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The Quest for Truth in William Gass's *The Tunnel* (1995)

In his essay, "Philosophy and the Form of Fiction," William Gass defines the novel, at least the type of novel written by a good writer, as a "philosophically significant drama" (Gass 1970: 10), and considers that "creative thought and creative imagination are not so much stirred by truth in any synthetic sense as by sublimity—a vision of absolute imagination" (Gass 1970: 12). Gass's views bring forth Tzvetan Todorov's fundamental distinction in his seminal article "Fictions et vérités," between truth of correspondence and truth of revelation: "la première (la vérité-adéquation) ne connaissant comme mesure que le tout ou le rien, la seconde (la vérité-dévoilement) le plus ou le moins" (Todorov 9). *The Tunnel* (1995), Gass's *magnum opus*, the fruit of twenty-six years of labour (Ammon 133), dramatizes truth attempting to tackle both types of truth. The novel features an idiosyncratic narrator, a historian by profession and a poet by vocation, who having despaired of history takes up the language of the autodiegetic I and offers a one man linguistic show with occasional forays into visual aids. William Frederick Kohler, unable to write the introduction to his completed study, *Guilt and Innocence in Nazi Germany*, sets off on a trip around the self. However, unlike other autobiographical writings, it is not the search for truth that motivates this new undertaking. Although the narrator wages a war on truth in a sort of language vs. truth debate, Gass explores the possibilities of imaginatively attaining truth, namely the truth of a man's life. Gass's character, in spite of his particulars and quirks, could be an everyman and his condition the human condition.

TRUTH IN FORM

For Gass, the search for truth coincides with the search for form. In his interviews, he makes clear that he "has only one responsibility, and that's to the language he is using" (Ammon ix). This amoral morality and formalist literary ethics, most prominent in *The Tunnel* that features the most hideous event in history, the Holocaust, has predictably disturbed some reviewers and critics, although the novel is not about history but about "Kohler's consciousness," as Claire Maniez rightly puts it in her article "Guilt and Innocence in William Gass's *The Tunnel*" (Maniez 1994: 369). There is no harm-

less way to truth, as there is nothing sacred in fiction, Gass seems to say, making language practically his sole *actant*. In an unpublished synopsis of *The Tunnel*, the author admits that “there is scarcely any [action] at all in his novel,” as H. L. Hix reports (Hix 133). If formal exploration of the possibilities of language is, for a writer, the quest for truth, a great achievement in language is the author’s Holy Grail. Likewise, the tight structure of the novel, which may appear loose and rambling because of the narrator’s associative discourse, fulfils the formal requirements of a superior design that aspires to truth. Gass, who, unlike Stanley Elkin, seems to have a positive opinion of interviews as creations of historical data and “part of the material from which [a writer’s work] is approached” (Duncan 48-49), told Idiko Kaposi that he “organized the novel in terms of a model gained from Schoenberg: 12 sections, 12 tonal systems” (Ammon 135).¹⁶ Although each section has a dominant theme, the themes keep being interwoven with varying emphasis and a constant perplexing recombination of the basic twelve tones. This musical model, highly dissonant and cerebral, relates to the narrator’s march towards poetry which turns out to be for him, if not synonymous with truth, at least the only possible substitute. Gass also refers to the twelve sections as “Philippics” (Hix 91). These fiery denunciations and impassioned tirades are the appropriate form for the mental state of the narrator who looks back in anger to display the worthlessness of the human condition.

TRUTH IN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Gass seems to fully adhere to the postmodern approach to truth, although he debatably characterizes his work as “late or decayed modern” (Ammon xi). The narrative straddles various genres, autobiography, memoir, diary, philosophical essay, professorial lectures on the meaning of history, which have their relation to truth in common. The accumulation of these truth-telling genres increases the impact of the constant truth-doubting upon the reader, which contributes to the destabilization of truth. The narrator’s autobiographical pact takes an interesting twist. In the first section “Life in a Chair,” Kohler promises to tell “the complete dishonest and unwholesome truth” (21). The ambiguous phrase is highlighted by capitalization, size and a different script. Indeed, he is an untypical diarist denouncing his prestigious predecessors in various modes, as he declares: “Even alone [...] the *vitam impendere vero* is not for me any more than it was really for Gide, who was

¹⁶ Other writers were also inspired by musical forms, notably John Updike in his short stories in which he used a technique he called “fugal weave” inspired by the form of the fugue.

perhaps dazzled by the bad example of Rousseau, that professional fess-upper, whom I should less readily believe than Casanova, to whom Truth was the ardent canter of a tossed skirt" (39). He pits himself against historical people, a whole host of famous autobiographers trying to show that all that glitters is not truth, that he can stare like Perseus at the Medusa of untruth in all its forms.

The main reason for the mistrust of this noble commitment to truth is both intentionality and the limits and dangers inherent in language. Language both stimulates and undermines the autobiographical enterprise:

But words (to be sincere) are what we wretched writers are, whatever our aims: whether some of us are historians like myself, or novelists like Gide, [...] everyone knows that within the customary chaotic realm of language it is often easier to confess to a capital crime, so long as its sentences sing and its features rhyme, than to admit you like to fondle-off to a bottle (21).

This highly informed and learned narrator establishes his pact not on the basis of truth but on the negativity and unattainability of truth, aggravated by the medium of language. Thus without fear but in enraged trembling he offers a sample of his days: "Lousy morning, lamentable afternoon, and now a demeaning evening, a humiliating play" (40), and a piece of his mind: "I sit in my own weak Pepys as in my own smear—my wet like one incontinent—and fuss" (39). After paying sardonic tribute to Pepys, he swears an oath of mock allegiance to Homer: "In the old days, before beginning and in order to continue, they always asked for celestial aid: bless these boats and make them safe: guide my faltering steps; strengthen my arm and sharpen my sword; preserve my penis from the pox, O Lord" (49). He makes clear that the modern muses who will stand him in good stead belong to a different category: "There must be muses of malfeasance and misuse who bring on our vulgar verses like a sickness, inspire our musicals and movie scripts, our lying adverts and political bios (93). If a metaphysical truth is clearly not at stake, still he wonders why he should write, stir memory, disturb the dead or the alive, "[s]ince the shit of my bowels have moved through for more than fifty years has been flushed daily and forgotten, why not the rest: Mad Meg, mother, father, Marty, me, the dirty Jews, the dirtier Nazis, Suzu, Lou, Culp, Planman-tee?" (42). Scatological language attempts to eliminate any eschatological aspirations that the act of writing could harbour.

Yet, the reason he detects in this autobiographical spurt does point to a basic existential condition: "When I write about the Third Reich, or now, when

I write about myself, is it truly the truth I want? [...] I want to feel a little less *uneasy*" (106, *emphasis mine*). "If I could simply feel a little less uneasy" (107). Locke's uneasiness, the state of ill-being and disturbance behind every act of will that migrated to existential philosophy, permeates and propels the narrative. All the action is concentrated on the pursuit of memory, on memory in flooding progress that gushes out of the narrator's past in an unstoppable associative flow. Kohler, enthralled by this new sirens' song, makes up his mind to dig into his past and remembrance is concretised by the actual act of digging a tunnel in the cellar of his house, which becomes the main structural metaphor in a narrative that luxuriates in tropes. Gerhard Hoffmann rightly noted that "Gass creates characters who find in symbols truth or ersatz satisfaction for the failure to relate meaningfully to the world" (Hoffmann 397). The author who self-avowedly "rejected a realism that wasn't real and [...] organised his fictions around symbolic centres" (Gass 1996: 47) has his narrator elaborate on the multiple metaphorical implications of the tunnel. Kohler tells us almost everything, covering a maximum number of interpretations while giving a sardonic wink at the critics. If the truth in fiction is tautological, according to Riffattere, in post-modern fiction, it is also denuded of its trappings (yet only to use different trappings) (Riffattere 7). Thus tunnelling is "the gesture" which "symbolizes" the narrator's "desperation" (153), when he decides to "descend [...] twelve philippics deep" (153); Hitler's favourite film is based on the eponymous book as well as the narrator's wife's formerly friendly but presently hostile womb—"I have my own hole now, your cunt is not the only cave" (462). And that's merely the beginning of the interpretative scheme, which maintains the dialectics of entrapment and liberation, of emptying and refilling, of cleanliness and dirt throughout the narrative.

TRUTH IN HISTORY

Gass not only dismantles the autobiographical mode but also broadens it by extending the limits of language to history. His character as a professor and writer of history has a greater responsibility towards truth. Yet, personal truth and historical truth have the same medium of construction and conveyance: language. The narrative puts forward the post-modern idea that history is a construct, as Steven Kellman puts it: "[t]he novel deconstructs history as a contrivance with a counterfeit past and a doubtful future" (Kellman 9). History is omnipresent in the narrator's stream of consciousness; Kohler constantly debates with himself or his colleagues who offer, each, a

different approach to history. Magus Tabor, a most forceful character, Kohler's professor and mentor, contends that history is the narrative of the power of the elites, an instrument of domination, and tests the limits of his own discourse: "I denounce one text to turd you with another," meaning his own (269). Tabor, Kohler's revered master bequeathed his chair to him carried all the way from Germany. The polysemy of the term also points to the inherited ideas.

The epistemological uncertainties in *The Tunnel* appear all the more provocative when the study of history involves the event that forestalled the progress of scepticism and relativism, the event that made absolute moral standards necessary. On such grounds, Marcus Klein in his article "Post-modernising the Holocaust: William Gass in *The Tunnel*" rejects the novel, contending that Gass trivializes the *Shoah* by exaggerating Kohler's guilt (Klein 86), thus missing the main point in the novel and Gass's narrative use of the Holocaust.

If the truth of correspondence is irrelevant to fiction, the truth of revelation is not alien to historiography. The narrator is no Holocaust denier, as some reviewers implied, but seems to have ventured an interpretation of Nazism in his books, displacing the responsibility to every man, which Jeffrey Pence qualified as "moral revisionism" (Pence 103). Gass has created a character who shocks and offends, whose political incorrectness, obscenity, penis-fixation, and play with antisemitism make unreliable. Jean-François Chassay included *The Tunnel* in a collection of essays on the unclean, summing up the controversy around the novel in a question: "comment un si grand intellectuel a-t-il pu produire un personnage aussi dégoûtant, racontant au lecteur tout de ses fantasmes les plus pervers et ses penchants politiques pour l'extrême droite?" (Chassay 5). Precisely, only a great intellectual with dazzling erudition and a versatile mind could create such a brainy, complex character whose loathsomeness, sharpness and wild experimentation with language, simply obey, as we shall see, to the necessities of the narrative. The reader is swayed from pathos [some critics find the narrator moving (Maniez 1996: 111)] to bathos and Chassay's approach, only partial, can by no means account for the former.

SHIFTING TRUTH

Truth, both historical and autobiographical, has been impaired for good in the narrative; yet, when all untruth is said and done, there is still the issue of guilt and innocence to deal with. If in history they are treated not as "onto-

logical elements" but merely as "ideological factors" by the narrator in his study on Nazi Germany (13), they pave the way to ontology in the narrator's discourse. All critics, to a greater or lesser degree, positively or negatively, and following the example of the narrator who relishes symbolic gestures, have highlighted the conjunction of history and his personal history exemplified by the position of Kohler's manuscripts, one hidden in the other. However, what has not been pinpointed is the narrator's double identity of perpetrator and victim and thus his shifting truth.

The vital link between history and personal history is not in the epistemological uncertainties that underpin these modes of writing but in human pain. Gass uses the horror of the holocaust to give the reader an insight into the horror of the human heart. After studying the historical phenomenon of fascism, the narrator peers into what he calls "the fascism of the heart," a baleful leitmotiv in the narrative. The phrase has been inspired by Hannah Arendt's "banality of evil" which is "part of the novel's functioning elements," as Gass told Kaposi (Ammon 131). It is not the historical phenomenon that interests the author but the ahistorical one. Almost everyone in the narrative is infected by it and is consequently guilty: from professor Kohler who attempts to bend his female students to his sexual demands, to the respectable colleague, who uses his administrative power to assert himself and humiliate the narrator, to the devoted aunt who methodically and surreptitiously gains power to reign over everybody's life, even to the reader, "his hypocritical reader, his double and brother" (Baudelaire), as the latter is offered to have his or her picture taken for the narrator's family album. The Holocaust provides the paradigm of evil, the archetype of the abject and it is tightly woven into the narrative.

Early in the narrative, the reader discovers Kohler's participation in the *Kristallnacht* when, like the rioting Germans, he broke a window, albeit, by mistake, a Nordic one. Frustration, another emotional mover of the narrative, is the blanket term that can account for all types of fascism as Kohler's fantasy of the Party of the Disappointed People (PDP) indicates. He makes it real by creating even graphically all the necessary regalia, including the deployment of the "Pennant of Passive Attitudes and Emotions," bigotry, spite, niggardliness, procrastination, sloth and jealousy, that marks the book's first page. He solemnly declares his loss of faith in humanity; "If, since the day Nietzsche composed the cliché and advanced the hope, Henry, all real belief in God has gone like the last garrulous guest, then it stands to reason that, following the Holocaust, all real belief in Man must wither too. Of course I cannot mean what I say. Well, I am *l'enfant terrible d'un certain âge*" (36). Here

the cat is let out of the bag. The crucial link of the Holocaust is with the narrator's childhood. The worst that human history has known is associated with the worst a child can experience, helplessly eye-witness his own mother destroy herself. The major trope in the novel is not the ostentatious metaphor in the title, but metonymy and a simile. Early in the narrative, the reader is told about Kohler's dipsomaniac mother who divests herself of all dignity, and the bigot of an arthritic father who damages his son's self-esteem. *The Tunnel* is no classic Freudian narrative that will finally reveal the trauma, as it is known right from the start and is recounted *ad nauseam*. Yet, it is only in the section before last that Kohler admits: "I did my best to disremember" (621), as his family is likened to the Holocaust and the extent of Kohler's guilt is measured, "his kiss of Judas" to the mother is confessed (617); his guilt and innocence, inextricably woven, are shown in the narrative's major episode when Kohler, a child-teenager, *in extremis* commits his mother to a mental asylum after seeing her half-drowned in the pool of her own blood and urine:

Despite my family training in forgetting, it all came back—those terrible memories did—when she grabbed my hand so desperately while we taxied to the—well, what shall I call it?—to the hospital, asylum, snake pit, nut house, loony bin. Taxied, Jeez. To take a taxi to your death. Just around the corner, driver, you can't miss it [...] Hey, if dead, she can say she stiffed the driver. So, little funny guy, who's going to pay the meter? You, kid? Me, me, me. (626).

There is no doubt that Frederick William Kohler is a loathsome narrator, as Lou, the woman he was passionately in love with called him when she abandoned him. Yet, in the last two sections, he clearly appears as a family Holocaust victim and the reader realises he has been so throughout the narrative, since "language never lies" (448)—in this statement Derrida's deconstructionist theory clearly comes into view—and "[t]he only reference against which [readers] need to test the narrative's truth is language" (Riffaterre 8); his discourse can now also be read as a martyr's tale.

Kohler often appears as a hater of Jews; yet, by virtue of a stolen, damaged childhood by two broken both mentally and physically parents, the narrator seems to identify with a persecuted Jew. This is how he relates his escape to Germany with a pun on destination: "I [...] coupled myself to one of those trains like a car crammed with refugees, and had myself drawn toward history and other desperations" (142). Some of his diary entries have been marked by the tattooed numbers which the concentration camp inmates bore. His life is experienced as life in a concentration camp: "I'm thinking of

digging a tunnel to escape from the camp" (148), he pictures himself saying to his wife. When, during the *Kristallnacht* he, by mistake, breaks the window of a house which apparently did not belong to a Jew, he calls it "a 'goy's" window pane (335). Likewise, when in his penis-obsession, he obscenely describes what is supposedly a Jewish penis like, he pictures his wife saying: "You're describing your own sweet weenie, Willie" (93), although he reassures himself with his uncircumcised "purity"—which is revoked in another hilarious episode, "Foreskinned," when he describes his humiliation by the army doctor as he is unable to pull back his foreskin stuck with dirt. Besides, like a martyr's tale, the narrative does not rely only on the text but introduces some pictures and plays with typography with a disturbing effect upon the reader, as Françoise Sammarcelli remarks: "les signes iconiques et les effets typographiques confrontent le lecteur au malaise" (Sammarcelli 2). Just like a Holocaust testimony, the narrative engenders disquietude and defies classification.

But above all, the confrontation with the abject that subtends the afflicted body relates the narrator's experience to a Holocaust victim's. The human body in *The Tunnel* is wreathed in the miasma of its fluids, waste and rot, as the narrator is obsessed with its decline, decay, degeneration, its moral and physical degradation. There can be no more space for cleanliness and propriety as there can be no atonement or purification for the perpetrator. Having experienced a personal Holocaust and having studied the Historical one (in that order), the narrator cannot escape the dark side of human condition: "I see slime as our world's most triumphant substance" (435). Close acquaintance with this double Holocaust shapes an inalterable vision of life, an ultimate truth: "beneath the surface of life is the pit the abyss the awful truth, a truth that cannot be lived with, that cannot be abided: human worthlessness" (197).

Even love, lyrically expressed in the narrative, fails to provide a lasting effect. One of the chapters, titled "Do Rivers" (a sensual code for the lovers similar to Proust's famous phrase, *faire catleya*, in *Un Amour de Swan*), offers some of the most exalted pages on love in modern American literature. Love corroborates the theme of the narrator's innocence: "The fingers which slipped through the enchanted forest of your twat [...] did not heft that rock on *Kristallnacht*" (111), and constitutes the only possibility to awake from the nightmare of history: "we were happy because we had no history (107), yet only to find oneself divested of the last scarp of illusion: "what was illusory was the feeling that it—the trip—would do the soul some service" (561), in the aftermath of the separation, and deeper into the inferno of existence. In

the geometry of the novel, there is no way out of the tunnel for the dirt dug out and dumped into the drawers of the heavy Victorian furniture which Kohler's wife collects, eventually discovered by her and thrown back on the joint manuscript.

ONTOLOGICAL TRUTH

This circular movement, which points to the impossibility for Kohler, a post-modern Sisyphus gone underground, to attain liberation, is also manifest in the activity of the reflecting I, lost in interiority, introspection, cerebration and cogitation. The narrator is ultimately the object of his own inquiry and everything in the narrative is contemporaneous, which points to the movement away from *chronos*, the linear, orderly conception of time, and towards *aión*, a time of pure becoming, according to the distinction in time made by the Stoics. All characters in the novel appear only in the mind's eye of the narrator and consequently as extensions and props of his mental activity. Occasionally, they offer metaphors for being which appears hollow and empty. Uncle Bart and the Aunt are cases in point. The former yields "an image in the form of a tall dark column of damp air, hole going nowhere" (121), "feeds" on "forgetfulness and silence," is "*Dasein* indeed" (116). The latter, a compulsive collector of empty card-boxes, gives the narrator an even more frightening experience when he enters her empty trunk: "Auntie's steamer trunk had borne into our house the character of consciousness itself, empty of course [...] it ought not to be let out, diluted by things already made, felt, thought, imagined, desired-dragged about, disgraced, defiled, deformed—for it was inwardness without anything in it" (590). Does Gass attempt to reach that "philosophy shown" (Gass 1970: 250) which he greatly admired in Wittgenstein? Along with the epistemological uncertainties, ontological ones envelop the truth of human life his *The Tunnel*, while the narrator's discourse tries to penetrate the hollowness of existence.

The reflecting activity in *The Tunnel* also reaches its limits, which is again expressed by Kohler's mentor in one of his lectures in a merry-go-round image; "from things to thoughts of things to thoughts of thoughts, from thoughts of thoughts to thoughts as things again" (253). The reader's attention is constantly redirected to language: "I stand alone on an empty page like a period put down in a snowfall" (125). Likewise, the main window, another central symbol in the narrative, out of which the narrator looks at the inner world, is a paper one, and, shaped by the narrator's words in the first

section of the book, appears empty, an empty square box in the middle of the page. However, as Hoffmann's states:

The meta-reflection on art in post-modern fiction proceeds along the same course as does reflection [...] from the artefact to the thought about the artifact to the thought about the thought of the artefact to the point where thought again encounters the limits of cognition, innovation and perfection but can react to it with the freely titling spirit of the comic mode. (Hoffmann 502)

This could be somewhat qualified in *The Tunnel*, which would give some credit to Gass's classification of his novel as late modern. Not that Gass refrains from resorting to the comic mode but his relation to his predecessors remains ambivalent as it also involves great respect and admiration.

POETIC TRUTH

Among the seven types of methods which Pascal uses for the discernment of truth mentioned by Thomas Harrington (Harrington 9), the fourth one is based on authority, whether of books or people. Hoffmann reports reference to 100 authors in *The Tunnel* (Hoffmann 183) and indeed the narrative often appears as a tapestry of other texts, criticized, questioned, parodied. For the reader tempted to see Kohler, the narrator who "received life like a wound" (Lautréamont's verse is very relevant here) as a tragic hero whose fatal flaw would be his entrapment in the worthlessness of the human condition, he or she would revise his or her position coming upon the sentence: "O my father! Country! House of Kohler! hole up here!" (153), where Gass parodies the conventions of Greek tragedy and turns his narrator into a comic-tragic hero.

However, out of all prestigious voices, there is one that has a special status and is always treated reverentially in the text: Rilke's. The German poet, Gass's favourite, is the narrator's constant companion and the narrative's patron saint. Through a constant dialogue with Rilke, which Jonathan N. Barron in his article "Sentenced to Sentences... Poetry and *The Tunnel*" analyses, Kohler ventures into the realm of poetry with the German poet as his guide: "the difficulty is that I only want to understand myself which is what I do when I interpose the poet between you—that is them—their lives—you, yes—and my mind's ruminating mouth" (125). The concluding section and one of the parts in the section before last, which relate *in extenso* the key episodes in Kohler's psycho-biography, bear Rilke's verse: "Outcast on the

Mountains of the heart.” Kohler under Rilke’s wing ventures the bitter song of himself. His assessment at the end of the digging alludes to the act of creation:

What a damnable dig it’s been. Even my nightmares grow holes. Among my rumpled sheets there must be one I’ve written something straightaway on. *Sincere*, as they say, as a knife. Memories brought back from the ground where they’d been *clayed*; memories rehid, newburied, in her heavy Victorian armoires and dressers. Did justice get done? Yet? Dump it, all, say on the parlor rug: a little lump of language. (651 emphasis mine).

Just like Rilke, an outcast, a loner, Kohler breathed life into clay attaining a glimpse, a modicum of poetic truth. There can be no redemption for the narrator, as the narrative ends with an “either/or”: either suicide or resignation; yet, “the little lump of language” emerging from the dirt makes him the poet of the abject.

Truth may be unattainable but not undesirable. The tenets of postmodernism that attempted to dismantle truth cannot put an end to the quest for truth which is part of our cognitive make-up. Although Gass placed his novel on the frontier between modernism and post-modernism, the truth value he attributes to poetry renews our faith in language as an instrument of quest. The aesthetic bliss that his novel offers is a form of truth that only art possesses.

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