In his review of the Plumb Trilogy in *New Zealand Books* in 2008, on the occasion of its reissue, Hamish Clayton tries to identify the aesthetic category that best suits it. After toying in succession with the labels of “Realist,” “Cubist,” and “postmodernist,” Clayton settles, rather surprisingly, on “Impressionism” as the most fitting category. His catalogue of possible categories is significant here only for its demonstration of the lack of critical consensus regarding the formal and aesthetic classification of what is generally acclaimed as the most outstanding achievement in Gee’s oeuvre. This, along with the meagre critical attention given to Gee’s post-trilogy fiction, lends credence to the view that literary criticism has not yet found adequate conceptual vehicles for estimating Gee’s adult fiction.


2 See Trevor James, “Beyond Realism: Maurice Gee and a Critical Praxis,” *Journal of New Zealand Literature* 14 (1996): 107–26. According to James, the relative lack of attention Gee has received from literary critics in New Zealand marks a huge gap in New Zealand criticism; certainly he has received far less than his stature as a writer deserves and I suspect that this reflects the influence of literary fashion. Though Gee has been consistently praised by reviewers, the realistic ‘surface’ of his fiction appears the most likely deterrent to more sustained and rigorous critical attention. (111)

Little seems to have changed in the intervening years. The most extended criticism of Gee in recent years is contained in Alistair Fox’s study of the representation of masculinities in New Zealand fiction, which rests on realist assumptions. See Fox, *The Ship of Dreams: Masculinity in Contemporary New Zealand Fiction* (Dunedin: Otago UP, 2016).
The present chapter advances the view that isolation in Gee’s fiction is a product of linguistic processes that are best understood through the frameworks provided by postmodernism. The pluralism that Clayton noted in the Plumb trilogy, and the accompanying relativism, contribute to the assessment of Gee as taking an increasingly postmodernist approach. But, more than these, Gee’s persistent technique in most of his novels of using fictionalized life-writing as the self-constituting act of its writer–protagonist appears to harness the performative principle that postmodernism has come to valorize. This will be elucidated in the course of this chapter. Paradoxically, the shifting performance of identity through fictionalized autobiography precipitates the possibility of semiotic isolation through narcissistic constructions, even while the act of writing opens the self to another, the reader. Isolation in Gee’s fiction, as provisional or accomplished fact, is an unintended facet of the possibility of playing ‘language games’, in the Wittgensteinian sense of the term. Wittgenstein sees language-use as analogous to playing a game. Just as one does in a game, one makes moves in language in accordance with its set of rules.

2008). Part of Fox’s thesis is that Gee has “provided a diagnostic map of the New Zealand Pākehā psyche in its troubled aspects” (18).

3 See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, tr. G.E.M. Anscombe (1945–49; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974): 11 (I. 23). Wittgenstein observes that “this multiplicity [of sentences] is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language-games as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten [...]. Here the term ‘language-game’ is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life.” He goes on to list examples of “language games,” which include:

“Giving orders, and obeying them—
Describing the appearance of an object, or giving its measurements—
[...]
Forming and testing a hypothesis—
[...]
Making up a story; and reading it—
Play-acting—
[...]
Solving a problem in practical arithmetic—.”

Wittgenstein makes analogies between “language games” and chess, a specific instance of which may be found in *Philosophical Investigations* 24 (I. 49). Anthony Kenny justifies the analogy that Wittgenstein makes between the speaking of language and games thus: “even though not all games have rules, the function of rules in many games has similarities with the function of rules in language [...]. Language games,