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The Narrative Technique of Plumb

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Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

differences.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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