

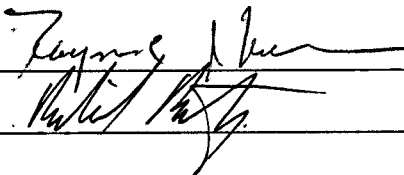
AMERICAN ACADEMIC POST-MODERNISM  
AND THE PROBLEM OF AUDIENCE

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### Abstract

This study compares the rhetoric of American academic post-modern fiction with the realities of its institutional practices. In particular, I examine the influence exercised by certain representative authors over the reception of their works, and the reciprocal effects of criticism on their creative production.

In my introduction, I distinguish between two generations of post[-]modernism--an earlier one characterized by its adherence to modernist precepts, and a later one which reacts against modernism; I suggest the presence or absence of a hyphen in the term as a way to indicate the respective attitudes toward modernism, but my study is concerned only with writers of the earlier, post-modern era, because it is in them that the contradictions between rhetoric and practice are, at the moment, most apparent.

The nature of that practice is demonstrated through readings of selected fiction and non-fiction texts by William H. Gass, John Hawkes, Robert Coover, and Gilbert Sorrentino, and through close consideration of various interviews, and critical responses. By following specific

metaphors and ideas as they are transmitted from author to critic--and sometimes from critic to author--I show how this community of readers arrives at an understanding of a writer, and how it may shape that writer's self-understanding as well.

The institutionalization of the literary writer has taken place over a relatively long period of time, and many of the behaviors I discuss have precedents in modernism, and roots in the same cultural changes that produced the modern university. For that reason, historical precedents, such as the genealogy of our critical understanding of Henry James and the influence of T.S. Eliot in professionalizing literature and literary criticism, are reviewed, and changes in the publishing industry and in the societal status of the intellectual are also considered.

Finally, by re-reading various texts against the developing consensus, and by proposing the work-in-progress as an emblematic form of post-modern fiction, I attempt to demonstrate some of the constraints under which this interdependence places both parties, and I briefly suggest some alternatives to the critical status quo.



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This dissertation is affectionately dedicated to Michael Levenson, to my wife Maggie, to her parents, and to mine: without their wisdom, confidence, and support it would not have been written. I am also grateful to Richard Rorty, to my brother-in-law Jim English, and to my fellow graduate students Phil Novak, Paul Vanderham, and Eyal Amiran for their thoughtful criticism and advice.

Introduction: Post[-]modernisms

What is postmodernism in literature?<sup>1</sup> The definitions that have been offered, in a debate that has raged since the 1950's, have in varying admixtures invoked history, ideology, and literary form: for some, postmodernism is an epoch which begins after the end of the second world war or after the assassination of John Kennedy;<sup>2</sup> for others, postmodernism is a matter of the political posture of the work;<sup>3</sup> still others associate postmodernism with narrative strategies and esthetic qualities apparent as early as Tristram Shandy.<sup>4</sup> There are two possible explanations for this lack of consensus: either there is a thing called the postmodern, the true nature of which has not yet been fully uncovered, or we are arguing with the same word about different things, and our problem is only that we offer every definition of postmodernism as definitive, and regard all such definitions as competing descriptions of a single reality. The latter seems not only the more plausible alternative, but also the more useful, since accepting it makes it possible to use the term, under specific definition, in a way that is at least locally descriptive.

Accordingly, in this introduction I will try to explain how I understand the word and why, given that understanding, I have chosen the audience as a focus for my discussion.

Paul de Man, in an interview published in 1986, took issue with the notion of "postmodernism" as historically descriptive, on the grounds that "The 'postmodern approach' seems . . . naively historical. . . . [involving] a very unmodern, a very old-fashioned, conservative concept of history, where history is seen as succession."<sup>5</sup> He says that even "The notion of modernity is already very dubious; the notion of postmodernity becomes a parody of the notion of modernity. . . . It is a bottomless pit . . . ." I would agree that the attempt to tie postmodernism to an account of the historical succession of styles is perhaps the weakest of the strategies for defining the term; among its other problems is the one Peter Bürger raises when he says that "the historical avant-garde. . . . liquidated the possibility of a period style when they raised to a principle the availability of the artistic means of past periods"--a point especially relevant to recent postmodernism, which has taken stylistic eclecticism as a sort of trademark.<sup>6</sup>

With that in mind, I will not interpret but only note as a convenient coincidence the fact that on the whole the ideological division within postmodernism seems to corre-

spond to a generational one. A good deal of the confusion surrounding the term's historical meaning might be attributed to the failure to acknowledge that there have already been two generations of the postmodern and that, ideologically speaking, the two have little in common.<sup>7</sup> For the purposes of this discussion at least, I propose the presence or absence of a hyphen in the term as an artificial but logical way to distinguish between them.<sup>8</sup> In the original form of the word, "Post-modernism," the hyphen privileges the modern, and I would suggest that this term is properly applied only to the first of the two generations, which sees itself as extending the project of modernism; in many regards, it would be difficult and probably pointless to distinguish between the post- and late high modernist fiction.<sup>9</sup> In "postmodernism," on the other hand, the hyphen has dropped out and the agglutinated form, in which "post" gets top billing, implies the emergence of a new entity. This form of the word is increasingly common, but I would suggest that rather than being applied indiscriminately it ought to denote specifically that rising generation which conceives of itself as distinct from and often opposed to modernism. And finally, when it is necessary in this introduction to refer to the two generations collectively, "post[-]modernism" will be the term used.

Post[-]modernism is often discussed as an international movement, but there are certain cultural conditions and institutional practices which are unique to the American scene: there is no American equivalent to the genteel reader of England or the Academy of France, and from the time of Parson Weems the American book has addressed a public far more demotic than European fiction's traditionally bourgeois clientele. Since then, the mass-market has come to dominate the consumption of cultural goods in this country, even as professionalism has become the characteristic mode of their production; the result is that our authors and their work now compete for survival in an environment that is oriented economically to the consumer and intellectually to the expert. I have chosen to focus on the earlier generation of post-modern writers because in them these forces and the features they form have by now become clearly discernible, but I see no evidence that the pattern will not be repeated by their successors.

Still, the struggle of American literature with the prevailing culture has been in large part a struggle for (and with) an audience and, although I do not propose to explore both sides of the point in my study, it is clear that the attitude toward the mass audience has been one important difference between post-modern authors like Gass and Hawkes on the one hand, and their postmodern successors--who often mix print with other media--on the other.

The newer of the two post[-]modernisms associates itself with cultural inclusiveness, and while there are reasons to be skeptical of that identification, it represents a clear rhetorical difference from the earlier post-modernism, for which the alienation of the mass audience has been something like a goal. In this respect as in many others, post-modernism extends a tradition which began as early as 1852, when resistance to what he conceived of as the philistinism of the masses led Flaubert to declare, "Between the crowd and ourselves no bond exists"--though in our century, not many would have joined him in continuing, "Alas for the crowd; alas for us, especially."<sup>10</sup> Certainly Pound felt no such regret when he remarked in 1912 to Harriet Monroe that "So far as I personally am concerned the public can go to the devil."<sup>11</sup>

For its part, "postmodernism" conceives of itself as following what Frank Lentricchia calls a program of "re-reading culture so as to amplify . . . marginalized voices," and defines itself as a variety of pluralism.<sup>12</sup> Hal Foster, in his influential Anti-Aesthetic, contrasts this "postmodernism of resistance" to the "postmodernism of reaction," and affirms art as an instrument of social change.<sup>13</sup> But the paradoxical elaboration (in Foster and others) of a recondite theory of "pop" art might well be regarded as an acknowledgment of the fact that an art which draws on the familiar in order to address itself to

the habitual is, in a protean consumer society, constantly in danger of embourgeoisement.<sup>14</sup> A complex theoretical apparatus, here no less than in "reactionary" postmodernism, guards against trivialization by assimilation:

Purity as an end and decorum as an effect; historicism as an operation and the museum as the context: the artist as original and the art work as unique--these are the terms which modernism privileges and against which postmodernism is articulated. . . . Pledged to purity, the mediums have reified--hence postmodernist art exists between, across, or outside them, or in new or neglected mediums (like video or photography). Historicized by the museum, commodified by the gallery, the art object is neutralized--hence, postmodernist art occurs in alternative spaces and in many forms, often dispersed, textual, or ephemeral. As the place of art is re-formed, so too is the role of the artist, and the values that heretofore authenticated art are questioned. In short, the cultural field is transformed, aesthetic signification opened up. (191)

In one important sense, then, the problem for both post[-]modernisms is the same, and is crucially different from the situation of the early modernists. Modernism for the most part rejected the security of the academy in order to take liberties with the culture; by contrast,



post[-]modernism stands at the embarrassing conjunction of that modernist heritage of alienation and a practical condition of institutional respectability and security. "Academic post-modernism" (a phrase which I use in my title for clarity's sake) might even be considered a redundancy, since--at least in this country--most practitioners, theorists, and readers of both post[-]modernisms are academics.<sup>15</sup> On the most cynical view, post[-]modernism could simply be divided into one generation that has something to lose (its established position) and another that has something to gain (that same position).

Even when its use is limited to a description of the formal qualities of strictly literary works, though, the term "post[-]modernism" still displays a confusing breadth of synonymy--arguably because formal innovation is an inadequate (but also inescapable) criterion for defining the various avatars of the post[-]modern, or for distinguishing them from each other or from other types of experimental writing. Witness, for example, the difficulties which Charles Russell encounters in his introduction to a recent (1981) "international anthology," The Avant-Garde Today: Russell undertakes to separate postmodernism from current avant-garde writing and, after conceding at the outset that postmodernism (like the "old avant-garde") aims to undermine modernism, he claims that the avant-garde of today,

rather than following the innovative strategies of postmodernists . . . who insist on the fictive nature of all experience known through language and who consequently offer primarily internal explorations of the experience of literature as self-reflexive artifice . . . struggles to make the text point beyond such encapsulation . . . toward the complex workings of collective discourse and behavior.<sup>16</sup>

Russell's distinction is at this point only a negative one, though, and the criterion of involvement in the praxis of life gives way, when it comes to enumerating the positive qualities of the work his anthology collects, to a celebration of the formal ingenuity of the avant-garde:

the writers presented in this collection push the self-reflexive disruption of language to extremes, at times distorting narrative structure, syntax, even the forms of words and letters, to force the text and language, the writer and reader into new patterns of perception and expression. Gambling against incomprehensibility, even illegibility, such an aesthetic raises the most problematic questions of personal and literary expression and for some, by extension, opens up new perspectives on social experience. (8-9)

And although the experiments of today's avant-garde are supposed to issue in "new perspectives on social experience," the persistent primacy of form is made quite clear

a few pages later, when Russell identifies as "the common assumption of all avant-gardes" the belief "that new forms of perception and expression lead to new states of consciousness and action" (13).

The apparently irresistible rhetoric of newness seems to ensure that innovative fiction will always justify itself in formal terms, as an experiment in "narrative structure, syntax, even the forms of words and letters," as a bold gamble that favors the odd. But aside from the question of what techniques (quotation? montage? stream of consciousness? idiosyncratic language?) might, after modernism, be considered new developments, there is underlying all of these oppositions the deep similarity of a shared premise, specifically the premise of originality itself. As critics in various fields and contexts have noted before now, the quest for the pure form, whether pursued as a search for origins or as a search for the original, is an abiding characteristic of modern art. Rosalind Krauss, for example, argues that both modernism and the avant-garde are simply "functions of what we could call the discourse of originality," and points out that that discourse serves much wider interests--and thus is fueled by more diverse institutions--than the restricted circle of professional art-making. The theme of originality, encompassing as it does the notions of authenticity, originals, and origins, is

the shared discursive practice of the museum, the historian, and the maker of art. (162)

The importance of being an original, or of owning one, is obvious. But when the "certification of the original" is an acknowledged impossibility, and the search for the pure becomes itself historically unoriginal, the "discourse of originality" is not therefore exhausted: far from ending, it simply embraces the copy. In this case, the last originality consists of repudiating the notion of originality. That work which is not actually shaped by this idea (Sherry Levine's photographs--or rather, those to which she signs her name--are a popular example) is often, as in The Recognitions of William Gaddis, preoccupied with it.

As the idea of a period style disappears, and duplication and quotation become the prevailing practice, the significance of a work of art inheres less and less in its surface aspects, and is constituted more and more in the relationship between artist and audience. Post-modern authors generally represent their fiction as an achievement in form, but criticism over the last twenty years has become increasingly absorbed in the questions of production and reception, and future readers may well value post-modern fiction for qualities other than those its authors now emphasize.

In 1970, Roger Shattuck argued that it requires at least three different disciplines to track the arts: one

concerned with "the work of art and its history," another chronicling "the history of public taste, including the evolving demands made by the public on the artist," and a third dealing "with the history of artists' attitudes toward previous works of art, toward public taste, and toward their own work and behavior as artists."<sup>17</sup> I would agree that the relation between the artist and his audience is of fundamental importance--and may even be, for the purposes of classification, a more reliably distinguishing feature than the form of the work itself. Expressions of artistic intention--public statements and manifestos--have often focused on formal innovation and difference, so form remains an important issue, but the significance of that form is clearly a function of the way a work is positioned within what Bürger calls "the institution of art." In fact, it will be my contention that even though the artist (as Benjamin noted) no longer controls the work once it is produced, he can influence its reception with his presentation (and, as often happens, his representation) of the work.

In his recent book, The Post-modern Aura: Fiction in an Age of Inflation, Charles Newman uses economic metaphors to discuss the genesis and permutations of contemporary fiction. In my own study I would like to apply the economic metaphor somewhat more literally. American academic post-modernism displays an unusual, if not histor-

ically unique, interplay between reader and writer, each having great practical importance for the other, and each competing to supplant the other. This reciprocity between producer and consumer has few parallels in contemporary culture, even in the mass marketplace. What I will be describing, then, is a sort of discrete economy within the culture, small enough to be extremely responsive, and having its own hazards and rewards, its own channels of distribution, its own connections to and dependencies on the larger economy, its own peculiarly adaptive forms and practices.

Interactions between author and audience in this fiction are complex. Basically, though, there are three questions to be answered: what role or roles are made available to the reader of post-modern fiction? what is the actual function and composition of the audience for post-modern fiction? and how do the author's attitudes toward and interactions with the audience affect the production of the fiction itself? In the process of asking, if not always definitively answering, those questions, we will examine the various attitudes criticism has taken towards post-modern fiction, ranging from servile imitation to promotionalism and professional rivalry, we will analyze some of that fiction's representations of audience, in scenes from Gass, Hawkes, and Coover, and we will investigate a few peculiarly post-modern phenomena. These

phenomena include: the death of the author, considered as an argument about the role of the reader; the institutionalized audience--writing for readers who write about their reading for other reading writers, etc.; authors as their own first readers, and their influence over subsequent criticism; the problem of restrictive readings, specifically those which treat fiction programmatically, as the embodiment of the author's announced theoretical aims and ideas; and the work-in-progress as an emblematic form of post-modern fiction.

The encounter with what has sometimes been called "metafiction" has become increasingly metatextual, and my account of that situation is itself often metacritical (a circumstance which suggests that post-modern inflation affects reading as well as writing). In order to assess not only particular examples of the fiction but also the historical moment and the institutional circumstances in which those examples are produced and received, it is necessary to offer critical readings of both fiction and non-fiction texts; I trust these sometimes extended analyses of introductions, essays, and interviews will prove themselves worthwhile.

One final proviso: while no inquiry into the contemporary institution of English studies could omit a consideration of historical and sociological precedents, these constitute the frame rather than the focus of the

present study. My purpose is only to present an accurate description of the context and conduct of post-modern fiction; I do not by any means pretend to exhaustiveness on the fascinating subject of the American academy's role in culture and society.



Notes

<sup>1</sup> Herewith a partial list of special issues, bibliographies, surveys of use, and essays suggesting definitions:

**Special Issues:**

Amerikastudien 22.1 (1977)

Arizona Quarterly 39 (1983)

Boundary 2 (all)

Journal of Modern Literature 3.5 (1974)

New German Critique 33 (1984)

New Literary History 3.1 (1971)

Telos 62 (Winter 1984-85)

**Bibliographies:**

in Maurice Beebe, "Introduction: What Modernism Was."

Journal of Modern Literature 3.5 (1974)

in Gerhard Hoffmann, et al. "'Modern,' 'Postmodern,' and 'Contemporary' as Criteria for the Analysis of 20th Century Literature." Amerikastudien 22 (1977) [Selected, based in part on Beebe, with later material]

in Brian Wallis, ed. Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation (1984) [oriented to the visual arts]

in Jonathan Arac's introduction to Postmodernism and Politics (1986)

in Ihab Hassan's The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture (1987)

Surveys of the term's use:

Gerhard Hoffmann, et al. "'Modern,' 'Postmodern,' and 'Contemporary' as Criteria for the Analysis of 20th Century Literature." Amerikastudien 22 (1977)

Andreas Huyssen, "Mapping the Postmodern." New German Critique 33 (1984)

Michael Koehler, "'Postmodernism': A Survey of Its History and Meaning." ["'Postmodernismus': Einbegriffs-geschichtlicher Überblick." Amerikastudien 22.1 (1977): 8- 18.] Unpublished translation by Thomas Austenfeld (1986). Bowers Library, U of Virginia, Charlottesville.

Michael Messmer, "Making Sense Of/With Postmodernism." Soundings 68.3 (Fall 1985)

On the definition of "Postmodernism":

Charles Altieri, "Postmodernism: A Question of Definition." Par Rapport 2.2 (summer 1979): 87-100.

William V. Spanos, "De-struction and the Question of Post-modern Literature: Towards a Definition." Par Rapport 2.2 (Summer 1979): 107-122.

Richard Wolin, "Modernism vs. Postmodernism." Telos 62  
(Winter 1984-85): 9-29.

<sup>2</sup> The first position is taken by Jean-François Lyotard in his Le Postmoderne Expliqué Aux Enfants (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1986), on page 40, where he says that Auschwitz "is the crime that opens postmodernity"; I will return to this point in my final chapter, on the work-in-progress. The second position is Larry McCaffery's, and is taken more cautiously than Lyotard's, in the introduction to Postmodern Fiction: A Bio-Bibliographical Guide (New York: Greenwood, 1986):

For the purposes of this volume . . . it would be very convenient to list November 22, 1963 (the day John Kennedy died) as the day postmodernism was officially ushered in--at least in the United States--since that was the day that symbolically signaled the end of a certain kind of optimism and naivete in our collective consciousness, the end of certain verities and assurances that had helped shape our notion of what fiction should be. . . . (xii)

<sup>3</sup> Jameson, Habermas, Rorty, Lyotard are a few of the names that come to mind in this connection.

<sup>4</sup> Sterne's book is often mentioned by formalists as "the first postmodern novel"--see, for example, Gilbert Sorrentino on page 5 of his interview with O'Brien in the first issue of Review of Contemporary Fiction.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Stephano Rosso, Critical Inquiry 12.4: 793. De Man goes on to say,

This applies more to the theoreticians of literature who feel the need to align their work with contemporary work in fiction, who have the slight intimidation which critics sometimes feel in relation to so-called creative authors and who would like to be in harmony with them.

De Man raises an interesting point: with few exceptions, none but those who identify themselves with one sort of post[-]modernism or another are involved in the debate, and hence almost all discussion is, whether overtly or covertly, polemical and selective rather than broadly descriptive. No one expects a Victorianist to be Victorian, or a Medievalist to be Medieval--why is it, then, that Larry McCaffery, for example, in his new "bio-bibliographical" study of postmodern fiction, should have chosen to give space only to that "critical thought that shares features of postmodern thought" (xxii)? With few exceptions, membership in the movement has become prerequisite to entering the "debate" over it.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Bürger, Theory of the Avant-Garde, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984) 18.

<sup>7</sup> One very good reason for regarding this split as primarily ideological rather than generational is that certain authors belonging to the earlier generation have more in common with their successors; writers like John Barth and Donald Barthelme, for instance, have generally taken a more genial and less didactic approach to their audience.

<sup>8</sup> I am not the first to make a point of the hyphen, or lack thereof, in this term: see for instance the editor's note in The Idea of the Post-Modern: Who is Teaching It?, ed. Joseph Newland:

The treatment of the word Post-Modern differs between the writers herein, based on their usage of the word. If the term is accepted as a usable label for certain tendencies in contemporary art, even with some reservations, it is treated as a single word: Postmodern. If it is viewed as a hybrid not, or not yet, deserving recognition as a useful label, it appears as Post-Modern. (np)

But this for-or-against formulation leaves no room for editorial neutrality, even if such were intended or desired; note, for example, the editor's own usage, in this note and in his title.

<sup>9</sup> With the exception of Gilbert Sorrentino, the writers discussed in my study established their reputations during the 1960's and were among the first to be called "post-modern." According to Michael Koehler, the word was introduced (in English) in the 1940's by Arnold Toynbee, in his book A Study of History--Toynbee, however, used "post-modern" to denominate the entire period from 1875 to the present. Charles Olson also employed the term in the 1950's, in a sense consonant with Toynbee's. Koehler says that Irving Howe may have been the first person to call the literature after modernism "post-modern," in his 1959 essay "Mass Society and Post-Modern Fiction." [See Michael Koehler, "'Postmodernism': A Survey of Its History and Meaning."]

<sup>10</sup> Gustave Flaubert, letter to Louise Colet, Selected Letters, trans. Francis Steegmuller (London: Farrar, Straus, 1954) 133 [excerpted in Ellmann and Fiedelson, The Modern Tradition (New York: Oxford UP, 1965), 171-72].

<sup>11</sup> Ezra Pound, letter to Harriet Monroe, The Letters of Ezra Pound, 1907-1941, ed. D.D. Paige (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1950) 13 [qtd. in Sally Dennison, [Alternative] Literary Publishing (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1984), 194].

12 Criticism and Social Change (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1983) 14-15.

13 The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, WA: Bay, 1983) xi-xii. Subsequent references to Foster will be incorporated in my text.

14 See Adrian Marino, "Les Cycles de l'Avant-Garde" in Théorie, vol. 2 of Les Avant-Gardes Littéraires Au XX<sup>e</sup> Siècle, dir. Jean Weisgerber, Histoire Comparée Des Littératures De Langues Européennes Sous Les Auspices De l'Association Internationale De Littérature Comparée 5 (Budapest: Akademiai Kiado, 1984) 1051:

Si l'avant-garde commence par se détacher de la société et de ses institutions, elle finit par être adoptée, pour tomber à un moment donné dans une sorte de domaine public. La négation, la révolte, le scandale se voient admis d'une certaine manière et, qui plus est, goûtés, promus a un statut social particulier. Subversif à l'origine, le phénomène se transforme--surtout dans les sociétés occidentales--en une véritable institution et subit un embourgeoisement évident, quoique cette marchandise explosive ne se laisse pas complètement assimiler.

15 This assertion is easier to prove, of course, with reference to those who publish than with reference to those who read, but during my study I will try to demonstrate its validity on both counts, at least as regards the earlier generation. Admittedly, there is little direct data on the composition of the audience for post-modern fiction--market research would be difficult to justify for a book with an expected printing of ten thousand or fewer copies, and is in any case not a common practice in the publishing of fiction--but if the distribution of reviews is any indication, this fiction finds most of its readers through academic quarterlies, and very few in any circle wider than that covered by The New York Times Book Review.

16 The Avant-Garde Today: An International Anthology, ed. Charles Russell. (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1981)  
8. Page numbers for subsequent references to Russell will be incorporated into my text. Note how little this description differs in substance or in style from the claims so often made for postmodernism. Foster, for example, even uses some of the same language when he characterizes postmodernism as "a rupture with the aesthetic order of modernism" and says that, "seen within a given problematic of representation, . . . its very 'illegibility' is 'allegorical'" (in Wallis 196). It is of course open to



question whether an awareness of the problematic relationship between art and representation didn't actually pre-date modernism.

<sup>17</sup> Roger Shattuck, "After the Avant-Garde," New York Review of Books 12 March 1970: 47.

Omensetter's Luck: The Work and The World

"The deepest quality of a work of art will always be the quality of the mind of the producer."

--Henry James

William Gass figures prominently in this study of audience in post-modern fiction, for a number of reasons. First, he is a pioneer among post-modern authors, and an acknowledged master of his craft; his adversaries are no less willing than his admirers to admit that "he's the best of the lot" to which he belongs.<sup>1</sup> Second, Gass is a proto-type of the academic American author: he was among the first generation of our writers to go straight from a graduate program into a career of university teaching, criticism, and grant-proposals. Third, even in a field of authors given to theorizing about what they do, Gass has been unusually industrious and effective in articulating his ideas of how fiction works and what it should be. The elaboration of these ideas has occupied countless essays and interviews, providing a programmatic account of the

aesthetic behind the artistic production of this pre-eminent post-modern author.

Gass's fiction is written slowly, and to date his oeuvre includes only one novel, Omensetter's Luck; begun in 1951, sections of the novel were published in Accent in 1958, and the entire novel was published in 1966.<sup>2</sup> He started writing his second novel, The Tunnel, in the mid-sixties, and it remains unpublished as of 1988. But Omensetter's Luck is hardly the work of a beginner: it is a sustained and impressive tour de force, and as such it offers us what may be our best opportunity to understand the relation between the theory and the practice of post-modern fiction. Furthermore, since the novel includes representations of both artist and audience, and since its reception not only established Gass's reputation but also confirmed his attitude toward the reading public, it seems an appropriate place for us to begin.

Omensetter's Luck is divided into three sections, each presided over by a different character. Brackett Omensetter, the character named in the novel's title, does not have a section of his own, and could not properly be called the "hero" of the novel, though he is of central importance. It would be more correct to describe him as the imaginative axis around which the book revolves: the three sections of the text arrange themselves around him in somewhat different ways, as their titles suggest. "The

Triumph of Israbestis Tott," "The Love and Sorrow of Henry Pimber," and "The Reverend Jethro Furber's Change of Heart" each suggest the relationship of a particular character to Omensetter and to the world.

The novel is narrated in what might be called the ungrounded third person.<sup>3</sup> The point of view given the reader is free-floating, and moves in and out of characters's immediate awareness, sometimes directly presenting the activity inside the mind and sometimes describing objectively the character, his surroundings, or the events taking place. The narrator is non-obtrusive, an eye but not an "I," and never makes his own presence felt. But even though he is self-effacing, the narrator does gradually establish control over his material, largely through consistency of tone and of stylistic effects.

Style varies somewhat according to the nature of the character presiding--Tott's section being the most facile and Furber's the most complex--but generally speaking, Omensetter's Luck is unified across its sectional divisions by the continuous development of imagery, by the recurrence of language, and also by a certain irrepressible impulse, on the part of Gass, to put sounding phrases in any available mouth--a practice which leads at times to incongruous effects (as when the arch-pedestrian mind of Tott is made to think, "I know these stories . . . my mouth gave each of them its shape, but I've no teeth to

chew my long sweet youth again.") More often, though, the effect of Gass's style is to produce the powerful impression of minute attentiveness to compositional detail, careful craftsmanship, and long gestation. Perhaps for that reason, the book feels as though it is consuming attention at a steady rate; tempo rarely varies, even though mood, density and voicing do.

Both style and thematic or conceptual content are involved in Gass's development of imagery--in fact, because imagery is actually the glue that holds the novel together, it can be difficult to separate it from the other elements; we need only pull out one thread to see how the fabric of the novel begins immediately to unravel in all directions. Take the hand, for example--it is, after all, a favorite example for Gass of how a world can be made of words.<sup>4</sup>

Like many of the basic materials of Omensetter's Luck, the hand is introduced in Tott's section:

He was out of touch. . . . each brick made by hand  
and laid by a master. . . . Sam raised his hand and  
peered between his missing fingers. . . . they hand-  
led vases, fingered silver spoons, smoothed hand-  
quilted quilts. . . . Wasn't anybody going to shake  
his hand?<sup>5</sup>

Tott lives in a world where no one knows him, where things which are really only remnants of their lost makers and

owners receive the touch denied him, and where the looked-for hand is missing. The words--and the sense of being--"out of touch" come up repeatedly throughout the novel.

It is what Henry is thinking about when he thinks,

Furber's body was a box he lived in; his arms and legs propelled and fended for him like a cripple's crutches and a blind man's cane; while Omensetter's hands, for instance, had the same expression as his face; held out his nature to you like an offering of fruit; and added themselves to what they touched, enlarging them, as rivers meet and magnify their streams. (41)

When Henry tries to get back in touch by becoming Omensetter, it is said that Henry "was newborn in that waltzing body now, he had joined it as you join a river swimming" (47).

Hands are sticky things in Omensetter's Luck, and when they have once come in contact with another image, they never really let it go. The association of fruit with Omensetter's hands, which first occurs in Pimber's section (quoted above), resurfaces with new implications in Furber's:

Omensetter's hands had reached for his, enclosing it warmly. His own had seemed terribly pale and damp, wrongly inside of the other's like a worm in fruit. (79)

The significance of fruit to the preacher, and its appearance in this connection, contribute to Furber's casting Omensetter as the old, pre-lapsarian Adam, and ultimately as the Devil, in the sermon which concludes:

And the fiend . . . He will appear with apple-rosy cheeks and friendly tousled hair . . . with candid eyes and open-ended speech. (176)

Furber's is not a logic that functions rationally or dialectically--it is the associational logic of language, where cause and effect are collapsed into one fluid and highly suggestive medium, and things take on the qualities of the words we use to describe them.

Many other images besides fruit and water cluster around the hand: stones, birds, shadows, flesh, money, sex all come to be connected to the image of the hand, and to each other through their association with the hand. And the hand itself is gradually articulated into fingers, palms, thumbs, knuckles, fist, and gesture--each an image-system in its own right, each with its own cargo of associations. In the final stages of this process, hands become simply the implied basis of metaphors: "He stood uneasily in the door as though an unpleasant thought had caught him by the sleeve" (121).

In addition to the accretion of image, the simple recurrence of language has its own function in creating the world. When words appear in the same groups across boun-

daries of character and setting, language begins to control rather than simply expressing reality, and the fundamental integrity of linguistic units is established. For instance, when Omensetter loses touch with his luck, in Chapter 8 of "Furber," he repeats word for word Henry's earlier "memory" of the Omensettters' trip from Windham to Gilean (198, 47); likewise, Henry's contemplation of his own death is repeated as Omensetter's vision of the death and burial of his sick son (60, 198). Words that were first presented as a third-person account of one character's internal images and feelings recur as the reported speech of another character; the explanation that suggests itself is that Omensetter is turning into Henry in the same way Henry turned into him. When Omensetter begins to feel that "there was a promise made to me and it was a lie" (199), he has become, like Henry, weak, disillusioned, abstracted from himself. This instance, in which language that originally appeared on the exterior of the novel later reappears in the world within the novel, furnishes us with a concrete example of a world literally created by the words that describe it.

When we say that imagery, and the linguistic form it takes, constitute the basic unity and coherence of Omensetter's Luck, we are describing not only the functioning, but also the structure of the novel. And because Omensetter's Luck is able to generate structure out of treatment



rather than subject, one cannot argue, as John Gardner does in his indictment of Gass, that "the more time one spends piling up words, the less often one needs to move from point to point, argument to argument, or event to event; that is, the less need one has of structure" (71). In some novels the equation of plot with structure may be legitimate; in Omensetter's Luck the absence of plot (were that the case) would not prove the absence of structure.

In fact, though, this novel does contain a plot, one prominent enough to have elicited criticism from the other side of the fence, from those who feel that Gass makes too many concessions to such traditional concepts. Richard Gilman and Earl Shorris have both scolded Gass for--however incidentally--telling a story in Omensetter's Luck. Gilman feels that "the edifice of [Gass's] achievement" is shaken by "its partial organization along narrative lines, its compulsion to tell a 'story' while its whole internal action struggles against the reductions and untruthfulness of storytelling, while its verbal action is struggling to be the story." He goes on to argue that "as the narrative moves to its climax, the book partly takes on the reductive nature of a cautionary tale, an allegory of truth and error."<sup>6</sup> Gass has accepted this criticism, but that need not compel our agreement.<sup>7</sup> Plot, or "story," can be said to be out of place in Omensetter's Luck only to the extent

that it remains undigested by, or unassimilated with the other elements of the novel.

Gilman is correct in saying that Omensetter's Luck flattens out into allegory at times near the end, but he is wrong to describe this as the infection of the novel by a foreign body called narrative, and wrong to take literally a rhetorical rejection of plot and character intended to focus our attention on style.<sup>8</sup> Nothing, not even story-telling, is a priori a bad thing in the novel, and the allegorical elements in Omensetter's Luck are adequately justified as part of that same symbol system which makes up the novel's "verbal action."

What Gilman and Shorris do not recognize, in their well-intentioned attempt to purify Gass, is that the treatment of plot in Omensetter's Luck is expansive rather than narrowly linear. To use another favorite Gassian analogy, one he borrowed from James, plot proceeds in widening rings rather than from A to B.<sup>9</sup> Each section of the novel covers roughly the same ground, namely Omensetter's time in Gilean, but each progressively adds to and complicates the narrative "facts" about Omensetter. Tott merely names the tale, and gives a glimpse of the players; "Pimber" divulges the core of events from Omensetter's arrival in town until Henry's death; "Furber" covers the same period of time, and adds the climactic events surrounding the recovery of Henry's body. And though from

all this a more or less straight-line plot can be abstracted, the actual presentation of the "story," especially in "Furber," is extremely disjointed. As the narrative skips around in time and awareness, foreshadowing, echoing, re-enacting and returning to events, plot unfolds into a sphere rather than as a line. Precisely because the "story" permeates Omensetter's Luck, the "verbal action" does not end up being dominated by narrative.

The story Gass has chosen to imagine, and the structure generated by the images in which he enacts that story, together incarnate Gass's abiding thematic concerns in and beyond Omensetter's Luck: the isolation of the human mind, the separation of man from nature through awareness, and of man from man through self-consciousness, and the role of imagination and language as responses to a defective human condition. Gass is always concerned to point out that the world we inhabit is formed in the mind first, and that it takes shape in answer to the things we ask of it. Henry James's observation that "the deepest quality of a work will always be the quality of the mind of the producer" is in Gass made ontological fact: the quality of the lives lived by his characters corresponds directly to the quality of their imaginations (the implication being that we should take care what we imagine and desire, since we are likely to get the world we ask for).

As I have said, the three sections of Omensetter's Luck each develop a character, and create a world as it exists for that character. Omensetter can be called the catalyst in this process because he activates the fantasies of those around him, and provides the occasion for the consubstantiation of imagination and reality. Through the agency of Omensetter's presence in Gilean, Tott, Pimber, and Furber each reify the qualities of mind they possess; beginning with Tott, we can see exactly what this means.

"The Triumph of Israbestis Tott" is not, as has been suggested, merely the successful pursuit and obliteration of a spider--a standard Gassian symbol for the artistic imagination.<sup>10</sup> Even at the most literal level, Tott's triumph is to survive: "He'd said he'd see the summer under and he had" (9). Tott outlives: he outlives the spider, outlives his time and his friends, and is finally faced with outliving the usefulness of the only things left him, the stories of a bygone Gilean. The auction that goes on throughout "Tott" is a parallel of the close-out sale Tott is conducting, in his largely unsuccessful attempts to interest people in his stories:

. . . the boy was gone, wrapped round by his mother.  
Yet I remember everything. Kick's cat. Droplets of  
cream along his jaws. Omensetter swinging his arms

in a dance. Surely they should be of use. No. An odd lot. He couldn't even auction them off. (29)

The challenge that faces Tott at this pass is to "live through that sweet weather again," to recreate a world in which he did once belong, and to do it so completely that he can cheat death by disappearing into the past. Gass has hinted that Omensetter's Luck was originally conceived as the record of this attempt, and that Tott "tells" the whole novel: sections and chapters often begin with words lifted from "Tott" and the novel develops from material that appears in larval form in that section.<sup>11</sup> But the question of whether or not the novel can be grounded in Israbestis Tott is rendered moot by the real nature of his triumph. Tott does recreate the world he belonged to, but his disappearance is not only into but in it. Tott worships Fact, and though he uses his imagination to escape his pain, as in his adventures in the wall, he can only sustain a replay of history--he cannot actually invent the world.<sup>12</sup> When Tott finally does get his facts straight, and gets the story of his life right, he effectively recreates a world in which he did not exist: Tott was a bit player in the world of Gilean, a man of no importance to others, and a mere spectator at the momentous events of his life.

Henry Pimber also disappears from life, but his imagination is different in nature from Tott's, and the

manner and significance of his disappearance is accordingly unique. Pimber's imagination is literally captured by Omensetter, and by the dream of becoming him. And yet, Henry's love of Omensetter is self-centered and self-serving, a form of narcissism--he loves Omensetter not for what he is, but because he represents what Henry is not, but would like to be. To Henry, Omensetter seems free and easy, large and physically powerful, "in touch" with himself and the world around him, and above all, happy:

Brackett Omensetter was a wide and happy man. He could whistle like the cardinal whistles in the deep snow, or whirr like the shy 'white rising from its cover, or be the lark a-chuckle in the sky. He knew the earth. He put his hands in water. (31)

Pimber's attraction to Omensetter is complicated by a certain helpless revulsion, though, and when a fox falls into Omensetter's well and Omensetter refuses to interfere in its destiny, the conflict between two powerful emotional forces temporarily paralyzes Pimber's will. He eventually shoots the fox, in the process giving himself a small gunshot wound, which leads to a parallel physical paralysis. He is cured--by Omensetter, he believes--but never again returns to normal. Killing the fox becomes a symbolic experience for Henry, a destruction both of himself and of Omensetter. The space cleared by this destruction is filled by the new Henry, a man who sits in

the world like a stone, and sees the world with a stone's impersonal and unshielded perception. Henry's "love" thus achieves its object, the goal of inhuman being-in-the-world; Henry's "sorrow" is to find that this new being is neither Henry nor Omensetter, and that his new world is no more happy or love-filled than his old one. Weak, selfish and self-deluding by nature, Henry creates a world that fails to remedy answer the needs or remedy the defects of the mind that produced it. Recognizing his failure, Henry hangs himself in a high and unvisited place, thereby forcing Gilean to seek him out, and wreaking a petty revenge on Omensetter and Mrs. Pimber for not loving him enough.

If, in some limited figurative way, "Tott" can be said to be the mind of the novel, and "Pimber" the heart, "The Reverend Jethro Furber's Change of Heart" is its body. Far longer than the first two sections, "Furber" fills up the last three quarters of Omensetter's Luck. In contrast to Henry and Tott, who disappear into their worlds, Furber's world disappears into him. What sets Furber apart from the novel's other characters, and what accounts for his taking over Omensetter's Luck, is his immersion in language. Not only is he a preacher, a man whose profession involves the manipulation of words, he is also by nature an obsessive verbalizer. For Furber, language has become an involuntary pre-occupation and a state of being. He sees with words, touches with words, and

tastes words when he eats, he inhales the fragrance of "marigold" not of marigolds, and he lives in a constant barrage of speech: "I am lonely among my voices, these voices roaring in me" (85). Even sex and rage are experienced as words by Furber: he "made love with discreet verbs and light nouns, delicate conjunctions" (162), and he "kept everything at a word's length . . . it was words he saw when he saw her . . . it was words he felt when his anger burned him" (182).

Isolation, being out of touch, is a problem for Tott and Pimber as well as for Furber, but for the first two it is a symptom of something else--old age, the need for love. Furber's isolation is both problem and solution: he doesn't want to be in touch ("You don't touch the minister" is a frequent refrain). He hates Omensetter for the same things others envy and admire because he wants more than anything to be free of the real, natural, non-linguistic world. In his last sermon, he says:

There is everywhere in nature a partiality for the earlier condition, and an instinctive urge to return to it. To succumb to this urge is to succumb to the wish of the Prince of Darkness, whose aim is to defeat, if possible, the purposes of God's creation.

(175)

Furber commits himself to winning the imaginations of Gilean away from Omensetter, and sets about accomplishing



his purpose with lies. Lying, as Gass often reminds us in the essays, was the crime for which poets were excluded from Plato's republic, and lies are particularly close neighbors of fiction. Furber fabricates a fiction in which Omensetter is evil, the Devil himself, and is responsible for Henry's death; he sells this fiction to Mat and to the rest of the town by appealing to the side of the imagination that cannot resist mystery and intrigue. This is Furber's crime: to allow his fictionalizing imagination to become involved in the "real" world. And although he suffers a series of setbacks--magical incidents such as the unaccountable reappearance of Omensetter's lost hat, which (wordlessly and without apparent effort on Omensetter's part) set Furber's diligently constructed insinuations at naught--Henry's disappearance finally presents the minister with "Opportunity like a hand to be seized and shaken" (124). Furber intends to seize and shake the hand of fate in his sermon, "and turn Omensetter into candle tallow" (167). Preparing for victory, he considers that events, "with a kind of fatality, had fallen in his favor. . . . everything was moving to the tune of his wishes, everything was changing." At the same time, Furber is vaguely disturbed "by the immanence of his success. He met it everywhere. It was in the air like the smell of apples--troubling, sweet" (166).

Notably, though, the sermon Furber preaches is one which goes beyond his original aim of vindictiveness, and simply uses Omensetter as an example of human life degraded to its animal origins. He retells Creation and the Fall of Man, emphasizing God's division of the elements and the painful separation of man from woman, and his repeated observation that "we do not belong" in this world is paired with the injunction that, "although we need comfort and hope and strength to sustain us, anything that draws us nearer to this life and puts us in desire of it is deeply wrong and greatly deceives us" (169). Furber argues, then, that we should take comfort from the very trouble that besets us, and that the way out of our present condition is not to escape downward away from knowledge, vision, and imagination, but to persevere in them, and by mastering them become more like gods and less like animals.

Stepping up into the pulpit, Furber had "meant . . . to try to fill their ears with fire. It was futile to hope that he could bring these creatures up, yet--yet he meant to try. Now he examined the space he intended to preach to. It lay just above an irregular terrain of heads. . . . " (168). Furber believes that his sermon goes "over the heads" of his audience, but it becomes clear that he is having a nervous breakdown while preaching it; as he becomes increasingly agitated and incoherent, the con-

gregation filters out of the church. He sees this exodus not as an embarrassed withdrawal from the painful spectacle of his own madness, but as confirmation of his assessment that the congregation would be unwilling to climb up "the steep pitch of his language" to that lonely Promethean pinnacle where each of them would be required to "give up their hope of living like an animal and return to an honest, conscious, human life. The prospect was hard" (167).

The day before he gives his sermon, Furber has been thinking of himself as "the hawk, predatory of mice"--the mice being his parishioners (165). Throughout the book, he alternates between insecurity and condescension, but at all times Furber is an outsider. This, along with his dedication to (or obsession with) language, is what makes him a figure of the artist--Gass has said as much. Preaching is a fairly obvious analog for the relationship between artist and audience, but in this scene it is also proves to be an image uniquely suited to expressing Gass's view of that relationship in concrete detail: the artist's alienation from society becomes the physical separation of the preacher from the congregation, his superiority to the public is translated as a physical elevation above them, his relation to tradition is contained in the notion of "preaching on a text," and public response to the chal-

lence of art is expressed in the gradual dwindling of the congregation.

The point of Furber's sermon may be lost on the townspeople, but the lies he has spread are not, and when Henry's body is recovered the town is prepared to believe that Omensetter is guilty of murdering him. At the same time, Omensetter loses faith in his luck, and in order to save the life of his son he resorts to the magic Furber has accused him of practicing. With Furber sitting by, even Omensetter's wife turns against him, accusing him of killing the child. She says, "We loved each other once. Why don't we feel the same love now--now when we need to? Why must we live in these lonely pieces?" (205). The phrase "lonely pieces" suggests a line from the sermon, "Men and women mingle, and are lonely after," and with the rest of what is happening, gives us an idea of what Furber means when he asks, "What had he said--made up--that wasn't coming true?" (208).

Confronted with its reality, Furber eventually repents of the world he has created--but he is unable to escape from it, and when Chalmley and the others seem ready to hang Omensetter, Furber's success ironically renders him helpless to interfere:

I turned the land against him--planting it with lies.  
His wife was turned against him; his children turned  
against him--from my lies. I turned Mat, and all his

friends, and all of Gilean against him--all by lies.

I turned even God against him--by my lies.

Take Doc's pill, Jethro, said Chalmley gently,  
you're just not well now. Everybody knows it's not  
in you to lie, whatever else--(233)

As with Tott and Pimber, success is an ending for Furber, but although he is nearly destroyed by the world he has created, Furber neither dies nor disappears. He fades from the fiction when the Gilean he has imagined fades from existence; what remains of him has undergone a change. Furber has become somewhat more human, and his change of heart is to have one at all, to repent the quality of his imagination, and to make some concession to normality. But Furber at this point is spent--not happy or fulfilled, merely emptied of the logoi spermatakoï, the magic words.

In the essays, as in the novel, the choice of words is a choice of worlds. The separation of mind and body, Furber's disease, leads in Omensetter's Luck to the association of people with animals, especially in situations where Furber feels the influence of the arch-animal Omensetter at work: "He bit his hand in helplessness and anger. Had his ministry been to swine and cattle; had it been to dogs and horses, goats and sheep? Now it seemed it had--or worse--was still to people. . . ." (160). Animal life is also the analogy Gass chooses in the essays to ex-

press his notion of a life that is not of the mind, or not of the imagination as he defines it. The entire essay "Even If, By All The Oxen In The World" circles this image, coming to the point most notably in the final paragraph, where Gass says:

The objects of popular culture are not art; their success or failure should not be judged as art's is; and the pleasures they provide, among goods, come last, even if, as Plato says, they are asserted to be first by all the oxen in the world.<sup>13</sup>

In another discussion of the same topic, the interpenetration of image and concept, symbol and theme becomes obvious when Gass remarks that "the function of popular culture is to bring people together. But real culture has always been the province of the handful, and it's a luxury: being a person is a luxury." Popular books bring people together, but "good books isolate you; they show how individual and unique and different . . . experience is."<sup>14</sup> We have already seen how the isolation of an individual from the herd develops in Omensetter's Luck into a metaphor for the isolation of the artist from society; the essays simply make this explicit, and generalize it to the isolation of art from (popular) culture.

The slippery side of this is Gass's extending what he sees as two conflicting aspects of human nature (the animal vs. the imaginative) into a pure opposition between

classes of human beings--artists against the rest of humanity. The insular existence of the characters in Omen-setter's Luck is a reflection of the insularity Gass feels as a writer; his idea of the life of the artist as Promethean, and the self-enclosing quality of his fiction, are both products of a mind that has chosen to capitalize on its own isolation, and to make a virtue of what it sees as necessity.<sup>15</sup>

As in Furber's version of creation, Gass creates "always by division, taking the lesser part, transforming it into its opposite, and raising it above the rest. So we should change our worst to our best" (OL 174). And like Furber, Gass wants to offer no comfort:

Art does not, I hasten to say, have a hortatory influence; it's not a medicine, and it teaches nothing. It simply shows what beauty, perfection, sensuality, and meaning are; and we feel as we should feel if we'd compared physiques with Hercules. (Fiction 274)

Implicit in Gass's analogy here is the role of the reader of the good book. It is a passive, even a meek role; we do not make critical remarks when comparing physiques with Hercules. The expression Gass uses to describe what fiction (the good kind) does to us is "fictionalizing the reader." That means that art presents its audience with "a challenge to and a denial of their own manner of existence, and accusation concerning their own

lack of reality" (Fiction 279). In some formulations of this idea, Gass goes so far as to say that he wants to "replace the reader's consciousness"<sup>16</sup>--an event which we imagine might resemble the effect Omensetter had on Pimber. But, as Elizabeth Bruss has shown, this part of Gass's theory has been changing gradually to allow the reader at least the function of realizing the work.<sup>17</sup> In a recent essay, Gass writes that

A novel is a mind aware of a world, but if the novel is not performed, if it is not moved as it ought to be through the space of the spirit, the notation notes not; because our metaphors, our theories, our histories . . . must be enacted, entered into.<sup>18</sup>

So the isolated work of art now includes the reader, and offers him an invitation of sorts: come in, come up.

Although this seems like a "change of heart" it is not--the dynamic of isolation has simply changed from "me against them" to "us against them." The idea that literature is some sort of a test of its readers does not originate with Gass, but it has been present in him from very early on,<sup>19</sup> and it is basic to "fictionalizing the reader." Paradoxically, his new attitude toward the reader has the effect of transforming an initially selfless Promethean ideal into a type of elitism, for now that the test can be passed it can also be failed:



I think the artistic aspect of fiction has always been irrelevant for most people. But generally other qualities have been present, and most readers wanted those. And if you deliberately remove them, as some writers do in order not to be misunderstood, then, of course, the people now say, "I don't want that."<sup>20</sup>

In the same statement, Gass goes on to disavow literary clubs that serve the "sociological function of dividing those who know . . . from those who don't," but the only apparent difference between what he recommends and what he disparages is that people pass the test, and enjoy their superiority, individually in the first case, and as a group in the second.

All this comes back to that fundamental value, isolation from the herd, which is in turn an illustration of the process of mind most basic to Gass, that of definition by negation. In a 1965 letter to the publisher of Omen-setter's Luck, Gass gives an example or two of this process in its raw form--examples which suggest how important definition by negation has been in shaping not only Gass's opinions, but also his art:

First of all I tried to write a book that would not be like all the books I despise. I would hope it had these negative qualities. (Afterwords 91)

With respect to Gass's theory of art, as distinct from his idea of the artist, definition by negation is

also a predilection with significant consequences. Many of Gass's theoretical positions are concerned with defining what art should not be; a notable example is his rejection of mimeticism in fiction. Purification is the object of many of these theoretical interdictions, but as Bruss points out, "Purification is not an essence but a relation; it depends on the very factors that it would repudiate or escape" (199).

In many instances, Gass is simply over-stating his case for rhetorical reasons, over-determining his conclusions the way he says fiction over-determines character (Fiction 52). And in any case, it seems appropriate for an artist to be zealous in the defense of art's freedom and integrity.<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, there are several possible consequences to the eloquence Gass exercises in the service of theory.

First of all, when one writes as Gass does for an audience composed largely of academics,<sup>22</sup> theory has a tendency to compete with fiction for the same intellectual resources; and because theory is more readily grasped than fiction, there is the possibility that a novel such as Omensetter's Luck will be attended to only as it illustrates the theories in convenient ways. And if fiction becomes merely the currency of theory, it may eventually be spent, fading from interest when the theory itself

disintegrates and loses its allure, as all theories eventually do.<sup>23</sup>

The second possible consequence of eloquence is that its force will prove to be reflexive as well as exoteric. Precisely because powerful language, in writing, remains in the world, it begins to take up space, and restrict movement. When Gass asserts himself as a theoretician, he sprouts tenets which he is naturally inclined, in subsequent discussions, to defend; this then raises the question of whether Gass's theoretical formulae describe or determine his subsequent fiction.<sup>24</sup> Gass himself knows that

We can often talk things into being only what we want to say about them. . . . We confine ourselves to too few models, and sometimes live in them as if they were, themselves, the world. (World, 273-274)

Finally, there is that possibility which informs and shapes Gass's own novel--that any idea, powerfully imagined and authoritatively expressed, can shape the character of individuals and ultimately of worlds. Taken seriously, and applied to the world that contains the book, this means that even the lives of people who never read Gass may be transformed by his ideas on the relationship of art and culture. In the discussion that follows, we will examine more closely the nature and genesis of the post-modern conception of author, text, and reader; and

though Gass is clearly not unique in his estimation of art's relation to its audience, we will see that his writings on this subject (and the claimed esotericism of his fiction) contribute to defining the way that a generation of writers, teachers and critics understand what they do, and that this in turn contributes to determining the value assigned those activities by the culture as a whole.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> John Gardner, On Moral Fiction (New York: Basic, 1978) 70. Subsequent references to Gardner's book will be incorporated into my text.

<sup>2</sup> Gass has of course published much besides Omensetter's Luck, both essays and shorter works of fiction, including many excerpts from his work-in-progress, The Tunnel. The most recent bibliographies of Gass's collected and uncollected works, interviews, critical and bibliographical essays on Gass (a selection), are in Larry McCaffery, The Metafictional Muse: The Works of Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme, and William Gass (Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1982), and in Arthur Saltzman, The Fiction of William Gass: The Consolation of Language, ed. Jerome Klinkowitz, Crosscurrents/ Modern Critiques/Third Series (Carbondale: U of Southern Illinois P, 1986). See also my own bibliography, below.

<sup>3</sup> In Booth's terminology this might be called impersonal narration by a reliably privileged observer.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Gass uses the hand as an illustration of making a world of words throughout his essay, "The Ontology Of The Sentence" in The World Within The Word (New York: Knopf, 1979).

<sup>5</sup> William H. Gass, Omensetter's Luck (New York: New American Library, 1966), 10-11. Further references to this work will be incorporated into the body of my text, and where necessary its title will be abbreviated as OL.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Gilman, The Confusion of Realms (New York: Random House, 1969) 78-79.

<sup>7</sup> However, Gass's acceptance of this criticism does have some significant consequences for his later work, which I will discuss in my final chapter.

<sup>8</sup> See the end of this chapter, and my discussion of avant-garde rhetoric and its relation to audience expectations in "Authors as First Readers," below.

<sup>9</sup> "The art of representation bristles with questions the very terms of which are difficult to apply and to appreciate; but whatever makes it arduous makes it, for our refreshment, infinite, causes the practice of it, with experience, to spread round us in a widening, not a narrowing circle" (from the preface to Roderick Hudson). See "Authors as First Readers," below, for a discussion of the genesis and historical significance of this image of the literary text.

<sup>10</sup> McCaffery, 230.

<sup>11</sup> Gass's hint is a broad one. It appears in his letter to the publisher of Omensetter's Luck, reprinted in Afterwords: Novelists on Their Novels, ed. Thomas McCormack (New York: Harper & Row, 1969) 97.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Tott's imaginary adventures "in the wall" on pp. 17-18: "More and more his fancy had to supply his vision with its objects. . . .He was conscious, always, of the inadequacy of his details, the vagueness of his pictures, the falsehood in all his implicit etceteras, because he knew nothing, had studied nothing, had traveled nowhere." On the other hand, "His dreams were not embarrassed by cliches, but in each he always knew the precise feel of the air, what manner of birds were singing, the position of the sun, the kind of cloud, the form of emotion in himself and others, and every felicity of life." In other words, Tott has a preternatural lucidity where "facts" are concerned, but no ability to make things up--the qualifications of a completely reliable narrator. Hence his unreality as a character, and his ultimate inadequacy to Gass's ambitions for the novel.

<sup>13</sup> William Gass, Fiction and the Figures of Life (1970; Boston: Godine, 1980) 275. Subsequent references to essays collected in this volume will be given in my text.

14 William Gass, "A Conversation with Stanley Elkin and William H. Gass," with Jeffrey L. Duncan, Iowa Review 7.1 (Winter 1976): 56.

15 Denis Donoghue also makes this point; in Ferocious Alphabets (Boston: Little Brown, 1981), 86.

16 William Gass, "A Conversation With William Gass," with Thomas LeClair, Chicago Review 30.2 (1977): 100.

17 Elizabeth W. Bruss, Beautiful Theories (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1982), 147-48. Further references to Bruss will be incorporated in my text. Bruss's chapter on Gass is the single best piece of criticism available to the student of Gass, and the only one that really examines the status of his theory as object.

18 "Representation and the War for Reality," in Habitations of the Word (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985) 111.

19 See Gass's letter in Afterwords, 91.

20 William Gass, "A Colloquy With William H. Gass," with Brooke Horvath et. al., Modern Fiction Studies 29.4 (Winter 1983): 590.

21 But note the discussion of the practical limitations on art's autonomy, in "Strange Bedfellows," below.



22 The evidence to support this assertion is presented on pages 84-89, below, in "Strange Bedfellows."

23 See below, "Strange Bedfellows" (for a discussion of the competition between theory and fiction for the limited resources of an academic readership) and "Doubling Commentary" (for a discussion of the problem of literary texts being "extinguished by use").

24 It will be my contention that Gass's theory has had the reflexive impact suggested here; see my final chapter on the work-in-progress.

"The Death of the Author"

William Gass concludes his most recent book, Habitations of the Word (1985), with an essay named after and responding to Roland Barthes' "The Death of Author." Both of these essays are as much about readers (and texts) as they are about authors. In his closing sentence, Barthes proclaims that "the birth of the reader must be requited by the death of the author"; Gass, in his, holds that "we need authors . . . . Readers, on the other hand . . . simply comprise the public."<sup>1</sup> We may balk at the terms on which Barthes proposes to liberate the reader from the author (his theory requires the depersonalization of both) and we may dismiss Gass's counter-arguments (some of the ideas he rejects would be difficult to attribute to Barthes); but since our concern at the moment is with Gass's ideas of authorship, of reading, and of the ontological status of the fictional text, his encounter with Barthes remains exceptionally illuminating.

Barthes' titular reference to the death of God indicates the nature of the conclusions he draws about authors:

We now know that a text consists not of a line of words, releasing a single "theological" meaning (the "message" of the Author-God), but of a multi-dimensional space in which are married and contested several writings, none of which is original: the text is a fabric of quotations, resulting from a thousand sources of culture. (B-DA, 52-53)

Barthes's example of writing as a "fabric of quotation" is a sentence from Balzac's "Sarrasine," and he argues that we cannot find an author within or behind this sentence--neither "Balzac the man" nor "Balzac the author," nor even "universal wisdom" or "Romantic psychology." "Writing," he insists, "is the destruction of every voice, every origin."

Gass initially objects to Barthes' comparison on the grounds that "we know . . . that there are authors, and we know . . . there are no gods," but he subsequently acknowledges that Barthes is discussing not the existence of real authors but the "decline in authority, in theological power" (G-DA 255) of what Booth calls the implied author. In any case, Gass can't resist a metaphor, though he prefers this one in Joyce's formulation, from Stephen Dedalus's well-known speech: "The artist, like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails" (qtd. G-DA 266).

But even when its author is an absence rather than a presence, Gass is unwilling to agree that writing sustains no voice and bears no mark of its origin. On the contrary, he maintains that "[i]t is the demise of just that confident, coldly overbearing, creator--that so palpably erased and disdainfully imperial person of the artist--that [Barthes] longs for." Balzac, Gass argues, is a misleading example from which to generalize, since he voluntarily abdicates originality in favor of the preconceived world of the reader:

The ordinary author, then, may indeed be no more than a blender of texts . . . but Roland Barthes is not hailing the death of these authors . . . but the death of the real ones, so that their texts may survive in the hearts of their readers. (G-DA 286)

Gass divides authors into those who impose a narrative persona on their works (his example is Trollope), and those, like Joyce and Flaubert (and modernist authors in general) "who wind their works up and then let them run as they may, and who cannot be recalled to rejoin or revise or reconsider anything."<sup>2</sup> Gass expresses this familiar distinction as a function of the dynamic between the implied author and the reader; in Trollope, he says, the reader is presented with a comforting guide and a familiar world, while in the creations of modernism the reader is

rudderless in a world that at best doesn't require his cooperation, and at worst is created to mock or destroy him:

Flaubert cannot count on the comfortable collusion of his readers to solidify his world . . . it is not the reader's funnybone he wishes to tickle, but the text he wishes to shape so securely a reader will not be necessary. Flaubert wants to expose his "readers" to their world of papered-over problems and foully bloated hopes by unupholstering their souls . . . he wants to demonstrate to them that they are only devouring the world and making shit out of their lives; he can hardly count on their help; their "help" would subvert his enterprise. . . . Thus the author becomes a god, instead of someone's garrulous uncle, because the author now disdains those lower and local relations. (G-DA 274)

As I have suggested, Barthes' depersonalization of the author requires the corresponding depersonalization of the reader: one becomes a field for instituting texts, the other a field for constituting them. Specifically, Barthes writes:

a text consists of multiple writings . . . but there is a site where this multiplicity is collected, and this site is not the author, as has hitherto been claimed, but the reader . . . the unity of a text is

not in its origin but in its destination, but this destination can no longer be personal: the reader is a man without history, without biography, without psychology; he is only that someone who holds collected into one and the same field all of the traces from which writing is constituted. (B-DA 54)

It is interesting, though, that the same symmetry is not maintained when Gass repersonalizes the author. This asymmetry is of long standing; in a letter written in 1965 to the editor of Omensetter's Luck and subsequently published as part of a collection of authors' comments on their work, Gass remarked that

the reader and his responses are not the test of a classic. The classic, rather, is the judge of him . . . . Melanctha, Happy Days, Under the Volcano, Ficcones, The Good Soldier, Moby Dick [etc.]--as different as they are--are examinations. They measure the emptiness of their readers, for these books completely and absolutely are.<sup>3</sup>

At one point in "The Death of the Author," Gass likens the literary text to a theatrical production (G-DA 266); elsewhere, in his 1981 preface to In the Heart of the Heart of the Country, Gass used this same metaphor to describe fiction as a play that doesn't require an audience:

on the page, though the stage is full, the theater is dark and empty. . . . And when the theater is empty,

and the actors continue to speak into the wings and walk from cupboard to sofa as if in the midst of emotion, to whom are they speaking but to themselves?

(xl)

In "Emerson and the Essay," the first piece in Habitations of the Word, Gass appears to adopt a rather different stance toward the reader, quoting Emerson to the effect that "'Tis the good reader that makes the good book."<sup>4</sup> It would be tempting to accept this as a fortuitously Emersonian inconsistency, but it soon becomes clear that, while the reader may have a role in the text, the part played is that of the author:

[T]o live is to speak and to be spoken, just as Emerson is once again alive in me when I realize his words. He preaches: I read. I read to become the preachment. Then "I" preach, and so "I" listen, finding an Emerson in myself just as he did. (EE 15)

As we have seen in Omensetter's Luck, the activity of preaching is symbolic for Gass of the artist's relation to his public, and when Gass portrays himself as a reader he places himself not in the congregation but in the pulpit, like Furber, "preaching" Emerson's sermon. It is significant, furthermore, that in Gass's opinion "what Emerson intended to do when he spoke was wipe away his audience like chalksmoke from a blackboard, and replace it with his

essay, heard in their hearts like an adopted beat" (EE 48).

Oddly, when he goes on to describe Emerson's own lecture performances, Gass's account bears a striking similarity to Barthes' description of authorship as a dialogue between writings:

Like any good lecturer . . . Emerson's exchange is ultimately with his subject . . . and with those admired predecessors who have also spoken or written about it. His theme soon speaks in its own voice, and on its own terms, whether the theme is fate, Plato, Montaigne, memory, or the conduct of life. Emerson, himself, is of no importance in these moments, just as his audience, now, can do no more than "overhear" a truly transcendental conversation. (EE 41)

It is not clear from this what really separates Gass's "transcendental conversation" from Barthes' "multi-dimensional space in which are married and contested several writings." Not univocality, certainly, nor even personality--"Emerson himself is of no importance in these moments," after all. Originality might be suggested, but then Gass describes Emerson as taking part in an "exchange" with those who have spoken on his theme before him.

Both Gass and Barthes see the literary text as enacting a reality that is finally neither the author's nor the



reader's; the difference is that Gass is unwilling to separate the agency of the text from that of the author--hence his devaluation of the reader, who merely eavesdrops on the creative process. "In fiction," Gass says, "quality ought to author everything," but it is the author who imparts that quality to the text; the reader only perceives it, as best he can:

The freedom from himself which the artist has given to his composition is the indifferent freedom of the Rilkean Dinge, an object which exists like a tree, a hat, or a stream . . . yet it is a thing whose modulated surfaces betray the consciousness it contains, and which we read, as we read words, to find the hand, the arm, the head, the voice, the self which is shaping them. . . .<sup>5</sup>

And although readers may "dislike works which seem superior to them, indifferent to them, proud" (G-DA 285), once the text has been declared the autonomous product of a shaping consciousness, the reader who questions it would seem to be--like Job--without epistemological standing.

The author answers in this scheme not to the reader, but to another writer, for only a rival creator can absorb and transform the given world, actual or textual.<sup>6</sup> And while he does not deny that "all that any author works with, in the beginning, is given her by one corrupted magus after another: the language, the life she leads, the

literary tradition,"<sup>7</sup> Gass's "real" artist does not stop at replicating the given. This, as we have seen, is why he takes exception to Barthes' exemplary author and work:

Balzac's revelations, however critical and "daring" and suggestive, pet the bourgeois to the purr point because they are revelations which remain in their world and in their language. . . . "Sarrasine" is corrupt in both its art and its attitudes. . . . (G-DA 288)

But if we contrast these remarks with the previous encomium on Flaubert, who is said to "to expose his 'readers' to their world of papered-over problems and foully bloated hopes by unupholstering their souls," it would seem that Gass is objecting to the content of "Sarrasine" as much as, if not more than, to its form. For although he is, in part, making a point about the language each author uses, Gass's discrimination rests expressly on the relation between an author's subject matter and his audience: he dismisses Balzac's "revelations" as fundamentally bourgeois because they don't threaten the reader's presuppositions, whereas he approves of Flaubert for wanting "to demonstrate to [readers] that they are only devouring the world and making shit out of their lives."

The reference to shit is characteristic in Gass--some would say he is obsessed with it<sup>8</sup>--and here, as is often the case, it constitutes half of an implied contrast

between the by-products of physical and of intellectual existence. As Gass sees it, the nature of human being is to "incessantly transmute. What I am emptying my bladder of . . . was once a nice hot cup of green tea." The author, too, consumes the world, including the world of texts, and excretes what is either an alchemical transformation of the raw material, or merely a "corrupt" by-product of its digestion.

Though he might have sniffed at Gass's formulation of it, the idea of art as metamorphosis was a favorite of Nabokov's, so it seems appropriate that the example of authorship which Gass offers in place of Balzac's "Sarrasine" is Nabokov's "The Vane Sisters." The first-person narrator of this story bears a certain biographical resemblance to Nabokov, but the final paragraph encodes a message--ostensibly from the (dead) sisters to the narrator--which has the effect of calling our attention to Nabokov's mastery of form, and reminds us that the narrator's conscious and apparently literal expression of meaning is itself unwittingly shaped by the designing hand of a hidden author. Gass proceeds to distinguish between author and narrator, applauds Nabokov's performance, and then concludes that here as in all cases,

the problem is not . . . whether the author is present in the work in one way or another . . . but whether the text can take care of itself, can stand

on its own, or whether it needs whatever outside help it can get. (G-DA 276-77)

If the text truly succeeds as an independent reality, then by definition it needs no outside help, from the author or anyone else: Gass says of Finnegans Wake, for instance, that it "is a replacement for the world. Unlike the world, it is overmade of meanings. Like the world, it does not mean" (G-DA 275). We have already gathered that--unless we are writers--our task in relation to this world will consist for the most part of appreciation, but Gass diagrams for us the "six regularly scheduled trains out of the text" (G-DA 277), to ensure that we won't mistake riding these for reading. The illegitimate transports of the reader are: replacing the text with its interpretation, concentrating on literary influences, investigating the text's structural underpinnings, referring things in the text to the world, regarding the text as a biography of the writer, or treating it as an allegory of its own reading. In other words, all critical activity, from literary history to deconstruction and reader-response analysis and with the sole exception of celebrating the qualities of the text, is forbidden because it reduces art to an unacceptable contingency on the world, and makes fiction a matter of fact.

Reasoning by antithesis is one of Gass's most common techniques, and his arguments frequently offer only unten-

able alternatives to the position he supports: in this instance, no one would want to restrict fiction to signification of the already known, or categorically exclude appreciation from the repertoire of the critic. On the other hand, it is worth pointing out that Barthes' objection to the idea of an author hidden or contained in the text is itself derived from the premise that "writing constantly posits meaning, but always in order to evaporate it." Barthes sees this lack of reference as the condition for the text's continued openness to reading, and argues that

[t]o assign an Author to a text is to impose a brake on it, to furnish it with a final signified, to close writing. This conception is quite suited to criticism, which then undertakes the important task of discovering the Author . . . beneath the work: once the Author is found, the text is "explained," the critic has won; hence, it is hardly surprising that historically the Author's empire has been the Critic's as well.<sup>9</sup>

Barthes may conceive of the text as a field of discourse which finds its "unity . . . not in its origin but in its destination" (B-DA 54), but because it can only be compounded from pre-existent linguistic and cultural elements, the text "belongs" to no one. For Gass, the "real" author's text is always the clockwork creation of a

form-giving god (whose "first creation is the Artist himself"--to quote the artist created by another autocratic modernist, Wyndham Lewis).<sup>10</sup> He is willing to efface the authorial presence only insofar as doing so allows him to argue that "when the author detaches himself from the text, he detaches the reader at the same time" (G-DA 274)--even then, though, the author is always only hidden, never absent.

Barthes' seems the more genuinely postmodern position, sacrificing the sovereignty of the author in order to preserve the integrity of the text and the indispensability of the reader; Gass, struggling to maintain the first two and deny the third, ends up sacrificing the theoretical coherence of his own argument instead. His bid to establish the independence of the text hinges on the idea that its author "cannot be recalled to rejoin or revise or reconsider anything"--the implication being that if the text is beyond authorial intervention, it must be impervious to the meddling of the reader as well. But at the same time, he seems to reserve a sort of conceptual stewardship to the author--the reconstruction of whose consciousness, as we remember, is the one right lure of reading.

This theoretical contradiction has practical consequences in the many instances where Gass undertakes to explicate his work in critical terms. For example, in his

previously cited letter on Omensetter's Luck, Gass remains within the bounds of appreciation when he points out for his editor the "chief triumph" and "best stanza" of various sections of his novel (LE 97, 100), but he would seem to be entrained in some forbidden form of egress from the text when he notes the recurrence of a "tick-tock theme throughout the book" (LE 98), singles out "the most experimental part of the book," or admits "I play around with point-of-view and tense shift" (LE 101). "I love theory, but I hate my own work," he says unconvincingly; "I hate talking about it. I hate trying to justify it. And my theory tells me that no explanations suffice" (LE 104).

It would be manifestly unfair to convict Gass of vacillation based on a comparison of two documents written twenty years apart, but the discrepancy between theory and practice is one that not only Gass but other authors we will be discussing have perpetuated over time, and indulge in today. In part, as we have seen, this discrepancy derives from a contradiction in the theory itself, between claims for the objective status of the work and for the immanence within it of the subjectivity of its author. In part, though, it could probably also be attributed to the fact that most post-modernist authors are teachers, members of a profession devoted to explaining works of literature. The interview has become a forum almost ex-

clusively given over to promulgating authors's explanations of their works, and has been instrumental in making the supervising presence of the author part of the apparatus of the text. However, this would not be the case if it were not also true that most readers of post-modern fiction are either professors or students of literature as well. In what follows, I will try to show first what basis there is for believing that post-modern fiction's audience is largely academic, and then that the post-modern author engages, despite the rhetoric of opposition and inaccessibility, in a lively interaction with that audience.



Notes

<sup>1</sup> Barthes, "The Death of the Author" in The Rustle of Language, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986) 55; Gass, "The Death of the Author" in Habitations of The Word (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985) 288. Further references to these two essays (hereafter B-DA and G-DA) will be incorporated into the text.

<sup>2</sup> G-DA 269. This picture of the relationship between the modernist author and work is an idealized one: Joyce's supervision of Ulysses, through his collaboration with Stuart Gilbert, is well-documented, and arguably extended even to suggesting the strategy for defending the book in its U.S. obscenity trial [c.f. the dissertation of Paul Vanderham, University of Virginia, uncompleted as of 1988].

<sup>3</sup> Gass, "Letter to the Editor" in Afterwords: Novelists on Their Novels, ed. Thomas McCormack (New York: Harper & Row, 1969) 91.

<sup>4</sup> Gass, "Emerson and the Essay," in Habitations of the Word 13. Hereafter, this essay will be cited in the text as EE.

<sup>5</sup> G-DA 267. Gass might have learned from either Rilke or Flaubert (or Joyce or Pound or any of a number of others) to regard the text as an artifact, objectified and self-contained; on the other hand, his notion of reading--of how and why we approach that artifact--seems to have come from some more romantic, subjectivist quarter. See, for example, the following from Gass's revised preface to In the Heart of the Heart of the Country (Boston: Godine-Nonpareil, 1981):

"the gentle Turgenev . . . --writing about himself-- said: 'Only the chosen few are able to transmit to posterity not only the content but also the form of their thoughts and views, their personality, which, generally speaking, is of no concern to the masses.' The form. That is what the long search is for; because form, as Aristotle has instructed us, is the soul itself, the life in any thing, and of any immortal thing the whole." (xliv)

<sup>6</sup> A fact which perhaps explains the scale of Gass's response (twenty-three pages) to Barthes' brief essay, and his vehement tone at moments like this:

[t]here is clearly considerable satisfaction to be had in the removal of the poet from his or her position in the center of public adulation. . . . Indeed, it is no longer the painter or the poet whom the

public looks for, talking or scribbling away in some café's most prominent corner, but (after Cocteau, who taught everyone the trade) a Sartre or a Barthes whom we hope to catch a glimpse of--a Lacan or Foucault, or some other impresario of ideas. (G-DA 271-72)

But Gass and Barthes, are both (in the manner of their respective cultures) "impresarios of ideas"--as was, for that matter, the Emerson of the essays. The difference is not in their status, but in their attitude toward authors: Gass and Emerson honor them dead, Barthes buries them alive.

<sup>7</sup> (G-DA 286). Throughout "The Death of the Author," Gass uses the feminine pronoun when referring to the author in the abstract.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Robert Alter in his review of Habitations of The Word in The New Republic 11 March 1985: "The prose is blotched with a cloacal obsession, the excretory functions being deemed the aptest image for most things" (34).

<sup>9</sup> B-DA 53-54. Barthes' last point here is relevant to Gass's notion of the special ("transcendental") relationship of the writer to his predecessors; although Gass is talking specifically about Emerson's relationship to the essayists of his tradition, the exchange of ideas he

describes can also take place among critics, and between critics and authors. In fact, as noted above (n6), both Gass and Emerson blur the distinction between "creative" and critical writing.

<sup>10</sup> The words are Tarr's, in the eponymous novel (1928; New York: Penguin, 1982) 20.

Strange Bedfellows: The Birth of the Audience

Poetry, like all things of perfect beauty, is perforce admired. But the admiration is distant, vague--a stupid admiration because it is the mob's. Then, because of this general reaction, a fantastic, preposterous idea occurs to these minds: namely, that poetry must be taught in school; and so, like anything else that is taught to the many, poetry is inevitably reduced to the level of a science. It is explained to all alike, democratically. . . .

--Mallarmé, "Art for All" (1862)

It is not that critics set out to invent difficulties, hidden meanings and deceptive appearances or to create incapacities in their audience, but rather that their specialization presupposes such an activity. Indeed, the machinery of culture itself--writing, publishing houses, educational institutions--has gradually come to reserve a place for interpreters and arbiters of public taste. Even contemporary authors can come to depend on critics willing to "immerse themselves in the work." Literature--the ancient works and the most sophisticated modern experiments--has become a thing associated chiefly with the schools that both preserve the distance between high culture and low and work to overcome it.

--Bruss, Beautiful Theories (1982)

These two passages mark, respectively, the incipience and the culmination of a process in which avant-garde writing and literary studies, responding to similar pressures and incentives, evolved from natural enemies into professional allies. As we will see, this conjunction occurs as the logical extrapolation of trajectories iden-

tifiable in literature and the academy as early as the turn of this century; but especially since the second world war, the rapprochement has been hastened by a common threat--namely, the increasing domination of American culture by market forces. For the academic humanist, there has been a very real diminution of public authority and respect; today we have very few public intellectuals, and very few academic generalists. For the writer of literary fiction, it has become increasingly difficult to compete for survival in an environment where marketability is often taken as the only measure of value. As a result, both writer and critic have turned away from the public, addressing themselves instead to a smaller but more sympathetic audience of fellow-professionals. To be well-read was once one of the accomplishments of any educated person; now, instead of the vague cachet of high culture, literature bestows more concrete benefits on the few who have use for it.

Let us look at the problem first from the writer's side. There are two ways for a writer to publish: in book form, or in magazines. Historically, American writers have found magazines a fairly reliable source of income--think of the many who benefited under Howells's tenure as editor of The Atlantic Monthly, for example. But by the middle of this century magazines like The Atlantic were catering to a wider audience, and one with narrower inter-

ests. Of course, for at least a hundred years there have been magazines devoted specifically to publishing literature for a smaller public of aficionados--magazines like The Little Review--but after the second world war, even that source of (already limited) revenue had virtually dried up. Jarvis Thurston, founding editor of Perspective (a magazine which provided an outlet for the modernists), recalls that

At the time we started [in 1947], Eliot had stopped his Criterion, and Warren's Southern Review had been killed by World War II. There were extant probably less than fifteen quality magazines with some national readership.<sup>1</sup>

When the little magazine finally re-emerged, it did so under the auspices of the university, and under the control of writers and critics of a particular stripe:

Until about 1953 there were about forty-two literary magazines in the whole country, and most were controlled by the academic poets. Any so-called avant-garde poet had great difficulty having his work published.<sup>2</sup>

For writers coming of age in the 1950's, then, there were substantial incentives to take up residence in the academy --outside its walls it was becoming difficult not only to earn a living as a writer, but also to find an audience (as we will see, publication by and reviews in magazines

still provide the best available evidence concerning the composition of the audience for post-modern fiction).

As for publishing in book form, the current situation is summed up as follows, by the associate fiction editor at Esquire:

[M]ost writers between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five have studied or taught in workshops . . . . Fellowships, grants, awards, small press publications, teaching and honorary positions are all part of getting ahead. Very few books by very few serious literary writers are commercially successful. Mailer, Roth, Oates, Updike, Vonnegut, Styron might be a list of bestsellers, but what about William Gass, or Wright Morris, or Cynthia Ozick? . . . . Only as academic credentials are published novels, short stories, and poems anywhere near profitable on a more or less regular, dependable basis.<sup>3</sup>

A number of people, notably Ted Solotaroff and Thomas Whiteside, have cited the so-called "blockbuster" phenomenon as a principal culprit in the commercialization of publishing.<sup>4</sup> The now-familiar reasoning goes like this: beginning in the 1960's, publishers started paying huge amounts for the rights to potential bestsellers, and started banking heavily on the success of one or two of the books on their list. Coincidentally, at about the same time conglomerates began buying up publishing houses,



often applying pressure--directly or indirectly--on management to show short-term profits. These two factors, combined with the success and consequent influence of mass-market chain retailers like B. Dalton and Walden-books, have in effect pushed literary fiction to the fringes of trade publishing, and have made it more and more difficult to publish new writers of literary merit; instead, trade publishing has moved in the direction of a sort of "brand-name" recognition, focusing its marketing and promotion efforts on high-volume, basically disposable popular novels.<sup>5</sup> This in turn coincides with the dramatic increase in market-share registered by paperback publishing over the last several years, and the decline in the importance of the backlist.

Of course, some good writing does sell well, and for the new or less well known talent there are a number of survival strategies. One way to survive is to write for, or at least with an eye to, the movies: a book like Deliverance is an example of work by a "literary" writer which from the beginning aims at becoming a film. The extreme version of this philosophy was succinctly stated by Simon & Schuster's Dick Snyder some time ago, when he called publishing "the software of the movie industry." Another option for serious fiction is to turn toward the university presses; Guy Davenport, for example, had his first two collections of stories published by Johns Hopkins.

These publishers are not averse to bringing out a novel in an edition of 10,000 or fewer, and seem well-suited to reaching the likely audience for such fiction with a minimum of promotional outlay. Others may choose to publish with the small independents, largely outside New York; some of these, such as North Point, Godine, or Black Sparrow have been fairly successful selling high-quality and high-priced editions of good writing. And many serious writers continue to publish either with major commercial houses (though these houses are not often the ones responsible for discovering and nurturing their talent), or with the more specialized houses like New Directions or Grove (though the recent buyout of Grove by Wheatland Corp.'s Weidenfeld Inc., and the subsequent demotion and departure of its pioneering publisher Barney Rosset--the man who made Beckett available to the American reader--might be regarded as an ominous portent for the viability of such commercial-but-literary publishing operations in the current conglomerate environment).

The question remains, though, whether even the university presses can afford to subsidize fiction and poetry; the fact is that their initial involvement with this kind of publishing was an attempt (perhaps naive) to reap a profit with a product that, next to the scholarly monograph, looked almost lucrative. It's also possible that in publishing, as in bookselling, the mere fact that most

of the market is based on high volume and fast turnover will force smaller independent or academic publishers to compete on the same terms.

On the other hand, it could be argued that the best-seller is not a new phenomenon, and that whatever the problems currently afflicting literary publishing, it is a mistake to trace them to this. A Swedish socialist critic, Per Gedin, points out that as long ago as "1901 Publisher's Weekly maintained that of the 1,900 titles published during the preceding year, a maximum of 100 had sold more than 10,000 copies. Profits, and in some cases they could be huge, were thus earned on vast printings of a very few books."<sup>6</sup> In fact, Gedin argues that publishing has always relied for its support on a handful of successes. It is not the blockbuster that is new to publishing, he says, but the decline in the status of cultural activity, the development of a mass market for books, and the current ascendancy of materialist values:

Culture is . . . unimportant economically. The frenetic recreation industry finds it more profitable to sell travel and hobby articles rather than books. This industry also gains support from the growth ideology adopted by industrial countries, which is aimed at quantity consumption and not its quality.

(179)

One of the principal distinguishing features of the American publishing scene from its inception, according to Gedin, was the lack of a European-style, homogeneously bourgeois book-buying public--the kind that supported European publishers like S. Fischer, Hachette, et al., with their broad selection of literary works and their extensive backlists. But even in Europe,

the situation for the traditional book trade became ever more difficult when mass society began to replace bourgeois society. Instead of a uniform sale to a relatively limited class of book buyers with a steady demand for many books, suddenly there is a mass-media-influenced demand for one book. It does not require a fairly restricted number of widely spread, well-stocked bookshops to fulfill this need but rather a vast number of sales outlets stocked with just this book. (186)

Several writers (including Frederick Busch) have observed a parallel influence of the mass-market on book-buying by libraries: the fear expressed is that, with a shrinking consumer base and no assured home in the library, the outlets for (and shortly thereafter, the production of) literary fiction will simply dry up.<sup>7</sup> Of course, the libraries in question are public, not university libraries.

Gedin goes on to say that the declining importance of literary fiction has been accompanied by a declining interest in the literary critic.<sup>8</sup> The result, as he sees it, is

the development of a literary activity which in many cases exists only for the critics. There are already a number of very good writers who receive excellent reviews, but whose books are confined to a closed system with few readers, and they have virtually no hope of a breakthrough in the future. In the USA, for instance, there are Walker Percy, William Gass, John Cheever, [and] John Barth. (184-85)

In fact, George Steiner (in an essay called "After the Book?") has gone so far as to suggest that reading itself is splitting into real and pseudo-literacy, the former practiced by a small élite mostly consisting of academics, the latter describing the limits of the practice of reading in the culture at large. In Steiner's view, there is nothing wrong with this, except that the élite today no longer has the power and respect it deserves.<sup>9</sup>

On the substance of Steiner's point, Ted Solotaroff agrees; in fact the subject of his essay is "the widening gulf between the publishing culture and the literary or even literate one. For if the former is advancing steadily into the mass culture, the latter is retreating to a

significant extent from it into the confines of the university" (78). He does cite the influx of writers into academia as a solution of sorts to the "age-old" problem of the starving artist, but he also sees a danger in the increasingly common career-path of the writer from MFA student to teacher of writing, with little adult experience outside the university (79).

I have a different scenario to propose, one not so apocalyptic (as far as the fate of the book goes) and perhaps more accurate to the facts both of the book business and of the profession of English studies. In this scenario, the blockbuster itself, while it may retain its high visibility, is likely to take a back seat in the future (if it hasn't in fact already done so) to more specialized, more segmented, and more highly researched marketing practices. One of many such specialized markets will be the academic audience, and literary fiction will constitute a subset of that audience's interests. "Serious" fiction will continue to be written, and will demand ever more specialization of its readers as social, technological and economic forces attach the practical value of professionalism to the erstwhile exclusivity of the avant-garde.

What evidence is there to support these predictions? Although publishers have sometimes included post-paid market survey cards in the books they sell, there isn't

much research into the market for specific books--in part because the profit margin doesn't justify the expenditure that would be required, but largely because of the opinion, widespread in publishing, that books can't be sold like soap, and that works of fiction in particular are unique products without a predictable or consistent market. On the other hand, its publishers are aware that the market for post-modern fiction is "academic and big-city": these books don't sell "in the shopping malls in the suburbs."<sup>10</sup>

In contrast to book publishers, magazines do have the resources to determine the nature of their audience, and can often describe their "average reader" in minute detail. On the assumption that their editorial decisions would reflect this carefully cultivated sense of audience, I reviewed the activity in periodicals around the authors with whom I am principally concerned--authors who, I contend, find their audience almost exclusively among professional academics and those they educate--and around a control group of authors who have both public and professional followings. Using various on-line databases, I compared the number and nature of citations for Gass, Hawkes, Davenport and Coover to those for Bellow, Updike, and Roth in the MLA bibliography and in the popular media. The results for the latter group bear out the claim, reviewed elsewhere, that the author of certified literary

merit will usually be one who has sold a lot of books but has also been well-received in the key periodicals.<sup>11</sup> The results for the former group bear out my own suspicion that some writers do succeed in establishing a reputation and an audience in intellectual circles without ever achieving popular recognition or celebrity status.

Writers in the second group--while they do publish in and receive the attention of the tastemaker periodicals--appeared in a much broader range of media. Philip Roth, for example, has published essays and interviews in The New York Times Book Review, The New York Review of Books, and Harper's; he has also given interviews to Mademoiselle and Vogue, placed essays in U.S. News & World Report, and excerpted his fiction in the glossy New York magazine. In contrast, writers in the first group were associated with fewer citations in both kinds of media (though the number of references in the professional media was proportionately higher); nonetheless, the references occurring in popular media were almost exclusively restricted to those periodicals most often named as the "gatekeepers" of literary merit: The New York Times Book Review, The New Yorker, The New York Review of Books, The Times Literary Supplement and some more general but still intellectually upscale magazines like Harper's.<sup>12</sup> In fact, although they clearly do have an audience, most post-modern writers show



very few signs of having any public at all, in the conventional sense.

In an interview given after Omensetter's Luck had been in print for twenty uninterrupted years, Gass was asked whether "what has usually been considered as the traditional audience for the novel, that is, middleclass women, specifically in the USA, middleclass housewives, has been replaced by the academic community of readers?" His response is worth repeating:

There are of course students and faculty people who read your work, but outside the academic community the majority of readers are still women, women who happen to be housewives and who, in one way or another, have been influenced by the university system.<sup>13</sup>

In order to disarm the question, Gass is willing to suppose an audience of (college-educated) housewives, but even granting that Gass's audience is comprised of "the few" rather than of "the many" it seems unlikely--were it an audience of a few educated housewives--that he would have enjoyed the enduring reputation he has.

We began this chapter with a quotation from "Art for All" in which Mallarmé blasts the "preposterous idea" that poetry "must be taught in school," and objects that in the process of being made universally comprehensible, poetry "is inevitably reduced to the level of a science." Elsewhere in this essay, Mallarmé draws an envious comparison

between music, painting, and sculpture on the one hand, and poetry on the other, complaining that simply because poetry's medium is generally accessible,

those who are first in line go right into a masterpiece; and ever since the beginning of poetry, no one has kept these intruders away by inventing an immaculate language, a series of sacred formulae which would blind the common eye with dull study, but arouse the patience of the predestined.<sup>14</sup>

Post-modern fiction answers Mallarmé's description of an art that selects its audience, but (malgré lui) the "immaculate language" is professional rather than priestly, and the ticket of admission has proven to be expertise, not grace.

Robert Boyers, founding editor of Salmagundi, has estimated that a writer like William Gass "will be lucky to find ten thousand readers for his book over a period of ten years," and that estimate is confirmed by others in the publishing business.<sup>15</sup> The standard explanation of this circumstance, one Gass himself has endorsed, follows Mallarmé and concludes that a work like Omensetter's Luck is too demanding for the average reader, that it is unpopular because it "blind[s] the common eye with dull study." In the words of Gass's former editor, this author's audience is "obviously" restricted to "the highly literate reading public."<sup>16</sup> But the numbers indicate that

Gass's work can't be reaching very many readers even in that rather limited group--and in any case if Boyers is correct when he calls Gass "a brilliantly accomplished and not impossibly difficult novelist," then the size of his audience is probably a function of something beyond the challenge presented by his works. In fact, I would argue that Gass's restricted readership is due less to the formal difficulty of his work than to that professionalism which has come to dominate what Peter Bürger, in his Theory of the Avant-Garde, called "the institution of art":

When one refers to the function of an individual work, one generally speaks figuratively; for the consequences that one may observe or infer are not primarily a function of its special qualities but rather of the manner which regulates the commerce with works of this kind in a given society or in certain strata or classes of society. I have chosen the term "institution of art" to characterize such framing conditions.<sup>17</sup>

As Elizabeth Bruss points out, "ever since the advent of so-called avant-garde literature there has been a silent army of interpreters and exegetes ready to . . . mediate between the latest literary experiment and the unreadiness of the audience."<sup>18</sup> What is new in the current American situation is not literary promotionalism (hardly an invention of the avant-garde, either in America

or in Europe), but rather the fact that until recently most "mediators" have been editors or publishers rather than "interpreters and exegetes" of a specifically academic nature. The example of 19th-century tastemakers like Charles Eliot Norton or James Russell Lowell might be raised in contradiction (both men held Harvard professorships), but though these critics may have derived their authority from an academic position, they exerted their considerable cultural influence primarily as editors of prominent periodicals (respectively, The North American Review and The Atlantic Monthly).

In any case, neither one would have been allowed to teach a course in the writers he promoted and published. In fact, there was apparently no such thing as a course in the modern novel until the very end of the nineteenth century, and it was not until the middle of our own century that even serious contemporary fiction would have been considered an acceptable subject for academic study. It has only been in the last twenty years that English departments have routinely offered courses in contemporary literature, and only in the last ten that this has established itself as a field in its own right within the discipline.<sup>19</sup>

At the opening of this century avant-garde artists considered the academy a bastion of conservatism, and with good reason: it was still overwhelmingly antiquarian in

its focus, it favored moral over aesthetic criteria in the judgment of art, and it was predicated on a belief in the continuity of the present with the past. In 1909, using language that resounds backward to Romanticism and forward to the student movements of the sixties, Marinetti declared:

To admire an old painting is to pour our sensitive-  
ness into a funeral urn, instead of throwing it  
forward by violent casts of creation and action  
. . . . As a matter of fact the daily frequentation  
of museums, of libraries and of academies (those  
cemeteries of wasted efforts, those calvaries of  
crucified dreams, those catalogues of broken impul-  
ses! . . . ) is for the artist what the prolonged  
tutelage of parents is for the intelligent young men,  
drunk with their talent and their ambitious will  
. . . . When we are forty, let those younger and more  
valiant than we kindly throw us into the waste basket  
like useless manuscripts! . . . They will come after  
us from afar, from everywhere, prancing on the light  
rhythm of their first poems, clawing the air with  
their crooked fingers, sniffing at academy gates the  
good scent of our rotting intellects already intended  
for the catacombs of libraries.  
But we shall not be there. (434)

Marinetti did foresee the possibility that Futurism might one day be interred in the "catacombs of libraries," but I think he would have been surprised to know that less than seventy-five years after his manifesto the chairman of Harvard's English department would describe the study of literature as having been conquered and debased by "current enthusiasms."<sup>20</sup> While writers of the generation of Gass, Hawkes, et al. no longer represent the cutting edge of those enthusiasms, they do occupy a position of interest and importance on the gamut which the literary enterprise has run over these seventy-five years: they are the first generation of experimental writers to have been fully trained and consistently employed in the American university.

These writers, it should be said, are not a tightly knit group; compared to the Futurists or to their counterparts in the contemporary continental avant-garde they could hardly be called a group at all. Though they all have an interest in formal experimentation, they are not engaged in the collaborative development of a coherent aesthetic program, and though they are certainly aware of each other's work, some of them may never have met. Still, the one thing they do share is easily as distinctive as any banner or slogan--they are all literary professionals and they write for what is arguably history's first professional audience.<sup>21</sup>

Given the traditional animosity between the academy and experimental art, academic post-modernism represents a noteworthy convergence--one no less interesting for the fact that these writers maintain the anti-academic rhetoric of the avant-garde in the face of their practical accommodation with the institution they derogue. Gass, for example, recently drew the following distinction between the scholarly article and the essay as practiced by Emerson (and Gass):

The essay is obviously the opposite of that awful object, "the article," which . . . represents itself as the latest cleverness, a novel consequence of thought, skill, labor, and free enterprise; but never as an activity--the process, the working, the wondering. . . . [T]he article pretends that everything is clear, that its argument is unassailable, that there are no soggy patches, no illicit inferences, no illegitimate connections . . . it knows, with respect to every subject and point of view it is ever likely to entertain, what words to use, what form to follow, what authorities to respect; it is the careful product of a professional. . . . and its appearance is proof of the presence, nearby, of the Professor, the way one might, perceiving a certain sort of speckled egg, infer that its mother was a certain sort of speckled bird. (25)

Gass's point that scholarly writing pursues a standard of completeness not enjoined upon the personal essay is interesting, though neither as new nor as valid now as it was when Adorno first made it in 1958;<sup>22</sup> what is more remarkable is the vehemence of his anti-academicism (in which he is joined, of course, by many if not most American academics). It is worth noting that "Emerson and the Essay" originally appeared in The Yale Review; and although the affiliation between Author and Professor still goes largely unacknowledged, it does deserve to be explored--not only because it offers us insights into the fiction produced by academic post-modernists and the manner in which their largely professorial audience has received it, but also because it may bring us to a better understanding of the cultural and institutional framework we share.

Historically, there is at least one sense in which avant-garde literature is cousin-german to the modern academy, for the same cultural conditions which fostered formalist experimentation are also responsible for having produced graduate education in America. In Professing Literature, Gerald Graff has dubbed the period from 1875 to 1918 (years which span the early development of the avant-garde movement) the age of "the new professionalism" in English studies. It was during this period that graduate education was first introduced to the United States,



and in Graff's view this post-Civil War era marked the beginning of "a new national respect for the progressive claims of science, specialization, and expertise." The nation's first graduate program in English, at Johns Hopkins, traded explicitly on this respect, and deliberately sought to cultivate "experts who could command all the available knowledge in their field and perhaps add something new to the sum of the world's knowledge." In Graff's assessment, the attractiveness of the new professionalism was that it offered

a measure of reassurance to Americans who had always lacked traditional authorities and now, after the Civil War, found themselves confronted by bewildering industrial and social changes. But in exchange for this reassurance, these American were obliged to surrender their independence of judgment to experts . . . . The growth of a cult of expertise in the university mirrored the development of bureaucratic corporations and of scientific modes of management.

(64)

At the same time, then, that many American academics disparaged contemporary literature for its "immorality, materialism, and pessimism," literary scholarship was itself moving away from its traditional devotion to the reproduction of values and towards a more scientific model of objective inquiry.<sup>23</sup> And in transplanting the prin-

ciple of progress from science to the study of literature, the way was prepared for acceptance of an art which also aspired to "add something new to the sum of the world's knowledge."<sup>24</sup>

Regarded as an indication of the character of the English studies, this represents a change; considered as a reflection of the academy's role in Western culture, it is consistent with Thorstein Veblen's observation, made in 1918, that

the place of the university in the culture of Christendom is still substantially the same as it has been from the beginning. Ideally, and in the popular apprehension, it is, as it has always been, a corporation for the cultivation and care of the community's highest aspirations and ideals. But these ideals and aspirations have changed somewhat with the changing scheme of the Western civilization; and so the university has also concomitantly so changed in character, aims and ideals as to leave it still the corporate organ of the community's dominant intellectual interest. <sup>25</sup>

Expertise is what the university now cultivates and reproduces: this is true not only in the sciences but also in the humanities, and it is as true of academic art as it is of academic criticism. And, as Veblen predicted, this is

the case because expertise is among the "highest aspirations and ideals" of modern Western civilization.<sup>26</sup>

The phenomenon of an academic post-modernism cannot convincingly be derived from any one cause or watershed event, but a portent of one of the broad cultural trends that contributed to it can be discerned even in Marinetti's tirade. "The Futuristic Manifesto" is framed in terms which implicitly accept the academic principle that culture is divisible into literary movements and periods, and although Marinetti probably adopted this taxonomy of culture in the interest of distinguishing his project in the public eye, by so doing he also made Futurism available to "that schematization and process of cataloging and classification which," in the analysis of Adorno, "bring culture within the sphere of administration."<sup>27</sup> In modern times, the administration of culture has been carried out largely through education, and once artists became historically self-conscious it was perhaps inevitable that their production would become grist for the academic mill.

Conversely, the changing status of modern literature in the American university has reflected important changes in that institution's understanding of its own purpose. In the 18th century, higher education in this country was provided by the seminaries and was intended to train young men for the clergy and for positions in public life. Contemporary literature of a secular nature had little to

do with that training and in any case, as Graff reminds us,

since the modern languages and literatures were considered mere social accomplishments, they were looked upon as feminine preoccupations. . . . This reputation for effeminacy would have to be effaced from the modern languages before they could become respectable in the university. One of the attractions of Germanic philology would be that as a hard science its manliness was not in question. (37-38)

To some extent, that same dynamic may still be at work in the vaunted "difficulty" of (mainly male) modernism and post-modernism.

Gradually, over the next hundred years, colleges became more secular in their orientation and since 1875 (when the graduate program was founded at Johns Hopkins), the study of literature has been dominated by a succession of practices, from philology to criticism to theory. The tools which each has brought with it imply certain assumptions about what needs to be done. Graff notes that "the campaign for criticism in the university frequently went along with efforts to legitimate modern literature as an object of study" (124), and the value of one to the other is not hard to see: whereas philological scholarship required a certain historical distance from its subject, and focused on linguistic form almost to the exclusion of

literary content, criticism foregrounded that content and presupposed its relevance to the reader.

But even when criticism had become the dominant mode of literary activity, it was a long time before modern literature gained widespread admittance to the academy. For example, New Direction's James Laughlin recalls that

At Harvard in '33, believe it or not, there still were no courses being given in [Eliot, Pound, Yeats and Joyce]. They were not yet accepted. . . . in those days, the Professor of Rhetoric . . . would get so angry if the name of Eliot or Pound were mentioned in his course that he would ask the student to leave the room.<sup>28</sup>

Laughlin and Graff (and many others) consider World War II to have been the turning point:<sup>29</sup> as Graff tells it, after the war "an institution that had once seen itself as the bulwark of tradition against vulgar and immoral contemporaneity [became] the disseminator and explainer of the most recent trends." Harold Rosenberg, in a 1960 essay called "Everyman a Professional," offers the broadest cultural explanation for this shift when he says that in an age of specialization teaching has become a matter of

popularization, which acts as journalistic or educational intercessor between the isolated mind of the theorist-technician and the fragmented psyche of the

public, [and] is the most powerful profession of our time . . . gaining daily in numbers, importance and finesse.<sup>30</sup>

More recently, though, some have expressed skepticism as to the efficacy of even that popularizing impulse which Rosenberg derides. In a 1982 essay, Edward Said recounts a conversation with a sales representative at the MLA booth for an unnamed university press; he reports having asked the man, about the many volumes of highly specialized criticism on display, "who reads these books?" The answer, according to Said, was that "each book could be assured of . . . sales of around three thousand copies." Said notes the remark not only because he is interested in the picture of a "steadily attentive and earnest crowd of three thousand critics reading each other," but also because he sees a historical irony in the fact that

the mythical three thousand . . . whether they derive ultimately from the Anglo-American New Criticism . . . or from the so-called New New Criticism (Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, et al.) . . . vindicate, rather than undermine, the notion that intellectual labor ought to be divided into progressively narrower niches.

The irony is that both types of criticism began with an attempt to "create a wide community of responsive readers out of a very large, potentially unlimited, constituency

of students and teachers of literature." In Said's view, the reason that this audience has ended up being so small is that both types of criticism were "competitors for authority within mass culture, not other-worldly alternatives to it." Both schools, he says, taught that "you did not need to be a professor to benefit from" an informed reading of literature; both had at the outset a "radically anti-institutional bias." But because "disciplined attention to language can only thrive in the rarefied atmosphere of the classroom" it was inevitable that these schools would find themselves enmeshed in the university, and that "purifying the language of the tribe" would become not a public program but an academic specialty.<sup>31</sup>

Graff's explanation of the fate of literature and the failure of strategies to promote ecumenical reading in the modern academy is more limited in scope, though it agrees in principle with Said's analysis. He points to a new alignment of theoretical and organizational forces within the English department after the war, and contends that the academy's sudden change of position on modern literature was mainly a result of the ascendancy of a supposedly value-neutral New Criticism and the hegemony of what he calls the "field-coverage principle" of departmental organization:

In the separate but equal segregation of the curriculum, Dr. Johnson and James Joyce each occupied an

honored place--Did not each represent "literature"?--and therefore the ideological differences between them did not need to arise as a subject. In the department . . . the problem of belief did not need to be confronted. In what was by now a familiar pattern, the institutionalization of a movement had been accomplished by the erasure of its more interesting cultural implications.<sup>32</sup>

By this account, modern literature was admitted into the English department on the condition that it leave its ideological baggage at the door. It might be argued in response that Joyce, to use Graff's example, wasn't party to the agreement, and that this unilateral "institutionalization" does not, after all, change texts. But meaning is ultimately assigned to a text by readers, and when, in Bruss's words, "literature--the ancient works and the most sophisticated modern experiments--has become a thing associated chiefly with the schools," then the institutionalization of reading does affect the text, in at least two ways.

First, it selects for preservation works that are particularly well-suited to the classroom. Graff suggests that in the post-war university New Criticism's concentration on the text itself "seemed a tactic ideally suited to a new, mass student body that could not be depended on to bring to the university any common cultural background--



and not just the student body but the new professors as well, who might often be only marginally ahead of the students" (173). And according to Richard Poirier, the so-called organic approach to reading also

promises that the student, by commendably energetic local attentions will, if his responses are "responsible to the text," put together a puzzle at the end. All the better if the puzzle can be completed in the fifty or sixty minutes of a classroom hour. . . . One result has been the promotion of those works lending themselves easily for illustration, and a corresponding evasiveness about the status of those that don't.<sup>33</sup>

In the case of Joyce, this might explain why the early and comparatively unremarkable Dubliners is taught far more often than his acknowledged masterpiece, Ulysses.

The institutionalization of reading also has another consequence, one observed almost twenty-five years ago by Lionel Trilling, whose essay "On the Teaching of Modern Literature" remarks with regret on

the readiness of the students to engage in the process we might call the socialization of the anti-social, or the acculturation of the anti-cultural, or the legitimization of the subversive. When the term-essays come in, it is plain to me that almost none of

the students have been taken aback by what they have read: they have wholly contained the attack.<sup>34</sup>

Safely quarantined in the classroom, subversive modernist fiction is "learned" like any other assigned reading, its details mastered and its critique duly noted. Graff cites this essay in support of his assertion that the modern curriculum tends to neutralize the ideological content of the material it presents, and concludes that the "philistine hostility" against which the avant-garde once defined itself has been "replaced, either by an attitude of acquiescence before experts or by a consumerlike receptivity" (231).

This phenomenon in the reception of the subversive work has its corollary in production, once contemporary authors follow modern literature into the academy. As the founding editor of Perspective magazine points out,

The generation of writers that shaped twentieth century literature (Eliot, Pound, Hemingway, Faulkner, etc.) earned their livings outside of Academia. In the forties, there was a mass migration of writers into the universities as teachers of courses in "creative writing." (234)

Not many modernists accepted steady employment in the academy--Faulkner seems to have been a late exception to the rule--but the subsequent generation of writers has turned in numbers to the universities. And although they may

continue the modernists' assault on traditional literary forms, the institutionalization of the experimental gives their texts a significance somewhat different from that of their predecessors'. As Bürger succinctly says, once "the protest of the historical avant-garde against art as institution is accepted as art, the gesture of protest of the neo-avant-garde becomes inauthentic" (53).

It is interesting to note that, according to Thurston, the "mass migration of writers into the universities" took place at the same time the institutionalization of modern literature was getting underway. We have already discussed some of the pressures behind this migration, such as the fact that many of America's little magazines ceased publication during the war and were replaced after it with university-based journals, with the result that the academy was able virtually to monopolize the distribution of serious contemporary fiction and literary criticism. These events in the realm of the little magazine coincided with some significant structural changes in the commercial publishing industry and, as I have argued, reflect a major change in our allocation and use of cultural resources. But we should not overlook the fact that, at the same time American writers were being driven into the academy by economic and cultural pressures, they were also being led there by the highly visible success of a few important predecessors.

T.S. Eliot was among the earliest and most influential of these forerunners. Even though he never committed himself full-time to the profession, he defined criticism for a generation of academics and made it an honorable vocation for the modern writer. In this last regard especially, his example is paramount for post-modernism. It was Eliot who proved that a writer's literary theories could attract an audience to his creative work, and could also influence that audience's response; and it was Eliot who showed how an author/critic, armed with a sufficiently persuasive account of literary history, could re-write the tradition to culminate in himself. In short, it was Eliot who decisively demonstrated that the future of both art and criticism was a professional one--confirming in the process the observation that "a profession is always defined by its elites."<sup>35</sup>

The debate concerning professionalism is at least as old as this century, but it has become more sharply focused in the last twenty years, thanks in large part to sociology's contributions to the subject. The most widely read of these have been Magalia Sarfatti Larson's Marxist analysis of contemporary society, called The Rise of Professionalism (1977), and Burton Bledstein's The Culture of Professionalism (1976), which concentrates on the middle-class, 19th-century roots of modern professionalism. Gerald Graff, for example, grounds his more specific

discussion of literary professionalism in these two books. Both Bledstein and Larson point to the university as the essential institution of professionalism, arguing that it not only trains, certifies, and employs professionals, but also instills the precedents and principles that later shape their conduct.

Edward Said's concept of affiliation is another, more recent version of this idea, one which extends the discussion to the production of literary texts:

Every text is an act of will to some extent, but what has not been very much studied is the degree to which texts are made permissible. To recreate the affiliative network is therefore to make visible, to give materiality back to, the strands holding the text to society, author, and culture. . . . [A]ffiliation releases a text from its isolation and imposes upon the scholar or critic the presentational problem of historically recreating or reconstructing the possibilities from which the text arose. Here is the place for intentional analysis and for the effort to place a text in homological, dialogical, or antithetical relationships with other texts, classes, and institutions.<sup>36</sup>

In 1987, Louis Menand published a study of T.S. Eliot (Discovering Modernism) which in effect carries out Said's proposal. Menand investigates the connection between Eli-

ot's critical statements and his poetic practice, and examines from an oppositional perspective the disparity between the stated aims and the real accomplishments of Eliot's cultural program; in particular, Discovering Modernism considers the reasons for Eliot's cultivation of the academy, and for the academy's response to him. In the immediate context, Menand's work is especially useful as it illuminates the genesis of post-modernism, and uncovers the roots of the relationship between its literary and critical forms.

Menand regards Eliot as acting out of a recognition that an encroaching "culture of professionalism" has jeopardized the cultural status of the artist, as it had been established under Romanticism:

. . . by the early twentieth century, the ideology of professionalism had established itself to the extent of making anything that smacked of amateurism look second-rate. Insofar as art still banked on the unprofessional side of its reputation, the artist was therefore beginning to lose vocational ground; for to the professional view, "inspiration" will seem like self-indulgence, and innocence of design will imply ineffectuality.<sup>37</sup>

According to Menand, though, Eliot's distinction was not only to be among the first to recognize that the standard of professionalism would soon be applied to art; he

was also one of the first to map the strategy by which art would be able to meet that new standard without at the same time abandoning its obligatory claims to a continuity with the tradition of the great works of the past:

The strategy is a simple one: it is to isolate the one feature of an activity that is most likely to require full-time attention, to make that feature the chief criterion of whether the activity is done well or not, and then to argue that every previous worker has historically taken the isolated characteristic to be the most important one as well. For the artist, this is the argument of formalism, and it is why formalism can be understood as a reflection of worldly values precisely by virtue of its effort to establish art as an autonomous sphere of activity.

(129)

So it is that we find Eliot, only nine years after Marinetti's manifesto, arguing against the idea that expertise in the artist is a sign of decadence, and defining "professionalism in art [as] . . . hard work on style with singleness of purpose."<sup>38</sup>

The significance of Eliot's example proved to be twofold, for it taught both artists and critics that their freedom was contingent on their limiting themselves to a proscribed arena of expertise--that of literary form. As Larson points out, professional autonomy always derives

from exclusivity, and "the secrecy and mystery which surround the creative process maximize the self-governance conceded to experts"; in showing academics that such self-governance depends on establishing "the experts' monopoly of knowledge" (235), Eliot made it clear that "Art for Art's sake" was a distinctly practical credo. "Every profession," Menand says,

has a side that . . . shelters its members from the day-to-day vicissitudes of the market and fosters the values of continuity, autonomy, and disinterestedness in a system in which most economic activity seems to be given over to uncertainty, government by externalities, and the pursuit of self-interest. And thus, at the same time, every profession does these things precisely in order to win a competitive advantage--if possible a monopoly--in the marketplace: it aggrandizes itself most effectively by identifying with a higher standard than self-interest. This double motive is reflected in the argument all professions offer as their justification, the argument that in order to serve the needs of others properly, professions must be accountable only to themselves.

(113)

And in fact, the service that both art and criticism were to offer the twentieth century was a constitutively pro-



fessional one: the analysis of culture from an allegedly disinterested and uninvolved perspective.<sup>39</sup>

We have seen, though, that the claim to an aloofness from the marketplace is a dubious one at best. As Menand shows, Eliot's critical activity paid immediate and material dividends in the acceptance of his art:

The Sacred Wood made Eliot something more than an arbiter of literary taste; with its publication, he became the hero of university English studies. . . . F.W. Bateson reported [that] "it was Eliot the critic who prepared us to welcome Eliot the poet, and not vice versa. . . ." (154)

And the university audience, while it may not have consciously articulated its motivation, was quick to recognize that it had an interest in championing Eliot:

The scholarship that occupies such a conspicuous place on the surface of Eliot's writing--both the criticism and the poetry--and that struck many of Eliot's nonacademic contemporaries as idiosyncratic and excessive, was perhaps also one of the things that made him so valuable to this new audience. Defending Eliot, they seem to have felt, meant defending the right of literary studies to a prominent place in the modern educational program. (Menand, 155)

The corollary in modern criticism to the "argument of formalism" in art was, of course, New Criticism, which brought to bear on its subject texts a scrutiny that proved, in practice, to "require full-time attention" and which complemented art's effort to establish "an autonomous sphere of activity" by restricting the legitimate basis for interpretation to the text proper, and ruling out appeals to biographical or historical evidence. But though the theory behind New Criticism aspired to purify literature of these externalities, application of that theory was itself inextricably enmeshed in the world:

Critical explication was, if anything, even more prone than the old scholarship had been to a kind of guild mentality where it is assumed as the natural course of things that any specialist in a writer or period will be a promoter of that writer or period . . . . Whereas scholarly accumulations of sources, influences, and other information had functioned as a silent endorsement, explication seemed to be an even more authentic endorsement, claiming as it did to lay bare the innermost structure of the work. (Graff, 228)

As we will see, the "guild mentality" has only become more pronounced under post-modernism: following Eliot's example, post-modern authors have supplied their audience with the critical principles they feel are prerequisite to

an appreciation of their work, and often supply the appreciation as well; academic phenomena, such as the interview and the colloquium, provide the means for these authorized readings to establish and perpetuate themselves, and confirm the specialist in the conventions of a promotional criticism.

The alignment of critical theory and literary practice within the institution of the academy has resulted, as I have tried to show, from a recognition of mutual interest and has, up to a point, provided mutual benefits. It is worth considering, though, that at some point--perhaps in a future none too distant--the interests of literature and criticism will once again diverge, and these two modes of intellection will find themselves in open competition for the limited resource of a specialized readership. Elizabeth Bruss, noting that it now "falls to literary theory to illustrate and perhaps to devise the fresh incentives for reading and to train, even to invent, a fit audience for contemporary literature," speculates that,

while explaining the potential satisfactions of reading against the grain of habit and of exchanging the narcissistic pleasures of identification for the austere and largely fleeting joys of reflexive awareness, theory is simultaneously presenting its own case as a candidate for aesthetic appreciation. And

if the reading public as a whole is shrinking, if . . . in a word, the majority of readers now are scholars (whether students or professional academics)--then the claims of literary theory to be our representative literary genre become stronger still. What better inspiration could a literature of theory have than an audience composed of theorists and critics? (79)

But whether or not it results in rivalry between academic critics and academic novelists over the disposition of the audience that together they comprise, this very insider-ism implies an acceptance of dwindling prerogative which, as Adorno explains in The Dialectic of Enlightenment, is quintessentially professional:

In every career, and especially in the liberal professions, expert knowledge is linked with prescribed standards of conduct; this can easily lead to the illusion that expert knowledge is the only thing that counts. In fact, it is part of the irrational planning of this society that it reproduces to a certain degree only the lives of its faithful members. The standard of life enjoyed corresponds very closely to the degree to which classes and individuals are essentially bound up with the system. . . . and apart from certain capital crimes, the most mortal of sins is to be an outsider.<sup>40</sup>

In combination with the persistence of formalist doctrine, these standards of conduct mark post-modern literary activity as an isolationist and deeply non-critical undertaking. And although Adorno or Said might be judged by some as inclined to overstate the case when they parallel the interactions among literary professionals with the interactions between the intellectual and the state, perhaps the same reasoning will seem more credible coming from an old-fashioned liberal humanist. Lionel Trilling, speaking of the profession of teaching, says that

If one undertakes the making of whole men or the construction of people, one does indeed have in mind the private lives of the men who are made whole or of the people who are constructed; but one's intention is also of a public kind which has ultimately to do with the state and with the quality of the persons who shall control the state, or at least with the quality of persons who shall criticize the state and make demands on it.<sup>41</sup>

In our present society, where culture is an industry like any other, the argument over the elitism of high art is beside the point: the market for commodities such as literary fiction has already been successfully linked and more or less limited to the university--its denizens, aspirants, and graduates. Within that sub-economy, itself highly specialized and professionalized, the "use value"

of literature has been supplanted by its "exchange value": one reads in order to write. And if much post-modern fiction does seem written to be written about, that attribute is perhaps not unrelated to the fact that the writers themselves are employed in the university, and are dependent on the rewards which success within that system can grant them. Admittedly, not all readers of post-modern fiction write about it--if they did, each work would occasion hundreds of essays in the professional press, which is not the case. But its audience does appear to consist mainly of other writers, critics, and college-educated professionals, and that portion of the audience which writes is largely composed of academics specializing in contemporary fiction, or even in a particular author.

The significance of the fact is worth examining: in contrast to earlier mediators like Charles Eliot Norton, members of this fledgling specialty are bound by the dictates of professionalism to demonstrate that their activity is warranted: whether or not they are conscious of it, these critics have a vested interest in affirming the value of their subject-matter. The result is that critical and creative writing often become mutually legitimizing activities, neither seeming very critical of the other or of the system within which they strive for legitimacy--much less of the larger economy to which the university itself is obedient.

It was, after all, primarily in response to the pressures of the larger economy that the situation I have been describing first developed. To say that writers of a certain sort are now forced to take university jobs in order to survive is not to suggest that their fiction isn't worth having on these terms, or that they should starve to prove their indifference to the market. Nor is any indictment implied in the observation that the teaching of contemporary literature is now an accepted professional activity in English departments; the literature in question rewards study and sometimes even appeals to students. Of course, these circumstances do have significant consequences for literary study, but as we turn our attention to that narrower context we should not forget that (in this culture, at this time) the academy is apparently the only environment capable of supporting intellectually challenging literary texts. And if we value literature, and the teaching of it, in part because they do foster our ability to question the given, then we should realize that something important has already been lost when their sphere of influence is restricted to the constitutively apolitical realm of literary professionalism.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Little Magazines: An Imaginary Interview With Jarvis Thurston," The Missouri Review 7.1 (Fall 1983): 234. Subsequent references to Thurston's self-interview will be incorporated into the text.

<sup>2</sup> Daisy Aldan, "An Interview on Folder" with Dennis Barone, in The Little Magazine in America: A Modern Documentary History, ed. Elliott Anderson and Mary Kinzie (Yonkers: Pushcart, 1978): 264. Folder (1953-1956) published New York School painters and poets, as well as James Merrill, Charles Olson, Frank O'Hara and others.

<sup>3</sup> Tom Jenks, interview with Speer Morgan in The Missouri Review, 8.1 (Fall 1984): 144-45.

<sup>4</sup> See "The Publishing Culture and the Literary Culture," Library Quarterly 54.1 (1984) and The Blockbuster Complex (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1981), respectively. Subsequent references to Solotaroff will be incorporated in the text.

<sup>5</sup> A recent informal survey of publishers at the 1987 ABA convention showed, among other things, that "most books are seen as having a product life cycle that is almost complete within the first year" (on the average,



the survey found that 91% of a book's total sales were registered in the first year); the mean for book sales was 10,000 copies, with sales of 70,000 or more copies generally considered necessary to place a book on a major bestseller list (Duane S. Crowther, "Quantifying the Sales Push," Publishers' Weekly 8 April 1988: 15-18). As noted elsewhere in my study, a sale of 10,000 copies was mentioned by several editors I interviewed as the high-water mark for most literary fiction.

<sup>6</sup> Literature in the Marketplace, trans. George Bisset (London: Faber, 1977) 55. Subsequent references to Gedin will be incorporated in the text.

<sup>7</sup> See When People Publish: Essays on Writers and Writing (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1986) 4:

Our libraries are. . . extensions of what Paramount Pictures think Simon and Schuster, and Pocket Books, both of which they own, ought to be selling. . . . Libraries, then, are becoming . . . tax-funded book-stores.

<sup>8</sup> If proof were wanted, one might merely cite the title of Andrew Greeley's April 10 "My Say" in PW: "Who Reads Book Reviews Anyway?"

<sup>9</sup> See On Difficulty, and Other Essays (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1978), esp. pages 201-202.

10 c.f. the following exchange during my interview of 7/10/87 with Bob Bender, a fiction editor at Simon & Schuster:

JU: Without asking about numbers in this case, another way to ask about the market for this fiction is to ask if there is any way to characterize the readership for writers like Coover, Gass and Hawkes. Are they . . . I won't be coy: is their readership largely academic?

BB: Academic and big-city, yes.

JU: Academic or people who have been through the academy?

BB: Yes. I mean those books, for instance, if we publish . . . let's take the chains, the bookstore chains as a case in point. . .

JU: Waldenbooks/K-Mart?

BB: Waldenbooks and B. Dalton, because they've got let's say about 800 stores. If we do those books, what will happen with the chains is that they will take them through their A-level stores, which are their big-city stores, and that represents maybe one or two percent of their stores. It's very difficult, unless we can somehow make the case that this is a big breakout book, in which this particular author now reaches far beyond his previous audience, those books are never going to show up in the other Daltons

and Waldenbooks. So. . .

JU: Their sales will be determined to a certain extent, by what . . .

BB: By the buyers at the chain stores, yes, who will say 'Oh, this guy doesn't sell in the shopping malls in the suburbs.'

[I am indebted to J.S. Cox for his help in arranging this interview, as well as the ones with Nan Talese and John Herman.]

<sup>11</sup> See my discussion of Richard Ohmann's "Shaping the Canon" in "Authors as First Readers," below.

<sup>12</sup> An interesting sidelight: Gass and Guy Davenport have both published in House and Garden (a Condé Nast magazine, cousin to GQ and Vogue), indicating either the special influence of a particular editor, or that these writers are not averse to the reaping the rewards of public notice. In another anomalous instance, Hawkes published a story in the 15 Jan. 1964 issue of Vogue.

<sup>13</sup> E.G. Diez, "The Writer's Community in the USA: An Interview with William Gass," Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingles 8 (April 1984): 162. Incidentally, as of late 1988 Omensetter's Luck had gone out of print; I was not able to find out from its publisher, New American Library, what its sales had been or why it had been discontinued. The

likelihood, however, is that this novel will now be picked up by David Godine, who has republished several of the books Gass originally published with someone else.

14 "Art for All," rpt. in The Modern Tradition, ed. Richard Ellman and Charles Fiedelson (New York: Oxford UP, 1965) 206.

15 Robert Boyers, "The Little Magazine In Its Place: Literary Culture and Anarchy," in The Little Magazine in America: A Modern Documentary History 57. Boyers puts the problem in the following context:

In the twenties and thirties, when Pound and Williams were young and the little magazine seemed full of promise, it was no doubt appealing to think of a publication directed mainly to one's peers in the community of letters. In time one might expect to win a range of other readers, and very few artists actually believed it might be possible to produce important work without ever passing beyond that original little-magazine readership. In our time the literary situation has decidedly altered such expectations. One needn't have precise figures to know that the wider readership earlier anticipated by the poets does not exist; that volumes of poetry, even by established and clearly "successful" [58] older poets like Stanley Kunitz, will find readers only in the

tiny community which reads and aspires to publish in this little magazine or that; that a brilliantly accomplished and not impossibly difficult novelist like William Gass will be lucky to find ten thousand readers for his book over a period of ten years.

His estimate of ten thousand was confirmed in two of my interviews with publishers. Nan Talese of Houghton Mifflin suggested that the high end might be a sale of 65,000 copies for a new novel by an author such as Updike, with the low end possibly as low as 3,000 copies for a new or unknown author. In fact, she said that sales of three to five thousand copies would be normal for a work of literary fiction (personal interview, 7/10/87). In Bob Bender's estimate, "fiction, literary fiction, tends to sell in a certain quantity; one can generalize somewhat and say these books sell 10,000 copies, maybe 12,000 copies-- something like that, depending on who we're talking about" (personal interview, 7/10/87).

<sup>16</sup> C.f. the following exchange, in a personal interview with John Herman of Weidenfeld & Nicolson (7/9/87):

JU: How would you describe the audience for these books? . . . . Who do you think reads these authors? You're in a better position to know that than . . .

JH: No, frankly, there again, though it sounds strange, one of the strange things about publishing

is that one doesn't have a very good sense for most books of who the audience really is. You can sort of . . . We don't do any research on it. Obviously, highly literate . . . the highly literate reading public is the obvious answer for these kinds of books. Each has its own niche beyond that . . .

17 Peter Bürger, Theory of the Avant-Garde, trans. Michael Shaw (Theory and History of Literature 4; Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984) 12. Subsequent references to Bürger will be incorporated in the text.

18 Elizabeth W. Bruss, Beautiful Theories: The Spectacle of Discourse in Contemporary Criticism (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1982) 78. Subsequent references to Bruss will be incorporated in the text.

19 These assertions rely on Gerald Graff's book, Professing Literature (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987); subsequent references to Graff will be incorporated in the text. This study combines a useful survey of the historical record of the profession with a sympathetic reading of recent sociological studies of American academic institutions and the culture of professionalism [particularly Laurence Veysey's The Emergence of the American University (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1965) and Magalia Larson's The Rise of Professionalism: A Sociological Analysis (Berke-

ley: U of California P, 1977)]. In his book, Graff cites the autobiography of Yale's William Lyon Phelps, in which Phelps claims that the modern novel course he taught in 1895 was "the first . . . in any university in the world confined wholly to contemporary fiction." Graff goes on to note, though, that "Phelps may not have been so far ahead of other professors as he implied"; Brander Matthews and Bliss Perry were also working on courses in the modern at about the same time (124). For Graff's view of the other end of the process see note 32, below.

<sup>20</sup> Walter Jackson Bate, "The Crisis in English Studies," Harvard Magazine 85 (Sept.-Oct. 1982): 51.

<sup>21</sup> Gass received his Ph.D. in 1954, has been continuously employed as a teacher of philosophy and English since 1950, and is now the David May Distinguished Professor of the Humanities at St. Louis's Washington University; Hawkes received his M.A. from Harvard in 1949, worked at the Harvard University press until 1955, has been a teacher of English since 1955, and is now the T.B. Stowell University Professor at Brown; Coover received his M.A. from the University of Chicago in 1965, taught off and on for seven of the sixteen years between '65 and '81, and since 1981 has been Writer-in-Residence at Brown; Davenport, Barth and Barthelme, while not discussed in this study, fit generally the same profile. On the other

hand, Sorrentino is something of an anomaly, professionally speaking; although he is now on the faculty at Stanford University, his education is limited to three years at Brooklyn College, and most of his employment has been as an editor (of Neon in the late 50's, Kulchur in the early 60's, and at Grove Press from 1965-1970). But unlike some other generally non-academic post-modern authors (Pynchon and Gaddis come to mind), Sorrentino is an active participant in the academic dialogue on his work (see below, "Co-operative Criticism").

22 T.W. Adorno's "The Essay as Form" is well worth reading; the recent English translation, by Bob Hullot-Kentor & Frederic Will, can be found in New German Critique 32 (Spring-Summer 1984): 151-171. Adorno presents the idea as follows:

In the essay, concepts do not build a continuum of operations, thought does not advance in a single direction, rather the aspects of the argument interweave as in a carpet. The fruitfulness of the thoughts depends on the density of this texture. Actually, the thinker does not think, but rather transforms himself into an arena of intellectual experience, without simplifying it. (160-161)

And in contrast to Gass's Platonism--which, as the conclusion of his quoted remarks demonstrates, has the effect



of equating the manner of expression with the nature of thought and thinker, Adorno extrapolates a more genuinely postmodern account of the essay's relation to experience:

Unconsciously and far from theory, the need arises in the essay as form to annul the theoretically outmoded claims of totality and continuity, and to do so in the concrete procedure of the intellect. If the essay struggles aesthetically against that narrow-minded method that will leave nothing out, it is obeying an epistemological motive. The romantic conception of the fragment as an artifact that is not complete in itself but openly striding into infinity by way of self-reflection, advocates this anti-idealist motive even in the midst of idealism. Even in its manner of delivery the essay refuses to behave as though it had deduced its object and had exhausted the topic. (164)

Finally, it is worth noting that Adorno makes these points as part of an argument with his academic contemporaries, who persist, he says, in "fencing up art as a preserve for the irrational, identifying knowledge with organized science and excluding as impure anything that does not fit this antithesis." As Adorno sees it,

The person who interprets instead of unquestioningly accepting and categorizing is slapped with the charge of intellectualizing as if with a yellow star; his

misled and decadent intelligence is said to subtilize and project meaning where there is nothing to interpret. Technician or dreamer, those are the alternatives. Once one lets oneself be terrorized by the prohibition of going beyond the intended meaning of a certain text, one becomes the dupe of the false intentionality that men and things harbor of themselves. Understanding then amounts to nothing more than unwrapping what the author wanted to say. . . . (151-52)

<sup>23</sup> As Graff makes this point (on 125), it is part of his overall argument that "the field-coverage principle"--the notion that an English department's responsibility begins and ends with assembling a faculty and a course-list that offers coverage of a comprehensive "grid of literary periods, genres, and themes"--proved to be of positive adaptive value in the profession's encounter with an increasingly scientific and bureaucratized world, and was therefore pursued to the exclusion of the sort of "principled thought and discussion" which might have cleared some common ground between members of different specialties. Although his prescription begs the basic question of whether literature can still be expected to provide a common set of values or experiences (not to mention the question of whether that homogeneity is a

thing to be desired), it seems to me that Graff's diagnosis is an accurate one.

<sup>24</sup> C.f. Graff, 64:

It was . . . said of [Daniel Coit] Gilman [first president of Johns Hopkins, and founder of graduate study in the U.S.] . . . that he had "realized that as civilization advanced, all critical decisions and new steps must be made by experts who could command all the available knowledge in their field and perhaps add something new to the sum of the world's knowledge."

<sup>25</sup> Thorstein Veblen, The Higher Learning in America: A Memorandum on the Conduct of Universities by Business Men, American Century Series (1918; New York: Sagamore, 1957) 24.

<sup>26</sup> One could go still further and argue, as Jürgen Habermas has, that the elevation of expertise is what defines cultural modernity. Reasoning from Max Weber's premise that during the 18th century there was a "separation of the substantive reason expressed in religion and metaphysics into three autonomous spheres . . . science, morality and art," Habermas says this autonomy made it possible that

Scientific discourse, theories of morality, jurispru-

dence, and the production and criticism of art could in turn be institutionalized. Each domain of culture could be made to correspond to cultural professions in which problems could be dealt with as the concern of special experts. . . . [But] what accrues to culture through specialized treatment and reflection does not immediately and necessarily become the property of everyday praxis. With cultural rationalization of this sort, the threat increases that the life-world, whose traditional substance has already been devalued, will become more and more impoverished. ["Modernity--An Incomplete Project" in The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, WA: Bay, 1983) 9]

Certainly, if we look back at the nature of the upheavals surrounding the rise of professionalism in the academy we see something matching the process Habermas describes here.

<sup>27</sup> See Theodor Adorno & Max Horkheimer, The Dialectic of Enlightenment, trans. John Cumming (1944; New York: Herder and Herder, 1972) 131:

Today aesthetic barbarity completes what has threatened the creations of the spirit since they were gathered together as culture and neutralized. To speak of culture was always contrary to culture.

Culture as a common denominator already contains in embryo that schematization and process of cataloging and classification which bring culture within the sphere of administration. And it is precisely the industrialized, the consequent, subsumption which entirely accords with this notion of culture.

28 "New Directions: An Interview with James Laughlin," with Susan Howe and Charles Ruas, in The Art of Literary Publishing: editors on their craft, ed. Bill Henderson (Wainscott, NY: Pushcart, 1980) 13-14.

29 This correlates with the observation of the sociologist Diana Crane, who found that "Analysis of the growth of publications in English literature from 1923 to 1967 reveals a linear pattern of growth until 1939, followed by a very slow rate of exponential growth (doubling every seventeen years rather than every ten years as in the basic science literature)" [Invisible Colleges: Diffusion of Knowledge in Scientific Communities (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1972) 94].

30 The Tradition of the New (1960; Chicago: Phoenix-U of Chicago P, 1982) 71.

31 Edward W. Said, "Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies and Community," Critical Inquiry 9 (Sept., 1982): 4-6. This essay is also reprinted in Hal Foster's The

Anti-Aesthetic.

According to Said, one important factor in the specialization of these initially anti-institutional modes of reading has been the widespread acceptance of the scientific field-model, which teaches that "knowledge ought to exist, to be sought after, and disseminated in a very divided form" (7). The problem he sees arising from the application of this principle to systems of reading is that it encourages the assumption that "the skills traditionally associated with modern literary criticism . . . are there to be applied to literary texts, not, for instance, to a government document, a sociological or ethnological report, or a newspaper. This separation of fields . . . constitutes an amazingly rigid structure" and also functions as "one depoliticizing strain of considerable force, since it is capitalized on by professions, institutions, discourses, and a massively reinforced consistency of specialized fields" (12-13).

<sup>32</sup> Graff, 206; Graff also reminds us that demand for specialists in modern literature built slowly over a long period, and still outran supply:

My impression, based on limited evidence, is that though courses in the literature of the recent past became frequent in colleges as early as the 1890s, it was not till well after World War II that it became

possible for any large proportion of study to be devoted to modern literature. . . .

It is not till the early sixties that a new pattern begins to emerge whereby, though the number of twentieth-century courses increases only moderately, the enrollment in them goes up disproportionately. . . .

Before the fifties, even had literature departments wanted to increase their commitment to modern literature, they would have been hard pressed to find instructors competent to teach the subject, because the emphasis in doctoral programs was still overwhelmingly antiquarian. Those who did teach modern literature tended to be recruited from earlier periods, and their versatility did not always earn them the respect they hoped for. (196)

<sup>33</sup> Richard Poirier, "What is English Studies?" in The Performing Self (New York: Oxford UP, 1971) 71.

<sup>34</sup> "On the Teaching of Modern Literature," in Beyond Culture (New York: Viking, 1965) 26.

<sup>35</sup> Larson, 227. In Invisible Colleges, Diana Crane explains that this is especially true of the academic profession, because its hierarchy consists mostly of vertical connections: "Analysis of the networks [of professional influence Crane calls invisible colleges] showed that

anyone choosing even one of the most productive members of the research area studied by the author could have been in contact with a large network of individuals. In other words, the high proportion of choices directed toward these individuals meant that members of these groups were not so much linked to each other directly but were linked to each other indirectly through these highly influential members" (49).

<sup>36</sup> See Edward Said, "American 'Left' Literary Criticism," in The World, The Text, and The Critic (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1983) 175. Said's concept of affiliation could be understood as a sort of deconstruction of social life: applying it to literary criticism, he concludes that ". . . we have fallen into the trap of believing that method is sovereign and can be systematic without also acknowledging that method is always part of some larger ensemble of relationships headed and moved by authority and power" (169).

<sup>37</sup> Discovering Modernism (Oxford UP, 1987) 117-118. Subsequent references to Menand will be incorporated in the text.

<sup>38</sup> From T.S. Eliot, "Professional, Or . . ." The Egoist 5 (April, 1918); qtd. in Menand, 125.



<sup>39</sup> See Burger, Theory of the Avant-Garde:

Lukács's and Adorno's avoidance of any discussion of the social function of art becomes understandable when one realizes that it is the autonomy aesthetic, which, in however modified a form, is the focal point of their analysis. The autonomy aesthetic, however, contains a definition of the function of art: it is conceived as a social realm that is set apart from the means-end rationality of daily bourgeois existence. Precisely for this reason, it can criticize such an existence. (10)

<sup>40</sup> Adorno & Horkheimer, Dialectic of Enlightenment, 150. See also Said, in "Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies, and Community":

. . . a constituency is principally a clientele: people who use (and perhaps buy) your services because you and others belonging to your guild are certified experts . . . . To an alarming degree, the present continuation of the humanities depends, I think, on the sustained self-purification of humanists for whom the ethic of specialization has become equivalent to minimizing the content of their work and increasing the composite wall of guild consciousness, social authority, and exclusionary discipline around themselves. Opponents are therefore not

people in disagreement with the constituency but  
people to be kept out, nonexperts and nonspecialists,  
for the most part. (18-19)

<sup>41</sup> Lionel Trilling, "The Two Environments: Reflections on the Study of English," in Beyond Culture (New York: Viking, 1965) 214.

Coover's "Voice": The Implication of Reading

Coover's works tend to propel themselves out to the end of time. . . . I refer to this centrifugal force drawing his work toward the End, and ask Coover to comment on the 'apocalyptic structure' of his stories.

"That's cheap phrasemaking," he says, "an example of intellectual jargon too vague to mean anything. You can coin a phrase like that and go into business, cranking out one book after another on the apocalyptic structure of Melville or Tolstoy or whomever."

\* \* \* \* \*

I move to talk about Coover's second novel, The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop. . . . I propose, by way of introduction, that the book can be read as a synoptic overview of the last three thousand years of human history, an allegory in which the Greek world collapses into the Christian, which in turn is routinized into our present bureaucracies. A dish of Nietzsche, Durkheim, and Weber seasoned with a pinch of Freud and Levi-Strauss. By the end of my disquisition I am worked up into an interpretive frenzy.

"I guess that's one way to look at it," Coover says laconically, before adding, "It's not good for an author to explain his own metaphors, and when he does, he's often wrong."<sup>1</sup>

Like the other authors discussed in this study, Robert Coover is a writer of experimental, anti-realist fiction and has been trained and employed in the American university system;<sup>2</sup> but he is unusually skeptical about the value of interaction between authors and their academ-

ic critics, and in particular--as indicated above--more than a little suspicious of interviews and the invitation to auto-exegesis they present. As for the production of fiction itself, he is quoted elsewhere in the same interview as saying that "the academic writing business" is "a trap. . . . It's too easy. You always somehow, whether you think so or not, are writing for that audience" (290-91). His novels have used sports, popular religion, film, and politics as organizing principles or pretexts, and--although the world he envisions is often absurd and grotesque, and he has declared on occasion that he is writing "for other writers"--in the estimation of Larry McCaffery his work represents an important departure from the norms of contemporary fiction, in that it gives

at least the appearance of being accessible--and even thematically significant--to a wide range of the American public--something which cannot be said about much of the best fiction of the past fifteen years from Gass, Nabokov, Hawkes, Barth, and Pynchon.<sup>3</sup>

Hair O' The Chine: A Documentary Film Script may not be one of those apparently accessible works (in spite of the fact that it retells the story of the Three Little Pigs), but it has a special relevance and interest in the present context because of its extended parody of the academic reader and its comic exposition of the interactive nature of textual interpretation.<sup>4</sup> Not including the

script's scenic and cinematographic directions, there are three elements in this "documentary film": a tableau of the Big Bad Wolf at the door of the third pig's brick cottage, interpolated scenes from a parallel motion picture in which "a Man" and a "pretty young Maid" undergo a variety of sexual encounters, and ongoing but interrupted narration (devoted exclusively to the wolf/pig tableau) by "a scholarly and amiable Voice." The film that is Hair O' The Chine includes within itself and ultimately collapses all three of these elements: as it progresses the scholarly narrator becomes involved (as the Man) in the Man-Maid movie (pun no doubt intended), and finally in the wolf/pig tableau and story as well.

An obvious predicament confronts any critic who would discuss Hair O' The Chine: since the story itself is about the pitfalls and fallacies of interpretation, and subverts customary exegetical moves, it is difficult to frame any statement (even the merely descriptive) that will not involuntarily become an object of the parody it presents. There is also the risk which faces any analysis of a joke --that of being heavy-handed; Coover's text itself occasionally falls prey to this danger, perhaps because its joke is about analysis.

The scholarly Voice begins by walking his invisible audience through the "almost infinite" range of interpretations that various (fictitious) critics have applied

to the story of the Three Little Pigs. As he presents and then dismisses each of these readings, the camera is continually cutting away from his intended tableau, and focusing on the more lively spectacle of the Man and the Maid. Three times ("consider the almost incredible influence the ternaries seem to hold over all such sacred texts") the Man pursues, tackles, and rapes the Maid, as the Voice marches obliviously through the theological analyses of the pig-tale, according to which "the wolf, in climbing the roof, is in reality attempting to gain undeserved access to heaven, but God (the pig) casts him into the boiling pit, that is to say, pot" (13). Three times the Maid teases and then is raped by the Man as the Voice, with an increasing loss of concentration, turns to the Marxist analysis of Bakunovich's The Insurrection of the Swine, in which the phrase "Nay, not by the hair o' my chinny chin chin" is taken to mean:

"You, who have a veritable fortune in hair, indeed almost all the hair in the whole world, come to demand of us, who have but one hair, that we surrender all to you, a self-evident instance of the cruel accumulative tendency of capital, which eventually must reduce even the best of intentions to tyranny. . . . But we shall not be intimidated! You may blow all you wish, but the true winds of change are with us!" (19-20)

Three more times the Man and the Maid engage in an apparent "agricultural orgy" (her jug is smashed over his plow, they mate in the mud) as the Voice invokes a totemist reading, finally arriving at the philological analysis of his "mentor," Dr. Schlüpfrig.

It is, notably, at this point that the Voice becomes unable to ignore what is going on outside the tableau, and begins to lose all self-control. For the next ten pages, the Maid appears alone, performing a series of autoerotic acts with an ear of corn, an apple, and the handle of a butterchurn; all of these items also appear in the tableau, and her performance parallels the Voice's discussion of their symbolic significance. At last the Voice becomes so distracted by the Maid that he interrupts his lecture.

The next time we see the Man, he is "leaning against the tree, neatly dressed in a freshly pressed blue shirt, blue trousers, and a pair of sandals. He is smiling at us." At this point we hear him speak for the first time, as "the Man (Voice) continues" the lecture with a recapitulation of Dr. Schlüpfrig's research (38). After being once more interrupted (and seduced) by the Maid, he manages to tell us that Schlüpfrig

had accepted, with most serious scholars, the probable corruption of "chine," meaning "spine," to "chinnie" and thence to "chin". . . . Schlüpfrig, however, tenacious investigator that he is, continued

to poke about in the leavings of human history, and chanced one day upon a second use of "chine" in fourteenth-century English: "cleft" or "split." "By Jove!" he was heard to thunder that memorable day through the echoing labyrinthine chambers of the National Archives: "BY THE HAIR OF MY CRACK!" (44)

Another, more assaultive, seduction intervenes before the Man can elaborate his own extension of Schlüpfrig's theories:

"from the beginning, we have been assuming that "hair o'" meant "hair of"--but, friends, is this the case? have we not failed to heed our own warnings regarding, on the one hand, the shameless doctoring of all sacred texts, and on the other, the effects of the long oral tradition? For "hair o'," in brief, are we not justified in supposing harrow or harry? . . . meaning "to lacerate" in the first, "to ravish" in the second . . . . Hah!" he cries, "TO RAVISH MY CLEFT!"

Taking "Nay, not" for a corruption of "he ought not," the Man decodes the entire text as meaning: "you have the duty not to be the cause of my ruin" (47-48); armed with this evidence, he presents his reading of the tale as an allegory of the history of human mating behavior. At first, he argues, the wolf "establishes a primitive courtship ritual, [which] terminates in assault"; this marks "a



period . . . of total male dominance, female submission and fear." As the tale progresses, though, the woman "learns to overcome her terrors and to assert herself. The consequence is a sudden historical rupture with the past, a break in the primitive courtship process--a heresy, if you will--and the male. . . . must devise new structures." The ultimate result is "the marriage ritual, invented by the male, to be sure, but under the obscure and perhaps unrecognized pressure of the female, and destined to be his undoing as dominator of the species"; this leads, he claims, to "total female conquest, the suppression of femaleness (symbolized by the 'dead' pigs) replaced by the end of maleness (the wolf reduced to stew)" (48-49).

At this point, the Maid (who has been taking notes and recording the lecture with mock admiration) launches another, still more violent assault; simultaneously, the tableau comes to life and the wolf unexpectedly blows the third pig's brick cottage to bits. As the man struggles towards the door of his cottage, bitten and bloodied by the Maid, he continues to lecture, pointing out that the chimney is a symbol for the mind, and that the manner of the wolf's death is emblematic of the fate of those who would reason with women (53). In the final scene of Hair O' The Chine, we see him peering out of the cottage window at the Maid, who stands in the same position as the wolf

did earlier, and we hear his voice, in an echo of the lecture's opening words, saying, "--to go, or is she drawing a breath for some unusual effort? Precision eludes us" (55).

Coover's story clearly revolves around the gradual reversal of sex-roles; the Man begins as the Maid's molester and ends as her victim. The stages of this process correspond to the progress of the lecture in a manner which suggests an inverse relationship between the physical and the intellectual: the Man's sexual subjection coincides with his assertion of mastery over sex as an academic subject. Furthermore, his involvement with the Maid becomes personal as his involvement with the subject does: the Voice becomes the Man, and is drawn into the movie, just at the point when he begins to discuss the research (of his mentor, Dr. Schlüpfrig) on which his own work is founded. Similarly, his victimization begins when he broaches his own interpretative conclusions, which are not only explicitly sexual but treat the text as a coded analogy of the waning of male dominance, a process which in his view has culminated in the "heresy" of mutual consent implied by the marriage contract. The fact that his own ultimate fate simply fulfills the terms of this interpretation would seem to suggest that the act of reading, in Coover's opinion, is inevitably reflexive.

But scholarly reading is also subverted from another side in Hair O' the Chine. Specifically, literary analysis is based on certain assumptions about the structure of the text--e.g. that it remains stable--and depends on the end's being known. The story of the wolf and the pig is altered in this case, though, so that the wolf wins. This change not only reasserts the unpredictability of the real and the vitality of the natural, it also "blows away" analysis: the tale we are told is linear and teleological to the extent that it completes a process, but since that process is one of reversal, the end--in which a cycle is poised to re-begin--is no end at all. And inasmuch as the reader, who had proposed to engage and master the text, is now subsumed by it, this turn of events calls into question the very control that reading implies: recklessly waxing philological, we note that the Teutonic source of the word read is a verb--raedan--which means "to exercise control over something," and that it shares indo-european roots with the words subordinate, suborn, reason, opinion, and riddle.

At least putatively, the audience for Coover and his scholarly voice are the same, but their approach to the Three Little Pigs obviously is not. The most important difference has to do with interpretive license: in writing a fiction based on a folk-tale, Coover is free simply to alter the given text; the scholar, on the other hand, is

constrained by it. The critical reader always surrenders a measure of autonomy to the text; in the fantastic world of Hair O' The Chine, the scholar pores over a text which itself becomes porous and absorbs him--and if the reader has become the pig, the wolf can only be the text.

When the critic also happens to be the author of the text under discussion, he or she might seem to be exempt from the normal limitations of critical reading, but in this case--even apart from Coover's point about the fallibility of authorial self-interpretation--I would like to suggest that another sort of constraint obtains. In what follows, we will see how and why authors have read themselves, and we will begin to consider the possibility that authorized interpretation may actually come to control, if not the text itself, at least its audience's understanding of it, and perhaps (as a matter of self-understanding) the author's subsequent production. In other words, if Coover were his Voice, and were explaining instead of creating Hair O' The Chine, the tale might turn out more conventionally, with the text enticed down the smoky path of reason into the pit (or pot) of analysis, there to be cooked down into a more readily consumable form.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Alden Bass, "An encounter with Robert Coover," Antioch Review 40.3 (1982): 295.

<sup>2</sup> For the particulars of Coover's career, see n21 in "Strange Bedfellows," above.

<sup>3</sup> Larry McCaffery, "Robert Coover," in American Novelists Since World War II, ed. Jeffrey Hellerman and Richard Layman, vol. 2 of Dictionary of Literary Biography, a Brucoli-Clark Book (Detroit: Gale Research, 1978); the first remark (quoted by McCaffery from Frank Gado, First Person: Conversations on Writers and Writing, in which context Coover is referring specifically to The Universal Baseball Association) appears on 110; the block quotation (in which McCaffery is referring specifically to The Public Burning) appears on 120.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Coover, Hair O' The Chine (Columbia, SC: Brucoli Clark, 1979). Subsequent references will be incorporated in my text.

Authors as First Readers

I think the older tradition is right--that of excluding the modern from academic studies--and I note that this tradition often touches American professorial writing on the living. I myself have been treated as though already dead, laid out on the slab, incapable of moving and kicking, contradicting the careful thesis by speaking out or branching into new artistic directions. Which means, probably, that the casual review is good enough for the contemporary author but the doctoral dissertation is too much. [Anthony Burgess, "The writer among professors"]

Turning the tables on the professors, Burgess here offers his version of Wordsworth's "we murder to dissect" --but his indictment is slightly disingenuous. Though he may prefer not to be hurried to his reward, Burgess would not be making these objections were he not aware that the academy has become the main gate to literature's after-world. For that matter, we may question Burgess's assertion that it is something new for writers to be studied by their contemporaries--Wordsworth, to use the example at hand, was a prominent subject in Coleridge's literary criticism.

Something is new, though, in the case of certain post-modern authors. We have seen that these writers,

unlike all but a few of their predecessors, are members of the academy, as are most of their readers. And unlike Burgess, they seem to welcome critical vivisection, often even performing it on themselves. When criticism becomes the end and pervasive accompaniment of reading, there is always the possibility that readers will recognize and value a writer only inasmuch as she matches a description; when authors self-dissect, there is the further risk that analysis, with its need for a stable object of study, will stagnate invention by inducing practice to conform to the prescriptions of theory. But if it is to have this prematurely paralyzing effect on an author or on an audience, analysis must become a party to every encounter between the author and herself, author and reader, reader and reader.

Nowhere is criticism so thoroughly integrated into the process of reception as it is in the case of academic post-modernism. This may be because post-modern fiction presupposes a reader who places a high value on formal innovation; certainly most of its critics have been readers of this type. But the problem with this apparently ideal arrangement is that criticism dissipates the element of novelty so important to the formalist undertaking. As Jauss puts it,

the aesthetic distance with which [a work] opposes  
the expectations of its first audience . . . can

disappear for later readers, to the extent that the original negativity of the work has become self-evident and has itself entered into the horizon of future aesthetic experience, as a henceforth familiar expectation.<sup>1</sup>

The result of the process of reception for readers, according to Jauss, is that "familiar expectation" eventually overtakes even an "avant-garde" work of literature. Post-modern authors, when they join in the activity of mediation, help not only to form new expectations, but also to bridge the aesthetic gap on which their claim to innovation is based.

If it can be said that art began as a way of conjuring reality, one might also say that criticism, from its beginning, has conjured up art and the artist. Criticism has in the past played a decisive role in establishing the public image of an author, and in determining the qualities for which that author's work is admired or despised; that fact alone might explain why authors sometimes enter the lists on behalf of their books--especially when those books are likely to contradict "the expectations of the first audience." And in cases where the work is aesthetically, politically, or culturally marginal, it is not uncommon to find the way prepared by polemic. The example of Wordsworth is illustrative in this context as well, his



Lyrical Ballads having been prefaced with an abstract of the "experiment" they performed.<sup>2</sup>

One of the interesting things about aesthetic polemic is that, though it is always advanced as one side of a dialectic of taste and is therefore by definition exclusive rather than all-encompassing, once accepted it has a tendency to establish even its most partisan points as Truth. But what is special about the post-modernists with whom we are concerned is that, while they undoubtedly share with their avant-garde ancestors the inducement of self-explanation--or did twenty years ago, when their books were still considered experimental--they have acceded to respectability with unprecedented speed. The reasons for this range from the practical (the acceleration and proliferation of information media) to the putative (the culture industry of late capitalism, in which "what is steadily being offered for sale is, as in other industries, next year's model").<sup>3</sup> This historically unique situation also has a variety of possible consequences, some being clearly undesirable, and others having indeterminate, but possibly quite positive ramifications.

Although the essentially avant-garde rhetoric of marginalization--the indispensable trope of all aesthetic manifestoes--continues to animate the self-descriptions of post-modernism, its value is more nostalgic than descriptive at this point.<sup>4</sup> These authors may not be widely

read, but they have gained admittance to and recognition from the group that, perhaps more than any other, determines literary status.

In a very interesting article called "The Shaping of a Canon: U.S. Fiction, 1960-1975," Richard Ohmann disagrees. His essay (part of a forthcoming book-length study) begins the difficult but important process of quantifying the value of raw sales, major reviews, attention from intellectuals and academics, and even inclusion on the college syllabus in the elevation of a contemporary novel to the canon. He notes that the last of these factors is

all but necessary: the college classroom and its counterpart, the academic journal, have become in our society the final arbiters of literary merit, and even of survival [for literature].

Nonetheless, he emphasizes that during the period covered by his study

. . . novels moved toward a canonical position only if they attained both large sales . . . and the right kind of critical attention. On the one side, this hypothesis conflicts with the one most vigorously advanced by Leslie A. Fiedler--that intellectuals are, in the long run, outvoted by the sorts of readers who keep liking Gone with the Wind. On the other side, it collides with the hopes or expectations of such

critics as Kostelanetz and Jerome Klinkowitz, who promote an avant-garde fiction called post-modernist, post-contemporary, anti-novel, or whatever.<sup>5</sup>

He finds, in short, that "canon formation during this period took place in the interaction between large audiences and gatekeeper journals"--a class of publications which ranges from the New York Times Book Review and the New York Review of Books to more academic journals such as Contemporary Literature (207).

Few of the "post-modern, post-contemporary, anti-novel" writers turn up on Ohmann's provisional list of the chosen, but one who does is John Hawkes. In an endnote, Ohmann calls Hawkes "the outstanding example of a novelist whose work has consistently impressed critics and professors, without ever appealing to a wider audience," and remarks that "should any of us be around to witness the outcome, it will be interesting to see if any of his books has a place in the canon forty or fifty years from now" (206n22). His essay names many writers (among them Mario Puzo, Herman Wouk, Judith Krantz, James Michener) who, in spite of the enormous numbers of books they sell, are doomed by the inattention of intellectuals to disappear from our cultural memory within a generation or two; the question he leaves unanswered in his note is whether an academic reputation alone is enough to ensure survival.

It would appear though, from the conclusions he draws elsewhere, that he doubts it. In Ohmann's analysis, attention is prior to recognition: a book needed to rise above the threshold of public invisibility before the "gatekeeper journals" and the intellectuals who man them would judge its value to be a question worth deciding. According to Ohmann, a book usually achieved recognition only after

it was selected, in turn, by an agent, an editor, a publicity department, a review editor (especially one at the Sunday New York Times), the New York metropolitan book buyers whose patronage was necessary to commercial success, critics writing for gatekeeper intellectual journals, academic critics, and college teachers. Obviously, the sequence was not rigid, and some might on occasion be omitted entirely . . . . But one would expect the pattern to have become more regular through this period, as publishing was increasingly drawn into the sphere of monopoly capital. . . . (208)

In the latter part of his analysis, Ohmann goes on to say that all these people,

and in fact the writers of the novels themselves . . . had social affinities. . . . I hold that they all belong to a common class, one that itself emerged

and grew up only with monopoly capitalism. . . . I call it the Professional-Managerial class. (209)

On the basis of the historical record of the period covered by his study, Ohmann argues that both large sales and the approval of intellectuals are preconditions for canonical status; but the facts do not logically disallow the possibility that a few readers, properly placed in the cultural machinery, could permit a book to bypass popular currency and arrive, slowly but perhaps more surely, at canonical status.<sup>6</sup> In some cases, I would argue, Ohmann's network of buyers and reviewers might reduce to a more specialized hierarchy of readers, consisting for the most part of teachers and students. Of course, writers who have a predominantly academic audience are not guaranteed admission to the canon, but neither are they automatically threatened with oblivion: as I will later suggest, continued interest in these writers is endangered more by restrictive readings than by a restricted readership.

Ohmann asserts that most "cultural leaders read the Times Book Review . . . not only professors, but . . . 75 percent of our elite intellectuals." His thesis is based on a 1972 study by the sociologists Julie Hover and Charles Kadushin, which found that

just less than sixty percent . . . [of leading American intellectuals] are not academics and one-sixth could best be classified as free lance writers. The

academic representation is about evenly divided between the social sciences and the humanities, refuting the belief that the literary intellectuals are predominantly professors of English or other humanities.<sup>7</sup>

But how many of those sixty percent, one wonders, have become intellectual leaders of the Professional/Managerial class without passing through the college classroom? And how many of those who write for the Times Book Review have not to some extent formed their aesthetic values in concert or in conflict with professors of English or the other humanities?

It is my belief that, especially when authors and readers do "belong to a common class" (a class, at that, which forgathers in the classroom), fiction with a limited public may still survive and even thrive. In fact, as we examine some hierarchies of readers, it will become clear that they are characterized by inter-relations and interactions even more subtle and complex than those Ohmann describes.

Discussion of any such hierarchy is complicated by the fact that people often play different roles within it. We have already seen some suggestion that the author may double as the most important reader; beyond that, readers will divide into teachers, students, critical writers, and other authors--all potentially overlapping groups. Still,

at the heart of the web of relations that preserves any work of post-modern fiction, one always finds what could be called the "properly placed" reader. That reader, by definition, has two things: authority, according to whatever standards currently hold sway, and an audience of her own. In order to reach a wide audience, the properly placed reader must also be a writer--and if her evaluation of an author is to shape general opinion, then at least some of her readers must be writers as well.

In her important essay called "Contingencies of Value," Barbara Herrnstein Smith points out that

Although . . . the evaluation of texts is not confined to the formal critical judgments issued within the rooms of the literary academy or upon the pages of its associated publications, the activities of the academy certainly figure significantly in the production of literary value. For example, the repeated inclusion of a particular work in literary anthologies not only promotes the value of that work but goes some distance toward creating its value, as does also its repeated appearance on reading lists or its frequent citation or quotation by professors, scholars, and academic critics. For all these acts, at the least, have the effect of drawing the work into the orbit of attention of a population of potential readers; and, by making it more accessible to the

interests of those readers (while, as indicated above, at the same time shaping and supplying the very interests in relation to which they will experience the work), they make it more likely both that the work will be experienced at all and also that it will be experienced as valuable.<sup>8</sup>

Following the genealogy of literary value backwards to its source, then, the taste of the general reader develops under conditions laid down by critical judgment, which in turn has been prepared for by the author's own evaluation of his work. According to Smith, this last is "a prefiguration of all the subsequent acts of evaluation of which the work will become the subject" (24).

The activity of "critical judgment" to which Smith refers would characterize most of what goes on in the community of writing readers that I have in mind, but the artistic prevaluation she describes is far less organized and overt than that carried on by certain post-modern authors. In many cases, these authors stand at the head of their hierarchy, with an audience of critics who grant a great deal of authority to their opinions. As I have already suggested, one problem with this situation is that authorial readings originally developed and expressed in opposition to contemporary ideas about fiction convert easily into doctrine once the battle has been won. For better or for worse, then, authors who double effectively



as First Readers can exercise a lasting influence on the reception of their works. Self-representation of this sort is a relatively recent and still-developing practice, but it approaches the institutional when the author belongs to an academy which focuses systematic critical attention on contemporary fiction.

The prototype of the author as First Reader is Henry James. In the late Prefaces to the New York Edition, James established the features for which his work would be valued, and set down readings which--directly and indirectly--have shaped his critical reception to this day.<sup>9</sup> If we want to understand how an authorized hierarchy of readers determines the reception and evaluation of our contemporary writers, it will be useful to examine the James paradigm in some detail. Naturally, there are important differences between James's activity and that of the living writers who, like him, practice criticism on themselves--not the least of which is that writers today live in the shadow of James's example--but the similarities are abundant and instructive.

The Prefaces to James's selected New York Edition of his works were written between 1905 and 1908, when the author was in his sixties. James himself was perhaps the first to recognize the significance of the fact that, in what would certainly become the definitive edition of those works included, he was not only re-reading but re-

writing his early work in the light of standards and methods developed later.<sup>10</sup> F.R. Leavis, who figures as the unfortunate neanderthal of this paleontology, argued in The Great Tradition that "the James of the Prefaces . . . is so much not the James of the early books that he certainly shouldn't be taken as a critical authority upon them, at any rate where valuation is concerned."<sup>11</sup> But of course it is exactly "where valuation is concerned" that the authority of the late James has proven incontestable: it was the James of the Prefaces who designated The Portrait of a Lady as his first work of genius, who pronounced The Ambassadors "quite the best, 'all round,' of all my productions," and who posted The Wings of the Dove and The Golden Bowl at the boundaries of his "major phase."<sup>12</sup>

Critics in James's time could not ignore the Prefaces, but it was R.P. Blackmur's 1934 essay introducing them that established their definitive value, in passages like the following:

[James] had to elucidate and to appropriate for the critical intellect the substance and principle of his career as an artist. . . .

Criticism has never been more ambitious, nor more useful. There has never been a body of work so eminently suited to criticism as the fiction of Henry James, and there has certainly never been an author

who saw the need and had the ability to criticise specifically and at length his own work.<sup>13</sup>

The significance of the Prefaces, however, is not just a matter of the shadow that they cast in later criticism, or even of the limitations which they, in conjunction with that later criticism, have imposed on our understanding of James: in order to assess their significance, we need to see the purposes to which they were ultimately appropriated in the context of those which they were originally produced to serve.

As the editors of a recent collection of James's critical writing point out,

The New York Edition is meant to create a critically sophisticated audience of readers, the first of whom will be James himself as he re-reads his works. As first reader James is an exemplar. . . .<sup>14</sup>

If James did hope to accomplish the education of an audience for his fiction, that expectation remained for the most part unrealized; like some post-modern writers, James never knew a "critically sophisticated" readership outside of a small audience of intellectuals.<sup>15</sup> Even among those readers, though, the response to James was marked, in the words of Roger Gard, by the prevalence of "a certain set of critical terms, used alike by hostile and favourable reviewers, which [had] the effect of shutting

out from consideration many of James's most individual and valuable achievements."<sup>16</sup>

James, then, was being evaluated by the very standards which his own work had, in fact if not yet in effect, rendered obsolete: praise and blame on these terms were both beside the point. The readings he presents in the New York Edition are not James's first attempt to endow his audience with the faculties necessary to appreciating his work, but taken together they represent his most extended essay in this direction.<sup>17</sup> James described the finished effort of the Prefaces--in a letter which he wrote to W. D. Howells, and which R. P. Blackmur forwarded to critics of a later day--as

a sort of plea for Criticism, for Discrimination, for Appreciation on other than infantile lines--as against the so almost universal Anglo-Saxon absence of these things; which tends so, in our general trade, it seems to me, to break the heart. . . .<sup>18</sup>

In other words, just as James's revisions are determined by his artistic situation--shaped, that is, by the values and standards developed over a long career--his manner of presenting those works is to an important degree a dialectically determinate response to the prevailing tastes in literature.

One way of confronting a hostile standard is simply to discount it, to redefine judgment so it is excluded.

According to Percy Lubbock, James's first champion in the academy, this is the way that James reacted to the standard of taste--the standard by which his contemporaries for the most part judged him:

. . . . If you ask Henry James whether he "likes " some book under discussion, the roll and twinkle of his eye at the simplicity of the question is a lesson in itself, and one that a young critic will never forget. Where, he seems to say, on the loose fabric of a mere preference or distaste will be found the marks of the long wear and tear of discrimination that are the true critic's honourable and recognizable warrant?<sup>19</sup>

In place of taste, Lubbock obediently offered formal technique as the field of valor for the critic--and by implication, for the author as well. Lubbock's argument in The Craft of Fiction lands with all its considerable weight on the conclusion that, as for "the just judgement of quality,"

any critic of any art is in the same predicament; the value of a picture or a statue is as bodiless as that of a book. But there are times when a critic of literature feels that if only there were one single tangible and measurable fact about a book--if it could be weighed like a statue, say, or measured [274] like a picture--it would be a support in a world of shad-

ows. . . . it seems that our chance must lie in the direction I have named. The author of the book was a craftsman, the critic must overtake him at his work and see how the book was made. (273)

For Lubbock, and after him for many others, it is only when "the book is ended and we look back at the whole design. . . . [that] its form shows for what it is indeed--not an attribute, one of many and possibly not the most important, but the book itself, as the form of a statue is the statue itself" (24). Lubbock might have taken his cue for the privileging of hindsight from the Prefaces themselves--but if he did, he left out an important caveat, one James delivers repeatedly, in various forms:

. . . some acute mind ought surely to have worked out by this time the "law" of the degree in which the artist's energy fairly depends on his fallibility. How much and how often, and in what connexions and with what almost infinite variety, must he be a dupe, that of his prime object, to be at all measurably a master, that of his actual substitute for it--or in other words at all appreciably to exist? He places, after an earnest survey, the piers of his bridge--he has at least sounded deep enough, heaven knows, for their brave position; yet the bridge spans the stream, after the fact, in apparently complete in-

dependence of these properties, the principal grace of the original design. They were an illusion, for their necessary hour. . . . (352-53)

In other words, there is for James no such thing as a blueprint for the work in progress: only the view from the completed structure reveals what relation, if any, intention bore to fruition. The assessment of a career in the Prefaces is similarly "after the fact," but James himself--in striking contrast to his critics--does not lose touch with the experience of discovery represented by his early books.

In The Craft of Fiction, Lubbock faced the same difficulty --that of reconciling the conflicting perspectives of experience and recollection--but he allowed himself far less tenderness for remembered uncertainties than did James, and his model of critical reading set an important precedent for emphasizing the product over the process:

Criticism is hampered by the ambiguity; the two books, the two aspects of the same book, blur each other . . . .the first, the novel with its formal outline, appears for a moment, and then the life contained in it breaks out and obscures it. . . .

(15)

To this day, critics speak of James's oeuvre with something of Lubbock's fondness for the determinate: the evolution into a monster of narrative technique is usually

presented as a planned, if not an inevitable, development.<sup>20</sup> In contrast, in the preface to Roderick Hudson, James described "the art of representation" as a practice which spreads "round us in a widening, not a narrowing circle," and accounted for his own development of narrative methods by saying that "experience has to organise, for convenience and cheer, some system of observation--for fear, in the admirable immensity, of losing its way" (259). These remarks make it clear that James did not conceive of his fictional method as the only one possible, but critical practice in the wake of James has waxed systematic, and the Prefaces have had precisely the "narrowing" effect James wanted to disavow.

James's figure for his technique of narrative orientation--the image of an observer surrounded by a widening circle of experience--offers a hook on which to hang some explanation of how and why this narrowing took place. One accomplishment of the Prefaces has been to establish as an article of faith the importance in James (and in modern fiction generally) of the Technique of the Central Intelligence--so called, by Allen Tate and Caroline Gordon in their influential anthology, "after Henry James, who insisted that all the action of a novel should be evaluated by a single superior mind placed in the center of the main dramatic situation."<sup>21</sup>



The notion of a Central Intelligence is presented in numerous passages in the preface, where James says things like: "The centre of interest throughout 'Roderick' is in Rowland Mallet's consciousness, and the drama is the very drama of that consciousness--which I had of course to make sufficiently acute in order to enable it, like a set and lighted scene, to hold the play" (Preface to Roderick Hudson, 268). But when Tate speaks of James "insisting" on Central Intelligence as a fundamental principle of his art, he probably has in mind remarks like these:

From the moment we proceed by "centres"--and I have never, I confess, embraced the logic of any superior process--they must be, each, as a basis, selected and fixed; after which it is that, in the high interest of economy of treatment, they determine and rule. There is no economy of treatment without an adopted, a related point of view. . . . (Preface to Wings of the Dove, 355)

There is, however, an important and indeed a fateful difference between James saying that the technique of the Central Intelligence appears to him to offer the best logic for narrative, and that certain economies follow on the adoption of that logic, and someone like Lubbock saying, not about James but about fiction in general, that "The whole intricate question of method, in the craft of fiction, I take to be governed by the question of point of

view--the question of the relation in which the narrator stands to the story" (251), and then instructing readers that "there is nothing more that can usefully be said about a novel until we have fastened upon the question of its making and explored it to some purpose" (272).

One novelist who disagreed with Lubbock, and has perhaps suffered for it, was E.M. Forster. In Aspects of the Novel, he addresses these lines of Lubbock's directly, and although he allows that "The Craft of Fiction examines various points of view with genius and insight" and correctly predicts that "those who follow him will lay a sure foundation for the aesthetics of fiction," he argues that

for me the "whole intricate question of method" resolves itself not into formulae but into the power of the writer to bounce the reader into accepting what he says--a power which Mr. Lubbock admits and admires, but locates at the edge of the problem instead of at the centre. I should put it plumb in the centre.<sup>22</sup>

It is important to note, in this connection, that Forster's book originated as a series of lectures: he is clearly pitching his argument at readers rather than critics. To argue for "bouncing" over method is basically to ask that we judge novels on the experience of reading they offer, rather than along formal lines which only reveal themselves once that experience is over. Lubbock, on the

other hand, is asking for a suspension of evaluation, or rather for the adoption of new evaluative criteria--and putting forward as an example of the new excellence The Ambassadors, a book elected by James precisely for its appeal to the retrospective eye. After Lubbock, this became the book by which we would measure James, and even Forster, who rejected the criteria, accepted the work nominated as characteristic of James. For the generation of readers who followed The Craft of Fiction, The Ambassadors became so closely identified with James at his best, that Leavis could complain, "since Mr. Percy Lubbock picked on it . . . [and] Mr. E. M. Forster confirmed him . . . [The Ambassadors is] the book most commonly attempted by those wishing to qualify in Henry James."<sup>23</sup>

In a talk given a few years after the publication of the New York Edition, H.G. Wells offered what we might take--especially in the light of Lubbock's disparagement of "mere preference" and his desire for even "one single tangible and measurable fact about a book"--as an explanation of why James's professional readers, with the exception of Leavis, unanimously granted such importance to the technique of the Central Intelligence and to The Ambassadors:

Whenever criticism of any art becomes specialised and professional, whenever a class of adjudicators is brought into existence, those adjudicators are apt to

become as a class distrustful of their immediate impressions, and anxious for methods of comparison between work and work, they begin to emulate the classifications and exact measurements of a science, and to set up ideals and rules as data for such classifications and measurements. They develop an alleged sense of technique, which is too often no more than the attempt to exact a laboriousness of method, or to insist upon peculiarities of method which impress the professional critic not so much as being merits as being meritorious.<sup>24</sup>

The argument over evaluative criteria, between Forster and Wells on the one hand and James on the other, has been won for James, and the battle was fought along lines that he laid down, but there is some evidence that the consequences of the victory might have made him uncomfortable. In an interesting passage in the Preface to The Awkward Age, James is defending an imaginary dramatist against the too-specific requirements of an imaginary critic. He claims here that if we judge a production to have fallen short of the mark, it is only by "mere feeling" that we do so: and though he grants that "for exact science, that is for the criticism of 'fine' art, we want . . . notation," he observes that "the notation . . . is what we lack, and the verdict of mere feeling is liable to fluctuate." As for himself, James says he would like "to

profit in [the dramatist's] company by the fact that if our art has certainly, for the impression it produces, to defer to the rise and fall, in the critical temperature, of the telltale mercury, it still hasn't to reckon with the engraved thermometer face" (314).

No doubt many principles could be proposed to explain the selective attention with which criticism has read the Prefaces, but I think we might profitably look first to the cult of difficulty which James helped to found, and which has proven itself so appealing to a professionalized criticism and a technically self-conscious literature. James is constantly talking in the Prefaces about obstacles surmounted, and it is perhaps understandable if the value he places on his own work is a ratio of successes realized to failures avoided. In what is probably the most famous formulation of this ratio, he says:

[T]o see deep difficulty braved is at any time, for the really addicted artist, to feel almost even as a pang the beautiful incentive, and to feel it verily in such sort as to wish the danger intensified. The difficulty most worth tackling can only be for him, in these conditions, the greatest the case permits of. (Preface to The Portrait of A Lady, 293)

In a crucial transformation which, like so many others, begins but does not end in Lubbock, this aesthetic machismo is extended from the creative process to the act

of reading. Early in his book, Lubbock is complaining of War and Peace that it is terribly difficult to focus one's attention on the pure form of the novel when its characters keep intruding their vitality: "it is an effort to keep the world of [the novel] at a distance," he says,

and yet it must be kept at a distance if it is to be impressed with the form of art; no artist (and the skilful reader is an artist) can afford to be swayed and beset by his material. . . . And then it is a further effort, prolonged, needing practice and knowledge, to recreate the novel in its right form, the best form that the material, selected and disposed by the author, is capable of accepting.<sup>25</sup>

It may not be surprising, then, to find Blackmur instructing readers thirteen years after Lubbock that "in imitating [James's] thought, step by step and image by image, we shall in the end be able to appropriate in a single act of imagination all he has to say" (261); certainly by this point it is no shock to be told that James's "intention and all his labour was to represent dramatically intelligence at its most difficult . . . point." But it is, I think, rather startling to be warned by the same writer that

This is the sum of his idiosyncrasy; and the reader had better make sure he knows what it is before he rejects it. The act of rejection will deprive him of

all knowledge of it. And this precept applies even more firmly to the criticisms he made of his work--to the effort he made to reappropriate it intellectually--than to the direct apprehension of the work itself. (240-41)

Both themes--the expertise of the artist and the high calling of the reader--are henceforth enshrined in the cult. Blackmur, advising readers to assimilate the Prefaces, says that such an "act of appropriation will have its difficulties, and we shall probably find as James found again and again, that the things most difficult to master will be the best" (236).

By the late forties, Mark Schorer could begin his essay "Technique as Discovery" by saying that "when we speak of technique . . . we speak of nearly everything," could assume James's eminence (without actually mentioning him more than once or twice) and go on to use him as a standard for making complex distinctions between Defoe, Emily Brontë, Lawrence, Wells and Joyce (early and late), and could conclude that "whatever one must allow to talent and forgive in technique, one risks no generalization in saying that modern fiction at its best has been peculiarly conscious of itself and of its tools."<sup>26</sup>

The Tate & Gordon anthology completes this process of institutionalizing James's aesthetic. For these writers, the artist of the difficult wins all his glory from the

technique of the Central Intelligence, which "requires the greatest possible maturity of judgment, the greatest mastery of life, and the highest technical skill to control"; in fact, this one technique "is employed in one way or another in the greatest nineteenth-century novels, from The Idiot and Madame Bovary to The Ambassadors" (626-27). As for the erstwhile machismo of the reader, by the scientific fifties it has been sublimated into a sort of flow chart, illustrating the complex interrelations between four types of narrators and the four narrative techniques associated with them--the reader is a student, not an artist, and as such is properly passive, eager, and humble:

The use of [this] abstract pattern . . . is simply to clarify the reader's or the student's mind as to theoretical possibilities in the art of fiction, and to make him technically aware of how the story is made as well as of what he is receiving from the story. (622)

As we will see, this Jamesian model of narrative as a theoretical activity requiring technical awareness in the reader and self-conscious expertise in the author had a profound effect on that generation of artists and critics who grew up in the fifties, came to prominence in the sixties, and achieved academic security in the seventies.



Notes

<sup>1</sup> Hans Robert Jauss, Toward an Aesthetic of Reception, trans. Timothy Bahti, introd. Paul de Man, *Theory and History of Literature 2* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1982) 25.

<sup>2</sup> I have in mind the longer preface to the 1800 edition, which Wordsworth justifies by saying that "there would be something like impropriety in abruptly obtruding upon the Public, without a few words of introduction, poems so materially different from those upon which general approbation is at present bestowed."

<sup>3</sup> Hans Enzensberger, "The Aporias of the Avant-Garde," in The Consciousness Industry: On Literature, Politics, and the Media, ed. Michael Roloff (New York: Continuum-Seabury, 1974) 25. On the preceding page, Enzensberger observes that

With the development of historical consciousness . . . faith in posterity begins to decline. No doubt, there opens before any work, even the least significant, a prospect of a new immortality: everything can, indeed must, be preserved in mankind's memory--but as "memorial," as a relic. That brings up the question of surpassability. Eternal survival

in the museum is being bought with the prospect that henceforth the march of history can stride across everything without extinguishing it. Everyone becomes aware of the process of steady advance, and this awareness, in turn, becomes the motor that accelerates the process. The arts no longer find protection in their future: it confronts them as a threat and makes them dependent on itself. Faster and faster, history devours the works it brings to fruition.

<sup>4</sup> It is interesting, in the light of post-modernism's rise to respectability, to consider the claims advanced for that generation of postmodernism that today confronts our expectations:

. . . feminist artists often regard critical or theoretical writing as an important arena of strategic intervention: Martha Rosler's critical texts on the documentary tradition in photography--among the best in the field--are a crucial part of her activity as an artist. Many modernist artists, of course, produced texts about their own production, but writing was almost always considered supplementary to their primary work as painters, sculptors, photographers, etc., whereas the kind of simultaneous activity on multiple fronts that characterizes many

feminist practices is a postmodern phenomenon. [Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism," in The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, WA: Bay, 1983) 63]

At least in the culture at large, there is still no question that the military rhetoric of "strategic intervention" is justified in this aesthetic struggle; but Owens's notion of a theory which constitutes practice, however postmodern, is itself more academic than avant-garde, and the acceptance of feminism as an academic orientation (note, above, the remark that Rosler's critical texts are "among the best in the field") is a sign that, like the earlier post-modernism, "feminist practices" have now achieved institutionalization.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Ohmann, "The Shaping of a Canon: U.S. Fiction, 1960-1975," Critical Inquiry 10.1 (1983): 206. Subsequent references to this essay will be incorporated into my text.

<sup>6</sup> Ohmann himself cites Catch-22 and One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest as two instances in which a book achieved canonical status without becoming a best-seller in the first few weeks of its release--though he says that only three books did so in the 1960's (the other being I Never Promised You a Rose Garden). In fact, in Ohmann's own

summary (quoted above) of the steps leading to canonization, "commercial success" is a notably minor element, one which could conceivably be replaced by the oft-noted "intangible" benefits (to pride, reputation, and recruiting) of publishing that fiction which is widely admired but rarely read.

<sup>7</sup> Julie Hover and Charles Kadushin, "Influential Intellectual Journals: A Very Private Club," Change 4.2 (March 1972): 40.

<sup>8</sup> Barbara Herrnstein Smith, "Contingencies of Value," Critical Inquiry 10.1 (1983): 25. Subsequent references to this essay will be incorporated in my text.

<sup>9</sup> The designation of James as "First Reader" comes from Verdeer and Griffin's commentary on the Prefaces in The Art of Criticism: Henry James on the Theory and the Practice of Fiction (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986). All subsequent references to James's prefaces are to this edition. Citing James's original proposal for the Edition, in a letter to Charles Scribner's Sons, Verdeer and Griffin point out that his

closely pondered description [of the edition] . . . indicates that he wants to obtain for his work the careful, serious attention that it had not yet received . . . . The New York Edition is meant to

create a critically sophisticated audience of readers, the first of whom will be James himself as he re-reads his works. As first reader James is an exemplar . . . . The search for a critical community that began with "The Art of Fiction" is now focused on the reader. (394)

Another term for the author acting as First Reader is given in Richard Poirier's The Performing Self (New York: Oxford U, 1974); his examples are Mailer and James:

When Mailer says that the "first art work in an artist is the shaping of his own personality," he is saying something the reverse of what is normally considered vulgar. He is saying that he cannot take the self in him for granted and that he cannot look outside himself for an acceptable self-image. The self is shaped, he says, "in" the artist, and this shaping he calls "work"--no easy job, nothing anyone can do for you and indeed made more difficult by the fact that some of the material "in" you has insinuated itself from outside. Hemingway is a writer who has done this shaping with such authority, has given such accent and prominence to the "first art work" which is himself that he can count on getting the kind of attention for subsequent art works--for his books, that is--that Mailer would like for his own. (103-104)

<sup>10</sup> James is not alone among modern authors in having taken the opportunity to revise early work late in his career: Nabokov offers another example in his late translation into English (with liberal revisions) of his early, Russian works. In fact, if we read anachronistically, as all this suggests we might do, there is a distinctly Nabokovian tone to James's famous remarks on revision in the Preface to The Golden Bowl:

To re-read in their order my final things, all of comparatively recent date, has been to become aware . . . that the march of my present attention coincides sufficiently with the march of my original expression; that my apprehension fits, more concretely stated, without an effort or a struggle, certainly without bewilderment or anguish, into the innumerable places prepared for it. As the historian of the matter sees and speaks, so my intelligence of it, as a reader, meets him halfway . . . . Into his very footprints the responsive, the imaginative steps of the docile reader that I consentingly become for him all comfortably sink. . . . This truth throws into relief for me the very different dance that the taking in hand of my earlier productions was to lead me; the quite other kind of consciousness proceeding from that return. Nothing in my whole renewal of attention to these things, to almost any instance of

my work previous to some dozen years ago, was more evident than that no such active, appreciative process could take place on the mere palpable lines of expression--thanks to the so frequent lapse of harmony between my present mode of motion and that to which the existing footprints were due. It was, all sensibly, as if the clear matter being still there, even as a shining expanse of snow spread over a plain, my exploring tread, for application to it, had quite unlearned the old pace and found itself naturally falling into another, which might sometimes indeed more or less agree with the original tracks, but might most often, or very nearly, break the surface in other places. What was thus predominantly interesting to note, at all events, was the high spontaneity of these deviations and differences, which became thus things not of choice, but of immediate and perfect necessity: necessity to the end of dealing with the quantities in question at all.

(382-383)

<sup>11</sup> F.R. Leavis, The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad (1941; New York: New York UP, 1973) 154. Leavis addresses, in an aside, the precedent of total acceptance already set by R.P. Blackmur. His remarks, granting that R.P. Blackmur "is an unusually

well-qualified reader," but stipulating that "he is also a specialist, and a formal introducer preoccupied with establishing his author's claims to attention" (155), must have seemed snide at the time; he would have done better, by today's standards, to say that

Like its price in the marketplace, the value of an entity to an individual subject is also the product of the dynamics of an economic system, specifically the personal economy constituted by the subject's needs, interests, and resources--biological, psychological, material, and experiential (Barbara Herrnstein Smith's terms, 11-12).

<sup>12</sup> James's assessment of The Ambassadors is quoted from Verdeer and Griffin, 363; that of The Portrait of a Lady appears on p. 294 ("a structure reared with an architectural competence . . . that makes it, to the author's own sense, the most proportioned of his productions after 'The Ambassadors'--which was to follow it so many years later").

A typical if early response to James's judgment on the last point is F.O. Matthiessen's Henry James: The Major Phase (1944; New York: Galaxy-Oxford, 1963), with its chapters on The Ambassadors, The Wings of the Dove, The Golden Bowl. Matthiessen's book is important, though, not for the selection it makes among the novels, but



because it is the first to have had the benefit of James's notebooks, and in that respect could be said to have inaugurated the "major phase" of James's critical reception.

<sup>13</sup> R.P. Blackmur, "The Critical Prefaces of Henry James" rpt. from Hound and Horn (1934) in The Double Agent: Essays in Craft and Elucidation (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1962) 234. In the absence of expository notes, subsequent references to this essay will be incorporated into my text.

<sup>14</sup> Verdeer & Griffin, 394. The editors also note on the same page that "[a]rranging for the edition was difficult partly because, despite James' position as Master of prose fiction, his books had not been selling well. . . ."

<sup>15</sup> C.f. Roger Gard's introduction to Henry James: The Critical Heritage, ed. & introd. Gard (1968; Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976). Gard's commentary goes into some detail on this point, discussing the pattern of contemporary reception across James's career. The short form of his findings is that James

was never read at all widely in his lifetime. . . and he is perhaps symptomatically modern in having emerged as a writer for a relatively large public

some twenty or thirty years after his death. Interestingly, Gard thinks that James's posthumous success is "at least partly due to the absolutely unprecedented increase in this century of 'professional' students of literature" (7-8).

A little later in his commentary, Gard notes that by the 1890's

we encounter for the first time with any consistency a happy and positive sense that James is and should be the concern of the sensitive minority, the artist of the few. . . . And in fact as the years passed he became more and more the 'Master' of a select literary élite. . . . (14)

Still, it is not at all clear that James himself was happy with this situation, especially if we accept Gard's contention that James's attraction to drama, which preceded and is regarded as pivotal in his development of the techniques of his "major phase," was motivated by a desire to find a present and tangible audience (see Gard, 13).

<sup>16</sup> Gard goes on to explain,

There must be a story in the mysterious sense in which there are not stories in James. The method must not be over 'analytic'. There must not be pessimism--which often seems to mean that there must be the assumption that right succeeds in the world,

and a happy ending for preference. There must be nothing 'unpleasant' in the English sense of that word. . . . The ending should be final, with no irritating loose ends or disturbing inconclusiveness. And above all, hitting right the centre of James's art, the reader must be able to place his sympathy, quickly and for good, with certain characters, and not have them subjected to any dramatic interplay which would produce change or qualification in his attitudes. (5-6)

<sup>17</sup> For example, Gard claims that ". . . the reader of this collection will also be able to see, when he return to [James's essay "The Art of Fiction" of 1884], that it is a specific, although for the most part covert, reply to contemporary criticism and indifference. James had his reviewers in mind" (10).

<sup>18</sup> James to Howells, 17 August 1908; quoted in Blackmur, 235.

<sup>19</sup> From Lubbock's unpagged 1954 preface to the 1957 edition of The Craft of Fiction (1921; New York: Viking, 1957). Subsequent references to Lubbock will be incorporated into my text.

<sup>20</sup> Take, for example, this account of James's development, from Sergio Perosa, Henry James and the Experimental Novel, Gotham Library Series (New York: New York UP, 1983):

To reach the thematic complexity and the balanced precision of dramatic structure of The Wings of the Dove (1902), The Ambassadors (1903), and The Golden Bowl (1904), James had to test the themes and the varied narrative techniques that were to contribute to the greatness of these last novels: the tendency toward painstaking and self-conscious experimentation, the increased attention to detail and groundwork, began to gather momentum. Hence the slow unwinding of a long process of tests and trials, the gradual focusing on the problems of technique and presentation that not only prepared James for the achievement of his major phase but provided twentieth-century fiction with advanced and refined means of expression. (4)

<sup>21</sup> The House of Fiction: An Anthology of the Short Story with Commentary, ed. Allen Tate & Caroline Gordon, (New York: Scribner's, 1950) 626. Subsequent references to Tate & Gordon will be incorporated into my text. It should be noted in passing that the Central Intelligence is not a first-person narrator; in the preface to The

Ambassadors--which, as we will see, is the headwater from which this stream of criticism rises--James makes that clear:

. . . the first person, in the long piece, is a form foredoomed to looseness, and that looseness, never much my affair, had never been so little so as on this particular occasion. All of which reflexions flocked to the standard from the moment--a very early one--the question of how to keep my form amusing while sticking so close to my central figure and constantly taking its pattern from him had to be faced. (Verdeer & Griffin, 371)

The Tate & Gordon anthology also provides concrete evidence for Smith's claim, in "Contingencies of Value," that "the canonical work begins increasingly not merely to survive within but to shape and create the culture in which its value is produced and transmitted and, for that very reason, to perpetuate the conditions of its own flourishing" (28-29). Consider, for example, the way Tate and Gordon apply Jamesian values to discipline two unJamesian renegades:

Lawrence uses here--unconsciously, no doubt--a technique which is the solid underpinning . . . of all of Henry James's later work: the rendering of an object or person through reference to another object or person. (351)

Henry James, in "The Art of Fiction," has an explanation for such magnificent failures [as Hemingway's]. He complains that Maupassant omits "one of the items of the problem" when he "simply skipped the whole reflective part of his men and women--that reflective part which governs conduct and produces character." Hemingway's characters reflect, but they do not reflect deeply enough. (423)

22 E.M. Forster, Aspects of the Novel (1927; New York: Harvest-Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, nd) 78-79.

23 Leavis, 161. Leavis probably has Blackmur in mind again here, specifically the latter's decision that although the Prefaces to The Wings of the Dove or The Awkward Age are more explicitly technical in reference, although that to What Masie Knew more firmly develops the intricacies of a theme, and although that to The Tragic Muse is perhaps in every respect the most useful of all the Prefaces, I think it may be better to fasten our single attention on the Preface to The Ambassadors (260)

--the reason obviously being that James himself had directed us to do so.

<sup>24</sup> Wells, "The Contemporary Novel," excerpted in Henry James and H.G. Wells: A Record of their Friendship, their Debate on the Art of Fiction, and their Quarrel, ed. Leon Edel and Gordon Ray (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1958) 134-35. Actually, it is hard to believe that Lubbock hadn't written his book when Wells gave this talk, hadn't wished in print "that the modern novel had been invented a hundred years sooner, so that it might have fallen into the hands of the critical schoolmen of the seventeenth century" and regretted that, "as the production of an age of romance . . . it missed the advantage of the dry light of academic judgment" (Lubbock, 22).

Wells's essay was given first as a talk called "The Scope of the Novel" to the Times Book Club in 1911, and then collected and retitled in 1914. This essay shares more than a similarity of title and occasion with Forster's remarks in Aspects of the Novel to the effect that critics,

zealous for the novel's eminence, . . . are a little too apt to look out for problems that shall be peculiar to it, and differentiate it from the drama; they feel it ought to have its own technical troubles before it can be accepted as an independent art: and since the problem of a point of view certainly is peculiar to the novel they have rather overstressed it. I do not myself think it is so important as a

proper mixture of characters--a problem which the dramatist is up against also. And the novelist must bounce us; that is imperative. (79-80)

<sup>25</sup> Lubbock, 17. Later in the book, this returns in a more familiar form, as the observation that "The easy way is no way at all; the only way is that by which the most is made of the story to be told, and the most was never made of any story except by a choice and disciplined method" (264).

<sup>26</sup> Mark Schorer, "Technique as Discovery," rpt. from Hudson Review 1.1 (Spring 1948) in The World We Imagine: Selected Essays by Mark Schorer (1948; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux: 1968) 3-23.



Co-operative Criticism

The excitement of contemporary studies is that all of its critical practitioners and most of their subjects are alive and working at the same time. One work influences another, bringing to the field a spirit of competition and cooperation that reaches an intensity rarely found in other disciplines. [Jerome Klinkowitz, introducing Arthur Saltzman's The Fiction of William Gass in the third series of Crosscurrents/Modern Critiques]

The interaction between author and reader which in James's case played itself out over a period of fifty years has lately been telescoped into an exchange that is literally conversational. Whereas James could only, "in wanton moods, dream of some Paradise (for art) where the direct appeal to the intelligence might be legalised," the contemporary author inhabits this heaven on earth.<sup>1</sup> And unlike James, who had to solicit the future from the time-capsule of a Preface, the contemporary author addresses himself to living readers in interviews. Of course, without the successful example of James's Prefaces it is not at all certain that readers would have learned to appeal directly to the author for their intelligence of the work, or that authors would be so inclined to respond.

We have seen how time can dilate and distort the authoritative reading, but the current situation raises new questions: what are the effects of temporal compression on authoritative reading? Is its influence intensified or diminished by the "spirit of competition and cooperation"? What are the implications of the professional interaction and practical interdependence of author and critic? Does it have consequences for the creativity of the former or the judgment of the latter?

The interview is the place to begin looking for answers. Earlier, I noted that post-modern fiction has achieved academic respectability in record time: the interview has proven to be one of the most important means to that end. In replacing the preface as the platform from which the author delivers a First Reading, the interview capitalizes on the intensification of activity in the print medium through which aesthetic programs reach their audience. Hans Enzensberger's remarks about the culture industry (cited above, n3 in the preceding section) also suggest that the interview can become an important marketing strategy in a culture where "everyone becomes aware of the process of steady advance, and this awareness, in turn, becomes the motor that accelerates the process."<sup>2</sup> At this point in the century, his contention that the arts are driven by the doctrine of progress seems incontrovertible; in the example that follows, it will become equally

plain that the motor he posits has turned out to be that reciprocating engine, the interview.

Interviews vary in tenor and tone depending on the individuals involved; nonetheless, there are certain types of behavior which characterize the encounter between author and critic. As an example, John O'Brien's interview of Gilbert Sorrentino--published in the inaugural issue of The Review of Contemporary Fiction (which O'Brien edits)--offers us an excellent opportunity to describe some of the more typical aspects of the author-interview, and to demonstrate the nature and extent of post-modernist criticism's remarkable reliance on the self-analysis of contemporary authors. The Review of Contemporary Fiction, published out of Illinois Benedictine College, devoted its Spring 1981 issue to Sorrentino. Establishing a pattern for future issues, O'Brien contributed both an interview with the author and an essay on that author's latest publication (in this case, Mulligan Stew): a look over the brief history of this journal shows not only that the authorial interview and excerpts from the work in progress are fixed features of almost every issue, but also that authors who are the subject of one issue are often contributors to the next.<sup>3</sup> The Review of Contemporary Fiction is not an important taste-making organ like the reviews Richard Ohmann discusses, but it is representative of the type of criticism that contemporary fiction has

received, and O'Brien himself, as a critic who specializes in the interview, is highly illustrative of the problems that confront even the best in a field where, as some rejoice to say, "critical practitioners and most of their subjects are alive and working at the same time."<sup>4</sup>

To begin with, the interview is a personal encounter, and the etiquette of such encounters is naturally somewhat different from that which governs the encounter between a critic and a text. We would expect the interviewer to be more deferential than the critic, even when it is the same person who plays both roles. Postures in the interview are reflected in syntax: the interviewer questions and the author answers; the interviewer's utterances are submitted, the author's are proffered. Add to this the assumption, regnant since James, that the author knows more about what he has written than any other reader, and it should not be surprising that most of the questions asked in interviews are polite requests for authoritative information about methods, meaning, and (artistic) motivation.

One form of the request for information is the invitation to self-appraisal, in which the author is asked to step back and survey his accomplishment with the eye of a detached observer. Like all other such solicitations, this one can be cast as a direct question:

O'B: "You have now published several works of

fiction and poetry. What do you see as the relationship between the two?"

GS: "They're married. They're absolutely married. The whole sense of language, the conception, the syntax, my attempt to destroy metaphor that conceals simile and allegory, which I have done my very best to destroy because I don't think that anything is alike. I never try to compare anything because I don't think that anything can be compared."<sup>5</sup>

Or it can be presented as a statement courting affirmation:

O'B: "Your distaste for using literature as a vehicle for ideas is implicit in the first two novels and explicit in your third. In various ways you keep reminding the reader that this is art, not life."

GS: "The breaking up of the concept of reality in The Sky Changes as well as in Imaginative Qualities has to do with my idea of what fiction should be; it doesn't seem to me that fiction should take the place of reality. The idea of the mirror being held up to life is a very remote one as far as my fictional thinking goes." (7-8)

The request for information may also take a more limited form--for example, the interviewer might ask the author explicit interpretive questions about his work:

O'B: "[I]s the first narrator [in Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things] the moral guide in the novel or is he too being satirized?"

GS: ". . . . The first narrator is not the moral guide. He is also being attacked and satirized as much as any other figure in the novel." (14)

Arguably, satire hasn't worked if you have to explain it-- but it is possible that O'Brien's question is simply a statement in disguise. This sort of answer-as-question may be thought of as an inversion of the statement court- ing affirmation, and can be recognized by its phrasing:

O'B: "Do you think that the primary relation- ship among your novels is stylistic rather than them- atic?" [emphasis mine]

GS: "I see a clear relationship . . . [that] has to do with my own sense of my prose style, because I don't think of my prose or poetry as being concep- tualized exercises in ideas or themes."<sup>6</sup>

Another common form of this occurs when an inter- viewer cribs his question from ideas presented by the author at an earlier point in the conversation:

GS: "The narrative line of The Sky Changes is broken and splintered. The past, the present, the future are mixed together in order to show very clearly that there really is no past that is worse than the present and there is no future that will be

better than the present. The mood of the book is darkness. I wanted to create a world that was black and without hope."

\* \* \* \* \*

O'B: "The tone of The Sky Changes is hopelessly grim. The novel is not only about the failure of love, the failure of marriage, of fidelity, of communication and hope, but also about the bankruptcy of a country and a culture. All this is suggested by the fact that the story physically spans across [sic] America as a way of paralleling the desolation of the characters with that of the country. Is the novel as dark as I see it?"

GS: "As a matter of fact, it is not only as dark as you see it, it is much darker." (9)

In addition to requesting information, though, an interviewer may at times confront the author with some more complex behaviors. For instance, if the interview seems to have become too friendly, the critic may exhibit mock aggression:

O'B: "The beginning of The Sky Changes seems to me quite abrupt, perhaps artificial." (9)

In such cases, a look backwards will usually show that the interviewer is trusting his weight to ice already tested and approved by the author:

GS: "I'm interested in a prose which is absolutely cold, structured, and chaste. I think [The Sky Changes] has a numb quality about it. I hope so." (9)

But should the interviewer really stray from the author's side, the path back to safety will be clearly (if not always patiently) pointed out:

O'B: "I can anticipate the grimace when I ask this, but do you see any similarity between your second novel, Steelwork, and James T. Farrell's Studs Lonigan? You are both dealing with the concept of the 'neighborhood' and its determining effects upon its inhabitants."

GS: "No, I don't see any similarities between the two. . . . I had no interest in taking a figure like Lonigan and telling you about his 'life and times.' This book sedulously avoids narrative in order to avoid that very thing. It sedulously avoids a protagonist for the same reason." (11)

This sort of one-sided exchange, in which the critic aims at reproducing an analysis scripted by the First Reader, may seem harmless enough when the primary purpose is to draw the author out (though it had the disadvantage, in this case, of restricting conversation to themes and ideas that--even in 1971, when this interview was begun--had little to recommend them beyond their espousal by the



author, and certainly were not blazing any new aesthetic or critical trails). Our expectation of critical insight from the interviewer is tempered by the awareness that civility is more likely than belligerence to induce candor in the author--in any case, we may remember D.H. Lawrence's warning that "an artist is usually a damned liar," and bear in mind that the artist's self-understanding is likely to be a partial one. Nonetheless, these excerpts reveal what is either a lack of imagination or a concerted partisanship on the part of the interviewer; given the cultural and historical context in which the interview occurs, the latter is strongly indicated.

Post-modern fiction is in the difficult and unusual position of carving out its own niche in the canon, defining itself for the future, and actively competing with literature of other traditions for adoption and enshrinement in the academy.<sup>7</sup> If the critic who writes on behalf of the post-modern author were the editor of a magazine like The Little Review, clearly devoted to promulgating the enthusiasms of a partisan few, then there would be no confusion of role and hence no cause for concern--but The Review of Contemporary Fiction is, in format and in fact, an academic journal, filled with what presents itself as academic criticism and scholarship. If the interview were the only place where these boundaries blurred, we might consider this merely an interesting problem in social

psychology--but O'Brien mimics Sorrentino's First Reading in his critical essay as well. New problems and ambiguities face us when the art-object arrives inextricably embedded in a discursive field, when the author shapes both the work and its reception, when academics reproduce partisan polemic in the form of a critical appraisal. In what follows, I have arranged excerpts from Sorrentino's interview and O'Brien's critical essay on Mulligan Stew in parallel columns--an admittedly artificial device, but one which should make it easier to see how the First Reader can set the terms critics will use to discuss his work, establish the context in which the work will be evaluated, and even define what it is to be a good reader. On the other hand, the comparison also suggests some drawbacks associated with the exercise of that power.

Sorrentino Interview

"[Mulligan Stew] is sealed . . . . A narrator who exists outside . . . would have given the reader a way of getting a handle on the book, but I didn't want the reader to be able to get a handle outside the terms of the book itself" (24).

"There were attempts at lists that . . . simply would have served no purpose in terms of the density of the book" (17).

"The style of Mulligan Stew is essentially the style of Lamont" (22).

"Bad prose is easily identifiable but you have to discover what the author is up to before you can say this is bad prose. Mulligan Stew is a good example . . . . You have to read a while to see that 'I' am not writing this; it's the bad prose of somebody else" (21).

"I didn't want [Mulligan Stew] to be explained via the real world, and I didn't want it too be able to explain the real world" (25).

"It doesn't seem to me that fiction should take the place of reality. The idea of the mirror being held up to life is a very remote one as far as my fictional thinking goes. The point of art is. . . . the making of something that works, if you will forgive me, in a 'machine-like' way" (8).

O'Brien Article

"[Mulligan Stew is] a truly enclosed world, dense, littered with contradictions and nonsequiturs . . . and devoid of any agent who will serve as a guide through it . . . . [Sorrentino] drops the device of the controlling narrator, thus stripping the novel of the signposts that would reveal the rules under which we are to be reading" (64-65).

"Sorrentino is not doing whatever parodying may be going on. Look to Lamont" (68).

"Without a context, there is no way of deciding what one is looking at . . . a recurring problem for reviewers [of Mulligan Stew]" (67).

"[What's important to reading Mulligan Stew is] not the question of whether it is a 'good' style, but how does it work here, what is its function" (72).

"It seems to me that Mr. Sorrentino's conception in writing this book was to [push] . . . certain devices . . . to their illogical limits; then frame this non-sense . . . so that nothing in the book can be used as a mirror for the world outside. . . . The result is a machine, a Rube Goldberg contraption of moving parts, each of which has no purpose other than to move" (63).

Sorrentino Interview

"Interestingly enough, I came to see that a list somehow strips all verbosity from the usual narrative paragraph" (19).

"Poems don't have ideas. Poems are artifacts, like sculpture" (5)

"I cannot believe that the expression of one's ideas has anything to do with the making of literature. I don't believe that ideas are a novelist's problem. Ideas should be left to the people who have ideas --philosophers, politicians, teachers. Artists can be extremely dull in terms of what they think . . . . An artist is someone who makes something; he does not necessarily express himself in any way whatsoever" (7).

"The work of a novelist such as John Gardner or William Styron or James Baldwin is . . . intent upon instructing you in the truths of life . . . . In a curious way they're instructors of the young, instructors of their peers" (21).

"I would like to bust the goddam novel apart and put it together again for once and for all and prove to myself that fiction is real unto itself" (18).

O'Brien Article

"Though the effect of the list [in writers like Rabelais and Joyce] is primarily comic, it seems to me that their interest in it is to investigate what happens when words are stripped of their narrative padding" (79).

"The artifact, not the life or the man, is the source of answers for whatever questions one may put to the work. In other words, the work of art reveals the maker in his role as maker, not the man. And this knowledge of the maker is manifested from within the work, not as a hovering presence whose detection will somehow act as explanation. The work explains itself" (76).

"At the core of twentieth-century literary theory and criticism in America . . . is the assumption that . . . the artist himself is one who 'knows' something and that the work of art then becomes the vehicle for either representing that knowledge or expressing it" (70-71)

"The work of fiction is distinct from the world of nature . . . . One cannot, therefore, look around for what the poem or the novel reflects, imitates, or represents, thereby establishing a 'use' for the art because one has found some object outside it to which it has reference" (70).

Sorrentino Interview

"Poetry has a function, and its function is to be beautiful. . . . poetry deals with language as a medium which is as pure and precise and as virginal as the very tones and sound that Mozart used. Poetry in the hands of poets like Verlaine, Pound, and the later Yeats is a medium which is as magical, precise, and as inviolate as the music of Mozart and Beethoven. It is on this basis that poetry should be criticized, although the criticism of poetry is usually unbelievably boring, wherein the critic is trying to tell you what the poem means" (27).

"[Mulligan Stew] is, in terms of literature, a reality . . . . It's as if it were in an airless box, existing in a kind of vacuum" (25).

"Writing fiction. . . . You literally do not know what is going to appear on the page. Without being romantic, it is indeed magical" (24).

"You have to be able to reconstruct the past in your imagination as you would like it to have been . . . you may jumble or falsify it. But there are no lies in art. The only lies in art lie in falsification of structure. Art selects and orders experience. It is not history. It is not what 'really happened'" (13-14).

O'Brien Article

"Art has to do with beauty, not with fashion. The language of criticism, therefore, should be that which describes the making, not that of the social sciences or of philosophy . . . . The work of the critic is to open up the world of art so that it can be revealed in terms of what it is: objects whose sole purpose is to be beautiful" (74).

"Gilbert Sorrentino's fiction . . . is in fact defining an art, so defining it that the airless worlds of Joyce and James, as well as Flaubert and Sterne, are again confirmed as pure and inviolate conceptions of the imagination" (79).

"If James's influence upon the modern novel was to pull the curtain on art's methods, so that the magician's act remain a secret, then Sorrentino lifts that curtain, only to reveal that the act is indeed magic" (63).

"The artist is not a historian who . . . is bound in by the facts . . . and who, after a time, has 'said' everything he has to say about those facts . . . . A novel cannot violate the laws of nature . . . but can only violate the rules established by the author within the work" (77-78).

truly enclosed world . . . devoid of any agent who will serve as a guide through it" (!); Sorrentino says "the style of Mulligan Stew is essentially the style of Lamont," and O'Brien advises us that we should "look to Lamont" as the source of the novel's parodies; Sorrentino tells O'Brien that "you have to read a while [in Mulligan Stew] to see that 'I' am not writing this; it's the bad prose of somebody else," and O'Brien informs us that in evaluating the style of Mulligan Stew we must be guided by context.

Similarly, the second page of column text makes it clear that Sorrentino's generic and aesthetic ideas about fiction have been adopted as the criteria according to which O'Brien judges the success of Mulligan Stew and the stature of its author. At the level of genre, this happens when literary traditions are re-read to establish the legitimacy of Sorrentino's endeavors--a process which can be observed in the pairing at the top of the second page of columns, where the language of Sorrentino's remarks about the list resurfaces in O'Brien's generalizations about Rabelais and Joyce. At an aesthetic level, Sorrentino's notion that "fiction is real unto itself," becomes O'Brien's conviction that "the work of fiction is distinct from the world of nature . . . . One cannot, therefore, look around for what the poem or the novel reflects, imitates, or represents." Of course, the critique of repre-

sentation is not the intellectual property of either Sorrentino or O'Brien, and my point is not that the critic in this instance is stealing an original idea from the author--but the critic is equipped for and guided in his judgment by values and intentions the author discloses in the interview.

Ultimately, as the third page of comparison makes clear, this authorial influence extends beyond the evaluation of an individual work, and even beyond the establishment of aesthetic standards; at its furthest reach it defines and circumscribes the role of the critic himself. When O'Brien follows Sorrentino's rule that "[Art] is not history," and concludes that "the artist is not a historian," he may have done nothing more than grant an author his donnée; but the domain of the critic and his autonomy within it have clearly been diminished when O'Brien fashions a professional credo--that "the work of the critic is to open up the world of art . . . [as a world of] objects whose sole purpose is to be beautiful"--out of Sorrentino's declaration that "poetry has a function, and its function is to be beautiful. . . . it is on this basis that poetry should be criticized."

In addition to its local and immediate consequences, this sort of supervised reception carries with it certain long-range problems as well. I suggested in discussing Richard Ohmann's theories that fiction has little to fear

from a restricted audience, but that restrictive reading does pose something of a threat; when a theoretically-inclined post-modern author commits explication to the permanence of print, the risk is that the key meant to open aesthetic space for a work of fiction will instead lock that work into a single function--the illustration of theory.<sup>9</sup> As noted in the discussion of Omensetter's Luck, this in turn raises the possibility that once the theory has dated--as all theory eventually does--the audience for the fiction will disappear.<sup>10</sup> Consider, for instance, how obvious, unremarkable, or uninteresting seem some of the claims O'Brien makes on behalf of Sorrentino: when was it still exhilarating to be told that an author is working against "the assumption that . . . the artist himself is one who 'knows' something and that the work of art [is] a vehicle for . . . that knowledge"? How many readers today would repeat in tones of dismissal O'Brien's laudatory assessments--that as an artist Sorrentino "is not a historian," that his book "is a machine," that its "sole purpose is to be beautiful"?

The modernist doctrine of the autonomous art-object (discussed above, in "'The Death of the Author'") is an article of faith for both Sorrentino and O'Brien, and the aesthetic they profess is in fact so deeply indebted to Flaubert, James and Joyce as to call into question the "post-"ness of this post-modernism--but what does set them



apart from the modernists is the radical dependence on factors outside the fiction implied by their practice of reading. This discrepancy between theory and practice is typical of academic post-modernism, and the present case is unusual only in being especially obvious: for example, despite Sorrentino's asseveration that "the expression of one's ideas has [nothing] to do with the making of literature," repeatedly affirmed by O'Brien, it should by now be clear that fiction strikes both men as an exercise in ideas--albeit ideas about fiction, about aesthetics, about art.<sup>11</sup> And though Sorrentino is adamant about non-referentiality, non-equivalence, and unparaphrasability when he describes his novels, it is a truth as old as New Criticism that the act of describing implies equivalence, signification, and paraphrase. When Sorrentino says he has no ideas about anything, the fact of everything else he says contradicts him.<sup>12</sup>

The exchange between Sorrentino and O'Brien raises one other question, namely whether and how critical reading can influence the author's artistic production. To ask this question is not necessarily to imply that the critic dictates to the author--Sorrentino is clearly the dictator in this instance; rather, it is simply to suggest that any concept is shaped by the terms in which it is expressed. In discussing James, for example, we saw how his descriptions of the experience of writing, once they

had been cast as elements in a prescriptive theory of reading, inadvertently narrowed the understanding of his novels for more than a generation of readers. Likewise, in the present case, if we can say that the author's language may become the key to controlling critical interpretation, it is at least possible that there would be corollary effects in the leakage of language from author-as-critic to author-as-creator.

In fact, we have before us an indication that such is the case. Begun during the fall of 1971 (shortly after the publication of Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things and at the inception of Mulligan Stew), continued for a while by mail, and completed by mail in 1979 (shortly after the publication of Mulligan Stew), Sorrentino's interview adumbrates the convenience of critical thought in the creative process. At one point in its latter half, the author reads into the record his notes projecting Mulligan Stew--notes written at about the same time the first part of the interview took place, notes in which he outlines his intentions for the new book using terms that differ from those of the interview only in being somewhat less guarded ("I would like to bust the goddam novel apart," e.g.). Sorrentino himself recognizes that writing "about [one kind of] world with another kind of voice" will result in "making another world" (16); by the same token, when an author conceives a work in the language of

criticism, the character of those proleptic assessments must to some extent determine the nature of the fiction that results.

Of course, a single instance is hardly sufficient to bear out that claim; what is required is an example of how this mechanism operates across an entire career, and the most suitable example for this purpose is the career of John Hawkes. Discovered by Albert Guerard in 1947, and vigorously promoted by him in the years that followed, Hawkes was the first post-modern author to gain notoriety. Like Gass, he has been an academic for his entire adult life, and his availability for and willingness to participate in discussions of his work have resulted in quite a substantial body of interviews--forty-four published between 1950 and 1985, according to Carol Hyrciw-Wing's recent bibliography.<sup>13</sup>

In these interviews, Hawkes propounds his aesthetic program, characterizes his fiction, and explains his intentions in specific novels; the images and analogies he uses migrate visibly from the interviews to the criticism, later to reappear in the questions posed by subsequent interviewers. In this manner, the language of Hawkes's self-descriptions has come to dominate the critical reception of his work, functioning--to borrow an idea from Kenneth Burke--as a "terministic screen."<sup>14</sup> But although the authority of this particular terministic screen is

derived from Hawkes via the interview, Hawkes himself seems to have derived many of its component terms from Albert Guerard's early analyses of his work--an inversion which indicates that the critical idiom is the basic medium of all post-modern literary activity.

Hawkes has often acknowledged his debt to Guerard, but to fully understand the nature of that debt we need to know something about the history of the relationship between these two men. Hawkes's career as a writer started in Guerard's fiction-writing class at Harvard, which he took after returning from service in the Ambulance Corps during WW II; he had just started working on his first piece of fiction, the novella Charivari, but previously he had written only some juvenile verse (he submitted that poetry to qualify for Guerard's class). Perhaps because he moved frequently as a child, Hawkes was not much of a student when he came to Harvard; according to Guerard, "Hawkes had all but finished The Cannibal before reading Kafka, Faulkner, and Djuna Barnes. His earlier reading of modern experimental literature was largely confined to poetry."<sup>15</sup> In fact, the semester before he left for the war, he had flunked out.<sup>16</sup> In a recent interview, Hawkes recalled that when they first met

Guerard . . . was probably in his early thirties, but to me he was an awesome figure. He was quite formidable, quite authoritarian, extremely knowledgeable, a

novelist himself, and he had so suddenly and abruptly praised my fiction at the outset in such a way as to give me real confidence.<sup>17</sup>

Certainly Hawkes has had many occasions, in the course of this long friendship, to express his ideas about fiction, and it is not only possible but doubtless partly true that Guerard's published criticism of Hawkes reflects those ideas --and as the forefront of contemporary criticism has moved away from Guerard, and Hawkes has become firmly established as one of the major talents of his generation, it is even possible that the balance of power in the relationship has shifted somewhat in later years. But given Guerard's formative role in Hawkes's life, it is also more than probable that to a significant extent Hawkes's understanding of the nature and value of his fiction has been molded by the context in which it was originally developed. Without going into the detail that we did in comparing Sorrentino's interview with O'Brien's article, we might suggest the nature and extent of Guerard's influence by quoting a few early passages on now-familiar themes, comparing them to Hawkes's own remarks, and noting briefly their establishment in subsequent critical analysis.

It was Guerard who brought Hawkes and James Laughlin together and when, in 1949, *New Directions* published Hawkes's first novel (The Cannibal), Guerard provided the

introduction. This introduction is the earliest critical analysis of Hawkes's work, and its influence on later Hawkes-criticism, including the author's own, is inestimable. In it, Guerard says things like "Terror . . . can create its own geography" (xiii), and announces, in terms that persist to this day, that

John Hawkes clearly belongs . . . with the cold immoralists and pure creators who enter sympathetically into all their characters, the saved and the damned alike . . . even the most contaminate have their dreams of purity which shockingly resemble our own.  
(xii)

Not long thereafter, the Radcliffe News published Hawkes's first interview, entitled "John Hawkes, author, calls Guerard's Preface Most Helpful Criticism" (March 17, 1950)--and so it would seem to have been: Guerard's remarks here about sympathy for "the saved and the damned alike" are reflected in Hawkes's earliest published critical writing (1960), in which he talks about the experimental novel as displaying "an attitude that rejects sympathy for the ruined members of our lot, revealing thus the deepest sympathy of all."<sup>18</sup> And as late as 1979, Hawkes still describes himself as being

. . . interested in the truest kind of fictive sympathy, as Albert Guerard, my former teacher and lifelong friend, has put it. To him the purpose of im-

aginative fiction is to generate sympathy for the saved and the damned alike.<sup>19</sup>

In his 1949 introduction, Guerard confidently compares Hawkes to Faulkner, Kafka, and Djuna Barnes (although he predicts that Hawkes "will move . . . toward realism"), and he concludes--on a disciplinary note--that

How far John Hawkes will go as a writer must obviously depend on how far he consents to impose some page-by-page and chapter-by-chapter consecutive understanding on his astonishing creative energy; on how richly he exploits his ability to achieve truth through distortion; on how well he continues to uncover and use childhood images and fears. (xv)

In an "Addendum" to the introduction, written for The Cannibal's re-issue in 1962, Guerard notes that "the predicted movement toward realism has occurred," but re-iterates the importance of nightmare and "vivifying distortion," in Hawkes's fiction. The concepts of distortion and terror, and the paradoxical linkage of purity and contamination have since become staples in the discussion of Hawkes's work: the Hyciw-Wing bibliography lists at least twenty-one essays with the words "nightmare" or "terror" in the title (beginning with a review by Guerard in 1961), and countless others have incorporated the same idea into their argument.

Guerard's "Addendum" also praises Hawkes for being able "to summon pre-conscious anxieties and longings, to symbolize oral fantasies and castration fears--to shadow forth, in a word, our underground selves" (xviii). In his first essay in self-explanation, presented at a symposium on fiction at Wesleyan University in 1962 and published in Massachusetts Review, Hawkes himself states:

The constructed vision, the excitement of the under-sea life of the inner man, a language appropriate to the delicate malicious knowledge of us all as poor, forked, corruptible, the feeling of pleasure and pain that comes when something pure and contemptible lodges in the imagination--I believe in the "singular and terrible attraction" of all this.

For me the writer should always serve as his own angleworm--and the sharper the barb with which he fishes himself out of the blackness, the better.<sup>20</sup>

The image of the fishhook is a more memorable formulation of Guerard's claim that Hawkes's fiction has the ability to "shadow forth our underground selves"; certainly it seems, in keeping with the metaphor of which it is a part, to have set itself deep in Hawkes's own vision of his work.

In a 1964 interview, one which has remained among the most often cited, Hawkes told John Enck: "my aim has always been . . . never to let the reader (or myself) off



the hook, so to speak, never to let him think that the picture is any less black than it is or that there is any easy way out of the nightmare of human existence."<sup>21</sup> In 1971, the piece in which the metaphor originally appeared was reprinted along with Enck's interview in John Graham's Studies in Second Skin (the dedication to which reads: "For Albert Guerard, who led the way"--Graham is another of Guerard's former students), and in 1975 the image returns in the following exchange with John Kuehl:

Kuehl: You once referred to fishing for yourself.

Hawkes: I said that "the author is his own best angleworm and the sharper the barb with which he fishes himself out of the darkness the better". . . . I mean that the writer who exploits his own psychic life reveals the inner lives of us all, the inner chaos, the negative aspects of the personality in general. . . . our deepest inner lives are largely organized around such impulses, which need to be exposed and understood and used.

It is perhaps significant that a few pages later, Hawkes remarks: "For me evil was once a power. Now it's a powerful metaphor."<sup>22</sup>

The "powerful metaphor" of authorship as auto-piscation was also used by Hawkes the year before to open an influential essay called "Notes on Writing a Novel," which was first printed in the Brown Alumni Monthly, reprinted

that same year in Tri-Quarterly, and finally revised and collected in a 1983 volume fittingly entitled In Praise of What Persists.<sup>23</sup> In that piece, Hawkes relates the following anecdote:

A scholarly, gifted, deeply good-natured friend once remarked that "Notes on Writing a Novel" is a deplorably condescending title. . . .

At that moment . . . I thought of a metaphor with which I'd ended a talk on fiction ten years ago at Boston College, when I said that "for me, the writer of fiction should always serve as his own angleworm, and the sharper the barb with which he fishes himself out of the darkness, the better."

But when I proposed "The Writer as Anglemorm" as an alternative, my friend pointed out that preciousness is worse than condescension. (109)

The "friend" remains unnamed, but it is somehow appropriate that Hawkes has trouble remembering the genesis of his image, mistaking the Wesleyan venue for a Boston College one; in an interview given in 1979 and published in 1983, he makes a similar mistake when Patrick O'Donnell remarks in passing on "the fetus fished out of the flood in The Beetle Leg." Hawkes responds: "Yes. Thinking of that image reminds me of an interview with John Graham where I said that 'the writer should always serve as his own angleworm [etc.]'." By this point Hawkes

is not remembering the occasion on which he originally formulated the idea, but misremembering one on which he quoted it--the interview with Enck. But Hawkes goes on to dwell on the image at some length, demonstrating that it still informs his understanding of his own work, however vague its origins:

It's an interesting paradox: separating the artist from the human personality, the artistic self from the human self, then thinking of the artist's job as one of catching, capturing, snaring, using a very dangerous and unpleasant weapon, a hook, knowing that his subject matter is himself or his own imagination, which he has to find himself and which he catches ruthlessly. It's a very schizophrenic image, full of dangerous, archetypal maneuvers in the deepest darkness within us. (123)

In psychology, schizophrenia is often linked to the presence of an overpowering authority-figure; we have already seen that Hawkes initially regarded Guerard as "an awesome figure . . . quite formidable, quite authoritarian." In a 1971 encounter called "John Hawkes and Albert Guerard in Dialogue," Hawkes jokes about that "awesome" authority, but with an insistence and intensity that belies his tone:

I have long suspected that I'm a fiction created

by Albert Guerard. I think I knew from the very first moment we met. (14)

. . . when I met him, and for years afterwards, he was, as a teacher, a ruthless authoritarian, a tremendous disciplinarian. About fifteen years ago, I had thought that I had achieved some kind of equality with Albert, at least on a personal level, and had escaped this terrible awe, and the awesome business of father/teacher, but now I've been plunged right back into it. (15)

My writing has been filled with awkwardness. . . . It's always been Albert who has pointed out where the distorting glasses have been taken off, or where the writing was flabby. . . .

Guerard: That's fantasy. It's not true at all.  
(25-26)

Despite Hawkes's bantering manner (and Guerard's denial), it is obvious that this relationship was an extremely important one for him, and his gratitude seems more than slightly tinged with the anxiety of influence. This is understandable, in light of the fact that for more than a decade after leaving Guerard's class, Hawkes submitted each of his novels to Guerard before publishing it; and in at least one instance, Guerard seems to have exercised his authority in the form of a veto. As Hawkes tells it, when Guerard read the manuscript for The Lime

Twig, "he sent it back saying 'Jack, this is deplorable; it's a good idea, but poorly conceived and written, and you'll have to start over again'" (O'Donnell 112). After that, it took Hawkes four years to revise the book, and although Guerard continued to exert a shaping influence on Hawkes's career, this was the last time he was given a manuscript for pre-approval.

Elsewhere in his dialogue with Guerard, Hawkes says, "just as you controlled everything else, you are, as a matter of fact, responsible for my fiction becoming increasingly so-called 'realistic'" (23), but after The Lime Twig this realism coincided with a new emphasis on the comic, and a marked uneasiness on the part of Hawkes:

Beginning with Second Skin, I was reluctant and partly afraid to ask my mentor for his approval of my work. That was the first manuscript I published without Guerard's pre-reading. I know he likes Second Skin a great deal. . . . [but] I don't think he likes the next two novels all that much; my feeling is that he thinks The Blood Oranges is, in some ways, a falling off. But he liked Travesty a great deal. . . . The reason we first went to France was because Guerard, himself, is partly French. . . . So France was the world that Guerard represented.

(O'Donnell 113)

If Hawkes was conscious of his comic novels as a departure from the kind of writing approved of by his mentor, Travesty (a "French" novel) would seem to have been his gesture of reconciliation. Hereafter, Hawkes returned to the earlier style and setting in The Passion Artist (very favorably reviewed by Guerard).<sup>24</sup> Since then, he has written one more book in the old style--Virginie (another French novel)--and one (his last and least successful novel, Adventures in The Alaskan Skin Trade) in what might be regarded as an abortive attempt to satisfy both Guerard and himself.

With regard not only to Hawkes's stylistic oscillations but also to the genealogy of his self-understanding, the central issue is the relation of the artist to the contents of his unconscious mind. In exactly this connection, Frederick Busch--one of John Hawkes's earliest and friendliest critics--recently wondered whether

John Hawkes, studying his life, perhaps studies his art as well. . . . [he] now faces the danger he has faced throughout a distinguished career--of tapping his usual psychic resources, of using his usual dreams, of relying upon his usual metaphors, and therefore of risking the loss of new language, new fictive worlds. . . . I go so far as to sorrow over his considerable praise from academics . . . because I fear that they seek to encourage Hawkes to write

what is "teachable" and teachably "post-Modern"

. . . . [L]ike every writer who taps his inner imagery, [Hawkes] must determine when he is to avoid his own urgings and the temptation to use what becomes a habitual vocabulary of images.<sup>25</sup>

It is interesting that, in an earlier version of the same essay, Busch's pessimism was decidedly less pronounced:

In Death, Sleep & The Traveler, Hawkes may be thinking about who he is as a writer, what he has done, and what he ought to do. He may, at times, seem to be writing out of a sense of Hawkes. . . . When Hemingway became a student of Hemingway--To Have and Have Not, as compared to its point of origin, "After the Storm," is a good example--he failed to measure up to his teacher. While I do not see signs of such a failure in Death, Sleep & The Traveler, I do see Hawkes as engaged in the most profound examination of his own writings; and he is daring to risk being influenced by that seductive writer, John Hawkes.<sup>26</sup>

Busch's change in tone between 1977 and 1986 suggests that he does feel Hawkes, with the aid of his academic critics, has seduced himself. I would want to add only that Hawkes's "sense of Hawkes" has, from the beginning, been shaped and developed by his most important reader, Guerard. And although influence here reverses the direc-

tion it followed in Sorrentino's encounter with O'Brien, in each case the academic context shared by reader and writer has fostered an approach to the text in which critical and authorial impulses are deeply "co-operative." On the most optimistic view, this situation might produce in post-modernism a reactiveness new to the medium of print, whereby the reader would have a role in the fiction-making process, and the author could approximate the subtle adjustments of story-teller to audience. But at the same time, when--as Klinkowitz puts it--"critical practitioners and most of their subjects are alive and working at the same time" and "one work influences another," criticism clearly needs to be conscious of that influence, and contemporary fiction needs to be read with it in mind.



Notes

<sup>1</sup> From James's New York Edition preface to The Portrait of a Lady, collected in The Art of Criticism: Henry James on the Theory and the Practice of Fiction, ed. William Veeder and Susan M. Griffin (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986) 296.

<sup>2</sup> Hans Enzensberger, "The Aporias of the Avant-Garde," in The Consciousness Industry: On Literature, Politics, and the Media, ed. Michael Roloff (New York: Continuum-Seabury, 1974) 25.

<sup>3</sup> Summer '81 1.2: Paul Metcalf/Hubert Selby number. Both Metcalf and Selby interviewed by O'Brien, articles on both by O'Brien, articles on Selby by Sorrentino and Metcalf.

Spring '82, 2.1: Douglas Woolf/Wallace Markfield number. O'Brien interview of Markfield, essay on Woolf.

Summer '82 2.2: William Gaddis/Nicholas Mosley number. Gaddis interviewed by John Kuehl and Steven Moore, Mosley interviewed by O'Brien; O'Brien article on Mosley.

Spring '83 3.1: William Eastlake/Aidan Higgins number; O'Brien interview with Eastlake, article on Higgins

Summer '83 3.2: Jack Kerouac/Robert Pinget; O'Brien

interview with Pinget.

Sorrentino contributed to two subsequent issues, Fall of 1984 and Summer of 1986. The Fall '83 issue was a Julio Cortázar/John Hawkes number; Cortázar was interviewed by John Kuehl (whose 1964 interview with Hawkes is discussed later in this chapter), Hawkes was interviewed by Patrick O'Donnell (who had just published a book on his work for Twayne; his interview is also discussed below). Articles on Hawkes were supplied by John Kuehl, Gilbert Sorrentino, and O'Brien, among others. Pinget and Markfield are both frequent contributors, as is Paul Emmet, another Hawkes interviewer [with Richard Vine, in Chicago Review 28 (1976): 163-171].

<sup>4</sup> O'Brien's publications on Sorrentino, in addition to the interview and essay in Review of Contemporary Fiction, include an interview in Grosseteste Review 6.1-4 (1973), an essay on Sorrentino in the September 1974 issue of Vort (see note 7), and the entry on Sorrentino in the Dictionary of Literary Biography (Yearbook for 1981).

<sup>5</sup> "An Interview with Gilbert Sorrentino," with John O'Brien, Review of Contemporary Fiction 1.1 (Spring, 1981): 5. Hereafter, page numbers for this interview will be given in the text. Incidentally, despite not believing that "anything can be compared," GS does go on to compare prose and poetry:

American poetry is one of the most elegant and formal arts in the world. Perhaps only painting and music can compare with it. It's far beyond prose, far beyond American prose in any event. American poets have solved literary problems that prose writers, except for those who are also poets, have not even begun to grapple with. (5)

<sup>6</sup> Page 5. On Sorrentino's never treating his prose or poetry as "conceptualized exercises in ideas or themes," see page 26 of the interview, where he says,

I write poetry in much the same way as I write prose when I am working on a book like The Orangery. . . . The driving force behind the books I write is that I have always liked to risk falling on my face. . . . I like to create problems for myself and see if I can solve them. . . . [In The Orangery] I wanted to see if I could take a precious, literary idea and make strong poems out of it. . . . I have always loved exercises and I have always tried to take the simplest literary exercises and make literature out of them.

<sup>7</sup> In the Sorrentino-O'Brien interview, for example, there is a current of hostility directed at Norman Mailer, Saul Bellow, John Updike, James Baldwin--authors who are in direct competition with the formalist innovators for

the attention of posterity. Early on, Sorrentino says that "Sterne is more modern than Saul Bellow or Bernard Malamud or James Baldwin" (5), and he later argues that

Reading James Joyce is an intellectual exercise which is very much akin to reading the poetry of John Ashbery or Charles Olson. . . . The same problems inhere in the reading . . . your expectations are that you are now going to be told something profound. When these writers don't tell you anything profound, but turn you back into the sea of their language, you're absolutely lost and tend to reject the work, whereas when you come across a Styron, a Baldwin, a Mailer, the popular writers of our time, your expectations are fulfilled. You are being given the wisdom of Norman Mailer's enormous experience of the world; you are not being given literature. (21-22).

Compare these opinions to those O'Brien expresses in his essay on Mulligan Stew:

Critics learn to read the nineteenth-century novel and so elect Saul Bellow as the father of the contemporary! (73)

It must always be the character's or the story's way of seeing that determines how that prose will be laid down. [Writers] are faced with the irony that the story can only become real if they abandon themselves to what yet does not exist. Consequently,

they write a story which they do not understand  
. . . . Or, they do not abandon themselves to the  
demands of the art, in which case they become Norman  
Mailer. (75)

It is worth noting that the early part of the RCF  
Sorrentino interview was conducted in the Fall of 1971,  
and that subsequent to gathering the remarks on Mailer  
quoted above, O'Brien contributed "Gilbert Sorrentino:  
Some Various Looks" to the Sorrentino Issue of Vort in  
Fall of 1974, pp. 79-85 . . . from which:

Unlike our National Book Award winners, Gilbert  
Sorrentino does not speak to our times, sheds no  
light on our politics, gives neither hope nor despair  
to our youth, does not, alas, give critics and teach-  
ers materials with which to work. . . . Gilbert  
Sorrentino will never, I suspect, be taken up by the  
critical industry. . . . what is one to talk or write  
about? What could they do but speak of style, the  
texture of the prose, structure? In other words, his  
"art." And to speak of such things, except as mere  
ornaments of theme, one would need to have been  
raised in a tradition of American literature which  
did not view Bellow-Updike-Salinger-Mailer-Malamud et  
al as the bearers of the American literary tradition.  
(81-82)

<sup>8</sup> The observation is Phil Novak's, only one of many helpful comments he has made in response to drafts of this chapter and others.

<sup>9</sup> For an excellent discussion of how an atmosphere of theory affects the reception of literary works, see the late Elizabeth Bruss's Beautiful Theories: The Spectacle of Discourse in Contemporary Criticism (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1982). Bruss says that

. . . literary competence may exploit innate capacities of mind, but it is also partly acquired, and literary theory plays an important part in that process of acquisition. This paradox has been formulated as follows by Leonard Meyer: "because works of art (the phenomena) are created by men, they can be affected by explanatory theories"--a problem that does not exist in the sciences, where no such interaction between theory and phenomena is possible. Human actions differ from natural processes in being carried out under descriptions that help to constitute their value; the postulates of literary theory are capable of altering our understanding of what the text is doing and what we ourselves should do when we study or respond to it. Thus, though a theory may set out only to answer "why" some aspect of literature is the way it is, circumstances make it

very difficult to avoid at the same demonstrating "how" to read or write--showing where to focus attention, which connections to deem relevant, what experiences to expect. (47)

Leonard B. Meyer's article is called "Concerning the Sciences, the Arts--AND the Humanities," and it appeared in Critical Inquiry 1.1 (1974): 163-217.

<sup>10</sup> It is arguable, in fact, that this accounts for the size of Sorrentino's readership--small, even by the standards of academic post-modern fiction.

<sup>11</sup> Judging from the way he talks about two of his models, Joyce and Olson (see the first inset quotation in my note 7, above), Sorrentino's reply would be that the exercise represented by true literature, although intellectual, is not an exercise in expressing ideas. But, though he says that "these writers don't tell you anything profound . . . [rather, they] turn you back into the sea of their language," he is clearly proposing that we prefer one set of ideas (about language) for another (about the world), and not that we do without ideas altogether.

<sup>12</sup> Likewise, his image of the artist as mystified conjurer (an image he borrows from James and presents to O'Brien) is undermined by his compulsion to give away the trick. Consider, in this connection, the difference in

attitude between James and a Jamesian: in his Preface to The Awkward Age, James says of the experience of having one's work subjected to critical analysis that

The thing "done," artistically, is a fusion, or it has not been done--in which case of course the artist may be, and all deservedly, pelted with any fragment of his botch the critic shall choose to pick up. But his ground once conquered, in this particular field, he knows nothing of fragments and may say in all security: "Detach one if you can. You can analyse in your way, oh yes--to relate, to report, to explain; but you can't disintegrate my synthesis; you can't resolve the elements of my whole into different responsible agents or find your way at all (for your own fell purpose). My mixture has only to be perfect literally to bewilder you--you are lost in the tangle of the forest. Prove this value, this effect, in the air of the whole result, to be of my subject, and that other value, other effect, to be of my treatment, prove that I haven't so shaken them together as the conjurer I profess to be must consummately shake, and I consent but to parade as before a booth at the fair. (The Art of Criticism 313)

O'Brien proposes that "if James's influence upon the modern novel was to pull the curtain on art's methods so that the magician's act remains a secret, then Sorrentino



lifts that curtain, only to reveal that the act is indeed magic"--but what we may now see instead is Sorrentino as the man behind the curtain, pulling levers and intoning "Writing fiction . . . .is indeed magical."

<sup>13</sup> Carol A. Hyrciw-Wing, John Hawkes: A Research Guide (New York: Garland, 1986).

<sup>14</sup> See Kenneth Burke, "Terministic Screens," ch. 3 in Language as Symbolic Action (Berkeley: U of California P, 1966). Burke says that "[e]ven if any given terminology is a reflection of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a selection of reality; and to this extent it must also function as a deflection of reality" (45). He goes on to elaborate the point as follows:

Not only does the nature of our terms affect the nature of our observations, in the sense that the terms direct the attention to one field rather than to another. Also, many of the "observations" are but implications of the particular terminology in terms of which the observations are made. In brief, much that we take as observations about "reality" may be but the spinning out of possibilities implicit in our particular choice of terms. (Burke's emphasis; 46)

<sup>15</sup> c.f. Guerard's introduction to The Cannibal (New York: New Directions, 1949) xn. Subsequent references to this essay will be incorporated in my text.

<sup>16</sup> To my knowledge, the only personal nightmare ever related by Hawkes (for whom the nightmare has become a trademark) is a recurrent dream "about not passing courses and not graduating from Harvard, in which case I would not have been a teacher, et cetera." ["John Hawkes and Albert Guerard in Dialogue," in A John Hawkes Symposium: Design and Debris, ed. Anthony Santore and Michael Pocalyko, New Directions Paperbook 446 (New York: New Directions, 1977) 21. Subsequent references to this interview will be incorporated into my text.]

<sup>17</sup> Patrick O'Donnell, "Life and Art: An Interview with John Hawkes," The Review of Contemporary Fiction (Fall 1983) 3.3: 112. Subsequent references to this interview will be incorporated in my text.

<sup>18</sup> "Notes on Violence," Audience 7 (Spring, 1960): 60. This brief essay and a story are accompanied by Guerard's "Introduction to The Cambridge Anti-Realists."

<sup>19</sup> Thomas LeClair, "The Novelist: John Hawkes," New Republic 10 Nov. 1979: 27. This interview is accompanied by Guerard's review of The Passion Artist.

20 "Notes on The Wild Goose Chase," Massachusetts Review 3 (Summer, 1962): 788. This piece has not only been reprinted in Studies in Second Skin, ed. John Graham (Columbus: Charles Merrill, 1971), but also in pp. 247-251 of The American Novel Since World War II, ed. Marcus Klein (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett, 1969), and in v. 29 of Contemporary Literary Criticism (Detroit: Gale Research, 1984) 25.

21 John Enck, "John Hawkes: An Interview," Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature, 6.2 (1965): 145. This interview is also reprinted in Studies in Second Skin.

22 John Kuehl, John Hawkes and The Craft of Conflict (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1975) 164-65, 166. The interview is incorporated as a chapter in Kuehl's book.

23 John Hawkes, "Notes on Writing a Novel," originally printed in Brown Alumni Monthly 73 (Jan. 1973): 9-16; also printed (in slightly different form) in TriQuarterly 30 (1974): 109-126; and as "Dark Landscapes" in In Praise of What Persists, ed. Stephen Berg (New York: Harper & Row, 1983) 135-147. Subsequent page references, given in my text, will be to the TriQuarterly version.

24 Guerard, Albert. "The Passion Artist: John Hawkes." New Republic 10 Nov. 1979: 29-30 (appears after LeClair's interview with Hawkes--see note 19, above).

25 Frederick Busch, "Icebergs, Islands, Ships Beneath the Sea" in When People Publish: Essays on Writers and Writing (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1986) 110.

26 Busch's essay, under the same title, appeared first in Santore & Pocalyko's Symposium on Hawkes; the lines quoted are from pp. 62-63.

Hawkes's "Equestrienne": A Pony for The Reader

"The Equestrienne" is a portion of Hawkes's 1985 novella, Innocence in Extremis--which is, in turn, an outtake from a novel, Adventures in the Alaskan Skin Trade. A large part of the novel is devoted to relating the misadventures of "Uncle Jake," as recalled by his daughter; relative to that story, Innocence in Extremis is an extended flashback, to a time when Uncle Jake, as a boy, visited his ancestral home in France with his father and family. "The Equestrienne" is one of the three set-pieces that make up the novella, but it has been published without introduction or reference to the context in which it was developed, and it can be read as a free-standing, very short story.<sup>1</sup>

In "The Equestrienne," Uncle Jake's French grandfather (referred to exclusively as "the Old Gentleman") stages an exhibition of dressage, as what we are told is one of several "occasions deemed by the Old Gentleman to be specially enjoyable to his assembly of delighted guests" (216). In this, the first of those (three) occasions and the only one here presented, a young cousin of Uncle

Jake's performs for an audience consisting of the visitors (including Uncle Jake), members of the household, and some neighbors, all seated in rows of plush Empire chairs arranged in a courtyard of the family chateau. The girl and her horse are the center of attention, but the performance itself is the medium for an interaction between the audience and the Old Gentleman.

In this case, the audience in the tale clearly stands for the audience of the tale, and almost from its opening lines the text signals the effect it wants to achieve--most notably in the modifiers that cluster around descriptions of the represented audience. As an example, take the passage just quoted: "the days of harmony and pleasure were further enhanced by certain occasions deemed by the Old Gentleman to be specially enjoyable to his assembly of delighted guests." It is the narrator who tells us that days already harmonious and pleasurable were "enhanced" by what is about to be related; and while we might be privy to some delusion in the Old Gentleman when we are told that he "deemed" his entertainment "to be specially enjoyable" to his guests, any distance between his objective and their reaction is collapsed in the very same sentence, when we learn that they are in fact "delighted." Each detail of the performance is similarly described and received: "The gilded frames and red plush cushions of the chairs shone in the agreeable light and . . . moved every-

one to exclamations of surprise and keen anticipation." In the world of the text as we are given it, the light is "agreeable," and the audience is unanimous in its expression of "surprise and keen anticipation." Throughout the tale, the reactions of the audience consistently confirm what the narration announces:

Through the gateway rode a young girl on a small and shapely dappled gray horse. Here was a sight to win them all and audibly they sighed and visibly they leaned forward. . . . [an] already grateful audience. (216)

There is no point in piling up further examples; suffice it to say that this high pitch of appreciation is insistently sustained, the only two discordant notes resolving into it almost immediately. In the first of these, contemplating his cousin, Uncle Jake thinks "with shame . . . of himself and his shaggy and dumpy pony" (218). In the second, shortly thereafter, his mother whispers to him: "mark my words, dear boy. That child is dangerous." These are important moments, but their importance lies not so much in any pall they cast over the performance as in the evidence they give of its irresistible charm. Uncle Jake's insecurity and his mother's mistrust soon give way to the universal sentiment: Uncle Jake realizes that "he wanted to become [his cousin] and take her splendid place on the gray horse," and even his mother admits "'she is a

beautiful little rider, Jake. You might try to ride as well as she does. It would please your father'" (219).

In her essay on the story, Christine Laniel remarks that

["The Equestrienne"] focuses on one of the most pervasive metaphors in Hawkes's works, which he analyzes as essential to his fiction writing when he refers to "horsemanship as an art" . . .<sup>2</sup>

Specifically, Laniel is suggesting that Hawkes offers dressage as a metaphor for the artistic use of language. That much can easily be read between the lines from which she quotes, but taken in full these lines also suggest that the same metaphor might be extended to include an association of other kinds of horsemanship with other ways of using language--after all, the audience too is comprised of equestrians:

Nearly everyone in that audience rode horseback. Most of them were fox hunters. Their lives depended on horses. . . . Yet for all of them their mares and geldings and fillies and stallions were a matter of course like stones in a brook or birds in the boughs. Most of the horses they bred and rode were large, rugged, unruly, brutish beasts of great stamina. The horses raced and hunted, pulled their carriages, carried them ambling through sylvan woods and took them cantering great distances. But little more. So here



in the Old Gentleman's courtyard the spectacle of the young equestrienne and her gray horse schooled only in dressage appealed directly to what they knew and to their own relationships to horse and stable yet gave them all a taste of equestrian refinement that stirred them to surprise and pleasure. They had never thought of horsemanship as an art, but here indeed in the dancing horse they could see full well the refinement of an artist's mind. (218)

The thrust of this passage, it seems to me, is first to suggest horsemanship as a figure for the use of language in general, and then to distinguish between the non-utilitarian "refinement" of its use in fiction and the practicality of more quotidian language used with an end in mind, as for example to convey information (in "rugged, unruly, brutish" words "of great stamina" but no elegance). In this scene "artist" and audience share what might be called a professional interest in horses, not unlike the professional interest in language Hawkes shares with his readers; and while it may be the general reader and not the critical one who takes language as "a matter of course," even the most perspicacious fox-hunters among us are obviously supposed to be "stirred" to "surprise and pleasure" at Hawkes's demonstration of verbal dressage.

In fact, at the conclusion of the performance the

story explicitly announces the lesson we are to draw from it:

. . . the audience rose to its feet, still clapping. They exclaimed aloud to each other, while clapping, and smiles vied with smiles and no one had praise enough for the exhibition which had taught them all that artificiality not only enhances natural life but defines it. (220)

Hawkes's instruction of the reader is too deliberate to be unintended and too obvious to ignore, so it must be explained. In Laniel's analysis, the author at these moments is

forestalling interpretation by anticipating it. As a consequence, the critic is thwarted in efforts to unveil supposedly hidden significations, which are obtrusively exposed by the writer himself. (222)

She regards this aspect of the story as a problem only for a criticism which needs "to unveil supposedly hidden significations"; as we have seen, though, "The Equestrienne" does more than interpret itself: it so relentlessly superintends response that it is likely to frustrate any reader, and not merely a certain sort of critic.

But for Laniel at least, the "alluring fascination" (222) of "The Equestrienne" survives in its strategy of "seduction, which implies the obliteration of reality and its transfiguration into pure appearance" (226). That is,

although she acknowledges that the story reads its own moral, she still finds Hawkes's presentation of "the artificial" fascinating, because it undertakes "the wilful deterioration of language as the vehicle of meaning."

This deterioration is said to take place in a series of puns and paradoxes (sister-sinister, mastery-fragility, innocence-corruption, etc.), and in sentences like the following (which explains the effect of the Old Gentleman's having positioned the girl sidesaddle on her horse, with her legs away from the audience): "The fact that she appeared to have no legs was to the entire ensemble as was the white ribbon affixed to her hat: the incongruity without which the congruous whole could not have achieved such perfection" (217). In this sentence, Laniel says,

we are made to experience both frustration and supreme satisfaction, since the expected word is missing and yet is virtually present, enhanced by the strange, incongruous connections that implicitly suggest it. By establishing the curious relationship of the logically unrelated, by uniting the like with the unlike in sudden and unexpected juxtapositions, the poetic text produces a jarring effect, so that we are left with the notion of a fundamental vacancy, of a basic lack that is the very essence of aesthetic pleasure. . . . (228)

Yet the sentence Laniel has chosen not only contains the "missing" word--"perfection"--but emphasizes it by placing it in the ultimate position. And in any case, Hawkes's notion of an "incongruity without which the congruous whole could not have achieved such perfection" is more plausible as a model than as an occasion for Laniel's observation that the "jarring effect" brought about by "the curious relationship of the logically unrelated" results in "a fundamental vacancy . . . that is the very essence of aesthetic pleasure."

Laniel also tries to restore some ambiguity to the story by arguing that Hawkes's "rhetoric of seduction" is always "reversed into derision, as an insidious vein of self-parody gradually penetrates the text" (222). As she sees it,

Hawkes's writing cannot function without initiating its own ironical debunking. The "morality of excess" [Innocence in Extremis 55] that guides the artist in his work also guides Hawkes in his writing, as exemplified by the profusion of superlatives and comparatives in the novella and in all his fiction. But this very excessiveness entails a crescendo, an escalation into more and more incongruous associations, so that his texts are relentlessly undermined by their own grotesque redoubling. (235)

Self-parody is indeed an abiding characteristic of Hawkes's writing--and often its saving grace--but though the language we have already quoted from "The Equestrienne" does suggest an excessiveness that might easily escalate into self-parody, Laniel herself admits that "during the performance of the equestrienne the burlesque element is extremely slight" (233). Consequently, when she makes the argument that this text undermines itself she is forced to rely entirely on evidence collected from other, later sections of the novella, and from the original novel. Still, even if there is no parody in "The Equestrienne," its absence makes it worth discussing.

In general, the significant gap in Hawkes's work is not between appearance and reality but between the serious and the parodic elements that constitute his fiction: the uneasiness of his texts is that while his self-parody seems deliberate, it doesn't ground or control the seriousness with which he presents his primary material. Since the critic is bound to make statements about the text, and since making those statements usually involves taking a position relative to the text by offering a reading, critics have often resolved this conflict in the text by going too far in one direction or the other--either affirming the response offered by the text (the more common tactic), or overstating the control exercised by the parodic element. Laniel's piece is unusual in that it does

the latter, but in order to make this case she has to read beyond the immediate text. By so doing, she is in effect submitting "The Equestrienne" to the control of a self-parody which develops across other, broader contexts. This begs the question of whether the parodic strain controls the larger contexts from which she abstracts it. In fact, I would argue, it does not--the uneasiness simply reasserts itself when we look at Innocence in Extremis or Adventures in the Alaskan Skin Trade as texts in their own right.

The significance of Hawkes's unstable self-parody, both with regard to its presence in his other fiction and its absence in the present case, is bound up with the problem of the audience and its response. It is perhaps easiest to see this connection in Travesty, a work I have elsewhere suggested was itself shaped by the response of Hawkes's most important reader, Albert Guerard.<sup>3</sup>

Travesty is the monologue of a man who intends to crash the car in which he, his daughter, and an existentialist poet (the lover of both his wife and daughter) are driving. Papa, the driver, denies being jealous or having any murderous motive; instead, he tells Henri (the poet) that his plan is to create an "accident" so inexplicable that their deaths will have to be understood as the deliberate execution of an abstract design. Henri is apparent-

ly nonplussed, since Papa reproaches him for his failure to appreciate the beauty of the thing:

Tonight of all nights why can't you give me one moment of genuine response? Without it, as I have said, our expedition is as wasteful as everything else.<sup>4</sup>

The response which Papa wants from Henri is specifically an aesthetic one, and he sees it as a mark of Henri's artistic insincerity that he is not be able to provide it. But, as the reader well understands, the detachment from self-interest which such a response would require is too much to expect, even from an existentialist.

As a monologist, Papa necessarily speaks for Henri, and in a similar way Hawkes, as a writer, speaks for the reader. His conceit is auto-destructive, but self-parody--a preemptive mode of discourse--is by definition both exclusive of and also highly attentive to the audience. The element of self-parody in Travesty asserts itself as the difference between the supposed reality of death within the fiction and the reality of death supposed which is the fiction--Hawkes, in other words, is Henri if he is anyone in this story. But as this equation suggests, the parody does not extend to Papa, and much of what he says is seriously intended--not least his confessed need for a response:

Let me admit that it was precisely the fear of committing a final and irrevocable act that plagued my childhood, my youth, my early manhood. . . . And in those years and as a corollary to my preoccupation with the cut string I could not repair, the step I could not retrieve, I was also plagued by what I defined as the fear of no response. . . . If the world did not respond to me totally, immediately, in leaf, street sign, the expression of strangers, then I did not exist. . . . But to be recognized in any way was to be given your selfhood on a plate and to be loved, loved, which is what I most demanded.

(84-85)

Self-parody, this suggests, is more than an attempt to forestall a feared lack of response (or an undesirable response); it may also become a way to avoid "committing a final and irrevocable [speech] act." On one level, Hawkes is deadly serious about everything that Papa says; on another, he implicitly denies responsibility for the ideas Papa expresses. At both levels, he precludes response--within the narrative through the technique of monologue, without it through the technique of self-parody. The effect on the reader is, as Laniel says, often baffling: the proffered position is clearly untenable, and yet the parody does not enable an alternate response because it equally clearly does not control the text.



The instability I have been describing might also be regarded as a side-effect of characterization. Hawkes is fond of creating figures of the artist, but these figures never completely fill the role in which they are cast; most often they are people who have the sensibility of the artist but who do not actually create art. Cyril in The Blood Oranges, Papa in Travesty, Uncle Jake in Adventures in the Alaskan Skin Trade, are all men whose medium is action, not language, and who do not pretend to present the fiction in which their artistry is conveyed to the reader. In Travesty, the distinction would seem to be mooted when narration is placed entirely in the hands of "the man who disciplines the child, carves the roast" (44)--but in fact it persists, since Papa's "creation," the actual crash, cannot be presented within the narrative structure Hawkes has set up, and so is not presented at all. In other words, although Hawkes's novella develops in the space between the disclosure and the enactment of Papa's intentions, the aesthetic Hawkes has embodied in those intentions can only be expressed in words, never in action--hence the equation of Hawkes with Henri. Seeking to evade both the irrevocable commitment of unfeigned statement and the fear of no response, Hawkes has adopted a narrative perspective that results in a fiction which implies but does not constitute the realization of an aesthetic.

If the conflict between a desire to present this aesthetic and the fear that it will be rejected is settled in Travesty by giving the narrative over entirely to statement, in "The Equestrienne" Hawkes experiments with the opposite solution, usurping the response of his audience. Rather than seducing the reader, this makes her superfluous: hence Laniel's frustration at trying to present a reading of the story as given--something which her recourse to other texts demonstrates she is ultimately unable to do. And like response, the absence of a controlling intelligence is dislocated in "The Equestrienne" from a meta-textual position to a thematic one:

All at once and above the dainty clatter of the hooves, they heard the loud and charming tinkling of a music box. Heads turned, and a new and livelier surprise possessed the audience, the fact that they could not discover the source of the music, which was the essence of artificiality, added greatly to the effect. (219)

But even within the story, this absence proves to be more apparent than real: at the end of the girl's exhibition, the Old Gentleman appeared and as one the audience realized that though they had all seen him act the impresario and with his raised hand start the performance, still he had not taken one of the red plush chairs for himself, had not remained with them in the

courtyard, had not been a passive witness to his granddaughter's exhibition. He was smiling broadly; he was perspiring; clearly he expected thanks. In all this truth was evident: that not only had he himself orchestrated the day, but that it was he who had taught the girl dressage, and he who had from a little balcony conducted her performance and determined her every move, and he who had turned the handle of the music box. Never had the old patrician looked younger or more pleased with himself. (220)

The Old Gentleman is not "a passive witness" to the presentation, he is its conductor, and his curtain call might be compared to Hawkes's persistent assertion of the authorial self in his interviews: in both cases, the creator remains behind the scenes during the actual performance, but reappears afterwards to make sure that its significance is properly understood.

The nature of Hawkes's dilemma and the variety of his attempts to resolve it are characteristically post-modern, in that they demonstrate a very real need to assert critical control over the text, combined with a desire that the reader should be persuaded to a particular aesthetic position. In the next chapter, we will see that post-modern fiction appears to have succeeded in finding an audience trained not only to respond, but to respond as desired.

Notes

1 "The Equestrienne" appears in pages 215-220 of Facing Texts, ed. Heide Ziegler (Durham: Duke UP, 1988); page numbers will be given parenthetically, and will refer to this text. Innocence in Extremis was published by Burning Deck (Providence, RI) in 1985, and Adventures in the Alaskan Skin Trade was published in hardcover by Simon & Schuster (New York, 1985) and then, as part of the Contemporary American Fiction series, in paperback by Penguin (New York, 1986). Ziegler's anthology, which includes fiction by Gass, Coover, Davenport, Barth, Barthelme and others, is the focus of my discussion in the next chapter.

2 Christine Laniel, "John Hawkes's Return to the Origin: A Genealogy of the Creative Process" (Facing Texts 221-246) 221-222. Subsequent references to this essay will be given parenthetically in my text.

3 See the last pages of the preceding section.

4 John Hawkes, Travesty (New York: New Directions, 1976) 82. Page numbers for subsequent references will be given parenthetically in my text.

Doubling Commentary

It is always difficult to substantiate the claim that one book can be taken as representative or characteristic of a literary movement, but Facing Texts--an anthology pairing the work of post-modern authors with essays by some of their most prominent critics--is probably as close to the ideal form of post-modern literary practice as it is possible to get. And whether we consider it as a literary text, a physical object, or a historical occasion, there are excellent reasons for agreeing with Ziegler when she calls Facing Texts "a metaphor for contemporary writing."<sup>1</sup>

This book, subtitled "Encounters Between Contemporary Writers and Critics," was published in 1988 by Duke University Press, simultaneously in hard- and paperback--an indication of the publisher's expectation that it will reach a wide audience. It goes without saying that, as an anthology, it is likely to find that audience in the classroom. But this anthology has ambitions unknown to the Norton. In the words of the editor, "each text" here

"is distinct yet inseparable from the 'context' in which it is situated," and

the contention implicitly illustrated by Facing Texts is that the constitution of [a] context [for the texts] is not primarily dependent on the reader reception of any given text. Instead, it is established through a series of metaphorical leaps between texts and, by analogy, within a text. (8)

The title is printed with the word "Facing" in bold print and the word "Texts" in a much lighter typeface, as though underlining the introduction's claim to present something that exceeds the sum of its parts. The title phrase itself could be construed as implying an absent subject (as in: "[readers] facing texts"), but "facing" might simply modify "texts" (as in: "[two] facing walls")--implying that it is not we who face the texts, but the texts which face each other.

Because I propose Facing Texts as an exemplary object, it might be in order to present a list of its contributors. On the "creative" side, Facing Texts presents a non-fictional "prelecture" by Stanley Elkin, stories by Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover, Guy Davenport, and Susan Sontag, and chapters from novels by Walter Abish, William Gass, John Hawkes, and Joseph McElroy; this "face" concludes with another piece of non-fiction, a "postlecture" by John Barth. Each of these is followed with a critical

response--in order, by Patrick O'Donnell, Alan Wilde, Marc Chénétier, Joseph Schöpp, Richard Howard, Christopher Butler, Tony Tanner, Christine Laniel, Robert Walsh, and Manfred Pütz. With the exception of Walsh, formerly of the New Yorker and now an editor at Vanity Fair, all of these critics are academics who have published extensively in the field of modern or contemporary studies. Ziegler herself has been an active contributor to the field, having previously written a book-length study of John Barth, co-edited a collection of interviews with contemporary novelists (including Barth, Coover, Elkin, Gass and Hawkes), and contributed to an issue of Delta which included work by Gass, Hawkes, Elkin, Tony Tanner, Jerome Klinkowitz, Tom LeClair, and Ihab Hassan. She is on the faculty at the University of Stuttgart, and will soon bring out a book on irony in post-modern fiction.

It is not unusual for new fiction to be presented in the context of critical response, of course; it is common practice for academic journals to devote a special issue to the work of one or two authors and to commission critical essays for the occasion--but until now not many books have been constructed on this model. And in at least one other respect, these "encounters between contemporary writers and critics" represent a significant departure: most of the critics who contributed to it were selected by the authors themselves, at Ziegler's request.

In fact, as her preface informs us, Ziegler herself was hand-picked by one of those authors. Facing Texts originated in a suggestion made by William Gass to an editor at Duke University Press, that Ziegler should edit a collection of contemporary American fiction. Ziegler says that, when the project was proposed to her,

I immediately recognized that in effect I was being offered the opportunity to realize one of my pet ideas: to bring together . . . unpublished pieces by authors as well as critics that would, in a sense, defy the chronological secondariness of critical interpretation. Such a book would make the relationship between author and critic an unmediated encounter, with authors and critics becoming one another's ideal reader. . . . [I]f possible, the pieces offered by the authors should indeed be hitherto unpublished so as to give the critics a sense of the exclusiveness, even privacy of their work and thus convey to them the impression of a close encounter with the respective author. . . . [and] the authors should choose their own critics in order to ensure that the close encounter I had in mind would not, unintentionally, be hostile, and thus destroy the possibility of mutual ideal readership. (ix)

In our discussion of the authorial interview we have already questioned the notion that the best readers are



friendly ones, and have seen that the conditions of "privacy" and "exclusiveness" may complicate rather than simplify the task of the critic. But even if we grant Facing Texts its *donnée*, we might still want to ask to what extent the finished product embodies its intentions. Of its twenty selections, nine had already been published when Facing Texts came out, and seven more evidently belong to works independently and previously conceived: only two of the creative pieces and four of the critical ones appear to have been generated specifically for this occasion.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, although the meeting of author and critic is represented as being unmediated and reciprocal, the fiction in no case gives evidence of its author's having read the accompanying critical piece. At one point, in fact, Ziegler's introduction even compares the relationship between author and critic to that "between mentor and pupil" (4).

Obviously, there is a profound contradiction between a criticism which defies "chronological secondariness" and one in which the critic's relationship to the author is that of pupil to mentor. This same contradiction is visible in much of the criticism of post-modern fiction; like many of her colleagues, Ziegler has difficulty bridging the gap between the authors' rather modernist ideas about the status of the text and her own more postmodernist ideas about the status of criticism. In fact, their

shared claim to be ontologically independent from the given text (of the world or of the work) puts them directly in conflict with each other. Ziegler is, in the end, more interested in establishing an aesthetic than a chronological equivalence between the creative and the critical texts: her book does not, after all, present us with the proceedings of a conference, symposium, or interview; rather, it offers us fiction-cum-criticism as an inseparable commodity, and seeks to inculcate a taste for what it purveys.

When Ziegler calls her anthology "a metaphor for contemporary writing," she means that the relation between the fiction and the criticism it presents is analogous to the relation of that fiction to the world: her argument is that the "[creative] texts and [critical] frames" that make up Facing Texts "defy, on principle, the referential function of the language" each of them employs. Ziegler's argument from metaphor against reference should sound familiar to readers of Gass, though in this case the elements of the metaphor (perhaps it should be called a meta-metaphor) are "texts and frames" rather than words. What Ziegler calls "the spirit of the text" (the effect of the metaphor) is not a property of any particular piece, but consists in the juxtaposition of elements, and "constitutes itself as . . . the principle of textuality itself" (8).

Although Ziegler says that the spirit of the text [her example is Gass's "Sunday Drive"] "can be intuited by the reader," she also claims that "it needs a critical reading like [Tanner's] 'On Reading "Sunday Drive"' to make it known" (12). This would seem to leave the eventual readers of Facing Texts only a passive role, that of appreciating the closure its critical essays achieve, but Ziegler maintains that the intertextual nature of her anthology assures its continued openness to the audience:

The reader alone can connect, and interpret the relationship among, all the texts assembled in this collection. Since the reader may further relay as well as increase the applicability of the principle of openness by becoming, for instance, a reviewer of this anthology, the anthological principle would appear infinite, if the anthology did not present a text in itself. In other words, the principle of openness has a counterpart in the text as it is published. However, that principle of openness infiltrates even the published text, representing its historical as opposed to its literary dimension. (6-7)

Note, though, that the reader to whom the text remains open is a reviewer, another writer whose job is to articulate "the spirit of the text," and whose place is at the "interface of the text's historical (or open) and its literary (or closed) character." The openness being de-

scribed here is not intrinsic to the text; it is simply a matter of reception, and the text's necessary availability to successively changing historically determined readings:

Although Facing Texts is the result of a series of historically conditioned referential situations--historically conditioned because of the marketing and advertising procedures that had to be considered by the publisher; because of compromises between the initial theoretical concept and necessary practical decisions made by the editor; because of time limits on the authors' creativity; and because of the idiosyncratic inclinations of each critic--these presuppositions are no longer part of the anthology as it now stands. (8)

By this logic, publication erases the historical dimension of the text itself, and only the reader remains "open." The same dynamic that underlies Ziegler's contradictory claims about the status of criticism is at work in this instance as well: by modernist lights, the properly finished work of art is "closed" in its "literary dimension"--readers are welcome to entertain themselves with it, but they should not imagine that they create it in any meaningful sense; the more pluralist theory of postmodernism, on the other hand, demands that all works to be praised must have the quality of "openness."

Ziegler's difficulty here, and in fact the form of the book she has produced, is a result of her need to certify as "inherent" certain of the fiction's aesthetic qualities, combined with a desire to extend to her critical texts the same kind of (already questionable) immunity to "historically conditioned referential situations" which formalists have traditionally reserved for art--evidently in order to enshrine along with the fiction an authorized reading that will shape and limit all subsequent response. If such a reading is to be included under the suprahistorical aegis of art, it is necessary that it provide an aesthetic closure called for not only by the reader but also by the text.

Ziegler relies on her metatextual idea of metaphor to satisfy this requirement. Metaphor, we are told, is a "combination of static and dynamic elements," and in Facing Texts "its concretization [is] the image in a text" (8). The "concretization" of that image is compared by Ziegler to Joycean epiphany where the mind, "'arrested by . . . [the image's] wholeness and fascinated by its harmony,'" achieves "'the luminous silent stasis of esthetic pleasure'" [(9); the emphasis is Ziegler's]. In this equation the fiction is dynamic, but criticism is truly arresting: "Tanner's essay represents the third step of stasis in the apprehension of the beautiful, the first two

steps having been constituted by the dynamic sequence, in Gass's text, of nature and art" (10).

This proposal, that criticism is aesthetically indispensable to fiction, brings to mind Derrida's notion of the supplement:

the concept of the supplement . . . harbors within itself two significations whose cohabitation is as strange as it is necessary. The supplement adds itself, it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the fullest measure of presence. It cumulates and accumulates presence. It is thus that art, techné, image, representation, convention, etc., come as supplements to nature and are rich with this entire cumulating function. . . . But the supplement supplements. It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself in-the-place-of; if it fills, it is as one fills a void.<sup>3</sup>

The supplement, then, is both an addition and a substitution, and it assumes both a completeness and a lack. Art, and representation or the image in particular, is both the surplus and the usurper of nature. As we have already seen, Ziegler conceives of criticism as related to fiction in the way that fiction is related to the world, and although her point is to "[defy] the representational function of . . . language" in both types of texts, Derrida's observations suggest that the parallel may be more com-

plex, and that defiance itself merely re-inscribes the problem it seeks to evade.

The contradiction between openness and closure which we observed in Ziegler's description of her anthology marks the persistence of this problem: a totally closed text would require no comment and thus have no place in the world, but a text which remains open is one which is not complete. In this sense, Ziegler's introduction re-enacts the problem all texts must face, whether the image they convey is an image of nature or simply the image of another text: either the image is supererogatory, or it implies the non-existence of that which it purports to present. The ambiguity of the supplement is also deeply ingrained in William Gass's contribution to Facing Texts, to which we now turn, and it can be traced not only in this text's relation to the world but also in the role it reserves for the reader--a role played out in this case in Tanner's companion-piece.

In his 1981 preface to another book, In the Heart of the Heart of the Country, Gass described his method of composition as an

exasperatingly slow search among the words I had already written for the words which were to come, and the necessity for continuous revision, so that each work would seem simply the first paragraph rewritten,

swollen with sometimes years of scrutiny around that initial verbal wound. . . . (xxv)

Writing in this manner--by repetition, accretion, and amplification--results in fiction that invites and seems to assume re-reading; we have seen in reading Omensetter's Luck how words and images in Gass's fiction "accumulate presence" as they re-appear in changing contexts, encouraging the reader to flip back and forth through the text. His method also tends to produce fiction that thematizes recollection, the supplement of experience, and his narrators often dwell as much in their past as in their present.

"The Sunday Drive," presented in Facing Texts as a chapter from The Tunnel, is on both levels an example of Gass at his recursive best. Narrated from a present which merely frames the tale, it consists of two interwoven sets of recollections, one from the narrator's childhood, and one from his adult life. Each set of recollections focuses on a particular incident, the earlier one on a car crash the narrator and his family narrowly avoided being involved in, the later one on a moment of epiphany during a picnic with his wife and children. The later outing is explicitly presented as a re-enactment of childhood experience, and the story's temporal texture is thickened by the fact that each of these Sunday drives is itself part of a series of similar events, so that each incident is



couched in the patterned repetition of certain features of family life.

Gass's story is, as Tanner points out in his reading of it, "a specific version of the pastoral"<sup>4</sup>--it repeatedly draws our attention to the fruitfulness of the natural world; and although human needs remain unsatisfied within that world, the narrator appears to achieve a different fulfillment through the aesthetic apprehension of rustic beauty. Derrida, writing about Rousseau, points out that

. . . beyond and behind what one believes can be circumscribed as Rousseau's text, there has never been anything but writing; there have never been anything but supplements, substitutive significations which could only come forth in a chain of differential references, the "real" supervening, and being added only while taking on meaning from a trace and from an invocation of the supplement, etc. And thus to infinity, for we have read, in the text, that the absolute present, Nature, that which words like "real mother" name, have [sic] always already escaped, have never existed . . . what opens meaning and language is writing as the disappearance of natural presence.

(159)

And although Tanner's essay raises the idea of the supplement in connection with art's relation to nature (213), in his analysis it is Gass's triumph to have eclipsed the

"undeniable real world and the undeferable reality of death" with "flamboyance and poetry--the whole 'aside' of style and language finely used" (214). In what follows, it will be suggested that the story itself (as opposed to its self-image) actually supports a more equivocal conclusion, one in which all the ambiguities of the supplement--lack and surplus, presence and absence, necessity and superfluity--re-assert themselves as qualities of the substitute Gass offers us.

One of the repeated patterns of "The Sunday Drive" is that of the scavenger hunt, but the pattern in this case is repeated with an important difference. During the depression years of the narrator's youth, nuts, fruit, and berries were gathered for the family larder from "convenient groves and abandoned patches of trespass grass which experience had identified as likely locations, and greed had staked out as rightly our property."<sup>5</sup> This competition for material resources is an indication of one's own superfluity, and a sign of weakness: "uninvited strays, we rooted even in the treetops. Not as useful as the wolves who weeded out the weak, we grabbed hard corn to grate into cakes . . . stealing to keep our weaknesses alive." On the other hand, the expeditions of the narrator's adulthood are devoted to collecting weeds and wildflowers to dry for decorations, and he makes a point of the fact that "when Martha, the children and I went out weeding

. . . our values were--well--compared to that earlier time--as upsidedown as the weeds would soon be . . . [while they dried] in our basement. We wanted, we believed, what no one wanted." Admittedly, the weed-collecting is undertaken primarily at Martha's instigation, but it clearly represents an analog for the narrator's own scavenging of the intangibles of scenery and sensation--an activity suggestive of the root meaning of the word scavenge, "to look at" (from Flemish scauwen, American Heritage Dictionary).

The difference between negative and positive scavenging hinges on the nature of the goods involved. In the first case, the family gathered what belonged to others, and even though their harvest was generally worthless the narrator recalls that "when another car would cloud the road while we were cutting or picking, I would grow hot with fear and shame." But weeds are by definition unwanted (and scenery is unowned) and consequently there is no shame associated with collecting them; in Marxist terms, these things have "use value" (as ornaments), but no "exchange value." The difference, then, is between appropriating and creating value: the former implies a surplus of need and is "not . . . useful," but the latter implies a surplus of ability, adds value to the world, and is therefore a form of productivity. This underlying scheme privileges aesthetic production on terms which call

into question Tanner's assertion that "it is in that realm of the extra, the surplus, the supplement . . . the unusable loveliness of unused barns, and--for us--simply language, that we discover and create meaning and beauty" (213). The "unusable" (and therefore practically valueless) "loveliness of unused barns" is an unforeseen discovery for the narrator, but once encased in the language of the story which presents them to us, their indifferent presence has been replaced by something that is not at all fortuitous--and it is precisely because art is not discovered but invented that we are called upon (by Gass and the tradition of genius) to admire it. As we will see, the supplement that is art "is exterior, outside the positivity to which it is super-added, alien to that which, in order to be replaced by it, must be other than it" (OG 145). It is important to bear this distinction in mind when we read the story. In announcing the Sunday drive to his family, the narrator had "planned to be impulsive," but his discovery of the barns was genuinely unintended; in Gass's "Sunday Drive," on the other hand, the discovery of beauty occurs as part of the planned development of the themes of accident, design and neglect.

In the story's climactic scene, the narrator, Martha and their two sons stumble on a "fairy-tale" farm, where three barns stand around an "abandoned barnyard: an overgrown fence, broken gate, high grass, of course weeds."

Just at this point, the narrator reverts to a recollection from one of the Sunday drives of his childhood, an occasion on which he was accompanied by a girl cousin "said to be [his] first love." While he and the rest of his family "gathered and rescued and thieved--Lois set out a row of mud pies" on a "long warped board," elaborately ornamenting each with flowers and other found objects. "In the middle of [one] pie," the narrator remembers,

. . . I noticed with disgust a pale emaciated pink worm she had rolled the way you'd roll a broken rubber band around a finger to create a satisfying whorl to place within the heart of her design. I stomped on several of her pies with a foot so fierce it set the board to shivering.

Although there is an obvious invitation here to speculate on the sexual content of the narrator's disgust, there is also a suggestion that his anger is a form of jealousy at his cousin's being able to indulge herself in designing inedible "pies" while the rest of the family purposefully "gathered and rescued and thieved" to survive. That is, there are two senses in which one can be "designing," and Lois's pie-making is enviable because it comes under the non-pejorative one.

The antithesis of design is accident, a concept which also has two valences, depending on whether the accident in question is caused or causeless. Immediately after its

evocation of Lois, the story turns back to a description of the barns; while his family disperses to collect, the narrator meditates on this tableau of neglect at what was once a site of cultivation. The barns, "built of wood shingle, melancholy, and roofing tin," are "prehistoric" and "romantic," and the narrator compares himself to "Pizarro or Cortez [coming] upon the habitation of an ancient people." At this point, the temporal fugue approaches its epiphanic moment, in which a replay of the narrowly-escaped accident collides with the flash of aesthetic bliss at the beauty of the barns. The accident seems to have been caused by the narrator's father, who enjoyed driving slowly--it is a head-on collision between a car passing the father's car and one approaching in the other lane:

The car which had been in line behind us was new and shiny. I had noticed it because it had followed us awhile, unable to pass and impatient because of the traffic. The car which had struck it was a heap of rust, and now its weakened fenders and body panels were broken and scattered.

This collision of the new and the old bears a certain similarity to the narrator's brush with the "prehistoric" barns, but there is one important difference. Both are accidental, but the former is chaotic and destructive, while in the latter case aesthetic order is imposed. Fur-

evocation of Lois, the story turns back to a description of the barns; while his family disperses to collect, the narrator meditates on this tableau of neglect at what was once a site of cultivation. The barns, "built of wood shingle, melancholy, and roofing tin," are "prehistoric" and "romantic," and the narrator compares himself to "Pizarro or Cortez [coming] upon the habitation of an ancient people." At this point, the temporal fugue approaches its epiphanic moment, in which a replay of the narrowly-escaped accident collides with the flash of aesthetic bliss at the beauty of the barns. The accident seems to have been caused by the narrator's father, who enjoyed driving slowly--it is a head-on collision between a car passing the father's car and one approaching in the other lane:

The car which had been in line behind us was new and shiny. I had noticed it because it had followed us awhile, unable to pass and impatient because of the traffic. The car which had struck it was a heap of rust, and now its weakened fenders and body panels were broken and scattered.

This collision of the new and the old bears a certain similarity to the narrator's brush with the "prehistoric" barns, but there is one important difference. Both are accidental, but the former is chaotic and destructive, while in the latter case aesthetic order is imposed. Fur-

ther, it is once again a matter of some guilt to have been "spared"--to be an excess as well as an accessory--in the accident, but the later scene exalts the overlooked. In the barnyard, next to "an outbuilding of indeterminate function," the narrator will

encounter an old gas pump, its glass gone . . .

dressed in rust like a fashionable statue of a pump, half a lifetime out of use. Another mark of man's presence here, the pump has become a work of art, but not one of man's making unless neglect is liberating.

Tanner confirms the story's implicit moral, that neglect does liberate: it liberates from use. Left to rust, the pump is like a sign that doesn't signify--it no longer performs its intended function; it has been detached from its intended purpose and made available to be appropriated as an object of purely aesthetic value. Like the pump, the narrator tells us, the barns themselves "have been abandoned, but they have been abandoned to beauty. They are no longer barns. They are themselves. A leftover light is burning. The barns . . . they have been left alone to breathe."

Clearly, though, art (as distinguished from the objects it presents) has a demonstrable usefulness--not only for the artist, but also (witness the occasion "The Sunday Drive" provides Tanner, and me) for the critic. In



the preface to In the Heart of the Heart of the Country, Gass remarks that

The contemporary American writer is in no way a part of the social and political scene. He is therefore not muzzled, for no one fears his bite; nor is he called upon to compose. Whatever work he does must proceed from a reckless inner need. The world does not beckon, nor does it greatly reward.<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, we learn some pages later that Gass was called upon to compose the title story of In the Heart of the Heart of the Country, by "a former student, who had reached the lower slopes of a national magazine, [and who] charitably wrote to ask if I would do a piece on what it was like to live in the Midwest" (xli); the result was published in Ted Solotaroff's New American Review, at the time an influential forum for contemporary fiction. It may also be of some interest, in this context, that Gass's new editor at Simon & Schuster is Michael Korda, a man who is known in publishing circles to be "paid, and paid very well, for delivering success," and who is himself the author of several bestsellers (including Power, Success!, and Queenie, which became an ABC TV miniseries).<sup>7</sup>

However liberating neglect may be in theory, its practical human consequence is need, and throughout "Sunday Drive" the ultimate freedom can only be won by repudiating that need. A standard feature of the excursions of

the narrator's childhood was a stop at the "Daisy" ice-cream store; the narrator recalls that his maiden aunt, when asked to choose a flavor on these occasions,

could never make up her mind. Oh I don't know, she'd say, giggling a bit. I really shouldn't have any . . . . In our house my aunt made the fudge, the cocoa, the popcorn, the cutsie sugar cookies, the custards, and then she watched us eat whatever it was like a starving dog. After we had gone to bed, she would suck up what was left and hide the results in her hips. Oh well, it doesn't matter really. Butter pecan, I guess.

Coming after the remark about her hips, "It doesn't matter" implies that the unmarried aunt has given up on sex, and transferred the satisfaction of that need to food, which she craves "like a starving dog." But the aunt's undisguised longing is shameful precisely because it can't be satisfied by food, and its persistence reveals that she herself is unloved. At the ice-cream store, the narrator's choice was always "Rainbow":

My father considered Rainbow nothing but a hash made of tub leavings; dinner's garbage reboiled for breakfast, he said it was. . . . You're licking leftovers.

. . . . Later I could have compared Rainbow to the stock pot at the back of the stove; I could have extolled leftovers, stews and hashes; but the youthful

mind is a barren plain: there is no range of reference. Crows eat what nobody wants.

I want Rainbow.

Crows go for what's run over on the road.

The narrator is ridiculed by his father for wanting "what nobody wants," but he already understands that the crow is nobler than the starving dog, and that the only shame is in wanting what cannot be had. In fact, it seems clear that the desire to escape the shame of unsatisfied need is what leads the narrator, in his adult life, to develop his predilection for another sort of "leftover"--experience's aesthetic surplus.

The opposite of need, in Gass's story, is control: need equals weakness because it arises from the insufficiency of the individual, and his dependence on remote sources of gratification. To be in control, on the other hand, is to be self-sufficient and self-determining. The narrator endures the drives of his childhood as a passenger; he is at the mercy of his father, who deliberately incites and then frustrates his desires by pulling in to the parking lot of one ice-cream store, and then abruptly pulling out--in a catachrestic "surprise of gravel"--to head off to another. His adult family life repeats the pattern of shame, frustration and denial, with his wife Martha standing in for his father:

"You don't want that," she likes to say, staring at the piece of pie we've chosen, while a white wad of Kleenex, no doubt the rejected wish itself, falls from her suddenly relaxed fist. . . .

. . . . And to me she used to say, "you can't like doing that," in competing tones of scorn and incredulity, so that now my wishes no longer run downward in those directions.

It is interesting to note that, in a different connection, the deliberate frustration of desire is presented approbatively in the preface which we have been reading alongside this story:

[As an adolescent,] I carried a critic with me everywhere who rose to applaud the passionate passages with a shameless lack of discrimination, and during the throbbing din it made I couldn't honestly feel or sharply sense or clearly think. Of course, sexual curiosity remains the lure of reading, yet what an enormous amount of the body's beautiful blushing is wasted on the silliest puerilities when writers write for the reasons readers read. (HCp xxviii-xxix)

We are not merely indulging in a conceit if we say that, for Gass, the reader (and his "sexual curiosity") belong in the back seat, while the author takes the wheel. In a sense, then, we have a figure for the reader in the nar-

rator-as-child--always anticipating fulfillment, never in control of his own destiny.<sup>8</sup>

The link between this notion of readers taking a back seat to the author and the theme of control in "The Sunday Drive" lies in Gass's conviction that authors exercise control not only over their texts and readers, but first of all over themselves. Elsewhere in the same preface, Gass says of his own childhood:

I remember resolving, while on long walks or during summer reveries or while deep in the night's bed, not to be like that, when that was whatever was around me: Warren, Ohio--factory smoke, depression, household gloom, resentments, illness, ugliness, despair, etcetera, and littleness, above all, smallness, the encroachment of the lean and meager. I won't be like that, I said, and naturally I grew in special hidden ways to be more like that than anyone could possibly imagine, or myself admit. (HCp xvii)

He claims to have decided by the age of eight that he would be a writer, and we may be forgiven if we see a certain similarity between his determination to escape from "the encroachments of the lean and meager" and that of his narrator.

This preface concludes with Gass projecting his own ideal reader, who shall be "skilled and generous with attention, for one thing, patient with longeurs," and

asking, "shall this reader, as the book is opened, shadow the page like a palm? yes, perhaps that would be best." So, like the child in the back seat who "used to watch the shadow of the Chevrolet accompany us in the other lane, my flat black head framed in an oblong window," the reader flattens out into a shadow cast by the author's vehicle, the text.<sup>9</sup>

Early in "The Sunday Drive," the narrator makes a passing reference to Macbeth, comparing the juice of the elderberries which his mother gathered (and which would comically stain him during the accident) to "'Lady Macbeth's blood,' my messed-up possessive slightly confusing the play's plot, but conveying the juice's indelible character nonetheless." The reference may help to explain what lies behind the notion of reader-as-shadow and the narrator's flight from life into aestheticism; in the last act of that play, Macbeth speaks the following famous lines:

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
And then is heard no more; it is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.                    [Enter a Messenger]

Thou com'st to use thy tongue; thy story quickly.  
Having just learned of his wife's death, Macbeth is ironically reflecting on her ambitious plans, but his speech

illuminates the essential distinction between the two worlds of the reader and the writer. The reader exists in "that other, less real world of common life and pleasant ordinary things" (HCp xix), and is "but a walking shadow"; the uncreated life he lives is a tale "signifying nothing," and he uses language, as the messenger does, merely to communicate information. The writer is mortal too, but he is branded by the ambition "to form [himself] from sounds and syllables" (HCp xviii) and produces something which does signify (in Shakespeare's intransitive sense), which uses language figuratively, and which can outlast the "shadow" of its creator.

In an essay called "The Soul Inside the Sentence," Gass says that in the process of composition the writer becomes

the word: he is its source; his id is now its energy; his ego is a soul and the words already there on the page, the project already begun, the life being formed out of leftover alphabets, exhausted genres, unspared parts from the remaining whole of literature, a presence which shadows that page like a long cloud across the sun; his creative superego is meanwhile seeking sanction--yea or nay--in the qualities of the great texts, searching above all for that quality most prized, most rare, most praised: that they shall not quickly pass away.<sup>10</sup>

This suggests that literary composition is in fact motivated by something like the hope of a personal afterlife and--given Gass's account of his childhood and the way he handles problems of need and control in "The Sunday Drive"--it might also remind us of Rousseau's remark that "the part that I have taken of writing and hiding myself is precisely the one that suits me. If I were present, one would never know what I was worth."<sup>11</sup> But in any case and for whatever reason, the greatest good is clearly to be left over, to persist, and the "great text" will be the one which succeeds in creating life "out of leftover alphabets" and emerging from the shadow of tradition. Such a text not only inserts itself in the literary tradition as "a plenitude enriching another plenitude," but also "intervenes or insinuates itself in-the-place-of"--in the place of the "walking shadow" of its author, and the "flat black" shadow of the reader.

Tanner seems to accept this idea of the text as the supplement that replaces, and he responds in kind, repeatedly reducing "The Sunday Drive to a list of substantives. The first of these lists includes "Labor and rest, contrivance and indolence, tending and neglect . . . permanence and transience, ripeness and rottenness, gratification and melancholy . . . in two words, nature and art" (205). We may recall that according to Ziegler "Tanner's essay represents the third step of stasis in the apprehen-



sion of the beautiful, the first two steps having been constituted by the dynamic sequence, in Gass's text, of nature and art." The task given the critical text by Ziegler is to "concretize" the "image in the text" and, in a passage that merits full quotation, Tanner selects that image from a key description in Gass's story:

the barns are like ships, like "good monumental sculpture" that gives the same sort of pleasure "by the force of its immediate mass and the caress of its eventual texture" (not for the first time a description of the aesthetic, kinaesthetic effect of something in the world offers, at the same time, a perfectly apt description of the effects to which Gass's prose aspires--and achieves). The barns remain, retain. . . . One barn has an "undeniably solid presence". . . . A satisfying, solacing, solid presence that contains the principle and possibility of its own absence. . . . these barns are not only like works of art for the narrator, they activate the creative, metamorphosing, dreaming faculties in him--effectively solicit and inspire, indeed create, the artist. The barns, as transcribed and in the transcribing, become the site and venue of somberly exuberant metaphysical and aesthetic speculation and epiphany.<sup>12</sup>

Tanner's appropriation of language from the story is significant for two reasons. First, by certifying that Gass's description of the barns (sic; see note 10) is also "a perfectly apt description of the effects to which [his] prose aspires," Tanner is only taking what is patently offered; it is not by chance that the text contains such a conspicuous self-image. Without disputing Gass's achievement, or even denying that the scene in question is the focal point of the story, we still might wish to ask whether the success of the piece is really that which its author claims for it. The importance of asking that question lies in the influence a critic such as Tanner exercises when he "concretizes" the "image in the text"--even in the immediate context, for example, we note that the barns become the occasion for Ziegler's discussion of the contemporary writer's relation to the literary tradition,<sup>13</sup> and that lines from Gass's description are intertwined with sentences from Tanner's essay in the cover art of Facing Texts.

Second, by appropriating Gass's language to a metaphorical description of his text, Tanner endows the latter with exactly that "undeniably solid presence" which the act of representation subverts--namely, a presence which "contains [not only holds, but also controls] the principle . . . of its own absence" (211). Earlier, we quoted Derrida to the effect that "what opens meaning and lan-

guage is writing as the disappearance of natural presence"; obviously, Tanner is aware of this point, but he consistently underplays the distinction between text and world, most notably when he metaphorically attributes the "solidity" and "mass" of natural presence to Gass's story. In fact, the major problem with Tanner's essay could be traced to what Kenneth Burke calls "the migration of metaphor,"<sup>14</sup> which in this case means identifying the work of art with what it represents (precisely the sort of error Gass inveighs against, on a different level); hence the essay's contention that "these barns are not only like works of art for the narrator, they activate the creative . . . faculties in him--effectively solicit and inspire, indeed create, the artist." The barns themselves are only "like" works of art; their qualities are not necessarily the qualities of the text in which they appear, and the artist who creates them is not same one they "create."

Tanner is predisposed to accept Gass's image of the barns as a description of "The Sunday Drive" because he has already accepted Gass's theory of literary language. Toward the end of his essay, in a passage from which we have already quoted, he tells us that Gass

seeks to so use [language] that it will have the force and caress of the mass and texture of the barns [sic], the hum and sting of the bees. . . . For it is in that realm of the surplus, the supplement, the

over-and-above which is the gratuitous buzzing of the bees, the unusable loveliness of unused barns, and-- for us--simply language, that we discover and create meaning and beauty. A truism to be sure. But reading Gass is to re-experience the quite immeasurable significance and excitement of that truism. (213)

The "unused" barns are, for Tanner, the "perfectly apt" figure for the text in which they appear because, like the text, they have "receded beyond utility" (212). He might have had this idea directly from Gass, who writes in "The Soul Inside the Sentence" of

the desire . . . to manufacture sentences which will persist past all utility, live outrageously beyond their means like exiled aristocracy or reckless nouveau riche, outlasting fashion and every novelty of thought or fad in phrasing. . . . sentences in language like a vaulter's limber pole to leap times, to transcend the initial circumstances of their making as well as each succeeding situation which might reasonably require them. . . . (HW 114-115)

But, as I have suggested, the utility of the literary text lies precisely in its supplemental quality of gratuitous persistence: that is what gives the critic something to do in creating his own supplement, the critical text, which seeks to consummate the (already consummate) work of art. Unlike the barns, "The Sunday Drive" was created for the

purpose which it serves, and neither is nor ought to be neglected.

Oddly enough, the doctrine of inutility and the insistence on neglect implies that the value of the literary object is relative rather than intrinsic. When the narrator discovers the unextinguished light in one of the barns, he construes it as evidence that "the fallen condition of the fences--the unmowed yard and rampant weeds--is relatively recent"; that is, the light indicates that the farm recently did have a function, and thus emphasizes that its condition is specifically one of desuetude--of having fallen out of use, having become "unaccustomed." Similarly, literary language for Gass (and Tanner) is language that has fallen out of its accustomed use:

A sign like GENTS tells me where to pee. It conveys information; it produces feelings of glad relief. I use the sign, but I don't dawdle under it. . . . The sign passes out of consciousness, it is extinguished, by its use. To the degree a sign grows literary, it does not have a "use." The meaning is not extinguished. I return to it again and again.<sup>15</sup>

Likewise, we have already seen that it is an article of faith for Gass that society has no use for literature, and that therefore literature will be "left alone to breathe" and writers "to be themselves." If literature actually is in any danger of being extinguished by use

(and I doubt that it is), it would seem to run the greatest risk under exactly the kind of criticism that Ziegler's introduction suggests and Tanner's essay practices, a criticism which reserves for itself the ability "to arouse in the reader that Joycean moment of silent stasis provoked by the wholeness and harmony of an image," and dedicates itself to reducing fiction to that image. If it is to endure, fiction has to continue to be read, and therefore it needs to remain open to reading; to the extent that an essay like Tanner's seals the text with an authorized reading, it also extinguishes it as an object of our further curiosity.

But the greater danger, it seems to me, is that which criticism courts when it derives its understanding of the work from the self-understanding of the author. As Derrida points out, critical reading "must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of the language that he uses" if it is to produce its own "signifying structure":

To produce this signifying structure obviously cannot consist of reproducing, by the effaced and respectful doubling of commentary, the conscious, voluntary, intentional relationship that the writer institutes in his exchanges with the history to which he belongs thanks to the element of his language. This moment

of doubling commentary should no doubt have its place in critical reading. To recognize and respect all its classical exigencies is not easy and requires all the instruments of traditional criticism. Without this recognition and this respect, critical production would risk developing in any direction at all and authorize itself to say almost anything. But this indispensable guardrail has always only protected, it has never opened, a reading. (158)

The modes of critical discourse are many: we can interrogate, meditate, amplify, classify, compare, deny, mock, reveal, digress, or second-guess; the problem with much post-modern criticism is simply that--because it seeks to supplant the text, but can imagine doing so only under an authority it borrows from the text--it limits itself to a merely "doubling commentary." In terms of the supplement, the choice is between a criticism which adds to and one which completes: Ziegler explicitly presents post-modern criticism as doing the latter; I would say it risks forfeiting even the honor of doing the former.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> Facing Texts: Encounters Between Contemporary Writers and Critics, ed., pref. and introd. Heide Ziegler (Durham: Duke UP, 1988) ix. All subsequent references to Ziegler will be incorporated into my text.

<sup>2</sup> Granted, the jacket copy modifies the assertion somewhat, stating more exactly that "during the creation of this book the majority of the contributions . . . were as yet unpublished" [my emphasis]. It is, of course, difficult to evaluate this statement, since we have no way of knowing the duration of that process: "some time ago" Gass made the original suggestion, some time after that the editor at Duke University Press relayed it to Ms. Ziegler, and in 1988 the book was published. But at least three of the fictions had already been published by 1985, a fact which might lead us to question the introduction's assurance that "the fictional pieces were in no case culled from existing books or short-story collections" (4). By my count, the only creative entries that remain unique to this volume are Barth's and Abish's; the critical pieces that actually appear to have been generated specifically for this anthology are those by Richard Howard, Robert Walsh, Manfred Pütz, and Christopher Butler. That would seem to leave only two of the ten pairs



of texts authentically unculled-for: Abish-Butler and Barth-Pütz.

In any case, the issue is not a trivial one, since many of Ziegler's conclusions about the significance of her anthology derive from the claim that it represents a meeting of author and critic which is essentially private, "unmediated," and personal. For example, these are the conditions said to be responsible for the collection itself achieving "the transcendence of each text's individual historical conditions" (5)--but here we approach the territory of "openness" and closure, and contradictions too profound to untangle in a note.

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology, trans. Gayatri C. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976) 144-45. Subsequent references [to OG] will be given in the text. I am indebted to Eyal Amiran for his suggestion that the notion of supplementarity be applied to the relation between the critical and the creative texts in this instance.

<sup>4</sup> Tony Tanner, "On Reading 'Sunday Drive'," in Facing Texts 205. Subsequent references to Tanner will be incorporated into my text.

<sup>5</sup> "The Sunday Drive" covers pp. 186-204 in Ziegler; to avoid cluttering my text, I will not give page numbers for individual quotes from this story.

<sup>6</sup> William Gass, In the Heart of the Heart of the Country & Other Stories, author's preface rev. and expanded (1968; Boston: Nonpareil-Godine, 1981) xviii. Subsequent references [to HCP] will be given in the text.

<sup>7</sup> The information that Korda is now Gass's editor comes from J.S. Cox of Simon & Schuster. The characterization of Korda is Morton Janklow's; Janklow is head of the powerful literary agency Morton L. Janklow Associates, and a staunch believer in the beneficial influence of conglomerates on publishing. His remark is quoted from a conversation with Thomas Whiteside, in Whiteside's The Blockbuster Complex (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1980) 58.

<sup>8</sup> There is a similar figure for the reader in John Hawkes's Travesty (New York: New Directions, 1976), where the entire novel is a monologue conducted by a man who intends to crash the car in which he, his daughter, and a poet are driving, in an accident "so perfectly contrived that it will be unique, spectacular, instantaneous, a physical counterpart to that vision in which it was in fact conceived. A clear 'accident,' so to speak, in which invention quite defies interpretation." It may seem odd that the poet is the passenger, but the story explicitly contrasts the imposture of his merely verbal art with the driver's lunatic but committed vision of "design and

debris." And as in "The Sunday Drive," the true artist is easily identified by the control he exercises over his audience.

<sup>9</sup> While we are pointing out images of the reader in "The Sunday Drive," we should not overlook the following: The middle barn is appropriately crowned by a four-square, double-shuttered cupola which holds into the wind the cut-out metal figure of a circling hawk. It is a conceit I find in a farmer almost metaphysical.

In Gass's Omensetter's Luck (New York: New American Library-Times Mirror, 1966), Furber is described as a circling hawk as he reads through the Bible in search of the text for his final sermon; when he finds it ("All flesh is grass"), he folds his wings and dives into the text (165). The same image is lofted in the preface to In the Heart of the Heart of the Country, where we are told that

the reader must . . . experience in the rising, turning line the wider view, like a sailplane circling through a thermal, and sense at the same time a corkscrewing descent into the subject, a progressive deepening around the reading eye, a penetration of the particular . . . at once escape and entry, an inside pulled out and an outside pressed in. . . .

(HCp xxxviii)

<sup>10</sup> William Gass, Habitations of the Word (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985) 138-39. Subsequent references [to HW] will be given in the text.

<sup>11</sup> From the Confessions, qtd. from Starobinski by Derrida in OG 142.

<sup>12</sup> Tanner, 210-211. Note that Tanner's quotation of Gass attributes to the barns some of the qualities which, in the story, actually belong to the accompanying silos; the silos are what "delight the eye the way good monumental sculpture does, by the force of its immediate mass and the caress of its eventual texture" ("Sunday Drive" 199).

<sup>13</sup> In what seems to me to be a misreading of Melville, Ziegler compares Gass's barns to the cottage-which-is-not-a-barn in Melville's "The Piazza." Ziegler says that

Melville's Romantic narrator can still believe--although as it turns out, mistakenly--that what he seems to detect in the distance belongs to some kind of fairyland. He desires a fictional object. Desire for Gass's narrator, however, is directed toward the real thing. (10-11)

But Melville's story, the first in his Piazza Tales, ends on a decidedly demystificatory note:

Launching my yawl no more for fairy-land, I stick to

the piazza. It is my box-royal. . . . Yes, the scenery is magical--the illusion so complete. . . .

But every night, when the curtain falls, truth comes in with darkness. . . . To and fro I walk the piazza deck, haunted by Marianna's face, and many as real a story.

And the story that follows is that of Bartelby.

<sup>14</sup> See The Philosophy of Literary Form, 3rd edition (Berkeley: U of California P, 1973) 147:

In general, primitive magic tended to transfer an animistic perspective to the charting of physical events. And positivistic science, by antithesis, leads to an opposite ideal, the transferring of physicalist perspective to human events. Each is the migration of a metaphor. . . .

In this case, the migration consists in a transfer of an authorial perspective to the criticism of fiction.

<sup>15</sup> William Gass, "Letter to the Editor" in After-words: Novelists on Their Novels, ed. Thomas McCormack (New York: Harper & Row, 1969) 92.

The Work in Progress

In Le postmoderne expliqué aux enfants, Jean-François Lyotard says that the "metanarratives" of modernity (the work-ethic, faith in technological progress, the christian doctrine of salvation)

. . . are not myths in the sense of fables. . . .

Certainly, like myths, they have as a purpose the legitimation of social and political institutions and practices, of laws, of ethics, and of modes of thought. But in contrast to myths, they do not look to the act of an original founder for this legitimacy, but to a future yet to come--in other words, to an Idea yet to be realized.<sup>1</sup>

If modern thought is in fact typified by the anteriority which Lyotard describes, then the work-in-progress might be regarded as an authentically modern literary phenomenon, since its published portions can be validated only by projecting them forward into an edifice still under construction, and not by referring them back to some already completed structure.

But by now it should be clear that the post-modern fiction we have been discussing is in many ways perched on the cusp between a descendant and an ascendant period: in its precepts it looks back towards modernism, but its practices often mark it as the literature of modernism's aftermath; this is particularly true of the post-modern work-in-progress. It is Lyotard's well-known opinion that the postmodern is divided from the modern by its rejection of metanarratives, and its acceptance of a perspective restricted to the ongoing: after Auschwitz, he maintains, it is impossible to believe that the future holds our redemption (40). But even if we question the accuracy of Lyotard's theory as a broad historical generalization, the change he identifies is at least metaphorically descriptive of a post-modern mutation in the work-in-progress, which in certain instances appears to have metamorphosed from a contingent into an autonomous form--one characterized by endless extension, continual revision, and forestalled completion.

The work-in-progress is not a post-modern discovery, of course: it has roots at least as far back as the eighteenth century, in Tristram Shandy, which emerged over a period of seven years and may actually have been uncompleted at the time of Sterne's death. Later, during the nineteenth century, novels often received serial publication in monthly magazines before they appeared as books;

and in our own century there is the example of Finnegans Wake, which took fifteen years to write and was excerpted in various periodicals, under the title "work in progress," for eleven. But the "work" that, even for Joyce, was always the goal of "work in progress" seems lately to be receding from view, so that when we apply the same term to post-modern examples we may actually be naming something new, an object that is a "work in progress" in the sense that a painting might be called "a work in oils."

There is an obvious precedent for this kind of a work, though, and that is In Search of Lost Time. In Marcel Proust, Roger Shattuck says:

Sometime in 1909 Proust grasped that his story was the very process of failure and rediscovery that he was going through. . . . For his present turmoil over memory and art projected his theme, both the message and the method of a novel.<sup>2</sup>

This description of a work which parallels (or "translates") the life of the writer, and which eventually consumes all of that life in the process of its production, could very well apply to the particular post-modern work-in-progress which we will be considering: William Gass's uncompleted novel, The Tunnel. Still, Gass does deviate from the Proustian model in certain important ways, most significantly in being more deeply skeptical than Proust when it comes to the possibility of embodying or



conveying experience in language. This skepticism could be attributed to the intervention of later modernism, which also licensed the liberties that Gass takes with superficial form (typographical tricks, cartoons, signs, and various other devices regularly interrupt the text of The Tunnel). Beyond that, it would be difficult to imagine two sensibilities more incompatible than those of Proust and Gass; and though Proust once fought a duel with a critic, he never participated in a colloquium,<sup>3</sup> while Gass inhabits that peculiarly post-modern critico-creative academic institution which the bulk of this study has been devoted to describing. As we will see, this practical situation has had a marked effect on the work which he produces.

A number of post-modern authors, including Hawkes and Coover, have published in the form of the work-in-progress, but it is Gass who provides the most productive example for study. The Tunnel purports to present (as though with Lyotard in mind) the meditations of an apologetic historian of Nazism, William Kohler, whose working assumption is that

If, since the day that Nietzsche composed the cliché and advanced the hope . . . all real belief in God is gone like the last garrulous guest, then it stands to reason that, following the Holocaust, all real belief in Man must wither too.<sup>4</sup>

In addition, Gass's text internalizes an illusory futurity as its occasion: in Kohler's words,

It was my intention, when I began, to write an introduction to my work on the Germans [Guilt and Innocence in Hitler's Germany]. Though its thick folders lie beside me now, I know I cannot. Endings, instead, possess me . . . all ways out. (LC 3)

The monologue that is The Tunnel arises out of Kohler's unsuccessful attempt to complete that book. But endless continuation is more than an imaginative premise or even a compositional principle here: it also describes the present condition of The Tunnel itself.

In my opening chapter, I noted that Gass works slowly; Omensetter's Luck was fifteen years in the making, and parts of that novel first surfaced eleven years before the book did. That equals Joyce's record (and exceeds Proust's), but it pales beside the saga of The Tunnel: this work has been "in progress" since 1966--by way of comparison, as of 1988 that is already more than twice as long as it took Odysseus to reach Ithaca from Troy--and since 1969 some nineteen sections, totalling more than 300 pages, have appeared in print.<sup>5</sup> Gass is now sixty-four, and has been publishing for thirty years; in the arena of fiction, more than two thirds of that career has already been devoted to The Tunnel.

To some extent, this delay is a direct result of Gass's ambitions for the book, ambitions he specifies in a 1972 interview:

The Tunnel is crucial work for me. All my work up to it I have privately thought of as exercises and preparations. This was a dodge . . . but it did work. How can you fail when you are simply practicing, learning, experimenting? I can't hide behind that dodge anymore. Further, in this business it is no honor to finish second. Now I shall find out whether I am any good.<sup>6</sup>

Another reason, not so striking but perhaps equally significant, is suggested in the following, more recent remarks:

The only things people wanted from me, and still want, are essays: lectures and essays. So I started doing a lot of them because I knew that otherwise I'd never get ahead, I would never get any time to work. All the breaks I've gotten in the field have been due to the essays, not the fiction.<sup>7</sup>

In the time that Gass has been at work on The Tunnel, he has published four books of nonfiction and a large number of uncollected essays and reviews; as he has said in another connection, "life takes you away from the point of life like a bad guide" (Morrow 17). Given that problem, it can hardly be fortuitous that, according to its author,

The Tunnel is "built on the seventh--[Kohler] writes Guilt and Innocence in his sabbatical years, so it's three sections for three sabbaticals, twenty-one chapters etc."<sup>8</sup>

But even if we discount the formative pressures of an academic schedule, the pattern of Gass's fiction-writing career is one that many major talents of his literary generation have followed: Pynchon's last novel was published fifteen years ago, Gaddis took twenty years to write J R, Salinger has not published since 1965. Salinger, of course, has deliberately retired from public existence, and is rumored to have at least one book in manuscript; Gass, on the other hand, may not have realized that the specter of the unfinished book is not Kohler's demon but his own. In 1972, he estimated that completion of The Tunnel was "several years away"; in 1979, it was to have been finished in "a couple more years"; in 1983 the manuscript was a thousand pages long and still "a couple of years" from being done; and in an interview with Arthur Saltzman published in 1984, Gass said the project was "coming along pretty well now . . . . [it's] a matter of staying in the book continuously for maybe another year."<sup>9</sup> In 1986, Saltzman published his study of Gass, including this interview and a chapter on The Tunnel, but the novel still had not materialized, nor is there any indication today that its advent is impending.

I do not propose to survey all the published passages from The Tunnel (and in fact, there is something odd, or at least oddly fitting, about Saltzman's devoting a chapter of critical appraisal to a book that does not yet exist--a point to which I will return); but because Gass's work-in-progress is so far an affair of interminable preliminaries, we might reap some useful insights into the post-modern work-in-progress by examining the text and context of one excerpt in particular, "Life in a Chair" (Salmagundi 1982), itself at least the second (possibly the third) version of the beginning of The Tunnel.

Some of the first few pages of "Life in a Chair" are taken from the opening of an earlier piece called "Mad Meg" (1976), which also reads as though it was intended to launch The Tunnel; in addition, "Life in a Chair" reproduces (with various insertions and deletions) sections ranging in length from a paragraph to several pages from two other earlier sections of The Tunnel, "Koh Whistles Up a Wind" (1977) and "We Have Not Lived The Right Life" (1969).<sup>10</sup> At present it is not clear whether "Life in a Chair" has absorbed this last section entirely, whether it has borrowed from it, or whether the same pages will simply appear twice in The Tunnel; at any rate, in an interview that appeared a year after "Life in a Chair," Gass suggested that "We Have Not Lived The Right Life" was the real beginning of the novel--albeit, he revealed, a

beginning that would be "hidden" about a hundred and fifty pages into the novel (Morrow 16).

"Life in a Chair" has no plot as such, but it does have some identifiable themes. The over-riding topic of the piece (and, one suspects, of The Tunnel as well) is the epistemological status of history, where history is understood as the translation of human events into language. The implicit justification for Kohler's ramblings is that they represent that side of the historian which is repressed in his professional writing, and that side of life that is outside the purview, or beneath the dignity, of history:

O, it would be a domestic epic indeed, and unique in the literature, one that took place entirely in the mind--on the john, in a bathtub, chair or darkened room, upon a sleepless bed; because historians never leave Congress or the President for the simple white houses of home. (LC 39)

As I have indicated, The Tunnel is supposed to be the result of Kohler's futile efforts to write an introduction for his history of Nazi Germany; Kohler's dilemma, it seems, is that once he has worked his way through the events of that period and arrived at the point where he must introduce his work in propria persona, he finds himself outside the artificially restricted territory of

the past--off the map, as it were, and without a compass or guide:

I intend no introspection. mark that. Redden that resolution. Occupation is essential. When I had written what I had written; when I had reached the present--the dead-end of history--to find it empty as an empty pantry; then I had Alice'd into the finis of my book. . . . So I shall dwell now in another kind of void unless I choose one dominant figure and arrow in: on -> Martha, -> Governali, -> Planmantee, -> Culp. But I intend no shallow introspection. Yes. No intro. (LC 14)

Alice is Alice in Wonderland, Martha is Kohler's wife, and the others are his colleagues. Of course, Kohler cannot really avoid introspection, and whenever he "arrows in" (with large arrows drawn in the text) on the other people in his life or on the wonderland of history, the "dominant figure" is himself. "Well, I intend no in," he says: "Out is all of it. Out of the print and over the cover . . . to grandmother's house we go. I study other methods of desperate disappearance" (LC 14). But Kohler can see no way out of the self, other than death--hence the desperation with which he studies exits and endings.

Finding one's way "out of the print and over the cover": what is, for Kohler, a problem of knowledge becomes a different sort of problem for Gass. In part, it

is a problem of form, because the task Gass has assigned himself in The Tunnel is to produce a work that will be the model of Kohler's mind:

I'm interested in making a self-contained system of concepts, ideas that will then define a kind of consciousness. It's a way of inventing a consciousness by supplying someone with the structure and content of an experience. So I make that up and create that consciousness. It's not a consciousness of the world; it's a consciousness of the work.<sup>11</sup>

Gass's notion of consciousness as a "self-contained system of concepts" suggests that his model of "the structure and content of an experience" will be organized along spatial rather than temporal lines. For Gass, it is not sequence but juxtaposition that makes a set of ideas into a system; and for that matter, he sees concepts themselves as things that "exist all at once, and the model for existence 'at the same time' is spatial."<sup>12</sup>

It is worth wondering how a work-in-progress can be said to "exist all at once," except in the author's mind; still, in that quarter The Tunnel has been obedient to a spatial model at least since 1978:

I am conceiving the book as a literal attempt to tunnel an escape, a tunnel out of language, so it has to have two forms. It has to be both the hollow that's taken out of language in order to somehow get



through it, and . . . also that place to which every day [the narrator] comes and disposes of the words he's dug up. So I've got two kinds of mutually contradictory forms for the book. First it is the dump-ground where he hides the dirt that he's dug, and secondly it's the hole-structure itself.<sup>13</sup>

The image of burrowing through and out of language implies that this tunnel is more than a hole, that it might also be a route along which to travel from one point to another. But Kohler is never allowed to escape from language into something else (he's "stuck with words") and Gass, for his part, disavows any sense of direction:

If I try to think out in outline some linear structure, then I start pushing my material in that direction like a baby in a pram. When you arrive at your destination, all you still have is a baby in a pram. I want the work to write itself, every passage to emerge from the ones which have come before, so I have to keep looking at what I've done to see what will come out.<sup>14</sup>

If plot is the temporal element in fiction, character would appear to be its spatial counterpart--but like Hawkes, who first made the declaration, Gass has on many occasions professed to have no use for either. In The Tunnel, however, he has actually chosen between the two, opting for the latter: his desire to "create a conscious-

ness" in the form of a novel results in a (putative) work of a thousand pages devoted to rounding out a single character, that of the speaker/narrator, Kohler.

In order to understand why Gass has elected to commit himself so exclusively to the spatial model, and why he chose to do so in a work that addresses itself thematically to the subversion of historical narratives, it is necessary to consider the lessons he learned from his first novel. At the end of a letter to the publisher of Omen-setter's Luck, dated June 26, 1965, Gass remarks with regret that the book he has just finished

. . . is seriously flawed. The middle is gross. It tries too much. There is too much narrative compromise. But large forms lack great emotional force because they take so long to complete.<sup>15</sup>

Two of these qualms have since gone by the board: Gass now believes that the Furber section, which comprises the last three quarters of OL, "is the only justification for that book" (LeClair, PR 88); and despite his early conviction that "large forms" cannot achieve "great emotional force," he is currently embarked on what is by all accounts a very large form indeed, and has now declared himself interested only in "affective effects" (LeClair, PR 69). The one stricture that has persisted, and that has given The Tunnel its shape, is the rejection of "narrative compromise."

It is significant that Gass was confirmed in this crucial resolution by the critical reception of Omensetter's Luck. I noted in my first chapter that both Richard Gilman and Earl Shorris, in their appraisals of that work, took Gass to task for being too traditional. Gilman, who was the first to fault OL on these grounds, was particularly distressed at the novel's "compulsion to tell a 'story' while its whole internal action struggles against the reductions and untruthfulness of storytelling, while its verbal action is struggling to be the story."<sup>16</sup> In an interview given in 1976, which appeared along with "Mad Meg," Gass specifically alludes to this criticism and testifies to its effect on his subsequent creative production:

Shorris' objection [to OL]--and it's also Richard Gilman's objection, I think he was the first person who made it--was that I was trying to work the result on the basis of a plot maneuver rather than on the basis of pure language. I think that it's a good objection, myself. . . . It is a theoretical flaw in the book. Some writers it wouldn't have troubled, it wouldn't interfere with their work. But it does mine, because I'm theoretically oriented.<sup>17</sup>

This suggests--correctly, I think--that Gilman's criticism would not have had the effect it has on Gass's work if Gass had not already been "theoretically orient-

ed." And in fact, it is arguable that the single most important influence on Gass's fiction has been his theory. While Gass does sometimes make misleading statements about his work, we ought to distinguish between those statements and the theoretical essays, which are not at all incompatible with his fiction. Some critics would disagree: in the article which follows "Mad Meg," Ned French says that "Gass is everywhere recognized as a theoretician leaning towards formalism, but the construction of his novels is realist."<sup>18</sup> In French's handling of the term, however, "realist" appears to mean nothing more than "concerned with reality"; that much could be said of Gass's theory as well, since it circles obsessively around the correspondence of words to the world. And as we will see in what follows, the fact that Gass's fiction strains toward the world is more a dramatization than a contradiction of the theoretical impossibility of succeeding in that attempt.

As a historian, Kohler is more concerned than most with the lives of "little people," and Guilt and Innocence in Hitler's Germany is intended as a description of the suffering and the sadism of individuals. Kohler's quandary, how to illuminate the private lives behind the public record, is the same one Gass confronts, once removed, in fiction: how to pack a person into print. By making his novel out of the consciousness of a historian of Nazism, Gass is able to present both hemispheres of his

concern: the difficulties of comprehending, and the difficulties of expressing, the interior life of an individual. From either perspective notation and instance can never converge, and Kohler's mistake is to have structured chaotic experience into an orderly account:

. . . (what is chapter-like about tyranny but the beatings and decrees? how much of life is simply consecutive like forks of food, as straight-forward and declarative as my disciplined academic style? everything is both simultaneous and continuous and intermittent and mixed . . . ah, my book cries out its commands, and events are disposed like decorative raisins on a cookie (that row there is the mouth, and there's an eye). . . . (LC 39)

This passage does not appear in any of the earlier avatars of "Life in a Chair," but for readers of the theory it ought to recall a 1976 essay called "Carrots, Noses, Snow, Rose, Roses," in which Gass uses a snowman as an example of the sort of "ontological transformation" human beings are responsible for whenever they commit an act of representation. Kohler's disposing of events "like decorative raisins on a cookie (that row there is the mouth, and there's an eye)" is a direct parallel, in tone as well as in sense, to Gass's description of the transformation that we wreak on commonplace coal and carrots when we employ them in the context of a snowman ("Buttons

of coal: notice how the same piece may be a button or an eye. . . .").<sup>19</sup> It is not immediately clear, though, whether transplanting this image from the theory into the fiction also constitutes a sort of ontological transformation, or whether the two contexts intersect at some level.

In a 1973 essay called "Groping for Trouts," collected in the same volume with "Carrots, Snow, Nose, Rose, Roses," Gass's topic is "the measurement of nature" (WWW 262); the "trout" is the world, and the stream in which we grope is representation. In particular, he discusses mathematical representations of the world, and compares them (as metaphors) to representations in language. Kohler is also concerned with mathematical representations of reality, inasmuch as his historical research involves the contemplation of the Holocaust as a set of statistics. In fact, at one point he says:

. . . perhaps I've absorbed my present insanity from all the books, films, papers, callous lists and neutral figures I have hunted up, compilations which contain everything except the sufferings they number.

(LC 20)

That notion of number-collecting as a fetish which objectifies and dehumanizes is first broached in "Groping for Trouts":



so that all I saw of them were the ripples where they'd been. (LC 27)

By the end, however, the stream has revealed itself as a metaphor for exactly that situation described in Gass's essay--the opacity of the medium through which we attempt to discern the world, or reveal ourselves:

. . . .I'd like to look below my

shot	gas hang	shot	shot
eyes and see not language staring back at me, not sentences or single			
shot	gas hang	shot	shot
words or awkward pen lines, but a surface clear and burnished as a			
shot	gas hang	shot	shot
glass. There my figure would appear as perfectly as any Form			
shot	gas hang	shot	shot
reflected in Platonic space--as those tall soot-black boots which I			
shot	gas hang	shot	shot
remember grew inside the marble. . . .			
shot	gas hang	shot	shot
The boots gleamed; they always gleamed; and that gleam lay back			
shot	gas hang	shot	shot
within the image of the boots like fish asleep in shaded water. (LC 60)			

The fact that the dates of publication for the essays I have mentioned are earlier than the date of publication for "Life in a Chair" does not, of course, prove that Gass builds his fiction out of images and ideas originated in his theory; it is quite possible that these elements could have been developed simultaneously in different forms, or even that they were first conceived as fiction--and his essays, in any case, are often more literary than philosophical. But whatever the sequence, it is obvious that Gass uses his theory as a sort of proving ground, and though I suggested earlier that the pressure to publish essays might be partly responsible for the protracted deferral of The Tunnel, it



may also provide him with an incentive and an opportunity to draft the material from which he is fashioning that work. It might even be said, on this reckoning, that the essays are not peripheral but integral to Gass's work-in-progress, since they are in effect a rehearsal for imaginative acts performed in the fiction.

There are other ways in which The Tunnel raises the possibility that post-modern fiction, especially when it takes the form of the work-in-progress, is a uniquely embroiled medium, more involved in and also more concerned with the extra-textual world than it generally acknowledges. If theory is a rehearsal for the work-in-progress, the work-in-progress itself is also a sort of rehearsal--not only as it drafts the "work" but also as it drills the reader.

Of the twelve sections of The Tunnel which have been published in journals since 1976, four (including "Life in a Chair") were accompanied by an interview and/or one of Gass's theoretical essays; during that same time, by my count, a dozen other interviews (or symposia or colloquia) with Gass and twenty-eight of his essays have also appeared. No academic critic would consider writing on The Tunnel without taking at least some of this material into account, beginning with those interviews in which The Tunnel is discussed and explained. At the same time, one of the problems of reading a work-in-progress is that there is no textual whole against which to judge the author's proleptic

descriptions of the "work." The whole resides, as yet, only within the mind of the author and he retains interpretive control over the work, since only he (presumably) knows its final form. Or to put it another way, whereas in reading a finished novel you may, if you wish, compare the various parts to one another and support your inferences about the text exclusively with references to it, in reading a work-in-progress the text itself is partial, and many necessary inferences can only be supported by referring to an element outside the text--namely the author's expressed intent.

Gass is not at all reluctant to say that he wants his readers to understand his books in a certain way, but he wants those books to be seen as containing within themselves the mechanism by which reading is controlled:

My texts are not open at all if I can have my way about it. I want the instructions to the reader to be my instructions, although I hope the reader will indeed create the work because otherwise it will not, in a sense, exist. But I want that "creating" to be done in accordance with my text, which I hope will provide the instructions.<sup>20</sup>

Arthur Saltzman's The Fiction of William Gass is the first and to date the only book-length study of Gass; predictably, its notes testify to the author's broad acquaintance with Gass's essays and interviews, and in fact one of those interviews is included in Saltzman's book. In his

chapter on The Tunnel, Saltzman suggests that Gass's (so far fragmentary) text does in fact "provide the instructions" for a proper reading, when he asserts that "although the novel remains essentially in-progress, [its] fugitive pieces can be roughly united into a composite picture which discloses the author's design for the completed work" (116). And later, Saltzman specifies that Gass's "design" in The Tunnel is

to capture and to indict the reader, forcing him to pit his conditioned patterns of reasoning against his emotional biases. We are asked to judge without resisting implications; to "say yes to Kohler" as a convincing artistic creation is to credit the novel with completeness, openness--with being, in Gass's phrase, "all there." (134)

As with Ziegler's introductory remarks on "The Sunday Drive," we can see here how difficult it is for the contemporary critic to praise a work without attributing "openness" to it (even though Gass repudiates that quality); but for the most part, precisely because The Tunnel is not "all there," the instructions which Saltzman is following in this assessment are taken not from the text, but rather from a 1978 interview with Tom LeClair, where Gass says:

Once I get the reader captured in [The Tunnel], I really want to do things to him. . . . And I hope to write about certain kinds of objectionable attitudes

and feelings in such a way that the reader will accept them, will have them, while he's reading. In that sense the book is a progressive indictment of the reader. If it works. . . . I want the reader to say yes to Kohler, although Kohler is a monster. That means that every reader in that moment has admitted to monstrosity. So my point of view in writing this book is less detached for me than normal. It does involve the manipulation of the reader, and I am not sure about it. (LeClair, CR 100)

It is notable that Saltzman makes no mention of the uncertainty expressed here, and does not pursue the proposed implication of the reader to the logical conclusion that such a project might also involve the reciprocal implication of the work in the world of which the reader is a part. Instead, he affirms the book as a purely intellectual exercise, a Jamesian feat of difficulty overcome, and concludes his chapter with the determination that

. . . once again, we have run flush against a new reality--another fiction--which is all the more startling a confrontation when we realize just how unlikely a narrative this promised to be for meriting moral vindication and love on its own terms. The Tunnel is the sternest test to date of energy of execution, integrity of craft, and worship of the redeeming power of the word as proof of the value of that fiction which

flaunts its "incestuous sentences," oblivious to that other world's endorsement. (134)

The disregard for "that other world's endorsement" with which Saltzman credits The Tunnel might conceivably be demonstrated by citing a passage like the following, from "Life in a Chair":

And when I wrote was I writing to win renown, as it's customarily claimed? or to gain revenge after a long bide of time and tight rein of temper? to earn promotion, to rise above the rest like a loosed balloon? or was it from weak self-esteem? from pure funk, out of a distant childhood fear or recent shame? . . . the world. alas. It is Alice committing her Tampax to the trash. (LC 4)

However, Kohler's rhetorical dismissal of the world is contradicted by other, more psychologically and thematically credible "confessions" to be found elsewhere in the same section--as for example when Kohler, examining his motives for undertaking Guilt and Innocence in Hitler's Germany, says:

It was always the work, the work, the Great Work. . . . I've dug patiently through documents, examined testimonies, also taken them, gathered facts and sifted evidence . . . seeking support for my theories, my beautiful opinions, in the diaries of all those des-

tined to be gassed, burned, buried alive, cut apart,  
shot. . . . (LC 17-18)

Nevertheless, Saltzman would be forced to take Kohler's first and less compelling self-justification seriously, because he has obviously already accepted similar statements made by Gass, in moments like this:

. . . even a good critic isn't likely to tell me anything about my work I don't already know, since I'm pretty careful and self-conscious in what I do. I also don't take much pleasure in approval. (LeClair, PR 93)

In the Sorrentino/O'Brien exchange, we saw a specific instance of an author's aesthetic theories controlling the reception of his work and even defining the role of the critic; in the Hawkes/Guerard corollary, we saw evidence that the interaction with a critical reader may also affect the way an author understands his own work. In the case of Gass, it is clear that the work-in-progress is that form of creative writing in which all the elements of post-modern fiction's academic environment meet and mingle, including even the most prosaic facts of professional life.

As the forces behind the work-in-progress vary, so do its functions. Such intermediate publication as The Tunnel has received does, after all, help to keep Gass in groceries and the public eye; but it also serves a more remote end. As long as The Tunnel remains in progress, the possibility that the text will change puts criticism off-balance, and

makes our reading at least as conditional as the writing is. Granted, we know the work-in-progress through its published portions, and each of these is presented in the form of something finished--each has a beginning, a middle, and an end, even if it is not The End. But the author of a finished "work"--as Gass says of Joyce--"cannot be recalled to rejoin or revise or reconsider anything by any plea or spell of magic or sacrifice or prayer," whereas in the "work-in-progress" the author not only may but probably will revise and reconsider.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, as we saw in Saltzman's case, by affording criticism only a partial view of its object the writer can make himself indispensable to interpretation. In fact, like most of the authorial practices that characterize post-modern fiction, publishing in the form of the work-in-progress is a way of preserving authority over one's text.

Still, it is reasonable to assume that The Tunnel will eventually be finished; at that point, one might ask, what difference will it make that it was once a work-in-progress? One answer is that the practice of publishing a work as it progresses ensures all future critics will confront an object which includes the layers of its composition, a record of choices made and possibilities rejected; at least in this way, the nature of the finished product is altered. But the lesson of post-modern fiction is that even the immutability of the finished "work" is illusory, another false ending.

For if the post-modern novel has come to be read and understood through practices which foreground the author, and if those practices govern it not only after publication but also before, in its incarnation as a work-in-progress, then the author has in fact never withdrawn to the wings of the work, and never ceased to "rejoin" its critics. Perhaps, then, the true innovation of literary post-modernism is just this: to redefine the work as something always in progress, and to redraw its boundaries to include the extra-textual apparatus of theory, criticism, and authorized reading.



Notes

<sup>1</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, Le Postmoderne expliqué aux enfants: Correspondance 1982-1985 (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1986) 38; my translation. The page numbers for subsequent references to this work will be given in my text.

<sup>2</sup> Roger Shattuck, Marcel Proust (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1974) 149.

<sup>3</sup> Shattuck, 13: " . . . Proust had to fight a pistol duel with a critic who . . . ridicule[d] him as 'one of those small-time fops in literary heat.' No one was hurt."

<sup>4</sup> Page 44; see note 5, below, for publication information. Subsequent references (to LC) will be incorporated in my text.

<sup>5</sup> In chronological order, the published portions of The Tunnel are:

"We Have Not Lived the Right Life." New American Review 6 (1969): 7-32.

"Why Windows Are Important To Me." TriQuarterly 20 (Winter 1971): 285-307 [rpt. in The Best of TriQuarterly, ed. Jon Brent (1982)].

- "The Cost of Everything." Fiction (1972) 1.3: unpaginated (3 oversize pp.)
- "Mad Meg." Iowa Review 7.1 (Winter 1976): 77-96 [preceded by Jeffrey Duncan's interview with Gass and Stanley Elkin; followed by Ned French's essay on Gass's fiction].
- "Koh Whistles Up a Wind." TriQuarterly 38 (Fall 1977): 191-209.
- "Susu, I approach you in my dreams." TriQuarterly 42 (Spring 1978): 122-142.
- "The Old Folks" Kenyon Review (Winter, 1979) 1.1: 35-49. [rpt. in The Best American Short Stories of 1980, ed. Stanley Elkin: 159-175.]
- "August Bees." Delta 8 (May 1979): 3-6 [accompanied by Régis Durand's interview with and essay on Gass].
- The First Winter of My Married Life. Northridge, CA: Lord John, 1979.
- "Summer Bees." Paris Review 79 (1981): 231-236 [a revision of "August Bees" from Delta 8].
- "Uncle Balt and the Nature of Being." Conjunctions #2 (Spring/Summer 1982): 18-29. [rpt. in The Pushcart Prize 7.]
- "Life in a Chair." Salmagundi 55 (Winter 1982): 3-60 [followed by "Representation and the War for Reality," and responses from critics Rosenberg and Hassan].
- Three passages from The Tunnel ("An Invocation to the

Muse," "In My Youth" and "The Fugue.") Conjunctions #4 (Spring/Summer 1983): 7-13 [accompanied by Bradford Morrow's interview with Gass].

"The Sunday Drive" Esquire (August, 1984) 102: 77-79.

"The Barricade (Homage to Donald Barthelme)." Conjunctions 8 (Spring/Summer 1985): 122-124.

Culp. New York: Grenfell Press, 1985.

"The Sunday Drive" in Facing Texts, ed. Heidi Ziegler (Durham: Duke UP, 1988): 186-204 [a longer version of the piece published in Esquire (Aug 1984), here accompanied by Tanner's critical essay].

During this period, Gass has also published three other pieces of uncollected fiction, sometimes identified as sections of The Tunnel but apparently belonging to (and perhaps constituting) an unpublished work called "Cartesian Sonata." These are:

"The Clairvoyant" (Part One of "Cartesian Sonata.") Location 1.2 (Summer 1964): 59-66.

"The Sugar Crock." (Part Two of "Cartesian Sonata.") Art and Literature 9 (Summer 1966): 158-171.

"I Wish You Wouldn't." (Part Three of "Cartesian Sonata") Partisan Review 42.3 (1975): 344-360 [rpt. in Pushcart Prize 1, 98-114.]

Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife, which first appeared as Tri-Quarterly Supplement Number Two in 1968, shares several characters (Philip Gelvin, Ella Bend, and Willie's

wife herself) with "Cartesian Sonata," and probably once belonged to that work; in fact, it is also possible that all four were originally intended as parts of The Tunnel, since Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife contains the first of Gass's Nazi jokes, and was mostly written in 1966--the same year Gass says he began The Tunnel.

<sup>6</sup> Carole S. McCauley, "Fiction Needn't Say Things--It Should Make Them Out of Words: An Interview with William H. Gass," Falcon (Winter 1972) 5: 44.

<sup>7</sup> Bradford Morrow, "Interview with William Gass," Conjunctions #4 (1983): 29. Subsequent references to Morrow will be given in my text.

<sup>8</sup> Régis Durand, "An Interview with William Gass," Delta 8 (May 1979): 8. This interview was conducted in July 1978.

<sup>9</sup> In order, these estimates are drawn from the following sources: McCauley 45; G.A.M. Janssens, "An Interview with William Gass," Dutch Quarterly Review of Anglo-American Letters (1979) 9.4: 259; Morrow 14; and Arthur M. Saltzman, The Fiction of William Gass: The Consolation of Language, Ed. Jerome Klinkowitz for Crosscurrents/Modern Critiques/ Third Series (Carbondale: U of Southern Illinois P, 1986) 159 [no date is given for the interview itself, but it was first published in the Summer

1984 issue of Contemporary Literature]. Subsequent references to Saltzman will be given in my text.

<sup>10</sup> See note 5, above, for publication information.

The corresponding pages are:

"Life in a Chair" | "Mad Meg"

6-9 | 77-79

"Life in a Chair" | "Koh Whistles Up a Wind"

22-23 | 196-197

"Life in a Chair" | "We Have Not Lived the Right Life"

17-21 | 13-14

52-54 | 14-16

60 | 16.

<sup>11</sup> Jan Garden Castro, "An Interview with William Gass," Bulletin of the Association of Departments of English 70 (Winter 1981): 31.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas LeClair, "A Conversation with William Gass." Chicago Review 30.2 (1978): 102. Subsequent references to this interview (identified as LeClair, CR) will be given in my text.

<sup>13</sup> Durand, 8-9. See also William Gass, Habitations of the Word (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985) 158:

My present novel, The Tunnel, is dominated by the trope of its title. The text is at once the hollow absence of life, words, and earth, which the narrator

is hauling secretly away; then it is the uneasy structure of bedboards, bent flesh, rhetorical flourishes and other fustian forms, which shapes the passage, and which incontinently caves in occasionally, filling the reader's nose with noise, and ears with sand and misunderstanding; while finally it is the shapeless mess of dirt, word-dung, and desire, which has to be taken out and disposed of. Every tunnel invokes Being, Non-Being, and Becoming in equal portions and with equal fervor. This is . . . a cautionary instance, for now and then the trope itself will be in such need of a proper bringing up, be itself such a symbol of flight and connection, concealment and search, that it brings its wretched employer nothing but confusion, nothing but Postmodernism, nothing but grief.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas LeClair, "William Gass: The Art of Fiction LXV" Paris Review 70 (1977): 78. This interview was conducted in July of 1976. Subsequent references (to LeClair, PR) will be given in my text.

<sup>15</sup> "A Letter to the Editor," in Afterwords: Novelists on Their Novels, ed. Thomas McCormack (New York: Harper & Row, 1969) 104.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Gilman, The Confusion of Realms (New York: Random House, 1969) 78-79. This essay was originally published, under the title "Omensetter's Luck," in The New Republic 7 May 1966.

<sup>17</sup> Jeffrey L. Duncan, "A Conversation with Stanley Elkin and William H. Gass," Iowa Review 7.1 (1976): 58. This interview precedes "Mad Meg."

<sup>18</sup> Ned French, "Against the Grain: Theory and Practice in the Work of William H. Gass," Iowa Review 7.1 (Winter 1976): 99.

<sup>19</sup> William H. Gass, The World Within The Word (New York: Knopf, 1978) 292. Subsequent reference to essays collected in this volume (WWW) will be given in my text.

<sup>20</sup> "A Colloquy with William H. Gass," Modern Fiction Studies 29 (1983): 592. What Gass wants the reader to do is evidently not so much to create as to recreate. On this point, he is more explicit elsewhere--as in this exchange, during a symposium, with Grace Paley and Donald Barthelme:

Gass: You [Paley] want the creative reader.

Paley: You got 'em. I mean, he's there.

Gass: I don't want them.

Paley: Well, it's tough luck for you.

Barthelme: I have to disagree absolutely about what Bill wants. He does want the creative reader. He

could not possibly write in the way he does without positing a highly intelligent and rather wonderful reader, totally docile, whom we all want to go out and drink with. You do posit such a reader, or you could not write the way you do.

Gass: What I mean by this is that I don't want the reader filling in anything behind the language.

Paley: Right, that's what's wrong with you. You don't leave him enough space to move around.

[from William Gass, Donald Barthelme, Grace Paley and Walker Percy, "A Symposium on Fiction," Shenandoah 27.2 (Winter 1976): 8.)

<sup>21</sup> The quote is from "'The Death of the Author'," in Habitations of the Word, 269; Gass notwithstanding, Finnegans Wake does (as Eyal Amiran pointed out to me) include rejoinders to at least one of its critics--Wyndham Lewis's "Analysis of the Mind of James Joyce" is alluded to at various points during the section sometimes called "The Riddles."



### Conclusion

A hundred years ago, in 1888, Walt Whitman wrote that "Literature is always calling in the doctor for consultation and confession, and is always giving evasions and swathing suppressions in place of that 'heroic nudity' on which only a genuine diagnosis of serious cases can be built."<sup>1</sup> My study has been aimed at stripping away some of the evasions and suppressions which post-modern fiction tenders to its readers--a project complicated by the fact that, though it often claims to abjure consultation, this literature is written by doctors for doctors, and specializes in misleading revelations. 1888 was also the year in which T.S. Eliot, the Aesculapius of literary professionalism, was born; and while it is possible that a hundred years from now the academic artist he personified will be considered one of history's oddities, it is at least as likely that no other sort will survive. But whatever happens in the future, the criticism which today confronts post-modern fiction must begin by being aware that there are certain obstacles to analysis, and that these obstacles often go unacknowledged.

The rhetoric of post-modern fiction is in many ways a distillation of modernist aestheticism; according to writers like Gass, Hawkes and Sorrentino, the work speaks for itself, the author responds only to the requirements of his art, and the attention of readers is neither sought nor expected. As we have seen, though, this rhetoric does not match the institutional practices of these authors and their critics. The post-modern work arrives imbedded in a web of interpretive and evaluative statements, and those statements remain inseparable from it; in reality, most post-modern fiction never has the chance to speak for itself. As for the post-modern author, though he may worry his words for years it can hardly be said that he is oblivious to the world into which he eventually sends them. The attention of the audience, far from being a matter of no concern or relevance, is so carefully studied that on occasion it even becomes the object of pre-emptive representation in the fiction itself.

It is not likely that any of this would be the case if post-modern fiction were not situated within the institution that also contains most of its readers. And while I have been concerned mostly with pointing out the negative side-effects of that cohabitation, it also has certain obvious benefits. For example, it allows for the production and preservation of fiction that conceives of

itself as something more than simple entertainment, and that demands more patience and skill than sales managers in commercial publishing houses believe the average consumer to possess. In addition, it does present the critic with an historically unique opportunity to engage the writer in dialogue--though I would say that in general the critics are too deferential or too like-minded for that dialogue to constitute a genuine exchange of views. Of course, what comes across as partisanship in a critic may be only that enthusiasm for the material that is essential in a teacher, and all of the readers I have cited are both. Indeed, the principal benefit of institutionalization is that it provides both the writer and the critic with an audience, made up of other writers, other critics, and a continually replenished supply of college students.

What makes this audience especially valuable, despite its relatively small size, is the fact that it consists of individuals either trained or training in the specialized approach to literature that is most congenial to this particular sort of fiction. But at the same time, it is also true that this environment shapes the writer:

. . . increasingly he writes books that will teach well, you know. He may be teaching books himself. He is often in classes talking about how you write, to writing students; before you know it, his books are about writing, and they teach splendidly because you

have all these things that you can do in the class, to point out this device, that move, and so on. . . . So there is an interaction: the writer is writing, of course, for the audience he has; the audience he has is also moulded by the kind of books he writes.<sup>2</sup>

Gass, whose words these are, seems completely satisfied with the situation he describes, but there is room in all this for some uneasiness. Novels that "teach splendidly" today may not be taught at all when the interest of the profession shifts away from demonstrating "this device, that move, and so on." Likewise, students who are trained to regard reading as an exercise in detecting "moves" and identifying "devices" may find that, once they have left the classroom, the activity is no longer very rewarding. And when at some point fiction does come to be studied in new ways and appreciated for different reasons, it may be difficult to re-interpret and renew the works of authors so bent on preventing any response but the one they project. I don't imagine, nor would I suggest that it will be impossible to do so, but I do think that even now, readers who attempt to ruminate in pastures other than those designated by the author are likely to find the fodder sparse and the fences high.

The role of the critic in this situation, it seems to me, ought to be to demonstrate to readers that post-modern fiction has some value beyond being part of a chain of in-

novation, some interest for non-professionals, and some application outside of the classroom. If we are to do that, it will be necessary for us to wean ourselves of the approval of authors, and find a way to respond to the text that is sensitive not only to its aesthetic qualities but also to its historical context. It may be objected that in my own readings the latter concern predominates, and that I have failed to respect or appreciate the purely aesthetic merits of my chosen texts. But with regard to that New Critical ideal, it seems to me that the fiction we call post-modern is also post-lapsarian: no critical reader can remain innocent of the apparatus of authorial evaluation and interpretation, so criticism ought to begin by being critical of that, and of its uses.

The state of affairs to which I have addressed myself here does not constitute a conspiracy, but it does indicate a sort of laziness, a too-ready recourse to the available resources and too little self-reliance. The warrant for critical inquiry has always been that it adds something to what we already know; literary creation, especially in the wake of modernism, is a notoriously conscious act, and this means that the critic of post-modern fiction needs to do something more than explain to the reader how that fiction was intended to be received, and what it was intended to accomplish. Criticism in all literary periods has tended to base its readings on some

account of authorial intention; but when authors act as their own critics, and when their assessments are widely regarded as privileged, it is important to re-assert that all readers are equally subordinate to the text. Finally, our authority cannot be derived from the author, or from any other critic: it is something each reading has to establish for itself.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads" (Preface to November Boughs, 1888), in Complete Poetry and Selected Prose, ed. James E. Miller, Jr. (Boston: Riverside-Houghton Mifflin, 1959) 453. See also p. 446:

. . . all the old imaginative works rest, after their kind, on long trains of presuppositions, often entirely unmention'd by themselves, yet supplying the most important bases of them, and without which they could have had no reason for being. . . .

<sup>2</sup> Jared Lubarsky, "The American Writer in Society: An Interview with William Gass," Eigo Seinen 124 [Tokyo 162, Japan] (1978): 9.

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