

Sentenced to Sentences . . . Poetry and *The Tunnel**

by Jonathan N. Barron

Living is doing, and dying is what it does; but writing . . . writing is hiding from history, refusing to do any dying . . . writing is lying . . . in wait . . .

- *The Tunnel*

William Gass, consummate formalist, writes a novel dependent on the historical event of the systematic murder of European Jewry. To what purpose? In an interview about *The Tunnel*, Gass, a trained philosopher, a student of metaphor (which determined the very subject of his dissertation), returns to the most fundamental metaphor of them all: words themselves. Asked why he included so much play with typography and other attention-calling visual devices in his novel, Gass responded: "The tension in the word between sound and shape, and then again, between these material elements and the concepts of the mind and their referents in the world, has been a constant concern in my work" (Zeigler 13). What does this mean? Said simply, it means that Gass makes a distinction between the world we inhabit and the various technical means at our disposal for representing that world, techniques that include language itself. For Gass, language, and more specifically written language, is just a machine for meaning, a set of devices, an instrument. He elaborates on this point noting "the very great ontological distance between the conceptual and the actual." In other words, when we render our thoughts -- "the conceptual" -- into words -- "the actual" -- we traverse a huge distance that, despite what many wish to believe, separates what we intend, mean, and think from what we actually write and say. The actual in the form of words never fully embraces the mystery of Being, soul, essence, what Gass calls the conceptual. This assumes, therefore, that words are fundamentally empty constructs: hollow structures that claim to be full of meaning but, in fact, never quite capture what they mean to portray. Said another way, language, grammar, and the instinct to communicate may very well be biologically natural but, when we resort to particular words, embedded as they are in particular cultures, we are as far from nature and biology as are our own computers, the machines most likely today to produce the words we write.

Since this distance between word and world is the fundamental premise behind Gass's sense of fiction, what might happen when a novel, an artificial world of constructs, engages the historical facts of the systematic murder of European Jews? For me, as a reader, that is the central issue of *The Tunnel* (1995) because it raises the stakes on this formalist game to a new ethical plane. In other words, when the book asks fiction to engage history, it pushes the distance between word and world closer together. It all but dares readers to question the very premise of fiction itself, a premise that says fiction has nothing to do with history: a premise that says fiction is mere construct, mere form. To invoke the Holocaust is to ask if fiction can ever really make a truth claim? It is to ask if fiction, from the formalist definition of that genre, can ever apply to the world? For if the very nature of fiction is that it is only artifice, forever self-enclosed, removed, and, finally, irrelevant to the world, then when the world appears in a fiction will it not, in effect, be cancelled out, rendered mute, even irrelevant?

The book raises the question of genre and ethics by manipulating and crossing together the specific rules and techniques not just of fiction but also of three truth-telling genres: autobiography, history, and poetry. In the book's very plot Gass creates genre confusion between fiction and these three discourse systems that claim to have a corner on the truth market. To summarize the plot with genre in mind is merely to articulate the dilemma I am describing in terms of the book itself. In short, the book is supposed to be a secret introduction, an autobiography or memoir, of Frederick Kohler. This memoir, however, is, itself, a secret text interwoven, and hidden between the pages of Kohler's history, *Guilt and Innocence in Hitler's Germany*, which he has, apparently, just finished. If his first person narrative, his autobiography or memoir, is the first truth-telling genre, then the history it introduces, which we occasionally get to read, is the second truth-telling genre of the book. A third truth-telling genre, lyric poetry, is also incorporated into this book.

To say that lyric poetry is, like autobiography and history, a truth-telling genre is itself an arguable point. Suffice to say that I must simply ask readers' indulgence and call on them to accept this premise as an accurate summary of contemporary genre theory. That theory does read lyric poetry as the name we assign to the genre that speaks to the truth of the emotional, ontological, experiential self. To offer at least a glimmer of evidence though I turn to Rainer Maria Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*. Writing to a young poet, Rilke says: "This most of all: ask yourself in the most silent hour of your night: must I write? Dig into yourself for a deep answer. And if this answer rings out in assent, if you meet this solemn question with a strong, simple 'I must,' then build your life in accordance with this necessity . . . And if out of this turning-within, out of this immersion in your own world, poems come, then you will not think of asking anyone whether they are good or not . . . A work of art is good if it has arisen out of necessity. That is the only way one can judge it" (7-9). From Rilke, then, one might best understand lyric poetry as the inward turn one makes in order to express one's deepest self, one's "heart." Poetry, in effect, is the tunnel one makes into the cave of the self.

Poetry, autobiography, and history as truth-telling genres, however, are each embedded in a work of fiction. Because the final genre, as it were, is fiction, no other genre can speak the truth, for the genre demands of fiction ought to cancel them out. This, I believe, is the test Gass sets for fiction. He troubles its waters with the invocation of other genres and, particularly with history and poetry, with other facts that those genres must, by definition, introduce. The ethical question this test asks is an urgent one: does it mute, even neutralize every fact, even the last century's murder of the Jews during the Second World War? Are facts, when found in a novel, mere artifice? It is as if Gass had asked himself the following question: If one writes a novel about a man who frankly admires Hitler, and if one lovingly details that man's own bigotry, happily citing a variety of Anti-Semitic limericks, is one, in writing that novel, as far from engaging the historical facts of Hitler and Anti-Semitism as one would be having not written anything at all? To say this another way, has Gass proven that no matter what subject a novel takes on it will always and forever be just a novel? Is one, by merely writing sentences, "sentenced to sentences"? Is one because of the law of fiction kept in a prison house of language

forever distanced and removed from the world? No matter what the facts of the world one engages? Does *The Tunnel*, once again, prove that fiction is merely fiction, or does it, at last, find a way for fiction to engage its double, its mirror: the world?

The answer would seem to be no because from a formalist perspective, fiction, no matter what its subject, can have no claim, no philosophical ground, to make a case about anything beyond itself. What follows logically from this is that no fiction can have any impact on the entirely different generic demands of ethical and moral judgements. Gass tests this definition by engaging a historical moment, through the stylistic devices of three truth-telling genres (poetry, autobiography, history) and, at the same time, clearly endorsing a Nazi ideology. In so doing, Gass's character demands that each reader break the frame. It would be a cold-hearted reader indeed who would not want to pass judgement on this character and his beliefs. I, for one, am all but goaded into reading him as the deeply unethical, hateful, petty little monster that he is. Kohler's words, and his deeds as represented in these words, demand my ethical, moral reaction. Yet the instant I, or any reader, does judge Kohler, she or he fails the novel's test. For to apply the moral standards of the ethical world outside the book is, on its face, absurd, just as it would be absurd to do so for any fiction. After all, it's only a novel.

But the novel itself makes an almost constant case against its own fictive status. Again and again, the main character, Kohler, insists on the facts of his existence. He is a historian, and he writes about himself in the first person. Yet no matter how many technical devices Gass deploys none can hide the fact that there is no Kohler: he is just a character. As if to increase rather than decrease the tension between fiction and the world, the book's title itself raises the same set of issues. As it turns out, *The Tunnel* was an actual film that made such an impression on Hitler, according to the very unreliable former friend of the Nazi dictator, that it inspired in him the idea for the Nazi party itself (Zeigler 16). Like Hitler seeing his Tunnel, Kohler, in his own Tunnel, is also inspired to form a political party, the Party of the Disappointed People, complete with symbols, uniforms and the like. To make this mirroring even more complex, the film named *The Tunnel* was itself not an original work but was rather a re-telling, in a new genre (film), of an even earlier fiction, a novel. In other words, Gass's book's title mirrors the title of a movie based on a novel that is said by someone, in a memoir, to have been the inspiration for the Nazi party, itself a weird fiction, a bizarre story purporting to be the one true story of Germany. Yet the claim for this inspiration has itself since been discredited.

Furthermore, not only does the title of Gass's book press the problem of representing the world to another breaking point but so too do the details of many of the events and circumstances of the main character's life. As it turns out, Kohler's story contains numerous and striking similarities to the biography of William Gass. He himself has said, "the resemblances between myself and my narrator are wholly trivial, I think, but I did emphasize them in order to test the reader's sophistication (a test many reviewers failed)" (Zeigler 19).

In other words, both the facts behind the title, and the details of Kohler's life lead readers to the same conclusion: no matter how much one may wish to bridge the gap between the

world and fiction, ultimately, fiction will triumph, and the world as we know it will vanish. No matter how close the connection may be between the world of truth and the world of fiction, nothing will alter fiction's basic premise: a novel will always be no more and no less than a novel. It is a tautology designed to erase all other external meaning; like a black hole it sucks meaning into its vortex and crushes it.

Despite all of this, I believe that *The Tunnel* is not just another death jolt to the novel: it is not just another formalist game insisting on the gulf between word and world. Instead, I believe that, of all the truth-telling genres opposed to the laws of fiction set into this book, only lyric poetry has the ability to move outside of the fiction, and, thanks to lyric poetry, the book, despite its fiction, can engage the ethical problems that define our world. In what follows, then, I turn to the poetry of this book in order to offer a far more affirmative reading of it than is generally thought possible.

Ultimately, I believe that by incorporating lyric poetry into his fiction, Gass establishes a new meta-genre that one might simply call, "the book." The book, as a new meta-genre, is a final set incorporating all the other sets, all the other genres, and, as such, it allows "the actual" and "the conceptual" to meet, to clash, and, in the resulting chaos of explosive contact to reveal, if only between the lines, the ethical, moral truths of our world outside of the book: through the intervention of lyric poetry the discourse of ethics, morality, and the conceptual might be witnessed by readers if only briefly, and, as it were, not in language but through it.

In the interview about *The Tunnel* to which I have been referring Gass explains: "My book is another book about human bondage. Political fascism is physically brutal. The fascism of the heart is a corrupt state of feeling, a realm of impotent resentment" (19). In this response, Gass tells his interviewer that his book does have a theme, a subject of great importance to ethical, moral discourse, to the world lived outside of books, and novels: "the fascism of the heart" and "human bondage" are decidedly anti-formalist concerns not bound simply to the stylistic techniques that produce them. Let me, then, analyze Gass's comment more fully. Readers already familiar with Gass's work know that, for him, the first potential bondage, or tyranny, is to be found in words which, by definition, lie, or mislead because they never fully express the concept or thing they are meant to convey. Yet paradoxically there does exist one genre, lyric poetry, that does make extraordinary claims to "authenticity," or what I am calling "truth." Lyric poetry, by its own generic definition, claims to represent accurately and authentically the emotional experiential facets of Being, of being human. In this particular phrase of his that I am quoting, Gass does not mention the word poetry but he does say that there is a difference between "political fascism" and a "fascism of the heart." It seems to me, then, that if fiction is entirely artifice, then poetry, fiction's generic opposite, is the one genre that admits its own artifice in order the better to tell the truth and break out of the formalist frame. In effect, Gass here is making concrete the distinction between the conceptual (the heart) and the actual (politics). The genre that comes closest to the conceptual of all the genres available, I would argue, is lyric poetry. If, then, inside our consciousness, in our thoughts, one finds an experience that Gass here names the "fascism of the heart," only poetry has, by definition, the generic equipment to discuss such a state of feeling because,

by definition, it purports to address real human experience, not fictive creations, in words. In *The Tunnel*, and in genre theory more generally, the only language system suited to divulging and attempting an expression of such a state of feeling is poetry. By contrast, the outward manifestation of such interiority, politics, is the proper province of history. When, therefore, Gass says that "the fascism of the heart is a corrupt state of feeling" he implies that his own book means to examine, even represent, such a "state of feeling." No novel, by Gass's own terms, could do this for us, as people: it could only do this for a character in a weird parallel non-universe. By contrast, the lyric poem claims to reveal the human not the fictive person. And, in Gass's book, poetry, not fiction, finally reveals the truth of the heart.

To say this, though, is to raise an even more troubling and important ethical test. For if poetry is that expression of the soul, and the soul, by definition is that pure thing, that essentially human quality beyond all containment, then how can poetry, the genre of purity, expose a corrupt, guilty, fascist heart? In other words, will the conceptual realm that is "fascism of the heart" triumph over the purity of experience, the ethical goodness that poetry claims to possess? If one associates the lyric poet with the fascist heart, will poetry be the one to suffer? In this rare case will truth triumph over form? Will poetry succumb to the fascist heart or will that heart be redeemed, made pure, through the formal agency of the poem?

In my reading of *The Tunnel*, lyric poetry triumphs over the fascist heart. Ironically, paradoxically, even bizarrely, lyric poetry manages to redeem, rescue and humanize the fictive character Kohler, and, in so doing, it redeems, humanizes, and makes ethics possible for the purported fiction to which Kohler belongs. By its mere existence, lyric poetry, as a formal expression for pure Being, by definition, humanizes Kohler. For him to be a lyric poet, is for him to reject his fascist heart. Not to do so would defy the law of genre and in this case, Kohler does not deny that law. When he says he is a poet, he is one.

Among the many objections one might raise to this perspective is the formalist case against all language systems. Are they not all fundamentally artificial, is not even poetry a mere system of rules for words? Certainly, no language can offer a transparent glass allowing readers to witness the experiential reality of the inner life. To this objection I must reiterate that what saves lyric poetry from the "error of transparency" is the fact that, unlike other genres, it never makes any attempt to be transparent. Poetry wears its artifice on its sleeve. Its various forms call attention to its material facts: poems announce their existence as mere words simply in the look they have on the page, line breaks alone prevent readers from falling into the mimetic trap of transparency.

Turning now to *The Tunnel* one finds that poetry asserts itself throughout its pages. Specifically, poetry asserts itself as buried allusion, as direct quotation, and as original composition. In what follows, I look only at a place in the book where all three manifestations of poetry blend in a weird hybrid. In this blending section of the book, for example, Kohler often repeats the following phrase: "I left poetry for history in my youth" (635). In this sentence, Kohler defines himself retrospectively, even nostalgically,

as a poet, or, at least, as a would-be poet. In making this assertion, Kohler trades identities; he moves from historian to poet. I believe that this new poetic identity, coming at the end of his narrative, has the effect of redeeming, even slightly modifying Kohler's "fascism of the heart." In making this announcement, in other words, Kohler judges himself. To say he was once a poet, or should have been a poet, is another way for him to say that he is sorry who he is, that he regrets what he has done with his life. It is to establish a hierarchy of ethical identities: it is a way to make the poet a more morally sound identity than historian. In making this judgement, Kohler liberates himself from the deeply unethical "fascism" of his own words, work, and heart.

This redemptive reading depends entirely on the context for the announcement, "I left poetry for history in my youth." As it turns out, this statement comes at the end of the book in the section titled, "Outcast on the Mountains of the Heart." This section title, meanwhile, is itself a quotation from the German poet, Rainer Maria Rilke. Of all the book's section titles, this is the most obviously poetic. And, of all the lines of Rilke to employ, this one, "Outcast on the Mountains of the Heart," is particularly appropriate to Kohler. As if to insist on its appropriateness, the title is twice used. It names not one but two sections of the book, one following after the other. Also, this is a decidedly ironic title if for no other reason than the fact that Kohler is not a character given to much meditating on the heart -- his or anyone else's. Yet in the sections of the book that follow from these titles, Kohler does examine, or at least he describes, his own emotions, particularly his feelings as a boy in his particular family. The two metaphors -- "mountains" and "heart" -- do suit Kohler's experience quite well. And, I suppose, even the word "outcast" is a metaphor in the fundamental sense of that term as understood by Gass. Therefore, the metaphorical meaning of the title is that the heart, Kohler's emotions, his interior space, the conceptual realm of Being, is so large, so vast, that it becomes, as it were, a chain of mountains. But in those mountains, in that interior realm of the conceptual, Kohler finds himself in exile, an outcast. Like T.S. Eliot's own Kohleresque character, Prufrock, Kohler is ultimately alienated from his own emotional life, his own consciousness. To be outcast within one's own heart, to feel isolated, alone, not quite at home even in one's own consciousness, this, certainly, is a terrible thing. The irony, though, is that Rilke's poetry here has quite literally named the experience of the fiction. And the experience is so vast, so important, that it must be named twice. This is ironic because a real poet, speaking of authentic experiences and emotions, here names the condition of a fictive character.

Turning now to the section that follows the first use of this poetic title, one finds three set pieces that, when analyzed, offer a psychobiography, a fiction, for Kohler's own alienation. In these set pieces, Kohler, the historian, goes back to his origins, his youth, as a way of tracing, and discovering, the meaning and cause of his present sense of alienation. In the first piece, "Aunts," he returns to the days when his aunt and his grandmother were familiar figures in his childhood home: in this piece, Kohler returns to his past, to "[t]he things that recollect us" (586). He tells us that he, the historian-detective, will find the cause of his own disease: "Historians should keep our vagrant habits in mind, for, on the whole, we don't remember the crowning of kings or financial panics . . . but tacky key rings made of building products instead . . ." (586). In effect, he

forsakes the grand narrative of traditional history for the petty details of minor lives like his own.

Although he then recalls the impact of both Aunt and Granny, his most significant recollection is of hiding in a big trunk; he recalls locking himself away just as now, as he writes these words, he locks himself in the present tense of the book, and just as he so often, in the course of writing this book, locks himself away in his own tunnel in the basement. When he was just a kid, though, he had no grand theories or explanations for digging tunnels in the basement, or even for locking himself away. Back then, as he says, hiding in the trunk was just a "kid's game, of course" (590). But, as he says, "I would later realize" that this experience "was the philosopher's concept of pure extension, *res extensa*; yes, that's how I felt about it, not knowing the words, but, just the same, it would be magical indeed to be there, being Being without being this or that (writing about it now, I realize, makes my mind and memory German)" (590). This sentence does not end here but let me stop it to analyze its implications. First, notice that the experience of isolation in the midst of such clearly dysfunctional and upsetting family dynamics is associated with a transcendent philosophical experience: it bears a striking resemblance to freedom as theorized in the German idealist philosophical tradition. Also, previous to this recollection, Kohler, throughout the book, has been denying his Germanic qualities, claiming instead that his roots lay in a decidedly American middle west. But here, under the title of a German poem in the name of a German poet who belongs to the romantic and modernist continuation of the idealist tradition of Kant's philosophy, Kohler does affiliate himself with Germany. When he says that his "mind and memory" are German, he means to flip from his earlier position, he means even sarcastically to deny the previous denial. At the same time, to claim affiliation to the Germany of Kant and Rilke is to affirm German innocence not guilt. For by associating himself with the work of Rilke and Kant, men who could not possibly be directly associated with the Shoah, Kohler, as it were, humanizes himself by associating his mind with pre-Hitlerian Germany. What's more, this experience of non-alienated, pure transcendent emotion -- no fascism here -- is beyond and without language: it is pure feeling, an experience of the conceptual in the raw. The sentence continues: "yes, that's how I felt about it, having no metaphysics, simply sensing it as exceeding any symbol of inwardness" (590). This ability to exceed any symbol, I would argue, is also the chief triumph of Rilke's own poetry, and the point to which Kantian idealism, and Heidegger's challenge to that idealism, means to arrive. It is a brief glimpse of the idealist, human being behind the fictive fascist.

The second set-piece, "Mother Makes a Cake," has, so far, received the most critical attention of the many instances Kohler recalls at the book's end. Certainly, this section is the book's most affecting moment. In it, Kohler describes the non-birthday party he had when his mother, too drunk to mail the invitations, forgot that she had forgotten, and so prepared a failed cake and decorated a house all of which merely deflated an already shaky self-esteem in the small boy. Recalling the whole horrible event now, as an adult, Kohler claims to have been relieved. Who needs guests? he asks. In such self-protective, misanthropic comments one is made witness to the bigot, the admirer of Hitler, the fascist heart. As he says, "'Guest' is a treacherous word. A guest is an ungrateful gobbler" (609).

But the context of this episode -- following from "Aunts" and placed under the sign of Rilke -- demands that readers psychologize Kohler's pain and explain his defensive retreat, his misanthropy, even his adult version of the childhood trunk, his tunnel. Reading this one cannot help but say, "Aha, no wonder you hid in the trunk when you were a boy!" And, since the child is father to the man, no wonder he hides now in his tunnel. In other words, these episodes offer psychological explanations for Kohler's "fascism of the heart": reading them one can say that his emotional life as man is a direct result of an alcoholic mother and a mean-spirited father.

As if to insist further on this story, the third and final set-piece, "Blood on the Living Room Floor," depicts both his mother's menstrual bleeding, and her adulterous affair. In this section, we are made witness to his mother's psyche, and to his father's medical condition. In this section, too, Kohler, the fifteen year-old boy, finds that he is the one who must sign the papers that would institutionalize his alcoholic mother. Also, in this section, a crossword puzzle is literally super-imposed over what are perhaps the most angry, honest, and plain-spoken words of the entire book. Through the muddy lens of the crossword puzzle we read: "I was only fifteen, god damn it, why did I have to visit him in his hospital, her in hers" (627). This I believe is the emotional center for Kohler: it is a place of almost pure existential pain, a place where the most distance is necessary. By superimposing a crossword puzzle on top of these words, Kohler is all but saying that if one can connect, as in a crossword, this to that, then, one will get the answer one needs, one will solve the problem. But, as in a crossword puzzle, such connections are merely arbitrary, constructed, fictive to the last. Kohler's crossword allusion means to mock, even subvert, the historical project of this entire three-part section, "Outcast on the Mountains of the Heart." Superimposing the crossword puzzle over this authentic moment tells us that, finally, the historian of the heart is but a mere puzzle-master. This allusion undermines his professional identity as a historian rendering it inherently false. The crossword puzzle allusion transforms the historian into just another novelist; only in this case the novelist, as historian, refuses to accept the fictive nature of his work. At the end of this section, then, recalling the events he has depicted Kohler has not succeeded in explaining the cause of his condition: he merely reiterated long suppressed instances of nightmare and dysfunction.

How appropriate that poetry should name this section, that it should offer the sign under which all else must follow. For lyric poetry, particularly Rilke's poetry, is not about knowledge, story-lines, historical cause-and-effect linearity but rather it is only about revelation. Rilke's lyrics, in other words, are only metaphors; they refer only to the poet's own heart. Unlike Rilke's poetry, Kohler's historical autobiographical attempt to tell his own story fails because it depends on fiction for its structure. Kohler the historian demands that his own story be one of cause and effect but he can't accept its own conclusion, its own plot. In the end he fails to find any cause and proves to himself only the bitter and useless fact that he has a clever ability to connect down with across.

Poetry does not just name this section; it also appears in an oblique but powerful allusion, (a technique I find again and again in *The Tunnel*). Intentionally or not -- it doesn't matter -- this section does allude to Allen Ginsberg's great poem, "Kaddish." In that poem,

Ginsberg depicts the moment when, at age fifteen, he signed the papers not only to admit his mother to a mental hospital but to enable the doctors there to lobotomize her. Intended or not, the parallel to Kohler's drama is striking. As an allusion, however, it has a double-edged effect. First, it subverts the truth-value of Kohler's scene by mirroring it with a real man named Ginsberg who did have this same experience, and who then wrote a poem about it: a poem, moreover, that rejects thematization and the tyranny of proper names. Kohler's attempt at telling his truth is subverted by this allusion because, Ginsberg, as a real person, only foregrounds the fiction that is Kohler. On the other hand, the allusion to "Kaddish" does paradoxically enhance Kohler's experience because it reminds the reader of a real-life analogue to Kohler, an analogue available in a powerful lyric poem. The allusion to Ginsberg's poem, therefore, both calls into question the truth of Kohler's narrative and subverts his own subversion of it. Kohler wants to distance himself from the emotion of pain he reveals so he sarcastically reduces it to a crossword puzzle. The allusion to Ginsberg, however, insists that such pain is real, does happen, has happened, and can be expressed. The effect of this allusion to Ginsberg, then, is to emphasize the experiential realm over and above the thematizing and fictive realms of such narrative genres as history and autobiography. At the same time, it also insists on the authenticity of such a realm. The Ginsberg allusion and this section as a whole insist on the power, authenticity, and, to use Rilke's word, "necessity" of lyric poetry. This section all but demands one forsake fiction for something else if one means to chart the mountains of the heart.

The concluding section of the book follows directly from this section and it too has the title, "Outcast on the Mountains of the Heart." In it Kohler focuses entirely on his own sense of identity as a would-be, or should-have-been, poet. In so doing, this final section offers a genuine narrative conclusion to the book. Here, Kohler does write himself an ending to his story, for when he meditates on his own identity as a poet, he concludes his narrative chain by moving from origin to maturity. In effect, he has told his readers what he wanted to be, what he is now, and his views about what he is now. The plot, simply stated, has provided us with a guilty, fascist heart. In the section just analyzed Kohler attempts to explain that heart and fails. He fails, however, only because stories as such, narrative genres as but species of fiction, fail to deliver anything by formal laws: they allow for no ethical or moral claims. They have no power to grant mercy or redemption. In this final section, then, Kohler turns to the one genre that does claim to offer redemption, even mercy, lyric poetry. His turn to poetry marks a fit conclusion to this plot because poetry enables him to purge even to redeem the guilty outcast on the mountains of the heart. His turn to poetry reminds him of his own humanity, of his own inner good nature. In particular, the section's allusion to Rilke sets the guilty Germany of Hitler against the innocent Germany of Rilke. If the majority of Kohler's book depicts his guilt, racism, and bigotry -- his "fascism of the heart" -- then this final section, this final "Outcast on the Mountains of the Heart," redeems that guilt by a return to the genres of historical innocence. Specifically, Kohler returns to the innocence of Rilke's first poetry. In this section, Kohler does not turn to his past; instead he turns to specific poems.

After a first reading of this section, one would likely assume that Kohler is here quoting his own poetry: a series of songs beginning with "The Beggar's Song." These poems, and

his announcement that his real identity is poetic all mean to argue, through the device of poetry as a genre, for his own innocence. In fact, however, Kohler is quoting, or varying, or not quite translating, Rilke's poems as published in his *The Book of Pictures* (1902; 1906), one of the very first books of poems Rilke ever published.

This turn to poetry is a classically fictive maneuver, for by turning to Rilke Kohler provides an answer to the problem of his guilty character. In poetry, he will find his pure self, and, in so doing, he will reassert his own humanity, his own innocence. In other words, why should one see redemption and a break from the law of the novel here? Why is not even this plot turn merely a nice trick of fiction? Because this plot turn is not about Kohler. When Kohler incorporates Rilke's poems he doubles up with Rilke. In that crossing, in that contact, Rilke, the man and his poetry, trump Kohler and his Tunnel. Translating Rilke's words into his own makes it possible for Kohler to express his interior conceptual life: to speak Being. It may be ugly, it may be perverse, but it is not, for all that, inhuman.

Here, the main character's poetry (which is really a translation/variation of Rilke's) breaks the fiction's frame. Even without the allusion and quotation of Rilke, Kohler's announcement that he had forsaken his historical, narrative identity in favor of a poetic one would have rendered him, paradoxically and ironically, more real than anything else. Simply by calling himself a lyric poet he would have humanized himself in his own fiction. But when he alludes to Rilke, when he uses Rilke, when Rilke invades this book, readers are able to engage Rilke's ethical, moral themes. His poetry allows readers to do what the fiction prohibits. Under the sign of Rilke all is allowed. Under the sign of Kohler nothing is possible. Even though the fiction makes the turn to poetry necessary: it is, after all, a fit conclusion to the story. That story is challenged, derailed, made more than just a mere set of forms by the quotation, translation of Rilke's poetry. Specifically, the final section begins with two poems, "The Beggar's Song" and "The Idiot's Song," both of which are variation/translations, even commentaries, on Rilke's "Beggar's" and "Idiot's Songs." Here is the first stanza of Kohler's "The Idiot's Song":

They don't stop me. I go as I go.

They say nothing can happen to one as me.

I ho ho. I tee hee.

How good. I go. I'm free. (634)

By contrast, here is Rilke's first stanza in Stephen Mitchell's translation:

They're not in my way. They let me be.

They say nothing can happen to me.

How good.

Nothing can happen. All things flow
from the holy ghost, and they come and go
around that particular Ghost (you know) -- ,

How good. (Mitchell, 19)

In his variation of this stanza, Kohler already makes a commentary on it. By dropping the reference to the Holy Ghost, Kohler subtly retains his own cynicism, demonstrating by

this exclusion his own lack of faith. But erasing faith from Rilke is unnecessary since Rilke's poem itself mocks such optimistic belief. Rilke's most cynical and wonderful moment occurs in the stanza's last line which in German reads: "wie gut." This "how good," twice repeated accents the cynicism. Kohler, however, turns that line into a nervous, even bizarre giggle: "tee hee." I read Kohler's "tee hee" as an indication of his nervous excitement at composing poetry again. In poetry, at last, he is freed from the yoke of narrative (fiction, memoir, history). But at the same time, the freedom of the lyric, its ability to reveal one's self is potentially frightening since there is nothing to stop him from revealing his own alienated "outcast" status. Or, would only an idiot think this? How distanced is Kohler from the poem's speaker, the poem's title character? Where is the idiocy? Is the poem's mockery of faith itself being mocked? Is Rilke saying, in effect, that only an idiot would lack faith? Or, is the idiocy Kohler's own "tee hee" of freedom? After all, only an idiot would think a fictional character could be made free by a poem. Sentenced to sentences how free does he think he will he ever be?

After printing his version of "The Idiot's Song," Kohler tells us: "I left poetry for history in my youth" (635). A close look at this sentence reveals the genre play it contains. For in this simple sentence, one finds four genres: history, poetry, fiction, book. The meta-genre, Gass's book, contains a fiction about a historian who wanted to be and thought (thinks) of himself as a poet. In this sentence, however, the genres are not equal. In it, poetry challenges history. The sentence implies that poetry was the better option and that Kohler made a mistake. The fact that Kohler's poems allude to Rilke's merely underlines the conceptual force, the "truth" that poetry, unlike history, would allow one to speak. Kohler says as much himself after he prints his "Idiot's Song." Following the poem, he writes: "I left poetry for history in my youth. A terrible turning. I've no excuse." In the previous section, as I have explained above, Kohler, rather than find a cause or an excuse in history, recognized, instead, that history as such was just another fiction, a crossword puzzle. To offer an excuse for his turn to history then would be to seek once again for a cause, a connection, a story, and this he resolutely refuses now to do. Instead, he simply explains why he had to forsake a career as a poet:

My rhymes clanged predictably, my meters were military, my metaphors fled the mind like frightened mice, assonance sent good sense to sleep, and though my alliteration was lively, its lilt always arrived on the wrong night, trilling when despair was my so-called subject, hissing when there was actually nothing to fear, peppering pages which had planned on being bland with a sudden seasoning, mumbling when the night was supposed to be clear. (635)

This passage, one need hardly add, is wonderfully poetic, and supremely ironic. Its stylistic techniques contradict every stylistic point it makes. In this stylistic denial, for example, Kohler proves that he never really did leave poetry at all. In this very paragraph, he proves he is a master of meter, metaphor, alliteration, assonance, the appropriate image. He is, in short, a poet.

As if to prove what a poet he is, he offers his readers another poem, "The Dwarf's Song." This poem plays off of Rilke's "The Dwarf's Song" from *The Book of Pictures*. Rilke's version, in the Stephen Mitchell translation, begins: "My soul itself may be straight and

good;/ ah but my heart, my bent over blood" (Mitchell 21). Kohler's version reads:

My soul may be large and full,
as they say,
as good as any and as pure,
but my heart is a withered pippin. (636)

This is hardly a literal translation (unlike Mitchell's translation it takes enormous liberties) but it does retain the sense of the original. Rilke's three stanza poem ends questioning why God even bothered to make a dwarf: "Is it because he's angry at me," asks the dwarf in Mitchell's translation. Thinking of his face, the dwarf says that no one ever comes near him except for "die gosßen Hunde." This big dog, he concludes, "haben das nicht" -- it does not have anything for him. By contrast, Kohler's third and final stanza begins: "God must hate my misshapen feet/.../my disgraced face." In his version, the "big dogs who slobber too" "couldn't care less how either of us looks." In Rilke's poem, at least a dog might give him something (itself an ironic cynical statement.). But in Kohler's version, the possibility that something, anything might exist to give him what he needs is erased. Kohler, in this poem, expresses his heart and he does so through Rilke.

In this final section, Kohler also gives us his version of Rilke's "The Blind Man's Song." Here, the changes are particularly telling. Rilke's poem, in the Mitchell translation, begins: "I am blind. You outsiders it is a curse." Kohler's, by contrast, says, "I'm blind. You there. That's a curse" (637). Mitchell's is clearly the more accurate translation given the fact that where Mitchell says "outsiders" Rilke says, "draußen." Kohler simply says "you." In so doing, he implicates each and every reader. Only the sighted reader could actively read this song. To be blind, particularly in the metaphysical sense of following the wrong road, of adopting the truth system of history when one should have been a poet, is perhaps the most devastating identity for Kohler. Following this song, in fact, he offers his readers his most extended meditation on poetry itself: "Poets are neither born nor made nor found in the field like the ash of a fallen star. There are no poets, there are only poems. But in my youth I wished to be a poet. Then I might write poems" (637). Here, Kohler explains that the poem, for him, does come from the conceptual; it does take the reader outside of a narrative's borders. "Yes," he tells us, "I had begun life with the poet's outlook, in the celebrational mode, for the poet cannot do otherwise than praise, even if, in a momentary slough of despond . . . he thinks of ending his miserable life" (638). Kohler then offers us "The Suicide's Song" and says: "The pedestrian viewpoint now in vogue insists that you become a poet by writing poems. How else did Rilke become the author of the *Duino Elegies* or *these songs which I enjoy double-crossing*" (639, my emphasis).

Kohler's double-crossing of Rilke is also the book's double-crossing of fiction with poetry, of the conceptual and the actual, of the real with the fantastic. But this double-cross is also just what the pun implies: a fake-out, a lie. In its pretense to mere verbal play, this book gives us an authentic feeling. The novel double-crosses us, as readers, when it gives us Rilke instead of Kohler. But was not the first double-cross Rilke's? After all, his own poems are called "songs," and they are part of a *Book of Pictures*? Already,

in other words, Rilke set his own poems against those other art forms with pretensions towards conceptual truth. By referring to those Rilke poems, by quoting Rilke's own double-cross, Kohler sets all of the various arts, music, painting, poetry, fiction (narrative) against each other. After "The Suicide's Song," Kohler explains: "History cannot be revised and requires no pronunciation. Only the history of history has the advantage, as Mad Meg so often said. Done, it's done. Living is doing, and dying is what it does; but writing . . . writing is hiding from history, refusing to do any dying . . . writing is lying . . . in wait . . ." (641). To write, particularly to write a poem, places one in an eternal time-zone of a never-ending present: there, one lies in wait. Sitting still, in the tunnel of one's words, one lies, one double-crosses: to wait is to be unable to tell the truth, to lie. Yet to lie in wait is merely to await the moment when a revelation will assert itself. The book is just a fiction. But Rilke's poetry, his great *Duino Elegies* in particular, offer something more. In the "Tenth Elegy," one reads: "Einsam steigt er dahim, in die Berge des Ur-Leids": These "Berge," these mountains built of "Ur-Leids," of the first, ordinary sad songs, become expressions of grief, not of fascism, and might not such grief in the form of mountains take a commanding precedence over fiction's tunnel? Even Kohler concludes, "So I was slow to realize how poetry created a permanent and universal present like a frieze of stone . . ." (642). In the heart of the heart of this fiction, one finds the magic mountain of poetry, not just a present, a gift.

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