

A Conversation with William Gass

It takes a great deal of nerve to ask William H. Gass for an interview, not because he will likely say no, but because he will likely say yes. And then? He's one of the greatest writers of our century, a philosopher by true specialty, and still at the center of controversy over the nature of writing, the purpose of writing, and the moral responsibility of the writer. His experiments with language and narrative form have always been in the limelight, and, with the arrival of *The Tunnel* and overly human William Frederick Kohler, are perhaps under the interrogation lamp. Kohler, a historian, has written *Guilt and Innocence in Hitler's Germany*. After years of reading documents that were figuratively, if not literally, drenched in blood, he now attempts to write an introduction to his own work. Instead, he deals with all he has found, including what he has found out about himself. He has, he believes, a "cold soul." Most readers are surely caught up in determining if that self-assessment is true. Is he a vile man? Or is he everyman? While Kohler is not the central focus of the following pages, they may help resolve the dilemma about his nature.

This conversation with William Gass took place at the International Writers Center, St. Louis. The Center is an underground complex, a mile or so from Washington University campus. It has a simple street entrance, just feet from busy traffic, and is thus easily accessible to someone already familiar with the site. The more conspicuous entrance is from above, through doors by which a legend proclaims "International Writers Center." But the Center itself is downstairs. The legend doesn't mention that one must take an elevator to reach it: that the stairs lead only to the maintenance maze of the building; that doors from the stair landings are not titled, and may not open. So, finding William Gass—and he is a dear man, a gracious host—was much like going into a tunnel and trusting that its creator and architect was truly an artist and a kind person. Here, with his usual patience and candor, he answers questions about his aspirations and accomplishments, and his hopes for William Frederick Kohler.

—R. M. Kinder

Works by William Gass: Non-Fiction: *Fiction and the Figures of Life, On Being Blue, The World Within the Word, Habitations of the Word, Finding a Form*; Fiction: *Omensetter's Luck, In the Heart of the Heart of the Country and Other Stories, Cartesian Sonata and Other Novellas, Willie Master's Lonesome Wife, The Tunnel, Reading Rilke* and the forthcoming *Tests of Time*.

Interviewer: I just finished reading *The Tunnel*, and though I disliked Kohler for a while—partly because of his foul language about women—he eventually won me over. He's trying to acknowledge everything in his own nature and still live with himself. Overall, he's a sympathetic character.

Gass: I doubt you would find a critic to agree with you.

Int: I think I would, and hope you'll discuss that in detail later on. But I'd like first to ask you some questions about your upbringing and perhaps your early writing. You said in the Preface to *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country and Other Stories* that at the age of eight you knew you wanted to be a writer. That's very young. Did you really know that soon?

Gass: Well, it was, you know, a family romance. Certainly it was that early. It was said that I wanted to be a fireman and then I wanted to be a writer. I remember wanting to be a writer; I don't remember wanting to be a fireman. But while it was very early, I don't have any idea why. I was a slow reader, that is, I was slow getting to be an accomplished reader in school. In the first few grades, I struggled. I had to work hard and I was behind a lot of people.

Int: I'm glad you said that, though it surprises me. It's probably good for some readers to know, too, because if William Gass could have had difficulty reading and still blossom into one of our greatest writers, then there's hope for the rest of us, those who straggle into abilities late—or

keep struggling. What kept you on course? Once you decided, were there key events or persons who kept you interested and going in that direction? Or was it kind of predetermined, as if you were born to be a writer?

Gass: It started in grade school. We had to do a report every week—written one week, oral the next—written, oral, written, and so on. Suddenly, for reasons the teachers alone knew, my oral reports were thought to be good enough that I was sent to other classes to give them. About the same time, I began to get reinforcement for my writing. Then, I gave the address at my junior high school graduation. It was a story, which I had to memorize—my memory was never good—but I had to stand up there and repeat it. By the time I was in high school, I was writing for the newspaper—I had a column—and I was on the Speakers Bureau. We went around giving speeches, debates, things of this sort. And so the early talks turned into lectures, which turned into a life of teaching.

Int: Were you already aware of your concept of the “word”?

Gass: I don’t think so. I wrote easily and I wrote a lot, and it sort of just poured out. Then there was a period of time when the flow stopped and writing became very difficult. But at first, not knowing anything, I just sort of bubbled. I wrote poems, I wrote any thought; I was in a kind of Whitman mode. I certainly was word drunk. I kept a list of the books I read, and I really tried to read a book a day. But was I saying that language was central? No. It was surrounding me; I was wallowing in it.

Int: Did the region of your upbringing influence your fiction?

Gass: Not much at all. North Dakota figures more in my writing than the Ohio where I grew up. North Dakota was

the place I was born; we moved when I was six. We would go back in the summertime and those returns to Minnesota and to North Dakota were more vivid and more exciting to me than the life I was leading in this small, industrial town in Ohio. I think that the North Dakota climate and landscape had more effect than the actual hometown one because it was so different. Summer was also a time of liberation for me—I was not only out of school but away in a small town where I could run around and have a good time. I was just enjoying and discovering.

Int: Do you believe you had a philosophical bent even then? When you were very small did you worry about grand concepts or were you just a normal kid?

Gass: Well, I don’t know. It’s normal to be at odds with your father, I suppose. I don’t know that I had any philosophical bent, but I was very argumentative. I was always arguing with my father who had strong opinions, and mine were equally strong.

Int: Did he encourage the arguing?

Gass: No. He hated it and that’s probably why I continued to do it—I was provoking him. But I don’t know that I had any abstract or generalized notions. By high school, I did, certainly, I was reading the popular literary philosophers, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, people like this, and I’d already decided that I wanted to study philosophy. But before then, no.

Int: You’ve described the kind of reader you hoped would read your books, but also stated it didn’t matter if that reader existed. Do you, then, write only for yourself?

Gass: I think I’d go further. I don’t really write for myself. When the work is underway, I write with regard to the

work itself—to its demands, as they become clearer. I'm a slow writer and it takes me a while to figure out what I'm doing. I try to respect the text and do what it requires. In fact, I figure the work out only when what I've done begins to tell me.

When I start to write only for myself, I tend to ride my hobbyhorse. Oh, I do fall into that trap—and it is a trap. But I believe that, finally, the text should never be skewed from its inherent course. Sometimes, I wish I hadn't, and weren't, making what I end up making, but there isn't anything I can do about it except quit. If the story has some integrity, then it's oddly like an argument: it has its own logic, its own direction, and its own sense, and my role is to find out what these are and be obedient to them. If I'm not, then I can sense myself moving the work in a direction it really was not meant to go. Still, I'm almost always surprised about how things turn out.

Int: The reader, too, has to trust that process, to be willing to be surprised, to give into the text. Doesn't she have to trust that she will eventually understand things—words—that she might initially object to? That she will experience what you, the writer, are discovering?

Gass: I hope so.

Int: You've said that when you write the first paragraph, the rest of the story is in those words, as if it flowed out in one shake of the pen. That is, you have to look into a word, start dealing with it, and it's a universe. Now, is that your concept?

Gass: Yes, but usually the word isn't isolated. It's in the context of a metaphorical play, making the word—which often turns out to be the title—an image, a symbol. I wrote a story called "Icicles" in which the notion of the icicle became at once symbol and itself; in another story, I began with a cockroach. In *The Tunnel*, the word extended

into the story. It wasn't just the "tunnel" as if it might be found in a dictionary, but *The Tunnel* connected to a bunch—pretty soon a whole bunch—of images, and then I sort of scare the bats [nice chuckle] out of the cave.

Int: Are you discovering those images? Not creating them?

Gass: Oh, yes—I discover them. That's the feeling, anyway. Once I'm inside a word, it becomes a philosophical concept. The whole world is there. It even has its own philosophical parallel. I think this is sort of a Hegelian notion—everything is so interconnected that if you begin investigating anything scientifically, you will eventually have to explain everything.

Int: That sounds similar to the superstring theory that Brian Greene explains in *The Elegant Universe*. He's saying, I think, that all the properties of the universe are united because they are looped together in patterns of vibration, like notes from a string. Nothing is in one specific place as, say, an atom is thought to be. Does that relate to your concept of the word?

Gass: Oh, yes—because the word is in many places at once. Whitehead said that people think reality has a simple location. That is, of course, also true about Descartes, for example, because a piece of matter in Descartes has an address, and that address is given by three axes. And so, you can locate a piece of matter in space by giving x, y, z axes. Then if you wanted to have four dimensional space, you simply have to have more numbers to fix a point. That's all it means to have four dimensions.

And that conception of the fourth dimension may be located in terms of a place in three dimensional space at a certain temperature, say—that's the fourth number. But if you break down that conception, that notion of space, as Whitehead, and then quantum mechanics, do, then you don't have simple locations anymore.

That also goes back to certain conceptions of what history is, how history operates, and how stories are supposed to operate. I have had a tendency to be non-narrative because I think narrative locates things in a simple cause-and-effect relationship in a simple space. And I don't think reality is like that.

Int: Is your approach more in accord with modern scientific views of reality?

Gass: I think that through the whole nineteenth and twentieth centuries there was a breakdown in the linear conception of reality. It had been attacked before by Hume, as had the idea that thinking was no longer to be understood in terms of a linear syllogistic model. Those concepts began to shift, even among logicians. Russell, for example, and Whitehead are logicians who were beginning to feel uncomfortable with the simple "if we have these premises, we draw this conclusion, and have some more premises."

Those notions were slowly developing in many historical, scientific, and literary writings, all at once. I don't know that one came before another, or one influenced the others, but there was something about the sense of finding inadequate certain methods of explanation that were basically Cartesian.

Int: Do you find this outlook positive?

Gass: Well, the other one's mechanical. This one is a little more Hegelian. It includes a sense of when "A" vibrates, everything eventually vibrates.

Int: What about current changes in the word and technology? What effect will they have? Will the new electronic books, internet publications, the abbreviated language they're using—that hideous code—be the end of literature as we've known it?

Gass: I don't think so. A few who propose this are anti-reading, anti-literary, anti-book. And this has always struck me as odd. Over and over again, one technological industry has replaced another. Some people may lose their jobs when industries go broke, and there will be people who wistfully think about "the time when." But, by and large, when the typewriter was supplanted by the computer, for instance, there wasn't any great fuss. Nobody wistfully said, "Oh, the typewriter." There are still things that typewriters can do better than computers. And no one tried to make a computer into, or pretend it was, a typewriter, though, of course, it *did* what typewriters *do*. And when the motorcar took over from the horse, they did call it horseless carriage for a while, but they didn't try to *imitate* a horse and carriage. And, after a while, they called it a car.

Now [laughing], you see, they're still pretending they're making books.

As long as they're doing that, there's nothing to worry about. I mean, they're trying to sell us something as if it were a book. Instead, they should just go and do what they do well. The computer does wonderful things. So it should go and do them. The book happens to be like a bicycle. A bicycle is just a wonderful piece of machinery—it does what it does wonderfully. So does a book. Now you're not going to be able to do a book much better than a book does. But go on and do something else—fine.

I read that one of the great advantages of these new electronic books is that you can store a lot of books in one little cassette and then you don't have all these books bulking up, you know, where you're living. I thought, well, if you're living in a shoebox, that might be true, but the fact is, it costs a couple hundred dollars for one of these things, and I can buy an awful lot of books for that, and good books, too. I just think that they're gadgets right now, and every kitchen is full of gadgets.

Int: Also there's a pleasant, tactile side to words and books.

Gass: Oh, there are enormous numbers of things that books have that these things don't.

I think that if printed books ever phase out, we'll lose a lot. Reference works, for example. Now, I love my reference works, because while I'm hunting for, you know, what does "pastrami" mean, I find all kinds of other words that I start to read about. I can't open an encyclopedia without getting lost in it. The dictionary, too.

The same thing is true about going to the stacks in the library. You see all other kinds of books and say "what's that?"

But, for just looking something up, the machinery's wonderful. It saves a lot of time. So, for a lot of people, it's an efficient machine; but not for serious people doing scholarly work.

Int: I can type in "William Gass," and Who! So many links.

Gass: [Laughter] All kinds of lies.

Int: I was taught that the mediocre writer identifies problems, and that the great writer addresses them, in fiction. That always seemed to me to be a good distinction. Do you think that kind of distinction is accurate?

Gass: Up to a point it is. It's complicated. The really great writers, the supremely great ones, they do address, and they overcome, but a lot of writers, good ones, identify problems and then very carefully never address them—they find ways around them. If they're very good, these ways can be creative and become a part of their way of writing.

Int: Could you give an example?

Gass: Sure. One of the things that is very much an aspect of this is that almost every writer will have certain subjects

that send him off in what I call a "page rage." It's like some sort of sore tooth. D. H. Lawrence and sex, for instance. On the other hand, other writers avoid these subjects. They approach them with silence, circumlocution—they can't confront, not directly. Now one of the great circumlocutors is Henry James. He writes about adultery and sexuality constantly, but only in this very delicate, roundabout way. But that roundabout-ness becomes his triumph. The difference, I think, is frequently the contemporary writer is encouraged to run right into a subject as if it were a tree. He never circles. And if you don't circle, you don't see as much. James is walking around the subject. By not directly confronting it, he sees everything.

Int: I wonder about Toni Morrison, because there are so many different views of her writing, among them that she's repetitious and hammers her point until she turns readers off, and an opposing stance that by these very methods she's identifying contemporary issues and explaining the perspective that's required in order to survive those problems.

Gass: I think that both sides are right in a way. I tried to find a word that would describe her mode of operation once and sprang it on her. She seemed to like it.

Int: What was it?

Gass: Operatic realism. It's because what she does is both melodrama and realism—a fusion. Now operatic realism is the kind of thing that you get in an opera, even, let's say, a *verismo* kind of opera, which is supposed to be like Pagliacci. Operas don't really do reality, but are infused with it. The curtain doesn't just come up on everybody sitting around reading a book, doing nothing. Something has to be happening.

That's what Beckett was so marvelous at; nothing

happened on his stage because that's the way the real world is. Ninety percent of the time, externally, nothing happens.

And, so, when you get this kind of surrealism, with this powerful emotion—well, I always read Toni's books that way, as operas. Then, I don't feel the criticism that's often made of repetition in her work. Indeed, in opera, you can sing the chorus again and again.

Int: That's a wonderful way to look at it.

Gass: If you don't look at it that way, then you'll almost certainly say, "All right! Enough already."

Int: If I like a book, I give into it, and try to find a way to read it. I've read certain works, though, that never won me over, no matter how I read them, like *The White Hotel*, and *The Painted Bird*.

Gass: You don't like frauds. Those writers are frauds.

Int: What do you mean?

Gass: Well, Kosinski's whole career is in doubt because it isn't clear to what degree he is the author of his own manuscript. That's what I was referring to. And the author of *The White Hotel* has been accused of plagiarism.

Int: From Freud?

Gass: Yes. So their whole careers are under a cloud.

Int: And that may make their work lack integrity? The reader senses this?

Gass: Maybe. That's what I was suggesting. I happen not to like their work either, because I think it's manipulative.

Int: That might explain my reaction to some of the atrocities in the works—the descriptions didn't seem necessary. Some books seem almost criminal, crimes themselves. Of course, they're not great works of literature—Grisham has one book that starts with a young girl being raped in a particularly vile way. There's no reason to do that.

Gass: Well yes, you know, the old tradition—which goes back to language again. When the Greek theatre moved from a very symbolic, poetic and static tradition to Euripides and beyond, more and more things happened on stage in full view of the audience. Still, Sophocles does not have Oedipus blind himself on stage, though no one would miss the opportunity now. Today, he'd have to blind himself in full view of the audience. You'd have to see the pin going into the eyes, blood everywhere. But Sophocles wants to have that happen off stage, so his language, the speech that describes it, will do the trick. I'm thinking of, perhaps, as violent an occasion as takes place in Faulkner's *Sanctuary*, where Temple Drake is raped by Popeye in a corncrib.

Int: And with a corncob!

Gass: Yes. But half the people who read the book never quite get it because it's told in such an unusual way.

Int: You think they really don't get it?

Gass: I know they don't, because I've had students, many students, who didn't. I think Faulkner wants the effect to come through the language and not through a sleazy reenactment of the actual event.

Int: I noticed that in *The Tunnel*, you never descend to sleazy reenactment for effect. You don't get too graphic about the real atrocities committed on the Jewish people.

Gass: One section; three pages. The Dubno description. That's the only place where I describe an actual holocaust narrative in the poet's words. That's the only occasion.

Int: But Kohler tries to make sense of atrocity through language. Eventually, we know he's acknowledging the worst that's in humanity and accepting himself in spite of it. And the reader, therefore, can see herself connected to the Nazi persecution and forgive herself.

Gass: I was hoping the reader would empathize with Kohler based on an understanding of the complex connections of his good and bad elements, how they develop, and how he is built by his own history.

Int: You once said that Faulkner couldn't write about anything trivial because to him there was nothing mean under the sun. He gave every human being and every action value. I feel that's true of your work, too. Is that something you're conscious of? Trying to add to the dignity of being human?

Gass: No, though I certainly believe that. When one's working, though,—when one's living—one doesn't do it. It's the grain of sand, the world in a nutshell, the flower in a crannied wall that one pays attention to.

This is the kind of problem that happens all the time at universities—between generalists and specialists.

Int: What do you mean?

Gass: It's an old traditional problem, micro-cause vs. macro-cause. You have the specialist who investigates some particular thing, minutely, and so goes into it at great length. Then you have the generalist, who puts all kinds of things together in a wide sweep. Well, the problem is that the generalist ends up being superficial, and the specialist becomes picky and empty.

But if you go into a subject properly, to understand more and more about it, you have to widen your gaze. Similarly, to be a good generalist, you have to be a specialist about a number of things, in order to know what your subject is, what the levels of understanding are.

When they become superficial, the trouble with most generalists is not that they can't treat everything in a profound way—because that's not what they're after—but because if they don't understand what level they're on, then they will become superficial.

I read a book on polar exploration once, in which the author put it perfectly. He was studying icebergs and, of course, most of the time most of the iceberg is submerged. And so the question was "Well, how do you know anything about an iceberg?" "Well, if you've been around icebergs a long time," he says, "the particularities of the iceberg's surface will tell you how much there is down there." And that's what a good generalist does. He presents something so you can sense how much there is underneath. And then a specialist does the opposite.

This used to be done in a very obvious and logical way. Working with the structure of the atom, you know, in the old days, we suddenly saw all these particles revolving around the nucleus, and we said, "It's just like that—heavenly bodies." So you had a sense that the smallest structures and the largest structures were harmoniously related. And that's the kind of world in a grain of sand.

Well, you also have to look at the world and see just a grain of sand. I wrote a piece once called "On Simplicity," on the same kind of dialectical interchange between simplicity and complexity. The simple style, for instance, or the notion of simplicity, as in Shaker furniture, involves an enormously complex sense of what this simplicity is doing, and what makes it so great—whereas, when you're merely simple, you're simple. That's all. There are a number of terms like that, that have a similar dialectical relation.

Int: What have you wanted to accomplish with your writing and has that changed?

Gass: Well, I don't think of much in terms of aims or change. That is odd about me in a way. My ideas about what I wanted to do, both as a career and as a writer, were formed in high school. And usually this isn't the case. People don't know what they want to do and how to do it and so forth when they're so young.

But as far as accomplishing what I wanted to do in writing, I think, I feel more like I'm at the beginning. The problem I have is that there are always ongoing projects which are attached to the past and what I really want to do is to start something new. I've always had the same aim, and that is to break new ground and to do as well as I could. To add something to the art is my idea of the only real accomplishment. Think of somebody working in science. If they can add some bit of knowledge to their field then they've done something. And if you can add something to the art—when you do that, what you've done is open up possibilities. You don't add something to the art by merely perfecting something.

Int: What new possibilities do you think you have opened?

Gass: I don't know that I have done all that much yet, in terms of really new things. Of course, in one sense, one always works with what's been done before. So, things that were, say, peripheral in a previous period, if they become central then you have a new period. And that, I think, is the difference basically between a modernist and a post-modernist tradition. Things that were peripheral devices you find in lots of writing in the modernist period. Then in post-modernism they simply became central elements and so forth. Nothing new in that sense. The trick is to work with the same things in different combinations, different relationships, different hierarchies of value rather

than discovering something really new.

Int: What was the main thing in *The Tunnel* that was new for you?

Gass: *The Tunnel* more aggressively explores certain kinds of connections between the reader and the writer, than is usual—not that it's never been done. Still, the process of implicating the reader in the narrator's consciousness, and causing readers to draw back even from themselves, as they momentarily may sympathize with the narrator, for instance, seems new. That kind of maneuver happens in other works, but I don't know how often it's really part of a program, as it is in my book.

Int: Did you know that was the program as you began it?

Gass: No. It developed out of the subject of rhetoric. The definition of the rhetorical device is usually that rhetoric is aiming at a certain effect in the reader, or audience. It's that notion of the rhetorical and persuasive power of language that developed out of the subject as I wrote. *The Tunnel* has to do with the power of persuasion—linguistic persuasion—which has always been a subject of mine in a way.

Int: How did the voice come about in the three-page passage describing the Dubno death pit?

Gass: That kind of voice is peculiar because it is the voice of most historians. It's a voice of somebody who has not experienced events but only documents. It's a reader's recreation. This is a good strategy for writing students. You take some account in the newspaper of some event and then rewrite it from the point of view of a witness or participant. This is, of course, something that happens in historical fiction all the time. It's a peculiar thing—you have to be seeing something you never saw. You have to

invent what it would have been like, only not for you, but for your narrator.

And in the case of the famous description of the Dubno death pit, as opposed, say, to the Kristallnacht, or some other moments like that in the book, the clue, or initial key, is the tone of the original document, which is absolutely flat. Now that means that you have to write, I think, extremely simply and with sentences that seem flat and matter-of-fact, but which, nevertheless, aren't flat. It's a difficult process.

Int: What did you think would be the critical response to *The Tunnel*?

Gass: It was pretty much what I expected. I knew the material was inflammatory, I knew that the way I'd written it almost invited comparisons between myself and the author. And the breaches of decorum, which are characteristic of all my work but here have been taken to a very formal level—I mean they were a part of the whole structure—those things were going to be offensive and offensive in vital ways. They aren't simply crude. Also, it would raise the issue for readers who were on, in effect, a different wave length esthetically than mine. I'm thinking particularly of the issue of writing finely about, and in support—or in representation—of things that are reprehensible.

This is an interesting esthetic issue, one I've always been fascinated with. I mean if Shakespeare does it (and perhaps it's because he give characters like Iago such great lines), nobody seems to mind—except for *The Merchant of Venice*. But if in our day opinions that people dislike are given eloquence, then there's a great deal of objection to it. I knew that was something likely to happen, if I were successful—that is, if I could give eloquence to such opinions.

Also, the twists. I suppose the standard one would be the description of the people being massacred at Dubno, my trying to give that a very sympathetic and horrifying quality. Afterwards, the narrator muses about the many

people who were killed, and all that was lost as a consequence. Then there is a sudden shift and he focuses on not only the good things lost, but the bad things lost—that is, he focuses on the fact that if you kill several million people, you kill lots of criminals as well.

Int: But that's the honest examination.

Gass: That's what someone on my side might say, but that kind of thing to many people undermines either the goodness or the horror.

Plus, there is the fact that the book isn't really about the holocaust. It's about a person who was never involved in it, who isn't Jewish, who's just this white male—and for such a person to write about it is almost sacrilegious.

So, I expected that reaction, and I got it. The response didn't surprise me. And I would have been upset if no one else had gotten upset. I mean the book was meant to be upsetting. The reception of other books has disturbed me sometimes because the reactions were unexpected, but in the case of *The Tunnel* I was pretty well ready for them.

What I didn't expect, in some cases, was the perceptiveness of some reviewers who were very favorable and very insightful. That was surprising in a good way.

Int: Which books were you disturbed about?

Gass: Well, *Cartesian Sonata* was hardly noticed, then very badly read. That bothered me quite a bit. Most of the time I'm pretty impervious, but that disturbed me and I'm not quite sure why.

I think that when I started out, my books appeared on the scene and surprised people. They just didn't expect me, of course—these were books that were a little different. After a while, though, there were people who were reading my theories and criticism and taking oppositional points of view. So, when my new books come out, I have a whole

bunch of opponents waiting for them that I didn't have at the beginning.

Int: Which is a sign of your success.

Gass: Well, sure. It's bound to happen, bound to happen. You get used to having opposition.

Int: You said that sometimes when you're writing, something occurs that you didn't count on and you wished it hadn't happened. Then you have to stay true to the work itself and follow it. Did anything like that happen in *The Tunnel*? Did anything surprise you?

Gass: Oh, yes. That happens in everything I write. Sometimes I can banish it, and should, because what I didn't expect was passages which I may have rather liked, but which really didn't belong in the book. And so I have to banish them. They're really devilish, because I'm always tempted to follow them.

Usually, since I'm writing over such a long period of time, something happens that puts a theme or an idea in my head and then it inveigles itself into my book. Maybe I could use it somewhere else, but not in the book I'm writing.

There are other things which are just, well, obsessions. I find myself chewing the same old eraser once again. Then, occasionally that material suddenly becomes disturbing in a way that makes me realize it really belongs.

Int: You retired from teaching, I understand, about a year ago. Do you miss it?

Gass: Well, I'm not quite away from it because I still talk to groups of students and so forth, and a few students still come by. But I think I will not miss the actual teaching, but the preparation, because preparing is how I learn,

really. For me, to try and explain something to somebody else is to have to learn about it. And that, that I may miss.

Int: You explained earlier that when you're teaching a subject like philosophy, you find it easy to discuss, say, what Plato said or wrote, but when you're talking to someone about her own writing, it's more difficult for you.

Gass: Well, when we're talking about my understanding or your understanding of Plato it's a remove from the psyche—only scholars would get their narcissistic relationship involved there. Whereas, for a writer, if you say she doesn't write well, you're attacking her whole character, her nature, making her whole being, you know . . .

Int: Questionable?

Gass: Yes. Paul Valery said once "Every sentence you write follows you around like a chain of monsters."

Int: Oh, how terrible.

Gass: Yes and a bad sentence will never be, you know, forgotten. Well, to talk about somebody's not succeeding in an artistic realm is quite different. It's far more intimate. You can be saying "Well, you see this sentence doesn't quite get it because," and you're really saying "Your perceptions are terrible. You're ignoring everything. You're not seeing this." Or "This emotion is terribly inappropriate. Where's your empathetic power?" In writing, our inadequacies are always in front of us.

Int: I read that Coleridge's teacher once brought all the essays back to class with no grades, returned them to the students, and said everyone had to rewrite the essays so that no sentence could be used in another paper. Each sentence had to apply perfectly only to the subject at hand. That seems harsh.

Gass: Yes, but it is a good standard.

Int: When you remarked “we’re all attempting to do the same thing,” were you speaking of students?

Gass: Problems are not always the same, but a person who’s trying to write, and having difficulty in succeeding, is suffering just as much as the so-called professional. In fact, everybody starts out the same anyway, going through the same process. If, for instance, I go around taking pictures of something, I do the same things and worry about a lot of the same things, and go to the same amount of trouble that a really good photographer does—the desire, the strain, the time spent. It’s just that when I finish clicking, there isn’t anything there.

If a person is serious, not just fooling around, then the pain is the same. Suppose I fail the high jump in high school? I feel terrible. Then I fail the high jump in the Olympics, and I feel terrible. But I don’t think that the feeling of the Olympiad person is somehow finer or worse or necessarily deeper. It’s the same. I mean, we’re all in the same boat. We tried to do something and we failed, and we cared about it and we suffered for it, and we’re looking at the same worn and empty hands.

Gass, William. “A Conversation.” Interview conducted by R. M. Kinder. *Pleiades* 21:2, 2001, pp 152-172.