

“Room-Full of Gass but no Substance”

Tests of Time: Essays

William H. Gass

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by Jeff Burse

Near the midpoint of his newest collection of essays, William Gass says that “Words are persuasions poured into the ear, revelations delivered to the reading eye.” There is a perhaps unconscious allusion to the poisoning of Hamlet’s father here. That words can be toxic recalls the preface to the first section: “It will surprise no one to learn that I much prefer my own bile and bad nature to theirs.” On the acknowledgements page Gass advises, “Each piece has suffered second thoughts, had cuts restored, tactlessness and injudiciousness rejoined, caution, like a scoutmaster’s hat, once more thrown to the winds.” A reader is prepared for the sourness to come.

The content is divided into three categories. “Literary Matters” begins with how narratives are formed and what experimentation in fiction is like, and moves on to appreciations of Italo Calvino and Peter Handke. There follows a discussion of list-making, and an essay, “The Test of Time”, which attempts to describe how art survives. The second section, “Social and Political Contretemps”, contains essays on writers and politics, tribalism, censors, on finding something to have faith in, and prejudice. The concluding section, “The Stuttgart Seminar Lectures”, presents three pieces: the thoughts of a fictional author, a revisiting of a children’s rhyme, and musings in a Platonic fashion on the nature of words.

No more than most essays, Gass’s cannot be described as purely expository, descriptive, argumentative or narrative. They are verbose, didactic, bullying, and filled with unsubstantiated assertions. The style of these will be looked at later; his thinking will be examined first. An early example of flawed reasoning is Gass’s argument that the nineteenth-century novel was “a delight to the bourgeois. It was story glorified by fiction.” For Gass, stories “invent a world which isn’t there,” while fictions “fill their pages and the stories they pretend to tell with data...” Stories, he expounds, are told “in order to live. That is just another one of our problems, and one wonders will we ever grow up. But we do not tell ourselves fictions” for they are “too complicated.” While Gass does say that many nineteenth-century novels are “great as works of art,” they are clearly wretched hybrids—mostly story, gussied up with a bit of fiction—created to validate specific beliefs (in money, religion, the class system). “The Nature of Narrative” provides no evidence for these assertions. There aren’t any sketches of novels by, say, Dickens, Melville, Balzac or Dostoevsky to serve as examples of the point Gass wants to make. There is an almost irrational spite towards the literature of various countries and an entire century of writers, not to mention the readers damned through their consumption of these works.

The number of problems in Gass’s essays mount rapidly. There are numerous passages where wordplay is meant to rush one by the abandonment of exactness or common sense. “When the Seine leaves Paris for the Channel, it makes several large loops while being forced by

physics to skirt high ground.” (69) Well, no. Geology plays a considerable part. Perhaps Gass, who is not a scientific thinker, is convinced that all natural phenomena comes down to physics. Physics describes certain “laws” of nature, but on its own physics doesn’t “force” anything. Here is more in the same vein: “Unfortunately, history, even in [Rousseau’s] own time, had already shown that God did not exist...” History, like physics, shows nothing. Furthermore, the argument over whether or not God exists isn’t a closed case for other people, so the smooth assurance that history has dealt with ‘the God problem’ is really just wistful and disingenuous. Elsewhere, Gass can say that were there something “worthy of worship” it should not be addressed or paid attention to, “so it may lie safe like a city left empty and forgotten, silent inside us, solely in the deeps of us, so we might wonder about it like some wonder about Atlantis and, lost and alone, so it may remain worthy of worship, and a star shining in the midst of our dirty earth.” This is a concise description of his isolationism and misanthropy. Gass’s inadequacy at providing solid arguments calls into question the purpose behind collecting these essays in the first place, and the further one reads, the more inescapable becomes the conclusion that they may be unworthy of being published.

In the essay “The Writer and Politics: A Litany”, Gass tells in fleeting fashion how writers have managed when involved with, or assaulted by, the state, organized religion and public opinion. His glancing view means that remarks about particular individuals open up more than he wants to delve into. “T.S. Eliot’s politics, unlike Wyndham Lewis’s or Ezra Pound’s, were everywhere yet remote, like a distant smell or a sound of surf.” When it comes to anti-Semitism, Eliot is not that different from his friends, and Gass’s insulation of this revered figure becomes suspect. However, he doesn’t hesitate to target Alexander Solzhenitsyn, stating that his “opinions are those of someone still in the pay of the czar.” This is an incredibly undeveloped way of looking at a remarkable figure in twentieth-century literature, who now is often portrayed as a reactionary. To say that Solzhenitsyn is of one mind with all czars is critical bankruptcy. Is Gass not capable of some more penetrating insight concerning Solzhenitsyn’s love of and devotion to pre-Communist Russia—specifically, its great literature and art? Solzhenitsyn was a deeply divided man, a great mind, but emotionally scarred and psychologically troubled. Yet Gass makes no attempt to understand him.

In “Tribalism, Identity, and Ideology” Gass laments for Salman Rushdie: “What scale can weigh his years of imprisonment within the hug of security police, where we must imagine his spirit being cautioned to skulk through the hallways of his own head? There is no way we can share these fears of a hidden gun held at the heart, as in a cruel game, to go off at a time unnumbered on any dial.” For years Solzhenitsyn was imprisoned in a camp, under the eye of security guards, barely fed, poorly clothed, labouring daily (and he has said many others suffered much worse), surrounded by guns, without benefit of intercession by governments or the media until well after he was released from a small prison to the larger prison of the USSR. How, and why, Gass arrives at a moral decision in favour of Rushdie and against Solzhenitsyn is a mystery. In the latter’s case Gass isolates him from his culture, and makes a snotty remark, but when it comes to Eliot, Gass essentially excuses his odious beliefs by turning them into an intellectual trend in which Eliot merely partakes along with some of his contemporaries.

Apart from poor reasoning, and obvious malice, most essays contain stylistic problems. There is clumsy alliteration and wordplay, as two examples will show. First: “Work occupies, amusement preoccupies, promises attract, threats distract, rigamarolic rites reassure, dogmas deaden and disguise.” Second: “The signifier has swallowed the signified, although you may still observe it as a swell in the stomach, like a bulge beneath the bedclothes of a bereaved and

sleeping body.” These are high-class tongue twisters, with nothing illuminating to offer. Early on, Gass provides an excuse for such cleverness: “Alliteration does more than candor can to justify God’s ways to man.” This is meaningless, and a bad excuse for an awful tic which is found throughout the book. As well, the invocation of God is odd, since Gass denies there is one, and even if one were to allow that it’s a play on Milton, it’s still a very weak defence. Occasionally he does produce a memorable phrase, as when he says that lists “are the purposeful coming together of names like starlings to their evening trees.” And there are times when one can agree with his points, while noting their later contradiction (e.g., his ambivalence on the power of writers) or awkward phrasing.

In the first two pieces which make up “The Stuttgart Seminar Lectures”, Gass’s talent for fiction and riffs find a suitable form, but “Quotations from Chairman Flaubert” and “There Was An Old Woman Who” do not redeem the bulk of *Tests of Time*. Gass’s fiction—such as *The Tunnel* (1995) and *Cartesian Sonata and Other Novellas* (1998)—is innovative, controversial, and explores how to tell a story. A mordant wit, aggression and loose generalizations may work in a character’s voice, but in this collection they prove fatal to all arguments.