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THE NOVELS OF MAURICE GEE

(1962-1994):

Gee's New Zealand: In the Throes of Entropy

A thesis in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in English
at Massey University

Mark Robert Lyons

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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.

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"Abbreviations":

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

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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.