

The Tunnel: A Topical Overview

by H. L. Hix

William H. Gass's *The Tunnel*, whatever its virtues, is not an inviting book. Even a reader willing to endure its length and its narrator's unrelenting bitterness must overcome its subordination of plot to other concerns: the book does not proceed from a to b along a "straight line" of narrative or exposition, revealing all relevant information before or as it is needed, but moves in a less ordered (or differently ordered) way that its author conceives as a more accurate replication of human consciousness. Its releasing and withholding information with little regard for plot means that *The Tunnel* offers more to its reader on successive readings, after the reader's overview allows each part to resonate with all others -- including later parts with earlier parts -- *during* the reading, and not only after the fact. Each of the essays to follow will present a unique reading of *The Tunnel* built around a set of original insights, but this introductory essay pursues the modest goal of giving, as a foundation for the reader's own insights, a synopsis of information important to an understanding of the book, so that a first reading of *The Tunnel* becomes more like a second reading. In deference to the novel's division into twelve major sections, this overview will briefly address twelve different topics: the book's **author**, its **structure**, its **narrator**, the character called **Mad Meg**, the narrator's departmental **colleagues**, his **parents**, his **wife and children**, his **lovers**, the imaginary **political party** he describes, his participation in **Kristallnacht**, the book's main **metaphors**, and **responses** to the book by other reviewers and critics.

Author

The Tunnel is the defining work in the corpus of William H. Gass, a writer of fiction and essays. Although continuous in themes and preoccupations with his other work (his essays no less than his other fiction), its length, its centrality in his own discussions of his work, and the length of time he devoted to its writing all indicate clearly that Gass considers *The Tunnel* his magnum opus. Reviewers and critics, though they do *not* agree about whether *The Tunnel* is Gass's *best* book, do not contest its centrality to his work.

The fictional life of William Kohler, the narrator of *The Tunnel*, shares several features with the real life of William Gass. In the book, Kohler is a middle-aged professor of history at a midwestern university, writing, he tells us, in 1967; Gass, who was roughly Kohler's age at the time in which the book is set, and who began writing *The Tunnel* in the mid-1960s, spent his career as a professor of philosophy at midwestern universities, first at the College of Wooster, then at Purdue, and finally at Washington University in St. Louis, where (although retired from teaching) he still directs the International Writers Center. Kohler endured a difficult childhood with an alcoholic mother and an arthritic father, as did Gass. Kohler claims to have given up poetry for history in his youth, but retains a fascination with figures like Rilke; Gass claims to have given up poetry for fiction in his youth, but his lifelong fascination with Rilke culminated recently in a book called *Reading Rilke*. And so on.

Its containing numerous autobiographical elements does not, however, make *The Tunnel* a straightforwardly autobiographical novel. Indeed, to identify Kohler's frame of mind too easily with Gass's would be not only to disregard Gass's stated intention to *construct* -- not to reproduce -- a consciousness in his fiction, but also to minimize the points of identity with the reader's own consciousness on which the book's force depends. Kohler *does* stand for William Gass, but not any more than he stands for you and me, and to try to enforce too strict an identity between the author and narrator, to insist (in other words) that *The Tunnel* is about the author's life, would be to repress the book's insistence that it is about the reader's life as well. As part of a judgment that the book fails, one might *argue*, as Debra Di Blasi does below, for the identification of author and narrator, but to *assume* the identification would be naive.

Structure

In a manuscript synopsis, Gass describes *The Tunnel* as a novel "in twelve Philippics." That the book's parts take the form of denunciatory speeches -- and not, for instance, incidents or episodes --- indicates that the narrator's frame of mind will serve as the axis of the book's ambitions; around that revolve the otherwise not always clearly allied units of the book. Gass has stated that he planned for the book's division into twelve sections to allude to the twelve-tone musical scale, though his intention does not entail that a reader would suffer who explored *The Tunnel* without making that association.

The book's sections themselves vary in form, but the most visibly "structured" sections also employ musical models. For example, the "Planmantee Particularly" chapters in the philippic on "The Curse of Colleagues" employ a structure reminiscent of musical variations, and one of the chapters in the "Mad Meg" philippic is titled for the musical model it follows, "A Fugue."

Though the novel is structured as a series of harangues rather than of episodes, some events do get recounted in the course of the harangues. As if to corroborate Antonio Porchia's observation that "Out of a hundred years a few minutes were made that stayed with me, not a hundred years," Kohler fixates on only a few events out of his fifty years. Among those to which Kohler devotes attention are: a wreck that occurs on one of the family's Sunday drives during his youth, and in which someone in another car is killed; an incident on a family vacation, in which his mother believes she has left her wedding ring at a hotel some distance back, only to discover it safely in her suitcase; his being overwhelmed as a child by a swarm of grasshoppers; his getting caught stealing pennies from his parents; his having to have his foreskin peeled back by a doctor after he had too long neglected to keep it clean; his mother's attempt to throw him a birthday party, which she botches by forgetting to mail the invitations; a severe storm during which a window shatters near his mother, leaving bits of glass in her hair; committing his mother to the hospital; his crawling into a heating duct one day at work; killing his wife's cat. The incidents do not explain one another as interdependent nodes in a temporal sequence, the way they would in a plot; they explain (only) Kohler.

Kohler

The book's narrator, William Frederick Kohler, teaches German history at an unnamed university in Indiana. A specialist in the Nazi era, he is the author of *Nuremberg Notes*, a book that, because of its sympathetic view of those on trial for war crimes, earned him some notoriety on its publication. He has since completed the manuscript of his magnum opus, *Guilt and Innocence in Hitler's Germany*, on which he worked for many years. When he starts to write the preface, though, he finds himself suffering writer's block, and begins writing the confessional memoir that becomes *The Tunnel*. To hide it from his wife, he places its pages between the pages of the manuscript of *Guilt and Innocence*, the place where he is most confident she will not see it. Also, he begins digging a tunnel (or at least he *says* he is digging a tunnel) under the basement of their house.

'Kohle' in German means 'coal,' and 'Kohler' means 'miner,' as is appropriate for a person who is -- absurdly -- digging a tunnel out of his own basement. Despite his name, though, "there is nothing genuinely German" about Kohler (18), as he himself admits: he was neither born nor raised in Germany; he lived there only for a short time as a student; and he learned German only as a second language.

Kohler is preoccupied with, and paranoid about, the small size of his penis. Its size serves him a constant reminder of his frustrated sexuality, but also as the first point of identification with Hitler: "I hated having a small cock, the bad jokes of small boys upon that point. I hated having a round face like a fat doll. Hitler hated being ordered around" (19). The frustrated sexuality itself serves as the primary stand-in for Kohler's various disappointments: his lackluster career, his failed marriage, his personal isolation, and so on.

Mad Meg

Kohler's most significant professional and intellectual influence was Magus Tabor, usually referred to as "Mad Meg," the teacher under whom he studied in Germany in the 1930s. So significant is Tabor's influence that Kohler's first rumination, "Life in a Chair," is about life in "the great Tabor's own chair, which I had shipped from Germany" (6). Tabor, a specialist in Greek and Roman history, contended that historians do not merely recount history, but rather create it. "Tabor believed that anything of which you could form a passionate conception automatically *was*, because the pure purpose of things lay in their most powerful description" (248). History, in Tabor's view, is subject to the most potent verbal account of it; historical truth is made not by those who do things, but by those who tell the stories about what has been done. Thus, for example, "when a man writes the history of your country in another language, he is bent on conquest," which occurs not by getting a white flag raised or a surrender signed but by replacing "your past, and all your methods of communication, your habits of thinking, feeling, and perceiving, your very way of being, with his own" (271).

Tabor's view about history corresponded to his own personality (whether as cause or as effect): "he was an absolute actor," like Shakespeare's evil Richard III claims to be, "and perfectly capable of raising and sustaining a purely rhetorical erection" (250). So it is against Tabor *and* his view of history that Kohler has to struggle: he has to keep Tabor's

habits of thinking and ways of being from overwhelming his own. He seems not to succeed, instead allowing Tabor to become in his mind "the spiritual founder of the Party of the Disappointed People" (266).

Kohler's Colleagues

Kohler's departmental colleagues, each of whom he scorns, serve as foils for his own views of history and of life, though the reader must bear in mind that all descriptions are of the colleagues as seen through Kohler's thoroughly jaundiced eye.

Of all his colleagues, Kohler most hates Oscar Planmantee, a pompous pedantic who wears his Phi Beta Kappa key on a chain between the pockets of his vest and his Mensa insignia in a buttonhole. Planmantee -- Kohler sometimes calls him "the Manatee" -- was born in Fort Wayne, Indiana, and educated in Ohio, though he was ashamed of his origin, and tried to adopt a Viennese pose (having learned German during the war and having married a Tyrolean woman, ten years his senior, who later left him). Clearly, Kohler's hatred of Planmantee is exacerbated by their similarity in this regard; Kohler, too, wishes to be more German than he is. Kohler describes Planmantee as contentious: "he didn't confine his objections merely to opinions, he was able to take exception to your posture, your point of view, your plan of study, your taste in sugary stewed tomatoes" (388-89). In regard to history, Planmantee is a positivist. He considers nothing in the last hundred years worthy of historical study, and he tries to quantify everything: "the lines he drew and called History were every one of them medians, summaries, averages, on-the-wholes, inasmuch as human affairs fell, for him, under the same laws as rust, rot, mold, or mildew did" (394). Among his other reasons, Kohler hates Planmantee for reminding him of, and attempting to punish him for, his (apparently multiple) indiscretions with female students.

Tommaso Governali is a third-generation Italian-American, and the author of a book called *Character Crucified on the Cross of the Historical Chronicle*. Kohler, who calls Governali's book "silly," describes him as "the nemesis of Planmantee" because he views Planmantee's positivism with scorn. Governali sees history on analogy with an opera. "He doesn't entertain ideas," Kohler says, "he sings arias." If for Planmantee history is finally statistical, for Governali history "is hysteria and histrionics. There is a pit, a proscenium, and a curtain -- whatever the audience can see -- but there is nothing going on behind the scenes: courtship and conspiracy take the form of duets" (400). In character, Governali "likes to insert himself in people's lives," whether by interrogating or empathizing. "He makes you suffer from his bartender's ear." After a time during which he enjoys the successes generated by his book (public recognition, a Guggenheim grant, election to the Faculty Senate), Governali eventually suffers personal problems centered on his daughter, Lire, who is rumored to be the result of an affair between Governali's wife and a chemistry student. When she is fifteen, she begins hanging around the campus, associating with hippy students, getting arrested at demonstrations, and so on. Eventually, Governali, trying to rein her in, pursues her to a local hangout, is given (without his knowledge) a drugged drink, enters "acid heaven," and is never the same, the promise of his early career never fulfilled.

Physically, Walter Henry Herschel, another of Kohler's colleagues, is short, stout, and gray-haired. Kohler takes his being jug-eared as appropriate, because Herschel is a sympathetic listener. Kohler describes him as self-effacing, "the kind of failure no one notices, no one exults over, no one mourns, not only because Herschel never complains about anything, but because no one credits Herschel with ambition, purposes, urges, points of view, a tender ego, calculation" (414). Herschel is the pushover of the department, with "a wee M.A. from a wee-er school" (306), who has not published a book, was tenured by "the pity of others," and is stuck teaching only survey courses. His view of history is modest, moderate, and common-sensical: he believes in facts and truth, and the ability of an honest historian to identify the former and communicate the latter. Kohler has to repress his admiration of Herschel's willingness to entertain all sides of an issue. "I call him the hedgehog because he is such a believer in both sides." Kohler says that "Herschel never declares, or asserts, or avers -- I do that; Governali avows and Planmantee affirms; they do that -- Herschel assents, or suggests; he elaborates, or gently opines" (182-3).

To his scorn Kohler adds something like sympathy for, or identification with, Governali and Herschel, but Charles Culp rivals Planmantee as an object of Kohler's unmitigated derision. "He is," Kohler says, "a punishment for my sins, a plague of boils.... After everyone else has walked out of my mind, he lingers like a bad smell" (156). Culp is writing "a limerickal history of the human race," in addition to a series of limericks (many quoted by Kohler in the book) each beginning with "I once went to bed with a nun." Culp harbors romanticized ideas about American Indians, and leads a boy scout troop that gives him a venue for enacting that reverence: his scouts "make moccasins and wear them on hikes. They make arrowheads out of flints, bows from the bushes, tomahawks out of stones tied to sticks" (157). By using the limerick, which he describes as "false and lifeless" (177), Culp adopts a resolutely ironic stance toward history, reduces it to a language "designed to make everything appear to be stupid, callow, scarcely whelped" (166). Culp's irony and Kohler's cynicism reduce their relationship to "almost wholly one of tiresome repartee" (198).

Kohler's Parents*

Kohler is the only child of Frederick Karl Kohler and Margaret Phelps Finney Kohler, about whom we are given information no more reliable than any other information in the book, and certainly no less tied to Kohler's own preoccupations. He blames them for his vices, learning "bigotry and bitterness" from his father, along with "how to be a failure," and catching "a case of cowardice from my mother" (136).

His father is devoted to baseball and "the Sunday drive": late afternoon excursions to check on the progress of spring, the building of a road, the extent of flooding or wind damage, the color of leaves across the state line in Pennsylvania" (220). But those pastimes cannot mask the small-mindedness that Kohler sees as his father's most distinguishing character trait. Even in regard to so apparently benign a practice as the Sunday drive with the family, Kohler emphasizes how unnecessarily autocratic his father was, never allowing anyone else in the family to choose the time of departure or the

destination. Physically, Kohler's father suffers from debilitating arthritis, and the distance between father and son manifests itself in the son's disinterest in learning to drive as the father's worsening arthritis impedes his ability to drive.

Kohler's mother's debilitation comes from severe alcoholism. Her condition manifests itself in various ways, including having an affair with the man who delivers bread to their home, and who gives her liquor in exchange for sex. Eventually, Kohler himself has to take her to the asylum and have her committed, but not until she is in bad enough shape that, when Kohler calls to have his father taken to the hospital, the ambulance attendants begin to take her, and have to be corrected. And she herself slept through the ordeal, and did not notice her husband's absence when she awoke.

His parents exemplify two distinct, but equally unpleasant, ways of living and dying: "my father's body broke his spirit like a match," and "my mother's broken spirit took her body under the way a ship sinks after being disemboweled by an errant berg of ice" (135).

Two other important relatives from Kohler's parents' generation figure prominently in the book. One is Kohler's Uncle Balt, who gets a section to himself, "Uncle Balt and the Nature of Being." He is introduced initially as the one who had been warning Kohler's mother about the storm, telling her to come downstairs, the day lightning shattered a window whose broken glass fell into her hair. Kohler describes him as "tall, thin, slightly cadaverous," with a weathered face and big knuckles. He farmed with a religious devotion, tending to his land all by himself. What interests Kohler, though, about Uncle Balt, is that he serves as "a metaphor for Being" because he was "a tall dark column of damp air, hole going nowhere -- yes -- wind across the mouth of a bottle" (121). Kohler compares Uncle Balt to a barnyard cat because he sees him so seldom, only at "dawn, dusk, and dinner," which made Uncle Balt "a man shaped of absence," who had "the intangible integrity of a hollow, a well's heavy wet deficiencies" (122). He died as he had lived his life, at work and in solitude, from a fall while trying to climb over a fence. His quality of presence-in-absence and absence-in-presence prefigures Kohler's attempt to create a figure of Being with his tunnel.

The other important figure from Kohler's parents' generation is his mother's sister, whom he refers to simply as "Auntie." Kohler's earliest memories of her are of visits in which she brings him candy, but later she and her mother (Kohler's "Gran") move into the Kohlers' house, sharing a room. She works as a secretary at an office supply firm, though eventually she is fired. Kohler describes her as acting out of passive aggression: "Her overbearing deference drove my dad crazy" (588); she "did things for people they didn't quite want done" (592); she was "the Princess of the Inappropriate Present" (597). She did in the Kohler home what she did at her jobs: starting with acts of efficiency and apparent generosity, she insinuated herself into everything. At the house, this process began with her taking over the laundry, mending, and ironing, and culminated in her taking "hold of the movement of life in our house" (597), even getting from Kohler's father's will at his death the use of the house for the rest of her life.

Like Uncle Balt, she gives Kohler a metaphor for Being, in this case through a trunk she

brings with her when she first arrives at the Kohlers' house. It is moved to the attic, where one day the child Kohler steps inside it and lowers the lid "to get the full feeling of that emptiness I'd entered" (591). The latch, though, catches ("I wasn't cabined, cribbed. I was confined. I'd be buried in my box of being.") and Kohler panics: "If pure Being was pure panic, I knew what pure Being was." He is able to hit the sides of the trunk hard enough to pop the latch and get out, but not before imbuing him with "a more manageable fright" (592) that seems to have stayed with him into adulthood.

Kohler's Wife and Children*

Kohler's wife, Martha, works as a curator for the local historical museum. She wants to open an antique store; toward that end, she collects antique dressers, which in the meantime occupy the attic and hallways in the Kohlers' house. She serves primarily as an object against whom Kohler can vent his spleen. Kohler repeatedly complains of her obesity, and throughout the book remains obsessed with her large breasts. He regularly grouses about their sleeping in separate beds and no longer having sex.

Their relationship was not always so arid, and Kohler still speaks with fondness of their early tenderness, mentioning for example that in their sex play "we both called my cock **Herr Rickler** when it rose" (90). But he also makes it clear how early on their relationship cooled. In one of the book's twelve philippics, "The First Winter of My Married Life," Kohler describes the inhibiting effect of their living in a poorly constructed duplex. The other half of the duplex was empty when the Kohlers rented theirs, so they did not anticipate any of the problems that became apparent as soon as the other side was occupied. Each half of the duplex was a mirror image of the other, so the bedrooms and bathrooms abutted. That floor plan, combined with thin walls, meant that noises passed almost undiminished between the two halves of the house, making the Kohlers exaggeratedly self-conscious: "We were soon ashamed of our own sounds, as if every sign of life we made were a form of breaking wind" (335). They heard the other couple making love, so they became inhibited when making love themselves; they heard the other couple arguing, so they became aware of the frequency of their own arguments. "We heard ourselves," Kohler says, "as others might hear us," with results fatal to their relationship: "I ceased singing in the shower. We kissed only in distant corners, and as quietly as fish. We gave up our high-spirited games. Martha no longer cried out when she came, and I grew uncertain of her love" (336-7).

Martha and William have two young sons. The elder is named Carl, and the younger seems to be named Adolf, though Kohler studiously avoids referring to him by name. The book offers no explanation for *why* he is named Adolf, or why Kohler so dislikes him. Unlike Martha, the sons are mentioned infrequently, and seem to be seldom on Kohler's mind. He says, "My kids will not come to visit me.... I did not become my children. I spat them out like pits and they grew up as near and yet apart from me as weeds in a row of beans" (137-38).

Kohler acts out his aggression against Martha by taking the dirt he is digging from under their basement to make his tunnel, and emptying it into the drawers of her beloved

antique dressers. The blue pun Kohler so enjoys about dirtying Martha's drawers is consummated by the incident in which he kills Martha's cat after it has scared him during his digging, which enables him to put her dead pussy in her drawers. Inevitably, Martha discovers the dirt, and near the end of the book brings in a drawerful. She "rather rudely brushed by me and with a heartfelt hoof tipped the entire drawer over my manuscript," leaving it "beneath a heap of yellow, gray, and bluish dirt" (648-49). We are not told what other effects follow the crisis brought on by her discovering the dirt, because its first effect, apparently, is to end Kohler's writing.

Kohler's Lovers*

Kohler identifies two lovers who have significant, lingering emotional significance for him. There are others with whom he had some sort of relationship (a student he refers to as "Betty Boop," and a young woman named Ruth -- nicknamed "Rue" -- who gives Kohler blow jobs but will not spread her legs), but these apparently mattered less to him.

Kohler more than once rehearses the one romantic "shortened summer month together" that he spent with one of his lovers, Lou. He relishes the ease with which she inhabited her body, the attraction for him of her living in the present, a denial of history he is unable to achieve, but one that is represented by her insistence on turning to the wall of their room a picture of a Civil War encampment. Kohler makes it clear to the reader that he loved Lou more than Lou loved him, returning more than once to the rendezvous at a sidewalk café when she "gives him the sack," a figure of speech he literalizes by reproducing the image of a grocery sack on p. 174. He tells about their sexual game, "Do rivers," in which he would run his fingers across her back as if tracing the path of a river, naming the river whose path he pretends to trace. Even though one time near the end of the affair he feels compelled to write "YOU NO LONGER LOVE ME" in capital letters instead of "doing a river," he continues to treasure the memory of their affair so much that "I would rather forget my children's names than the names of my rivers" (562).

Kohler's other significant lover, Susu, is portrayed as a femme fatale, a slender French woman singing in a seedy German bar, whose very song "was drawn to me as sucking insects are" and "was thirsty for my blood" (98). He meets her, "a silken sliver, illicit wish" (103), in his student days, though later, doing research for one of his books, he learns from "a stack of brutal documents" (99) that she had "roasted the thumbs of a dozen Jews and [eaten] them while they watched" (115). Though she had been "a commandant's whore," when the Nazis learned that she had gypsy blood they decapitated her. Although less is told of the particulars of Kohler's relationship with Susu than of his relationship with Lou, at the end of the book he claims a stronger identification with Susu. If Lou was his opposite, one who can shun history in favor of the present moment, Susu is his double: "it was Susu who was my soul's sort. She was success in the pure form of failure" (651).

The PdP

Even before the written text of the novel begins, the book presents drawings of "The

Pennants of Passive Attitudes and Emotions," the "PdP banner," the "Medal for ingratitude," and an unidentified insignia. These are later complemented (pp. 266, 288) by other images of PdP paraphernalia.

The PdP, the Party of the Disappointed People, is an imaginary political organization Kohler has created to fulfill the function of all political parties, "to organize and institutionalize human weakness" (533). It consists of an underclass defined in such a way as to include, Kohler thinks, everyone. "Our" disappointment stems not from simple mutability: "if things did not pass away, our interest in them would," Kohler reasons (286). Nor does the disappointment derive from simple ill fortune. Born into consistent ill fortune, "we would finally accommodate our needs to necessity; we'd acclimate ourselves." Even the contrast between good fortune and ill fortune does not generate the disappointment of Kohler's PdP. In an echo of and allusion to Thomas Hardy's sonnet "Hap," Kohler says, "that contrast, too, if it were carved in stone, if it were God's inflexible rule, could be endured, and poets would find ways to praise it."

The disappointment results from our belief "that life might have been otherwise; that it's been wrongly lived, and hence lost" (286). "It's not having held what was in our hands to hold; not having felt the feelings we were promised by our parents, friends, and lovers; not having got the simple goods we were assured we had honestly earned and rightfully had coming" (366). This is the disappointment Kohler feels in himself, and attributes to the Nazis; it is the disappointment that becomes hatred, and makes people unpredictable. "What do we protest? That we die alive. Who shall blame us when we turn on our murderers then, and murder them?" (287). It is the disappointment that becomes what Kohler calls "the fascism of the heart."

Kristallnacht

Kohler reports having been a participant in what came to be called Kristallnacht.⁷ As hostility toward Jews increased in Germany during the time leading to WWII, Jews were required to identify their shops visibly as Jewish-owned. On the night of 9 November 1938, rioting Germans vandalized and looted many of those shops. Kohler reports having been awakened at about three a.m. by noises in the streets. He got out of bed, dressed, and went into the street. Immediately he was taken for a Jew and threatened, but he escaped. He reports having "wandered about. The streets were empty except for occasional gangs. The windows of the Jewish shops were being smashed" (329). He saw convoys of trucks, a synagogue being burned, small groups of men. Eventually he ran into three of his friends from the university, who reported having seen much more vandalism than Kohler himself had seen. The four join others drifting in a group toward the sound of breaking glass. In the end, Kohler throws a paving stone through the window of a Jewish grocer's shop. The breaking of the window proves anticlimactic: "There was more pitter than patter, I think. Now, if I wished, I could steal perhaps a cabbage or a big beet" (331). He retrieves the stone and breaks another window, this time not belonging to a Jew. Kohler's attitude toward his remembered behavior on that night seems to be something more like embarrassment than guilt or remorse.

Metaphors

Metaphors pervade the book, but two metaphors preside: the window and the tunnel. The window, which represents the ambiguity of our connection to the world, our seeming to look out on a world from which the very looking out separates us, has appeared as a metaphor regularly in Gass's previous fiction, as for example in "Icicles," one of the stories from *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country*. There the narrator uses the window to represent the fearfulness of the protagonist, Fender. Though the windows allow Fender to observe the icicles that are the object of his fascination, they also allow others to see him, which makes him afraid even to touch his tongue to the window to cool it after a hot bite of pot pie. In "Icicles," the narrator leaves the reader to infer the importance of windows to Fender, but in *The Tunnel*, the first-person narrator meditates on windows quite explicitly, devoting one of the book's twelve major sections to the theme of "Why Windows Are Important to Me."

Windows matter, Kohler says, because "it's always a window which lets me see" (282). The windows in his home office (overlooking the garden) and his office at the university (overlooking the public park) "are the porches of appearance. Through them move the only uncoded messages which I receive" (282-83). They let him look out, in other words, on an ahistorical world, a world not subject to Tabor's oppressive view of history-as-a-coded-message-and-only-a-coded-message. They open onto a nostalgic, pre-cynical world into which he occasionally permits himself a glimpse, as when he pines for his one-time lover, Lou. They give him a way of looking out on others while remaining concealed himself. Windows give Kohler a way to manipulate concealment and exposure, just as do his two other self-confessed significant spaces, "the white of the page, and the black of the board" (311).

Windows also figure in several of the crucial events narrated in *The Tunnel*: during his stay in Germany during the 1930s, Kohler spent, he tells us, a great deal of time secretly watching the apartment opposite his, peering for that purpose (obviously) through two windows, his own and the opposed apartment's; it is a window that a storm shatters in Kohler's youth, sending down a glitter of glass on his mother's hair; Kohler claims to have thrown a brick through a window on Kristallnacht; and so on.

Kohler signals the importance of windows by the title of one of the sections, but uses the very title of the book as a signal about the importance of tunnels. Like windows, tunnels had appeared as metaphors in earlier fiction by Gass, as for instance in "The Pedersen Kid," the first story in *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country*, where Hans and Pa try to dig a tunnel through the snow to get to the barn without being seen. In *The Tunnel*, Kohler's fascination with tunnels is general enough that he tells of unscrewing a metal plate on the wall of an office at the university, and entering "a passage filled with cobweb and pipe" that led to the maintenance tunnels on campus. But the most important tunnel, of course, is the one Kohler is digging in the basement of his house.

As a metaphor, the tunnel is overdetermined: it is the dust/clay that represents human mortality; it is the great vagina that represents sexuality; it is a hole that exists precisely

where and because there is nothing, so that it represents the paradoxes of being. When Kohler imagines Martha catching him digging, he gives explanations like, "you see here an historian hunting for a false cause, for a reason why I'm here which will not be the reason I'm here," or "I am down here, my dear, looking for a reason to be down here" (148). Although the sexual aspect is occasionally explicit ("Ah, Martha,... I have my own hole now, your cunt is not the only cave" (462), more often the tunnel and *The Tunnel* seem to be identified in Kohler's mind, as when he says what could refer to either or both, "I shall descend and bend, creating a whole... twelve philippics deep" (153). That the tunnel's being derives from its non-being gives Kohler a way to find a meaning in manifest absurdity, to act in the face of what he often labels 'disappointment.' "A plaque on the front door may one day read: Herein lies a pointless passage put down by a Pretender to the Throne of Darkness. Let God uproot this pathway if He likes, we shall still stare at the hole the hole has left, and wonder at the works of Man, and marvel at the little bit that mostly *Is*, and at the awkward lot that mostly *Aint*" (153). Digging the tunnel makes Kohler the representative disappointed person. "With my tunnel I have committed the ultimate inactive act" (468).

Responses*

The more-than-thirty-year gestation of *The Tunnel*, combined with the publication during that time of many of its parts, meant that critics had begun discussing the novel even before the complete work was published. For instance, Arthur Saltzman devotes a chapter to *The Tunnel* in his book on Gass, though it was published in 1986, almost ten years before *The Tunnel*. Saltzman argues that *The Tunnel* develops themes and techniques introduced in Gass's earlier collection of short stories, *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country*. According to Saltzman, Kohler, like many characters in Gass's earlier fiction, cannot keep his imaginative constructions under control; his world of words overwhelms him. Like Saltzman's book, Watson L. Holloway's 1990 book on Gass devotes a chapter to *The Tunnel*. Holloway, though, focuses on *The Tunnel*'s effect on the reader. *The Tunnel* lures the reader, he says, into appreciating and identifying with (at least some aspects of) its despicable narrator, thereby indicting the reader, forcing him or her into a recognition that he or she is "a shit" just like Kohler. Or to put the indictment in a universal rather than an individualized frame) that base and corrupted motives, hateful prejudices, and ill will are common to humanity, not isolated in certain lower types.

When *The Tunnel* finally was published, reviews ranged from wildly enthusiastic to contemptuous. Michael Silverblatt's "A Small Apartment in Hell" in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review* represents the former extreme, and Robert Alter's "The Leveling Wind" in the *New Republic* represents the latter. Silverblatt begins his review by calling *The Tunnel* "the most beautiful, most complex, most disturbing novel to be published in my lifetime" (1). The book's beauty, complexity, and disturbance arise, according to Silverblatt, from the juxtaposition of its "annihilating sensibility" with the beauty of its language and its "stoic sympathy" in depicting "what we used to call the human condition" (12). Kohler is a moral monster, Silverblatt says, but the book is terrifying because it enforces recognition of the extent to which Kohler "seems to be like us." Silverblatt notes the frequency in *The Tunnel* of "itemizations, listings of all kinds," and

concludes by describing the book itself in those terms, as "the most rigorously fearless moral inventory in all of literature" (13).

Robert Alter, in contrast, calls *The Tunnel* a "monster of a book" bloated by "sheer adipose verbosity and an unremitting condition of moral and intellectual flatulence" (29). Alter accuses Gass of having produced "a complete compendium of the vices of postmodern writing." Those vices, according to Alter, begin with the attempt to "disrupt the realist illusion." By filling Kohler's head, and (since this is the same thing) the novel's pages, with so many earlier books, "from Plato and Pascal to Kleist, Proust, and Rilke," Gass reduces everything to text. Another vice of *The Tunnel*, according to Alter, is its "transgression" of structural expectations. Instead of the linear narrative of traditional novels or the formal symmetries of modernist novels, *The Tunnel* offers only a "loose, unimpeded, free-associative flow" (30). Lack of decorum adds to Alter's list of vices: "there is no subject about which the narrator is not both flippant and obscene." The lack of decorum raises Alter's central criticism: that the removal of aesthetic distinctions (reflected in each of the vices) supports a leveling of moral values, and the novel itself attempts to "announce the end of moral history" (31). It fails in that attempt, though, because Kohler's cynical worldview overwhelms the novel, allowing "no glimpse of a complication or an alternative," and because the book trivializes genocide by equating it with "the nickel-and-dime nastiness that people perpetrate in everyday life" (32).

In a review in the *Atlantic Monthly*, Sven Birkerts managed to capture, without attempting to mediate between, the opposite reactions that Silverblatt and Alter represent. After some preliminary discussion about Gass and his generation's pursuit of "the Great American Novel" -- the magisterial, synthesizing book that would weigh in with the big novels of history -- Birkerts adopts the imaginative procedure he will use through the rest of the review: putting the book on trial, and splitting himself for that purpose into prosecution and defense. The prosecution argues that *The Tunnel* is "a monster of skewed recollection," worrying certain details to death while neglecting "whole decades" (114), that *The Tunnel* does not cohere, does not "instruct or enlighten," and features a character with no redeeming value. The defense argues that the narrator *is* a horrific character, but that "we are being asked not to like him -- Gass would be horrified if we did -- but to *know* him" (117). According to the defense, the worrying of details takes the reader as close as possible to entering the mind of another person. And finally, the style accomplishes the goal Gass states in other books, to put a soul inside the sentence. Birkerts concludes that *The Tunnel* contains much to deplore and much to celebrate, "and I cannot see that either cancels the other" (120).

The most thorough treatment of the book so far is a volume of essays entitled *Into "The Tunnel,"* edited by Steven G. Kellman and Irving Malin, containing an assortment of various short investigations (brief introductions, an interview, and topical essays) unified only by their attention to *The Tunnel* and by the conviction, stated by one of the editors, that *The Tunnel*, because it lacks a gist, "insists on multiple readings" (9). Several highlights from the Kellman and Malin book merit mention.

James McCourt's essay (reprinted from the *Yale Review*) reads *The Tunnel* as a

performance of *Hamlet*, specifically as "mainly a performance of two scenes: the closet scene and the graveyard scene" (21). McCourt affirms the rightness of the (non)action of the novel -- that for 650 pages the protagonist does little other than sit in a chair or dig a tunnel -- by observing that, because "the moment we begin to live we begin to die" and because as moderns we must "reject the fantasy of an afterlife," our lives look like Kohler's: "the only available occupational resources *are* sitting in a chair talking and digging our own graves" (23). Though he sees the novel as a "requiem for a world that began ending in Dallas on 22 November 1963," McCourt attributes the book's power to Kohler's failure being as universal as Ahab's in *Moby-Dick*, so that his condition is not political, but "primal."

Susan Stewart's "An American Faust" sees *The Tunnel* as the story of "the ethical relation between the individual and the collective in the twentieth century" (36), a "negative allegory of Hegel's lectures on reason in history" (38). Instead of the melioristic Hegelian prospect of "an evolution in consciousness, a trajectory toward freedom," Kohler presents us with experience "as a blow or wound" (39), so that his is a history of trauma. Stewart observes that "the book does not produce catharsis; rather, catharsis produces the book" (41). She traces in *The Tunnel* the narrator's frustrated Freudian relationship to the body of the mother, and concludes by noting the parallels between *The Tunnel* and the Faust myth, especially as exemplified by Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus*: for example, the presence of Magus Tabor as a Mephistopheles figure.

In "Is There Light at the End of *The Tunnel*?", Heide Ziegler contends that *The Tunnel* is not a formalist work, but "treads" instead on "moral ground." In the shadow of Kohler's *Guilt and Innocence in Hitler's Germany*, the distinction between guilt and innocence disappears. "*The Tunnel* is a descent into our collective unconscious, an expression of the underside, so to speak, of our *Zeitgeist*" (73). Ziegler observes that the tunnel "is Gass's metaphor, not Kohler's" (76), and serves therefore as the first distinction between the author and the narrator. She compares *The Tunnel* to Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, noting that in each book the reader is confronted with a series of vices, but that, in contrast to *The Pilgrim's Progress*, "no vice is ever overcome in *The Tunnel*" (79). Distinguishing between the strong assertion that all humans are fascists and the weaker assertion that all humans are susceptible to fascism, she says that the latter is the moral heart of Gass's novel. Ziegler argues that Gass attempts "to change the Holocaust from a horrifying, unforgivable, yet singular European spectacle into a general historical possibility" (80).