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THE TUNNEL OR THE POETICS OF AUTONOMY

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1. THE AUTONOMOUS WORK OF ART

«There is no out-of-doors in the world
where language is the land»[1]

The Tunnel is William Gass's latest work. It has been intended to become his masterpiece, as the almost thirty years devoted to its composition demonstrate. It is an ambitious work of fiction with the central design of reaching an aesthetic autonomy that allows the book to be read non-referentially. And that is precisely the proper approach to *The Tunnel*, because it has been conceived as a self-contained object whose internal coherence is both its most powerful component and the axis of any significance.

William Gass has always been concerned with the singular character of the linguistic medium in the province of fiction. He justifies the special status of the artistic expression with the ontological transformation the word suffers, according to him, when used with literary purposes (Gass, 1989, 280-307). Because the narrated and the physical world belong to separate domains poetic language doesn't have to adjust to the schemes that govern the linguistic reality of the empirical existence.

Hardly ever has fiction been so reluctant to be interpreted in terms of the factual world as it is in Gass, precisely because hardly ever has it been so near to becoming a fact as it is in *The Tunnel*. Language stops being the *means* of describing in order to become the *object* of rendering; it is treated like the material with which a new object is created. Like in abstract painting, where the paint stops being paint as soon as it is transformed into a shape and enters, in interaction with other shapes, the system of the picture, language's expressive function loses weight when becoming the element of the

1. Gass, 1989, 317

fictional artifact. Both systems –the one within the frame and the one inside the covers– must be interpreted in relation to their own rules and not in terms of the empiric domain they inhabit. «Realities» cannot be found in them, because they *are* realities. Traditional –referential– readings of *The Tunnel* drive consequently to erroneous interpretations of the book.

«The aesthetic aim of any fiction is the creation of a verbal world, or a significant part of such a world, alive through every order of its Being. Its author may not purpose this –authors purpose many things– but the construction of some sort of object, whether too disorderly to be a world or too mechanical to be alive, cannot be avoided.» (Gass, 1980, 7) These assumptions concerning the aesthetics of fiction find the most definite embodiment in *The Tunnel,* where the book's central metaphor materializes in its own language. The process of reading Gass's last piece becomes an evolution through a linguistic passage which rises above the reader progressively engulfing him until an almost total verbal suffocation. The product of fiction is then in this case, not only a world, but an invisible object with the autonomy of any material item, but more powerful for being made out of concepts.

By means of the central character of a historian busied with the act of begetting one of his pieces, Gass explores the process of artistic creation and develops an aesthetic philosophy of a marked Rilkean influence. This is one of those instances in which, as he says when talking about metafictions, «the forms of fiction serve as the material upon which further forms can be imposed.» (25) In this case, the fictional surface hides the book's linguistic focus, since its primary goal is the transformation undergone by language in its transition to the artistic medium.

Before devoloping further arguments, a brief synopsis of *The Tunnel* is convenient: William Frederick Kohler is an American historian famous for his thesis on the Nazi crimes. As a specialist in the Third Reich, he participated in the Nuremberg Trials, and now, in his 50s, he is a scholar and a University Professor in the United States. Kohler has just completed his masterpiece, *Guilt and Innocence in Hitler's Germany*– *G & I* is the abbreviation he uses to refer to his book– which he hopes will bring him broad recognition and public acclaim. He just needs to write an introduction and the book will be finished; however, the introductory piece he has projected is not easy to perform, and he cannot find expressions to fulfill his needs. What he wants is precisely the antithesis of *G & I,* the personal section, the inner book that completes and confirms *G & I.* At the same time he begins digging a tunnel out of his house's basement, and the digging, together with his efforts to write his introduction builds up *The Tunnel.*

The next step is to analyze how William Gass's book achieves its aesthetic autonomy, for which three aspects are particularly relevant: formal structure, character creation and referential self-effacement.

The Tunnel is conceived as a mental picture of its protagonist, and Gass, like the great masters of the consciousness portrayal –Joyce, Beckett, Faulkner...– rejects chronology as a structural device. Because the mind is a chaotic domain only non-

linear discourse can echo its modus operandi. The book's narrative flow is sequential and incorporates in the same plane memories, present dilemmas and anticipations. From a very fragmented beginning, the prose in *The Tunnel* gains in consistency towards the end, thus rendering Kohler's mental movement from an initial restlessness to a stage of emotional calm.

If chronology then is not an organizing principle in Gass's book, the structural force must be found in other factors, and the right place to turn to is the metaphor of the tunnel, the book's pivotal motif. This powerful image works at different levels in the narrative, conferring unity and becoming the source of meaning. At one level, Kohler is digging a tunnel which bears the narrative's factual load; however, its relevance subsides as the reader's field of vision expands and the verbal tunnel begins to take shape. The tunnel out of Kohler's cellar stands for the vehicle of the book's metaphor; it's the concept around which *The Tunnel* is erected, but it loses empirical value when the possibility of Kohler being in any place that is not sitting in front of his page becomes highly improbable, which confirms its entirely formal function.

Gass's piece aims at «showing», not describing, and he chooses a metaphorical pattern to generate his novel. Metaphor is for him more than a process of inference; it's a figure of presentation or display (Gass, 1980, 63). Its form and method can be compared to the form and method of the novel, and, evoking Aristotle, he claims it to be a sign of genius due to its organizing qualities. According to Gass, the novel should be conceived «as a monumental metaphor, a metaphor we move at length through, the construction of a mountain with its view, a different, figured history to stretch beside our own, a brand-new ordering both of the world and our understanding; for most of us do live under our lives like creatures covered by a sea or shadowed by a mountain, a volcano, its edges deepened further by ravines.» (68-9)

Formal structure is then in *The Tunnel* a metaphorical question. The book's internal coherence originates in the fact that every element in the narrative is a direct contributor to the linguistic tunnel. Structural autonomy derives from the self-contained metaphor, and both vehicle and tenor are subsumed within the fictional sphere. The two tunnels have their office, since a displacement of signification takes place among them: the tunnel in the basement, which acts as the metaphorical vehicle, loses substance as the tenor embodied in the tunnel of words takes shape. According to Gass, models aren't real, and metaphoral models even less (75), which justifies the ontological blurredness of the vehicle in *The Tunnel*.

From the very beginning in the book, language acquires an inner motion which situates it at a level superior to a mere narrative instrument; the sentences that circle Kohler «like a toy train»[2] foreshadow the round shape of the tunnel.

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2. Gass, *The Tunnel*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1995. p. 4. (for all the quotations of this book in the essay).

The closure of the linguistic picture performed in *The Tunnel* is highlighted by its analogy with the brain promoted by the text. This way, Kohler's cellar is also very often his cell, and sometimes he thinks of it as his own skull *(The Tunnel,* 13). This imaginary landscape lacks temporal and spatial components, for the protagonist's consciousnes is the only source of action.

The book's structural patterns and formal closure have been discussed so far. The next step consists in examining how the technique of character creation contributes to the piece's autonomy.

Apart from Kohler, all the characters in *The Tunnel* are ontologically unstable. Their lack of definition is due to the fact that the reader receives them through Kohler's fictional persona. His narrative status goes beyond the rank of omniscient voice; he not only controls the characters but articulates and incorporates them in his made-up life. They are fictional illusions and Kohler prevails as the only center of consciousness.

These characters accommodate in some passages to mimetic frames of definition, but a few pages later they are easily identified with objects in Kohler's world, with body parts or with mental states. They are created inside the narrative, and it's the narrative itself which cancels them. Lou, for example, is featured as Kohler's most influential lover, and even though he recalls some of their romantic escapes together, her actual condition of woman is questioned as a consequence of the instability of predication in the book.

The same instability applies to Kohler's historian colleagues, who are likewise ontologically fuzzy. His relation with them is uncommon: Plammantee is Kohler's nemesis, and he says of the self-effacing Herschel «I hide in Herschel as he hides in me.» *(The Tunnel,* 283) Culp's concerns are basically linguistic, and he appears mysteriously after Kohler's quarrels with Martha. By means of these pseudo-characters, Kohler articulates and establishes his opinions, contrasting them with their logocentric interpretation of history.

Magus Tabor –Mad Meg– and Martha are at a higher level of definition, but they don't reach fictional immediacy. Master and wife belong to the protagonist's past –he is dead and she has «moved neighbourhood»– and they are flawed and vague as mental reflections are. The conversations and discussions Kohler has with them can never be considered events in the fiction, for they belong to the calm of consciousness. Tabor and Martha are created within the narrative and cancelled by the narrative itself, because Kohler's main tenet is a radical distrust in creation through memory.

Tabor is the magus of the word, and his speech is so full of passion that his audiences vibrate with emotion. He is a man of vision and has enlightened Kohler about the plastic quality of the process of history-making. After his death, Kohler shipped his master's chair from Germany, and it is there that he sits to write his works. Tabor, the chair and the verbal function share a close relationship in the book.

Obviously, the characters in *The Tunnel* don´t submit easily to naturalistic interpretations and they must be understood in terms of the narrative, which reinforces

the book´s self-rule. The reader is compelled to lean on these suspicious figures in order to stay within the fictional frame, but their role is basically formal. Their dialogues lighten the prose, and so they are suitable for an agile narrative flow, but as the tunnel takes shape and the method gains in density, they lose protagonism. For that reason, Kohler dispenses with his colleagues at a certain point and eliminates them in a despotic act of aesthetic manipulation: «Like the devil in the guise of a tailor, I scissor their shadows from underfoot where I´ve cast them, old playmates of mine. Then I roll their souls up, these silhouettes cut as if the pattern had been razoned from the cloth, and, under my arm, I take them down the hall to their domains.» (436-7)

Finally, there is a third component which establishes *The Tunnel* as an absolute entity, and it is the self-effacement of its system of allusions.

Gass´s book is a web of intertextual references. Literary, philosophical and mythological implications pervade the text creating an atmosphere of dense signification. Sometimes the allusions are explicit, but on most occasions they consist in motifs or images that can be recognized as deriving from the most celebrated written records in history. Names, fragments of poems, concepts of different philosophical theories, famous sentences, mythological items, etc. become diagnostic hints for the reader who is in search of an interpretation of the book in terms of pragmatic guidelines. Nevertheless, they are culs-de-sac deprived of denotative qualities; by means of their repetition, they create the illusion of meaning, but, with few exceptions, they fade with no more purpose than this ludic attribute.

This last quality confirms *The Tunnel* in its significance as an autonomous work of art. Its fictional components don´t adjust to the traditional narrative patterns, and the book is totally untrustworthy in the light of empirical knowledge.

2. IN SEARCH OF AN UTTERANCE

> «The poet struggles to keep his words from
> saying something, although, like the carrot,
> they want to go to seed.»[3]

The protagonist of *The Tunnel* has just finished a notable piece of history; G & I is a justification of the Nazi crimes, a calm and peace-seeking book according to his author, and its exhaustive technique qualifies him as a first-rate historian. But the strategy he has in mind for the elaboration of its introduction will make of it the antithesis of the history book. In order to confront the public book G & I stands for, he will write a private introduction, the personal work. «Perhaps my long German book was an exte-

3. Gass, 1989, p. 17.

rior, a façade, for which I am now constructing an inside, «un livre intérieur», as Proust put it.» (*The Tunnel,* 95) He fancies his introduction to be a domestic epic, unique in literature because of taking place entirely in the mind (32). This duality is the basic system upon which Kohler conceives his total book; it is furthermore the central exponent of the set of polar forces which interact within *The Tunnel* shaping up its metaphorical form.

The character of Kohler is also rooted in this sort of basic oppositions: he looks German, but he is American. His mind is split in two: one is his German self, the anti-semitic activist who broke windows on *Kristallnacht*, the author of G & I; the other is the sceptical Professor who suspects any absolutist manifestation and who aims at writing an honest introduction for his book.

This dialectical order of oppositions mirrors Hegel´s notion of the absolute: «The true is the whole. But the whole is only the essence completing itself through its development.» (in Bernasconi, 3) This assertion comprehends antithetical elements as a requirement of totality; only in its denial does the whole exist. This principle is a vital axiom in *The Tunnel's* process towards autonomy, as the next section will reveal.

The goal of Kohler´s personal book is, as he expresses it, «to put this prison of my life in language.» (*The Tunnel,* 4) But he is going to find a major obstacle in the process, and this is his essential nonconformity with the linguistic medium. Language is for him, on the one hand, an autocratic vehicle that imposes its inner configuration on the verbal function´s mental form, and, on the other, an impure element loaded with signification that it has acquired by its use in time. The kind of ideal language Kohler needs to render his written product doesn't exist.

The relation between the word and the concept in the world it denotes escapes any rational justification according to Kohler; it is an imposed correlation. The German poet Rainer Maria Rilke, who held this same position, wondered how people could exist who faced without prejudices the forms which already had a name.[4]

This attitude of Kohler´s is the product of knowledge; as one gains discernment, one loses innocence and passion. He remembers that, as a child, he considered the world to be made of absolute truths, and he believed blindly in words' referent. The grocery was his favourite place in town, and there he used to spend hours looking at the tins and food packages whose labels were for him «irreproachable judgements and unimpeachable statements of fact.» (*The Tunnel*, 59) This belief in the referent made of language a transparent dispenser of life for him, and he was fervently absorbed by the fictional world of almost every book he read.

Now, as a grown-up, Kohler questions the origin of words and, analyzing the example of his home town´s street names, some of which have now lost the attribute they invoked, he concludes that they stand for the past; «the sort of history they contain refers exclusively to states of mind, to fads and furbelows, to illusions, and points only

4. Rilke, R.M, *Rodin*. In Garcia Alonso, p. 58.

at the people who chose them, and never toward the things or persons they stand for.» (63)

The awareness of the whimsical affinity between the signifier and the signified is the reason of the drawings that Kohler makes with words; it is a way of highlighting a referent otherwise illegitimately represented by the word. His discontent with language's opacity is the cause of his bitterness, which contrasts with a happy logocentric childhood. To quote Kohler's own words «It is a killer –knowledge is– the big K.» (154)

Kohler's linguistic preconceptions are a serious difficulty to carry out his ambitious project of putting his life in words. His primary wish is to get included in his own work, to merge with the verbal reality encircling him, but his early endeavours are fruitless, and this causes in Kohler a state of anxiety reflected in the fragmentary prose of the book´s first fourth.

He studies different possibilities of self-representation by means of language; diaries are inconvenient not only because, in spite of the method's privacy, they can be an expression of human hypocrisy, but also because they impose their fictional pattern on their authors' conduct. Memory is also a channel to be discarded, «memory is not enough to establish the reality of the self, because the selves I remember are like photos in the family album.» (ibid., 109) Both procedures need a verbal phase of reordering and implementation in the creation of self, and this makes them linguistic artifacts, which is precisely what Kohler is trying to escape in his introduction.

Not even in the isolation of his work can the historian find a pure self-expression, and he suffers the agony of watching his page taken by his own lies. Kohler expresses his urge as follows: «I'd like to look below my eyes and see not language staring back at me, not sentences or single words or awkward pen lines, but a surface clear and burnished as a glass. There my figure would appear as perfectly as any Form reflected in Platonic space.» (ibid., 48-9) This quotation confirms his wish of using the linguistic medium not merely to describe but to «show.» The Platonic Forms or Ideas were held by Plato to have a real existence distinct from their manifestations in individual objects; this theory can be interpreted as an attempt to find the referent, which is in line with Kohler´s obsessions.

The problem of trying to give a verbal picture of the mind, as Kohler is attempting, is forgetting that thoughts experiment linguistic articulation before passing to consciousness. According to Gass, words are weapons and «we use to hold our thought as we hold a bone.» (Gass, 1989., 121) Unfortunately to Kohler, language imposes its structure even in the individual processes of thought; its ordering force is all-powerful, and this disheartens him in relation to his literary plans.

Words and their referents make the basic ordinary language; «words mean things –Gass maintains– But the use of language in fiction only mimics its use in life.» (Gass, 1980, 30) This is what Kohler –and Gass– rebel against, trying to transform the linguistic element when used with artistic purposes. In fact, this is what Gass means when he says that «the poet struggles to keep his words from saying something, and as artists we all

struggle to be poets.» (Gass, 1989, 301) Only realist fiction makes use of everyday language, because it aims at a description of life; but real art wants to make of its vehicle of expression a new element, for its goal is not reproduction but production, and for that purpose it must undergo an ontological transformation.

Kohler tries by different means to keep his words from saying something; on the one hand, he conceives an unconventional kind of language that, though keeping the basic syntactic structures, allows innovations in its lexicon, like functional shifts among grammatical categories, coining of new signs, etc. The result is a fresh style made of phrases like «the world is William welshing on a bet; it is a low blow, a dreary afternoon, an exclamation of disgust (...) It is Alice committing her Tampax to the trash» (*The Tunnel*, 18), and made also of new words meant to express a personal signification, like «Why should their ghosts Banquo me...» (ibid., 18) and «you want to Heidegger some wholesome thought, darken daytime for the TV, grind the world into a grain of Blake.» (ibid., 54)

Another method used by Kohler is to offer a mental portrayal, not by describing his thoughts, but by giving a chaotic verbal account of the random set of discourses that can make a chain of thought. Pieces of diaries, letters, poems, songs, and his imagined conversations with the improbable characters, mixed with ready-made elements from newspapers, legal articles, etc. build the dialoge of a restless mind in search of an utterance.

Kohler's attempts aren't rewarding; the assertion of self he wants to make hasn´t found a form this far. He implores his muses to sing, which must be interpreted in terms of the character he wants to imprint in his language, because «singing» and «whistling» in *The Tunnel* are the manifestations of the transparent discourse. Gass argues that, in literature, the sign «sings»; in ordinary language, sound and shape are accidental properties of words, «but when language is used as an art it is no longer used merely to communicate. It demands to be treated as a thing, inert and voiceless. Properties that it possesses accidentally as a sign it suddenly possesses essentially.» (Gass, 1980, 92-3)

According to Kohler, only the best poets can «sing», and paradoxically, some of them were blind, like Homer. In chapter four, Kohler begins digging the tunnel out of his house´s basement. It coincides with an intellectual «inscape» –to use his own word- towards an interior mode of cognition.

Kohler has proved to be a sceptic as far as language´s referential capacity is concerned. He believes as well that the knowledge supplied by the apprehension of the world through the senses is pernicious for artistic creativity; now he is convinced that only by sacrificing sight will he be able to «see»: «These days darkness that lies under the mind like the cool shade of a stream bottom yields our only safety, for to rush to the light is to Gloucester-out the eyes.» (*The Tunnel*, 69) Paradoxically, he admits that windows are important to him because «they let in whatever chooses them, and not at any shout of mine will they behave.» (283)

The difficulty to understand this theory of aesthetics originates in the double

value of the verb «see» as used by Kohler: on the one hand it invokes the kind of artistic insight he needs to comply with his project; on the other, it refers to the most superficial mode of perception, that which observes but doesn´t interpret. In the method that combines both, the historian has finally found the right creative strategy, that which will frame the final tunnel; by incorporating without decoding all kind of visual experiences, he will gather the material for the ultimate object of art, the product of his visionary artistry.

Kohler becomes to us an indiscriminate artist who absorbs as valid ingredients not only actual perceptions but also the mental visions which are the product of imagining and remembering. All these practices were discarded until now by him for their unsuitability in the expression of self; but the language by means of which they are conveyed now is emptied out of significance, it has become an inert element susceptible to modelling.

Kohler has adopted this technique under the influence of his master Tabor; it was he who advised him to write about his personal experiences, the things he had seen: «Write about change, about what you´ve seen with your own eyes: factory smoke, kids playing rob-the-candy-store. Write about transformation. Avoid love. Write about being, my boy. Write about me.» (244-5) Kohler rejects Culp´s suggestion of using limericks as verbal form because, since they are only surface, they don´t create self; but Tabor´s recommendation is highly advantageous for nothing could be more personal than creating a work of art out of the materials of the individual experience.

The tone of the book has turned serene and its language plain now that Kohler has found the right course of action towards the artistic expression he is looking for. He is entirely devoted to the production of written material, a new kind of language that has become a soft verbal clay ideal to shape his revealing item: «I´ve locked myself in my pen for safekeeping. Koh –I am writing myself into a whirlworld, Marta. The circulation of sound shall draw me up.» (149)

3. THE TUNNEL

> «there are no descriptions in fiction, there are only constructions, and the principles which govern these constructions are persistently philosophical.»[5]

The previous section has been devoted to the analysis of how Kohler´s denial of ordinary language as artistic medium impels him to dig a tunnel as an escape from the referent, and to enter a process of introspection searching for mental pictures. He explains

5. Gass, 1989, p. 297.

it as follows: «If I am lonely because I do not like the world, why should I let it in, then, to run around in my head like a troop of loud kids and trouble me? nosirree, I dig; I go down into the depths of myself and fool around in hidden and cart dirt away secretly.» (*The Tunnel*, 266)

The two levels of *The Tunnel's* metaphor are explained by Gass himself in an interview: «In my narrator's so-called referential life he is taking dirt out, but in terms of the construction of the book he is bringing it in and molding it. He is building two kinds of tunnels, then, one from the outside and one from the inside. In the verbal tunnel the reader is on the inside.» (Le Clair & McCaffery, 171)

The verbal dirt that makes the second tunnel is the linguistic residue of Kohler´s mental visions. By recuperating images from his past, he produces the verbal material neccesary to shape these thoughts. Kohler is going into his own depths; however, the book´s ludic aspect makes it hard to distinguish between his real memories and his fantasies. Uncle Balt is the most explicit example since, after having been powerfully defined, he proves to be a figment, as Kohler confirms: «So I might as well have an Uncle Balt. His invention affects me more in this moment than he would if he'd ever lived.» (*The Tunnel*, p. 301) This accumulation of verbal material, either remembered or invented, is designed by Kohler *only* to elevate that inverted-U-form above him, and does not have sentimental purposes, he being a deeply decontextualized character.

Annoyed with the superficial quality of most things in life –he has also a superficial side represented by his history book and his German aspect– Kohler wants to find the expression of «being» in opposition to the prevailing «appearing.» His uncle Balt is an illuminating case that he analyzes in those terms; he defines him as «a man shaped of absence» (122), made of pure isolation. Nevertheless, Kohler finds a lack of contrasting value in that quintessential property of his. He compares him to the emptiness of a well, but he argues that «no well can exist apart from the firm walls which surround it» (122), and so, consequently, Uncle Balt needs the people around him in order to establish his isolation. Kohler explains it with a structural terminology, saying that only after he discovered the difference between a term and a relation was he able to interpret Uncle Balt´s nature, for he was just a term (122).

Understanding Uncle Balt is a pivotal event in his artistic development, because it gives him the clue to the expression of Being he wants: «Uncle Balt has yielded me a metaphor for Being, makeshift maybe, but an image in the form of a tall dark column of damp air, hole going nowhere –yes– wind across the mouth of a bottle.» (121) This quotation epitomizes the reason why Kohler is building a tunnel with language; Being, as an intangible quality, cannot be rendered unless by using a corporeal medium that confines it in its own verbal medium? What could be more appropiate for Kohler to put the prison of his life in words than being imprisoned by his own words? This is the significance of the historian's metaphor: the object of art that he is creating with a metamorphosed language, the tunnel of words, is at the same time the form that defines and encloses his essential Being. With this purely plastic use of language, the artist

merges with his creation in an unprecendented event in the history of written art; he is the source of the linguistic material that actually engulfs him in a process of self-creation.

This search for the aesthetic absolute is a re-reading of Hegel´s metaphysics in the artistic domain. Gass even adopts his concept of *Dasein*, which Kohler finds suitable to define Uncle Balt's nature: «He was Dasein´s quiet cancellation. Dasein indeed.» (166)

But the building of this tunnel has Rilkean foundations as its efficient ascendancy. The German poet is the archetype of the artist who dreams of melting into his element in order to be incorporated in his own work of art. Like Kohler, he strives at «showing» by means of poetic language. creating an atemporal poem-object which can exist independently. His basic methods are likewise introspection and patience, incubating in the dark and yielding a fruit that gets illuminated.

Rilke defines poets as «the bees of the invisible»; Kohler makes often reference to that maxim, and the image of the bees appears constantly in his discourse. The phrase encapsulates the essence of Rilke´s aesthetics, and he explains it in a letter to his Polish translator by saying that the poets' mission is to imprint in them the transient earth in order to bring its essence back to life (Bermudez Cañete, 106). Bermudez Cañete clarifies the idea and argues that, for Rilke, only in the sphere of beauty, where things are liberated from their utilitarian dimension, can man approach the invisible. The Rilkean concept of the «invisible» is interpreted by this scholar as the product of a language without words (107). In consequence, the poet must be able to internalize the world and, by means of language, integrate it in «the invisible.»

The affinity with Kohler's creative process is obvious; he is using a language deprived of referential significance –a language «without words»– to create an artistic object which is the result of a subjetive practice. The verbal tunnel is an invisible entity, an amalgam of the artist and his reality, which materializes symbolically only under the eyes of the reader.

The Tunnel is never in the course of its reading as coherent as it is at the moment when its metaphor is rendered; the suffocating language and syntax towards the end of the book make the reader «feel» the form above him, and he leaves behind the battlefield where he has fought with the text´s epistemological difficulties to enjoy the plasticity of a language used by the sake of aesthetic goals.

Gass holds the opinion that the condition of simplicity is something to be adquired with effort: «Simplicity is not a given. It is an achievement, a human invention, a discovery, a beloved belief. Consequently, beneath simplicity itself, whenever it serves as an ideal, lie moral and metaphysical commitments of considerable density. If the foundations of Reality are simple, the grounds of simplicity are complex.» (Gass, «Simplicities». In *Finding a Form*, 305)

The previous statement must be applied to the interpretation of *The Tunnel*, for the book's final easy shape is achieved by saturation. The interaction of multiple discourses and the accumulation of diverse knowledge metamorphose into a bright and

distinct form. Only with effort can the transformation suffered by the language in *The Tunnel* be understood, since the reader strives to process an enormous amount of information whose function is in the end to serve as framing material.

The inner forces that build *The Tunnel* evoke the Heideggerian concepts of *Erlebnis* and *Ereignis*. *Erlebnis* describes the processes of «experience» necessary to have access to *Ereignis* or unprecedented «event» which takes place as an insight. In *The Tunnel* they find their equivalent in the practice of remembering as a way of gathering facts –imaginary or not– in order for the unique event of the verbal tunnel to take place. Anyhow, it must be understood that these two metaphysical concepts acquire purely aesthetic connotations when applied to Gass´s work.

The method of *The Tunnel* has a marked subversive character; defying the imposed signification of words, the verbal artist creates a new form of expression. Against the mechanical acquisition of the doublet signifier-signified, he celebrates the difficulty of a personal and subjetive mode of non-referencial cognition based on signifiers. Instead of being a vehicle to convey the referent, this new language *creates* the referent, but not a mimetic one; it´s a fictional object which integrates the artist and his reality.

«In every art –Gass says– *two contradictory impulses are in a state of Manichean war: the impulse to communicate and so to treat the medium of communication as a means, and the impulse to make an artifact out of the materials of the medium and so to treat the medium as an end.»* (Gass, 1980, 94) These two impulses are present in *The Tunnel*, since Kohler wants to reveal his self but discards mimetic methods of communication.

Poetic language, it has already been mentioned, undergoes in Gass an ontological transformation. In *The Tunnel*, this transformation acquires a new dimension, and the language´s texture changes as it crosses different stages towards the presentation of its verbal item. In an essay about Gertrude Stein, Gass defines *Protective Language* as an expressive mode which names but not renders and replaces events with speech; it is a mimetic discourse of a simple style whose narrative consequence is a distance between the object it describes and the object itself (ibid. p. 89-90).

This kind of language must be avoided when aiming at the product´s artistic immediacy. *The Tunnel's* fragmentary first stage tries to escape that variety of speech, and that´s precisely the purpose of the functional shifts and deviations of its lexicon observed in this essay´s second section. By breaking the rules of mimetic expression, an attempt is made to produce an independent artistic work. Nevertheless, it has also been mentioned that, as the book develops, its language gains consistency and simplicity. From the moment when Kohler visualizes the metaphor that sheds light on his method, the narrative medium undergoes a progressive transformation towards a traditional variant.

The book´s second part is, in fact, written in *protective language*. In the disclosure of his memories and/or fancies, Kohler's language is plain and homogeneous, and it could be understood as a vehicle for the conveyance of meaning. But at this point in the

book, the establishment of the verbal tunnel is palpable, and the power of language must not be found now in what the words «say», but in their essential materiality. Conceived as the substance of the establishment, the verbal medium has lost all its denotative properties.

A question may arise in relation to *protective language*: what's the reason of using a verbal mode that replaces events with speech in the elaboration of a fictional *event*? The answer is that only that kind of «neutralizing middle tongue», as Gass defines it, has the required plasticity for the molding of the tunnel. This language is «neither abstractly and impersonally scientific not directly confronting and dramatic, but one that lies in that gray limbo in between.» (89) Its superficial qualities of simplicity and neutrality are used in a context where they have a purely material transcendence, and the final tunnel is built by adding on this soft verbal substance.

4. EPILOGUE

The Tunnel is a subversive work of fiction designed by its author to resist the historically assumed and culturally imposed correspondence between a signifier and a signified. Gass condemns the bigotry that doublet inflicts in the relation between language and the world, and he resents the subsequent arduousness of the artistic discourse. He aims at finding a pure verbal element free of denotative load and capable of a powerful and personal expression.

The Tunnel has been conceived as the paradigm of self-contained novel to be ideally read non-referentially. It studies an ontological transformation of common language when used with artistic purposes and how it can acquire the mechanisms to enter new systems of signification.

The system of *The Tunnel* is based on framing principles since language is used there as material for the erection of a tunnel which becomes the book's organizing force. After the denial of language's signifying properties as a way to the referent, only its most material features are to be considered in this genesis of the referent. Everything contributes to the final shape –memories, fantasies, dialogues...– but the instability of most of the book's discourses confirms that their «veracity» in terms of pragmatic canons is irrelevant, and that only the verbal substance which supports them is of consequence.

But finding the expression of a liberated discourse is not an easy task, and the protagonist's creativity goes through acutely sterile phases in the ascending scale of his genius. *The Tunnel* is a Kunstlerroman where the artist makes two crucial discoveries: the first one is a cognitive method based on a superficial mode of perception which incorporates without decoding the material of the final visionary form. The second is the establishment of a literary self defined and ciscumscribed *only* by the language he produces. Once artistic maturity is achieved the narrative voice turns serene and consistent.

After the protagonist has found the right course of action, the ontological status of the tunnel is clear: on the one hand, every narrative ingredient in the book is legitimated by its material contribution to the round figure, and not by its relation to the world; on the other, the verbal tunnel has its mirror image in its metaphorical counterpart. The tunnel out of Kohler's cellar is the tunnel from the outside, which stands for the process of introspection undergone by the protagonist to escape the referential world. The tunnel from the inside is the one built with the verbal substance which holds Kohler´s mental depths. Both tunnels complement and justify each other and thus they establish the total closure of their system of signification. Metaphor is a stylistic device based on symbolic approximations to the referent, but it always stays aseptically distant from it. In consequence, a metaphorical model is very convenient for a signifying system that avoids the referential world as the source of meaning.

The Tunnel is a coherent piece of fiction with a solid theoretical foundation. To be precise, most of the fictional elements in the book are at the service of the ambitious design of creating a self-contained work of art. It is a manifesto of the poetic autonomy disguised under the forms of a fictional discourse. Gass's formal concerns find a channel in Kohler's creative activity which is a monument to the imagination.

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