

What's Eating William Gass?

by Gary Percesepe

Take One:

Sometime in the 60s a philosophy teacher named William H. Gass was writing a novel. He had it about where he wanted it when someone stole the manuscript from his car. He re-wrote the novel, adding one new outsized character named Jethro, and published it under the title **Omensetter's Luck**. Some guy reviewed the new novel in a respected national magazine, called it the most important novel of this half-century, and made reference in the review to Joyce, Proust, people like that. There were, let us say, expectations. Gass followed up with a collection of short stories called **In the Heart of the Heart of the Country**, which included a longish story called "The Pedersen Kid," a story which he'd had a hell of a time getting published (John Gardner finally published it in a small magazine called MSS, now defunct) and which Raymond Carver, who you've heard of, couldn't make any sense of when he was learning the trade with Gardner. (Gardner told him to read it again. As near as I can tell, Ray didn't. Didn't hurt him.) Gass then began writing a novel called **The Tunnel**. From time to time pieces of the new novel would appear in literary magazines, sometimes accompanied by essays in which Gass delivered himself of rather chesty literary pronouncements. Years passed. He kept working on the novel. Meanwhile, his essays kept appearing, mostly in **The New York Review of Books** and **The New York Times Book Review**, and some other places. These essays were collected and published by his publisher, David Godine, in three volumes. Two of these three collections had the word 'WORD' in them. There was another book which might have had the word 'WORD' in it, but didn't. This one was called **On Being Blue**; it also had to do with language and style. There was an "experimental" novella in 1972 called **Willie**

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Masters' Lonesome Wife, which had some pictures of a naked woman in it, and seemed to be an outworking of Gass' literary theories. Some, notably John Gardner, took exception to it, not because of the pictures of the naked woman, but because Gass (Gardner thought) seemed to think that words and sentences both created and inhabited a fictive world, an aesthetic space beyond good and evil. Gass talked a lot about how he meant 'word woman,' not real woman. Gardner countered with a book called **On Moral Fiction**, in which he talked about Tolstoy a lot. There was debate in the land; doctoral dissertations were launched. Gass kept writing the novel, with Gardner and others commenting on the pieces that had already appeared. Somewhere in here Gass' name got tossed around with some others, including John Barth and Donald Barthelme; the word 'postmodern' was frequently employed. Nobody seemed to **like** the word much, at least no one who was actually writing fiction; there were many disclaimers. Barthelme remarked as how it was difficult to slap a saddle on this rough beast, "postmodern." Barth mailed many small white postcards to Gass with his thoughts on this and other issues (these can be seen among Gass's collected papers at the Washington University library, in St. Louis). Barthelme and Gass appeared together, with some other writers, on a panel once; Ann Beattie was in the audience, frowning at Gass. (Gass made a point of mentioning this to me in an interview I did with him a few years back. This was some time after one so-called critic of minimalism, in what sounded like a self-parody, famously complained about minimalism and "all these Ann's that seem to be writing fiction nowadays.") This was still the 1970s, which seemed to last as long as this paragraph. By this time Carver had come out with his first collection, **Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?**, and later Ann Beattie, Mary Robison, Frederick Barthelme and others were publishing, and the word 'minimalist' started showing up with greater frequency, generating more heat. Jump: We're in the late 80s now. Gass fired off a **New York Times** piece which attacked the minimalist thing, and named, among others, Frederick Barthelme. Barthelme published a response of sorts, a cri

de coeur with an irresistible seek-the-surface lightness (no easy task) and a Veronica Geng-inspired title: "Convicted Minimalist Spills Bean." These were high times. People like Tom Wolfe were telling writers to write real fiction (translation: write like me). T.C. Boyle was simultaneously writing densely plotted novels with nineteenth century poundage and going slick, (causing Gass, who had written a gushing blurb for Boyle's first novel, to blush and reconsider). You could go to a writer's conference at a place like Antioch College and hear genre writers mispronounce the name Barthelme, mock minimalism, plead for plot. Meanwhile, Gass kept writing his novel, which finally appeared in late February of this year, published by Knopf. It's his second novel, written across four decades.

Most of the preceding paragraph is true.

Take Two:

Having completed his magnum opus, **Guilt & Innocence in Hitler's Germany**, William Frederick Kohler, distinguished Professor of History at a distinguished Indiana university, sits in his chair, intending to write an Introduction. Blocked, he writes instead a history of history, or better, a history of the historian-as- liar, lout and loser. Fearing his wife will discover it, he hides the new manuscript by slipping it into the pages of his book. Meanwhile, he begins digging a tunnel out from the basement of his house.

So much for plot. But Gass's readers, who have waited nearly thirty years for this new novel, have never worried much about plot, nor about character, in the traditional sense. He is NOT a nice man, this Kohler, only more so. His mother was a gin- besotted drunk, his father a verbally abusive bigot.(So much for How He Got That Way.) He speaks with the volume turned up. He lies like a rug, has anxieties aplenty, and his sins are not small. He gives new meaning to the hackneyed literary phrase "unreliable narrator." Kohler's excavations are a kind of neo-Rilkean Journal of his other Self/book, replacing the objective with the subjective, the public with the private, the innocent with the guilty, the carefully reasoned causes of history with the shape-shifting meanderings of his burrowing into

Self, into women, with the Holocaust as host and every man a meanie, fascists of the heart.

As for character in this novel, its name is language. Kohler, plumber of the depths, is himself a word-man, and Gass (the name means alley in German) has so cleverly matched structure to prose, so lovingly sentenced us to sentences, that for the first fifty pages of the book we hit the wall in a series of false starts. This book is a total word war. Along the way we are treated to a blitz of metaphors, some charming (as when Kohler describes the house where he made love: "A wooden stair fell from one widened window like a slide of cards" and many of them crude ("sunning in asslight till you tan"); given a limerick history of the world from the standpoint of nuns in bed, to wit:

I once went to bed with a nun,
who had screwed every nation but one.
I don't want to Russia,
but your Pole feels like Prussia--
far too Chile--to Finnish the pun

--Kohler's colleagues in the history department (who look like they wandered onto the page from the set of an abandoned Nabokov shoot); and informed that language is always honest; it does not lie, only its users. "Notice that 'lover' is mostly spelled by using 'over,' and 'sex' is two thirds 'ex.'

But even Gass can occasionally go wrong. Why the Rilke fascination, hasn't that been outgrown? (Kohler takes a lover names Lou, a Salome stand in and a way of doubling Rilke.) Doesn't Rilke sound oddly precious coming from this Kohler-bear, especially at the end of the novel where it seems he wants to rewrite things as a Portrait of the Artist As a Young (and very bad) Poet. Gass should stick to limericks. And the many textual experiments, like the paper bag on page 174, and the various props of the PdP (Party of the Disappointed People) are not nearly as well integrated into the project as in **Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife**, his 1972 novella. Instead, they seem grafted onto the narrative, with the Big M standing for Modernist; Been There, Done That. Also, he hits a bad

patch of kitsch along about page 366 and skids a ways (before recovering with some good old-fashioned philosopher bashing--Hegel: Asslicker of the Absolute; Kant: He walked like a watch).

This book will be hated, which, when you think about it, is a lot to say for a book these days. Though few will know why, it will inevitably be compared to Harold Brodkey's **The Runaway Soul**, another thirty year writing project. (Note: Just today I got around to reading Sven Birket's review in the June **Atlantic**, and, sure enough, there was the obligatory Brodkey comparison.) There will be the usual grumbling about morality in fiction. John Gardner started this line with Gass (See Take One), and his surrogates will surely queue up in reviewing stands and dissertation lines to castigate Gass for the crimes of this novel--already the **New York Times** reviewer cannot forgive him for writing of "bedrooms as bad as Belson"--but Gass hasn't changed his mind for over thirty years. He's mad in the mouth and he can write. He spent years reading Flaubert's letters and cultivating a certain kind of anger for class-based stupidity. He's been digging this tunnel in all possible ways since his first published story, "The Pedersen Kid." His credo is that there is freedom and safety in sentences, and language replaces the life. He's playing the one note he knows. If you don't like it, I suppose he'd say, fine. Go dig your own tunnel.

