

## Confronting *The Tunnel*: History, Authority, Reference

by Melanie Eckford-Prossor

In some ways, *The Tunnel* perfectly completes Gass's triptych: his earlier works dealt with philosophy and fiction; with this novel he moves to fiction and history, thus completing his passage across the three traditional fields of the humanities: philosophy, literature, history. Gass explicitly discusses his interest in history. He has "described *The Tunnel* as an exploration of 'the inside of history' -- the ambiguity and confusion hidden beneath any intellectual attempt at understanding the past" (Kelly 5). Gass proceeds to explain his point by attacking -- and over-simplifying -- historians' use of narrative: "Historians tend to want to create a narrative, to make the world along the lines of the so-called realistic novels of the nineteenth century that pretended the world has meaning, that there are heroes and heroines and climaxes . . . . I happen to believe in none of that, so I feel my book is real realism: there's contradiction and confusion and deliberate darkness" (Kelly 5). That "darkness" can be found interleaved within the pages of the fictional work of history, *Guilt and Innocence in Hitler's Germany*. These interleaved pages range across a number of genres and issues: testimony, autobiography, narrative, philosophical meditations, questions about the nature of history, thoughts about the death of a mentor. Together they comprise the autobiography of the fictional character William Frederick Kohler. Phrased this way, my sentence's logic aims to clarify the different genres cohabiting in *The Tunnel*. The sentence appears to render *The Tunnel* connected and coherent -- a feeling perhaps not shared by all of its readers, for whom encountering *The Tunnel* is very much like walking into an unknown opening. Where we are or how to navigate through this tunnel is not easily answered. Indeed, the biggest question challenging the reader of *The Tunnel* might well be "What is it?" The question is both ontological -- a question about the Being of the novel -- and epistemological -- a question about how discipline and genre change knowledge. These are important questions because linking the novel to a field or genre determines expectations, which in turn can change interpretations of the text. Further, determinations about genre present potential danger since they manipulate the thin membrane between fiction and nonfiction: a reader could determine that *The Tunnel* is an autonomous work of fiction that, as a work of fiction, exists as a self-created world. Indeed, this is the position toward fiction that Gass advocates in *The World Within the Word*, especially "The Ontology of the Sentence, or How to Make a World of Words."

Within the pantheon of Gass's fiction, *The Tunnel*'s unusualness derives from its explicit extra-textual referents: World War II, Hitler, Nazism. Such extra-textual referents import with them an ironic edge, making *The Tunnel* not a grand work of modernist metaphor, but an ironic work which ultimately fossilizes into historical artifact. But William Gass has spent much time, space, and energy asserting a separation between fiction and the world, and a lot of people, including reviewers of *The Tunnel*, have at least half-heartedly recognized this demand (see Kelly and Manning), despite persistent questions about the role and power of the author for at least the past thirty years. Nevertheless, when Gass

invokes the Holocaust and fascism, he goes too far, ultimately exposing the limits of his aesthetic theory. By using these events in fiction, and by having Kohler narrate them, he shifts the focus of his fiction from the world of words -- the Gassian obsession with sentences made so beautifully that they are models of worlds -- to the broad and difficult terrain of the separation of fiction from history and the use and consequence of narrative. Further, the difficulty posed by the novel is its ironizing of fascism, a position which demands the reader confront both the concepts and kinds of history as well as the consequence of genre. Irony cannot be avoided. It arises from the choice to recognize the extra-textual as textual, to refuse the injunction to be caught in a web of words.

How, then, are we to understand the aesthetic within *The Tunnel*? In fascism, the aesthetic is often figured as an aesthetic of the monstrous -- monstrous on a literal level in which the actions taken against Nazi enemies defy categories of horror -- but monstrous, too, in terms of Nazism's attacks on art itself. Those attacks took the form of exhibitions of what the Nazis called "degenerate" art, which they "hung" on the walls in random patterns, scrunching work against work, ridiculing art by violating how art is (literally) seen in museums: the aesthetics of art movements such as German Expressionism were ridiculed as "degenerate," as too were the artists, whose degeneracy derived from their political positions to their religion to their sexuality. Given the history of fascism's reception of experimental art which challenged the norms, how should readers who object to *The Tunnel* because it challenges the "norms" of understanding the Holocaust or the depiction of women proceed in objecting to *The Tunnel*? By questioning the aesthetics of *The Tunnel*, do we, ironically, place ourselves in the role of the German public who came to the exhibition to ridicule the artists? Do we place ourselves in the position of the Nazi curators of the exhibit who rejected this art because it violated their ideology? To respond to these questions we must confront what I call Gass's aesthetics of separation, composed of his theory of metaphor and his idea of fictional worlds as self-contained models of worlds. This aesthetics of separation can be seen clearly in an interview with Gass in which he discusses the work of John (Jack) Hawkes: responding to a question about the subject matter of *The Tunnel*, Gass explains that he is "not trying to take on the Holocaust. It's just the background. . . . I am interested in the same kind of problem Jack Hawkes came up against in *Virginie*: to see whether or not one could write beautifully about the grotesque, the sexually grotesque" (Saltzman 24-25). Gass elaborates: he wants the passages to "be great regardless of what they're about. Celebrations, even" (Saltzman 25). Separation is not simply the separation of fictional world from the world outside fiction, but is separation complicated by the level of the sentence. The kind of aesthetics of separation that Gass seeks to practice places the beautiful form of the sentence above all, especially above content.

Much of the content, then, is explicitly callous, and forces the reader to sort out the narrative by attributing genre. When Kohler comments calmly that "in the midst of the Holocaust, the murder of a few more Jews is not an enormity" (*Tunnel* 201-02), the reader must decide how to understand the point, and such understanding cannot be separated from genre, as Rabinowitz has argued. Attributing genre(s) to *The Tunnel* is difficult because the text explicitly refers to actual historical events, such as World War II, and because Gass's own statements about reference muddy any easy approach to

understanding reference. This ambiguous relation between *The Tunnel* and extra-textual historical reference links it to other genres such as "survivor narratives, stories of rape or childhood abuse" whose claims of "referential truth" (Caruth 2) are made problematic by their use of techniques such as metaphor, seen by many as a form of distortion, acceptable for literature, perhaps, but not for extra-textual events, events that occur outside the text and which invoke the exterior textual world for the reader. Such debates about the effects of literary language on reference "have long been at the heart of literary studies, where the status of the literary text -- which is always by definition possibly a fiction -- is in question" (Caruth 2). Caruth continues: "Attempts to assess the truth value of such texts frequently oscillate between theories that claim that literary texts refer directly to a world outside the text, and theories that emphasize that because all texts can always be fiction, they therefore do not reliably refer to any reality, which consequently remain inaccessible or even in question" (Caruth 2). From this view, any determination of genre becomes a determination of reference, which in turn elicits certain expectations from the reader. In what way is the novel a history? What is the purpose of history, or the historian? How does history (or does it at all), differ from testimony? Literature? Storytelling? Autobiography? Any combination of these? What historical techniques does the novel use? A listing of facts? Philosophical positions about the meaning of history? Is it a chronicle? Memory? These generic questions directly influence how literate contemporary readers will receive the rampant antisemitism, the misogyny, and the borderline personality of Kohler. Generic questions force the reader to decide how politics connects to history, and how the inclusion of extra-textual historical events change history's -- and the novel's -- claim to truth.

When linked with the wanton invocation of known historical events such as Kristallnacht, the intellectual puzzles posed by genre, the crossword puzzles that literally edge several pages, and the map puzzles whose blue ink suggests the Finger Lakes of upstate New York confront the careful reader not only with the problem of generic attribution, but with the connected problem of how to negotiate reading with both intellect and emotion. These are often phrased as opposed terms, in which one term, emotion, is suppressed since its presence often marks the reader's naïveté. Intellect, not emotion, can solve puzzles. But the puzzles Kohler provides vary quite a lot, and some, such as the childhood puzzle of how to collect and pay for books, immerse reader and character alike in puzzling out the reference and emotion in reading. Kohler confesses:

My appetite was innocent and indiscriminate. I went from *The Story of Mankind* to *The Corpse with the Floating Foot* with scarcely a blink or hiccup. Imaginary murder amused me as much as actual ones. The past was as fictional as the future. For writers like Van Loon or readers my age, mankind had a history because its history told a story; there was an incipient "working out" in all things human which encouraged the hope of a happy resolution, even if it was only discovering the guilty, which *G&I* is devoted to doing, just like Charlie Chan or the other sleuths in those paper-covered books. Certainly I could not understand, then, how completely the world survived as the word, or that it was the historian's duty to shout Time and talk down Oblivion. (64-65)

Like Kohler, the reader must contemplate the history of her acts of reading, as Kohler

himself, in his stories of his childhood, contemplates the world he entered when he read and collected books as a boy. Kohler links his sense of self to his acts of reading, and, as in the quotation above, links his generic blindness (" Imaginary murder amused me as much as actual ones. The past was as fictional as the future.") to his current historical project. This gambit of looking closely at one's own act of reading, of indulging in a kind of metareading, may seem familiar to followers of Gass, but, as I've been arguing, *The Tunnel* presents something different, especially as the novel itself mutates and fluctuates from genre to genre. These fluctuations elicit multiple ethical reactions to the novel. Reading *The Tunnel* demands an ethics of ambivalence that moves between the poles of intellect and emotion and that refuses the usual advice about reading (such as Coleridge's formula of the willing suspension of disbelief: disbelief is very useful when reading this novel). Given the subject matter of *The Tunnel*, given its intellectual puzzles, its indulgence in unspeakable references (Kohler discusses his American, alcoholic mother's "Belsenated body" (619)), a conscious practicing of a kind of ethical ambivalence is useful; indeed, alternating among various ethical positions allows reading in sympathy with the novel's rejection of easy categorization, be it generic or in terms of literary movements such as modernism or postmodernism (see Unsworth and Blythe). These movements import with them implied aesthetics which cannot account for the novel's strange, ironic mutations of "reality" exemplified by the novel's shifting theories of history. Such shifts, such ironic mutations, attack any kind of historical legitimacy, regardless of the ethical claims made by certain interpretations of history.

What history is, what object it takes, what purpose it serves are questions that can be potentially ironic, especially given the novel's mutating genres and the problems they pose for interpretation. The concept of irony I invoke here is Linda Hutcheon's. Instead of seeing irony as a static form of literary language, she defines irony as made by discursive community, as defined by its unpredictability -- its edge, its inclusive nature (versus the exclusive nature of metaphor), as discourse "in use," as "a social and political scene" (Hutcheon 4). Hutcheon's understanding of irony refuses lists of formal qualifications, preferring to argue that "irony isn't irony until it is interpreted as such," whether that be by the ironist or the receiver of the irony (Hutcheon 6). This last point confronts the place of intention in the understanding or attribution of irony, an important point given that *The Tunnel* confronts us with the question "What is history?" and leaves the many answers in any number of partially or completely insane characters, from Kohler to the aptly named "Mad" Meg. Moreover, answering the question "what is history" means considering genre, politics, facts, and ethics. At stake in all four of these divisions is a genre's claim to truth, as well as the question of the truthfulness of history. In the traditional Greek triumvirate of the Humanities, it is History (with a capital *H*) which discusses events as they are or as they have been. Already we can see irony's edge in *The Tunnel*. It cuts into these key questions about the very nature of history and historicity, but does so within a literary work, a work of fiction, whose techniques, such as narrative, when imported to history, have elicited great ire from certain historians. Perhaps nowhere has this been more discussed than in the history of the Holocaust.

For many historians, the Holocaust is a special and difficult event because of its scale; the question becomes how, using what methods or techniques, historians can represent the

Holocaust. The argument falls roughly into two camps: some historians (such as Berel Lang) follow Saul Friedlander when he asserts that there are facts which exist before they enter language. Quoting Vidal-Naquet, Friedlander agrees with the question "everything should necessarily go through to a discourse; but beyond this, or before this, there was something irreducible which, for better or worse, I would still call reality. Without this reality, how could we make a difference between fiction and history?" (391). Friedlander sees this question as "the unavoidable link between the ethical and the epistemological dimension of . . . [this] debate [over representing the Holocaust]" (Jenkins 391). The other side argues that history cannot be separated from the narrative in which it is told. As Hayden White puts it, "[t]here is an inextinguishable relativity in every representation of historical phenomena. The relativity of the representation is a function of the language used to describe and thereby constitute past events as possible objects of explanation and understanding" (Jenkins 392). The problem, assert White's critics, arises with the phrase "relativity." White believes that certain narrative forms produce certain kinds of emplotment, resulting in certain kinds of history. This is anathema those who believe that history should and does deal with facts. White, too, is interested in the content of history. He comments in *The Content of the Form* that "Hegel was right when he opined that a genuinely historical account had to display not only a certain form, namely, the narrative, but also a certain content, namely, a politico-social [*sic*] order" (11).

Dilthey and Hegel, though, recognized that there are different histories, and different methodologies for those histories. Dilthey sees history's object as "human beings" and Dilthey "deals with physical facts only so far as they affect human life. Indeed, it is the task of history to show what man is" (133). Hegel, however, believes in three kinds of history. Of these the one most applicable to Kohler is original history. Says Hegel, "original historians . . . transform the events, actions, and situations present to them into works of representation. . . : their essential material is what is present and alive in their surrounding world. The culture of the author and of the events in his work, the spirit of the author and of the actions he tells of, are one and the same. He describes more or less what he has seen, or at least lived through" (4). This is very much the method of Kohler as historian. While he does do some research -- we are privy to diaries of Nazis -- much of his thesis comes from his experiences in Germany during the 1930s.

And there is another historical model at work in *The Tunnel*, one best exemplified by Mad Meg Tabor. Tabor, a kind of composite of Wittgenstein and Heidegger, howls with derision at the idea there can be facts. Kohler remembers Tabor entering the lecture hall in search of "a fact. . . a permanent unlikelihood, a counterfeit miracle, a wonder which nature can never have honestly produced" (237). Tabor's extreme position, his doubt of facts, places the historian at the very center of the world because, in addition to doubting facts, Tabor views truth as "the historian's gift to history" (7). A man who invokes physical labor (as Kohler becomes a man who toughens his hands when he mines his tunnel), Tabor cries "I cobble history" when he meets Kohler in the chancellery. And cobble both of them do. Kohler is truly his master's pupil. It is perhaps in the Kristallnacht episode, discussed below, that we see Kohler at his very worst, his most "Mad Meg."

Like history, autobiography and testimony depend upon the description and referentiality of events "that really happened," although in testimony and autobiography the very relationship of the speaking subject to his or her experiences enhances the reader's assent to the "truth" of the genre. Perhaps the best examples of the difficulty presented by the generic truth claims of autobiography occur with the character of Uncle Balt. When reading about Uncle Balt, a man responsible for everything from taking in young Kohler's family, to helping Kohler's mother get to safety during a tornado, the reader accepts the paradoxical reality of Balt built from Kohler's memories. These memories attest to the powerful autobiography of Kohler, a power derived from the use and manipulation of language. Again the multiple genres show irony's sharp edge: how, after all, can a fictional character have an autobiography -- he describes his own life -- when his status as a character, himself constructed, clearly contradicts his ability to narrate his memories. Still, while this edge might be amusing, it is not particularly unusual in fiction, especially fiction from William Gass.

It takes about two hundred more pages for the reader to feel the bite of irony's cutting edge. There we are told that Uncle Balt is a fiction: "So I might as well have an Uncle Balt. His invention affects me more in this moment than he would if he'd ever lived" (301). In the words of *Willie Master's Lonesome Wife*, we readers, at least those who ascribed to accepting Uncle Balt, have "been had from start to finish" (unpaginated). Our "being had" is itself ironic. The irony arises from "being had" by a fictional character in whose reality the reader believed. Following Hutcheon's idea of readers as members of discursive communities, the irony of Uncle Balt is doubled: the text clearly discusses the consequences of believing in things as real (as the quotation above illustrates), but the reader nevertheless continues doing so because of the generic assumptions in play -- this is a fiction, and fictions are to be believed. Moreover, this is an autobiographical section, which Kohler cannot stop himself from writing in favor of completing the introduction to his book. What he appears to present us with in these interleaved pages is autobiographical revelation. As such, the always forestalled introduction functions as an introduction to Kohler himself, to Kohler's own guilt and innocence, not to *Guilt and Innocence*. The recognition of the layers of fiction mark an adept reader, but it is the reader's membership in exactly this discursive community that accounts for the sense of being "taken" and the deep cut of irony. And there are further ironies. If the novel exploits the slipping of disciplinary and generic boundaries, of which Kohler's dubious historicizing or fictionalizing of his own past is a good example, how is it we are to understand what we are reading? Is it "only" fiction? If so, how does a reader "take" the remarks of Uncle Balt against women? How does someone read references to historical events or places? The inclusionary model of irony that Hutcheon creates, when linked with plural discursive communities, accounts for the reader's recognition of metafictional practice, while also allowing for irony to cut across that practice itself. How or why do we allow an aesthetic response or practice to invalidate history itself? More ironies ensue when we see Mad Meg and other fictional characters (such as the members of Kohler's department) partake in discussions of history which provide the frameworks for discussions of the "truth" of events outside their own text. These successive screens of truthfulness have an ethical dimension which multiplies in almost direct proportion to the lack of ground for judgment. We find ourselves asking, "what is happening here," and

where, and with whom, am I, the reader, to locate myself?

Reading the Uncle Balt section with hindsight, one finds there are moments where the careful reader might pause to decide how much substance she or he should give to the narrator. Early on in "Uncle Balt and the Nature of Being," Kohler reiterates that "as I say, my mind rarely entertained his figure, offered him anything but forgetfulness and silence. [paragraph] Yet that was what he fed on. So it seemed. He was *Dasein*'s quiet cancellation. *Dasein* indeed. More archery into the infinite. And there I go again" (116). To what does the "and there I go again" refer? Does it refer to a particular kind of inquiry? Philosophical, maybe? This possibility might be borne out by the reference to Heidegger, whose concept of *Dasein* is the focus of his major work *Being and Time*. If this is one possible reference is the attack on *Dasein* an attack on a kind of sophistry, a kind of "archery into the infinite"? Certainly many philosophers not in sympathy with Heidegger have made such critiques. The "archery into the infinite" seems to suggest that the problem is the movement into the philosophical, away from this version of personal history. But seen from the retrospective reading, things change. Once we discover -- if indeed we should believe the confession -- that Uncle Balt is fiction, the "archery into the infinite" becomes fiction itself. The story of Uncle Balt is history writ small; it is also a kind of history deeply distrusted by Hegel, and it is the kind of history that should make the reader wary. Viewed in light of the revelation that Balt is fiction, the "there I go again" confirms Kohler's fictionalizing, and his disguise of fictionalizing. Those who know Heidegger's idea of *Dasein* might pause when told "He was *Dasein*'s quiet cancellation. *Dasein* indeed." As fiction, Balt would be *Dasein*'s cancellation, since *Dasein* is a kind of lived existence for aware humans. Balt, we find out, is history faked: he is a fictional character who was supposed to be a real character in the autobiography of a fictional character who is himself a historian.

Indulging in such fictionalized autobiography, which often takes the form of returning repeatedly to memories of himself as a boy at nine, ten, eleven, permits Kohler to examine the place of reading and his relationship to language. These are Kohler's crucial years, when he turns from poetry to history, a turn, a *khère* (to risk the Heideggerian term), which he regrets throughout the novel. With a keen sense of adult angst (itself a further irony?), Kohler laments "I left poetry for history in my youth. A terrible turning. I've no excuse" (635). The link between history and poetry is, of course, language. Musings on language, and our changing relations with language, become a focus for Kohler when he reminisces about tornados of his past. The point is less the experience of the tornados than the language that creates those tornados. In this way, the narrative functions much as Hayden White suggests: autobiography's narrative structure and truth claims, expressed in the language of the child, reinforces the sense of intimate revelation that marks autobiography. Kohler, recalling a tornado in which his "breath was drawn out . . . with a sudden thok! Like a cork fired off in the funnel" proceeds to comment that "[n]ow [as an adult] I would say that the Angel of Death had parted our hair, but at the age of ten the truth is all you can endure" (114). The language may shift from child to adult (metaphor overcomes onomatopoeia), but the recognition that the language shifts rather than the event itself shifting (from tornado to flood, say) insures the reader's recognition that, within the fictional world being created, such memories are real. What

the ten-year-old sees and feels is recorded in the language of the ten-year-old: "thok." If within the fiction the referentiality to the narrator's own past -- the autobiographical dimension to *The Tunnel* -- is itself undermined after we've been encouraged to believe it, how are we to understand the historical references?

The Uncle Balt section conveniently exploits the dependence of truth claims upon discipline and genre; readers assent to genre and the implied truth claims, thereby choosing to cloud the difference between fiction and extra-textual reference. Rather than focusing on Kohler, we should consider the truth claims we willingly give up when we read by asking ourselves how those truth claims change when we attribute genre, especially a number of nonfictional genres, such as historical narrative. Once we discover -- and once we decide to trust -- Kohler's lies, does the Uncle Balt section change from the autobiography of a fictional character to an exercise in storytelling? Does this change occur because the layering of truth claims demotes the section from autobiography to a form of fiction, storytelling, which has a very different truth claim from autobiography? Is there some hierarchy of generic truth claims which would map the differences between autobiography, testimony, and history? These questions are particularly pertinent if we recall that Kohler was at the Nuremberg trials, participated in Kristallnacht, and that he uses diaries in his research. These experiences and documents link him to testimony -- both verbal and written. The collocation of these genres within the novel has a number of consequences: the movement from one genre to another, especially genres whose extra-textuality makes implicit reference to truth claims, exhorts readers to attend to truth claims, but it also forces us to consider very basic, if difficult, disciplinary differences, such as that between history and literature. *The Tunnel's* extra-textual references complicate understanding these differences because the novel depends upon evoking the Holocaust and fascist Germany. Gass has addressed this point, as mentioned above. He explains that he is "not trying to take on the Holocaust. It's *just* the background" (emphasis mine, Saltzman 24). But this is precisely the point. It is the background. As such the reader collaborates in forming the novel's background by supplementing it with extra-textual references. Only ignorance of the Holocaust could hinder this process because the novel places at its center the absent text of *Guilt and Innocence in Hitler's Germany*. Invoking Hitler and Germany adds a kind of legitimacy to the novel. Germany exists. Hitler existed. The Holocaust happened. This is not lost on Gass at all (see Saltzman 25). Indeed, he needs such references for us to read the novel as "real realism." The general knowledge of Hitler and Germany enhances Kohler's profession as historian and full professor of history. Reading such words, the reader must oscillate between the recognition and knowledge of the referentiality of these events and the simultaneous recognition of the novel as fiction. Paradoxically, the recognition bolsters the text's referentiality. But what happens when, as we've discussed in the Uncle Balt section, we're told that the fictional character, so lovingly created as "real" in the grand realist tradition, is a hoax? Perhaps this question is so important because of the assumptions we make about histories and testimonies and autobiographies, all of which are contained within the fictional novel and all of which import expectations of truth.

While the different genres as used in *The Tunnel* create ironies about truth, referentiality, genre, reader, author, and narrator, the consequence of the irony is not distance but,



potentially, the evocation of strong emotion. The inclusivity -- rather than exclusivity -- of irony (as Hutcheon sees it) activates ironies about the response to genre (being surprised, say, at Uncle Balt not being "real"). But the extra-referentiality gives irony its edge here: in a novel which ironizes genre, how are we to, can we, refuse to ironize events? Further, what happens when the event ironized is the Holocaust? What are the ethical consequences of ironizing the Holocaust? This ironizing results from the contrast between the general recognition that understanding the Holocaust is "at the limits" of human understanding and Kohler's puns about horror, meditations about the unimportance of a few more people dying, and so on. This is not a new arena for Gass. *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife* contains similar puns. The brutality of the actions taken against Jews as described by Kohler, his views on women, as well as his own "testimony" to participating in Kristallnacht (discussed below), requires the reader to fill in the voices of the discursive community. Because these are voices that might decry the brutality of the Holocaust, irony could as easily produce strong emotion as distance. Readers who respond to the text with outrage or anger are readers who feel, perhaps, confronted by the ironies which saturate the multi-genred text. The sources of irony, then, are formal -- the many genres used -- and historical -- the hatred of Jews, the hatred of women, especially by men like Kohler who use women as muses. But irony in use, far from removing emotion, in fact stimulates it. Irony produces outrage. Irony produces edge. As Hutcheon comments, "violation of (even unspoken) conventions can . . . result in strong reactions with serious consequences" (15). Given the extra-referential sources of irony within the text, returning to the issue of truth claims sharpens irony's edge.

Extra-textual irony also occurs if we consider the sheer amount of time it took for *The Tunnel* to be completed. The novel is imprinted with the history across which it has been written. Begun in 1966, the novel has been written across decades of increasing social protest and unrest (the 1960s and 1970s) into an era notorious for self-centeredness (the 1980s) finally emerging in the middle of a decade invoking a new simplicity at a time of unparalleled American prosperity (the 1990s). Yet the vision of history central to novel seems mired in the student demonstrations and riots of the sixties and seventies in which privileged American college students accused their government of "fascism." These student protests mirror the protests within academic disciplines during the same time period: during the thirty years it took for Gass to complete the novel certain theories of history once considered radical (White, Foucault) have now become accepted. How then has the novel's vision of history as expressed by Kohler and Tabor been affected by changing concepts of historiography proposed by Foucault, by White, and by others? Ironically, it could be argued that writing this book over such a period of time transforms a novel about history into an artifact of history. But what should not be ignored is the novel's connection of the protests of American college students to the reality of German fascism during the 1930s and 1940s. Although it might be tempting to equate America's experience in the 1960s and early 1970s with those of Germany during the 1930s and 1940s (both countries suffered violent struggle, ideology wars, demonstrations, riots and so on), set beside the reality of German fascism these condemnations ring hollow indeed and make a definitive equation seem both cowardly and historically inept.

The rhetoric of German fascism in the 1930s makes it difficult to separate a politically aggrandized nationalism from the political party that that nationalism serves. Nor, from Hegel's perspective, should the political be separated from the social. Germany during the 1930s figured itself as a country waiting for its destiny to be fulfilled. The Germans aligned history with politics through fascism. The question that faces *The Tunnel's* reader is the degree to which Kohler sympathizes with fascist ideology. It is a question never answered by Kohler the academic historian, but is one that is hinted at by Kohler the producer of testimony, Kohler the writer of fiction, Kohler the narrator of his own autobiography. Kohler's "autobiography," his testimonies to growing up in Grand, evoke the sense of waiting for Germany's historical destiny to be fulfilled in 1930s Germany and confirms Rey Chow's assertion that fascism, far from being a negative movement, is in fact a movement of "technologized idealism": by "technologized" she means that the scale of fascism is so great that humans themselves become part of the technology of fascism (14). Consider the countless soldiers of the SS who set into motion the Nazi death camps. By "idealism" she means that pro-fascists sought "an idealized self-image" through fascism (16). To the degree that fascism makes use of history, Kohler's slavish fascination with Tabor aligns Kohler with one of the most powerful agents of fascism: history. History, as Tabor sees it, is nothing but the "truth" chosen and created by the historian; history becomes the fount of positive fascist models. Within *The Tunnel* what puts those models into play is the technology of narrative and the structures that narrative can create, such as genres which we understand and order based on some relationship to extra-textual referents. For instance, fairy tales, while perhaps "metaphorically true," are not really true. Houses cannot be constructed out of gingerbread. But references to the Holocaust and to Hitler are different and problematic. They have existed. Their evil, while monstrous, is predicated upon certain actions (this is, after all, why Germany outlaws Nazi symbols and referents). Within *The Tunnel* images from Kohler's past are idealized. These are images achieved through the technology of generic and stylistic sophistication -- indeed, one could argue that it is generic sophistry that enables Kohler to move so deftly from genre to genre.

Nowhere is this sophistry more challenged, though, than in Kohler's testimony about Kristallnacht. The genre of testimony is often connected to trauma and is most often discussed within the political context of the victim. Moreover, testimony, especially as conceived of in Latin America, has a class dimension: the testimonio addresses not just the physical and psychic trauma of the victim, but the poverty of so many of the victims. The transmission of testimony makes it notoriously difficult to judge since it depends upon the same truth claims as autobiography, with the added dimension of the testimony itself serving a political end. This is, after all, what happened at Nuremberg. To which end, then, does Kohler confess his participation in Kristallnacht? Does he do so to serve the politics of fascism? Does he confess to make himself victim? Or is his confession itself an inversion of victimization? It is the last possibility that seems most probable, and we should note that with that inverted victimization comes a political agenda. Kohler's attitude seems to be, and I use the cliché deliberately, "boys will be boys." Kristallnacht is nothing but an exciting romp through the streets where the participants make a few mistakes about identity, and where breaking storefronts with rocks gains the rock thrower a cookie: "And on that night of breaking glass in Germany, when the windows of the

Jews were being smashed, when I was caught up in the excitement, infected by the frenzy too, by the joyous running through the streets, until my arm was lifted and I hurled a brick myself" (309). From this moment of testimony rooted in memory we travel to the historian Kohler who explains that "the Jews, who knew they were destined for death -- death could scarcely have surprised them -- could not believe in their own murders when managed in this manner, for such ceremony as they had come to count on was removed; it was so open, more matter-of-fact than even brutal, so fearless, honest, unemotional -- so **sincere** -- like spraying for mosquitoes; it so clearly transcended all excuse, it did away with reasons. On that splendid disdain for subterfuge, they flew -- the Nazis. . . ; they rose as gods from the graves of their middle-class lives; anointed, they left their little businesses behind, the normal world with all its petty laws, for sainthood (309).

This passage clearly illustrates Chow's "technologized idealism," but in terms of genre, is it, to return to Hegel's phrase, original history? If so, testimony becomes the fact with which the original historian builds his case. The point returns us to two different issues. First, we should recall the discussion and debate over history. Is a testimony equivalent to a fact? Second, we should recall the truth claims of testimony and autobiography as well as the problem of discussing extra-textual events. Uncle Balt is, in the world outside *The Tunnel*, just not very important; but revising Kristallnacht through apparently "real" testimony is another matter. For me, at least, this is where irony exceeds the text and eventually snaps into indignation. For this section to be ironic, I would need to willingly oscillate between different understandings of Kristallnacht, and I might do so for a while. But once I consider genre and the use and place of testimony, I refuse the act of ambivalence. At the Kristallnacht section, I choose to refuse to follow Gass's lessons for reading.

Nevertheless, the degree of my reaction to this section shows the power of invoking fascism at the same moment that it makes us consider how fascism works. Chow explains that there is "a specific conceptual mechanism used in many accounts of fascism, the mechanism of projection as defined by Freud. . . a defense: when we sense something dangerous and threatening in ourselves, we expel and objectify it outward, so as to preserve our own stability" (17). Chow analyzes the components of fascism, here seen as projections not only in the Freudian sense, but in the visual sense of items projected on screen. What Kohler throws "out," what Kohler "projects" is Uncle Balt, his love affairs, all failed and flawed, and arguably fictional and extra-referential themselves (Lou Salome, after all, dumped Friedrich Nietzsche for Paul Ree and was also linked with Rilke, whose poems Gass has recently translated). What Kohler throws out, then, what he projects, are the moments and chances for idealism itself. Most often these moments coalesce around his relations with women, but they occasionally occur in idealized autobiography, such as the memories of Uncle Balt. Examining projection this way moves us in to the character of Kohler. How can we examine the larger issue of fascistic projection in the novel which is not literally visual? (Interestingly, both Chow and Hutcheon turn to the visual to discuss fascism: Chow to film, Hutcheon to art.) The answer can be found in the work's narrative which acts as a form of metaphorical projection: narrative is a kind of projection, a throwing out (in all senses) of all which makes Kohler fearful, hence the need for and power of inclusion of multiple genres.

Gass, indeed, has explained the novel as "the fascism of the heart" (Saltzman 24). Readers can be lured into the book's own fascism, enjoying the experience of fascism by assenting to the world of words. The problem with this idea is that it turns and reinscribes fascism as a kind of aesthetic ideal. Such an aesthetic gesture should itself invoke questions about extra-textual referents.

Because of the problems animated by aesthetic versions of fascism, fascism, I want to argue, cannot be understood -- at the very least in this novel -- apart from irony, an irony of use and edge, an irony that is not formal, but constructed by discursive communities, an irony that is inclusive, active, social and political. It is irony that invalidates a kind of aesthetic fascism because this sociopolitical irony occurs by repeatedly moving outside the text itself. Irony keeps the extra-textual referents in play and examines what happens when they interact with Kohler's narrative. This irony makes it possible for Kohler to move "in" -- a word charged with meaning for Gass -- in to his imaginary lovers and his made-up childhood. But Chow cautions that "when we move from the lack that is supposedly 'in us' to external atrocities, some change, presupposed and yet unexplained, has taken place. This change, which is the unarticulated part of all of these theories of internalized violence, is metaphorical, imaginary, and, as I will argue, technological" (19). The "external atrocities" to which Kohler moves back and forth are the atrocities committed by the Germans to the Jews, atrocities in which Kohler himself participates, as we saw in *Kristallnacht*. But the "external atrocities" within the projection of narrative might also be the very writing of *Guilt and Innocence* itself -- the atrocity that leads the historian to abandon truth for fiction, to try to use projection as a form of insulation, where the worst that can be imagined is that which he, as historian, has enabled to be thought through reasonably. Or, in the mind of Martha, the atrocity of digging the tunnel in the first place.

The ethics of ambivalence is useful in an ironic text such as this, which encourages the reader to access multiple discursive communities. It provides a language in which ethics in fiction can be discussed rather than more traditional ethics, especially versions of Aristotelian normative ethics, which depend upon a transparency between the act and the person acting. Fiction, by its very nature, defies such transparency. Indeed, one might argue that those who accede to such transparency are woefully naive. Fiction, then, presents more problems of interpretation than nonfiction because it requires coming to terms with reference. Fiction requires us to move through layers of narrative and fiction, and, like irony, and like judgments about aesthetics and politics, fiction requires, at some moment, a determination about intention (see Lyon). Ethics necessitates a communicative act involving the individual and a larger social group, though that group could easily be a discursive community, to echo Hutcheon. Layers of narration, multiple genres, all the qualities of fiction that make *The Tunnel* enticing -- at least to me -- are precisely the qualities that require something other than a normative ethics -- one that accounts for the engagement of the reader in the author's text and that does not require the reader to be absorbed by the author's text. A certain level of autonomy exists, even as the ideas that one entertains, especially in *The Tunnel*, are offensive. The ethics of ambivalence challenges the fiction of various theories of reading: there is no reason why one must suspend disbelief, nor why the absorption into another's consciousness is positive. Can't

there be different levels, different degrees, of absorption? Indeed, once we think about belonging to various discursive communities, the ideal of the single-minded reader who assents to the fictionality of the world seems itself a convenient fiction.

If we argue that the text is suffused with ironies which operate in a number of different spheres, if the text ironizes Kohler's relations with fascism at the least, and, more likely, with Nazism, then how should we understand Kohler's own highly fictionalized Party of the Disappointed People, its medallions, its flag and so on? Is the PdP ironic? Maybe in its name. Within the text, the PdP functions as the party of realism, compared to the idealism of fascism. Further, the creation of the PdP gives Kohler the one thing he does not ironize. One might argue a certain irony in the color coding of the emotions of discontent, and so on. The irony arises from the evocation of the unseen national flags of red, white, and blue, in which the colors, representing admirable qualities such as courage, are counterpointed to the colors and qualities of the PdP flag. The PdP are disappointed people who plod on. In a novel suffused with details and idealism, the PdP is interestingly vague, which aids its realism. If it is ironic, it is ironic on a very small scale. In a perfectly ironic twist, that which is least described is the most "real" because the reader of *The Tunnel*, who is "had from start to finish," comes to be most dubious about places and objects most known. Reference breeds distrust, activates the ethics of ambivalence. The irony here is almost too good to be true: in an ostensible history that which is vaguest is most real. It is this narrative reality itself which separates the PdP from extra-referential historical organizations, such as the Nazis.

That the novel ends with the most fictional elements, the interior narration of Kohler, the reference to the PdP, with the PdP symbol/medallion on the facing page, reasserts the fictional in a text that deliberately confuses the fictional, the autobiographical, the historical, and so on. Each of these genres addresses truth claims differently. By concluding *The Tunnel* with the visual, Gass proffers the opportunity to reassert irony and to make extra-textual references that he often shuns. To look at the PdP medallion and not have a series of related images -- from Nazi banners, to nationalism, to cross sections of the brain, to maps -- avoids the very act of projection that the reader now activates. It is all very clever, and one oscillation of the ethics of ambivalence enjoys the many opportunities of recognition that the text allows: the novel opens by discussing puzzles, it acts as a puzzle, Kohler's mother is obsessed with crossword puzzles, Kohler as narrator enjoys puns -- simple verbal puzzles, and when one reaches the page on which is printed a crossword puzzle, one can congratulate oneself that one put it together. Still, why do we do so?

This is a question a number of critics have posed (see Blythe, Kelly). For me, *The Tunnel* is an artifact, produced during the heyday of postmodern experimentalism, and finally published when extra-textual referentiality was being explored in a very different way. Like *The Tunnel*, these texts, *When Nietzsche Wept*, or *Einstein's Dreams*, or *The World as I Found It*, and many others, turn to history. The fictional and the extra-textual fuse, necessarily, in these texts. But the difficulty with *The Tunnel* is the insistence upon self-referential irony as a product of close reading and the refusal of extra-textual irony, itself a product of close reading, but the reading of culture instead of the reading of Gass's

words. Ultimately, for me, the irony makes the novel intellectually intriguing at the same moment I find it ethically repugnant. This intellectual challenge has been called by some a real achievement. For these people *The Tunnel*'s achievement is the ability to publish an unfinished book, a book with no end. I think the book does something much more difficult than that, so difficult that it finally caves in on itself: *The Tunnel* is not a novel without an end. It is a novel without a beginning -- neither *Guilt and Innocence* nor the interleaved sections ever really begin. The refusal of extra-textual reference, the hovering hand of the author, the exploitation of genre provide the novel fits and starts, false relatives, plenty of muses, lots of play, but no where to go. William Gass has ultimately written himself in: the novel without a beginning is indeed the ultimate hermetic text.

### Works Cited

- Blythe, Will. "Tunnel Vision." *Esquire* March 1995: 164. *EBSCO Host*.
- Caruth, Cathy and Deborah Esch, eds. *Critical Encounters: Reference and Responsibility in Deconstructive Writing*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1995.
- Chow, Rey. *Ethics after Idealism: Theory-Culture-Ethnicity-Reading*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1998.
- Dilthey, Wilhelm. *Pattern and Meaning in History: Thoughts on History and Society*. Ed. H. P. Rickman. New York: Harper & Row, 1961.
- Friedlander, Saul. "Probing the Limits of Representation." *The Postmodern History Reader*. Ed. Keith Jenkins. London: Routledge, 1997. 387-92.
- Gass, William. *The Tunnel*. New York: Knopf. 1995.
- . *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife*. 1968. New York: Knopf, 1971.
- . *The World within the Word*. New York: Knopf, 1978.
- Hegel, G.W.F. *Introduction to The Philosophy of History*. Trans. Leo Rauch. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1988.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*. London: Routledge, 1995.
- Kelly, Robert. "A Repulsively Lonely Man." *New York Times*: 26 February 1995. [www.nyt.com/books](http://www.nyt.com/books).
- Lyon, Arabella. *Intentions: Negotiated, Contested, and Ignored*. University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1998.

Manning, Greg. "The Dirt on Gass." *Meanjin* 55.3. EBSCO host.

Saltzman, Arthur M. "Language and Conscience: An Interview with William Gass." *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 11.3 (1991). 15-28.

Unsworth, John. "William Gass's *The Tunnel*: The Work in Progress as Post-Modern Genre." *Arizona Quarterly* 48.1 (1992). WWW.jefferson.village.virginia.edu/~jmu2m/arizona.quarterly.48:1.html.

White, Hayden. *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1987.