

## Götterdämmerung in the West: William Gass's Little Big Novel

by Jim Barloon

*Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests.  
I'll dig with it.*

-- Seamus Heaney, "Digging"

What words do we summon to describe a 650-page novel, a work "thirty years in the making," if not big, massive, substantial -- a genuine tome? (Or perhaps the better word, as William Frederick Kohler, the novel's protagonist and narrator, himself might pun, is *tomb*.) And while the novel has all the earmarks of a *magnum opus* -- brilliant wordplay, weighty themes, sheer heft -- it also bears, even flaunts, the insignia of littleness: a *parvum opus*. The book may be, as advertised, a meditation upon "history, hatred, unhappiness and, above all else, language," but behind its treatment of each runs a snide, snickering undercurrent. In Hamletesque, or postmodern, fashion, these things are mere "words, words, words," or, if they are something more, signifiers of certain if shadowy realities, they serve a consistently deflating function -- like a "kick me" note slapped on the back of the class chump. *The Tunnel*, in its deconstruction of language, history, the American family, is a little big novel, a text that reduces, like an e.e. cummings poem, traditionally large themes to lower-case status. While Nietzsche proclaimed, with fin-de-siècle bravura, the death of God, Gass (or Kohler) exclaims, in the spirit of a whoopee cushion, the death of whatever's left untoppled in the transcendental realm.

### Culping with Life

Several reviewers of the novel -- Sven Birkets and Robert Kelly, for example -- have described it, appropriately, as *Joycean*, an adjective that often has positive as well as pejorative connotations. Like *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, *The Tunnel* has been painstakingly written by a man with pyrotechnic verbal abilities; also like its Joycean forerunners, and many other high modernist and postmodern novels, *The Tunnel* is a relentlessly allusive, Daedalean, trope-chocked text. Yet Joyce's novels, despite their notorious difficulties, can be read as affirmative, mythopoeic works; *Ulysses* particularly has been read in this light, and is even interpreted by some as a tender love story, with its famous last word, "Yes," signifying the rapprochement between Molly Bloom and her uxorious husband, Leopold. Although *The Tunnel* frequently reaches Joycean depths, it cannot approach its heights. Whereas Joyce, for example, employs a babel-ing profusion of voices, from pathos to bathos, Gass's language -- virtuosic within its range -- generally spans a lower register, much like the low, guttural sounds of the German sprinkled

throughout the narrative. Kohler, a quasi-pseudo-German American, sounds the universal *nein* -- *Also Sprach Kohler* -- and whereas *Ulysses* ends with an iterated "Yes," *The Tunnel*, an inverted Joycean text, ought to reach its terminus with a simple, dolorous "no" -- lower-case.

One of Kohler's colleagues at the Midwestern university where he teaches history is Culp, a quibbling, quipping man who is writing a "limerickal history of the human race." Kohler often disparages Culp's trivialization of language -- "I tell him he's dealing in mind *merde*" (176) -- yet tends to engage in the same sorts of verbal jousting, endlessly shuffling words and dealing in verbal legerdemain. Unlike Scheherazade, Kohler tells tales not to save his life, but simply to salve his death-in-life, much like the tunnel he hollows out in his basement. Despite Culp's assertion that he and Kohler "are one" (177), they are separate characters, yet like Culp, Kohler does not seem to recognize, or grant, the grander, ennobling possibilities of language. Kohler refers to his own aphorisms as "Culpagrams" and talks of being "as Culpicated as ever," as if to blame Culp for his tropological license; but, then, Kohler never does admit, in any context, his own culpability. And why not? If words bear no integral relationship to the "things" they signify, if language is an enclosed, impermeable system -- the sine qua non of structuralist thought -- then words are cheap, and can hardly be cheapened no matter how we use them. Language writ large, in reverentially large type, belongs to an idealistic era, gone for good -- or bad -- and now who's to say (as everyone nowadays says) that a Shakespeare sonnet is better than a limerick about a lucky lad from Nantucket?

Kohler is fond of repeating that he "gave up poetry in his youth," convinced that "the truth [was] ill-treated there but welcome like another fallen temple among the ruins of the past" (304). Once the connection between Poetry and Truth (or, in the romantic formulation, Beauty and Truth) has been severed, the heroic strain stretched to the breaking point, all that remains is rococo prose. The poet, or man of words, casts off his vatic function and takes up residence with other street performers, a mere word-juggler:

**My name is William Frederick Kohler,  
but as I grew both fat and older,  
I lost the Willie and the Freddie,  
until a simple K was ready;  
though by the time I'm timed to die  
that withered K will be an I --  
an I that soon will melt away,  
and only leave this I in clay; (167)**

Kohler, *contra* Nietzsche, indites the death of poesy, yet another "fallen temple" in our age of unbelief. His mental world simply reflects his prosaic life, in which he and others of the suppositious "Party of the Disappointed People" are "dying alive."

Although poetry may no longer be possible, at least for Kohler, words can still fill up the blank spaces, the abyss, of our lives. In a short chapter called "Blackboard," the blank-

board becomes a symbol for the void, the *tabula rasa* with-in and -out, while words are things writ upon the wind, evanescent, possessing only a second-hand kind of reality, like the shadows in Plato's Cave: "Chalk was made to be removed, the board was built to remain" (313). Despite the fact that words, like chalk, taste of "dusty death," they proliferate, for word leads on to word and text begets text -- rather like an Old Testament genealogy -- filling the page and our lives up. Ultimately, words resemble nothing so much as other words, so that all modifiers are dangling, removed from and in ambiguous relation to that to which they refer. Thinking, for example, that he has outwitted Planmantee, another colleague, Kohler retorts, "so I had the s.o.b. d.o.a. at the o.e.d." (391). Characterizing his married life, he confesses, "I am an intransitive man. I'm reconciled to it. Even my husbanding has no object" (468). Then there are the polyglot puns: "the ring of a real *Ding*" (244); "You look German, Kohler, you simply *schein* of Germany" (249). This is language best described as narcissistic: words dazzled by their own reflection.

When Gass's language isn't drawing attention to itself, it is busy propagating, metastasizing like a colonizing force. As several reviewers, including Robert Kelly, observe, "a favorite trick for a Gassian paragraph is to be [*sic*] a list of items rhythmically, sometimes even rhymingly, thrown together" (18). Hence this: "I grew great and ornate like Browne or severe as Swift or as rich and thick as Shakespeare, snappy as Pope. There is Büchner, Raspe, Richard Dehmel. There is Stefan George and Stephen Spender. Ah, Guido Cavalcanti" (72).

Gass also, like Joyce, "does" rivers: "The rivers I tried to inscribe, after Lou had fallen asleep, were more distant, less Midwest: the Danube, the Rhine, the Rhone, the Nile, and I spoke their names only in my deeply pillowed head" (558). This is more than Gass touring de forcing, though his prose often borders on showmanship. Kohler uses words to fill his fat self up, to experience, or manufacture, the feeling of satiety that his starved life cannot provide. He roots up verbal delicacies as a pig does truffles; he is a word-pecker. As Magus Tabor, Kohler's mentor, declaims, "Thought takes thought, not things, for substance; language replaces life; history usurps the past, and we make sounds about sounds without limit" (268). Although Kohler compares himself, and others who would naturally belong to his Party of Disappointed People (PdP), to Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock (300), perhaps *The Waste Land* better describes his milieu -- "dry sterile thunder" -- so that words are simply "fragments shored against [his] ruins."

Even the great writers and thinkers of Western Thought, the besieged canon, are mere names, sounds more or less musical: "Gide committing Chopin and other indiscretions, Cudworth, Claudel, Jeremy Taylor, Mörike and then Baudelaire -- the most beautiful name of all. Vico. Verlaine. Michelangelo -- the most beautiful Mallarmé -- the most beautiful -- Sophocles -- the most beautiful name of all" (69). Here again we encounter Kohler's ruthless reductionism: the storied pantheon reduced to mere sounds. Kohler, then, would likely answer Juliet's famous question -- "What's in a name?" -- with the reply "everything and nothing." Names, he would agree, are arbitrary markers, yet they are all we have, forming a universe unto themselves; as he says, "Naming is knowing, all right, because the name is what we know" (563). This principle is underscored

throughout by the litanies of alliterative lists (e.g., "Hardy, Hawthorne, Hazlitt, Hemingway, Henty, Hopkins, Housman, Hume" (68)). For Kohler, words are like children in a homeroom class: arranged in alphabetical order, they generally associate according to phonetic and orthographical contiguities.

Kohler's own name is subjected to the same process of dissection and taxonomy that other words undergo. His full name is William Frederick Kohler, or, with the honorifics attached, "William Frederick Kohler, Herr Professor" (306). Ridiculing the "scarfy losers' names" of his students, Kohler proudly declares that he is a William and a Frederick, "the monikers of conquerors" (371). Yet even in this respect, Kohler is reduced, having to answer to various less aggrandizing diminutives -- the fate of the conquered. Even Herschel, a colleague for whom Kohler has little regard, calls him "Bill." "What a Billywilliam I've become to Herschel; what a fall," Kohler remarks (306); his other colleagues generally call him Willi. Martha, Kohler's wife, refers to him, unendearingly, as "Koh," a word very close to *Kuh*, German for cow. But perhaps the most belittling feature of the name *Kohler* is its association with plumbing fixtures. With this conjunction we have finally, as Kohler himself might crack, reached bottom. Imagining how his young son's schoolmates will one day taunt him, Kohler writes: "They're going to ask: hey, Kohler, how often do you flush? You're a drip, Kohler, you know that? They're going to say: hey, Kohler, don't leave the lid up" (371). His son Carl is so short that "the kids were already calling him 'Kropped,' when they weren't calling him 'CacaKohler,' or suggesting that his father was the inventor of indoor plumbing" (299). Like so much in this novel, the narrator's name gives promise of greatness, but life and language diminish it, and him, to a bare-boned minimum. As Kohler says of his bullying father, "he belittled me, cut me down to size, broke my ego's every bone, blackened my capital I" (201). It is a legacy that Kohler will bequeath to his own sons.

If this sounds like a confessional, it is because Kohler is writing his novel surreptitiously, *sotto voce*, tunneling into his past as he's burrowing beneath his basement -- dirty business both. While he hides the dirt in the drawers of his wife's collection of dressers and bureaus, Kohler secretes the "leaves" of his "unbeknownst book" between the pages of *Guilt and Innocence in Hitler's Germany*, his "Great Work." The intertextuality is hard to miss. Indeed, like his history, which attempts to extenuate Hitler's guilt for German atrocities, the novel -- leaves of Gass -- chronicles Kohler's own guilt and innocence. The pains taken to conceal his personal history, however, amount to a sealed indictment. Again an analogy can be drawn between Gass's Kohler and Eliot's Prufrock. The epigraph to "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is a passage from Dante's *Inferno* in which Count Guido de Montefeltrano, a False Counselor, agrees to tell his life story to Virgil and Dante only because he believes that they cannot return to earth to reveal what he tells them. He answers their request, or so he thinks, "without fear of infamy."

Kohler, too, writhes in hell, a denizen of a lower world, though it resembles Hades more than a Dantean, divinely ordered inferno. Remembering an evening when he was left to care for his fussy, new-born son -- "the Prince of Wailers" -- Kohler asks, "what have I done to deserve this, left here in howl hell, what circle is it?" (378). So Kohler writes his own history, mea culping in his own unhallowed vacuum, attempting to put the "prison of

[his] life in language" -- tortuous prose for a tortured soul.

Ultimately, as we shall see, Kohler recognizes little difference between his own wretched history and the human story which history tells; one is simply contained within the other. Although both stories, the private and the public, point up the depravity of humanity, the private kind -- the text before us -- reflects the condition of its production: "My history is objective and orderly and factual and keeps military step with Time, whereas these notes are scrambled and secret and even more sordid, abuzz as they are with honest lies, and they straggle after Time like whores after soldiers -- " (301). Nevertheless, the two stories do commingle, are juxtaposed in a sort of historiographical counterpoint, as modern texts, particularly, often are. Kohler, for example, asks, "How far have the 'me' pages gotten now in *Guilt and Innocence*? late in the bloody business? Let's see . . . I'm infiltrating the chapter entitled 'The Lessons of the Führer'" (454). If, as Hayden White and others have argued, history in the twentieth century is increasingly characterized as nightmare, then *The Tunnel* might be said to constitute one man's especially bad dream of a life. It is the twentieth century in miniature.

The ludic, lapidary quality of Gass's prose is not what distinguishes *The Tunnel* from other twentieth-century novels, though Gass does it as well as anybody. What is perhaps unique about the novel -- and what might help to explain why, as Gary Percesepe predicts, "Gass's book will be hated" (381) -- is the use of such manic language to treat such depressing themes. Samuel Johnson complained that Shakespeare could not resist a pun; how, then, should we respond to a man who composes pitiless limericks about the Holocaust?

**A sensitive Nazi at Auschwitz  
was annoyed by rabbinical outfits.  
These habits retard  
the melting of lard,  
which is the reason for being of Auschwitz. (307)**

There is something gratuitously transgressive about productions such as this -- like the work of a schoolboy adept at the dirty word, but now grown up and tenured. Even Kohler's preferred choice of "genre," the limerick or light verse, is calculated to affront readers and, more important, diminish his subject. As defined by *The Concise Oxford Companion to English Language*, the limerick is "a form of facetious jingle," the form, that is, at the furthest remove from his somber themes. Imagine *Mein Kampf* as a light-hearted musical.

But no matter how reactionary Kohler is as a man, as a writer he exudes postmodern chic. Like John Barth's story "Lost in the Funhouse," in which language itself creates the labyrinthine "funhouse" where artists such as Ambrose live, *The Tunnel* -- ironic, allusive, and elusive -- carves out an elaborate, syllabic matrix, a fascist funhouse, a place where members of the PdP can romp and be themselves: a novelistic Paraguay. As such, the novel could almost be classified as a dystopia, a place in the mind so intricately mapped out that, should you care to go, the book could lead you unerringly into the

darkest of sulphurous depths. This is not only where Kohler, who has been "touched by the fascism of the heart," dwells, but the place from which he unearths the past.

### Base Uses

In "The Burden of History," Hayden White observes that "to a significant segment of the artistic community the historian appears to be the carrier of a disease. . . . This is why so much of modern fiction turns upon the attempt to liberate Western man from the tyranny of the historical consciousness" (39-40). Even Kohler, an historian unlikely to assuage anyone's fears about the debilitating effects of history, acknowledges the dangers: "What do we do but spread done deeds on present fields? Don't we claim to be fertilizing for the future? Certainly we risk infecting our contemporaries with the contagions of the past" (439). Although Kohler criticizes Culp for "dealing in mind *merde*," here, as elsewhere, Kohler likens history to *merde*, shit, the refuse through which historians sift, and sniff -- building ideological redoubts out of compost. Again, Hamlet's words, and the frame of mind they reflect, provide an illuminating reference point: "To what base uses we may return, Horatio! Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander, till 'a find it stopping a bung-hole?" Hamlet can imagine an equally inglorious fate for Caesar: "Imperious Caesar, dead and turn'd to clay,/ Might stop a hole to keep the wind away." To Kohler and historians like him, including his mentor, "great men" such as Alexander and Caesar are little more than the dust they became; the historian, nevertheless, resembles not so much the archaeologist as the plumber: "And every event, then, is somebody's -- something's -- stool. History has an asshole, Culp old man, I shall say to him tomorrow, and the present is its most immediate relief" (175).

Kohler's mentor was Magus Tabor, Mad Meg, a German historian who preached that the old-style, let-us-now-praise-famous-men brand of history no longer obtains: "It's not the study of kings and princes, gentlemen . . . the study of history. . . . Genius, fate or fortune? -- no. Gods? -- no. Heroes? -- never. Neither time nor time's occasioning" (247). The new paradigm reflects the developments in linguistics and philosophy since the fin de siècle. If, as one historian of ideas has asserted, "thinking about the world in historical terms was an original creation of the nineteenth century," then de-mythologizing and deconstructing history -- both as a habit of the mind and as an academic discipline -- might be said to be original creations of the twentieth century. Kohler's contention, for example, that Hitler was not only *not* an Evil Maniac, but that he bears little blame for the Holocaust ranks among the most egregious claims conceivable (though the argument has been made before). Hitler, according to Kohler, "did' damn little": "His hands posed; he postured; he preached; he sulked; he charmed; he threw tantrums. Hitler went about wishing like a will-o'-the-wisp, as though he had Aladdin's lamp, as if he were the prince of beggars, and left it to others to find a fulfillment for each cup of hope he held out" (457). In Kohler's shrunken world, even Hitler, the modern-day Mephistopheles, is simply a creep.

In this, Kohler has mastered the lessons of his *Meister* (who assures Kohler that he "will make a good German"), a man who promoted the new paradigm of history by parodying

the old. Like Hamlet, for example, Tabor discerns nothing grand or tragic in the destiny of Caesar:

To the ordinary German student, or to our Folk -- our immortal German people -- what -- I give you the most hackneyed example -- a blob of fisheggs on an egg half -- what is the betrayal, say -- the stabbing -- the murder -- of Julius Caesar? Tabor sighed angrily and threw his arms away. A celebrated illustration. Think of it, Kohler. A trite old story. A dreary anecdote dressed like a schoolboy for a play. Sick-en-ing: the Rubicon, the die is cast, the Ides of March, the proffered crown -- portents, saws, and attitudes -- sick-en-ing. There: a press of people, petitioners, another scroll . . . *Yes, yes, but read it, Caesar!* . . . What a pallid picture book! such insipid English tea!" (215-16)

Tabor sounds like a lot of contemporary historians, academics mostly, who argue that the past is only a construct of the present, an appropriation of the past, and one that generally encodes, if only penumbrally, some or other hegemonic ideology. Heroes, then, are not born but made -- by old-time historians. Nietzsche expresses the more enlightened, if disillusioned, view in his *Twilight of the Idols*: "*The disappointed one speaks.* -- I searched for great human beings; I always found only the *apes* of their ideals." In most other novels, Tabor's prolonged syphilitic decay (echoes of Nietzsche) would symbolize his mental and spiritual degeneracy, but in Kohler's world the concept of the "beautiful death" doesn't exist; there is only, as the novel's epigraph blazons, death: "Anaxagoras said to a man who was grieving because he lay dying in a foreign land, 'The descent to hell is the same from every place.'"

Infected with Tabor's "madness," Kohler returns to the United States bearing his mentor's chair (Tabor had made his protégé his heir) and, in Yeats's phrase, "full of passionate intensity." Newly married, he begins his scholarly life with high hopes, aspiring "to climb beyond bias, become Olympian, part the clouds" (337). But, weighted down with piddling duties, a curdling wife, and "cursed" colleagues, he never even gets off the ground.

In addition to Culp, Kohler's colleagues include Planmantee, Governali, and Herschel. The five historians who make up the department represent various current as well as outmoded critical theories, from positivism to relativism to idealism. They also engage in the usual kinds of in-fighting, back-biting, and one-upmanship for which academics are famous; indeed, John Leonard describes *The Tunnel* as "this most savage of academic novels" (390). The one thing they all have in common, however, is smallness:

Why should we not be mediocre men? Culp, a character from the comix, Planmantee, a clothing-store dummy, Governali, some woppy opera's supernumerary, Herschel, the ordinary soul itself, crushed beneath his own benevolence, incontinent, ashamed now of every human function, and I, who configure them all, who have within myself multitudes of such miserable nobodies . . . failures in the forms and futures of their families, among the poorest exemplars of their professions, losers at love -- clowns, wimps, wops, fops, and fatsos -- why not

die here, at this space on the page, in the ceremonies of History. (434)

Kohler's nemesis in the department is Planmantee, a positivist who has it in for Kohler and who derides his colleagues' lack of rigor. Because he approaches history as if it were a science, Planmantee has no tolerance for the lax, ad hoc methods of the others; his positivism, says Kohler, is "a perfect club for the historical bully he would become" (387). He also convenes departmental meetings designed to show up Kohler's dubious methods and his disgraceful treatment of attractive female students -- behavior for which Kohler has a history. On one occasion, Planmantee tells Kohler that the "charges [are] so serious they endanger what little remains of your career" (430). Once again, Kohler has been accused of groping a student and offering her a pass, provided she not spurn his pass, but Kohler can't really see what the fuss is all about. Maddened, he tells the truth about them, and himself:

I'm sick of the space you take up in my life. We are one -- yes -- alike -- alas -- we are all old farts caught in cast-off pants. I differ from each of you only in one detail: that once in a while I take a chance. And I'd blow up the world if given it: that wondrous opportunity to even every score. Oh . . . and your losses are nothing like mine. . . . just think (we members of the better species) what divine sparks we might have played at being, and come and gone with spirit; instead, around us, as before, nobodies killing nobodies for nothing -- oh yes, we know it, what failures we all are. (435)

While Planmantee is a formidable opponent, Herschel and Governali are pathetic figures, unsubstantial, used-up men with antiquated notions about history. Both men betray their senescence by their adherence to obsolescent notions. Just as, in literary studies, the author and the work have been knocked off their pedestals -- since privileging either amounts to a kind of fetishism or deification -- so in the study of history has a similar leveling occurred. Here, also, has the death of the author been proclaimed, but with a difference: whereas in literary studies it refers to the author of texts, in historical studies it pertains to the author of great and decisive deeds. History is now written in the passive voice, the unaccountable agent subordinated to the more "objective" event or result. Yet Herschel and Governali, who swim against the *au courant*, cling to the old-time faith, to history writ large:

History with the great **H**, Governali's Idol, has destroyed tragedy, the epic as well (Sabining the Muses), and only incidentally done in love, marriage, kingship, religion, the Wild West, because heroes are creatures created by ignorance; like infatuations, they are born of hype, of superstition, fraud, as are gods, saints, and movie stars; and they all pass into legend, myth, romance, still further fictions, like clouds into clouds. . . . Do you want to wonder at Albert Schweitzer, Mahatma Gandhi, Churchill, Charles de Gaulle? believe in Washington and play at Lincoln logs? Goody. First put out your eyes: blind, you will dream them clearly. (154)

Herschel's belief in history is revealed when he self-effacingly suggests to Kohler that in his next work he "consider giving . . . giving the big men more weight -- I mean more



attention, you know -- than you did in your first" (307). Kohler remarks upon the irony that a man like Herschel would make such a request: "Even in my books he hopes he and his friends will remain unremarked and unremembered, that no one will recognize or record them" (307).

Kohler's own view of history is not only less aggrandizing, but is as diminished, as banal, as Governali's is grandiose. In one of the examples Kohler provides of his seriocomic lectures -- though he never knows "when the students will walk out on [him] again" (471) -- Kohler draws an extended analogy between war and a marital spat: "Well, class, we were trying to make some sense of the quarrel the last time we met, you may remember, and the reason for our doing that was my belief that war works in history the way the quarrel works in a marriage" (192). This sort of reductionistic comparison also reinforces the connections between the two texts, one public and one private, the latter contained within the former. The implication is that Kohler's own miserable history -- his Dickensian childhood, his sinking career, and his abysmal marriage -- represents a microcosm of the world at large; we are all of us, and are all of us leading, low-lives: "I say our topmost men are pond scum, Herschel, that's my opinion; the rest of us have sour blood, we're dregs, we silt the bottom, we should be poured out" (487).

Not only do the two histories inscribe parallel stories, but they actually, at one historically critical juncture, intersect. The point marks, as Kohler bombastically puts it, the "calamitous events of November ninth to tenth in that yearlong night numbered nineteen hundred and thirty eight" (317). It is the night known to history as Kristallnacht. Kohler was a graduate student at the time, a student of Mad Meg's, and was awakened in the dead of night by the "hubbub" in the street, and after joining the crowd and encountering a couple of fellow students, Kohler proceeds to play his own small, bit part in history. Not wanting the SS to "have all the fun," Kohler hurls two bricks, one through the shop window of a Jewish greengrocer, the other through the shop of "a goy." The chapter closes with the lines, "You see, I said to my cold soul. For my part, it wasn't just Jews" (334). Thus the subject of Kohler's history, *Guilt and Innocence in Hitler's Germany*, comprehends part of his own history -- though in both cases Kohler sees little cause for guilt.

Kohler's sense of solidarity with the Nazis does not stem primarily from bigotry, though he is a bigot, but rather from his view of the Nazis as little men, disappointed people like himself, who, for once, banded together, rose up and struck back. Although Kohler himself yearns to lash out and inflict pain, almost indiscriminately -- "That's how my smile would be, see the rotten spindles? if for the briefest bit of blessed time, I -- my habitually helpless hand -- once -- once -- just once -- held the whip" (367) -- he is too weak and cowardly to do so. Apart from Kristallnacht, Kohler acts out his aggressions only twice, in both cases upon a helpless victim. He not only abuses his wailing son, but strangles his wife's cat and inters the body in the dirt he's planted in her drawers. Kohler, then, is the embodiment of Nietzsche's man of *ressentiment*: a small Furor who bullies creatures even smaller than himself. Since Kohler can't stand to think there might be individuals bigger and better than himself, he cuts everyone down to his own size. History, in this mode, conspires to topple and pull down all the idols peoples have erected

to memorialize the men and events that cast long shadows in their own time and beyond; this sort of history -- which mounts, in effect, a *Putsch* against the past -- is beyond Good and Evil: "So now my book is done: *Guilt and Innocence in Hitler's Germany* needs only its impossible introduction to go forth. And what is all my labor worth? What does my work do but simply remove some of the armor, the glamour, of Evil. It small-*e*'s it" (155).

In his tendency to minimize his subject and its significance, Kohler takes after Culp, his quipping colleague, for both utilize only the lower, more debased register of their chosen media. Culp's use of language corresponds to Kohler's abuse of history. Writing a "limerickal history of the human race," as Culp is doing, amounts to an indictment of humanity, if only in an Horatian vein; it is history as camp. Kohler, by attempting to write off -- or, as Derrida would have it, to place under erasure -- the culpability and wickedness of the Nazis, does much the same thing, though more subversively since his history purports to be factual and "objective." A self-acknowledged "human-racist," Kohler confesses that he writes "to indict mankind" (457). Then again, if man is simply, as Hamlet fears, a "quintessence of dust," the historian has no choice but to dirty himself by sifting through handfuls of dust, delving hellward into the earth. Ah, but Kohler is no Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be; neither is he a Fool, but, rather, a "melancholy Bane." In his efforts to rehabilitate the Nazis, to "small-*e*" their deeds, Kohler demonstrates to what base uses history may be put.

That we are living in fallen, debased times is a recurrent theme of the novel. Language, history, even the younger generation -- all are less than what they used to be. The students that Kohler teaches, as well as his own sons, belong to a generation unique to American history: "I look out at all the upturned smoothy faces in my classes, and I realize . . . that most of these young people will never surpass their parents. At much of anything. Not even par. This is new, I think, in our society" (370). Kohler describes his two sons as "sallow little simps whose skills lie in their range of whines" (465). To Kohler, mankind is quickly becoming, if it has not already become, a race of Lilliputians, and we are all "petty men . . . and peep about to find ourselves dishonorable graves." In its remorselessly demythologizing emphasis, *The Tunnel* might best be described as the novel that attempts, in a single coup, to complete the postmodernist project of dethroning the logocentrism characteristic, some say, of Western thought. Terry Eagleton characterizes logocentrism as a belief in or search for a "transcendental signifier," whether it be "God, the Idea, the World Spirit, [or] the Self" (131). A shadowy figure, Kohler proclaims the twilight of all Idols, all transcendence, especially Language, History, and Love; these things, of which poets used to sing, are small things really: the detritus of shattered Idols. As Kohler insists, needing to believe it, "nothing grandly Greek survives in our time, small men and small minds move mountains with machines" (434).

Concluding his review of *The Tunnel* for the *New York Times Book Review*, Robert Kelly predicts, "It will be years before we know what to make of it" (18). If this is true, as it may be, it's because the novel is as dense (and perhaps as dangerous) as a slug of plutonium. Again a comparison can be drawn between Gass and Joyce, who boasted,

famously, that *Ulysses* would keep the professors busy for years. For those with the patience to dig through it and follow its sordid meanderings, *The Tunnel* will yield a filthy rich mine of material for some time to come. So while it may be too early yet to speak of *the* key, or keystone, to the novel, I would contend that an important key, or mainstay, is this minimizing or be-littling disposition of the narrator's -- which is both a measure of the man and of our times. Yet for those who cannot stomach Kohler's indicting anatomization of American society -- the Visigoths have not only arrived, but are hanging out at the mall -- there is always the plea that his scabrous portrait merely represents a projection of his own small, stunted self.

Indeed, by virtually every measure except his girth, William Frederick Kohler is a small man: a small large man who has written a little big novel. Even his penis is dinky, no bigger than a boy's. In college he was called "Mister Minnow" or "Tiny Tim," and he confesses, with genuine anguish, that "the razzing [he] received was harrowing" (381). Before we can construe Kohler's vermiform "widdler" as a miniature of himself, he beats us to it: "My weenie was, in fact, a little wormlike model of my soul, and whether I had grown like it over time, or it had proved to mimic me, I will never know" (383). Again, Nietzsche's characterization of the man of *ressentiment*, the man driven by jealousy and spite, fits Kohler -- a man who has anointed himself the leader of "the Party of the Disappointing Penis" (384) -- to a (small) tee. Speaking of himself and his kind, Kohler writes: "they are all that sustain you: the record of the crimes against you, the history of your years of endurance, the broken promises you have replaced with the one you've now made to yourself: a kingdom to come, with revenge as reward. That promise and your continued impotence make you patient, very patient, inside the rhetoric of your wrath" (530). This pathological surd, to adopt a Kohlerian word, emanates from a man who, as a historian of the Third Reich, troubles to put himself "in the villains' place" (463).

At the end of *Ulysses*, Leopold Bloom returns home, tells Molly that he expects her to serve him breakfast in bed in the morning, and falls asleep in their bed, at her side. In the famous last section of the novel, we overhear Molly's fluid, unpunctuated thoughts -- a logorrheic log -- including a declaration of her perduring love for her "Poldy." She is, as Nietzsche would put it, a "Yea-Sayer." At the end of *The Tunnel*, in contrast, Martha discovers the dirt moldering in the drawers of her beloved antique pieces, takes an entire drawer, and dumps the dirt onto his manuscript, so that his "life's work lies beneath a heap of yellow, gray, and bluish dirt, under what a hole held, the center of zip" (649). Koh then debates, in Prufrockian fashion, what he shall do; his options, spelled out in the final lines of the novel, are no better than Hamlet's: "Revolver like the Fuhrer near an ear. Or lay my mind down by sorrow's side" (652). The contrasting endings of *Ulysses* and *The Tunnel* underscore the antithetical tonal and conclusory differences between the two novels. Whereas Bloom sleeps beside a wife he loves, Kohler, in a phrase repeated several times in the novel, lies "by sorrow's side." And what if *he* were to demand his breakfast in bed and attempt to fall asleep in Martha's bed (they sleep in separate rooms)? While her unabridged answer would likely be as earthy as Molly Bloom's, her short answer would be, unreservedly, emphatically . . . no.

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