did occur, and much of what he writes is verified, at least in part, by others. But Plumb's use of the devices of fiction shows how creative the narrative process is for him, and how fictional is the George Plumb of the narrative.

Plumb recognizes that the existence of his children does not ensure the continuity of his identity, but the self that he creates through his narrative is also an enduring entity. Plumb is concerned that something of himself should live on after his death, as he makes clear when he describes his conversations with Raymond:

For him being entertained meant having his understanding increased and his emotions stirred. So I told him about his grandmother and of our days on the Coast, of the Gardners and Joseph Sullivan and Johnny Potter. I told him about my friends Edward Cryer and John Jepson; about my trial for heresy, my street corner preaching, the Plumb family in California, my days in Lyttelton jail. In this way my history became part of his; and history slid into myth. He will carry it with him forever, an extra chamber in his mind (p. 261).

Plumb is ensuring that he will live on. He claims that he has given Raymond "something that increases him" (p. 261): what he has given his grandson is a history, or myth, that is Plumb's own. Plumb wants to become part of a family myth. He hopes that his history will be passed down through the generations like an heirloom.

This desire to create an enduring self can be seen as one of Plumb's main motivations for writing the narrative. Artists endure through their work, as long as their work is seen or read by other people, and Gee's function as a creative writer is suggested here, particularly as much of the novel is based upon his own family history - or myth. Indeed, Plumb's phrase "history slid into myth" reflects not only upon himself as narrator, but also upon Gee's authorship. Insofar as Plumb represents James Chapple, Raymond can be seen as a fictional equivalent of Gee. Plumb claims that history slides into myth, in the mind of his grandson. But Chapple's grandson is not prepared to become an unwitting perpetrator of his myth, so Plumb is made, by Gee, to write his own myth. Throughout the

narrative, the reader is able to see that history is not so much sliding into myth as being overwhelmed by myth. Plumb leaves a highly personal record of his life which interprets events so that they support his self-image. Through the act of narration, then, his mythic self-conception is imposed upon his history.

Plumb and Meg

In his review of Plumb, David Dowling comments on what he sees as the "uneasy gap at the heart" of Plumb:

His offsprings' opinions go some way to filling the gap, but how much greater a novel this would be if we could get beyond Plumb's ear trumpet¹⁷.

In this section I intend to examine the way in which Plumb and its sequel, Meg, complement each other. But I hope that the preceding chapters have shown that Plumb is a complete novel, and not just the first volume of a three-volume work. In fact, we do "get beyond Plumb's ear trumpet", not only through the comments of his sons and daughters but, more importantly, by the many ironies of the novel, which allow us to understand more than Plumb does.

However, it is certainly true that Meg provides us with another perspective upon George Plumb - or rather, the second novel reveals in greater detail the attitude of some of his children towards him. In Plumb, the opinions of Oliver and Felicity are demonstrated to some extent, but the attitudes of Esther, of Alfred and of Meg herself do not really emerge until we come to Meg's narrative.

In Meg, we learn more of Plumb in his domestic setting, of Plumb as a father of adolescents who were growing away from him. Meg recalls that Plumb was comically out of touch with his children:

Dad said, "You have Esther home by half past ten, young man."

"Half past ten?" Esther screeched. But Dad had spoken. He lowered his ear trumpet and took no more part in the argument - which determined that Esther should be home by half past twelve (Meg, p. 76)¹⁸.

The comedy of this passage is generated largely by the fact that Plumb's authoritarian attitude and isolation are self-defeating. Plumb evidently feels that having "spoken" he need take no more part in the conversation, so he retreats into his deafness, apparently confident that his authority will not be questioned.

Plumb is not only out of touch with his children, but with their entire generation, as Meg makes clear in her description of Esther's 21st birthday party:

... Dad put in an appearance. He made a speech ... He talked far too long, too heavily - of youth, and duty, and the tasks of life and its rewards. The Dust of Conflict and the Palm of Victory. People sneaked onto the verandah and came back when it was over. Dad watched Esther blow the candles out with a mystified air. He had not come across that tradition before. He ate a piece of cake. Then he put his hand on his forehead and went to his study (Meg, p. 85).

Plumb reveals a serious, high-minded man, dedicated to intellectual endeavour and moral progress. He is often admirable, and even when he is misguided, the reader still takes him seriously because he has the potential to do so much harm. Meg allows us to see the reaction of other people to Plumb's values, and so we have a far lighter view of him in the second novel. Plumb's dedication to intellectual pursuits and his absorption in the life of the mind, which were portrayed as unique characteristics in Plumb, are more often comic eccentricities and foibles when seen through the eyes of his youngest daughter.

This sort of comic view of Meg's father is rarely available to the reader of Plumb. The fact that his cricketing friends called him "the steady little trundler" (Plumb, p. 16) is perhaps the only indication Plumb gives that he appears somewhat comic to others. He sees himself as being an individual rejected by society because he posed too great a threat to its complacency. Oliver's rejection of him is based on deep hostility and resentment. Felicity's sarcasm about her professed belief in "the New Woman" (Plumb, p. 171) is edged with bitterness. Alfred's later attitude towards his father is one of complete hatred. Never does Plumb describe himself as being tolerated with amusement. Such a self-image would not fit his mythic consciousness.

But Meg's narrative shows that Plumb's teenage children regarded him with amused affection, and very little respect. Plumb's own memories of his sons and daughters tend to concentrate on them as young children, in awe of their father, or as embittered, psychologically scarred adults. His view of their adolescence is remote. He claims that Alfred "admired [him], came near to worshipping [him]" (Plumb, p. 179), but Meg describes an Alfred who mockingly refers to his father as "Jehovah" (Meg, p. 81).

Plumb sees his life as resembling a kaleidoscope, with its many different facets all contributing to the ever-changing pattern. Meg's narrative presents her father's life from an angle entirely different from any that he recognizes. By presenting an external, slightly comic view of Plumb, she allows the reader to see yet another facet of his life.

The second novel continues to modify the reader's understanding of Plumb's character, and it therefore affects the reader's judgement of Plumb's life. The reader of Meg is encouraged to see Plumb from the point of view of his teenage children, and as Meg sees him later - an old man who, though loved, is only one part of the family which means so much to her.

Meg has read her father's narrative before she begins writing her own, but she says curiously little about it. She makes no comment upon his assessment of her character, nor does she ever comment upon his narrative style. She does, however, briefly

describe his pamphleteering style:

Dad was in his study, smiting away at the war-lords
with his pen. No more was needed for my happiness
(Meg, p. 79).

The mock-heroic tone of this comment stems from the fusing of perspectives. As a child, Meg admired her father, and had faith in his ability to change the world. As an adult, she views his activities as having been a waste of time. The fusing of earlier and narrating perspectives is, it will be remembered, a characteristic of Plumb's narrative, also. In Plumb, the technique often has the effect of undermining the beliefs of the young Plumb, because the view of the narrating Plumb insinuates itself into his attempt to describe his earlier self. Meg's description of her father "smiting away at the war-lords with his pen" also shows the view of the narrator colouring the description of an earlier belief. But in this case, its effect is not only to undermine the young Meg's naive and childish faith, but also to undermine Plumb's attempt to spread the doctrine of pacifism.

Although this technique of fusing earlier and narrating perspectives is found in Meg, its function is not exactly equivalent to its function in Plumb. In the earlier novel, the irony it generates is sometimes aimed at the young Plumb, sometimes at the narrator. Meg, as a narrator, is more consciously ironic at the expense of her younger self than Plumb:

For the rest of my visit I sniffled in my hankie and dabbed my eyes, and Robert patted my shoulder, and I said things like, "Please don't, I'm all right," and "I know you'll do what you have to," and "We love you, Robert."

Meg presents herself as ineffectual and helpless, in this passage. This ability to see herself in an unflattering way is a characteristic of her narrative, and contrasts sharply with Plumb's portrayal of himself in mythic terms. Meg's tendency to be uncompromising in her appraisal of herself and of her life, prevents her narrative from being laced with unconscious irony, as Plumb's is.

Although Meg says nothing of Plumb's narrating style, she comments upon the narration as a record of Plumb's life:

In his last year he wrote the story of his life. He put thoughts aside, and book-dipping aside, and looked at himself with a fair amount of knowledge and not too many evasions - perhaps none, perhaps he came to places and was genuinely blind. Yes, that is it. He wanted the truth (Meg, p. 173).

Meg is concerned with the veracity of her father's account of his life, rather than with any interpretation of it as a reinforcement of Plumb's self-conception. She is convinced that parts of the narrative are not strictly truthful, but decides, significantly, that Plumb was not evading unpleasant truths, but blind to them. She recognizes Plumb's genuine desire for honest self-appraisal.

Meg does not specify at which parts of her father's narrative she believes him to have been blind. Much of Plumb's blindness is eroded in the course of his narrative, as he grows to understand his own failures and limitations. Meg does not acknowledge this progress to self-knowledge. She notes her father's moments of blindness without, it seems, placing much faith in the awakening to his own nature which he achieves at the end of his narrative.

Having read her father's narrative, Meg is able to comment upon it. Plumb, writing more than ten years before Meg writes her story, acts as a commentator upon Meg.

Plumb saw sentimentality as the "vice" in Meg's personality:

Goodness was natural to her. Love was natural. But between response and understanding her feelings were spoiled; between conception and expression they passed through a falsifying element (Plumb, p. 218).

He explains this idea more fully in Chapter 98, when he says of Meg:

Hers is the artist's type of mind, not the philosopher's or mystic's. She sees particular things, the simplest and hardest seeing to accomplish. (I have never managed it.) And I think takes the next step, transforms them imaginatively. But this is not the whole creative act. There is a final connection she never makes. She fails to find language (Plumb, p. 262).

In both of these passages, Plumb is acting as a critic of Meg's narrative, twenty years before it is written. He claims that her problem is one of expression, of language. She sees and feels truly, but can only express what she has seen and felt in trite phrases which debase it.

The truth or otherwise of such assertions can only be established by a careful examination of Meg, which does not fall within the scope of this work. Plumb's comment here is significant not only for what it reveals about Meg, but also for what it reveals about Plumb himself.

If seeing "particular things" is the first step of the "creative act", and if Plumb himself has never accomplished it, he cannot possess "the artist's type of mind". This passage seems, then, to constitute a denial of his own artistry, with a suggestion that his own mind resembles that of the philosopher or mystic.

Plumb associates artistry with "particular things" - the observation and recording of detail. As a narrator he tends to include less detail than Meg does. When Meg records her moment of indecision over whether to sell Peacehaven, she remembers pursing her lips, walking round the room, putting the kettle on (Meg, p. 236). Plumb rarely mentions such actions, which appear extraneous to the immediate purpose of the scene. This indicates that Plumb is more consciously selective, omitting those details which do not add to the picture he is building of his life as an

heroic pilgrimage. Actions such as putting on the kettle do not fit his mythic conception of his life, and so are "not to [his] purpose" (Plumb, p. 12) within the narrative. As selectivity is vital in shaping a work of art, Plumb's claim that he does not observe "particular things" should not lead the reader to conclude that Plumb is not an artist. Indeed, the artistry of his narrative control is made obvious by the very selectivity which he believes prevents him from producing art. Meg's narrative, with its wealth of small detail, seems artless in comparison.

Plumb's comments upon Meg's use (or misuse) of language may be relevant in reading Meg, but many of his more general comments about his youngest daughter say more about him than her:

Only let me say that of all of them, all of my children, it was Margaret or Meg that pleased me most. Her soul sparkled like water; and when she lifted her tender eyes to me, Edie's eyes, my heart grew full of joy in my love for her. Margaret, who grew up to marry a plumber and smoke cigarettes and worry about the colour of her lipstick (Plumb, p. 61).

The final sentence has a grim finality, as if Meg's whole adult life can be summed up in this brief description. These words, intended as an indictment of Meg's life, actually constitute an indictment of Plumb himself. The terrible dismissal of Meg suggests that she is almost totally worthless as a person. It takes most of its negative force from his preceding description of her promising childhood. The whole effect is to convey his

disappointment in her, rather than her own failure.

Meg proves herself to be a far more complex and interesting person than Plumb suggests. He is incapable of judging her in any other terms than his own, and so believes that she has not fulfilled herself because she has not fulfilled his expectations of her.

Plumb himself learns that harsh judgements of this kind are unwise and often cruel. When Meg welcomes him affectionately on his return from Wellington, he thinks: "This is a good girl ... " (Plumb, p. 225). His visit to Robert is already influencing his attitude to others, and effecting his understanding of Meg's life. He is able to appreciate Meg's great strength - her ability to love - without condemning her for what he sees as her intellectual shortcomings.

Many of Plumb's references to his youngest daughter reflect back upon himself - his values, beliefs and judgement. In contrast, Meg presents Plumb as various members of the family see him. She reveals the attitudes of her brothers and sisters towards Plumb, coloured by her love for him, which is greater than theirs. Meg, like Wilcher in To Be A Pilgrim, is influenced by her family throughout her life, and, as a consequence, her portrayal of her father is often a family view of him:

It was a stacy gesture, but usually it made us feel guilty or contrite. On that day, when he had gone, we spluttered with laughter (Meg, p. 80).

This is largely because Meg's memories are centred on her family. She is one of the Plumbs, part of a large group of interdependent, loving people. Plumb sees himself as an isolated and unique individual, and his family are normally seen by him in the context of their effect upon his pilgrimage. This difference is reflected in the jacket designs of the novels, both by Lindsay Missen. Plumb's cover shows the central figure of Plumb in the foreground, with a church, a tree and the land shadowy in the background. The cover of Meg shows a large family home with a tree in front, and family photographs, with Meg's face emerging, ill-defined, from the background. Plumb is shown dominating his surroundings; Meg is depicted as a relatively inconspicuous part of hers. The jacket designs therefore reflect the self-image of the respective narrators.

Plumb's comments upon Meg often reveal his egocentricity, his absolute faith in his own values. Only towards the end of his narrative does he adopt a more tolerant attitude to Meg and to others generally.

Meg is more concerned to portray her family than herself, although her observations about others tell a great deal about herself. As a narrator she is certainly more interested in the views of others, than is her father, and so allows us to glimpse

Plumb through the eyes of a number of people. While Plumb is basically self-centred, Meg is relatively self-effacing, and always conscious of the opinions of others:

... [the old clock's] dark English appearance, antique calling-up of a mythical Home, is the least of its qualities. For me. Always that. Others feel differently. A lesson that took me far too long to learn. I mistook my recognitions for an absolute (Meg, p. 11).

This is a recognition of both the existence of other views and of the validity of those views. Throughout the narrative, Meg constantly draws attention to the fact that she is recording her personal responses to her surroundings:

But enough of Duggie. He's not worth anyone's time. I don't think he is (Meg, p. 146).

Apart from such deliberate references to her subjectivity, Meg is generally less assertive as a narrator than Plumb. Plumb often describes the thoughts and motives of other people as if he were an omniscient narrator:

Emerson frowned ... He looked at the sky; wishing he was up there (Plumb, p. 247).

In contrast, Meg's descriptions of other people's behaviour usually include built-in recognitions of the fact that they are interpretations based on individual perceptions: "Emerson looked startled at the idea" (Meg, p. 144). This statement is not a

categorical assertion that Emerson was startled, only that he appeared so to Meg.

Meg's understanding of the fact that "others feel differently", apparent at a very early stage of her narrative, makes it impossible for her to create a mythic selfhood from the circumstances of her life. She is capable of looking at her life and herself through the eyes of others. This does not always involve simply reporting the remarks of other people, but sometimes actually attempting to see situations as they would:

The heel of my shoe caught in [Fergus's] fly and all the buttons sprang off and ping-ed on the carriage wheels. We should have laughed. If I had been Esther I suppose I would have gone into the bushes with him and made love. But it ruined our day (Meg, p. 110).

Meg frequently compares herself to others, in this way, and it is a technique which enables her to emerge from her narrative as a character far less absolute and dominating than Plumb seems, in Plumb. Rather than seeing herself only in terms of private values, as he does, Meg's identity is very much a social one making her part of a family. This explains not only her interest in recording the lives of her brothers and sisters, but also her interest in their opinions of each other and of her. She is a relative figure, seen in the context of the Plumb family. In Plumb, the narrator allows glimpses of others only within the context of himself and his life.

This difference in basic approach to experience is rooted in the respective personalities of the two narrators, of course. But it goes much further than that, because it determines the way in which they conceive of their lives. Plumb's frequent use of assertive vocabulary, and his constant evaluation of himself in terms of his own beliefs, create a tone of confidence, of certainty, even. This enables him to retain his mythic self-conception, and his unchanging sense of his own identity as a pilgrim.

This certainty is not available to Meg, who compares herself to others, and attempts to see herself and her world through the eyes of others. Her narrative self-effacement prevents her from creating a mythic identity through the act of narration, as her father was able to do.

Footnotes

1. This essay was first published in Landfall, VII (1953), pp. 26-58.
2. "Fiction and the Social Pattern", in Essays On New Zealand Literature, ed. Wystan Curnow (Auckland: Heinemann, 1973), p. 77.
3. ibid, p. 77.
4. London: Heinemann, 1963.
5. Summer in the Gravel Pit, (Auckland: Longman Paul, 1965).
6. "Fiction and the Social Pattern", in Essays on New Zealand Literature, p. 75.
7. This essay was first published in The Future of New Zealand, ed. M.F. Lloyd Prichard, (Christchurch: University of Auckland, 1963), p. 84-107.
8. "New Zealand Literature: the Case for a Working Definition", in Essays on New Zealand Literature, ed. Wystan Curnow (Auckland: Heinemann, 1973), p. 141.

9. A further discussion of this issue does not come within the scope of this piece of work. It was the subject of an important controversy during the 1950s and early 1960s, of which the essay by Dr Curnow to which I have referred is one of the final expressions. Those opposing his views found Louis Johnson's Poetry Yearbook (which appeared almost annually from 1951 until 1964) to be a suitable forum for the expression of alternative critical approaches. Although the debate centred around poetry, many of its basic points are applicable to fiction also. I refer the reader to the following articles in particular:

Johnson's Introductions to both the 1952 and 1958-9 editions

Charles Doyle's article entitled "Anger or Apathy?", 1958-9, pp. 13-14.

Johnson's introductory commentary, entitled "Looking Forward and Looking Back", 1961-2, pp. 9-10.

Baxter's article, "Notes Made in Winter", 1961-2, pp. 13-15.

Johnson's introduction "The Year the Drought Broke", 1964, 1964.

10. New Zealand Listener, 10 February 1979, p. 17.
11. Joyce Cary: To Be A Pilgrim, p. 16 (London: Joseph, 1942). All page references given are for the Carfax Edition.

12. Maurice Gee: Plumb (London, Faber, 1978), p. 11. All page references given are for this edition.
13. Landfall, March 1979, p. 79.
14. I received this elaboration of Dr Dowling's views in a discussion with him.
15. Wayne Booth: The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 122.
16. For example, Wayne Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction, p. 388, quotes Emile Zola:

You are highly blamable when you write badly. That is the only crime that I can admit in literature. I do not see where they can put morality, if they pretend to put it elsewhere. A well-made phrase is a good action. From The Experimental Novel and Other Essays, trans. Belle M. Sherman (New York, 1893), p. 365.

17. Landfall, March 1979, p. 79.
18. Meg (London: Faber, 1981). All references to Meg are to this edition.

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