THE NOVELS OF MAURICE GEE

(1962-1994):

Gee's New Zealand: In the Throes of Entropy

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Mark Lyons: MA Thesis: "The Novels of Maurice Gee"

Some Corrections

p.i, par 2, line 10: *A Special Flower* [not *The*]
p.iii, par 2, line 2: certainty, [add comma]
p.v, par 1, line 5: investigation [delete comma]
p.1, par 2, line 3: *mixed* [in italics]
p.2, par 2, line 10: Their
pp.2-3: two lines repeated
p.3, par 2, line 1: tales [add "s"]
p.8, par 3, line 6: flying [add "I"]
par 5, line 5: deserving [substitute "ing" for "ed"]
p.10, par 5, line 1: [Gee's]
p.11, par 1, line 7: it was especially [add "was"]
p.12, par 2, line 5-6: where he [delete "Gee"]
line 7: name, - are re-used, and his
p.15, par 3, line 3: documents [add "s"]
p.16, par 1, line 7: corresponds [better than "complies"]
p.17, par 1, line 11: judgemental
p.18, par 1, line 18: bugger!
p.20, par 2, line 3: (1990) are [delete comma]
p.21, par 3, line 7: they could or might mean [for "that could or might be"]
p.27, par 2, line 3: the gap [add "t"]
p.29, par 4, line 1: those
p.53, par 3, line 3: poses the [delete comma]
p.68, par 2, line 3: biographer's
line 5: subject-position [add "j"]
par 3, line 5: self-importance;
p.69, par 4, line 4: render [delete "s"]
par 5, line 1: entropy"
p.78, par 4, line 11: Ejaculations
p.91, par 1, line 11: all [for "a"]
p.93, par 1, line 2: lie
p.96, par 2, line 7: quotations
p.97, par 3, line 5: parents'
p.98: heading: Adults'
p.110, Worthington book: title should be in italic.

CONTENTS

"Abbreviations":

BS	***The Big Season***
SF	***A Special Flower***
FD	***In My Father's Den***
B	**"Beginnings"**
GC	***Games of Choice***
GMC	***A Glorious Morning Comrade***
Pl	***Plumb***
M	***Meg***
HofO	***The Halfmen of O***
SS	***Sole Survivor***
CS	***Collected Stories***
P	***Prowlers***
GW	***Going West***
CS	***Crime Story***

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INTRODUCTION

This inquiry explores the dualistic aspects of Maurice Gee's novels, particularly with reference to *Prowlers* and *Going West*. I will be highlighting the juxtaposition of opposing *characters* (the observers and the doers), and the opposition of mind and body - of idealism and empiricism - as developed in these two novels. I will also be investigating how Gee's novels explore the dynamics of human relationships, accounting for the recurrent themes *of language, fear, death, love* and *madness*, as they appear in his oeuvre. Chapter three explores how Gee's *fiction* deals with the difficulties of writing an *objective* account of someone's life. All these areas of investigation reveal an overall view that Gee's New Zealand society has gradually shifted towards a state of chaos and uncertainty within the last one hundred years.

In chapter one I will explore the images and events, as depicted in Gee's autobiographical essay "Beginnings," that have shaped his creative imagination. I will show how they have been transformed, or re-worked, in his fiction, as well as how and why they stress the importance of *imagination*. I will be arguing how, through his characters, Gee continues to *exorcise* the traumas, conflicts and confusions of his own past, as well as demonstrating the didactic functions given to this process by his subjecting his main characters to similar experiences. I will show how Gee investigates the negative effects of a puritan heritage, and ultimately, how it can be damaging to the growing and developing adolescent psyche, causing confusion, and distorting one's perception of the real, particularly in the way it is expressed in the novel *In My Father's Den*. I will show how Gee's abhorrence of 'bureaucratic and institutional repression' is expressed in *The Big Season*, and the 'O' trilogy – at the level of *community*, – and in the two novels, *The Special Flower* and *Games of Choice* – at the level of *family*. More specifically, I will show how the narratives emphasize the need for the individual to break away from these constricting forces in order to find his own shape, and achieve a firm sense of personal identity. I will inquire into the ways in which Gee explores the idea of 'the mixed nature of the human condition' in the 'O' trilogy, and will commence a discussion of how this theme is developed in *Prowlers* and *Going West*, which will be expanded in the remaining two chapters. I will discuss how the sense of feeling 'special,' and of

being in possession of 'special knowledge', can create the illusion of feeling privileged, but also how this can be seen as a burden, and how it can generate a sense of 'isolation,' thereby alienating the individual from the outside world. I will show how Gee's vision of the world can be interpreted as dualistic.

By tracing the changing and evolving moods of Gee's fictive New Zealand since the publication of *The Big* Season (1962), I will show how that world has shifted from an apparently secure and meaningful world of certainty as expressed in *Plumb*, towards a state of perceived aimlessness and emptiness, or, in other words, a perceived state of entropy, as expressed in *Meg*, *Sole Survivor*, *Prowlers*, and, to some degree, *Going West*. The collapse of modernism's governing principles, particularly with regard to language, will be discussed further in chapter two, with an inquiry into another dualistic aspect of Gee's fiction, that of the division of mind and world, or, of idealism and empiricism.

Chapter two will also explore Gee's radical shift into the post modern arena with the publication of *Prowlers* (1987). This novel explores 'the collapse of language.' It demonstrates the ambiguity of the medium of language, and attempts to resolve that situation by dissolving the opposition between being and knowing. Through the discourse of science, Noel Papps (first person narrator), initially believes that he can 'get directly at the world or at the unique particular sensory otherness of objects' (Armstrong 24), but that belief can be construed as illusory.

The novel's underlying question is, how is a life measured? As an empiricist Noel begins his narrative not recognising that the mind, through the medium of language, *transforms* external nature, thereby altering it. As he begins to write his memoirs, he discovers *human behaviour* requires a specialised mode of discourse to describe its dynamic nature, that of figurative language. He experiments with this mode of discourse, and initially he struggles. It is a mode of expression that he had always dismissed as idealistic, but as his narrative progresses he comes to terms with it, and eventually finds it appealing and best suited to his needs. Simultaneously, he begins to comprehend the complex and ever-changing nature of human behaviour, which is seen as 'shifting and mutable.'

I will utilise Descartes' *mind-body* model to explain the role that Noel's mind plays in the acquisition and analysing of knowledge. Following on from my argument in chapter one, where I show how Gee's fiction demonstrates the constricting forces of community and family, and how they prevent the natural growth of the individual, suppressing spontaneity, I will demonstrate how *Prowlers* expresses the view that certain modes of language, being cultural constructs, can restrict the natural growth of the imagination, and the ability to understand oneself clearly. Eventually, as Noel's narrative progresses, and with the aid of his grand-niece, he learns to accept, acknowledge and appreciate the role that metaphors play in assisting consciousness to make sense of the world. Noel's narrative regularly 'takes on a life of its own,' inventing and embellishing the *facts*. The novel stresses the importance of the use of imagination for the promotion of spontaneity.

Noel has never experienced a fully satisfying and long-lasting loving relationship. I will show why, throughout his life, Noel has avoided a commitment, in this sense, with another person because of its association with trauma, fear and ensuing emotional pain. This view is supported by his statement that 'the world I find back there is hardly plenum – it's atom and void, a multitude of bodies rolling about and damaging each other when they come close'. I will show how he resolves this fear through his developing relationship with his grand niece, Kate Adams, and concludes that 'solitary isn't our natural state' (p.133).

Noel eventually confronts his sense of the metaphysical void, and at times begins to lose a sense of himself as whole. I will be looking at the concept of *madness* in this chapter, and how Noel, at times of crises, occupies his mind with 'learning skills' and reciting technical data as safeguards against *going over the edge*, or, losing his mind. His conscious-self is seen to protect the mind as a whole from the imaginative power of his subconscious-self.

I will show how *Prowlers* demonstrates that the process of exploring one's past, and getting it down in written form, is what is important, rather than the end product. Moreover, *Prowlers* demonstrates the importance of *otherness*, that is, meaning is defined in terms of what some entity is not, more so than what it is; *meaning* and *truth* are constantly deferred, that there are no absolutes.

In chapter three I will be exploring the biographical aspects of *Prowlers* and *Going West*. I will be examining Gee's own sentiments regarding the 'imperial' aspects of biographical discourse, i.e. how far a biographer should go when reproducing someone's life for public consumption. Being mindful of his published expressions of his feelings on this matter, I will be advancing a case that the two novels under investigation are attempts by their author to establish important guidelines that should be adhered to when reproducing someone's life for public consumption. Thus, the spurious nature of biographical discourse will be illustrated.

I will show that both novels demonstrate that the closest one can come to a true and authentic account of a life, including one's own life, is 'an approximation.' I have utilised Michelle Dawson's excellent thesis, "Biography and the Writing Subject," to assist me with this aspect of the inquiry. Her arguments are an extension to my inquiry - in chapter two - into the nature of language, the question being, 'Do we write language, or, does language write us?' Noel Papps, in *Prowlers*, and Jack Skeat, in *Going West*, through the process of writing their narratives, unavoidably 'construct' what Dawson refers to as their own 'subject-positions.'

Related to the biographer's constructing his own subject-position is the question of *motive*. Despite their respective assertions to be the best qualified to write the life of their subjects, both Noel and Jack reveal motives to suggest that they may deliberately, or, subconsciously, re-present an inauthentic account of their subjects. I will show examples of how they feel inferior to the subjects of their biographies, thus demonstrating good reason, from their perspectives, to marginalise, or, misrepresent them.

The perspective from where each novel is presented becomes an important factor when making judgements about the reliability of its narrator. I will also be examining the *point of view* of each novel for this purpose.

One of the effects of the 'inevitable' re-construction of the biographer's subject-position is that this person undergoes a process of growth, that is, an increase in self-knowledge and self-worth. I will show how Noel and Jack 'gratify their own desire to resolve [their] own sense of fragmentation through the unity or story of the lives of others – and implicitly [their] own' (Nadel 9).

By exploring the development of the principal moral concerns and narrative strategies of Gee's fiction – from 1962 to 1992, - I will show that the values, morals and ideas that had once reinforced the individual's sense of identity and self-worth, in Gee's earlier depictions of New Zealand society, have been displaced, for succeeding generations, revealing a contemporary world of uncertainty.

Gee's contemporary narrators demonstrate their sense of a dislocation, or, a slippage, between the *signifier* and the *signified*. There is a sense that the individual self appears hollow, empty and fragmented in a world of 'free-floating relativism' (Williams 184.) Gee's *New Zealand*, as expressed in his novels up to and including the publication of *Going West* (1992), is presented as being 'in the throes of entropy.' His fiction presents an overt sense of indeterminacy within family and community. Many factors are shown to be responsible for this apparent state of chaos and disorder within Gee's New Zealand society. I will be highlighting these factors within the context of the discussions indicated above, and show how Gee's main characters resolve these significant matters for themselves.

Chapter One

Gee's World of Indeterminacy: Early Influences Reworked and Developing Themes.

This investigation will include most of Gee's publications between 1962, when his first completed novel, *The Big Season*, was issued, and 1994, with the publication of *Crime Story*.
The first part of this chapter will look at the influences that continue to stimulate Gee's interest in the human condition. It is a theme that has always dominated his novels and has become an obsession for him. Through his narrators, he explores the 'tension between the inner and the outer' aspects of the human mind. His narratives strive to demystify the complexities of what it is that drives his characters to do the things they do, particularly the darker, more sinister aspects of their behavior.

In all his novels, including his fantasy writing for young adults, the human condition becomes the narrative's main point of thematic focus. From the concentration of this focus emerges what has been called the 'mixed [my italics] nature of the human condition' (Manhire 11). Other themes that are explored in this chapter are, the repressive nature of puritanism, the employment of imagination, the metaphysical void, Gee's dualistic vision, and isolation. All these themes contribute to an overall portrayal of New Zealand society as being 'in the throes of entropy.'

Firstly then, with the aid of one of his few, though informative, autobiographical writings, I will explore some of the more significant events of and images deriving from Gee's recollections of his past, that I recognise as having given vital force to his literary works. An account of how Gee started out as a young writer, and of the early influences that have shaped his creative imagination, will be a useful starting point.

Gee endured a rigorous apprenticeship as a short story writer, writing part-time, between 1955 and 1962. During this period he endeavoured to refine his art until he felt confident enough to embark on his first novel. He continued writing short-stories until 1975, when "Buried Treasure
Old Bones" appeared in *Islands* 4 (1975). Between 1968 and 1988, he also published a series of essays, the most significant being the autobiographical piece "Beginnings" (1975).

In the following passage, from "Beginnings," Gee recalls his mother, Lyndahl, and her passion for writing, and for telling stories. It also reveals the original stimuli that generated his interest in *the past* – a theme that permeates many of his novels – and created an awareness of the importance of the employment of *imagination* for the writer, as artist and creator:

> When her day's work was done and her husband and children in bed she sat with her feet in the range oven and wrote stories and poems in exercise books [writing by hand initially, the *organic way*, and in exercise books, is a tradition that Gee still continues]. She had natural gifts, but her circumstances were wrong. She needed to write hard, she needed practice. There was never sufficient time. She could not discover what it was she wanted to say...Now and then she came near to her subject. Frank Sargeson included her story 'Double Unit' in his anthology *Speaking for Ourselves*. One can see she would have never been a writer. There should have been other stories, better ones. But she did not have the time. Her family swallowed her...[Gee's grandfather, James Chapple] was a writer too...But it was not his story that captured me, it was my parents. There struggles and triumphs became a part of my history. Through tales my mother told – tales full of point and colour and detail – I came to know the Depression as Enemy, and Len and Lyndahl as heroic beings. The life of my imagination stretched back beyond my birth. I saw their moonlight flit from their smoky tin shack on Ngamotu...I saw dad pedalling his bike after a loaded timber truck...I saw Dad's father, who had been a builder, painting white lines on the roads, and Mum on her feet at the Labour Party meeting telling everyone straight what had to be done. Some of it may not have happened. It all happened to me (*B* 289-290).

Gee later adds that 'Mum had love and mental passion and deep roots in her past' (*B* 292). Women with their 'feet in the range oven,' composing poetry or prose – i.e., Meg, in the novel of the same name - or, 'on [their] feet at the Labour Party meeting,' – i.e., Kitty Hughes in *Prowlers* - have featured in Gee's fiction. His recognition of Lyndahl's inability to refine, and to fully realise her writing ambitions, may well have formed part of the impetus for Gee's own desire to succeed as a writer. He made a conscious decision, at the age of forty-five (1976), in his own words, not 'to stop writing for the rest of [his] life...[but], a rather daring thing to do, with a young family growing up,' to become a full-time writer (Manhire 8). His *plight* is therefore not dissimilar to Lyndahl's.

His being cognisant of the fact that one 'needed to write hard,' and 'needed practice,' in order to write well, suggests his conscious awareness of the art of writing as a *craft*. Gee asserts that 'a

His being cognisant of the fact that one 'needed to write hard,' and 'needed practice,' in order to write well, suggests his conscious awareness of the art of writing as a *craft*. Gee asserts that 'a craft has to be learnt and it has to be learnt the hard way, through constant practice, constant putting-of-pen-to-paper...I like to think that the language I use has overtones and reverberations – that it carries more weight than the actual dictionary weight, so to speak' (Gee: Manhire 12). Commenting on Gee's third novel, *In My Father's Den* (1972), Manhire says 'It is a short novel, 175 pages, but does not seem so. While the printed text seems sparse, each word counts fully. The novel is densely textured, layered with resonant images and motifs; words carry more than their dictionary weight' (Manhire 23).

The 'tale [his] mother told,' Gee's own childhood recollections of the Depression and the war years, and 'other influences, and events [he] could not understand that set up a trembling in [his] mind going on till this day' (*B* 291), are reworked and transformed through Gee's imagination. I will show how they occur repeatedly, in various forms, in his novels.

Prowlers, which is the pivotal novel in this thesis, focuses mainly, as we will see in chapter two, on the employment of 'imagination' in the forms of *invention* and *embellishment*, as a means of presenting the narrator's story in an interesting and colourful way, with a view to captivating the reader. For Gee, *imagination*, as in 'fantasy and magic,' has the potential to 'aid discovery and intensify' life's experiences (Manhire 9), and also to enable the verbal evocation of experiences that could not be adequately dealt with except through metaphor or symbol.

The 'other influences' Gee refers to are the novels he consumed during his teenage years. At the age of fourteen Gee 'discovered the novels of Zane Grey. He read thirty or forty in the space of six months' (Manhire 5). Gee recalls:

> For all his faults [Grey] had moments of clear cold sight... With his aid I was able to take my first long look at 'the human condition'. I saw that human beings were lonely, that they lose what they most desire, that the passions that shake them produce cruelty more frequently than kindness. Most important, for one brought up in a non-religious household, I learnt that there was no help from outside, that a man makes himself or destroys himself...without the books to free my imagination, give it range, provide figures for it to travel in, I might not have been able to take a really firm grip of these 'facts' that have served me as mental furniture ever since (Manhire 5).

Other works of literature that have influenced Gee were those he borrowed from a neighbour, whom he calls 'Ben Hart.' Not enough money was available in the Gee household, during the Depression, to purchase books. He recalls,

> he [Ben Hart] had lived in Newington Road longer than us, behind a high hedge with his lace-capped wife. But there I was one year sitting in his living-room playing draughts with him... I was sixteen. Mrs Hart, a tiny china lady, brought us cups of tea and plates of cake [images that occur frequently in his novels]. But what I was really after was Ben Hart's books. I had flown with Rockfist Rogan over the coast of France and ridden into the badlands with Buck Duane. Now I was on the track of something better. The real point of my visit came when the game was over... I went to the book-shelves and chose my next Dickens novel and carried it home... In six months I had read my way through Dickens [Paul Prior, the narrator of *In My Father's Den*, exploring his past, makes a similar comment, 'I took Dickens at a gulp' (p.55)], *Pickwick Papers* to *Edwin Drood*... then I tried Hardy. It was not the same. I borrowed *Tess* from the school library – and somehow I was no longer seeing Ben Hart (*B* 292).

Gee's grandfather was a *conscientious objector* during the 1914-18 War, and he went into exile in the USA with his family. When he returned to New Zealand he was jailed for 'sedition' (Manhire 6). This story was reworked in *Plumb* (chapters 54 and 55). Gee remembers:

> Grandpa was real. He was a writer too. I could take down *The Divine Need of the Rebel* and *A Rebel's Vision Splendid* and look at his photograph in the front – a bald-headed man with his finger laid thoughtfully on his cheek. Even without colour you could tell his eyes were blue, they cut through people. He wore black clothes and a parson's collar. We knew he was important, and somehow very brave. He did not wear his collar any longer. He had quarrelled with his church and been to prison (*B* 289).

Much of George Plumb's history, in the novel, *Plumb* (1978), is similar to that of James Chapple. Meg, from the novel of the same name (pub. 1981), is modelled on Gee's own memories of his mother. Many of the events and characters that appear in "Beginnings", are reworked in the Plumb trilogy.

Gee was seventeen when he began to write his first novel – it was never completed – 'a pacifist one [that he believed in his youthful naivety] would end war forever... It was about a young man called Mr Graham. He wore black clothes [like James Chapple] and spent a lot of time telling a boy (me) why war was evil. I gave it up after about half a dozen chapters. I like to think I started it because I was a Chapple and saw it was no good because I was a Gee' (*B* 291-92).

The influence of Zane Grey's fiction emerges in Gee's first completed novel, *The Big Season* (1962), which focuses on conformity. A lonely character, identified as 'the honking man,' gets spied on lying on his bed in a single-room of the local boarding-house. When nobody else was at home he 'was always reading a cowboy story or a detective story with girls and guns on the cover. Except on the nights of the parties. Then he just lay with his lights on looking at the ceiling' (*BS* 13). Two young boys, Rob and Arthur, are spying on him through the window, from the dark and seclusion of the garden. These two young boys would often sneak out of the local picture-house when the movie was 'no good,' and go up to this local boarding-house to spy on the people there. The boarding-house is *forbidden territory* for them: 'the people who lived there,' Rob's father tells him, 'were the wrong sort of people and it didn't do a person any good to be associated with them. He told Rob there were two sorts of people, the good and the bad and the good couldn't touch the bad without starting to go bad themselves' (*BS* 14).

The first page of the narrative is headed '1946-7 Prologue' (*BS* 5). Chapter one, following the Prologue, is simply headed, '1958' (*BS* 15). Gee had been 17 years old himself in that year, and was playing rugby in Paeroa - *The Big Season* deals with the dynamics of a rugby orientated New Zealand provincial town. The remainder of the novel consists of numbered sections, finishing with number '15' (*BS* 179). These numbered sections, or, chapters contains Rob's experience over a six-month – rugby season – period, prior to him leaving town, at aged twenty-one.. As the omniscient narrator begins the narrative, young Rob Andrews and his school-mate, Alfred, had been 'at the river all afternoon,' and were presenting Alfred's mother 'with a rich haul, half a kerosene tin of whitebait... She said Rob could come round for tea, but he said he couldn't – his mother had visitors and he had to be there. They were having lamb. They always had lamb on Saturday' (*BS* 5). So immediately the reader is presented with an insight into the degree of conformity that Rob is subjected to. The spontaneity of accepting an invitation for tea, and enjoying the fruits of their afternoon's labour together, is suppressed by the *routine* and *tradition* of Rob's family situation, which has become an accepted norm of the late 1940's. He knows he has 'to be there,' at home with the family, and his parent's friends, regardless of his own wishes. Rob's

parents demonstrate little tolerance for his preferred activities. As we will see, Rob's father is shown, by the narrative, to be excessively controlling of Rob's life. He rules the family *with an iron fist*, or, more specifically, 'a willow stick,' which he is not ashamed to administer fiercely, as and when he deems it necessary, such as when he finally discovers that young Rob has disobeyed his instructions not to go up to the boarding-house. If Rob's father's strict regime is not adhered to, he will beat it into his boys. Rob's childhood background is presented in the Prologue, prior to the main part of the narrative, which deals with Rob's resistance to his family's, and the community's, oppressive conformity, when he befriends the people at the 'boarding-house', just prior to his twenty-first birthday. This strategic timing illustrates the excessively long period of time a young adult had to endure their parent's rule, at that time in history.

The Big Season also explores the mysteries of sexuality for young adolescents, or, more specifically, the suppression of their natural desires. When this theme arises in Gee's fiction, the inference is always that the Puritan ethos is to blame. Also, as I will show, *voyeurism*, in its diverse forms, is another of Gee's preoccupations. The following passage from *The Big Season* demonstrates how deftly, and inoffensively, the author presents this delicate subject. The event presents Rob's self-righteous father as the *ogre*, rather than Bill Walters, the supposedly *undesirable* resident of the boarding-house. In fact, in this initial incident, Bill is presented as a level-headed, if not, heroic figure, compared to Rob's father. Russell Haley once commented very astutely that he 'can feel something bulging the surface of the prose...a hidden sexual charge...an overwhelming sense that [Gee] can reach something numinous and atavistic when he deals imaginatively with place' (Haley 7). This 'charge' is most notable in Gee's short-story, "The Right-hand Man," but is present also in the following passage. The reader is drawn into the action, and becomes the voyeur. Later on in the Prologue, following a number of spying adventures, at 'the boarding-house, a terrible thing happened' (*BS* 14):

> There was a party, and in the middle of it the honking man came out of the lavatory. He was wearing only pyjamas. The boys [Rob and Arthur] went back behind the coal-box and waited for him to go inside. He came out of the lavatory and stood at the kitchen window looking in. There was a lot of people in the kitchen but after a while they went away and only the woman [who had earlier purchased whitebait from Rob and Arthur] with the flat nose was left. She was taking things out of the fridge. The man watched her. Then he went inside. He walked in a funny way. The boys crept back to the window. The man was inside when they got there. His back was towards them and he wen up to the woman.

> Her mouth was open and she called out something and went into the corner. The man followed her. Then Bill Walters [whom Rob would befriend later on in the narrative] came and Scarface after him. Scarface laughed and suddenly got angry and picked up a bottle by the neck. Bill Walters pulled it away from him and rolled it across the table and went to the honking man and pulled him round. The fly of his pyjamas was open. Rob couldn't believe what he saw, Bill Walters grabbed a tea-towel and held it round the man and helped him out of the back door.
>
> ...Rob couldn't forget what he'd seen when the honking man turned round. He knew some of the stories he heard at school and some of the drawings he'd seen were true. But now he wanted to know what really happened. He asked his mother once how babies came and she said it was a very beautiful thing but he was too young to know about it [as with Gee's recollection of his own mother (*B* 287)]. She said, no, a woman couldn't have a baby without a man, but she wouldn't say any more than that. Now Rob remembered what he'd seen and remembered his mother saying it was beautiful and he couldn't work things out. So one night he asked [his brother] Donny. He told Donny what he'd seen.
>
> Donny told their father, but only some of it, and their father got more angry than he'd ever been before and gave Rob a hiding with a willow stick and made him tell the rest. (*BS* 15-16).

Gee had experienced similar beatings from his own father, Les (*B* 286).

Puritanism

Rob experiences pressure in various forms from family and institutions to induce him to conform to their expectations of him as the local hero of the provincial rugby fraternity. Gee, having himself been a keen and able rugby player (see Kevin Ireland's comments in Kate Brett's article), and thus familiar with its *protocol*, deftly portrays the ambiences and idiosyncrasies of New Zealand's national sport. The novel is not about rugby though, but the phenomena provide the ideal conditions to explore how people try to manipulate and control others at the levels on both family and community - which is a kind of 'extended family.' Rob finds that the subtle, conscious and unconscious manipulations by his father, mainly, and friends, are formidably constricting. Through writing about Rob, as a young adolescent, Gee is able to explore the confusion and the mysteries he himself had experienced during his own adolescence, as delineated in the following passage, again from "Beginnings." From this passage there emerges another of Gee's preoccupations –

explored in greater depth in *In My Father's Den* (1972) – that of the long-term damaging effects of what Gee sees as the constraining, confusing, and potentially distorted teachings of puritanism. In Gee's New Zealand, puritanism has the potential to prevent the natural growth of individual lives, by setting up an inherent confusion in young minds. He shows how these conditioning forces can distort perceived reality, suppress natural inclinations, and inhibit spontaneity, particularly, as in this instance, through the suppression of sexuality in adolescence:

> In that world [of school] I did well. I was quick in the playground and quick in the classroom... I was in the school football team that trampled the nun-coached Cattle-dogs into the mud. But all was not well. Clyde found me out. He was a little blond wiry fellow I shared a desk with in standard 4. He discovered what I carried with me like a handicap of lead. He bounced up and down in his seat. I knew what he was doing, but he leered at me devilishly, made me ask, 'What are you doing?'
>
> 'Practising.'
>
> 'What for?'
>
> We usually talked about it as 'having a go.' I did not believe in that activity – it was a lie as well as a 'smut.' I asked my mother and she said a man and a woman had to be together to start a baby, it was a beautiful thing. I would find out about it when I was older. When she had gone my younger brother looked at me with contempt. 'You know people have to have a go.' I denied it. If the thing was beautiful it could not have anything to do with 'down there.' The word Clyde had chosen knocked my pretences flyng. I could not hide the facts from myself any longer. But that did not mean I had to like them. My disgust filled him with glee. He grinned at me and practised. I detested him, and could not take my eyes off him. For some months I was his follower. He left the school at the end of that year, ending a nightmare for me.
>
> ...My best friend was a boy called Harry... I infected him with my puritanism. We made a pact not to swear. We were a two-man purity squad, patrolling the playground listening for bad language (*B* 287-88).

The practice of puritanism can lead to the misconception that one is 'special,' or, worse still, 'better' than those who do not practice its precepts. Rob's father, Ray, condemns the existence of the boarding-house, and especially its residents, whom he barely knows. He demonstrates his condescension with his reference to them as 'bad people.' He is hypocritical, extremely prejudiced, and more deserved than they are of the derogatory comments he aims at them. This is

demonstrated by his beating of his son, his looking down on others, the glory he hopes to reap, at the expense of his son's, and of the other team players he coaches, and his attitude to his wife and children, particularly Rob, who is more active than his passive brother, Donny, who complies far more with his father's expectations of him.

Ray plays the *holier than thou/self-righteous* father-role, after discovering what his son had been exposed to while playing 'the voyeur,' spying through a window of the local 'boarding-house' and witnessing supposedly *sordid* events. Rob's father, Ray, shuns his own responsibility for his son's supposed misconduct in an attempt to cover up his own embarrassment. Ray is also capitalizing on what is in essence just an unfortunate occurrence. Ray has always disapproved of the boarding-house because he believed it lowered the standards of the community. He saw this business with the 'honking man' as a golden opportunity to close the place down. The author, through his narrator, has created a situation where irony will illustrate a case of double standards. Prior to Ray taking Rob up to the boarding-house, Rob's mother, and their friends, 'the Millers and the Robertsons' (*BS* 7), cosily share a meal and drinks speculating how they can capitalise on 'the boom' – in ways tantamount to *criminal behaviour* – following the war. Added to this, Mr Robertson confesses an example of his dishonesty to his *friends* (*BS* 11), and Ray, who will condemn more innocent *goings on* at the local boarding-house, continues his friendship with a man whom he knows is dishonest and deceitful. The phrase, 'thick as thieves', would be an apt way to describe their conspiring. Further to this, they also discuss their association with the 'black-market': 'Mr Robertson said you had to have connections to get good whiskey and then you couldn't get it very often. It was too soon after the war. You had to go to the black market' (*BS* 7). They are behaving like a *rogue's gallery* as they conspire to exploit the community which they themselves belong to, and ostensibly support.

After whipping Rob with a 'willow-stick... [Ray] pulled him [Rob] outside to the car and drove up to the boarding-house. He talked all the time but Rob did not listen. He rubbed the welts that had come up on his legs and tried to stop crying.' Then, when Ray had conveyed the story to the *undesirables*, 'the wrong sort of people' (*BS* 14), at the boarding-house, he was

> talking, fast and very angry... they all talked and shouted together. Nobody heard what anybody else was saying [illustrating that people see things the way they want to, and that people , generally, are not good listeners, especially when they get angry]. But at last Rob's father made them understand and they looked at Rob and at the window. Bill

> Walters [whom Rob would eventually 'hang-out' with prior to finally leaving town] started to laugh.' He spotted Rob's welts, and commented, 'I see you're knocking another one into shape. I hope to God this one gets away from you' (*BS* 16).

The phrase, 'gets away', 'adumbrates the structure and theme of the novel - which deals with Rob's attempt to *get away* and to find his own shape' (Manhire 13), in the same way as Gee himself did, and as many of his central characters seem to do.

Rob's father called Bill 'a drunkard and a criminal' and threatened to 'have him run out of town [there is a flavour of Zane Grey in that comment!]...[and] have the boarding-house closed' (*BS* 16). Bill 'shouted at Rob's father that *he* was the criminal, *he* was the one who was to blame for the whole rotten mess the world was in and he'd never stop fighting until he and everybody like him was wiped out. *Wiped out*' (*BS* 16). All this serves, along with the preceding events (p.11), to expose the irony of the situation, i.e. the hypocrisy of Ray's statements and actions. More importantly, it illustrates the prudish and arrogant nature of one man's prejudices, and his intolerances, as well as the confusion set up in the young boy's mind, to the point that, 'nothing made sense' (*BS* 17).

As I have said, although the book's title is *The Big Season*, meaning the *rugby season*, the story has very little to do with rugby. As Manhire observes,

> Rugby is not his [Gee] primary interest here, rather it is a convenient (and almost paradigmatic: the connection between team and town is made several times) means of indicating the pressures which work upon the individual in urban and suburban New Zealand, that world – at once legendary and familiar – which mistakes conformity and community, and respectability for the condition of being respected, and which has put a narrow, puritan self-righteousness in place of more tolerant ways of being (Manhire 12 – 13).

The following passage, from an interview by Brett with Kevin Ireland, a close friend, 'and great admirer of Gee,' discloses some useful insights into what drives Gee to exorcise, through his writing, the 'basinful' of puritanism he himself had endured, while growing up at home. One can also justifiably speculate about a didactic, as in an *exposing* motive behind the exploration of this theme, as a result of these findings. According to Brett, Ireland

> Has strong memories of the time [himself and Gee] spent in London in the early 1960's [Paul Prior, the protagonist and narrator in *In My Father's Den*, and Noel Papps, likewise protagonist and narrator in *Prowlers*, also travel to London, and return to New Zealand, changed men]...'There were the parties and the endless all-night talk sessions where we sat around and worked off some of the terrible nonsense we had been brought up with. We all suffered to a very large extent from the merciless puritan rigidities of the age, but with Moss [Gee] it especially the case because he got an extra basinful at home.' To understand this, Ireland says, you have to grasp that in the Chapple/Gee household, puritan ideas were inextricably bound up with lofty liberalism: 'The Chapples saw themselves pursuing a higher way: social justice, pacifism, republicanism. It meant they had to be better people, aspire to greater heights [a sense of feeling 'special,' and hence becoming 'isolated']. All that put terrible strains on marriage and children. Moss was caught up in a web of tensions in the family that was terribly traumatic.' Although Gee was a 'very lacerated' young man when he arrived in London – all the more so because he left an infant son and an unresolved relationship behind – the experience was pivotal in his becoming a writer. 'Going to London for him was a great cathartic release. It was terrifically important. It provided an emotional distance he had never had before and with that came the great power to translate experience into literature [as Noel demonstrates in *Prowlers*].' Ireland says Gee went to London as a short-story writer with some limited publishing success in journals such as *Landfall* and came back 'a grown-up and fully committed writer.' Ireland says one of the lessons Gee took from his adolescence and has explored in his fiction ever since is that things are seldom as they seem, that beneath the upright, neat, middle-class exteriors, secrets lurk: secret lusts; twisted sexuality; violence. Maurice's novels always have the capacity to surprise because they suddenly turn very cleverly around and the characters go off beam (Brett 96-99).

Brett also adds,

> Kevin Ireland puts his finger on the essential contradiction between Gee as novelist and person: 'He's a remarkable man. He's a very pure person with a powerful interest in the darker side of people's lives [Gee is a incessant reader of biographies, and his wife reads autobiographies: A formidable partnership (Brett 101)]. It's paradoxical, but some writers and priests share this common ability to remain aloof from the depravity they deal with and

> yet to understand that depravity profoundly.'...Manhire describes Gee as a 'liberal humanist - at once resigned to and pleased by the mixed nature of the human condition.' He says Gee's novels 'commend tolerance and teach it to several of their characters. Yet it is never a tolerance that has failed to see things as they really are. In Gee's lexicon, charity and clarity are very close relations.' Charity and clarity. A writer who can look evil in the eye, call it by its proper name and then offer his characters the possibility of some small 'moral and psychological victory' as a vote of confidence in the human condition (Brett 101).

Gee has himself 'spoken of *The Big Season* as a novel which explores the pressures of a community telling on an individual' (Manhire 15). Wainui, the 'small-town' setting for the novel, is the pseudonym for 'Paeroa where Gee taught in 1955-56' (Manhire 12). As we will discover, all of the settings for the main actions in Gee's novels resemble very closely the places he lived at the time of writing them, or he uses them later, as with Henderson. Henderson, the town where Gee he grew up, appears repeatedly, though of course it is re-created, and transformed. The images of 'the creek', 'the eels', the 'swagger' - he is *the fat man* from the novel of the same name - his 'grandparents' home', 'Peacehaven' appears in the trilogy, its name unchanged. The story of his uncle's wife who had 'chased [her husband] through the orchard with an axe' is re-worked in *Sole Survivor*. John Kay, whose 'mother believed in Radiant Living and fed him on nuts and raisins' (*B* 285), appears as 'Pitt-Rimmer', though he is cared for by his daughters, in Gee's well-known short story, "A Glorious Morning Comrade" (1975). All these images, and more, can be found again and again in Gee's novels. The 'isolation' that results from 'lofty ideals' and a sense of feeling special - examined in greater depth in the next section - applies equally to Rob Andrews.

His second novel, *A Special Flower* (1965), continues the same theme of constriction, but confines it to the dynamics of a single family, rather than a community. It stresses the importance of spontaneity in people's lives, made explicit in the following passage:

> We cry too much, we Pinnocks. That's because we're good at it. Tears for all occasions. What we're not good at is laughing. We're cursed with a lack of humour. Have you ever heard me laugh, Peter - really laugh out loud, the way Coralie used to? Of course you haven't. I can't. I'm sterile (*SF* 105).

The novel juxtaposes the exuberant personality of a young woman with the virtually stoical Pinnock household. This bringing together - through unlikely circumstances, and seemingly tragic events - of contrasting attitudes to life, creates the possibility of growth and increased tolerance for the Pinnocks.

In My Father's Den (1972), as I have said, pursues, in much greater depth and intensity, the theme of puritanism. This well-crafted novel has been described by Manhire as a 'novel and murder story... [where] Gee has deliberately used the form of the detective story or thriller, and has employed many of the conventions of the genre (a gory crime requiring investigation and explanation) as a means of charting a number of deficiencies in the New Zealand character and way of life' (Manhire 19).

Paul Prior, brother to the murderer of Celia, a young schoolgirl whom Paul has befriended and also been tutoring privately, has returned to Wadesville, his New Zealand home town, after some years travelling through Europe. He returns to Wadesville, a changed man, 'in his mid-thirties as an aloof, bookish schoolteacher' (Manhire 21). Wadesville has changed, too. He no longer feels a part of the community he once felt at home in. Like so many of Gee's aging male protagonists, Paul experiences a strong sense of loss for the 'wholeness' of the past, a wholeness he associates with being a child. Not surprisingly, it is Paul's mother, though more specifically her 'grim and fundamental' Presbyterianism, that had been responsible for his constricting childhood. Although he never felt close to his mother, he had a strong bond with his father, who allowed only Paul the keys to the garden shed/'den', filled with books and enough comforts of home (*FD* 47). He felt close to his childhood friends, and sought refuge in the natural environment. Paul's fondest memory is of the occasion when he, and his friend, Charlie Inverarity - Celia's father, in the narrative present - explored the local creek in a canoe. He uses 'fear, comradeship, discovery' (*FD* 46), as the signifiers to describe the experience. Jack Skeat, the protagonist, and his life-long friend, Rex Petley, in *Going West* (1992), also clamber into canoes and try to re-create the wholesomeness of their childhood. 'He [Rex] had a sparkle in his eyes. It was not Fiona's [Rex's young daughter's] ride any more, it was his and mine,' says Jack (*GW* 190-192). Adventures, as well as misadventures, associated with 'creeks', 'estuaries', and 'mudflats', become leitmotifs in Gee's novels.

Paul Prior, again, as with all of Gee's protagonists, where the past becomes an issue, struggles to come to grips with it. For Gee, it seems imperative that these characters acknowledge their *pasts*

in order to achieve a sense of wholeness and a firm sense of themselves. The theme of *the past* is dealt with in the next chapter, but only in as far as it affects Noel Papps in *Prowlers*, and Howie Peet in *Crime Story*. In the context of Paul Prior's journey, Manhire suggests that:

> Gee seems to feel that those who understand the past and their relationship to it (who have, that is, a reflective sense of their own experience) are likely to have a fuller sense of identity and personal capacity than those who do not. The novel's structure emphasises this. Sections set in the present alternate with those set in the past, and they are brought slowly together as the novel proceeds. The present action, the murder inquiry, takes some six days in the middle of May 1969. (There are dates for each section of the novel, but no chapter headings.) The narrative of the past occupies about 45 years; it tells the life of Paul Prior and the history of his town, Wadesville. Each narrative section moves forward (day by day in one case, year by year in the other) until they merge (Manhire 20).

A similar play with time, as a narrative strategy, is used, along with commentary from Gee, in *Prowlers*, as we will see in the next chapter.

For Paul, part of his own personal investigation into the mystery of Celia's horrific murder includes an examination of his own past, in order to understand and resolve events in the present. As Manhire succinctly puts it, Paul Prior

> becomes an investigator as well as the object of investigation, detective as well as suspect. He reviews his life because he believes he may find clues explaining Celia's murder. ("I've got a feeling about you," says a police inspector. "You've got something for me, even though you mightn't know what it is." [*FD* 67])...The police seek the truth about the murder, and Paul Prior seeks the truth about himself. [On another level] both point to a larger truth Gee seeks - the human circumstances which make murder and any sudden eruption of violence possible. *In My Father's Den*, on one level, is a diagnostic investigation into the New Zealand psyche...the detective story is used 'as a means of telling a story of character and environment, not as an end in itself' (Manhire 19-20).

'The human circumstances' that drove Andrew Prior to murder Celia, are responsible for his confused state of mind. He is clearly guilty of the act of murder, but the many factors presented to

the reader, that had contributed to the culmination of events leading to what Andrew had perceived to be an act of cleansing, complicate the judgement process. Establishing the truth in this novel is problematic. The truth is constantly deferred. By the end of the narrative, when the reader is in possession of the facts, that is, the facts according to Paul's subjective viewpoint only, and not necessarily *all* the facts, a reasonably informed judgement could be made. The narrative wants to blame Paul's and Andrew's mother, and the 'grim and fundamental' Presbyterianism that has motivated her strange behaviour, her strict discipline and unrealistically high moral judgements, that both Paul and Andrew have inherited, although so far, violence has erupted only in Andrew. What further supports this view, is the knowledge that it is written by an author who, according to Kevin Ireland, has experienced a similar upbringing, and writes, one could say, obsessively about it. Gee will always do more than just *sketch* an important character's past, particularly if any judgement is to be made, or sentence passed. Gee's narrative advocates greater tolerance and understanding, and the need for the reader to reserve judgement for its characters. Gee uses the first person narrative to demonstrate that the single point of view is very limiting and constricting when seeking the truth about someone, or something. This is exemplified in the *Plumb* trilogy, with its three complementary first person narrators.

The importance of the past, such as Manhire ascribes to the dilemmas of Paul Prior, similarly applies to many other characters in Gee's oeuvre, such as Kingsley Pratt in *Games of Choice* (1976), George Plumb, Meg Sole and Raymond Sole in the *Plumb* trilogy, certainly Noel Papps in *Prowlers* (1987), Jack Skeat in *Going West* (1992), and several of the characters in *Crime Story*.

ii

The Trilogy - *Plumb*: *Meg*: *Sole Survivor*

Any comprehensive study of Gee's fiction is incomplete without some reference to the *Plumb* trilogy. Each of the three main characters, George Plumb, Meg Sole and Raymond Sole, document his or her experiences of the *narrative present* in conjunction with those of the *narrative past*, in their individual quests for truth. As in *A Special Flower*, some of the more significant events are viewed from more than one perspective, and sometimes revisited, or reviewed by either the same or other characters. Their vision consequently is increased. All this serves to inform those involved, including the reader, as to how elusive the truth can be. Growth, or increase in knowledge/self-knowledge, and clarity of vision, are important resulting factors.

The trilogy includes a comprehensive and complex compilation of themes, motifs, imagery, characterisation and anecdotes. It provides both the student and the critic with a wealth of material to work with, and has consequently generated extensive critical commentary, some of which has surprised even Gee himself. The ideas for the trilogy were processed for a number of years in the author's mind before he was ready to write it. What renders it particularly valuable for the present inquiry, is that it is largely composed from biographical and autobiographical source material. Manhire concurs that 'George Plumb's life is that of Maurice Gee's grandfather, James Chapple' (Manhire 34). The sketch Gee offers of his grandfather (*B* 290-1), complies very closely with George Plumb in the novel. In the 'author's note' at the end of *Plumb*, Gee explains how he has combined the real with the imaginary:

> Much of George and Edith Plumb's early history is Chapple history. Not all. For example, James Chapple did not meet Joseph Sullivan. He was though a Presbyterian minister, he did take the chair at McCabe's meeting, and he was sent to prison for sedition. His religious career, his opinions, his wanderings, were very like George Plumb's. However, George and Edith's domestic life is largely imaginary, and after 1918 wholly so. The twelve Plumb children are not the fourteen Chapple children. My uncles and aunts are not to accuse me of putting them in a novel. Felicity, Oliver, Robert, Alfred - the twelve - are fictional beings. Emerson is fictional, although his adventures are those of my father-in-law, Oscar Garden. In one way Oscar Garden's flight was more remarkable than Emerson's: he made it after only two week's flying experience... (*Pl* 272).

As we saw in the last section, 'in the Chapple/Gee household', Gee was subjected to the combination of 'puritan ideas' and 'lofty imperialism' (Brett 96) which he continues to shed and, as I have suggested, part of that process involves a kind of exorcism through the process of writing. He is also able to resolve these major issues for himself through the writing of his characters. Both Meg and Raymond endure this same process with the lofty ideals they inherit from their father, and grandfather respectively. Like Nick and Susan of the 'O' trilogy, which we will look at in the next section, they suffered 'the isolation of their special understanding and feel it both their burden and their privilege to persuade those around them to see things more clearly' (Manhire 9). Maurice Gee seems to have suffered the consequences of being put in that situation, and experienced the 'isolation' of it. As noted above, Gee came to know his parents as 'heroic beings', and felt an obligation to imitate them.

Likewise, George Plumb experiences isolation in various forms. The nature of his work as a minister of the Presbyterian Church isolates him from his own wife and children as he attends to matters in the community. Then he undergoes a traumatic 'crisis of faith' and pursues a 'mystical union with the One' (*PI* 147). He has very little time to greet his family when he returns home before tea and withdraws into his study for the evening, becoming isolated again by the four walls of his study, which is a symbolic imprisonment. He is isolated even more severely for two years, being jailed for heresy and sedition. In the narrative present, as an old man approaching death, he is isolated from the world by his deafness, with his 'ear-trumpet' being his main instrument of communication. Even that is finally destroyed by his banished son, Alfred, when George requests his forgiveness. George decides not to replace it. He has learnt, even if too late, not to be so judgmental. He tries to expiate his cruel rejection of Alfred, if only by accepting the destruction of his ear-trumpet, thereby expressing his desire for redemption. The condition of being isolated is not strange to him; he seems to embrace it in the novel's conclusion. Very early on in Meg's narrative she declares her resolution: that she

> has banished... Capitals altogether: the Plumbs as Chosen Ones, my Father as a Giant Among Men. Drunk on family, I lost all judgement. Well, it's over. I see these happy titles for the false things that they were. I'm grown up now. The Plumbs have a human shape. They're nothing special.' (*M* 15)

Each book in the trilogy requires an examination of the past, with a view to gaining a better understanding of the present. It is also a story of growth, as with self-knowledge, to achieve a sense of 'wholeness' while searching for the ever-elusive *truth*. Each character carefully and colourfully depicts the important events of the past and re-views the dynamics of cause and effect and the indeterminacy of chance and fate, so as to 'understand circumstance' (*M* 11). It is important to look back and recognise the important factors that had turned the tide of events, altering the course of individual lives. As Manhire observes, the reader learns 'how trivial and arbitrary are the events which can thoroughly transform a human life' (Manhire 33). Meg recognises that she had not seen things clearly as a girl and a young woman. Enjoying 'the house and gardens' of Peacehaven, she remembers, 'they had seemed, for a time, outside the laws of this place. It was my doing, it was my seeing and blindness, which set them on the outside; and now they are subject to reality. Have been for many years. My vision was false, and I learned to see with a usual eye, and have learned much more that way, and am happier' (*M* 11).

As Meg begins her story, she expresses a reluctance to 'spend [her] time looking back'. She feels that she is 'forced to turn there'. She knows that 'much has to be looked at with a cold eye', as Gee has said Zane Grey does so well. She is 'learning to see life more clearly without the fog of sentimental illusion' (Jones 326). Kingsley Pratt, in *Games of Choice*, avoids 'a clear view of things: metaphor is his *ultimate weapon, a device for spinning up fogs*' (Manhire 28). Imagination, for Kingsley, 'is a device for throwing up screens preventing action' (*GC* 83). Meg likewise is aware that 'there is much to be stripped of its clothing and seen nakedly' meaning that she 'must avoid the fancies' of metaphor (*M* 9), the dressing-up of external reality idealistically and sentimentally, as she had done in her youth. Raymond, who later becomes a journalist, 'calls them [these fancies] coy and clever and tells me [Meg] I must be plain or fall into self-regard and falsity' (*M* 9). The unconditional love for her son, Raymond, could lead Meg to follow his advice too far. Due to his aridness, he would not the best example to follow. She perceives the whole process of analysing the past as 'a duty', and a 'need' (*M* 11). Noel Papps, in *Prowlers*, experiences the same reservations, but he asserts, 'yet I'll go on. I think that if I'm silent I'll soon die' (*P* 14). Jack Skeat, in *Going West*, proceeds likewise: 'Why do I do this? Why do I start? I have no need of discovery. Isn't that what I'm leading to? Not simply memory but the ordering that is a kind of invention.' He considers the alternative pleasures with which he could indulge himself now that he is retired, 'all that, waiting for me - and what do I do? I shine my torch back into the dark. Stupid buggar! Don't go there' (*GW* 5), but he does. As with Meg, there is a 'need'. Meg's goal has been to

> hold myself steady in my shape, which is a sensible one, a shape that makes me useful. I must look at the person I came from. There was a girl, a sister, a wife, sentimental, tender, green, open, painfully open, [and conversely] closed, darkly closed. I was that woman; brought surely, unknowing, to my doom - which was to see. See life, understand circumstance, know death - to get an eyeful, as my sons would say... And to understand how, must look at that girl, etc.' (*M* 11)

A theme that will be discussed in more depth in the next chapter is 'invention'. Meg recalls that at Alfred's funeral, Willis, that is, Meg's brother, 'spoke about Alfred as a boy. A good deal of it was invention. Willis had been away at sea. I think he believed it though... tree huts and mud dams in creeks, and evenings around the piano while mother played, and a church picnic where Alfred tried the lucky dip and won a kewpie doll, which he gave to his sister Meg...Like me Willis was a sentimentalist, but it was fitting in him' (*M* 208).

Meg remembers how, as a young girl, she did not want to visit her father in jail, because it would not be the same as the one she had formed in her mind. Meg forces herself to attend the trial of the young boys, the 'queer-bashers', who had murdered Alfred, and urinated on the body, because he had been a blatant homosexual. She does this because, as she says, 'I have to. I'm trying to understand it' (*M* 209). Her father had banished Alfred from the family when he discovered him having sex in the orchard with his homosexual boyfriend. This is just one of the issues her father, George Plumb, has had to try and resolve in his mind. It is one of the events in his life he is 'sorry about' (*Pl* 271). As Manhire has observed:

> Meg's story does not glitter with irony in the way her father's does. She is, of course, already at a point of wholeness when she begins her story. She recounts the stages by which she has become what she is - and Gee manages the narrative shifts between past and present as effortlessly as in *Plumb*. But the effect is not, as it was there, to display irony which the narrator fails to notice. Perhaps she sees more clearly by the end of her story; unlike her father, however, she begins with a good idea of what she will see. Her decision on the novel's final page to seek a reconciliation with Fergus [her husband] confirms the firm sense of self she has achieved. But it does not adjust our view of her, or her view of herself. (Manhire 51).

In *Sole Survivor*, the third part of the trilogy, the reader experiences, along with its narrator - Meg's son, Raymond Sole - a sense of indeterminacy. Raymond experiences *the apparent collapse of life's governing principles*, which is shown to be a symptom of the age he lives in. He experiences a New Zealand as it enters into the post-modern world. The reader begins to experience a New Zealand 'in the throes of entropy'. Raymond's condition at the close of the novel is essentially *nihilistic*. Raymond not only lacks the clarity of vision that his mother had achieved, he doesn't even seek it. In response to Russell Haley's criticism, Mark Williams insists that 'Gee's work from the late seventies into the eighties calls into question the organising assumptions of the earlier work and seeks some adequate formal response to the collapse of meaning, the disappearance of depth, and the general aimlessness of contemporary life' (Williams 175).
This shift, Williams suggests, occurs

> towards the end of *Sole Survivor*... Raymond Sole confronts the emptiness within that his forebears had so painstakingly filled with the anxieties and illuminations of their terrible obsession with meaning.

> This condition is not peculiar to Ray Sole: it is the condition of his time. Gestures no longer relate to any shared meanings. His cousin, Duggie Plumb, the machiavellian politician, is not merely an aberration, he is representative. Ray, who has seen himself as morally superior to Duggie, discovers himself as merely a dispersed collection of conventional roles and attributes. Centreless, drifting - he occupies the ungrounded space that is the late twentieth century.
>
> *Sole Survivor* ends amid the exhaustion of the energies that had been so remarkably present at the beginning of the *Plumb* trilogy. More than this, it marks the end of the historical and ideological framework that had generated Gee's earlier fiction. (Williams 175-6).

This sense of chaos and disorder, and of an apparently purposeless existence, is intensified, though with a more satisfying conclusion, in *Prowlers* (1987), and its symptoms explored in *The Burning Boy* (1990). Williams' comments (1990), are confirmed by Bill Manhire, who suggests that '*Sole Survivor* is a novel that finds no answers...Raymond Sole himself is a man quite without expectations; he is used to tracing the trajectory between beauty and ugliness, innocence and experience, and in most matters he expects to be let down. There is no struggle in him to achieve clarity of vision - not of the sort that characterised his mother's story, anyway' (Manhire 52). Raymond is a successful journalist, but

> he sees only surfaces...he is no good on depths. He can comprehend parts but not wholes. He doesn't understand his wife, and watches helplessly [metaphorically speaking] as she swims off to her death...The one serious piece of writing he wants to do is a biography of Michael Joseph Savage - but he cannot 'make a whole round life'. The work is all done, but he 'can't bring it together'... he writes the lives of those that do not matter to him. He is a ghost-writer... His daughter says to him, 'Think some thoughts of your own'. As a teenager he briefly inherits one of Duggie's girlfriends; more tellingly, he even acquires as his mistress Beth Neely, his father's ex-mistress. He plagiarises Camus...in order to impress her. Some of his behavioural poses and verbal mannerisms sound as if they are the result of reading too much laconic, hard-boiled fiction...His dependence on Duggie, conscious and unconscious, is frequently apparent...He [Ray] seems inauthentic - without self and centre. He understands the hollowness in his mother when she has her breakdown. She has 'cancelled' George Plumb's faith 'in man becoming Man', but having done so can 'discover nothing to fill herself with' [SS 32]...However it takes a good deal of

> his life to see clearly the full extent of his own inner emptiness. Like him, the occasional women he is involved with after his wife's death begin to find out 'that what they thought deep was only empty... They complained that I wasn't there, or that only part of me was there' [SS 212]. Complementing his [own] sense of inner emptiness is Raymond's perception that the world outside him is empty... Glenda's depression is defined in terms of emptiness; and making love to her, Raymond finds that he 'penetrate[s] into emptiness' (Manhire 55).

Raymond also, albeit very briefly, experiences a kind of 'cosmic emptiness' which again becomes one of the main topics of investigation for Noel Papps in *Prowlers*. From high vantage points, above Wellington and again, above Gerriston, Raymond has the impression that, in the first instance, Wellington Harbour appears as a 'flat white plate, porcelain and lovely - then a hole that opened into nothing'; he says it 'had me in a mild visionary state, and this was my vision: people showing glow-worm lights on the edge of nothing' (*SS* 72). At Gerriston, he says, 'I felt I was on the edge of nothing, hanging on with fingernails and teeth. I was afraid of my tininess. The town was made of cardboard. It was accidental. Raymond Sole, sitting on this tower, was accidental' (*SS* 83). He perceives himself as a man without substance, insubstantial, not unlike the '19th century Russian "superfluous man" ' (Reilly 2).

Duggie is a man of 'action', one of Gee's many 'do-ers', whereas Raymond is an observer, one of Gee's many 'see-ers/thinkers' (Reilly 2). Raymond 'wants to look at things, take them down and go away and look at them again; whereas Duggie Plumb wants to manipulate people and be in the action [see *SS* 23] - which makes him a politician' (Manhire 53). Gee juxtaposes Jack and Rex (*Going West*) in the same way. Rex gets involved; he takes risks. As a poet, Rex just 'describes'; he does not search for meanings with his poetry, because he perceives the meaningfulness of things intrinsically and does not feel the need to reduce them to something that could, or might be, as Jack does. 'Rex refused to theorise, while I [Jack] never got beyond the "need to discover truth", which was "the moral role of poetry" ' (GW 23). Such examples exemplify what Gee sees as the mixed nature of the human condition. The opposition of terms like action and non-action generate 'tension, a well known provider of balance', as Papps says, more than once. These binary oppositions become one of the main themes for both *Prowlers* and *Going West*. The essential, and 'complementary' ingredients of 'good' and 'evil', as parts of the human condition, are explored fully in the 'O' trilogy and in *Plumb*. This sort of viewpoint is essentially dualistic, and Gee's novels can be seen to demonstrate this perception of the world quite overtly.

iii

Gee's Dualistic Viewpoint

There is a long gap between the completion of the *Plumb* trilogy in 1983, and the publication of *Prowlers* in 1987. During this period Gee completed several fictional works for younger readers including the 'O' trilogy, and *The Fire Raiser* (1986). The four main characters of *The Fire Raiser* appear again in *Prowlers*, but in their adult form, and their names have been changed. This strategy continues the author's exploration of *point of view* and the leitmotif of the need to develop psychological growth, tolerance and self-knowledge in the context of looking back into one's own past.

During this period between the completion of the *Plumb* trilogy and *Prowlers*, Gee developed a dualistic view of the world with his fantasy novels for children. This shift has been foregrounded in the *Plumb* trilogy by the juxtaposition of the themes of good and evil, but it is expressed more overtly in the 'O' trilogy.

The formulation of a dualistic scheme of *good* and *evil* in Gee's 'O' trilogy develops the basis of an essentially relativistic vision that Gee explores later in his subsequent adult fiction. Because the Motherstone philosophy underscores and orchestrates a major part of the action and character development in Gee's later oeuvre, it is imperative to examine and understand it before looking at its manifestations in his subsequent novels.

The *Halfmen of O* (1982) introduces the Motherstone philosophy and foreshadows the two later works of the 'O' trilogy, although, naturally, the narratives are 'character centred and story driven.' The Motherstone, created by 'Freeman Wells', is described as 'grey, ordinary, a simple slab' with 'huge powers sleeping in it' (*HofO* 178). On it must lie the two tear-drop shaped 'halves', also created by 'Freeman', to form a perfect circle, symbolising 'Balance' (*HofO* 70). One half, the light-coloured half, represents the 'good'; the other, the dark-coloured half, represents the 'evil'. The following passage explains the history of The Land of O, and the Motherstone philosophy. It is told to Susan and Nick - the heroes of the story - by Marna, the widow of 'Freeman'. The Motherstone philosophy parallels the Christian myth of the Creation and Fall of Mankind. Susan and Nick's mission will be to restore the 'Balance' in 'Humankind' by recovering the 'halves' and replacing them on the stone.

> We have not always been Halfies. Only for nineteen turns of our globe. In the beginning, in the ancient days, Humankind tore themselves apart. There was no law, only chaos. Nothing comes from that time but a memory in the blood. Then a wise one came. Some call him Firstman, some Freeman. He found law in chaos. He looked in man and saw there Good and Evil, and he gave them names and understood them. Then there was a moment when knowledge gave him powers that some would call magical, and others call divine. Some say there was a creator who used him as an instrument. I cannot say. But Freeman, Firstman, made the Motherstone, and laid the halves on it, and put humankind in Balance. Chaos stopped. History began. And Humankind lived for many thousands of years free to choose the evil or the good. Alas, there have been countless evil times, vile ambitions dressed up in great names. War and oppression stain the centuries. But the Balance held. The halves lay on the Motherstone and Humankind stayed in tune with Freeman's Law. Light and dark contended and held each other in a deep embrace. Yes Susan, that is it, you have the mark on you. There, on your wrist. See how the light bends into the dark, see how the dark leans into the light. They hold each other, good and evil. And see, if you look close, in the light there is a spot of dark, and in the dark there is a spot of light (*HofO* 68-69).

In this complete form, the Motherstone symbolises 'the mixed nature of the human condition. Ruth Verryt (*Prowlers*), refers to 'Aristotle, Augustine, [as] those "splitters of our nature", those "creators of halfmen" ' (*P* 177). The halves were broken apart by Otis Claw; 'the name had a dreadful sound. It scraped across their minds like a rusty knife' (*HofO* 69). By separating the halves, Otis Claw believed he 'would rule Humankind'. As a 'pupil' of Freeman, Otis Claw, then called 'Otis Hand', was described as having been 'a golden boy, brilliant and beautiful, who learned the lore of the Stone through the pores of his skin.' When Otis Hand's wisdom matched that of Freeman, Otis was left in charge 'of the Freeband about the stone', and Freeman and Marna went to Wildwood. Marna continues her creation story explaining how they lived in

> Wildwood for many years to study the way of the Woodlanders. We came to love Wildwood. We learned many things. We found the sky, and learned its uses, and Freeman opened the path to your [Susan and Nick's] world.
>
> Otis had all the time he needed. He had tasted power, and the seed of evil grew in him, and swelled in him, until he was nothing but a smiling face, a fair exterior, fitted over

evil...He saw everything was free. That he could not bear...But first he must destroy Freeman's Law. He must break the Balance, pull the halves apart...he delved into the lore - and found a way.

There came a day when we in Wildwood, Freeman Wells and I, felt a cleaving in ourselves. We fell down in a sickness and we screamed in agony as nature broke apart in us and the Balance broke. When the fever left we stood and looked at halfies. We were Halfmen. All through Manhome, all through O, wherever humans lived, it was the same. Woodlanders were unchanged. And Birdfolk, and Stonefolk, and the People of the Sea. They had their own Law.

We knew what had happened. We needed no one to tell us. Otis Hand had learned a way to violate the Stone. Otis Hand had wrenched the Halves from their deep embrace, and in every man and woman in O, good had fought with evil, one last fight, until one or the other was driven out...We knew that down in Manhome, Darkland now, Darkland from that instant, the hordes in whom evil had triumphed hunted down and murdered the unresisting Good. We were Good. I say it with no pride. There is no pride in being half. Good must be won daily in the battle that never ends (*HofO* 70-71).

The final sentence of the above passage will reverberate in any reader's mind who is familiar with Gee's adult fiction, that is, wherever he juxtaposes a character who promotes essentially good deeds with one who promotes bad or destructive deeds.

Writing for children requires a plot with movement. Consequently the characters are not as complex as those found in Gee's adult fiction. As Manhire astutely observes, 'The element that is conspicuously missing from the children's writing is the serious exploration of character. Gee's young heroes tend to be granted character traits (one child is dreamy, another practical) rather than characters' (Manhire 11).

Also, 'the interesting thing about Gee's work for children is the extent to which it has welcomed fantasy, a possibility the adult novels never seem to entertain. Magic and fantasy, however, are a means of exploring and intensifying life, not evading it' (Manhire 9). Conversely, some of the characters in Gee's adult novels can be seen to abuse and misuse 'fantasy' and 'imagination' as a means of 'evading' life, such as we have already seen with Kingsley Pratt in *Games of Choice*. It is important to understand that the employment of 'fantasy', in Gee's canon, can be utilised just as

effectively to evade life, as it can 'as a means of exploring and intensifying' it. Used appropriately, the latter end is achieved, but used inappropriately, the former, undesirable condition results.

Gee's children's novels are allegorical. The 'power-seekers', such as the Wilberforces in *Under the Mountain* (1979), and Otis Claw in the O Trilogy, represent 'the leaders of [our] race' (*UM* 79), as in the human race of Western culture, and they 'anticipate a character like Duggie Plumb' (Manhire 9). 'Gee's abhorrence of imposed uniformity, bureaucratic and institutional repression' (Manhire 10), is expressed in *The Priests of Ferris* (1984) – part two of the 'O' Trilogy.

A significant word that carries reverberation, 'beyond the dictionary weight' is *Wilberforce*, simply by its inference to the concepts of *will* and *force*. The following passage describes the Wilberforces. They are:

> slug-like creatures of the mud [who evolved by] symbiosis...each one depending on the other. The Wilberforces joined with [the] big worms in the mud. It took many thousands of years. But what they decide on they do. They became the brain in a huge body more powerful than any machine that was ever made, in a sea of food that seemed to have no end.' [As the name suggests, the Wilberforces are] 'creatures of tremendous will - no imagination, no feeling, no conscience...they remind me of some of the leaders of your race. But ambition, will - there have never been creatures like them. And all turned to a single cause - to destroy, to multiply. Their name, we'll call them the Wilberforces - although Wilberforce is too good for them. You could never pronounce the name they gave themselves, but it means *People of the mud, who conquer and multiply*. See how they spread (*UM* 79).

Another preoccupation, which appears in both Gee's children's and adult fiction, is the theme of *isolation*. Regarding this theme, Manhire suggests that,

> The children are charged with special knowledge of a terrible threat to humanity of which the world remains ignorant. The children are left isolated, with the burden of their knowledge and prospective task, but unable to call on the help of those who are at risk [they are preoccupied with mundane thoughts]...This is a conventional situation in children's fiction (indeed, in any narrative), yet if fits with the rest of Gee's fiction. Several of his central characters, from Rob Andrews to George Plumb, feel the isolation of their

> special understanding and feel it both their burden and their privilege to persuade those around them to see things more clearly (Manhire 9).

Since the publication of *Plumb*, other characters to share this hopeless sense of isolation include Noel Papps (*Prowlers*), Lex Clearwater and Duncan Round (*The Burning Boy*), and Jack Skeat (*Going West*). In fact, any of Gee's characters who is found in isolation, is usually troubled, or 'burdened', by the possession of some form of special knowledge or alternative viewpoint that the majority do not, or cannot share.

New Zealand society, as Gee's novels present it, can be viewed very simply, in binary terms, that is, in terms of a dualistic viewpoint, or model. Gee's portrayal of the external world, and of character traits, are perceived in terms of mixings of opposing forces. Each world becomes 'the battleground for the opposed, and equally matched forces of good and evil' (Manhire 11). We will look at how Gee portrays this concept in *The Burning Boy*, a novel that departs to a large degree from his obsession with the power of the past over the present. As an example of this dualistic perception of the world, I will examine the idea of 'the haves and the have-nots' of Gee's fictive representations of New Zealand.

Because of the way Gee presents these two groups, in direct contrast, as opposing one another, they can be viewed in terms of *light* and *dark*. In the majority of cases, those who choose power and wealth as their God are portrayed as dark (bad), like the Wilberforces. They have appeared repeatedly in Gee's novels, most notably as Duggie Plumb in *Sole Survivor*, Phil Dockery in *Prowlers*, and Tom Round in *The Burning Boy*. Conversely, characters who do not choose power and wealth as their god, are portrayed in terms of light (good). Gee juxtaposes these two extremes of character traits in such dualities as Raymond Sole with Duggie Plumb, Kitty Hughes with Phil Dockery, and Tom Round with the goodness of a number of other characters in *The Burning Boy*. In *Plumb*, Plumb's 'good' sons juxtapose Oliver, the vindictive and sadistic judge. Howie Peet, in *Crime Story*, though finally redeemable, is earlier contrasted with his former wife Gwen.

I want to now explore, in a little more detail, how Gee presents this juxtaposition of good and bad in *The Burning Boy*. Gee juxtaposes the Rounds and the Birtles who live in the 'Wakefield' town of Saxton [1]. The Rounds are wealthy; the Birtles are not. As in *Crime Story*, Gee conveniently uses a tragic accident, not simply to unite the two families, but to unite the *rich*, and, by comparison, the *poor*. This strategy supports the 'chance and fate' element of Gee's social thesis, e.g. 'everything

we did was circumstantial' (*P* 212). Duncan Round is the 'burning boy' of the novel. He has been badly scarred by an explosion, caused by his friend, Wayne Birtle. Duncan Round lives, for most of the narrative, in his head, until a caring and sympathetic school teacher, Norma Sangster, and her close friend, John Toft, draw him out.

In chapter nine, Gee's narrator divides the 'haves and have-nots' with this description: 'the distance between the Birtles' house in Spargo Street, Duckham Square, and the "toasty warm" Round house above the river and golf course in Coppermine Valley can be measured socially... he gap between the rich and poor is widening again but that isn't peculiar to Saxton' (p.109); and Norma Sangster comments, 'Those Rounds...just don't care about anyone else. Anyone not a Round is a square' (*BB* 62). Gee has carefully chosen the name 'Coppermine' to suggest wealth, whereas 'Spargo Street', relatively speaking, does not.

Firstly, in this chapter, the narrator provides the reader with 'a bit of history' of Saxton. This explains how the 'climate, topography, hard work and ambition and greed and commercial chance determined the town's shape more than the social theory and distinctions' which became blurred, Saxton grew into an egalitarian New Zealand town' (*BB* 109). The distinction between Gee's fictive town of Saxton, and the real town of Nelson, is also blurred, as he, through the narrator, exposes the darker side of this apparently picturesque, and cultured corner of the world, one which is popular with the back-packing tourists from the outside world. 'Saxton is remote, but the world passes through' (*BB* 109). The outward expression of Saxton gives the impression that it 'is a place free from troubles. Look harder,' suggests the narrator, who proceeds to describe 'kids...sniffing solvents from plastic bags... street-kids squatting in an empty corner-dairy by Duckham Square,' where, as the reader has already been informed, the Birtles live. There is a 'helicopter rattling your teeth...making the marijuana sweep. Back in the town school's out and schoolboys and girls are smoking the stuff while their older siblings, unemployed, are drinking in the pub' (*BB* 110-111). A drunk 'Russian sailor from a tuna boat... won't make it back to his ship [because] local goons...roll him into an alley and kick him senseless. He'll be three months in hospital and then will be flown home and will never really understand what happened to him in Saxton' (*BB* 111). A world of chaos and disorder pervades the narrator's description of people and events at the local

> courthouse on a Tuesday. Sit in the waiting room with the butt-scorched floor, with young fellows in boots and broken sneakers and jeans and bush singlets and leather jackets,

> listen to them speak, listen to the girls, with their nicotine-stained fingers and red-rimmed eyes. It's not the same language used by those lawyers who go by - young fellows, young women too. See how they dress. You can illustrate a two-nations' argument here. What are the charges when the accused, those in here, those brought in from the cells, face the judge? Cultivating cannabis. Possession for supply. Driving with excess breath alcohol, blood alcohol. They've pissed in a doorway, punched the neighbour or the *de facto*, kicked in the window of a menswear store. They've stolen from a container lorry parked up for the night. Threatened a constable with *numchukkas*. Threatened a chemist with a knife and got away with a pocketful of prescription drugs. They've kicked a Russian sailor half to death. They're mill-hands, knife-hands, labourers, bushmen, fish splitters, sickness beneficiaries, solo mothers, unemployed. The judge sentences them to prison or periodic detention, puts them under supervision, orders reparation. He fines them and disqualifies them (the shop manager too. The estate agent, the retired shoe-salesman). Every Tuesday there's a new batch. Shelly Birtles has passed through (theft of a chequebook and credit card). Shelly is under six months supervision (*BB* 111-112).

It is not difficult to imagine the author sitting in the courthouse of his home town of Nelson, doing his research for this novel. This is the familiar world of the very desperate 'have nots.' Juxtaposing this world are the *haves*: 'the little millionaires and clever bankrupts... [or] inflation millionaires, there are more than a dozen in this town,' we are informed, 'mostly land agents. They buy and sell, buy and sell, and produce nothing along the way... They take the money and other people take the debt. You try and buy a bit of land at the edge of town, for a fair price, you can't do it. They own it all, these fat fellows, these little boys. You don't believe me? Look at the registration of properties. They sit there waiting for the value - ah, not the value, the price - to rise... Tom Round. He plays their little game with them' (*BB* 112). Phil Dockery, from the preceding novel, *Prowlers*, is also one of these 'inflation millionaires.' These 'fat fellows' appear again; in *Going West* there are the 'Pittaways', and in *Crime Story* there are Howie Peet and his cronies. Some of Gee's power-seekers, Howie Peet included, are redeemable, in that he is a *maker*, and not just *an exploiter*, and to some degree so too is Phil Dockery. Evidently there is a graduation, or, an hierarchy of *bastard-ness* in Gee's model, Duggie Plumb being the worst.

The duality of Gee's 'haves and have-nots' deriving from his depiction of New Zealand's political and economic decline becomes a major point of focus in *Prowlers*. On an occasion in the narrative past, when Kate Hughes (Noel's grand-niece), was interviewing her grandmother (Noel's sister),

local Labour politician, Kitty Hughes, for a school project, Kitty makes a witty and cynical comment that her husband, Des, 'raised me from the middle class to the working class.' Then, in her reply to her grand-daughter's rhetoric, 'I thought we didn't have any classes in New Zealand', Kitty asserts:

> Is that what they're teaching you at school? We've got haves and have-nots. That's our classes. Top dogs and fancy pants and make believe Englishmen and tax accountants. And the workers on the other side, who do all the hard slog and get nothing (*P* 228).

Kitty is representative of the many emancipated women in New Zealand who move into positions of power within local politics for the good of the community. She is modelled on a real-life figure from New Zealand political history, Mabel Howard. Gee acknowledges his debt to David Gee's biography of her life, *Our Mabel*, in the 'Acknowledgments' at the beginning of *Prowlers*.

Notes

1 The topologies of Saxton resemble that of Jessop, in *Prowlers*. Saxton and Jessop both resemble the Nelson of the real world, where Gee was residing at the time of writing both *Prowlers* and *The Burning Boy*. This is confirmed by the descriptions attributed to Saxton: 'the sunshine hours are the highest in New Zealand... a hill known as the centre of New Zealand; a boulder bank enclosing mudflats and the port. It's a geological phenomenon' (*BB* 110), and 'the nearest city is forty miles by air but if you go by car and ferry you must travel all day' (*BB* 109).

Chapter Two

Prowlers: The Collapse of Modernism's Governing Principles

i

Prowlers juxtaposes the technical discourses of *science* and the discourses of *literature*, through the narrating of the protagonist, Noel Papps. He is a retired scientist, who initially demonstrates the characteristics of a radical empiricist, always striving for truths and certitudes, the freedom from doubt. He has been, for most of his life, a positivist, who has demonstrated a firm sense of being connected to external phenomena, i.e., there is an immediacy between the objects and ideas in his mind and the words he uses to describe them. In his professional career, Noel had learnt 'to establish boundaries, to categorise and analyse.' He anticipates exercising the same ordering power and control over the external world when he begins to write his *memoirs*, but initially he 'is betrayed by his own language' (Williams 182). Unrealistically, he expects to 'measure [a life] in micrograms' (*P* 174), and to 'get [it] down in [its] right balance' (*P* 5). This goal has strong appeal for him, but this method proves to be unsuccessful, and he finally concedes,

> Some things are going and will not come back – some people gone. Others are shrinking in importance – people, events – and multitudes are going to be left out. Yet I see the importance of everything. Each thing has its weight. That is what concerned me in my work. A life though isn't measured in that way. How is it measured, how does it move? That's what I'm busy finding out. That's what I'm *not* busy finding out (*P* 217).

Plumb, in Gee's novel *Plumb*, comments, 'There is no science that can measure behaviour'(*P* 149). Gee continues his interest 'in the architecture of the old life' in *Prowlers*. He explains that, 'There's the fullness, on the one hand, of experience, and the narrowing down of time on the other. So as one increases and fills out the other is decreasing. You've got a huge imbalance' (Reilly 6).

The novel traces Noel's growth in self-knowledge and tolerance. Through the process of analysing and documenting his life, and the lives of other significant individuals who have intersected it, Noel succeeds in broadening his perception of the world. He encounters numerous obstacles, but manages to achieve countless small 'victories' (*P* 212), plus a few very large and valuable ones. *Prowlers* is the story of 'increase' (*P* 94 and 117), that is, increase in self-knowledge, and, in turn, in self-worth. It is also the story of radical change, a recognition of indeterminacy, and of the problems associated with accepting it. As we will discover, Noel is an extremely complex character: initially, he is portrayed as being dogmatic and self-opinionated, although, as his narrative advances, his persona becomes more colourful and appealing. His initial task in the novel is to write about his sister's public and private life. This information is to be edited by his grand-niece, Kate Adams, who will integrate it into the narrative of her own biography of Noel's sister, and one-time Labour politician, Kitty Hughes (deceased). Mark Williams' comments regarding this *passing on* of biographical data are worth examining at this point, since they serve as a useful *opening up* of my own 'conversation' with the text. He suggests that

> The novel, then, is constructed around a complex and interlocking web of writings. All these writings are at one remove at least from the events they describe. They are focused through a consciousness dwelling on its past, casting it into written record for another character who is herself engaged in a different kind of written account. In short the novel is less concerned with the literariness of life than with the literariness of literature. We are ushered into a self-enclosed and self-reflexive world of words. For all the detail of the novel, its reaching out towards a substantial world, that world is experienced by the narrator as well as the reader as one slipping inexorably into language. The novel still wants to hold its mirror up to nature, but nature continually eludes the novel's narrator and us, who read over his shoulder (Williams 181).

Williams' reference to the 'complex and interlocking web of writings' needs qualifying. Since the reader never actually sights Kate's narrative, it has to be assumed that it is unimportant, at least in as far as the novel, as *artifact*, is concerned. Apart from the first chapter, which presents a number of false starts to Noel's narrative, a few crude remarks aimed at Kate, intermittent records, and a few of her own written and verbal responses. Noel's narrative addresses Kate directly. As far as Noel is concerned, she is his only 'reader' (*P* 182). The narrative is complex in the sense

that it combines little stories that describe the events in the past. These stories record Noel's own conscious awareness of his responses to them at the time they occurred, his responses to his own historical awareness of them, his own historical comments upon them, his comments about his own narrating process, and his own responses to Kate's actual and implied responses to Noel. The reader is naturally 'ushered into a self-enclosed and self-reflexive world of words,' because, from a post-modern perspective – and this novel certainly does enter the post-modern arena – what other perception of the world is there for the modern consciousness? Noel, however, is not a product of the post-modern world; rather, he is most certainly *of the old school*, and he finds the transition into this world problematic. Up to this point in his life, he has assumed language to be a transparent medium that directly reflects 'the world of nature'. But he is also an old man experiencing a rapidly changing world of 'Gay rights, women's rights, Maori rights, rights to play rugby with whom we want,' and he asserts, 'I'm glad I don't live in this time. I'm just passing through to somewhere else' (*P* 69). The novel does not reveal a specific narrative time, but there are enough clues to suggest that it is somewhere around the early to mid-nineteen-eighties.

Noel's interest in his past has been stimulated by Kate's task, which is to complete her 'Lomax Institute Archival Project', about the institution in which Noel had worked for most of his professional life, and of which he had become Director, from '1955-68' (*P* 24). The stimulus of this project, in turn, has created an interest, for Kate, in the public and private life of Kitty Hughes, who had been her grand-mother, and had had a high public profile as the local Labour politician for Jessop. Kate decides to write Kitty's biography and approaches Noel for assistance. He agrees, and this engages him more intensely in his own past. Kate uses a tape-recorder to interview Noel, as well as the notebooks he supplies, containing both his recollections of Kitty's life and inevitably his own life too. She then edits these recordings for her 'transcripts' (*P* 3). Ostensibly then, Kitty is the focus of these interactions. But *Prowlers* is not about Kitty; it is about Noel's life. More specifically, it is about his struggles to conceptualise and document the significant events of the past as he remembers them.

Parts of the narrative in *Prowlers* adhere very closely to the *stream-of-consciousness* [**1**] mode of narrative, that is, a drama of the mind. They dramatise the frustrations of a mind as it struggles to come to terms with post-modern concepts of knowledge as *process* rather than as a matter of absolutes. Initially, that mind resists, and dismisses, the changing dynamics of what had once appeared to be a familiar and secure place. It has to search for ways of coping with the fear of advancing too far, and avoiding a descent into madness, because, at times, it threatens to fragment, or even dissolve altogether.

Writing one's memoirs may appear to be a relatively straightforward task, but Gee has complicated it by presenting the reader with a consciousness that is conditioned in the discipline of analysing and recording technical data, and whose accustomed mode of discourse proves to be ineffective for the recording and analysing of people's lives. The dynamics of the two worlds, the world of science and the world of actual mental behaviour, appear, initially, to be incompatible. The former is perceived as determinate and stable, while the latter is perceived to be indeterminate and unstable. Noel feels he is most in command of external nature when he is operating within the discourses and determinate laws of science.

ii

Fear, Love and Madness

Another character who features largely in *Prowlers* is Noel's high-school science-teacher, the colourful Tup Ogier. Not only had he introduced Noel to the world of science, but it was arguably Tup who had the biggest influence on him during his highly impressionable, early teenage-years. He took young Noel under his wing when he recognised his passion for, and obvious potential to succeed in this discipline.

I want to trace Noel's journey from his initiation into the world of science, highlighting important developments and realisations for him, through to the present narrative time period, as he looks back to and documents his past. Firstly then, let us visit the event that first stimulated his desire to be 'in control' of external phenomena, and to achieve a direct connection between mind and world,

the inner and the outer. One may notice too, Noel's obvious artistic flair for telling a story creatively. Noel and Phil had been fighting 'in the corner of the school grounds' (*P* 7), when Tup came along and prised them apart (note the employment of metaphor, simile and embellishment, in retrospect of these past events, in both the following passages), Tup

> marched us by our necks off to his room to tan our hides...he only let his strap roll out like an ant-eater's tongue and rolled it up again and put it away and spread a chart of the human brain on his table...He told us the brain was a flower, see how it opened like a rose – the cerebellum – but down here in the stem a worm was eating, here in the medulla oblongata, the reptile brain. That's where Phil and I had been, splashing with the crocodiles in the swamp...the chart had taken my breath away, and I had no time for unimportant things. Tup strikes again. Every time he aimed at me he scored a bull's eye. I felt as if I had been given a taste of some new food and its flavour lingered in my mouth and penetrated my cerebellum. In lunch-hours I sneaked inside and opened Tup's drawer and studied the chart; played games with it, sailed down this river and that, explored the hemispheres like continents and found scaly birds and man-eating fish; but came always back to names and outlines, for the real adventure started there – in control. That was the thing I smelled like a rose (*P* 7-8).

The importance and significance of Tup's influence will become more apparent as we progress with this inquiry.

Here is another of Noel's *little stories* which is still a part of his initiation period, and which also constitutes a part of what he refers to as his 'shocks and recognitions' period (*P* 8). It follows shortly after his scuffle with Phil Dockery. Noel's reference to his *relationship/identification* with Miss Montez provides a useful clue in explaining his failure to establish an enduring relationship with a *partner*:

> And I sneaked up to the belfry and spent my time with Miss Montez, stroking her, poking my fingers in her apertures. She had lovely fingers, she had lovely toes, and a pelvis like a gravy-boat. Beautiful joints – Tup rubbed them with mutton fat – and a curve in thigh and forearm no woman with flesh on her has ever equalled, not for me...Her eyeholes had a

symmetry and balance that made me want to weigh and measure them... Tup told me later she was probably a man.

Tup moved her arms and legs with a set of levers at the back. 'Children, say hello to Miss Montez. She's my good friend of many years. I met her first on a river steamer in Brazil. A Portuguese lady, a soprano at the Manaos opera. She threw herself into the river for hopeless love of an Italian tenor - ' and so on, aimed at the girls. The piranhas ate her – 'look, you can see the marks of their teeth on her bones' – and the tenor sang an aria that made everyone cry. Then Tup bought her from the captain for seven shillings.

'That's all lies, sir,' Kitty said.

'When we don't know the facts we're entitled to invent,' Tup replied.

There were facts enough for me, her bones were facts. He raised her arms like mantis arms – but likenesses were nothing beside names. Tup told me them: occipital and parietal, clavicle and scapula, humerus, ulna, femur, fibula... Mouthing these I possessed Miss Montez. I entered a world shining with order, bright with controls, where two follows one and three follows two. To know the name of things is my desire; our only proper knowing is through names. Circles are completed in the noun, margins and boundaries are clear, and we are free from vagueness, free from fear, with every object known from every other. The name, the name, is the single proper epithet (*P* 8-9).

For the empiricist, such as Noel has been,

[one's] mind [is] a mirror which reflects the world of nature... the self becomes the centre of experience and potentially the governing principle in everything we perceive. Consciousness is thus assigned a crucial and powerful role in human affairs. All events and objects are perceived as images or impressions cast upon its screen, and consciousness then acts as a command centre, overlooking, mediating and judging the data it receives. With consciousness in command in this way, we can truly feel we are in control of our world, masters of our own destiny (Slinn 9).

Noel firmly believes he is 'in control of [his] world', yes, but he does not feel that he is 'master of [his] own destiny'. Remembering his High School days, he writes – in the third-person - 'he [Noel]

was clever. Like fat boys he must be a character, and he was part way to it when things happened in Jessop that made him something else' (*P* 6).

The knowledge that Noel has internalised and contained in language, in his role as scientist, is a specialised form of knowledge formulated by a specialised mode of discourse, the *technical* discourse of science. It is also part of what Warwick Slinn - in his study of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1806) - refers to as,

> the knowledge of everyday life, where 'the mind finds its content in...experiences of various sorts, concrete facts of sense, thoughts, too, and principles, and in general, in whatever lies ready to hand, or passes for a solid stable entity, or real being' [Hegel Pref.107]. That realm is where the mind 'runs its content back to some touchstone of certainty,' to the security of some familiar referential 'resting place' [Pref.107]. For Hegel, that is where knowledge is external to its material and, therefore, 'the expression of inert lifeless understanding' [Pref.110] (Slinn 18).

The ironic example of Miss Montez, the science-class skeleton, illuminates this point. As we have seen, Noel is introduced to the *concrete* world of naming through the naming of her parts, 'occipital and parietal, clavicle and scapula, ulna, femur', etc. Nothing – 'the aching void' (*P* 9) excluded - could be more 'inert' and 'lifeless' than bones. Slinn explains that this type of knowledge is different from the

> knowledge, or rather the knowing, of speculative philosophy, which is the attempt to understand the nature of living being, living reality, not dead representations after the fact...this sort of dynamic, dialectical discourse [occurs] where the subject is demonstrably an active agent within the process of a textual production that is continually shifting and mutable...(Slinn 18-19).

This is the realm that Noel Papps enters and experiences when he attempts to conceptualise and record the characters and events of his past. Utilising simile, he describes his thoughts as 'fast and shadowy, like bats in the night' (*P* 93). Utilising the discourse of science, and comparing *here* (in the present) to *there* (in the past), he says, '*Here* predicates. It makes a fizz and ferment, it's rude and beautiful. *There* lies dull and idle, won't be moved. *There's* inert' (*P* 85). The past, for Noel, is 'potent with meaning, ripe with extensions, but always failing to signify' (*P* 192).

As an empiricist, his 'effort to explain the past is an attempt to produce a sense of ordered movement and progress' (Slinn 20) - such as he has experienced within the topologies of science – or, at least, that is his expectation. But external reality, in the pragmatic realm of science, is 'a static product of existence' (Slinn 18), and is therefore less problematic to control. Noel discovers that the dynamic nature of human behaviour is, by comparison, far more problematic; due to its nature as being in constant flux, it is 'shifting and mutable'.

When Noel ventures outside the familiar/empirical world of science, and enters the dialectical realm of human behaviour, where different, *metaphorical* modes of discourse are responsible for shaping external reality, his biggest 'shock and recognition' (*P* 8) is of the inability of *technical* modes of discourse to embrace this dynamic and indeterminate realm. He discovers a disturbing slippage between the signifier and the signified. There appears to be a 'collapse of [modernism's] governing principles' (Williams 178). Initially, he is merely puzzled:

> Extraordinary to be confused after a life so full of magnifications and clarity. And mysteries penetrated. And governing principles understood (*P* .2).

In the first few pages of his narrative, Noel's consciousness wanders, formulating random associations. It is erratic, and reveals an extreme sense of uncertainty and disorder. His writing displays a confused, and apparently unfocussed consciousness that constantly contradicts itself, yet is able to utilise information, ideas, concepts and formulae from the technical discourses of science, to resolve apparent conflicts, and get itself *back on track*.

A most unnerving experience arises for Noel in this early part of his narrative. A series of unsettling and disturbing thoughts leads to a *surreal* experience, in which he senses a fragmentation of the self:

> I've flown apart. There are bits of me floating off as I spin and spin. Can I persuade them back by being still? Here they come, the asteroids, the basalt moons (*P* 3).

He feels that he is losing control. To rescue himself from this condition he re-starts the narrative:

> Start again... I'm not like this, not a mad old man. I'm Noel Papps. I'm dux of Jessop College. I'm Pettigrew Scholar. Here I come, I'm Dr Papps, I'm head of Soil Science. I, alone, discover what is wrong with the Plowden Hills, why they won't grow, and I, Noel Papps, repair that error... I put in what they haven't got; and look at me now, I'm Director of the Lomax Institute, I'm Sir Noel. (*P* 3).

He is attempting here to rescue the self from dissolving altogether, and achieve a concrete sense of self. This could easily be misconstrued as egotism, or dogma [**2**]. There are no less than eleven iterations of the personal pronoun 'I' in this very brief paragraph, suggesting an acute desperation to assert a sense of personal identity. The necessity of such repetition suggests that Noel has experienced what may be referred to as *a thinness of being*, very similar to that experienced by his wife, Rhona, who had been institutionalised. Here Noel describes his perception of her condition:

> She looked at me sometimes... and I saw a pleading in her eyes: Make me forget him. I was not man enough. I could only be gentle or furious, could only say, Be still, it's going to be all right, you wait and see, I love you, Rhona, I'm here love; and touch her with my hands that felt like dead leaves I suppose – or slap her in the face with accusations. Later on her plea was not make me forget, but don't let it come close, don't let it get me. Those are the words I find for the look she gave. I couldn't save her.
>
> So she went. She took little steps and was *thinned in her being* [my italics] as she withdrew. It's my guess she learned techniques of shifting her consciousness. A kind of tinkering went on, she altered things; but when she came back it was alarming. She woke not *from* but *into* bad dreams, and gathered strength and did not stop but flung herself back to her safe place. At last she simply peeped at the real world through some crack or rent in her own. She had glimpses. And one of those, on her last day, set her seeking me (*P* 116).

The feeling of being 'thinned' in one's 'being' is usually precipitated by one or more *sensations*, or *sense impressions*. These impressions act as *triggers* that reactivate previously experienced impressions of a similar nature, from the individual's past. In Noel's case, his most frightening experience had evidently been when he came face to face, one dark night, as a young boy, with

the Jessop arsonist, Edgar Le Grice; the experience was so terrifying that the young Noel 'pooped [his] pants' (*P* 22 and 28). The *effect* of this sort of sensation causes a series of responses in the affected individual. At the *lower* end of the scale it might be experienced as just anxiety or apprehension, at the *higher* end, as fear, terror, or in extreme cases, *madness*. In Noel's case, he recites his *statement of faith*: 'I'm Noel Papps. I'm dux of Jessop College...' etc., as a strategy to 'pick [him]self up' (*P* 1), to reinforce his sense of self, to rescue himself, to pull himself back from the edge of nothingness towards 'some touchstone of certainty, to the security of some familiar referential resting place.' This is a defence mechanism *programmed* into his consciousness.

Containing his life in just 'one paragraph and a joke' (*P* 3) - constituted by his statement of faith - depresses him. He perceives it as a failed (third) attempt to start his narrative. Then he drifts into an *unsuccessful* metaphoric explanation of where his days have gone:

> Have I reached the end? Is that all? One paragraph and a joke? My God, is this my entry? Where are the days? They were brimful. They burst like crates of apples. They ran off down the lawn like apples spilled, I have not the hands to grab them all. Where are they gone, lying in the long grass, lying in the hydrangeas? Slaters crawl in brown caves pecked by birds. I crush cider-flesh with my feet, walking by (*P* 3).

This is another good example of Noel's imaginative capabilities and artistic flair, but his conscious self rejects the metaphor when it turns *dark* and sinister with its description of the slaters that 'crawl in brown caves'. Noel's empirical 'condition[ing]' (*P* 206) will not accept this mode of discourse as valid; it is 'inadmissible' (*P* 1). There is a battle between the conscious and the unconscious selves, and the conscious self, by sheer exertion of will, takes over:

> Piffle! Rot! I'm not Kitty. This is her stuff. Get yourself out of my head now, Kit. Go on. Minds can't touch. I know my days, they're marked on calendars, eighty years. Not one is lost, not one lasts a moment longer than I allow it to. I'm in control and all those forces outside law – fear, grief, desire, comedy, ambition, hatred, love – are cellular in me and know their place and wait until I stain them to their lawful show; and that's no boast. Amazement and clear sight go hand in hand (*P* 3-4).

His imagination had been running away with him. This condition *echoes* Gee's comments concerning his own creative energies, or, artistic impulses. Gee says, that for himself,

> the telling of a story is supreme, and if the thing has some general application, if what emerges has some general philosophical point, that's a bonus. I couldn't begin to say how much is conscious and how much comes spontaneously. After a while a piece of work begins to generate its own energies and make its own demands. The struggle for the writer is to stay in control (Hill 54).

I would suggest that, through his narrator, Gee is expressing his own experiences as a writer: that imagination can run away with the highly creative story-writer sometimes, to the point where the intrinsic integrity of the created fictive reality, and literary artistic control, can begin to slip away. This suggests that there is a fine line between genius and madness.

It has been suggested that Noel is, 'as a kind of writer, a counterweight to the novelist' (Williams 184). Noel, like Gee, is struggling to stay in control, and trying not to invent too irresponsibly. Noel's metaphor, the 'crate of apples', certainly generates some energy, and his spontaneity is effective, but, as I have said, his conscious-self interjects, and suppresses the creative drive. He observes of himself, 'what I'm doing is not allowing myself to invent too much. Invent is wrong, imagine it should be' (*P* 155). When Noel begins to drift into an imaginative, or metaphoric, mode of expression, a deep-seated fear overrides; it is the fear that reality may be lost and not recovered. For Noel, it is the fear of going mad. At times he feels very close to the edge of the void, the edge of nothingness. Peering over the rim into Harkin's Hole he declares, 'I want that fall and dark and oblivion; terror, peace. Terror, then nothing, which lies beyond peace and cannot be imagined or spoken of.' He says, 'now the scientist in me wants it explained', but concedes that he is 'not metaphysician or psychologist and can't oblige' (*P* 205). Nevertheless, in the style of a true scientist, he offers as much explanation as he can about his puzzling experience at Harkin's Hole:

> It simply seems to me that the mind...at certain promptings enters the realm of supra-knowledge where rational enquiry does not hold; is out of phase with the realities of the place (if *place* it is), and speculation compromised by impurities we bring with us – so one finds the things one is conditioned for; or can, on the other hand, refuse to find and simply

> travel there without hoping for knowledge to carry home. Comes out with memories though – but treated as data they become compromised in turn. You see the problem? There are no names we can agree on (*P* 205-6).

These comments echo another assertion from Noel's first entry, 'how can we hope to travel there?...we're buried at a crossroads with the stake of our limitations through our hearts' (*P* 1). We are reminded here, too, of Rhona, and how she 'peeped at the real world through some crack or rent in her own'.

If Noel's observations are accurate about the inner-world that Rhona retreats to, Rhona and Noel's situations are comparable, but reversed. There is an important difference too: Rhona is the more knowing, because she peeps at the *real world*, that she has known, and doesn't like what she sees, and retreats, presumably devoid of memory. Noel, conversely, can only *imagine* another world, that he has never known. He can only begin to sense it as it draws near, and only *guess* its nature. In other words, Noel is protected from the void by his conscious-self, and is retained in the *real world*. Conversely, Rhona is protected from the real world by her unconscious-self, and is retained in what Noel presumes is a kind of void – intimated to, on the occasion when Phil Dockery *dismissed* her: 'Rhona surrendered then to nothingness' (*P* 108) - 'her safe place' (*P* 116). This assumption is supported by the comparable descriptions Noel ascribes to each realm: when Rhona enters her 'safe place', Noel recognises her contentment, 'by a softness on her mouth, and a tiny smile, and by a widening of her eyes' (*P* 112), her cheerful song (p.136), and he comments that 'she sighed and smiled and dreamed again' (*P* 136). Noel can only guess what the void offers, so he suggests that it is similar to his perceptions of Rhona's world, i.e. 'dark and oblivion; terror, peace. Terror, then nothing, which lies beyond peace and cannot be imagined or spoken'. He wants to *know* the realm of the void, but he can't. He has to wait his turn, and near the end, is 'upset', because '[Phil] knows' (*P* 231), and 'Rhona knows, Kitty knows, Irene knows. If not, well... That's three black dots too many for good sense' (*P*230). Tup knows too (*P* 105).

In the final pages of *Prowlers* Noel waits in a state of contentment for the arrival of Halley's Comet. He waits 'in a scientific spirit, but senses readied and imagination primed. I know it's just a cloud of cold gases in the sky'. Firing up his imagination, he adds, 'but how marvellous if it should lean to me and burn me in a blue or yellow fire' (*P* 234). 'Jessop had a

new crematorium and Tup was its first customer. We agreed it was appropriate – the scientific end – and I thought of the oxidizing flame and Tup initiating me into mysteries' (*P* 104).

iii

We will now depart from *Prowlers* for a while and examine another of Gee's characters, Howie Peet – the main character in *Crime Story* (1994) - who, like Noel, demonstrates a similar defence mechanism at times of crises.

Howie is one of a cluster of Gee's creations who are apparently incapable of connecting emotionally with other people. Howie is a very successful entrepreneur, and drives himself forward from one deal to the next, seldom looking back, only sideways, for the 'sharks' (*CS* 43). When his son says, 'It's easy for you' (*CS* 45), Howie launches into his *I had it tough* and *life was a struggle* type statements; his *creation story*:

> "Easy?" Howie answered. He was in a sudden rage, but would not twist and vanish in the way his son did. "Do you want to know how I started out?" Told it straight – the ravelled jersey and bare feet and bed with holes rusted in the wire, and two of them in it, top and tail, his brother's feet digging under his chin all night long. And no sheets. No underpants. Dripping instead of butter on bread...until Gordon said, "That's not what I'm talking about." Howie would not stop. "I dragged you and Athol and your mother on my back. No one helped me. I did it by myself. And I kept my nose clean. I could have taken short cuts, short cuts is easy – you think I didn't see them doing it. Half of them from King's College, in their ponsy voices. I'm just the chippy from out west, I'm just good for banging in the nails. Well, I showed them, and I kept it straight, I kept it honest, and in the end they were coming to me"...There was no enemy, there was just yourself in a contest with yourself – and Gordon would never understand. "Ah what the hell, you've heard it all before, drink up your whiskey and go home." (*CS* 45).

It is interesting that Leanne, another important character in *Crime Story*, makes the same statement: 'I'll end up carrying this family on my back, Leanne thought' (*CS* 97). Her brother, Brent Rosser, a professional burglar, is losing his mind because he is responsible for Ulla's (Howie's

sister-in-law's) quadriplegia, and is about to brutally murder Mrs Ponder, because she is threatening to phone the police. Leanne's father has been made redundant, and her mother is about to join a strange religious cult. Leanne is herself a frequently homeless solo mother. There are some interesting parallels between Leanne and Howie, the main connection being that Leanne's plight reminds Howie of his own upbringing (*CS* 156). This pricks his conscience and moves him to become more aware of how the past influences and affects the present. His brief encounter with Leanne (*CS* 140) instils a *guilt complex*. He immediately becomes more compassionate and sympathetic towards his own family members. He becomes more supportive of them, particularly his son, Gordon, who is about to face corporate fraud charges, by association. Leanne reminds Howie of his mother (*CS* 156), and he begins to realise that he must start being more responsible for others, and responsive to their needs, and not just his own.

Trevor James's article 'Beyond Realism: Maurice Gee and a Critical Praxis', offers some interesting ideas with regard to Howie's mind-set. James astutely draws attention to the fact that Howie sees

> life not as a struggle against others but with oneself... This interpretation is extraordinarily existential since there are no referents beyond Howie. This does much to explain the stress laid on Howie's energy and self-sufficiency, but it also raises questions about the adequacy of a personal identity constructed in such terms. There is something of the weakness of the hermeneutical circle [**3**] in a construct of identity dependent upon a notional struggle of self with self (James 113-114).

James supports his claim by suggesting that these *statements of faith* are akin to the *creation stories* found in theological discourse:

> Since the importance of narrative or 'story' for the construction of identity is appreciated both in literary studies and in narrative theology, it is interesting to see how Gee constructs what may be described as [one of the] 'narratives of identity' within his novels. In the case of theology there are many 'narratives of identity', but especially important are the creation stories that provide the essential 'trace' for concepts about human identity: a good illustration of this is the idea of the 'imago dei', a foundational concept in theological

> discourse and an image which is highly creative, being able to generate other images and function effectively therefore as a kind of 'root metaphor' (James 112).

Although Phil Dockery, the entrepreneur in *Prowlers*, does not recite any such *statement of faith*, there are similarities between his experiential circumstances and those of Howie Peet, likewise with those of Tom Round, the entrepreneur in *The Burning Boy* (1990). Howie though, is a man of high moral integrity, unlike Phil Dockery, who destroys Rhona and exploits other women, and Tom Round, who is guilty of sexual/incestuous abuse. This blatant lack of compassion, coupled with having little sense of the *other*, is a common trait among Gee's power seekers. The victims they destroy on their way to the top are cast aside and quickly forgotten. Duggie Plumb, in *Sole Survivor*, is the worst of them.

Howie is yet another product of the 'Henderson' region (*CS* 38) – where Gee spent his childhood (see "Beginnings", Gee) - who has *grown from rags to riches*, and is now a successful entrepreneur.

In chapter three of *Crime Story*, Gee describes Howie's affluent home comforts, complete with the 'naked lady...Darlene, who woke and slid at him and repaid him and repaid' (*CS* 38). Then, in the following passage, with a 'conjunction of particulars [and] an ordering of experience that has become central to self-understanding' (James 113), Gee presents Howie's background as the 'depression boy':

> ...All this for the sawmill boy; the kaypok mattress, outside dunny, broken sofa, broken lino boy. Henderson boy. Iron stove, wooden tub, barefoot through the hoar frost, holes in his teeth, torn pants, no underpants, rags for a hankie – that sort of boy...Depression boy, swimming at Falls Park, dog paddle and overarm, and diving from willow trees that swayed in the wind and climbing the skinny kanuka , agile as a monkey, and monkey-screaming at the girls in their changing shed. Hooligan boy. Apprentice boy. Canvas apron, hammer in his belt. Howard Peet. Howie Peet! The toughest thing that ever came out of Henderson School...Now, tonight, he was sixty-six and two-thirds, he was two-thirds there, and he still felt like a boy...'I feel like a boy tonight' (*CS* 38-39).

The 'particulars' are 'experiences integral to Howie's being and accordingly recalled... This *construct* is both Howie's *creation* story and the model which determines how he responds to other experiences and people. At moments of crisis Howie reverts to this story' (James 113). Gee goes on to describe Howie's incessant entrepreneurial drive:

> Sometimes he was astonished at how well he had done. But yesterday was only for today, and now, when you finished it, was only for tomorrow. He didn't stop here, he started here. His skin, his fingertips, his spine, the shiver and the tingle told him that. When Howie looked back he had no sense of travelling great distances, even though times were far away. The creek, his mother's kitchen, the islands and the launch, the bloomered girls in the roofless shed, and Gwen, Darlene – there was no break; it was not even linked like a chain. 'This is me by God, and it goes on tomorrow.' And that was why he said, 'I feel like a boy' (*CS* 39).

James points out that Howie's former partner, who had been the mother to Gordon and Athol,

> queries his [Howie] self-centered confidence and ceaseless entrepreneurial activities. Issues of ontology and metaphysics are implicit in her questions – Is there anything beyond this activity? Is this activity 'based' in anything? Does Howie have any sense of vulnerability, finitude or mortality? Gwen senses the absence of such questions in her husband and his colleagues and...queries their constructions of a selfhood based on such 'foundations' (James 114).

Immediately following Howie's dispute with his son, he receives a telephone call with the news of Ulla's disability, as the result of the violent attack by Brent Rosser. This shakes Howie's whole foundation: 'Howie has to face the reality of [her] broken spine and quadriplegia. There is nothing in his self-understanding to help him cope with such a disability. The idea of it shakes his confidence by presenting him with *a sense of the void* [my italics]' (James 114-115). On receiving the news, including some hard facts, Howie passes the phone to Gordon, and pours another drink:

> but it was air not whiskey he wanted. Nothing could be worse, stuck on a bed. Your body lying there like a sack, full of what? Full of nothing. And alive only in your head and no way to touch it, no way to touch your eyes and mouth...he had no sense of her, only

> himself. There was a rolling, a dislocation, in his hips. Like a socket loose. Shit, he said, don't go soft on me (*CS* 46).

In a kind of sympathetic gesture, he felt

> a premonition of dissolution in his own body...for a moment at least the assured surfaces of Howie's world have broken and he has glimpsed what he did not want to see or even imagine. Can one really imagine 'nothing' and is there even a language for it...the surface realism of the texts has cracked to present something beyond realism and, certainly, something which disturbs Howie's self-assurance and his system of values (James 115).

Despite his self-assured tough exterior, Howie is not totally devoid of pity; he is capable of some compassion, albeit only very briefly. Despite all his prejudices towards Ulla,

> he had never known her, never liked her...his eyes filled with tears for Ulla. He was pleased by that...He tried to get her, tried to make her more than just a picture, but she wouldn't come, and he realised that she had never smiled at him...So now she was helpless, now she would know...Howie put that aside almost with disgust (*CS* 47).

Not being able to construct more than a static picture of Ulla is like Noel's inability to conceptualise disturbing images of the past, and his having a sense of the past, not as motion, but as 'a batch of sterile slides' (*P* 3). Howie perhaps feels some guilt about not connecting with Ulla, not having tried harder to know and understand her better. He had dismissed her as a foreigner, as one who does not belong – she had emigrated to New Zealand from Sweden: 'He had thought Athol a fool to marry a woman who looked round to the other side of the world, looked back home. You can't be happy, Howie thought, except in your own land' (*CS* 47). He feels helpless because 'he [imagined he] saw Ulla look at him and smile. That was all he wanted. He wanted to help' (*CS* 48). But it is too late. The smile he desired had to be earned, not demanded. This is the tragedy for Howie; he has been crippled with an acute lack of compassion. Before the effects, on him, of Ulla's quadriplegia, he could not even feel pity for his own son. He virtually disowned him because of his own fear that he might be implicated, and found guilty by association (*CS* 164). Gordon and Athol, as far as Howie is concerned, are not 'his sons', they are 'her [Gwen's] sons' (*CS* 23). Despite all this apparent pity, Howie is still able to perform all the routine lock-up and personal hygiene duties, including having sex with Darlene; he hardly misses a beat; just 'a grating in his

hip,' before retiring for the night (*CS* 47-48). As a result of Ulla's quadriplegia, her son Damon comes to live with Howie and Darlene, and through the development of the relationship between Howie and Damon – as with Noel and Kate – Howie's tough exterior dissolves considerably. Such is the didactic nature of Gee's realism.

iv

Let us now return to Noel Papps, and to *Prowlers*. Despite his octogenarian status, Noel's mind has a knife-edged sharpness for recalling scientific data, such as reciting 'the valency tables' (*P* 55), anything, in fact, that he has ever learned by rote. But, as stated earlier, given the dynamic nature of the world of people's lives and related events, especially images from the past, he often experiences difficulty in conceptualising, containing, and understanding them:

> Nothing will be still. Poverty and abundance transmute. And this is that and that is this. And *it* was so, but yet not so (*P* 14).

When he begins to assist Kate Adams with her biography – his part in the project being to fill in the gaps of Kitty's life – he is frustrated by the ambiguity of the written word, and he is surprised to discover a slippage between signifier and signified: 'The name's a lovely shell, lovely container, but outside and in, chaos, harmony, unknowable' (*P* 9).

Despite Noel's constant assertions that he is in control of external nature, he nevertheless demonstrates insecurities, contradictions and inconsistencies. He displays an inability to control his use of language when describing anything other than science's technical discourses.

Before leaving the first page of the novel, the reader is clear about the fallibility of the narrator. Inconsistencies roll off the page. But *Prowlers* is not just about the *fallibility* or *infallibility* of its narrator, nothing as simple as that. It is about a large *learning curve* for Noel, Kate, and if so desired, the reader.

The dynamic world of live bodies that operate under indeterminate laws/rules threatens to overpower him. It generates a fear so large that he believes he will lose his sense of self and go mad. He exclaims, 'I'm surprised more people don't go mad. We must have minds made of leather' (*P* 117).

He becomes insecure and, at times, fearful. The depths within himself, the traumas of the past, cannot be contained in language. He is fearful to summon them up, lest the images presented overwhelm him. He perceives himself as 'shallow, shifty, a kind of Aral Sea in [his] emotions' (*P* 94).

Such a disposition is not dissimilar to that of an earlier character, Kingsley Pratt, in *Games of Choice* (1976), 'he [Kingsley] considered himself with dislike: he had a shallow and tricky mind' (*GC* 23-4). Kingsley Pratt, conversely, exercises his imagination regularly – such as imagining himself as a 'Saint Kingsley Pratt' (*GC* 16), but for the same purpose, to avoid looking back. He does this to 'keep himself from any backward glance at his life. That could only lead to the games of choices, to the dreaming of other ways, which spread him thin' (*GC* 16). It has been suggested that *Games of Choice*

> refers to games of fantasy, the disabling day-dreaming evasions which enable people to imagine, along with agreeable futures, the lives they might have led. And so the past, history, is mentally rewritten as people invent 'alternatives' to what has actually happened. This is, finally, a way of not facing the present: the refusal to accept the past is equivalent to a refusal to accept one's self, even to see that self clearly (Manhire 28).

Noel likewise, throughout his life, has avoided 'any backward glance' at his life, in order to evade any sense that he has failed, or missed any opportunities. He too, has difficulty in seeing himself 'clearly': 'That's Noel Papps, a bit of him. Or is it marks on paper?' (*P* 6), and, 'I've flown apart. There are bits of me floating off as I spin and spin' (*P* 2). These statements also suggest that Noel conceives of himself as 'a man without a centre, substance or presence. He is not quite clear about his name, or his relation to it' (Manhire 28). Noel refers to himself as, 'Sir Noel', and 'Chimp', and he engages in incessant role-playing, as 'Robin Hood...Friar Tuck...Sheriff of Nottingham...Kaiser' (*P* 6). Commencing his narrative he says, 'I'll go along by predication. That's the method. But acting shall be my vehicle. I've placed that talent second long enough. How I shall howl! How I shall laugh' (*P* 9). This suggests that he lacks confidence in himself as a subject for his narrative. As with Kingsley Pratt, Noel 'relies on outward circumstances [and status, to] supply him with a reality which he does not feel himself' (Manhire 28-29). Role-playing, like 'day-dreaming' and 'fantasy', constantly defers a clear view of the self and a realising of one's

inadequacies. As with Kingsley's maps, that 'lack a human content – and especially the awareness that human beings change and grow' (Manhire 30), so with Noel's professional career, 'all that solid, all that real old stuff', particularly 'Miss Montez'. Noel prefers to play the voyeur, the 'observer', rather than the participant. He has always avoided, as much as possible, any deep emotional attachment to another person because of the fear of seeing his own reflection. This is suggested in his statement towards the end of his narrative, after securing what he recognises as an emotional attachment to his care-giver, Kate, 'what was missing was a person to reflect me back at myself' (*P* 212). Although he married Rhona, it was not because of any deep emotional attachment to her. Recalling his feelings for her, he states,

> I married Rhona because I was back home and thought Dr Papps should have a wife... I married her because of my need; and from pity, from my perception of her state; and notions of my strength and maturity. With all that mixed in a brew anyone might believe himself in love. She fitted so neatly into the hole left by Irene. She freed me from the need to discover where it was I had arrived.
>
> I went into it a boy but in four years was as much a man as I'll ever be. Whole geographies changed. Sandy coasts sank beneath the sea – by that I mean my self-esteem took a proper shape, my notion of myself began to accord with reality. What came up out of the sea was habitable, only just, but, by God, it was real. The soil might be thin and sour, and rocks break out all over the place: but it was mine and would not vanish in a dream... (*P* 117).

Noel appears to have married Rhona because of a personal need and not because he particularly wanted to. Their 'cute meet' was purely circumstantial, and because Phil had finished with her. The time was right for Noel to have 'a wife,' and Rhona happened to come along at that time. He married her because a deep void, within himself, needed filling, rather than because of wanting to help Rhona, or, to give something of himself to her. He could not have Irene, so Rhona would do. His relationship with Ruth Verrytt was merely convenient, that is, to satisfy their mutual lust for one another.

It has been said that when Noel is

> faced with any deep emotion, his self threatens to dissolve altogether, to open up a space so great, to thin his being to such a degree, that he fears he might go mad. Unwillingly and in spite of his fetishistic need to exert control, he has entered the postmodern world in which *all* the old certitudes...have given way to a free-floating relativism, a lack of depth, a radical barrenness of being (Williams 184).

Williams ascribes an almost identical tendency to Raymond Sole – who has made even less progress in *love* than Noel - at the close of another of Gee's novels, *Sole Survivor* (1983):

> Meaning had all along been a pose, a front behind which lay a great hollowness...He has 'passed through no cleansing fire; no fire of thought, experience, language' [*SS* 161]. He faces himself at last as a loose collection of attitudes and postures – unshaped, ungrounded, inwardly dead (Williams 177).

One can compare this with Noel's, 'I've flown apart. There are bits of me floating off as I spin and spin' (*P* 3). Williams adds:

> For Raymond this is a linguistic as well as a moral loss. As a journalist, he has associated truth with nouns and pronouns. 'Adjectives blur things, adverbs too; and verbs can falsify' (Williams 169).

Similarly with Noel, as noticed above, 'words are doing funny things these days' (*P* 174); and, 'nothing will be still...And there you see this double focus, which is a kind of seeing round corners, a view through mirrors cunningly placed, when all I want is to look *straight* at the *single* thing' (*P* 14).

Images from the past, re-constructed in language, are 'failing to *signify*' (*P* 192), for Noel. It is the *old order*, that of science and positivism, that had made him feel that he was connected to the 'single thing'. Williams further suggests that

> The old order [in Plumb's time] had preserved the pure connection between words and things. Truth was a mere matter of naming things that existed in a solid world before words became caught up in the general decay, became slippery and unreliable. Language

> at last becomes unable to point beyond itself to familiar realities, becomes self-enclosed and empty (Williams 177).

Noel's phrase, 'life was a series of shocks and recognitions' (*P* 8) could just as easily apply to Raymond.

Noel grieves for the loss of the business of science, 'all that solid, all that real old stuff' (*P* 99). But he does so, only after experiencing the insecurities within the realm of human behaviour, following his agreement to help Kate with the biography. That decision has led him not just to reluctantly *drag up* the past, and re-examine his own life, but also to interact, intensely, with a contrasting younger generation. He is compelled to enter a new and strange territory, the inhabitants of which speak a strange language and experience a totally different value system. This challenge is no less difficult for Kate, who offers to be a live-in caregiver to Noel. A high level of tolerance is required from each of them, and although their worlds collide, and friction is inevitable, the arrangement is successful, and both learn valuable lessons in self-knowledge. They are family after all, and although such a conclusion is very rare in Gee's fiction, this familial relationship *ends* amicably.

A major part of Noel's previous inability to comprehend the dynamic world of human behaviour can be attributed to his life-long failure to *connect* emotionally with another life – excepting perhaps in the case of his affair with Ruth Verryt, but even that, as with all his other encounters with women, was very temporary. He has never been successful in *love*. Noel's biggest desire in love was to *connect* with Irene, his childhood *sweetheart*, but 'the only time [they] touched in friendliness' (*P* 225), was when she explored his skull during a lesson in *phrenology*:

> Suddenly she leaned at me and put her fingers at the base of my skull. I felt her strong key-pressing touch. It was personal and impersonal. 'Yes, I thought so. Amativeness. What a bump. You naughty boy' (*P* 225).

The final statement in the above passage is ironic of course, because he never found an enduring loving relationship, though not for the want of trying. He didn't know how. He is incapable, it seems, of relating, in any depth, with living or dynamic matter. Noel's narrative only makes two

positive references to his capacity to love. The first is tentative and non-committal, and relates to Phil Dockery. The numerous references to Phil throughout his narrative have only ever expressed contempt for him, but on this one very recent occasion, Noel experienced an emotion he couldn't describe. Here he is trying to describe the way he felt:

> I want nothing from him. I don't love him but have a feeling I can't name, made up of pity and respect, and disapproval, and long familiarity. We are, simply, close to one another. It's as if he's in my family and I must love him willy-nilly in spite of all the things I loathe about him. That came out stronger than I intended. I wrote 'love' and the word isn't right but I can't find one to replace it with. Perhaps it's right (*P* 214).

His other reference to love is immediately after the above entry, which included details about how Phil intimated that he loved Shane, and would leave him all his property. Noel says, 'I know I love Kate. It needn't be a secret. And I'm leaving her my property' (*P* 214). Remembering Phil's admission and gesture, Noel figured it was the right thing to say, and the right gesture to make too, about Kate. This could be seen as another example of Noel's lack of a solid centre within himself. Just the same as his accepting his wife, Rhona, as if gifted to him by Phil. Just as with Raymond Sole accepting his father's and Duggie's discarded mistress and girlfriend respectively. It isn't that he would begrudge leaving his estate to Kate, he just wouldn't have thought of it without this prompting. He is not used to considering the needs of others. He has led an isolated and solitary existence, despite his marriage to Rhona.

Here is an extract from an interview (1990), with Colleen Reilly that explains the dynamics of this human tragedy, as Gee sees it:

> *Reilly* – ...your truth-seekers do seem to be inadequate lovers.
>
> *Gee* – That's right, I've noticed that too. But so are most of the others. I suppose it's because one of my central obsessions is the difficulty of connecting, and my novels are partly about that. Love runs into all sorts of difficulties.
>
> *Reilly* – When I'm teaching *Plumb* it is hard to get students to see what Plumb has accomplished in terms of self-knowledge because they're always putting it up against what he hasn't accomplished in love.

> *Gee* – Well, he's accomplished huge things in terms of self-knowledge even though the victory may appear small to people sitting outside. He has managed a large revolution in himself – and similarly Meg [Plumb's daughter], and to a certain extent Raymond [Meg's son]. All three make progress in self-knowledge. I guess that's what the books are mainly about (Reilly, interview 1-2).

Noel achieves the same 'revolution' in himself. In their quests for *truth*, Plumb, Raymond, Noel, and Jack Skeat (*Going West*), isolate themselves from the real world of human relations. They surround themselves with 'a wall of books, a world of ideas, that protected them from the world *out there*, a seemingly hostile, or at least potentially indifferent world of nature' (*SS* 230-231).

I suggest that Gee's leitmotif of the secluded/reclusive figure - usually *male* - reading/writing in a *den*, is a metaphor for the mind (inner), struggling for a relationship with the world (outer). Manhire poses, the questions, 'does an interest in books represent an evasion of the world? What is the difference between the romantic novels Meg reads and the *worthier* texts with which her father wrestles? Both can obscure one's vision' (Manhire 68). Plumb says. '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' (*PI* 96). The missing ingredient for these 'den-dwellers' is a dynamic, caring and loving relationship with another human being. Plumb's daughter, Felicity, tries to warn him:

> For fifty years I have sat alone at night and read or written. But print and solitude, Felicity says, are drugs I am 'hooked on'. She is going to break me of the habit. People are more important than books. Besides, she said, pulling me to my feet, Max wanted to change my dressing (*PI* 139).

The lesson that is implicit in this passage is that *people need people*. Luckily, Noel is rescued from his potentially solipsistic state through his developing relationship with Kate. He states that 'what was missing was a person to reflect me back at myself. And take reflections in her turn' (*P* 212). This is contrasted with the novel's opening statement, 'I do not like her' (*P* 1), to illustrate one of the 'large revolutions in himself' brought about through his progress in *self-knowledge* through the establishment of a meaningful relationship with Kate.

v

In his role as a soil-scientist, Noel had adopted the empiricist's, or *objective* view of the world. But alongside this view-point there was always a *semi-conscious* awareness of an alternative perception of the world, an *idealist*, or *subjective* view-point, where the mind, as not just a passive/ reflective mirror, works actively and creatively to transform external reality. This perception of the world was partially suppressed by him, generally on the grounds that its operations were interpreted as irrational. His empirical conditioning prevented him awarding credence to this subjective view of the world. His passion for science led to a total immersion in the principles of that discipline. The fervour of that experience is expressed in the following recollection:

> He [Tup] made me learn the valency tables... I had all that before I went to College so it's no wonder I was dux.
>
> Tup narrated to me the history of science, and gave me heroes, Lavoissier, and Boyle and Priestley and Scheele – my favourite, a boy like me, mixing chemicals in a little room – and I conversed with them and told them I was setting out to join their company. I no longer dreamed of scoring the try that wins the match, I gave a little sniff at that and put on my genius look. I dreamed of – I practised – inventing a piece of apparatus like the alembic, like Boyle's pump, that would leap chemistry ahead; and formulated laws and discovered principles and tried the name Papps against Avogadro and found it lost little in dignity.
>
> I put myself in danger: side by side with Davy inhaled 'nitrous air', and chased fluorine with the pioneers and had that 'wild spirit' flash from its container into my face. I loved the danger... and the drama and the poetry – 'wild spirit'. The poetry in shapes – carbon skeleton.
>
> What brought me back from this, brought me up short, was the tale of men who sat and thought. They unnerved me, they made me cold and small, I saw my tiny size and knew the shortness of my step. I worshipped them but did not really like them: Dalton *thinking* his way to atomic theory, Mendelyeev sitting in a room, working out the periodic law *in his head*. For Tup it meant that thought was creative, imagination precedes discovery. I sensed that would be too hard for me, I would never travel there, and I got very busy

> practising skills, learning tables. Don't run away with the idea that I'm not happy with what I achieved (*P* 55-56).

The theme that emerges here is that of *the limitations of the human vision* as exercised by the non-exceptional man. Contemplating the great minds of scientific discovery and invention, Noel realises his 'tiny size' and hence, the 'shortness of [his] step.' He realises his insignificance within the scale of history. The safety mechanism he adopts, when confronted with overpowering aspects of the might, vastness and indifference of the powers of nature, is to divert his attention to practising skills, and learning tables. This strategy is similar to that of reciting a statement of faith, or, as in the case of Kingsley Pratt, indulging in fantasy and role-play to evade a personal sense of having failed due to missed opportunities.

I want to take a look at Tup's efforts to enlighten Noel, by attempting to instil in him an awareness of the fear and terror *beneath the surface.* Noel had returned from two years' research in England, and was invited to present a paper at the Lomax Memorial Lecture of 1933. The event serves as another reminder for Noel, on two counts, of 'his tiny size', and 'the shortness of [his] step.' Firstly, he was invited because the Institute was 'short of money' (*P* 97), and could not afford to invite a more prominent speaker, and secondly, he 'had a pimple on his nose', and declares, 'I must be reminded I would never be a man' (*P* 97). On the weekend following the Memorial Lecture Noel visited Tup at his home. Noel remembers how they'd 'stood in the French doors and looked at Settlers' Hill and the Berthon dome white against the sky. [They] reminisced about it like old men':

> Tup advised me not to forget astronomy. The [magnifying] glass, he had told me, banished fear; but a little bit of fear was salutary, and that other glass, on the hill, opened one to it, and showed too how it might be contained. 'There's nothing like astronomy for tension.' He told me how he'd looked out into space and sometimes cried with fear at the spinning suns, and the gulfs between, immeasurable – not, he conceded, by mathematics, instrument, but in the human scale, by the mind. He had watched the comet – Halley's – advance, coming out of deeps beyond comprehension, and had lost, he said, all sense of his being; and regained it, in the end, by an act of will. And when the comet stood at its apogee and filled his lens the margin of understanding over terror was so fine – a crescent

> as thin as a fingernail clipping – his sanity depended on taking one more breath, just that simple physical *willed* act. And that, he said, is the margin we hold: that's all that keeps us from idiocy.
>
> I won't pretend to go along with this. I told him I did not understand and that depressed him. But we went back into the room and found the tea warm enough for a second cup, and we had more biscuits, and he grinned as though this act, drinking, munching, proved his case. Perhaps it did (*P* 99).

Tup had tried here to open up Noel's imagination to 'the margin of understanding over fear', but he failed to grasp it, and consequently he had continued his evasion of this awareness, that is, up until now, within the realm of more imaginative modes of discourse, as he re-constructs his life, and the lives of others: 'Sometimes, these days', he declares, 'I understand it [*the margin we hold*]. We hold on by our fingernails, by an act of will. But my grasp of that slips away' (*P* 99-100).

Despite his scholarly studies, his research and overseas experience, he had remained still incapable of the sort of understanding Tup tried to convey. There are no major gaps in Noel's academic learning, but there had definitely been an important missing ingredient, that of *imagination*. Exercising his imagination has always seemed too risky, and invariably proved to be fearful for him; consequently the concept is suppressed, at least until he is compelled to confront the past.

As I have said, Noel is increasingly aware of the seemingly contradictory nature of the world beneath the surface, 'the thing beyond the thing' (*P* 105), as with observing the 'praying mantis [eating] a fly' (*P* 4), through Tup's magnifying glass, 'which he called "my truth teller" ' (*P* 4 and 99), and with eventually acknowledging and imaginatively comprehending the sense of terror that Tup had been referring to. Tup's continual efforts to usher Noel through life raises the notion of whether Tup, himself, had always embraced both visions, or had he moved along from one vision to the other? I am inclined to suggest the latter; there is a tendency in *mature adults* to pass on to the younger generation what they regard as valuable lessons that they themselves have acknowledged and internalised.

By the end of his narrative, when he has explored figurative/metaphoric re-constructions of external reality, he can acknowledge his awareness of the *terror*, and also of the *beauty* of this reality. Prior

to this experience he had failed to understand that it is the mind that constructs this *subjective perception* of the world. Things are not always as they seem. Part of the process he experiences as he enters the realm of *knowing*, through the medium of figurative/metaphoric language - as opposed to a more pragmatic, or, empirical methods of interpretation - is that it is the individual's imagination, his own imagination, which constructs the phenomena of either *ugliness* or *beauty*; *terror* or *euphoria*. This awareness, which he eventually internalises, helps to dissolve the phenomena of fear that he used to feel when he was faced with traumatic experiences.

Tup had assured Noel that magnification would banish fear, because the experience would disclose the truth of what was perceived, and, as Tup explains, there would be 'No more superstition, Papps, when you look through this [magnifying glass]... The end of fear' (*P* 4), however, as Noel says,

> Nasty things lie under surfaces. That's the sum of my wisdom learned through lenses – my lifetime of squinting through bits of glass. Tup said magnification banished fear. So it seemed to me for many years. Now I know it shows empty places, endless recession, and how can we hope to travel there? (*P* 1).

Noel's reference to 'bits of glass' includes windows. Playing voyeur at Irene's parlour window, Noel perceives and misconstrues an intimacy between Irene and her brother, Royce, and 'knew [Royce] had possession of her' (*P* 92), which was the thing that Noel had long desired.

Immediately following this 'false vision', Noel 'squatted and moaned' (*P* 92), he had seen something that he'd rather not have seen. The trouble is that Noel dwells too seriously on Phil Dockery's continuing comments/slander, that is, his inference of incest between Irene and Royce, such as, 'Daddy first, so why not little brother? Why go outside the family?' (*P* 93). Phil's imagination is malicious and cruel. He feels an 'increase' in himself by the slandering, and belittling others. Noel concludes, 'I've spent too much time looking through lenses. The naked eye is good enough for me' (*P* 234).

When Noel toured Europe, and discovered that the old concentration camp of 'Dachau [Germany] was close by', he '*couldn't go*' (*P* 130), he 'can't face up to man' (*P* 131). He fears he may over-react to the horrors that once occurred there. From Ruth's historical studies,

> I saw how the inquisition and the *auto-da-fe* and the tearing out of tongues and the burning on hooks over slow fires, and Titelmann, mad strangler, joking killer...followed Aristotle, Augustine, and saw the line Ruth followed through to Auschwitz, Belsen. But there I did not want to go with her. I could not face the things that happened there (*P* 177).

He had *tasted* fear when confronting the Jessop arsonist in a dark alley, as a young boy. He had perceived the looming figure as 'a black moon rising. I had pooped my pants' (*P* 22 and 28). As a young boy too, he witnessed the destruction of Frau Reinbold's house, and the symbolic burning of her piano. But more vividly, he remembers the events leading up to it. What was supposed to be the joyous occasion of 'the patriotic pageant' (*P* 10-13) transformed itself, with disturbing ease, into a mob riot, led by Edgar Le Grice, the Jessop arsonist. The destruction that followed was *mindless* and terrorising for the young Noel.

The following passage reveals a number of interesting points. It demonstrates the lasting impressions of *first hand* traumatic experiences; it explains why Noel avoids human contact, as much as he can, because of its association with fear and emotional pain; it also demonstrates Noel's, and on another level, Gee's imaginative writing skills, the *artist's eye for the real.* In his article on New Zealand masculine realist fiction, Russell Haley describes Gee as 'the best of our writers'; he says, 'we can feel something bulging the surface of the prose. Often it is a hidden sexual charge...[with Gee] it is an overwhelming sense that he can reach something numinous and atavistic when he deals imaginatively with place' (Haley 7). The following passage serves as an excellent example of what Haley is suggesting. The scene follows the school pageant with Edgar Le Grice leading a mob riot to ramsack Frau Reinbold's house:

> The French doors bulged and burst. Le Grice appeared...He leaned back inside and gave a heave and seemed to lift the Bechstein over the step. Men with white mad faces came beetling round its sides. They beat it across the flower beds, kicked it like a donkey and tipped it three feet into the sunken garden. One jumped on it and struck it with an axe.

> The letters of the name sprang out and looped to my feet. (And my father lifted the spiked Prussian helmet from my head and put it down behind a daphne bush.).
>
> The axe made kindling of the ebony wood. The keys came out and made a waterfall. Wires sighed, and hammers did a caterpillar walk. Edgar Le Grice had gone back into the house. Now he appeared in the doorway, with a bottle held stiff-armed above his head, and throat lined up as though he meant to swig. He jumped on the piano, shouldered the axeman away, stood wide-legged in the broken keys. Liquid spun like glycerine and fractured into glass at his feet. He held the bottle until it was empty, then flung it back-handed at the house, where it burst on the wall and rained his mob with splinters. Le Grice had sucked motion, speech, intention, even fear from us all. We were like the sleepers in the castle and could not move as he passed among us, but could see. The rattle of his matches brought us awake.
>
> 'No!' Shouted Tup Ogier.
>
> 'Ha!' cried the mob – a breath in time with the fire's explosion. Le Grice seemed lifted by it and thrown back. He landed on his feet on the garden wall, and stood wide-legged, lit-up, facets of him flashing red and yellow. I think of him now as pleochromatic, but that's a defence, that's a retreat, it leaves out black. And as the piano crackles and the flames turn crystalline, it's black I see: Le Grice spinning at me, basalt moon (*P* 12-13).

The image of Le Grice as a 'basalt moon' had created a lasting and fearful impression on Noel. Although Le Grice is portrayed as an ogre in Noel's mind, a terrorising image for him, he is also mysterious to Noel, and Noel likes to solve mysteries. For Noel, Le Grice is intriguing. However, the terror that was instilled in Noel by Le Grice's actions is tangible because he had actually experienced it, and although that event is way back in the past, it is reinforced by another vivid memory of Le Grice, as *arsonist*, threatening, as he recalls, to 'break me in pieces...loom[ing] over me' (*P* 22), shortly after the incident at Frau Reinbold's house.

Noel is aware of *man's inhumanity to man*. He has seen its effects on Rhona and Les Dockery. His perception of the world 'back there', in the past, is 'hardly plenum - it's atom and void, a multitude of bodies rolling about and damaging each other when they come close' (*P* 133).

I suggest that the message, implicit in the content of *Prowlers*, is that too much compulsion to be in control will inevitably inhibit the development of the imagination. Spinosa's proposition that it could just as easily be nature moving through him, thinking his thoughts and pulling his strings, could not be more alien to Noel. Having studied 'philosophy' (*P* 56), he might be aware of the concept, but the idea would not have seemed plausible to his young, evolving, and pragmatic conception of it. The proposition would have seemed too idealistic, and as Noel says, 'Idealism always brings ruin in its train: there's nothing like it for denaturing. It deals in simplification, then multiplication, and in the end there's too much to see, monochrome, gigantically single-celled, and assertion is the only road left open' (*P* 67).

During his teenage years, Noel had studied, at Tup's behest, 'the history of medicine, astronomy, *philosophy* [my italics], physics – Archimedes and Aristarchus, Pythagoras and Plato, Galen, Ptolemy, Harvey, Kepler, Newton, Darwin, so on' (*P* 56). He says, 'Tup had me speak of science as natural philosophy' (*P* 56). Noel has been educated in a holistic view of the world, but he has failed to internalize that knowledge, to exercise his mind imaginatively. Anything that did not fit, or feel comfortable to his conscious-self, to his empirical/scientific mind-set, would have been dismissed as irrational, just like the concepts of minds touching (*P* 3), and 'speaking-eyes' (*P* 2), that the young Noel had abhorred. Ironically, he practiced too much 'assertion', he was guilty of the same *sin* he had accused Kate of (*P* 67). Noel has always played it safe by occupying his mind with 'a litany of facts' (*P* 57). There is no doubt that he has always had the potential to think and write articulately and imaginatively. Now, as an octogenarian, after courageously facing the terror and fear of his past, and accepting a view of the world as 'shifting' and 'mutable', he does it with *relative* ease. The *final* product, his 'notebooks' (*P* 234), or, more specifically, the *process* of recalling and recording both the *peace* and the *terror* of his past, becomes successfully completed. He had found the process unnerving, even scary, initially, often going down into the depths of himself, facing the apparent darkness, then making a hasty retreat to the surface, but he has taken himself close enough to those traumas to be aware of them and to accept each of them as a *necessary evil*. He now knows the necessity of an awareness of the tension between the bad and the good, the 'terror' and the 'beauty', as in the *Motherstone philosophy* (*HofO* 68-71). He can now accept, and in fact celebrate the mixed nature of the human condition. He is not repelled by

human interaction that is deliberately damaging. Nothing human surprises him any more, or seems alien to him. He has achieved 'small victor[ies]' (Hill 54), but does not become *fully* aware of them, even towards the end of his narrative, towards the end of the *process*, though he knows only too well that the process will be continuing, even after his departure from life:

> My life has narrowed to a point...Kate, the view from my sundeck, the little bit of springtime that is left, it's enough for me. This strikes me as a healthy state to be in. Imagine such good health at eighty-four.
>
> I'll finish scribbling here but keep on somewhere else. My book is done (*P* 231).

In a final gesture of acceptance, he declares, 'Let's burn my notebooks first, shall we, Kate' (*P* 234). The 'we' in that final statement is perhaps the most comforting and significant word in his narrative.

He desires a *living*, symbolic experience, of the cremation of his own life - contained in his notebooks – to simulate Tup's own cremation. It prefigures Noel's own death and cremation.

Notes

1 In '*stream-of-consciousness* narration...we are presented with outer observations only as they impinge on the current of thought, memory, feelings, and associations which constitute the observer's awareness' (Abrams 146). Stream-of-consciousness 'converts the story of outer action and events into a drama of the life of the mind' (Abrams 121). See Abrams p.180 for more details.

2 This sort of statement, which is an attempt to ascribe some sense of purpose to his life, would be 'dismiss[ed] as dogmatism' in Hegel's formulation. 'For Hegel, 'the quest for meaning and understanding has little to do with the sort of knowledge which produces "a fixed and final result" ' (Slinn 16-17). The nature of human lives, that Noel struggles to conceptualize and contain in language, is not static, but ever 'shifting and mutable', which is why he struggles to succeed,

though he does reach an acceptance of that limitation: 'let it stand as an approximation' (*P* 200). The stories of human lives resist closure and 'fixity'. 'Hegel's *Phenomenology* is not so much about experience', as in *status, position, achievements*, etc., but rather, 'it is about *changes* in experience, changes in the *forms* of experience, transformations of the *concepts* through which we give form to our experiences' (Solomon 13). In other words the 'focus on change and transformation produces a discourse which is dominated by the notion of living substance as restless and active, as a continual process of differentiation, where truth, in Hegel's disruptive metaphor, is a "bacchanalian revel" [Pref. 105]. It is therefore a discourse dominated by the flavour and mode of dialectical thinking with its transformations and fluctuating abstractions. Such a focus also means that fixity and finality belong to some other mode of knowing' (Slinn 16).

3 'In formulating the way in which we come to understand the meaning of a text, Dilthey gave the name the *hermeneutic circle* to a procedure Schleiermacher had earlier described. That is, to understand the determinate meanings of the parts of any linguistic unit, we must approach them with a prior sense of the meaning of the whole; yet we can know the meaning of the whole only by knowing the meanings of its constituent parts. This circularity of the interpretive procedure applies to the relations between the meanings of the single words within any sentence and the meaning of the sentence as a whole, as well as to the relations between all the single sentences and the work as a whole. Dilthey maintained however, that the hermeneutic circle is not a vicious circle, in that we can achieve a valid interpretation by a sustained, mutually qualifying interplay between our evolving sense of the whole and our retrospective understanding of its constitutive parts [exactly as you, the reader, have just carried out!]' (Abrams 86).

Chapter Three

Biography in *Prowlers* and *Going West*

> We're trapped at the intersection of two planes (is and ought, there's two good names), we're buried at a crossroads with the stake of our limitations through our hearts (*Prowlers* 1).

This passage comes, as we can later recognise, in retrospective reflection upon the dilemma encountered by the narrator, Noel Papps, when he discovers another dimension to the truths about his sister's life. He discovers that when his brother-in-law had gone out wandering, one wet, cold night, in a state of ill health, and died of pneumonia, his sister had deliberately searched for him in the opposite direction. She is now deceased, and he is faced, along with Kate, who is writing the biography, with deciding whether or not this implicating factor should be included in it.

Gee creates a similar situation in *Going West*: Jack Skeat's friend, Rex Petley, has recently drowned as the result of a mysterious boating accident off the Hauraki Gulf. Jack knows that many years ago Rex murdered a man who was sexually abusing a young girl whom Rex had befriended. Many years later Rex met the young girl by chance in a park. They struck up a new friendship, and in due course Rex left his wife of many years, and married the young girl, now a woman. Jack wants to know the truth about Rex's drowning. He knows Rex was a very competent boatman. Rex's nephew, Tod, had survived a boating accident, though Tod's wife and children had drowned. Rex's previous wife wants the official verdict on Rex's death to be 'suicide' (*GW* .275). Jack's implied theory is that Rex, being the sort of man he was, either wanted to find out for himself, by swimming the route Tod claimed he had swum, if Tod was telling the truth about having deliberately drowned his wife and children, and/or that Rex wanted to subject himself to an expiatory ordeal, having been a murderer himself.

By creating a dark side to people's lives, Gee illustrates that there could always be something unknown about a person's life that would alter another's perspective of them, sometimes quite

radically so. New Zealand literary critic , Kevin Ireland, appears to know Maurice Gee reasonably well, - perhaps well enough, that one day he may feel qualified to write a biography about him, or at least make a major contribution to it. But the way Gee presents the process of coming to know the life of another person, or, even knowing oneself, in his novels, throws a heavy shadow of doubt over the authenticity of biographical discourse. Part of the argument in this chapter suggests that Gee is a little nervous about a pending biography of his life, and that on one level, *Prowlers* and *Going West* are attempts, by Gee, to create an awareness in his readers of the spurious nature of biographical discourse. Published interviews with Maurice Gee support this view.

In this chapter I will investigate how *Prowlers* and *Going West* deal with the subject of *biography*. The objective is two-fold: the first, which is the more concentrated inquiry, will examine the imperialistic aspects of biographical discourse, and the second will show how these two novels promote what I believe to be one of the author's objectives, that is, to suggest some moral standards, as guidelines, for how far a biographer should go when constructing an account of a person's life for public consumption. We have already discussed the dynamics of Noel's relationship with language, which cannot be assumed to be a transparent medium. The next step is to highlight how the assumptions made by the biographer about his role, and about the medium of language itself, are equally problematic. I am interested in how close one can get to true and authentic accounts of Kitty's and Rex's lives, and in exploring the strategies that the narrators utilise in achieving this end. I will show how both novels demonstrate that the nearest a *biography* can come to the truth about a life is an 'approximation' (*P* 200).

According to Noel, Kate desperately wants to believe that Kitty, like herself, is pro-Feminist. If so, then Kate is likely to try to reconstruct Kitty's life by selecting material that will support that view of her. However she is disappointed and shocked when she discovers that the issue is not so straight forward. Here is the extract from one of Kitty's political editorials that suggests an alternative truth which does not comply with Kate's pre-constructed view of her:

> Above all must we remember, we are women, and womanhood means duty. It means service. We must lead good lives. We must make our longings reasonable, and our ambitions modest... The sphere of activity calling most of us is domestic, and goodness and heroism are no less present there than in the world . We must be good heroic wives and mothers. (*P* 68)

What Kate fails to realise, in her naivety, is that all political utterances are politically motivated. There are always hidden agendas, or subversive motives built into the genre. Noel tries to explain that

> Kitty played games, and went through phases, and loved roles and opposing roles and change and variety, and chased approval, and liked to shock; and was a complicated being...growth and change seem to be outside Kate's understanding. She can't tolerate inconsistencies; and so she will never write Kitty's life. Or if she does, it won't be Kitty (*P* 68).

Once Kate understands Kitty's need to have played the many roles demanded of a public figure, she begins to know Kitty better, and approves. The irony, of course, is that Noel's account of Kitty's life is equally as subjective as Kate's. The novel reveals numerous discrepancies and 'inconsistencies' in Noel's supposedly authentic account. How accurate is Noel's criticism of Kate? What is Kate really like? We can only know Kate through Noel's account of her. Noel tells us: 'Feminism. That is where Kate really lives' (p.67). But Noel's definition of feminism may differ radically from Kate's, or the reader's. He offers us a few clues of what he believes feminism to be:

> She [Kate] doesn't read much but when she does it's mostly about wrongs done to women – believes in Iphigenia, she does, but won't let Helen have a place... my ancients she categorized as "a pack of wankers" (p.67).

As for the myth of 'Plato's cave' that Noel tries to convey to Kate (p.67), Kate retorts: 'bloody indecent, people chained in caves, just about what you'd expect from a pack of slave-keepers frightened of looking at "real issues" '(p.67); and her comments about Noel's colleagues at the Lomax Institute of Science suggests that she harbours some strong feminist viewpoints: ' You sit in your chairs sniggering, playing your little sex games in your head ' (p.27). So, when

Kate discovers that Kitty does not appear to share her own feminist viewpoint, Noel tells his reader that she is filled with 'rage and disappointment. There are tears in Kate's eyes now' (p.68). Noel is very protective of his version of Kitty. He believes that he is the only one who knows her well enough to present an accurate account of her life, one that will not 'distort' the truth: He asserts that Phil Dockery 'knows nothing about Kitty but pretends to know the lot' (p47).

Writing a biography is a very complex, controversial, and political enterprise. He discovers that the process incorporates other people, not least himself. Although the task becomes problematic in many unexpected ways, for Noel, it proves to be an important learning curve for him, and he is relatively successful with it.

Gee's comments on the subject of biography are worth noting at this juncture. When asked whether there might be a forthcoming biography of himself, Gee intimated that,

> he has been approached by a couple of writers keen to tackle his biography but he does not think any serious biographer could accept the proviso that they steer clear of certain areas of his life. "In a sense I am hamstrung [says Gee]. As I get older I am of course tempted by the idea of an autobiography, but I don't feel I have the right to involve other people. And yet the story of my life makes no sense without those areas, those relationships" (Brett/Gee 95).

Re-constructing the lives of others is a form of imperialism. It is a process of *appropriation*, through the medium of language:

> Facts are products of discourse, which in turn determines their interpretation. The "subject" (or biographee) is the person whose life is interpreted through that discourse, but...by appropriating an authorial role and constructing their own subject-positions in their biographies, the biographers inevitably redefine their subjects as objects of their narratives (Dawson v).

Prowlers - and *Going West* - raise serious questions concerning biography. It is not the purpose of this thesis to enter into this *post-modern* debate in great depth. Some of its elements will be discussed, but only as far as they relate to the concept of biography as dealt

with in *Prowlers* and *Going West*. To begin with, I will look at the relationship between the inferred biographers – Noel Papps (*Prowlers*) and Jack Skeat (*Going West*)– and the subjects of their intended biographies.

The first, and certainly one of the most important assertions of this inquiry, is that the biographer, through his/her writing, *constructs* the subject of their biography, through the medium of language, and in terms dictated by the genre. Dawson suggests that,

> Biography, by its very definition, is firmly entrenched in traditional Western ideology. In keeping with the expressive realists' texts of early nineteenth-century humanism, it presumes the notion of a fixed reality which pre-exists the subject's writing, and which can, to a greater or lesser degree, be re-presented objectively by the biographer (Dawson 2-3).

The discourse of a biography, then, is an ideologically conditioned construct. The biographer, by adopting an 'expressive-realist' stance, assumes an authoritative position, and 'reflects the reality of experience as it is perceived by one (especially gifted) individual, who *expresses* it in a discourse which enables other individuals to recognise it as true' (Belsey 7). But more accurately, the subject is *re-constructed* because,

> post-structuralism and structuralism attempt to reverse the empiricist-idealist limitations placed on the process of narration by showing how the narrative constitutes the subject's act of self-construction, through discourse, which is never authentic, original, or referential but always ideological...[M]eaning arises from the process of the construction of the narrative, for there can be no external reality to which the text can refer. 'There is no outside-the-text,' writes Jacques Derrida in his discussion of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions*. 'What Rousseau has said...cannot be separated from the system of his own writing' [*Acts* 104]. The subject-position/s presented in the text constitute(s) the subject's self, but at the moment of production it is always already in the past, even as it is recorded. The subject is therefore never fixed or unified, but always in the process of becoming (Dawson 10).

Noel is an old man who is looking back into his past, ostensibly to illuminate the subject's life for Kate's biography. But Noel reveals appreciably more about himself than about Kitty. In reconstructing his sister's life, he reinforces his own 'subject-position'. In the light of modern literary theory, nothing is less surprising:

> [through] the act of creating fiction out of fact...giv[ing] unprocessed historical record a plot structure...the written text (the biography) becomes not only the site of production of the biographical subject [i.e. Kitty] from the biographers [i.e. Noel's] point of view, but also the site of production of the biographer's own identity. Thus the biographical subject becomes merely the content of the biography, the biographer's object in opposition to which he creates his own subect-position (Dawson 11-12).

At one point in Noel's narrative, he suffers the illusion that Kate really wants to write *his* life story. She has finished her PEP project at the Lomax institute and has written to Noel asking his help, but he does not know that it is to ask for his assistance in compiling a biography about Kitty. Initially he thinks she is after sponsorship, then he assumes she wants him as the subject for her intended biography. These reactions to her letter suggests he is full of his own self-importance, he says,

> I know what her project is, I've been waiting for someone to dream it up – my biography. The answer's no. Why should I give myself away to some Tom Dick or Kate who thinks my life is simply a career? If there's something to say about me I'll say it myself. I'll tell my own lies and my own truth (p.33).

It is Noel who sees his life as only a career (*P* 3), and he fears that other people will view it similarly. The truth is, of course, his career *has* dominated and dictated the terms of his life and has made him the person he is. There is a large part of himself that conceives of his life as 'simply a career' and this sits uncomfortably with him at the time he uttered the above statement.
In Gee's earlier novel, *Sole Survivor* (1983), the narrator and journalist Raymond Sole experiences difficulty in fitting the pieces of Michael Joseph Savage's life together. More systematically than

Noel, Raymond is engaged in writing a biography, the 'manuscript' of which has been sitting 'in the drawer of [his] writing desk,' untouched for seven years:

> [He] spread[s] it on the carpet... Now I have Savage on the floor, all his parts. "St Michael, the brewer's pimp from Sydney." All I had to do was put him together. I shifted them about like a jigsaw puzzle. Gaps showed up but that didn't worry me. "Now then. Now then." Mickey – Joe – Savage belonged to me (*SS* 188).

Raymond is unable to fill these gaps, and there is every indication that he will never be able to do so. The separate parts of Savage's life will not fuse into a meaningful whole. Raymond has the facts about Savage's *public life,* but little or nothing of his *private life.* They are there, the coherent whole exists, but there are moral issues to consider, and as Gee says, 'the story of my life makes no sense without those areas, those relationships' (Brett 95).

Both *Prowlers* and *Going West* explore the complexities of constructing a Biography – how to establish, and how to convey to the postulated reader, the truth about someone's life – and both narrators assert firmly their claims to be the best qualified in achieving these aims. However, the methods, and more importantly, the motives, adopted by each narrator, renders the genre erroneous. Noel acknowledges the constant deferment of truth in the following passage:

> I'll make a retreat – where to? The Second Law of Thermodynamics, a thing to be sure of. I'm ready to surrender my bit of heat and help the Universe run along or down. Down doesn't scare me. Entropy may lead anywhere (*P* 230).

He 'ends the novel less in possession of his past than in an acceptance of entropy (Monkman 10).

I have already noted in chapter one (iii), Manhire's observation that 'the element that is conspicuously missing from [Gee's] children's writing is the serious exploration of character' (Manhire 11). This chapter also explores how and why Gee focuses so intensely on character development in his novels for adult readers, particularly within the context of biography. By that I mean to suggest that Gee deliberately paints a comprehensive picture of the two narrators in *Prowlers* and *Going West* in order to expose their fallibility. Both Noel Papps, in *Prowlers*, and

Jack Skeat, in *Going West*, assert their authority to know the subjects of their biographies better than anyone else, but, as we will see, the narratives reveal that their ulterior motives, and hidden, or subconscious agendas, suggest otherwise.

Noel is assisting Kate by writing into his notebooks any significant information he can remember about Kitty's life, then passing them on to her. She then reads his narrative and decides what she will include or exclude in her own biographical narrative. 'Honan sees the main practical problem in biography as the process of "selection--or exclusion--in connection with organisation" [Honan 640], and Vandiver defines the biographer's sternest task as the selection, arrangement and organisation of "the mass of data" from which he must "conjure life from leavings" [Vandiver 61]' (Dawson 15). Kate also interviews other people that knew Kitty, and they offer their versions of Kitty. She also has her own memories of Kitty. Other sources include: Kitty on audio tape, editorials, letters written by and letters written to Kitty, and newspaper cuttings – Kitty was a very active local Labour politician with a high public profile. It is from these 'leavings' that the subject's life is to be reconstructed. The reader is never actually presented with Kate's narrative. References to her work on it drop away so we do not know whether or not she persists with it.

Naturally, because *Prowlers* is presented by Noel, in the first person, everything is told from his perspective. Ostensibly *Prowlers* sets out to be about Kitty. However, the narrative focuses on Noel's life. This raises the issue of *motive*. Can a biographer write *objectively* about someone else's life? Kate is *re-constructing* Kitty's life, and does not know enough about her to present an objective viewpoint. She must rely primarily on secondary source materials with which to construct her narrative. Apart from a few anecdotes that Kate provides about her personal experiences of Kitty, plus an audio recording of an interview she did with Kitty when Kate was at high school, the reader is presented only with Noel's account of the people and events that influenced his sister's life. Like Kate, Noel has a hidden agenda that is liable to distort the truth about Kitty's life.

To reiterate, both Noel and Jack claim to be the best qualified to know their subjects: 'I'm in a better position than most to say what he [Rex] invented and what connects with his experience,' says Jack (*GW* 6). Also, Noel says of Phil,

> He knows nothing about Kitty but pretends to know the lot....all he remembers are the things she said and did [which of course, is no different than for Noel]. He remembers other things she didn't do. [and Noel concedes] I suppose I should give him the licence I give myself. Kate has accused me of inventing most of the stuff in my notebooks. You can't remember that, exactly what you said, and they, and she, you're making it up. I defend myself by saying it all seems right to me, and quote Tup Ogier at her – 'When we don't know the facts we're entitled to invent' – but it *does* seem right, I believe it; and I've no doubt Phil believes the things he remembers. Like, 'Kitty was the first girl I ever kissed.' He never kissed her.
>
> I know that because Melva Dyer and June Truelove put it round the school – Flea-bag Phil under the bridge with Kitty Papps – and Kitty told me it was a lie (*P* 47).

We can deduce from this passage, early on in the narrative, that Noel has a long way to go before he can accept that the 'truth' is a matter of perspective and personal motive. Noel and Jack tend to dismiss other people's assertions which are at odds with their own accounts. The reader will find himself getting at least a little irritated by this, because it is this sort of arrogance that can sometimes hide, or distort, the truth about the subject's life. Is Gee again trying to tell us something here? I suggest he is. Essentially, what the novels are expressing in this respect, as the Plumb trilogy does, is the significance of *point of view*. Just as with the essence of 'the thing itself' being transformed by the mind, that is, by human perception, through the medium of language, so it is with the truth about someone else's life. The process of comprehending it is primarily subjective, and, as we will see, external phenomena are ever changing and cannot be fixed or unified within the language system, i.e. even at the moment of perception they are being relegated, or reduced, to the past tense.

Not unlike Noel Papps, the meticulous empiricist, who must account for everything by weight and mass, Jack Skeat is a retired archivist and likewise attends meticulously to detail. The omniscient voice informs us that Jack exudes 'moral compulsion. [He] explores, backwards, inwardly, and will describe exactly what he finds.' The reader is informed, that in his task to discover the truth about Rex's drowning, and other significant matters, Jack

> will choose to go up or down and left or right. He's not going to breathe rarefied air or advance in caves where he has to wriggle and slide. [Like Noel] he's not afraid of guessing or invention and will probably attempt some of each – [unlike Noel though he] is not afraid of ugly things he'll come on in that way – but he wants to avoid cleverness, which is a way of holding at a distance [as we saw with Kingsley Pratt]. Jack wants to see close, Jack wants the truth. He would like it to be significant truth.
>
> Already he discovers that pomposity is his vice (pp.16-17).

Jack Skeat does not instil confidence in the reader. He is an unreliable narrator in the true sense of the term. I suggest that Gee presents him in that way to illustrate his fallibility, that is, as a warning sign for the reader, to indicate that all biographical discourse is potentially spurious. As I have said, Gee is aware that his own biography will eventually be written, and that there is a risk that the account of his life will not be accurate. There has already been a good deal of raking around in his private life by the critics and the 'thesis boys' (*GW* 215). The readers that are most likely to read his biography are those who read his novels, so what better way to prepare those readers as sceptics, than through his stories? Gee is in effect protecting his own interests in advance.

A distinction needs to be made at this point between biographers who know their subjects personally, as with Gee's narrators, and those who do not. The latter are far more likely to present more impartial accounts of their subjects' lives. Dawson's thesis compares eight biographies of Olive Schreiner's life. One of them had been written by her husband, Samuel C Cronwright. He was criticised for writing a biography of his wife so soon after her death – three years after.

Dawson says that 'if he had not, some unauthorised life "necessarily incomplete and almost certainly incorrect" would appear' (Dawson 27). Dawson points out a number of reasons why Samuel was reluctant to undertake the task of writing his wife's biography, namely, Olive 'overshadowed his own achievements... he made many sacrifices on account of her unconventional life-style.' Olive's friend Havelock Ellis had refused to write it, and Dawson suggests that Samuel 'felt compelled to proceed with the task himself, but a sense of fear of being judged adversely for writing it prevails throughout the biography' (Dawson 28). Although Samuel's text

> never attempts to undermine the status his wife had achieved in the literary and political arenas, nor does he present her as anything other than a woman of great genius ... the sub-text suggests that [his] biography constitutes his attempt at re-establishing his role as an autonomous individual in opposition to the possibility that his peers viewed him as dominated and disempowered. In order to re-empower himself [he] appropriates the role of 'knowing' author, thus allowing himself to present his subject accurately, while at the same time defining himself as independent of her (Dawson 28).

Noel, to some degree, and most certainly Jack, feel inferior to their subjects. They reveal a number of reasons for wishing to 're-empower' themselves in relation to their subjects, and they demonstrate this overtly in their narratives. Noel asserts his superiority over Phil Dockery - who is one of his subjects - throughout the 'school pageant,' referring to him as 'the Port Rat', 'barefoot boy', 'flea-bag Phil in his ragged pants' (*P* 6). Young Noel manipulates Mrs Beatie into choosing him rather than Phil for the part of 'the Hun' in the pageant, and remembers thinking, 'she recognised me; saw the centre of strength that would hold up the shaky structure she assembled, and was left with Phil Dockery as New Zealand' (p.7). Noel regularly increases his sense of himself at Phil's expense, like emphasizing Tup's choice of Noel above Phil to tutor privately. When Noel can no longer face the competition of young Phil living with him and his parents, Noel comments to his father, 'but when I go to college I think I'll need a desk where his [Phil's] bed is.' Dad agrees and says, 'Ah yes. Well I suppose it'll be nice not to wipe the lavatory seat all the time. Now don't you say I said that, Noel. I wouldn't want to hurt him for the world.' To which, Noel remembers his response to himself was, 'How I laughed inside. How roosters crowed in me – doodle doo! I stood on tip-toes and beat my wings' (p.50). When Kate tells Noel that she is planning to write Kitty's biography rather than his, he says to her, 'I'm not sure she'd want you doing that... [and confesses

to the reader] There's a measured response. There's a comment screwed down like a lid on jealousy and rage. How much did she [Kate] guess of it? How much, Kate? My burst of rage that you should choose Kitty ahead of me?' (p.43). Kate's rejection of him as her subject is naturally going to distort his view of Kitty to some degree. He makes several attempts to marginalise her greatness.

At the beginning of his narrative in *Going West*, Jack says of Rex, 'Born 1930, died 1988. Those years contain him, and contain much of me. [And then he asks himself] Is that why I take on this task? I want to write my own life, not his? I'm tired of being a satellite, author of one bad book? I want my magnitude observed?' (*GW* 1). There is motive enough there to reduce Rex to the status of object in relation to Jack as subject, and he can be caught red-handed achieving that end more than just once, albeit mainly in the 'sub-text.' The third - omniscient - voice helps to portray him more honestly than he presents himself. Jack admits that 'I did not often do better than Rex' (*GW* 67). Commenting on Rex going 'to university with a credit pass in Scholarship [Jack adds,] I had one too' (*GW* 68), grabbing another opportunity to reinforce his 'subject position' in relation to Rex. These and other similar attempts to marginalise Rex's fame reinforce the view that Jack cannot be relied on to present an authentic account of Rex's life. Jack remembers feeling a sense of falling short with his own poetry relative to Rex's. Complimenting Jack on his 'two best poems' Rex said it was a 'pity [Jack] had spelled out the meaning at the end...description was meaning, why couldn't I see that?' (*GW* 68), which generated for Jack, a sense of inadequacy. Again, the intent to marginalise Rex is conveyed overtly in the following passage from *Going West*:

> He [Rex] wrote from the age of sixteen. Before that he could hardly spell his name. But I must avoid smartness. There are those who belittle Rex. I'm not one of them. Before the age of sixteen he showed no real ability with language (p.68).

Jack just cannot help himself. He seldom misses an opportunity to inflate his own ego at somebody else's expense.

The fusion of fact and fiction

The term 'emplotment,' coined by Hayden White in his *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, means 'the act of creating fiction out of fact' (White 5). The 'unprocessed historical record' must be made 'more comprehensible to [the historian's] particular audience by providing his chronicle with a plot structure [and] arranging the factual events into a temporal structure [that is], into a beginning, middle, and end, thus uniting an accumulation of discrete facts into a new unity, his story' (Dawson 12). The following passage explains the fictional nature of the historical 'chronicle.' It blurs the distinction between the 'chronicle' and biographical discourse:

> Traditionally the historian, unlike the writer of fiction, is not believed to invent his narrative. He is seen as 'finding,' 'identifying,' or 'uncovering' the facts, a conception, according to White, that 'obscures the extent to which "invention" also plays a part in the historian's operation' [White 6-7]. In keeping with this view regarding the fictional aspects of historical writing, Nadel asks, 'can the collection and ordering of data in a person's life ever give us complete knowledge of the truth, or must one recognise the fundamental inability of ever knowing the past exactly and therefore accept its fictions?' (*Fiction, Fact and Form* 209). According to White's and Nadel's definitions there can be no accurate, objective record of the historical facts. The linguistic representation of facts invariably involves the narrative acts of emplotment and invention. History – and by implication biography – becomes no more and no less than a product of fiction, indeed, the very term 'biography' becomes suspect. Thus Nadel states: 'Every biography is in one sense a failure because it cannot duplicate the life of its subject nor recreate its character on the page' [p.102]. Biography can only remain intact as a discrete genre in post-Saussurean, post-Freudian society because the reader and the biographer alike align themselves to and are produced by traditional ideology, 'The biographer recognises, in all honesty, that he is rather cautious, even on occasion timid: he is by nature conservative,' claims Brian Matthews ['Writers' Week Panel. Biography,' *Southern Review* 22.1 (1989): 29.] If biographers want their product to be a successful commodity, if they apply the very term 'biography' to their work, they need to conform to the reader's expectations (Dawson 12-13).

A biography, as with any narrative text, requires a reader to bring it into existence. I suggest that biographers, and writers of *memoirs*, which include the fictional figures of Noel Papps and Jack Skeat, construct their text - in the form of a fictional plot - for the same reason that readers read them, that being to gratify their 'desire to resolve [their] own sense of fragmentation through the unity or story of the lives of others – and implicitly [their] own. The fictive power of "story" provides [the reader and the composer of that story] with a coherent vision of life' (Nadel 9).

Noel Papps eventually resolves his sense of fragmentation in a post-modern world by attaining a sense of wholeness through the re-construction of his own life and the lives of others in his narrative. Noel creates an awareness that we are all in the process of *becoming* and that truth and meaning are constantly deferred, a view that is supported by the proposed burning of his notebooks, his 'sterile slides' (*P* 3). In the following passage, towards the end of his narrative, Jack resolves his moral dilemma concerning the truth about Rex's death, and his own personal sense of guilt, that of being an accessory to the manslaughter of Sidgy:

> I'm going to make copies [of Rex's poems] for John Dobbie. He'll have a problem. He's going to have to decide between Alice and the truth. I'll give him whatever help I can. But no Tod (and no Sidgy). Those parts of the truth he cannot have. I'll leave them in my notebooks, which will have an embargo of – fifty years? Someone else can finish Rex's life, if there is any interest in him left.
>
> [He will let Harry know the *whole* truth]: She [Harry] is part of me and I of her; and Rex of us both.
>
> I've asked Harry to read my notebooks too, when I get them back from Margot... I hope I'm not making a mistake. But I feel there's a cure in what I've written and I want Harry to know about my health. Now and then fold into each other like the fingers of two hands.
>
> I don't sneeze so much any more. I don't get a rash on my chest and my short-term memory is holding on. Perhaps I won't need to go to [Mt] Duppa this decade [where Jack plans to consume his terminal cocktail]. Last night, watching a foolish thing on television, I saw a man gagged and locked in a cupboard and I didn't have to get up and leave the room.

> ...I'm out of my hole under the stairs and do my own work at a desk in the sitting-room. I watch liners and container ships going in and out. Past Rangitoto is the Coromandel. The little yachts stand upright on the sea.
>
> I've let my eye look inside and back. It's good to be able now to turn another way (*GW* 278-9).

By looking back and examining his past, Jack has also looked within himself and now has a holistic view of himself, and desires to 'turn [and look] another way.' He wants to look out, to what he recognises as the external world, rather than looking within himself. He knows the limitations imposed on a quest for the truth, and now knows that there are many truths, as with Noel's conclusion, 'Let the whole thing stand, all these pages. Let it stand as an approximation' (*P* 200). At this conclusive point in the narrative Jack is contented with what he has achieved. He is enjoying better health, an improvement he attributes to writing his memoirs, and having resolved, for himself, unresolved issues from his past. He is enjoying the moment, the *now*.

Jack pursued the role of poet because of his moral compulsion to get things right, and not necessarily because he had a flair or inclination. His compulsion to provide 'the big generalisation,' that Rex humours him with (*GW* 23), can be seen as a weakness. Interestingly enough, his father, Walter's philosophy of life is not dissimilar to George Plumb's. In the following passage, Jack remembers his father:

> My father presents himself, a rare event. If I do not welcome him he may never come back. Diffidence was his mode of conduct...He was clever in his marriage. He offered all their shared ground to my mother. That way he managed to survive – that way he flourished, modestly, in corners she could not be bothered to occupy. He kept many secrets. He kept his cleverness secret, and he kept secret what he loved. I write of him in this formal way because he loved order, formality, he put bounds on nature by holding it in a web of limited responses. Nothing broke in on my father, nothing roared in his ear or flashed cruelly in his eye.

He had been religious in his youth, with some degree of warmth, but when I knew him well enough to talk to, in my mid-teens, two or three years before his death, he had shed all purely Christian belief. The Church was important in two ways – as an institution preserving forms and as custodian of a morality.

Talking to my father was not easy and it did not happen frequently. I had to knock carefully at the door, not too long, not too long, but firmly enough to let him know the person outside was his son. He would take fright at a need too plainly expressed. But it was part of his code that a father should talk with his son and advise him of his duties, and of satisfactions he might take. Dad warmed up after a cool beginning. He sometimes even called me Johnnyboy.

'Measure your wants, Johnnyboy. Never go after anything in an ungentlemanly way.'

That was a precept. He lit his pipe for precepts and puffed for punctuation and emphasis. His dry lips made little popping sounds.

'Johnny, I'll say this' – pop – 'the man who chooses the easy way is setting off' – pop – 'in the wrong direction.'

I listened earnestly and thought him wise. Now and then a loop of saliva was dragged between the pipe stem and his mouth and I averted my eyes while he dealt with it. Dry lips, ideal for precept-making; but inside he was like the rest of us, moist, impure. It troubled me – and I was troubled too when he spoke of his Englishness. I thought him boastful, silly, self-satisfied. The English had been great, perhaps still were, but the war just won was ours just as much as England's. Dad spoke of 'the yeoman virtues', 'the bulldog breed', 'hearts of oak', and was speaking of himself. He was drunk on his Englishness and to me, a puritan, he became unclean...' There's something not quite right about a pun,' my father would say. He did not like anything that broke out of bounds. Metaphors. Apostrophes. Statements of intention. Disliked storms. Hated sunsets when the sky went bloody. Blushes, belches, farts, made him blush. Ejacculations, I have no doubt, became distasteful to him. But Dad I'm not here to take the mickey. I think I had some luck in having you.

> A moral sense need not be confining. I have travelled many places in mine and had strange adventures on the way. Dad would not have liked some of them. He would have been appalled to find me holding Loomis in the palms of my hand. But by that time he was dead. And I had travelled crookedly – discovered language, dabbled in sex, begun my lifelong friendship with Rex Petley. I had broken into fragments and started on my lives. But I retained my moral sense, and I keep it in my baggage still. It has given me huge amounts of trouble. Without it I would scarcely exist (*GW* 29-31).

It is not difficult, after reading the above account, to see that while perpetuating some of his father's moral principles, Jack nevertheless developed his own particular and significant brand of moralising. Ironically, Jack's moralism had little to do with the inner life and experiences of his father: Jack says,

> Morality does not crumble, it's shown to be horribly imperfect, that is all. Like our other attributes it wears a human face.
>
> I can let Dad go now. He knocked and I let him in and we've reached agreement on my inheritance: his lesson, his death. Though one is misshapen and the other mysterious, they have become a part of me. They don't, of course, make me what I am, a multitude of other things comes into the sum. But they are – what? – they're formative.
>
> Thank you for your lesson, Dad. Thank you for your death (*GW* 33).

One of his father's secrets was that he preferred male sexual company to that of female. Every Friday afternoon he would visit his friend George. Only he and George knew of this clandestine meeting. Every Friday, and only on a Friday, instead of waiting for his train to stop at Loomis Railway Station before dismounting, he would carefully calculate a dismount from the moving carriage as it pulled into the station, Jack comments,

> Until an October evening in 1947. Our local constable stood at the door with [Walter's] Gladstone bag held on his chest...We learned that Dad had fallen getting off the train and struck his head on a trolley and had, it seemed, died instantly...Death without meaning was out of order (*GW* 32).

When Jack and his mother were told of Walter's Friday ritual of dismounting a moving train, 'it made a fracture almost as great as his death in [their] ordered lives' (*GW* 32).

With regard to his own poetry, Jack says he

> never got beyond the 'need to discover truth', which was 'the moral role of poetry'. I had no aesthetic and nor had Rex. He would not even talk about practice. I remember him saying that he liked nouns – and his are solid, undressed, plain (leaden at times). I believed in solidity too but I fell prey to adjectives (they still won't let me go) and I thought myself mature and stern when I cut them down to one. But stone was stone for Rex and clay was clay, and that's the way it remained all his writing life. To me he seemed to have no flair. 'Load every rift,' I said. But his poems made a census of the streets he found himself in: official, neat, local, contemporary.
>
> Mine, by contrast...
>
> 'Good stuff, Jack. I like the way you colour it all up. And then, bang, the big generalisation. Good stuff.'
>
> I waited for him to go on, but Rex had lied as far as he was able.
>
> 'Hey, they'll have to shift that 'ess' to the back of your name.'
>
> The joke failed to match the event. He held my lovely first work in his hands. Now what he must say was a serious 'John Skeat'.
>
> 'You beat me you buggar. You're the one who's laid the bloody egg.'
>
> That was better. That diverted me. Until I thought about it later on it was enough. Then I understood that he'd said nothing. All he had done was understand me. Rex had changed the points and sent me off on another line (*GW* 23).

Perhaps Jack's father, Walter Skeat – who also had a few skeletons in the cupboard, 'he kept many secrets' (*GW* 30) – is largely responsible for that. Jack remembers:

> Diffidence was his [Walter's] mode of conduct. He had a little smile, a drawing in of his mouth at the corners, that qualified each remark he made. Remember Walter Skeat is insignificant, it said. His success as a solicitor owed something to it. He gave sound

> advice but seemed to allow his clients to find it for themselves. They came from his office glowing with their own cleverness. My father was the clever one though (*GW* 29).

The voice of the omniscient narrator initially presents Jack as a character that appears to lack self-confidence, and then asserts that,

> Jack is not the self-doubting person this account begins to make him seem. He has a strong sense of his own worth and a good many victories, both private and professional, to his credit. If he plays them over, in detail, it's for pleasure, not to reassure himself. But he does know he might have done better and when he's tired is inclined to berate himself. Chances lost cause him aches not unlike those in his joints (*GW* 10-11).

Here is one incident that appears to contradict this view. When Merv Soper printed Jack's one and only book of poems, *First Fruits*, consisting 'of eighteen pages...in 1949, with crooked print and a stapled cover and an apple, ill-drawn, on the front' (*GW* 23). Merv told Jack that his

> book was in quite a few shops on sale or return, but New Zealand poetry didn't sell and [he] mustn't expect...In that moment [says Jack] I knew I was not a poet. It came like a vision: my proper size. Was it Merv – diffident, provincial, amateur – turning as I turned and holding a mirror up to me? I said to myself, I can't write. The knowledge was not fixed from outside but was a new part opened and at once occupied (*GW* 26).

Jack manages to turn this potentially devastating event around and embraces it with a sense of personal relief :

> I felt a weight lift from me and my body levitate and I wanted to cry out with relief at being free. I need never suffer again the disappointment of not finding the words that would take me to the place where I wanted to be. Falling short had already set a frown on my face and would have sent me through life with a blurred eye and a limp tongue. Now I was free from the pointless struggle. My lightness floated me across the lawns. I smelled the mown grass, I saw the kissing couples, I slid with the cool fish among the lily stems – and I did not have to write a poem. It was like being told a lump is benign (*GW* 26).

Jack had reached the realisation that in order to write good poetry one needs to be blessed with an innate inclination to do so. The poetry he had written stemmed from a personal moral compulsion to do so. It had been a struggle, and now he was relieved that he no longer had to continue with what he considered to be a chore. He had realised that the process of writing good poetry was not his forte. This is not to say that Jack did not value poetry, he did, but he discovered that he 'had rid himself of something [he] had no need of. I won't say it didn't hurt', he admits, 'I valued poetry. I wanted to feel the need – but felt instead the lightness of looking into a future more widely open than it had been' (*GW* 27). He could now channel his energies in another direction, and leave the composition of good poetry to Rex.

The objective voice of the narrative presents a useful and impartial examination of Jack, and highlights further warning signs that cannot be ignored:

> He suffers from allergic rhinitis. Attacks are brought on by changes in temperature and, possibly house dust, and possibly apples...he [stays] out of the way when his wife shakes the mats. He does his share of the housework...but he won't do anything that raises dust...(*GW* 12).

The last statement can be taken metaphorically, meaning that he will not agitate the past if it is likely to create too many waves, and therefore he will dress up the facts to disguise certain truths and evade the darker aspects of his past. As we discovered in *Prowlers*, 'when we don't know the facts we're entitled to invent' (*P* 8).

Jack and his wife, Harry, have been married for more than twenty years, yet Jack still wonders:

> Is he ever going to know her? She becomes familiar, then recedes, and turns half round and there's a new aspect he hasn't seen. How does she do that? She has turned so many times nothing should be unfamiliar now. How does she remake, how does she new-feature, the part that's turned away from him before she, twisting unexpectedly, lets him see?

> I love my wife, he thinks, as he drives to North Head, but the emotion is not grounded in any certainty of who she is.
>
> Harry can be dangerous when shifting, momentum can suddenly die and she'll swing back, remove herself entirely from his knowledge. He points at the sky, the clouds, Rangitoto darkening, to prevent it (*GW* 20-22).

If Jack cannot totally 'know' Harry, whom he has lived with, and shared the most intimate of moments with, how can he expect to write an authentic account of Rex's life? Evidently he cannot, and the example of the abyss that exists at times between Jack and Harry reinforces this view. It seems the author has incorporated it into the narrative for that very purpose. The final account of Rex's life, therefore, can only ever be 'an approximation.'

Going West begins with the heading, 'Jack Skeat's Notebook: 1,' and presents *facts* about himself and Rex: 'He was born at New Lynn in 1930...and died in 1988, out past Tiri in the Hauraki Gulf. He was the author of nine books of poetry and a small amount of fugitive and occasional verse. He had two wives, two daughters and two sons; but his first wife (who is mistaken) told me once, "He never married" ' (p.1). Then he starts again: 'Born 1930, died 1988. Those years contain him, and contain much of me...Jack and Rex made a binary; and if I was a dark star, well, I had more weight.' He then makes a third attempt: 'Notes, comparisons: We were both born in 1930, he in New Lynn by the brickworks and I in rural parts, west and north: a small town in the orchards. My father was a solicitor with a good country practice and my mother...' (*GW* 1). He continues to present more information about his own life, thus reinforcing his own 'subject-position' and therefore relegating Rex to the status of *object* rather than *subject*. Most of the remainder of chapter one describes 'three ways', as in three modes of public transport one can take from Loomis - a pseudonym for Henderson, where Gee spent most of his childhood - to Auckland. Each mode, either 'ABC buses...[or] train' (*GW* 3), or, 'bus [partway, then] tram' (*GW* 4) offers a slightly different perspective of the same terrain, thereby reinforcing the importance of requiring more than a single perspective to achieve a fully comprehensive understanding of external phenomena. One's impression of towns and 'cemetery' and countryside, etc., will vary according to the mode of public transport one chooses.

Summing up the three alternative routes, Jack says, 'The bus had the cumulative magic of the known, the train odd bits of drama and a back view of things' (*GW* 4). The first route he describes is that used by 'the green and yellow ABC buses. It takes its passengers 'straining up the white concrete road to the edge of town – where farms opened out, with a long view over the harbour, past Pt. Chevalier and the sugarworks, to Rangitoto pale and uneasy in the distance... The road ran down Waikumete Hill, with acres of grey gravestones and white crosses on the right...' (*GW* 3). The second way 'by train,' offers a limited view of the cemetery: 'a grey fringe of cemetery overlapping the hill' (*GW* 3). Going by train means that one misses the opportunity of perceiving the 'twin slopes' of Waikumete Hill as 'open[ing] out like thighs, with a little hump there, pubic mount,' as he calls it. The home for the *mentally challenged* is referred to as, 'the asylum,' where 'you might see the loonies walking in the grounds' (*GW* 3), if you travel by bus, and as the 'Crazy House' (GW 5), if you go by tram. You're seeing or not seeing the land marks depending on which form of public transport is used, illustrating how, by chance, one's impressions are formed. Whether you see the 'twin hills,' as just hills, or, as 'opened out like thighs,' is a matter of individual perception, and therefore is purely subjective. Jack remembers: 'The third way was the one I liked best. (The) tram... But always I felt danger: those shining grooves and bacon-slicer wheels. Peril is a better word' (*GW* 4).

The following passage demonstrates how Gee very skilfully chooses the words that will best describe the experience. There is a sense of excitement, and nostalgia conveyed by this passage, even if the reader has never experienced riding in a tram. The reader doesn't question the authenticity of this experience; he is consumed by it:

> The motorman released the rope, manoeuvred the whippy pole, set the grooved wheel on the overhead wire. He took his place in the box in front [like a toy lego-man] (the tramcar had two fronts and two backs), woke the lovely throbbing underfoot, eased the lever round, and we were off, grinding up the single track and lurching through the curve on the Y. When the seats filled up you gave yours to a lady and stood on the platform with the road rushing by at the bottom of the steps. You leaned out when the pole broke loose and watched sparks flash and heard them spit as the motorman eased the wheel back on to the wire. High speed along the flat into Mt. Albert, with a grinding and a hissing from the wheels and a swaying in the car that was barely in control... along Karangahape Road,

> and then the stomach-lurching right-angle turn and the dive down Queen Street, past the town hall and the Crazy House [juxtaposed for effect!] and the Civic, to John Courts and Smith and Caughey and Milne and Choyce [these names, which many older Auckland readers can relate to, will connect them to the real world, blurring the distinction between Gee's fictive world and the real world, and creates the illusion that Jack's story, and on another level, Gee's story are for real]. Off at the zone there and through the traffic, the city's heart. That was why I liked the trams, they set you down in the middle of things (*GW* 4-5).

To give Rex more life and presence for the reader, Jack cunningly creates a link between this final scene and Rex's poetry in order to reinforce his knowledge of Rex. He also discredits John Dobbie as Rex's 'official biographer.' This astute and cunning strategy reinforces his own subject-position and status as a reliable source for telling Rex's story more accurately:

> And while I remember the zones, those narrow concrete islands in the street, Rex used them in his poem 'Passing Through' and some readers have failed to understand zone as an actual thing. It's the safe place between the slicing wheels and the butting cars, but not a place one can stand about in. By the time he has finished with it, of course, it comes to mean any number of things (*GW* 5).

Jack makes other attempts to discredit John Dobbie: 'the armada on the creek [and] the woman on the bridge, one day perhaps I'll point out those, but it's of no importance that the chestnut tree in the school grounds overhung the dental clinic not the boy's lavatory or that Mr Warren not Miss Hoyle was our teacher in standard four' (*GW* 52). It may be 'of no importance', but there are enough discrepancies here to discredit.

Jack says that he himself, is 'not going to do [Rex's] childhood' (*GW* 6), but he inevitably does. Just as Noel Papps gets carried away with his narrative and embellishes, so does Jack. They both ignore their intentions to adhere to 'chronology' as a guiding principle. Their narratives take on a life of their own, and as with Gee, when he writes his novels, the difficulty is 'for the writer to stay in control.' 'All I'll do is make a chronology' says Jack,

> a catalogue. The dates, the places, the people, the circumstances. And nothing circumstantial as evidence. No evidence, in fact. I won't even quote verse, although I'm

> in a better position than most to say what he invented and what connects with his experience. I can guess too, better than Elfin John, at all the things that lie between. But I won't do that. Rex hated biographical raking around in his lines. I'll say what I know, that's all, and let him speak for himself (*GW* 6).

He adheres to none of these guidelines, and continues, throughout the narrative, to invent and embellish, which, for an archivist, is particularly irresponsible. However, the nature of the discourse with which he is engaged, just as with Noel, seems to demand this kind of freedom and flexibility.

I want to now examine the topic of authorial intrusion. The following passage explains some of the conflicting viewpoints regarding the degree to which the biographer should reveal his presence in a biographical narrative:

> while the essential truth is seen as residing in the interpretation of an accumulation of facts, biographers differ in their attitudes towards the construction of their narratives. Some see the most successful biography as the largest possible accumulation of facts with the least possible subjective commentary by the biographer. Based on empiricism, this view leads to the conclusion that the biographer must at all costs remain hidden from the reader's view: 'the biographer...must keep his own voice out of the story so that the subject and his times can live again,' states Oates (125), while Kendal claims: 'The highest biographical art is the concealment of the biographer' (38)...For other life-writers the essential truth lies in the biographer's mind, reason or thought. By omitting the inessential and subjectively interpreting the essential, the biographer is believed to achieve the most accurate picture of his subject in a text which is concise, unified, and which follows the conventions of fiction [and Dawson quotes Honan's viewpoint regarding this issue:] ':...a sense of the author's presence in the biographical narrative is needed if we are to convey feelings accurately...I must present a "story," a coherent and clear narrative line, and on this linear string I can attach facts that are known about my author for given times in his life' [Honan] (Dawson 7-8).

Dawson points out that this sort of 'paraphrasing' approach, such as has been used by

> Meintjes... without acknowledgements...[i.e.] privileging the (in traditional terms) fictional rather than the factual aspects of biography...applying a cause/effect model typical of

> realist narratives [can be tantamount to] inventing the facts,' which in fact, he [Meintjes] has been criticised as doing (Dawson 8).

'The essential truth' that Dawson refers to will only be generated from 'the biographer's mind' if the biographer has fully internalised the essence of the biographee's life and times, or has known the biographee personally, such as with Noel knowing Kitty, and Jack knowing Rex.

What must be clarified, at this point, is that neither Noel nor Jack is, strictly speaking, writing an official biography. Noel is assisting with the construction of a biography, while Jack is writing his own memoirs. Nevertheless, all three processes are similar. Both *Prowlers* and *Going West* deal with the discrepancies that could arise when one is involved in this process, and to what degree, if any, those discrepancies may distort the overall *truth* about their subjects.

Both novels demonstrate the development of the individual self, as in the *growth/increase* of the writer as a result of experiencing the process of looking back and re-evaluating the past in relation to the present. Increases in self-knowledge and self-awareness are achieved. Absolute truths remain elusive to the point of being unattainable, according to the way Gee presents them in these narratives: 'Truth, as a weapon, will change shape' (*GW* 40). The processes of searching for the truth, however, are important; that is, important for the individual self. This is demonstrated by the importance that both narrators - Noel and Jack – accord to tidying up loose ends in significant episodes in a person's life, as with Noel's resolutions concerning the discrepancies in Kitty's, Phil's, and Irene's lives, and again with Jack's resolutions concerning the mysteries surrounding his father's uncharacteristic behaviour and the apparent meaningless of his untimely death.

In both novels, 'biographical raking around' uncovers some unpleasant truths that create challenging dilemmas for the narrator. There is Jack's discovery that his highly moralistic father had a secret lover of the same gender, and Noel's discovery that his sister may have been partly responsible for her husband's death. *Biographers* are also likely to find out some home truths about themselves that might not fit very comfortably.

Dawson takes her inquiry beyond humanist-realist parameters to include Freudian psychoanalysis , that is,

> by defining consciousness as a process of textualization... [thereby destroying] the humanist notion of the individual as the centre of the universe... By constructing narratives from our experiences, we are able to 'catch hold of some crucial idiosyncratic contingencies in our past" in order to "make something worthwhile out of ourselves" thus creating present-selves which we can respect [Rorty] (Dawson.9-10).

The idea of 'creating present-selves which we can respect' appears to be the ultimate aim of Gee's narrators who investigate the past. Plumb's conclusions about his life come to mind: 'I'm glad of the good I've done, and sorry about the bad' (*PI* 271). Like Meg, Raymond, Noel, and Jack, he has accrued a sense of having achieved some 'victories' along the way, as well as conceding some regrets and losses; but all of them achieve *peace of mind* and contentment in their respective denouements. This imperative is demonstrated comprehensively in *Going West* by the examples of Jack, Rex, and Tod, that is, how they shed the guilt they harbour concerning the wrongs that they have done to others in their respective lives. The novel shows that the individuals experiencing guilt of this nature are not solely responsible for their actions, in that they have been driven to causing harm to, or, to damaging others, as a result of dysfunctional attitudes of others towards them. Each must accept a share of the blame and in some way expiate the portions of the wrongs that they are responsible for. The most significant example of this situation is demonstrated by Rex's attempt to exonerate himself from any portion of the blame for the deaths of his nephew's children and their mother. Rex would never allow his nephew, Tod, into the Rex Petley fold. He had kept Tod out. Rex had constantly dismissed and excluded Tod throughout his youth. The clearest example of this is when Jack recalls the Petleys 'at Moa Park having a picnic' (*GW* 185-193). Jack presents Rex as being very protective of his daughter, Fiona, 'Fee' (*GW* 186): ' "She's Alice's [Rex's wife's] proxy," he [Rex] said as she ran about, but I saw how he loved that girl' (*GW* 188), says Jack. The reason why Rex was over-protective of Fiona was perhaps because his own younger sister, Joy, had drowned, 'late spring, 1949' (*GW* 63). Rex, as a young boy, had taken it on himself to love and protect Joy. Another possibility is that Rex does not trust young - especially competitive - boys to act responsibly, especially since it had been a male, Rex's cousin, Bert, who had been largely responsible for Joy's death by drowning.

Rex, Fiona and Jack were about to set off in their canoes when Tod indicated that he too wanted to join in the fun, but Rex scolded Tod, saying,

> 'Clear out, we don't want you.'
>
> 'Are you going down the creek?' [asks Tod].
>
> 'Yep, and you can't come, so don't ask. Get in. Fee' (*GW* 189).

Tod offered to row Jack's canoe for him. Jack agreed. Rex 'had his canoe half in the water, with Fiona in front. He climbed in and pushed off from the bank, and frowned when he looked back and saw Tod in [Jack's canoe].' Rex issues another command at Tod: 'I don't want to hear you open your mouth' (*GW* 190).

With Jack's compliance, Tod was allowed into the Rex Petley fold, albeit only briefly. Much later on in Jack's narrative, after Rex's drowning, when Tod was much older and had confessed to the family of his deliberate drowning of his wife and children, Margot (Rex's widow) explains to Jack that

> All the time we [Rex, Margot and their daughter, Sal] lived out here [Tod] kept on visiting...we'd see him sitting in his car, grinning through the window, waiting for us to ask him in.. He was by himself at first and later on with his wife and kids. Rex didn't like him. I couldn't see why, I thought he was harmless enough. But Rex – he didn't like people coming here... Tod was trying to break in. Get an entrance somehow, get himself a place here, I don't know. And Rex wasn't having any. He'd send him away at first, when he came by himself. Later on it wasn't so easy, with his wife and the two little girls.
>
> ...He seemed to think Rex had secrets. He knew something Tod had to know. I don't know what he thought it was. Maybe it was what you call Petleys, and Rex was inside there and Tod was out. But God, Jack' – feeling at last – 'that was just an imaginary place, wasn't it? I mean a place for his imagination. Everyone else, Lila and the rest, were pleased with Tod. No one else tried to keep him out.'
>
> 'No.' [says Jack]

> 'But he recognised the – magic? – OK, magic, somehow. I mean for Rex. He saw how it gave Rex another life.' [Margot explains that Tod used to turn up with poetry that he had written, she said it was] 'shitty stuff, he [Tod] knew it was shit, but he was telling Rex he knew there was a secret place, and special meanings. Rex wouldn't even read it, I did. I had to tell him [Tod] it was no good.'
>
> 'What did he do?'
>
> 'Just grinned at me. He took it away. The important thing was, he'd signalled Rex. That was what mattered. God, he was like some black little bat with claws that wanted to hang on Rex's shoulder' (*GW* 269-270).

Margot explained to Jack that Tod used to come out 'in a flash sportscar. A Jaguar. But I think he must have burned out. They do that don't they? You have to be a top executive before it [a stock-market crash] happens or they dump you. Tod wasn't making it to the top' (*GW* 270). Tod had most of his money [invested] in 'Lupercal...Then 1987 came...Poof. All gone. And as well as that he'd lost his job. Lila told Rex. We didn't see Tod for a while after that. Not until after his wife and children got drowned' (*GW* 270). In his business, Tod had been trained to 'trim the fat' (*GW* 270). He had lost his wealth and his job, 'everything he had was all gone. He had to start again. He couldn't have them [his wife and two daughters] round his neck...He was trimming fat', comments Margot (*GW* 276).

Jack and Margot believe that Rex, riddled with guilt, went out in his boat to set himself the same task, in fact one could suggest, an even sterner task than Tod had set himself, following the drownings, to find out for himself if the five miles could be swum safely. Likewise, Tod has, in a sense, exonerated himself from his portion of the charge by giving up his materialistic aspirations and working to help support Margot and Sal, at least from his perspective, that is. Rex has selfishly – by not thinking enough of Margot's and Sal's needs - sacrificed himself to exonerate himself from his portion of blame. As Margot says of Rex, 'Sometimes I hate him. What did he think he was trying to do? I needed him. Sal needed him. Why couldn't he see Sal? Why did he have to put himself first?' (*GW* 274). I suggest that Rex submitted himself to his expiatory ordeal because he believed he must accept a portion of the blame, by shutting Tod out for so long, and perhaps also for hitting Sidgy, which had resulted in death, all those years ago

Jack has also been busy tying up the loose ends. I suggest that Jack had himself felt a degree of guilt for being an accessory to Rex's murder of Sidgy. Rex is dead, so Jack feels safe because he is now the only one alive who knows about the murder. Margot is the only one who needs to share the truth with Jack about the 'Sidgy' issue. Jack has relinquished responsibility for the official verdict concerning Rex's boating *accident*, John Dobbie is the one who is 'going to have to decide between Alice (Rex's estranged partner) and the truth' (*GW* 278). He has discovered the truth about his father, which explains his parent's dysfunctional relationship. He now understands why they led completely separate lives and consequently could not function as a *normal* family, such as the Petleys. He also believes he is helping Margot by granting her request to be able to read his notebooks about Rex. Jack felt an 'enormous relief - to know [he] had been writing for [Margot] too, that it wasn't a solitary and wasted and turned in' (*GW* 266). Naturally he is also relieved to believe that he has solved the mystery of Rex's death. Perhaps that is why he rewards himself with moving out from the hole under the stairs and studies in the lounge. His ailments subside, and the return of his short-term memory could also be attributed to the sense of relief that he feels.

In this chapter I have shown how *Prowlers* and *Going West* explore the imperialistic aspects of attempting to compile an authentic account of a person's life, for public consumption. I have also demonstrated the problematic nature of the issues concerning motive and hidden, or, subconscious agendas, particularly with regard to the assumptions made about the spurious nature of biographical discourse, and the equally spurious role of the biographer as the agent for that discourse.

Conclusion

In the same way that Gee's fiction advocates a holistic conception of one's own life - incorporating a comprehensive understanding of one's past – in order to achieve a coherent understanding of the individual self and a firm grounding for personal identity, so this thesis has, in some respects, undergone a similar process, by conducting a comprehensive investigation: Chapter one examined some of the more significant personal experiences and obsessions of the author's own past and examined the patterns of their emergence in his fiction. Chapter two examined how Gee's fiction questions the stability of the processes of language and memory, and the problems associated with the individual's perception of the external world through the language process. Chapter three looked at how Gee's fiction deals with the imperialistic nature of biographical discourse, that is, how accurately can one expect to re-present one's own life and the lives of others through a potentially fallacious medium, certainly within the parameters of post modern criticism.

The main focus of this enquiry has been to explore the various ways that Gee's fiction addresses the ambiguity of the language process, and how his themes constantly allude to a world of uncertainty. I have shown that while Gee's fiction remains 'character centered and story driven,' the sub-text increasingly tends to infer a mood of indeterminacy. I have tried to convey the pattern of this shifting dominant mood of Gee's novels, up to the publication of *Crime Story* (1994), by promoting the notion that this mood, or, characteristic, has undergone a gradual, though definite movement towards one of disorder within the language system, and in New Zealand society, according to the author's portrayal of that society. Gee's contemporary New Zealand is portrayed as being in the throes of entropy. This theme is in keeping with the works of many contemporary novelists. Gee's earlier works, written within the 'humanist realist' parameters, where characters possess a firm sense of themselves, seldom questioning the certainty of their futures, or, the ability of the medium of language to connect them to 'the *single* thing' (*P* 14), has undergone a major

transition, particularly in the novel *Prowlers* (1987). I have examined the questions concerning the ambiguous nature of language - its inability to accurately represent phenomena that lies external to the human mind - that are addressed by Gee's narrators, particularly in the period between the publication of the Plumb trilogy (1976-1982), and *Crime Story* (1994). I have shown how the narrators struggle to make sense of the world, and of themselves, and how external nature appears to 'slip inexorably into language,' and the reader 'is ushered into a self-reflexive world of words', and nothing, other than 'the Second Law of Thermodynamics' (*P* 230), which in essence means *death*, seems certain. However, despite this apparently disempowering condition, I have shown how each narrator demonstrates the ablity to arrive at some form of tangible and satisfactory conclusion about the world, and their place in it. It is a conclusion that leaves each of them feeling that they have made some form of progress in self-knowledge, to a point where they accept the condition of truth and meaning as being constantly deferred, and a world that is 'shifting and mutable.' They have achieved small victories for themselves as they narrate their past. They are able to continue with the rest of their lives with a sense of feeling empowered, that is, achieving some sense of control over their present and future lives.

Chapter one examined some of Gee's childhood influences - revealed in his autobiographical essay, "Beginnings" (1975) - that make a positive connection with the themes, images and characterization in his works of prose fiction. I traced the developing mood of his fiction, from the publication of *The Big Season* (1962), up to and including *Crime Story* (1994). This part of the inquiry revealed an initial preoccupation with the repressive forces of family, community, and puritanism. In Gee's fiction these institutions demonstrate a potential to inhibit the natural growth of the individual. This theme, initiated in *The Big Season*, was developed further in Gee's fantasy writings for young adults, which evolved into a more concentrated focus on 'the human condition,' or, more specifically, 'the mixed nature of the human condition.' During this transition, I showed how Gee began to develop a dualistic view of the world. I explored examples such as 'the haves and the have nots' of New Zealand society, and also the underlying driving force of his Motherstone philosophy: the essential mix of 'good and evil'; a theme that was carried forward, with more complexity and covertness, into his adult novels. This dualistic vision underscores Gee's

juxtaposition of characters presented in terms of opposing, but, complimentary characteristics, such as the 'observers and the doers,' the *passive* and the *active.*

Also, in chapter one, my examination of the Plumb trilogy revealed the author's preoccupation with both the importance and the difficulties of addressing one's past, as a key to understanding one's self in the present, thereby achieving a sense of 'wholeness', and increasing the scope and clarity of one's vision. The author, through his narrators, demonstrates the significance of the development and employment of one's 'imagination' through 'magic and fantasy,' as a means to penetrate life's superficial surfaces, thus enabling the individual to 'explore' and 'intensify' life's experiences. The theme of 'isolation' emerged from my enquiry into Gee's characters who are 'charged with special knowledge,' or, some 'alternative viewpoint,' i.e., the child saviours of the 'O' trilogy, and Gee's adult narrators who believe they are 'special,' being the most notable.

The idea of the individual's shallow vision of life's surfaces, rather than its depths, is explored more fully, through the eyes of its narrator, Raymond Sole, in *Sole Survivor*. This idea of exploring the 'metaphysical void,' and 'a cosmic emptiness,' is recapitulated in *Prowlers*, following a five year period, while the author completed the 'O' trilogy. My exploration of this theme was continued in chapter two, under the heading of "*Prowlers*: The Collapse of Modernism's Governing Principles."

In chapter two my inquiry concentrated on *Prowlers*, the pivotal novel in this thesis. I argued that this novel's central concern is with the problematics of language as a medium for seeking the truth. Gee has entered the post-modern arena, overtly, with this novel, and through Noel Papps, the first person narrator, he explores the post-modern conception of the slippage between the signifier and the signified. The aging narrator looks back over his own life with confusion and uncertainty in his quest for clues to the essence of his own life and his sister Kitty's life. The mood of uncertainty, present in Gee's earlier fiction, still pervades, not just the sub-text, but now overtly, in the narrative's more conscious levels. The juxtaposition of the technical discourses of science, and the discourses of literature, demonstrate both conflicting and complementary characteristics throughout the processes of narrating Noel's past. The medium of language is shown to be ambiguous. Initially, external nature eludes the narrator. He discovers that he is forced to utilise

the *figurative* mode of communication – a mode he has always suppressed because of what he considered were its idealistic properties – to conceptualise and document the past world of 'live bodies.' It is a dynamic world - relative to the world Noel perceives through the discourses of science - which had, up until the narrative present, continued to evade him. He is unfamiliar with its dynamic and indeterminate properties, the nature of which, appear to be in direct contrast to the more determinate world of science, with which he is more familiar. He refers to the world of science as 'all that solid, all that real old stuff.' Noel's career, as soil-scientist, provided him with a safe haven where he could just *exist* – rather than *live*, by taking part - in a sort of *comfort zone*, within, by comparison with the more dynamic world of human interaction, a *sterile* world of positivism. Now, as an octogenarian, contemplating death, he experiences a post-modern world, where all the once familiar certainties have been superseded by a 'free-floating relativism, a lack of depth, a radical barreness of being.' Despite these difficult transitions for Noel, as the narrative progresses, he courageously overcomes his apprehension and fears, and learns to master and embrace the art and craft of recording the world of human behaviour. He faces the traumas of his past, and begins to take part, by interacting more closely with Kate. The themes of fear, love, and madness, as they are portrayed in *Prowlers*, were explored, with a view to illustrating the narrator's difficulties in understanding his evasion of the employment of imagination as one of the methods of facing fear and terror, and penetrating the deeps within himself. *Prowlers* teaches its narrator, and the reader, that in order to know *love* and *beauty*, one needs to experience their contrary forces, *hate* and *ugliness*, and in turn how to understand and control the ensuing emotions. Hate, as Gee's fiction presents it, is defined in terms of an individual's self-serving drive, which is indifferent to the needs of others, and callously exploits them. Noel ends the novel in acceptance of the essentially *mixed* nature of the human condition, and of life as a continuum, in preparation for his own death. Noel's proposed incineration of the notebooks that contain his life, symbolises the pending cremation of his physical body, and represents the concept of *life* changing form, rather than life as a dying entity.

Chapter three, again, addressed the language process. More specifically it concentrated on the potentially deceptive form of *biographical* discourse. I examined its properties with constant references to Michelle Dawson's excellent thesis, "The Subject of Biography." Within this context I

showed how both *Prowlers* and *Going West* demonstrate the principles underscoring Dawson's arguments. The main point that emerged from this investigation was the inevitability of the biographer re-constructing his own 'subject-position,' thereby relegating the biographee/subject to the status of *object* – as opposed to *subject* - of the intended biography. Any resulting biography would constitute no more than a fictive plot, or, at best, an 'approximation' of a life, on which is attached a string of supposed *facts*. With each narrator's investigation of the past, they discover problematic data, not just about their subjects/objects, but also some disturbing truths that affect them personally. I showed how this raised serious questions about the inclusion or exclusion of *incriminating* information. My investigation addressed the imperial aspects of compiling an account of someone's life for 'public consumption.'

Furthermore, on another level, I have argued that Gee's exploration of the dynamics of ascertaining the truth about someone's life can be seen as a didactic process, that is, to create an awareness in the reader of the spurious nature of biographical discourse. By so doing Gee is protecting his own interests should a biography of him appear in New Zealand book-shops, which seems highly probable considering the wealth of critical writings his novels have already generated. I am aware that such an assumption is highly speculative, but I have tried to support this argument with relevant direct quotes from interviews with Gee that suggest a degree of apprehension on his part, regarding a potentially pending biography about his life.

The whole argument in chapter three, centers around the notion that it is impossible to construct an *objective* account of another person's life, or even of one's own life, simply because it is language that constructs the writer, not the writer who constructs language. Also, at the time of conceptualising and writing an account of someone's life, 'it is always already in the past, even as it is recorded,' and has therefore altered in some way. Post-structuralism has created an awareness in the informed reader that a narrative of any formulation 'constitutes the subject's act of self-construction'. Despite Noel's and Jack's constant assertions – as fictional characters - that they possess a superior knowledge of their subjects, their accounts of them will only ever be 'an approximation.' They would reveal as much about themselves in their narratives as they would of their subjects. In fact, this will certainly be the case if the biographer has known their biographee

personally. Personal 'motives' and personal 'agendas,' have the potential to influence a biographer, either consciously, or, inadvertently, marginalising their subject's success, with a view to asserting their own. The process of expiation, as demonstrated by Noel, Jack, Rex and Tod as strategies, and/or motives, can also potentially distort the truth. These findings further support my central argument that the truth, or, reality, is constantly deferred, and therefore unattainable, which in turn creates a mood of uncertainty/entropy, or, apparent chaos and disorder within Gee's fictional New Zealand society.

Up until 1994, Gee's fiction has reached a point where New Zealand society is shown to be in a state of uncertainty. Ultimately it is for the reader to decide for themselves whether Gee's New Zealand is purely fictional, or, alternatively, that it is *mimetic* and therefore representative of the 'real world,' i.e., is Gee holding a mirror up to society and saying, 'this is what is happening in your world.'

The world, as it is presented in Gee's fiction, is the world as he sees it. Though his vision is limited, he does try to expand that vision by looking over the shoulder of, or through the eyes of his narrators. Ultimately though, the characterisation and imagery belongs to Gee because it is created/constructed through his own consciousness. As I have tried to demonstrate in chapter one, Gee was influenced by many factors, i.e. his parent's view of the world, which is naturally flavoured, in turn, by their respective sets of parents; his peers, and their parent's influence, and the popular fiction of his time, such as Zane Grey; Dickens and Hardy. Gee's role as social commentator is similar to that of Dickens and Hardy. His fiction can therefore be seen as a kind of 'social realism.'

Several of the features and themes investigated in this thesis can be traced in Gee's more recent novel *Live Bodies*. However, having already subjected them to systematic exploration, Gee treats them more cursorily in the later novel, which remains accordingly, outside the scope of the present study.

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