

# SENTENCED TO DEPTH

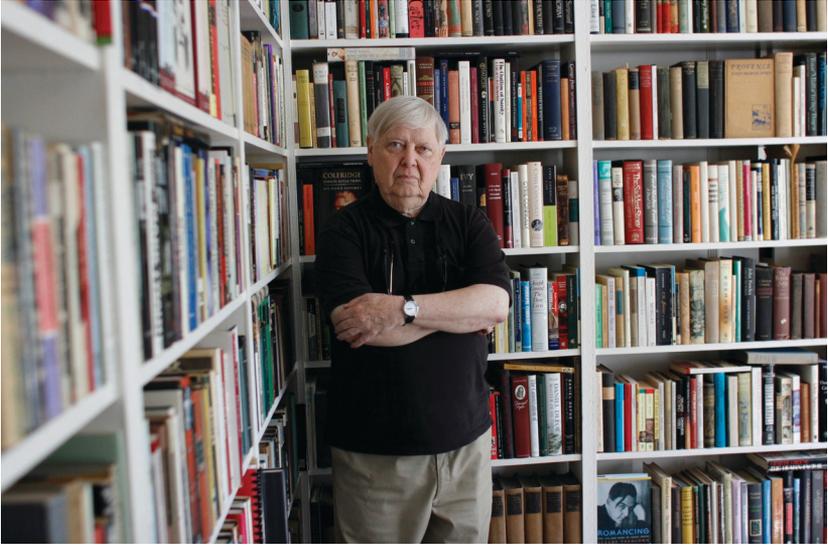


photo by Frank Di Piazza

*an interview with*

## **WILLIAM H. GASS**

*by John Madera*

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**I**n *Fiction and the Figures of Life*, William H. Gass offers the fledgling writer—or any writer, period—numerous insights toward the construction of meaningful, emotionally resonant, and culturally significant fiction, or, as Gass writes, “objects which are especially worthy of love.” Throughout the book, Gass elucidates the disparities between fiction and philosophy, while also revealing how philosophers and novelists share numerous techniques, strategies, and obsessions. Language, identity reinvention, creating worlds, and playing “divine games” are the domains of both. Gass, speaking of the artist’s ongoing responsibility to make works of art, works of love, also unleashes his vitriol on the declining culture of the West.

In “Even If, By All the Oxen in the World,” Gass uses his critique of American popular culture as an opportunity to examine what consciousness is and how it remains elusive no matter how deeply it’s been explored. While consciousness “comes too easily” and “is narrow, shuttered by utility, its transitions eased by habit past reflection like a thief,” it can also

close and open like an eye; its depths are not illusory, and its reflection itself is not mechanical. It’s something won, retrieved, conserved as love is, and as love should be . . . Every consciousness has its rainless lands and polar wastes, its undiscovered and unventured countries. And there are simply boring stretches, like the Western Plains or the dry mouth’s taste. Certainly consciousness is capable of subtle, wonderful, and terrifying transformations. After all, it is the dream we live in, and like the dream, can harbor anything.

Gass proceeds to depict a very bleak world. He asserts that we are passive and voyeuristic and that most of what we produce is

ephemeral and meaningless. Most of our acts are mechanical, futile, sexless, and devoid of sensitivity. Then he asks us to imagine a world where cheap sensation, instant gratification, hedonism has been removed, where life as spectator sport has vanished, where we are “suddenly and irrevocably alone . . . alone only with love to be made, sense, and dreadful life.” I hear echoes of Noam Chomsky quoting Walter Lippmann’s ideas of the manufacture of consent, spectatorship, and the roar of the bewildered herd when Gass asserts that popular culture’s primary purpose is to prevent one “from understanding what is happening to them, for social unrest would surely follow, and who knows what outbursts of revenge and rage. War, work, poverty, disease, religion: these, in the past, have kept men’s minds full, small, and careful.”

Gass concedes that since the works of popular culture are mired in competition, are fad-producing, have little to no sense of beauty, are devoid of “finish, complexity, stasis, individuality, coherence, depth, and endurance,” it is a mistake to compare them to works of art. While “Both shape a consciousness . . . art enlarges consciousness like space in a cathedral, ribboned with light, and though a new work of art may consume our souls completely for a while, almost as a jingle might, if consumption were all that mattered, we are never, afterward the same; we cannot consciously go on in the old way.” Like the pleasures received from “disease, work, poverty, and religion,” popular culture gives us “something to do, something to suffer, an excuse for failure, and a justification for everything.” And while exceptions intermittently appear in popular culture, it “does not soften, excuse or justify anything; popular culture is the product of an industrial machine which makes baubles to amuse the savages while missionaries steal their souls and merchants steal their money.”

Gass is concerned with words, words, words—how they are the building blocks of meaning, how, like numbers for mathematicians or pigment for painters, stories are the very raw materials for narrative construction. Speaking to the novelist in “The Medium of Fiction,” Gass asserts that “the yammer of thought, the constant one-after-another of sounds, the shapes of words, the terrible

specter of spelling, are each due to this fact that meanings are heavenly bodies which, to our senses, must somehow announce themselves. A word is a concept made flesh, if you like—the eternal presented as a noise.”

In “The Artist and Society,” Gass offers a kind of viewfinder through which one should judge “the reality of an act, a man, an institution, custom, work of art”—that being “by the constancy and qualities of its effects, the depth of the response which it demands, the kinds and range of values it possesses, the actuality of its presence in space and time, the multiplicity and reliability of the sensations it provides, its particularity and uniqueness on the one hand, its abstract generality on the other.” Later in the essay, he lists the artist’s virtues as honesty, presence, unity, awareness, sensuality, and totality. “Honesty” is the ability to assess what one has accomplished and the ability to contextualize it. “Presence” is defined as such concentrated focus that the artist is completely vulnerable and transparent to the world. The artist also lives in a swirling synaesthetic dream where mind and body are one, feelings turn into sensations, and hands become “magnified eyes.” Awareness is allowing “the world to be seen—an unimaginable thing to most of us—to fully take in a tree, a tower, a hill, a graceful arm . . . Only through such openings may the world pass into existence.” And totality is described as “an inner measure, wound to beat, a balance which extends to limbs like bones, an accurate and profound assessment of the proportion and value of things.”

For Gass, the making of art is a sensual act: “The artist is a lover, and he must woo his medium till she opens to him; until the richness in her rises to the surface like a blush.” He writes:

The aim of the artist ought to be to bring into the world objects which do not already exist there, and objects which are especially worthy of love . . . Works of art are meant to be lived with and loved, and if we try to understand them, we should try to understand them as we try to understand anyone—in order to know them better, not in order to know something else.

Gass is an unabashed reveler of language, a word idolater, a sentence junkie, and he will surrender himself to beauty at all costs. With a taste of irony, Gass writes: "The enjoyment of beauty simply as beauty is an intolerable frivolity. And in a world of function, purpose, and utility—this world of the drone, the queen bee, and the hive—so it is. So it is."

Reading Gass's essays and stories, one can't help being infected by his obsession with thought and feeling, with the body, with sensuality, with sensuous joy, with beauty, with beauty in ugliness, with all of life's minutiae, with subtlety, with art as love and love as art, and with the pleasure of a meticulously well-written sentence.



I flew out to St. Louis, Missouri to speak with Gass over the course of two afternoons, in his home in Parkview, surrounded by over twenty thousand books. This career-spanning interview, peppered with anecdotes and reminiscences about Stanley Elkin, Robert Coover, Howard Nemerov, Mona Van Duyn, and others, finds Gass elaborating on his literary and philosophical theories, his thoughts on various forms of electronic media, as well as in-depth glosses on his new novel, *Middle C*, as well as several other projects in the works.

Once you know that I came armed with over a hundred twenty-five questions, it's easy to see why Gass later signed my copy of *Omensetter's Luck*, his critically acclaimed debut novel, "For John Madera, My Inquisitioner."

We began our interview by talking about Gass's life as an academic.

**JOHN MADERA:** And was that around the same time that you had retired from teaching at Washington University?

**WILLIAM H. GASS:** No, I was still teaching. I only taught in the philosophy department. Thank god. And I stayed on teaching for a

long time past ordinary retirement. Before I'd left, quit, I just felt I was in a chair, and it was time for somebody else to have this chair. I'd sat in it for so long. So, I was about seventy-six, I think.

**JM:** And you started teaching there in the 1960s?

**WHG:** I started teaching here in 1969.

**JM:** So, were you there at around the time that Elkin was there?

**WHG:** Oh, yes, yes. I knew Stanley—actually, I taught a year, as a guest, at the University of Illinois when he was a graduate student, so I met him in Urbana many, many years ago.

**JM:** But he didn't take a class with you.

**WHG:** No. He was a graduate student at that time. I had a one-year appointment in three departments, actually: the writing program, the English department, and the philosophy department. So I taught one course in each. It was the only time I ever taught writing. I hated doing it. But I worked with Stanley on a magazine called *Accent*. It was published there.

**JM:** Weren't some parts of *Omensetter's Luck* published in *Accent*?

**WHG:** Yes. That was what brought me there. And Don Finkel was there in the graduate program. And then, when I came to St. Louis, there was Mona Van Duyn and Howard Nemerov. It was a wonderful group, in fact, many more than that, of writers, who were in the writing program here.

**JM:** What kind of talks did you have with Elkin?

**WHG:** Oh, we never talked writing. We did have a joint interview once. I think the Iowa people did it. But it was done here.

**JM:** Elkin was kind of slippery in that interview.

**WHG:** Well, Stanley was not an idea guy. It was amazing how little of the so-called higher culture he was aware of. I remember the day he discovered Beethoven's Ninth. I mean, you know, he was in his fifties or something. And he said, "This is wonderful!" He was a very urban-oriented guy, too. So, all these trees around here—he loved Parkview, but all these trees made him uneasy, you know. We traded stories and a lot of lies. Stanley wanted to know everything you were doing and was constantly competitive, in a very pleasant way, really. He wanted to know whether you were traveling, or had any invitations to read. And yes, well, he'd say, "What are they giving you?" That was very important to him. So I always tacked on a thousand bucks. [Both laugh] It drove him nuts. He was always interested in the money side of it, he said, but then he would go and write in such a way that proved that money was not even a concern. It was an interesting cover-up. Normally, you would expect someone to be a kind of hypocrite who pretended to be not interested in money, when you know they really were. Stanley pretended to be interested in money, but he wasn't. He did all these things like that.

I met him and got to be quite close to him in Urbana. And then we lived in the same neighborhood. He lived only a few blocks away here. Howard Nemerov lived in an adjoining neighborhood. Not far. An easy walk from here. Same with Mona Van Duyn and Jarvis Thurston. But nobody talked ideas. It wasn't an idea bunch.

**JM:** So it wasn't a Bloomsbury over here.

**WHG:** No, no, no, uh-uh. It was Stanley coming back from a trip, and we'd all get together and listen to Stanley recount—and he was a great storyteller. And it got so that many of us who would have colorless lives adopted his stories for our own. I mean, I told them about Stanley as I'm telling you now, but I don't have any stories. But Stanley now, when Stanley was at Bard . . . this or that happened. We miss him a lot. He was a great presence. Very tough

guy when it came to his students. Very high standards. And he was ruthless, and bullied his students really. By invitation, I sat in on some of his classes. I would not approve of his methods, but they worked. He got rid of everybody who wasn't really dedicated. And he was a good teacher, but he was old-fashioned in the sense that psychological continuity of a character would worry him, plot would worry him, this and that. But then some of us were trying to kill off characters and knock off plot and so forth. But he himself, again, was a great example of—his characters didn't have a psychology, they had a *psychosis*. He created by impulse not by plan, though he'd tried. He was a great prose writer.

JM: Mary Caponegro sends her love.

WHG: Oh, great. I have her book right there. [Points] *All Fall Down*.

JM: Also, last night, I attended a talk by D.A. Powell, one of my favorite contemporary poets, and he discussed, among other things, how the techniques of method acting might inform the practice of poetry, and he juxtaposed, without a hint of irony, Wallace Stevens's "The Emperor of Ice Cream" with Gwendolyn Brooks's "The Rites for Cousin Vit"—all this to say that he quoted from your essay "Finding a Form" to discuss the necessary impact that sentences in a poem must have, that

a good sentence had to see and hear and smell and touch or taste whatever it was supposed to see and hear and smell and touch or taste; that acuity and accuracy of sensation was, in those sentences that invoked it, essential. Even in sentences that describe a thought instead of a perception, the thought has to be well seen.

I should mention that I did my homework this morning by listening to Miles Davis, one of St. Louis's hometown heroes, and that I also strolled along the local Walk of Fame.

WHG: Oh, did you? It's sort of cheesy, right?

**JM:** It's not the kind of thing I would normally do, but since I'm here, I'd figured I'd take a look at it. Anyway, to indicate where my allegiance lies, let me say, that along with Miles's, I checked out the stars of T.S. Eliot, Stanley Elkin, William Burroughs, and yours. They have one for Marianne Moore, too. I didn't know she lived here.

**WHG:** She was and lived here until she was about seven or eight. We claim her, but . . . she lost her father and her family moved east, and that was that. She did come back a time or two. We have an old institution here called the "Wednesday Club." They gave away for years, and still do, a poetry prize. Tennessee Williams won, once. Moore not only won this prize, but was a judge, once.

**JM:** Did you ever meet her?

**WHG:** No, I was a young tyke when she was "pushing" some horse, or extolling a Brooklyn Dodger, I think. The Brooklyn Dodgers were her team.

**JM:** I saw Elkin's star, and I was happy to see that it was in front of a bookstore. A proper placement.

**WHG:** And mine in front of a bank!

**JM:** Yes, I was disappointed. [Laughter] Alright, I thought, Elkin's is in front of a bookstore and Gass will be in front of a library. That's what I was hoping. Well, there's a little bit of rubble on the sidewalk, though. [Laughter]

Someone once told me that while in conversation with you he felt that no matter how witty a riposte he'd proffered, or erudite an extrapolation, about something you were both discussing, that you always effortlessly and unselfconsciously topped whatever he'd said.

**WHG:** You'll find out that this is true. [Both laugh]

**JM:** Another friend said that when she met you she was so nervous she “barely coughed out a word.” Was there ever anyone who’d made you feel this way?

**WHG:** Oh, yes. I got over it with Max Black, who was my teacher at Cornell, my thesis director. But I never got over it with Wittgenstein. You remember the anecdote about Gertrude Stein and the little bell ringing in her head that told her when she was in the presence of a genius? And it rang for her with Picasso and Alfred North Whitehead. Well, it rang once for me: Wittgenstein. It was just as well to be tongue-tied in his presence because he didn’t want to hear from you anyway. What we did was listen to him. He would talk about an issue as if we weren’t there. When I repeat it, describe it, it sounds so phony, but we listened to him think out loud, for our benefit. It was, in fact, genuine. It was as if you could suddenly follow [Wallace] Stevens, say, deciding whether to keep or remove a word. We listened while he struggled with the pros and cons of some sort of interpretation of some epistemological problem, mainly. I was very skeptical, but I immediately saw, I think, that this guy was something. At Cornell, it was all Wittgenstein. Half the department was late-Wittgenstein and half the department was early-Max Black and all the “mathematicianal” people, the Positivists, the ones I worked with. He was really . . .

But I met a lot of people I’d consider sort of geniuses in their way. Gaddis was an easy-going, most ordinary person in the world. You’d never be able to figure from how he presented himself or from talking to him what he was like on the page. You could get some of his thoughts, ideas, attitudes, but nothing else. It’s interesting about writers like that. Jack Hawkes: ha! You talk to Jack, you would never guess he wrote those books. I still don’t believe it. But Jack Barth, on the other hand, *is* like his books. There’s a high intelligence operating there.

**JM:** Some of my favorite interviews, like most of those with Samuel R. Delany and many of Nabokov’s, were thoroughly composed

affairs. What's the value for you of an impromptu interview? What interviews of other writers have you enjoyed? And, for fun, whom, across time and space, given the chance, would you have interviewed?

**WHG:** First of all, an impromptu interview is so much better because you don't prepare and you don't polish. And you let things go that are not properly phrased. Once it gets on paper it becomes something else. It's hard for me to write even an ordinary note or letter. I keep thinking, *That isn't the right*—you know. And it is better now. The "machine" has helped. Email has helped me. Now I'm able to just dash off something.

**JM:** The expectations are lower, too.

**WHG:** Yes, they are. It doesn't count. And so it's much simpler all around. Relaxed. You're also not being held to a standard of some sort. There's a book of conversations with me, and it's all me in one sense, these interviews, but I don't even think of it as a book of mine. Because it isn't.

I rarely read interviews. Even my own. In fact, specifically because I'm scared of what I would find.

**JM:** I'm surprised about that, considering your love of diaries, journals, and—

**WHG:** Ah, diaries are written. Virginia Woolf knows . . . it may be a little diary—"Only for me, ha ha." André Gide writing in his journal is writing in a way that's just as important as when he's composing . . .

**JM:** So, they're not really ephemeral entries . . .

**WHG:** No.

**JM:** And if they were, you probably wouldn't be reading them.

**WHG:** So, I don't really read interviews. It's one of the things that, oddly, I neglect. It isn't a mode that attracts me much in that sense.

The magazines that I regularly write for I rarely read. I get copies of *Conjunctions* all the time, so I do look at that. But I write for *Harper's*, but I never . . . *New York Review of Books*: I never subscribed. Now that I don't work for the *New York Review of Books*, I do subscribe. It don't make no sense.

**JM:** So given the chance to have a conversation with someone, across time and space, whom would you have interviewed?

**WHG:** Oh, that's hard because you're not imagining the conversation with the person, actually. You have a daydream persona that you're projecting. That said, I'd love to have lunch with Colette. I'm no dummy! I wouldn't pick out somebody—to stay in the French—I wouldn't pick Paul Valéry, although I admire him to the sky. And I wouldn't be interested in exchanging ideas. Conversations [about ideas] do stir up some people, and I spent a lot of time in philosophy doing it, but it's also a place where ideas are trotted around too glibly, where you can't get a hold of things. I much, again, prefer ideas, more often, in dialogue form, but it's often as far from an ordinary conversation as could be imagined. So, it would be somebody like Colette. Somebody whose life and struggle and sensuality and gifts, and so forth, are so admirable, I think. I often tried to teach her but American students don't get sensuality. Sex they get, they think, but not sensuality.

**JM:** Speaking of Valéry, I just read his *Dialogues*, and they're definitely comparable to Plato's. I couldn't believe how beautiful they were. The essays "Eupalinos, or the Architect" and "Dance and the Soul" are—

**WHG:** Oh, they're magnificent. He wrote some of the most beautiful prose I know. I can't read French well enough to get the quality, but the translation by William McCausland Stewart is super. I have it

on the authority of my French friends. Valéry is wonderful.

**JM:** By the way, I recently saw and heard Robert Coover read from his latest novel, *Noir*. I was happy when Coover opened the floor to questions (it's a rare thing in a reading, these days, at least in New York City). Unfortunately, everyone, save me, was shy. To get things started, I asked him if the Mad Meg in his novel bore any relation to Mad Meg in *The Tunnel*. He said no, then mentioned that you'd both spoken about that already. And he also said that you both check in with each other from time to time. Alas, this was how the Q&A ended. Would you talk about Coover's work and your friendship with him? Are/were there any other writers with whom you have/have had such a relationship?

**WHG:** We've known one another a long, long time. He published his first novel in the same year [1966] as *Omensetter's* was published. We were presumably, I'm told, candidates for the same prize. He won it. I reviewed . . . I have troubles with names at this age . . .

**JM:** Oh, I've had trouble with names since I hit my thirties.

**WHG:** *Pricksongs and Descants*.

**JM:** That review was in *Fiction and the Figures of Life*. I think I'd mentioned to you that early this year I decided to read all of your books in chronological order. In addition, I sought out and read all of the excerpts of your current novel-in-progress that have been published in *Conjunctions* over the years, as well as some other uncollected short stories and an assortment of uncollected essays.

**WHG:** I can't imagine. You must be a flagellist. [Both laugh]

**JM:** After the Q&A, Coover mentioned to me in passing that "Emma Enters a Sentence of Elizabeth Bishop's" was one of his favorite stories of yours.

**WHG:** He sent me a nice little note after that came out.

**JM:** Did it first appear in *Conjunctions* and then later in *Cartesian Sonata and Other Novellas*?

**WHG:** No, it first appeared in a truncated version in *Iowa Review*, but it was an early draft. I tend to treat magazine things that way. And then it was totally rewritten and enlarged, and so forth, and then published in the book.

**JM:** Did you already envision it as a longer piece when you first sent it out?

**WHG:** No, I had no idea. I never do know. I set out ten years ago, it turns out now, to write novellas. No more novels. My god, they take forever. I was going to do what seems to be my natural breadth: about thirty, thirty-something pages. Even my longer books tend to break into sections of that sort. So I was going to just do novellas. I love novellas. And I wrote two first drafts, which I did publish in *Conjunctions*, and the third one which was going to be in the middle of two stories, two novellas, one called *In Camera* and the other *Charity*. These are really unfinished, totally. *Middle C* was supposed to go in there. Now I'm on page 500 or something of that book. It just ran away.

**JM:** I have a lot of questions about *Middle C*. I'm excited to hear that it's over five hundred pages.

**WHG:** I have three more chapters to go.

**JM:** Do you see yourself reducing it at all?

**WHG:** I might throw out a chapter or two. The whole book is very iffy. There are days I want to throw the whole thing out. But I will get a draft done, get to the end in a few months, I'm sure. Then I'll set it away for a few more at least. I rewrite all the time. I have to

set this thing aside so I can sort of get a perspective on it. It's much different, I think, from anything else I've done. Kind of like the *Goldberg Variations*.

**JM:** So, how about the title, *Middle C*? Besides the musical reference, what else does it suggest to you? And in the excerpt "The Music Lesson" there's a whole conversation between Joseph and his teacher Mr. Hirk about middle C on the piano.

**WHG:** It's a grade in class. It's mediocrity. The stuff I put about middle C in the mouth of the teacher, so-called, was gleaned, of course, from standard things said about it in the history, and it stands, really, for the whole traditional association of emotions, feelings, attitudes, etc., with various keys and various chords, and so forth, which grew out of, flourished finally, in the nineteenth century.

It is all about being nobody. It's all about being however foundational, or thought to be foundational. The character is busy escaping the contamination of other human beings as his father apparently was doing. As [Thomas] Hobbes suggested, when you have an absolute sovereign, you have no rights, and you can be snuffed out; and the only way to avoid that is to be unobservable, to be so quiet, to be so out of it. This character tries to imitate that while nevertheless trying to make do with the situation he finds himself in, being hauled out of Austria ahead of the Nazis. He has to make a living and so forth. His living depends on his life being made up. He's a fraud. So he sends a fraudulent self to work in the world. It can get as soiled as it likes, but another self will be back behind, not touched by . . . This is an idiotic view in a way, but my main theme is questioning what is the ordinary citizen's responsibility for what goes on in the world. I don't have an answer to that question exactly. [Laughter]

At the College of Wooster, where I used to teach, there was a guy named Peters who they hired to teach medieval history. And he was a terrific teller of tales about medieval history and the students flocked to his classes. Turned out he didn't have any of the degrees

that he'd said he had. He was a Brit whose name was Peterkins, or something like that. Straight out of Dickens. His charm, which was considerable, was all—he just made up half of this stuff.

**JM:** Sounds like another talented *Talented Mr. Ripley*.

**WHG:** Yes. In many ways he was better than the regular staff. And this guy in my book, Joseph, is better than the regular staff at this little college where he's teaching. The book is satiric and it's light, and nothing important can happen in it. It's as close to what Flaubert said about wanting to write a book about nothing. Being nothing in order to be something. Anyway, it all sounds very nutty, and I'm sure it is, but it's that direction. And there's my whole stalking horse, Schoenberg, who threatened that whole tradition in music, which was paralleled in literature by the Victorian novelists and all the rest.

And my book is also about a professor and his external self, his being in the world, a man obsessed with a sentence that he has to keep fooling with. So the book is really an indictment—and so was *The Tunnel*—an indictment of mankind.

**JM:** *Middle C* is your first novel-length fiction in third-person narration. Why have you preferred first person narration in your novels? You wrote an essay about the pitfalls of second-person narration, so what are the peculiarities, particularities of first- and third-person, and what are their inherent challenges? Come to think of it, you explored, after a fashion, in your essay "I," first-person point-of-view.

**WHG:** Third-person gives me far more flexibility. I play pretty fast and loose with it. First-person narration straightforwardly commits you to the vocabulary and the actual mental processes of your narrator. If, as in this case, you have a narration from a character who is not stupid but self-taught, who learns the piano by ear—if I do a third person, I can talk about him better, describe or show him forth better than he could himself, since he's three people really:

Professor Skizzen, Joseph, and Joey. And Joey is the child-like, sort of, part. He's not a multiple personality because I have a theory that every person is many people. The problem is getting a ruler, a ruling system that will keep all of the persons you *are* happy . . . [Laughter]

JM: Coexisting . . .

WHG: Coexisting in a state. It's sort of like Hobbes's *Leviathan*, which was made up of all of these people: the image of the king, the body; or, like a corporation, in a way, where you have so many people it becomes an abstraction. He's not an abstraction in that sense, but he's more than one self, so to speak. It's easier to handle that with a more flexible form. But I also use a lot of conversation, dialogue, so there is a lot of first-person stuff in it.

JM: Well, there's the whole lecture he delivers to his students in the excerpt "A Little History of Modern Music." So will *Middle C*, like the published excerpts, jump around in chronology?

WHG: I have a chart that outlines what style every chapter is to be written in. There are some repetitions, but I'm going after a different style in many, many different cases. The narrative bounces around all over. Each chapter falls into no ordinary temporal sequence.

One of the things that I'm playing with is how does this change the reader's—let's step back a minute. Suppose you're reading a cliffhanger, and you've read fifty or sixty pages and you can't stand that you have to look and see what happens later, well, you don't have to check to see, because I've already done it for you. What I'm interested in is what happens to the meaning of a segment which is about an earlier stage—not just this flashback stuff, but when you know what's going to follow, or what preceded, when you're getting this other thing, it reads differently, it has a different feel to it, you can get different things out of it. Because of the style changes I want to challenge the idea that our, sort of, lives go flowing on, to try and see more about what happens intrinsically in a situation.

And what happens intrinsically in a situation is that the situation has to be defined by what the character will perceive as coming on, or perceives as having been, as well as what someone else knows about what happened, and knows what will be packed into the situation. It's basically the biography of someone while they're still creating their life. Because it's treated suddenly as if we're looking at something and we know what will happen. Or the book is reading itself several times over before it gets to the end.

I suppose if it were straightforward, you'd start like *Tom Jones*, and you go through to end, and then when you were at the end, you would know a little more about what happened in the beginning in so far as that thing is composed in terms of you getting there. And that's what, of course, Fielding does, but he doesn't—Joyce will—but he doesn't then say, and now you're coming back to reread this book in the light of what happened over at the end of it, and I will now be going through this book in an entirely different way and in fact I may only read certain chapters because I don't like that section—it's boring—or I'm even just studying a paragraph. Pack it all in levels.

**JM:** When excerpts of *The Tunnel* were first published many critics couldn't get a handle on what the final product was going to look like. And having gone back and read some of those selfsame fragments I, too, wondered how everything would finally cohere. But, of course, in the complete work, how all the pieces cohere is demonstrated. "A Little History of Modern Music" is completely different from "The Garden" section.

**WHG:** That's the idea.

**JM:** You once described "A Little History of Modern Music" as an outtake. Is that section now incorporated into the complete novel?

**WHG:** It could have been anywhere. It's a part of the book. I knew I had to have a lecture, at least one.

**JM:** It's hilarious and devastating at the same time.

**WHG:** I like working with ideas that once were popular. The views that he exhibits in that lecture are very old time stuff. I don't believe any of it. [Laughter] In a way. It's fun then to go to something else, another scene—I just finished a section, it's only a few paragraphs, which is about the student who shows up in class and knows everything: the nightmare.

**JM:** I've been that nightmare, unfortunately. [Laughter]

**WHG:** You say, something like, "Well, Peeps then ate three barrels of oysters." And he puts his hand up and says, "I think, sir, it was three-and-a-half barrels." He corrects you—that kind of thing. There's that. There's the difficulty of teaching your first classes and so forth. And finally, how he becomes a figure on the campus. And it's carefully calculated by him. And it just incidentally happens to be very true of the academic world. So much fraud. Talk about *Wall Street*?

**JM:** They're comparable or worse?

**WHG:** They both haven't the foggiest idea what they're talking about.

**JM:** Your character's name, Skizzen, is rich with associations. It most resembles *skizze* the German word for sketch, which was derived from the Italian word *schizzo* meaning "sketch, drawing," literally meaning "a splash, squirt," from *schizzare* "to splash or squirt," of uncertain origin, perhaps from L. *schedium* "an extemporaneous poem," from Greek word *skedios* "temporary, extemporaneous."

**WHG:** I have a poem in there. The catacombs piece. It's about a visit to the Paris catacombs. And then a few other little things here and there, like a whole chapter done in what I call "flying verse."

**JM:** What's that?

**WHG:** It's going very fast. Before you're found out. [Both laugh]

**JM:** Is this Skizzen's poetry?

**WHG:** No, it's not his poetry. It's a description of a metaphorical idea. That section is about death, and how you go and visit it. I love that part. At the catacombs, you're searched by the police, so you won't have stolen one of the skulls. They went through Mary's [Gass's wife] purse to make sure that she hadn't—I don't know if you've seen the catacombs in Paris, but it's something not to miss. When we were going down this very rickety ladder to the bottom of it, I thought, "Me and my fat and lousy heart, I'll never get back up out of here again. Just pitch my tent down here and wait for the end." But it's scary in a different sense than you might customarily think of it. They have things sorted, you know. Thigh bones here, hip bones or whatever, over there. It's not a whole skeleton. Anyway, there is this section, and Skizzen decides he's going to set this to music. So it's a lyric for a piece of music.

**JM:** In "The Apocalypse Museum," where we first meet the music professor Joseph Skizzen, we find him, in an echo of Emma's falling into an Elizabeth Bishop poem, "worrying" a sentence. He's another one of your word-drunk characters who, instead of finding freedom, finds himself trapped in a word-wide web of his own devising. He struggles over fashioning a sentence that best expresses the "concern that the human race might not endure has been succeeded by the fear that it will survive."

**WHG:** That's what he's trying to do.

**JM:** It's referenced in another section, but is this working on a sentence carried out throughout the entire novel?

**WHG:** Oh yes. Main theme. And it's solved when he comes up

with the Schoenbergian twelve-tone row sentence, divided, as Schoenberg did, into six in one section and six in another, and he then solves it. When he carries this out and is sure to be confronted by a committee who has discovered his falsification—if there's any tension in this book, it's that one of these days they're going to find out. And he has reason to think that he has been and that he's going to be interrogated by a committee of his fellow faculty, so he's carrying on in his mind a kind of defense and attack, and so on.

So the accuser in his head says, "You're obsessive. You just spent so much of your time on this stupid thing." And he says, "I'm not an obsessive because I solved the problem. I'm not doing it anymore. I did it." An obsession never gets done. He got it written just right.

**JM:** The sentence.

**WHG:** I didn't think I could do it. [Laughter]

**JM:** I can't wait to see it.

**WHG:** It's very simple. Every word comes into the twelve-tone system. The twelve-tone system is adopted by him as a strategy against his fellow music teachers—he's got two other guys in his department. He doesn't know anything. He's going to learn things by trying to teach it. But he doesn't know anything much about music in the formal sense. And he has to keep everybody at arm's length. So if he says he's a Schoenberg expert, they think, "Oh my god . . . it's too hard . . ." so it works the way he wants. They don't want to ask a lot of questions because they don't want to show their ignorance and they don't want to get caught in an argument they can't proceed in, and so forth. He doesn't really like Schoenberg all that much, and that's all to the good for the Joey character. It puts all that stuff away from him. But he of course does like Schoenberg, in a way. He really likes late Liszt, and so on. Everything is sort of falsified. But then, the best thing about Schoenberg's system is that it helped him solve his obsession, or his concern. But it doesn't change, of course, the meaning of the sentence.

**JM:** Similarly to Kohler in *The Tunnel*, there's a kind of seduction to Joseph, a character that has reprehensible ideas, things that are unlikeable about him, but you're tricked into liking him in spite of his vitriol—

**WHG:** He hates mankind. But he's a Swiftian-type of hater in the sense that he doesn't hate individual people, treats them reasonably well, lies to them all the time, but in a nice way. I share that: I'm just fed up with mankind, but what's wrong with him is he uses it to try to escape being a member of it—that is impossible.

**JM:** He's trying to check out.

**WHG:** He still wants to think he can get away with something. It's one of his failures, which he'll blame on his father, of course.

**JM:** Which comes back to this idea of trying to escape from responsibility. At one point it's mentioned that Skizzen "obsessively rewrote" his sentence at least fifty-seven times. I imagine there's many more.

**WHG:** Yes, there's a whole section with nothing but.

**JM:** Just variations?

**WHG:** Yes.

**JM:** I wonder if the obsessive revisions in this section resemble your own protracted revising process?

**WHG:** Well, it sort of does. Yes, sure. As with any obsessive person, if they get this just right, it will solve something or other. It will take care of this or that. And you seek perfection on the page. You never get it. Often you even make things worse. It's miserable. And even if you did get it, nobody would know or care. But then when

that's the only thing that you are sure of, it's worthwhile.

There is a theme throughout, borrowed, I think, from lines in [Rainer Maria] Rilke: Is there a redeeming side to all this? We're perfectly aware of mankind's inhumanity, but, as Rilke says, art is great, isn't it, but the question is, "But is it great enough?" And that's of course another problem he has to face, too, and I have to face. I mean, if you're doing this sort of thing—I had, of course, a lifetime at the university, where I taught a very safe thing: philosophy. It's like teaching music: it can't hurt anybody. It's just wonderful. As long as nobody believes you, you haven't hurt anybody. Imagine people starting to believe what you said. Really terrifying. Sure would shut me up in a hurry. That's sort of scary.

**JM:** Skizzen's only escape from his sentence is his daily practice of entering clippings of terrible deeds perpetrated by people into a scrapbook. He's the curator of what he calls "The Inhumanity Museum," the "proof through news reports, through ideas, images, and actions, of the wholly fallen and utterly depraved condition of our race . . ." It's a kind of echo of one of the five points of Calvinism, namely, the total depravity of man. This reminded me of Kohler whose only escape from his words is the physical act of digging a tunnel.

**WHG:** Yes. [Jonathan] Edwards. Sinners. I'm working on a book of Baroque prose, and the great writers like [John] Donne, [Jeremy] Taylor, Sir Thomas Browne, and Hobbes. All of these people are coming around about the same time, coming to grips with this same problem. It's not just the Calvinists. Donne and Taylor are, not Catholics, but Church of England.

**JM:** Anglican, right?

**WHG:** Yes, they're close. They had the lowest opinion of this world. It is a shit heap, you know, just awful, and everything has to be directed toward the next world, and the attraction of the next world is the awfulness of this one. And over and over in the religious

tradition, both Catholic and Protestant, but also Eastern, it's how to transcend, how to get past, the horrors of ordinary life. This is especially true in, say, the sixteenth and the seventeenth century, but in medieval times, too, because life was so short. It was really hard. There were so many illnesses that one had to just suffer through. Life began early. Sir Francis Drake at nineteen was the admiral of a fleet, I think. People who would be called pedophiles today were having sex with Romeo and Juliet, thirteen- or fourteen-year-olds. As soon as a girl menstruated she was a woman, and then that was it. And you better get it in because otherwise you're not going to have it. And there was all of that awareness of the shortness of life. And of course, Taylor writes: "Holy living, holy dying." And it's great prose. So there's nothing new about that attitude. But there's a belief that there's part of us that can get through, that can be saved or damned, depending, and so forth. And Skizzen doesn't have any of that to fall back on or anything. It's a long and an old tradition. The churchmen were told they were okay because they damned life, and there was a savior and so forth. But condemning human existence is old news. But people won't like it. That person delivering it will be called bad, because he has no message except, hey—and it's true, we are a parasite on earth, and we're going to kill our host. Does the earth deserve us? [Laughter] That's the injustice. It was a perfectly nice world. People ate one another, but only in moderation. [Both laugh]

**JM:** The portrait you draw in "The Inhumanity Museum," which runs a few pages, is pretty frightening, and serves as an overall indictment of so-called civilization's barbarity. Joseph's reading aloud of the clippings brings him a kind of joy:

Joseph Skizzen put his whole heart into his voice, happy not another ear could hear him, satisfied that no one would ever see his collection either, for he was no Jonathan Edwards, although his tones were dark, round, ripe, and juicy as olives, because he had no interest in the redemption of the masses whose moral improvement was quite fruitless in any case. He did privately admit, and thus absolved himself

of it, that Joseph Skizzen was a man who enjoyed the repeated proofs that he was right.

**WHG:** He's happy. He realizes, even, that he loves the fact. I sit down at the table every morning and open the *New York Times*, and say, "For Christ's sake, what are they doing?" and I'm having a great time. You know, it verifies what you thought. Every day more evidence of what you believe is there. Every day. And I have a part, a place in the book, where I stop and say that the reader is invited to insert, to paste here, a clipping from the paper of the day they're reading the book, and that belongs in the Inhumanity Museum. I suggest that it comes from the day they're reading the book, to reinforce that it's still going on.

I also talk about what he's not putting in. He's not putting in wars. Some wars go in, but ordinary war—everybody's fighting and killing one another, but he's not putting that in the Inhumanity Museum. And there's a possibility that we are by nature warlike, and that we can't help having wars, and in which case . . . there would be no sense in saying, "naughty, naughty!"

**JM:** Like gorillas will go and attack other gorillas.

**WHG:** Yes, that's right. Those are gorillas. What do you expect from a cobra? So you have to find things that seem unnatural. No one can claim—

**JM:** That it comes from animal nature.

**WHG:** Yes. I just finished writing a review [of Richard Evans's *The Third Reich at War*] for *Harper's*. It's just so horrifying. The things people did. They weren't even Germans. What were they, Romanian? Employed by the Germans to kill Serbs, and so forth. And they'd line them up, strip them, kill them the way they would kill a cow, and hung them up on a hook. What is this? And these people go home to their loving wives. It's bloodcurdling stuff. Tons of it, tons of it. And then you go back through history. I'm working

on a section of the book, now, looking at historic behavior of this sort. It's always been around. Horrifying! And the glorying in it. The last chapter of the *Odyssey*, when Ulysses comes back and kills all the suitors—the joy in the poem, the relish. The vengeance. It strikes me as a problem. [Laughter]

**JM:** There are many examples of wonderful alliteration like these: “We would live in ice like a little bit of lost light.” “He scissored when he spotted superstitions singing like sirens . . .” And many dazzling examples of assonance like: “That barren patch grew like a scratched rash.” I’ve encountered many editors who are put off by such sentences. How do you manage to get away with it?

**WHG:** Well, I don’t. They punish me for it. They don’t like it at all, and I love doing it because I know they don’t like it. I was taught all this, but it was so bunk, and it was all held back. It was okay if I followed a certain form in poetry, as long as I didn’t write like [Gerard Manley] Hopkins, whom I adore, or Stevens. God. But if you’re writing prose, you can’t have any rhymes in them—you have to get rid of it; you have to get rid of sound patterns and alliteration, and so forth. But alliteration was one of the first structural things in English. Anglo Saxon poetry is alliterative poetry. I have always argued that the difference between prose and poetry in our age is quite different. Some of the best poets are prose writers, that is, they do everything that poetry used to do and doesn’t now. Poetry is prosy now, and not as interesting as prose, I think—not even close. I’m also reminding people that this is a homemade object—the cuckoo clock, it says something, things speak themselves as well. That’s because I’m anti writing as merely written. I want the oral tradition. You go back to John Donne’s prose, or any of those writers, you get plenty of that, you get rhyming, alliteration, you get all kinds of other connections, all other devices of suggestion, and echoing, and so forth, because they were talking to hundreds, sometimes a thousand people in a church. Their sermon had to go out verbally and they had to use all the mnemonic devices they could, because they wanted to

embed the so-called message. It was the word, it was the “living word,” and all that, that they wanted to stress. It was the same time the opera begins, masques and so forth. They were trying to figure out how music and its nature, and language and its nature, could cohabit. It is for me a great moment because of that. Ford Maddox Ford has a good passage in one of those endless books he wrote on the history of English literature about how prose changed after the protestants won the war in England, how prose went down the hill as the [former] king of the hill.

Taylor is absolutely stunning, I think. He’s doing all of these things because he wants the language to sing in a truly musical way, and to haunt the hearer. It’s also very scary because—you see this in newspapers all the time—they do headlines and they alliterate the hell out of things, and they do it because it calls attention to the article itself, but also, of course, [because] alliterative and other patterns are a way of making what is being said seem true, which is terrific in, what should be done in, a book of fiction if the “seems [true]” stays there, but if it doesn’t, then you’ve got oratory designed to provoke belief in the worst possible rhetorical way, where rhetoric is used to sway, to persuade people regardless of the grounds, the rational or evidential grounds of the argument. It’s the whole secret of the art, I think. And since we know that the visual side is really going to predominate more and more, we should start using it. I messed around with that, but it’s beyond me, though I’ll show you something that my neighbor and collaborator Michael Eastman did for me. He’s a great photographer. We’ve worked together a lot.

*[At this point, Gass leaves the room and brings back a work of art, a framed image of the emblem of the Party of the Disappointed People, from The Tunnel, which had some text from Middle C layered on top of it. As I fawned over the image, Gass wryly joked, “I’ll sell you a T-shirt. I told my editor Vicky Wilson, ‘Forget the book, let’s just sell the T-shirts. It has this image on it, and everybody is a member of that. Everybody’s disappointed about something.’”]*

**JM:** The image of ruins is a theme that runs through these excerpts. For instance, in "The Apocalypse Museum" it's surmised that "any agent of our end will have a radiant sense of ruin." Joseph Skizzen is described as "someone born of ruin as flies are from offal." In "The Abandonment of Family," we learn that Joseph and his family lived in London during the air raids of World War II "more in a pile of rubble than in a building, for one wall of the tenement was down, some stairs had collapsed, and many windows were broken." I couldn't help thinking of Malte's (the narrator of Rilke's *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*) fascination with the ruined building, especially the "colored wall" with a "hole that was black and had been ruthlessly punched out. But the most unforgettable things were the walls themselves. The tenacious life of these rooms had not let itself be stamped out."

Rudi, Joseph's father, would sit "in the middle of a ruined room to dine on dreams and reassurance." And he's described as wanting "to fade into the background, be a piece of household goods lost in the rubble of war; rubble from which the State summarily removed the family when they bulldozed blocks of bombed-out, burned down buildings." Joseph's mother says, "My heart has been kidnapped . . . borne with my babies away into a world of wreckage." Mr. Hirk, Joseph's music teacher is described in "The Music Lesson" as "unwrapping his enthusiasms . . . confronting the death of his hopes, the ruins of his life." Skizzen in "A Little History of Modern Music" talks about a "rubble of a room to study, perhaps to play, to chat with a friend, before sleep once again takes you into its chamber of dreams and its cruel simulation of death." Inviting silence for Skizzen may only "invite ruck to rumpus us, to ruin our holy space." For him, relatives arrive "like ruinous news." Skizzen again: "Who shall build from these ruins a new obedience?" Joseph in "The Garden" calls his shouts to his mother about his goings-on "reports from the ruins of reason."

In a recent review of Rose Macaulay's *Pleasure of Ruins*, you write: "She has mentioned that among the pleasures of ruins must be some vindictive ones. I still remember the kid in kindergarten who kicked over my house of blocks, and his glee at my distress

and his accomplishment." So what is it about ruins that you find captivating? And why is this theme important in *Middle C*? Thinking about how a tunnel was used as a structuring device in *The Tunnel*, I wondered if ruins were used as a model for *Middle C*?

**WHG:** It's a ruin of the ordinary. It shatters old relationships. [That's] the positive side of ruin. [It destroys] strangleholds on the image. Schoenberg had to break that in order to get through to this other scheme of things, which in fact was destroyed by the exact same fanaticism and rules to get away from, from the old tradition. It is that kind of dialectic that happens all the time in the arts, I think. You get a new breakthrough, something's different, and then it becomes rule-bound, the way everybody does it. Pretty soon it's dead and you have to start smashing again. *Pleasure of Ruins* shows that we love ruins. An ordinary building can suddenly become quite an attraction, just by being still standing, and weathering, becoming *something* through the delicate moves of nature, which are like a good artist's moves. That's what makes great work, where many small gestures and decisions—that were the right ones—were made. There are a lot of books that are said to be masterpieces in which none of the sentences are any good. And I just find that inexplicable.

**JM:** What are some of those books?

**WHG:** I just finished reviewing Knut Hamsun. You get a book of his and every sentence in [his books] is as flat as—talk about pedestrian. I hated his stuff.

When I was doing a lot of photography I became very interested in ruins, because I was interested in abstraction. And the ruin often presented me with a magnificent—I couldn't get it, of course, because I wasn't good enough—surface, with incomparable colors, in extraordinary relationships, that took literally years to create, by wind, weather, all kinds of stuff like that, and there you suddenly have this gorgeous thing, which your camera takes away. And what it is does is show the direction that beauty exists in. These

relationships are between elements of the composition. And, in a sense, the surface is an accident, but everything that's happened is according to a cause, not accidental in the natural sense, but the camera then has to see this connected section and capture it, and then you have something really incredible. Why can a whole street in a slum be incredibly, aesthetically interesting, and a suburb street, where everything is new, totally dull?

[James] Stirling, when he built the [entrance to the] Stuttgart Museum, calculated how long it would take for the copper eaves to stain the walls, and planted vines that in ten years would be ready and so forth. It's gorgeous. I took photographs of it, and used to lecture on it. That museum's stages of development as it slid into its natural position. It's a great museum, a brilliant design.

*[Gass went on to describe how gardening is analogous to Stirling's approach to design. He shared that Mary, his wife, is a gardener, and that a year ago they'd put in a beautiful red maple, remarking that he won't see it when it reaches its full height, but then also shared how one of their kids had planted a little tree on a "bygone Arbor Day," and how it was now "higher than the house."*

*Then he brought me to the window of his library where he pointed out a "Bradford Pear, and a Hawthorn in bloom." Gass then showed me many of the pieces of art hanging in his home, including photos of flora with vivid colors, many abstractions. He spoke about Michael Eastman and introduced me to the work of Tom Phillips's, his "humuments." He shared that Phillips, while at the International Writers Center at St. Louis, "took a Victorian novel and he put his pictures over top of it, leaving the text to show through, to make little poems, and then an ongoing story, every page."*

*"This is a Miró," Gass said, pointing at a luminous aquatint, and explained: "I was in an art gallery in Chicago, and with my first prize—I had it in my hand for about an hour—I bought this. I always wanted to have one real piece of art."*

*He showed me his "rust," an artwork hanging on his wall. We talked about Rilke's text on Rodin. Showing me a photo he had taken of a "a*

scar on a car," Gass said, "One abstracts the thing from the situation, and then it becomes an entity. And the less representational, the better." We looked at a photograph of his taken in Bologna, which featured a door; a photo of a building in St. Louis, with strange tile on it, taken by Eastman; another taken by Gass in Minnesota; one he'd taken in "Singapore, fifteen, twenty years ago," another of his photos featuring lines and curves playing off of each other. Gass shared, "I had a couple of shows. But when I met Michael [Eastman] and started to work with him, I realized I was a total amateur and no good, and so I stopped. And I'm just crazy about his work. This sort of thing [pointing to one of Eastman's photos]—I know people think I'm nuts—it's such a pleasure to me, this kind of abstraction."

The *pièce de résistance* of the tour, for me, if only because it offered a lighter side of Gass, might have been when he showed me the two antiques standing in an alcove that Gass described as "just a combination," saying, "This is Mary and me. This is a milk separator, and it looks sort of like a tubby fellow, and this is Mary, 'the squeeze,' an old clothes wringer, with a stirrer for the pot of boiling clothes. "We just thought that at entry you should meet the host and hostess."]

**WHG:** St. Louis has a climate very much like Washington. Doesn't get a lot of snow. Usually. It doesn't get very cold. Usually. It gets hot. It'll get zero. Very little snow. Once in a while. It'll go into the hundreds in the summer. Very humid. On the other hand, in a house like this, if you get it air-conditioned, we can escape this, as long as a storm doesn't blow out our electric. If it does, boy, it really gets bad. It's low-key, artistically speaking. And when we had the artists here, the poets particularly, and Stanley [Elkin], we had more people from the Academy than any school in the country. It was low-key, nothing. as I've said, not a lot of false intellectualizing. Howard Nemerov did wonderful work while he was here. He came in the same program that brought me here to stay a couple of weeks. He was at Brandeis at the time, and he said, "Can I come and stay here?" And we said, "Okay." [Laughter] And that was how we got him.

**JM:** Tell me about your collaborations with Peter Eisenman.

**WHG:** I had a father who was an architect. I always wanted to be an architect, but I knew I couldn't do the math. Could never get it. And I would always be embarrassed by the way Mary could zoom through the calculus when she was studying.

Mary wanted to be an architect and was studying here, and this started to encourage an interest I already always had. And one day, out of the blue, god knows by what chance, the phone rang, and it was *Progressive Architecture Magazine*, and they said, "How would you like to do a house review?" I'd never done it, so I thought—in those days I was ready to try anything. So, I said, "Sure." So, I went to New York, met Eisenman. Didn't know much about him. And he took me out to Connecticut, where he had built what was called *House VI* [or the *Frank Residence*, a "post-functionalist" building designed by Peter Eisenman, completed in 1975]. I went about in this place and—it was my anti-functionalist, anti-utilitarian feelings—it was sheer form, it was beautiful, it was crazy, but it was wonderful. I mean, there were holes in the glass windows from the bedroom to the living room, and you could look down. Open a closet, so beautifully designed you wouldn't want to store anything in it. That's a triumph. That is exactly Flaubert to a recipe. And he had a pale background, translucent, so you could see the shadow of the stairs and the back through it. It had formal relationships like you wouldn't believe. It was just wonderful. All white, absolutely white. So I wrote this thing with great enthusiasm. Peter was very happy, because I talked about how great it was. And it was a turning point—a famous house. And he was especially pleased because it had caused the people who he had designed it for to divorce over it. It wouldn't be his last clients who did that. It's like Frank Lloyd Wright would have marriages break up, too. And he was a very intellectual architect. All architects are trying to be intellectuals, unfortunately. He had been monkeying around with Derrida, and at the time that I had met him he was working with Chomsky. I couldn't figure out why.

**JM:** His linguistics or his politics?

**WHG:** His linguistics. And what he did was take a basic element, an architectural element and then do logical things to it, like invert it, like a Schoenbergian thing, mirror image, multiplication image, geometrical transpositions, turn it out, and so forth, until he had the whole building, and I just loved it. And he had published a number of pieces on it, and he was also running a kind of school, which had a magazine connected with it, and people came and heard various architects give lectures—some of the most famous Europeans were coming in, and so I got to hear that, and later gave a lecture there. And we were quite friendly, and he came out to St. Louis at the architecture school for some lectures, along with some other big shots, and he had no work. It was what they called “cardboard architecture.”

**JM:** All theoretical?

**WHG:** Yes. And so I proposed to him that I enlarge on my piece on *House VI*, and that he design the book for my text. He said it was a great idea. I did expand the text. It’s never been entirely published. He showed me some early sketches. It was a big building like his house. Now his house had no entrance; it had a space through which you could get into it, but it was not an entrance. It was just like what I wanted to do in *The Tunnel*. The beginning comes about two hundred pages in, or something, because it has to be a hidden opening to the tunnel, so the first parts are disguises. Our nuttiness was about on the same level. His book was called “The House Devolves.” The book would begin in the middle and work to both sides. And he showed me these designs, but he never carried them out, and then he thought he’d design a house for me. And I said, “If you do a house for me, I’ll want it, and it’ll break my heart because I won’t be able to build it. I can’t afford this kind of thing, so don’t do that. Why don’t I write a story and you design a house the character should live in, and we’ll trade ideas as we go along, and this story and

your design will be shaped according to—and the title was “The Toy Box,” but I started [other] things—and then he started to get work, and playing around like this was no longer . . . and then he won the thing to do Checkpoint Charlie [Museum]. He did that building and then everything after that took off for him.

He threw me over for Derrida. That’s a little history of our relationship. It was charming.

**JM:** I’m interested in hearing more about your collaborations. Tell me more about “The Architecture of the Sentence” with Mary Gass. How did that transpire?

**WHG:** I was working on things and did some sketches, but she did the final drawings. I’m still working on more complex plans, but it just takes so much intensity. I wanted to map out the aesthetic syntax of the sentence, and I did indeed finish a piece on the aesthetics syntax of the sentence, which was published. Do floor plans of . . . sentences building a space, creating a space, and I tried to show how, with drawings, how a sentence is formed. If you pictured it the way linguistics people do their drawings, only instead of choosing what they choose: a tree, or various strategies. I’d treat every concept as a square or rectangle and then show the relations of those rectangles. When you say, “white rose,” the concept white is a space inside the concept rose. It’s a standard logical thing, but if you then draw out those concepts in spaces, in rectangles, you start getting a structure. Indeed, you can see it, see the structure of the sentence, but I was working on façades and modulations, the façades of the repetitions—and what do windows do? Rhymes are like windows, you see through them to another part of the poem, or another part of the sentence, and so on. Mary’s part of it was to find and work out intelligible drawings for these ideas.

**JM:** These things are being developed further?

**WHG:** Yes. [In] the next book, which I sent off recently, I work on narrative sentences from that point of view as well.

**JM:** The next book meaning the book on Baroque prose.

**WHG:** No, this is called *Life Sentences*; it's a new collection of essays. I'm going to get three books out before fall. This one, *Middle C*, and a book of essays about art, photography, and travel, that have nothing to do with literature.

**JM:** Have these essays appeared before?

**WHG:** Most of them. In architectural journals. I did a lot of lecturing in architecture. A piece on Chinese gardens, which was in *House Beautiful*, and . . .

**JM:** What's the title of this book?

**WHG:** *Those Other Arts*. There's a piece on Jasper Johns. There's a bunch of pieces on travel. A long, long piece—it's the most substantial one—on the Mississippi River.

**JM:** I'd read in *Understanding William Gass* that over a hundred essays of your essays are uncollected.

**WHG:** There are a lot. Mostly book reviews.

**JM:** I'd always thought that *Fictions and the Figures of Life* was the beginning but there was a lot more written before the earliest of all the essays.

**WHG:** I wrote a few philosophical pieces, so called, but mostly book reviews. The third volume is very iffy, because I wanted to put in it some of the things I've done as introductions and so on for Michael's books. I've done a photographer's book. I'd like to reproduce some of those things and that depends on . . . I'm not sure how any of these will be published by Knopf, because everybody's in hard times. I don't make a nickel for them, they lose money on me—so why should they want to publish me? So they may not.

**JM:** Oh, I don't want to hear that.

**WHG:** Me neither, but that's real life.

**JM:** You mentioned another possible collaboration in an interview: "My daughter, who is also a photographer, has found a bunch of early 19th-century glass plates taken, probably in Buffalo, of people. I'm going to write a story for them. They're very suggestive, almost ghostly, presences." Has that project ever materialized?

**WHG:** No, it's sitting around waiting. I have a bunch of projects of that sort with Michael. There's a photograph he took of an old barbershop. It has all the chairs lined up against the wall. You can see the black spots on the wall where people's greasy hair, [indicating where] they were sitting. Funny, but beautifully done, so I wrote one piece—the only thing I've ever done on film—on *Casablanca*.

**JM:** "Don't Even Try, Sam."

**WHG:** Yes, and I took the part of the piano. Okay, well in this barbershop one I'm taking the part of those chairs, and I've gotten pages of that done. I haven't gotten more with those glass plates yet. I have a lot of projects, they sit around for years, sometimes, before I get to them. I have several going on at once. Because I'm so slow. And if I get pissed off at one . . . that's what happened *The Tunnel*, I'd get so sick of it that, in order not to write it, I wrote other books. So *The Tunnel* is responsible for most of what I've done, just to avoid doing *it*.

**JM:** Do you feel these other projects feed each other?

**WHG:** Yes, I do. And are almost as important to me as the fiction, because the problem is I have to take seriously every bit of writing. We talked about that earlier.

**JM:** You mentioned in an interview with Heide Ziegler that you were working on a book of your photographs? Did that project ever materialize?

**WHG:** No. I set that aside.

**JM:** Why?

**WHG:** First of all, it would be a waste of time, no one would publish it. But I'm not good enough. My photographs, I used a lot, but I used them as a teaching tool, and they really worked wonderfully, in a sense. Let's suppose you're trying to get the students to understand what [Immanuel] Kant meant when he said that the aesthetic experience is not mediated by concepts. Okay, show them a photograph of a floor of an abandoned building—I used to go into all of these abandoned buildings—that's been sitting abandoned for years, and there are all these pigeons flying around, and they've layered the floor with guano, pigeon shit. Huge warehouses, light coming in shining off this, and it's gorgeous. So you take a picture, which looks like—you know how with aluminum foil, when you crumple it up and then smooth it out again you have all these little lines and it shines and stuff? That's what it looks like. So you show them a slide. "Oh, boy," they say. Then you say, "It's pigeon shit." Concept. Bing! And I used to take pictures of dog deposits and bird shit, especially during the season when there was lots of huckleberries, some berries that would stain it, and sometimes it would be quite nice, and I'd use things like this, so they'd see it right away, they'd understand that there are names for things, forbidden them to see, and to get them used to seeing, because they'll never have an aesthetic experience until they can do that. So I used a lot of it, and some of it would have been okay to put in along with an essay as an illustration, but not as "Look at this as a photograph."

**JM:** Another project you mentioned was a paper you were working on, where you were trying “to prove that every virtue contains a vice.”

**WHG:** That’s an essay I’ve been working on one way or another. I didn’t get at it straightaway, so I’ve been nibbling at its edges, and using pieces of these ideas elsewhere. Big mistake, as far as that essay is concerned. I was going to play around—of course the number seven is arbitrary, but historically necessary, in this case. You have the seven deadly sins, but for every sin you have to show virtues, and vice-versa. So I take the virtues and write a thing showing how bad they are, how nobody likes—the first one I use is neatness, and it’s easy because you can easily show that neatness is anti-historical. It wants to pretend that the party last night didn’t happen, and so it removes it, and denies that it happened. And it is authoritarian because [it says that] everything has a place and should be in that place, and, in fact, it would be better if it never came out of that place, and so forth, you know, you can play around. It was sort of—I was going to have fun. And you can show how essential adultery is, and then you can play games—“thought experiments” is what they call them in Germany—like imagine a city or a village, a village in which you’re living, in which everybody is terrific, models of moral uprightness. Boring! You need stories, you need lying. Oh boy, a person who tells the truth all the time—an awful person. So it was that sort of thing. I wasted some, because I used the neatness thing, and I wrote a piece extolling adultery. It’ll be in the new book [*Life Sentences*]. A lot of these things have to be redone, because of space and other kinds of problems, like having a deadline, I just couldn’t get it to go the way I’d wanted them to. I had a piece on sensuality for a magazine, and I did publish it, but it’s terrible. I published a third of what it was, same way with a piece about *A Man Without Qualities*. It was so grandiose. It was to be a major thing, but I also wanted to get the damn thing published so it would help the book, a beautiful edition that Knopf put out. And I got it out on time, but it’s just terrible; it just absolutely gives the wrong impression of the essay as a whole—but I never got there.

You know more about what I’m doing than I do. [Both laugh]

**JM:** I can't believe you have 20,000 books in here.

**WHG:** Well, they're spread out on different floors. In the basement are rows of bookcases, all of the philosophy, all of the history, all the biography, all the psychology and linguistics, and a thousand movies.

**JM:** Umberto Eco wrote that he has about 20,000 books as well.

**WHG:** We have one great cultural event every year—it's coming up, and that's the book fair.

**JM:** I should've have timed my visit with that.

**WHG:** Yes, you could've gone to the book fair. It's wonderful. And it's cheap. We get a lot of books, from a hundred to two hundred books every year. It goes several days. And we pick up first editions, like a first edition of a collection of essays by Valéry for a quarter. A book of *Joseph in Egypt*, two volumes, signed by Thomas Mann to his hostess when he came to . . .

**JM:** Now how much did you pay for that?

**WHG:** A buck. [*He hands over the book.*]

**JM:** I can't believe it. That's great. And you got this for a buck.

**WHG:** So you get treasures like that. They rush into the book fair and scramble to buy junk. Nobody wants what we want. The first edition on a little thing that Hemingway did on Kiki of Montparnasse. A bunch of Gertrude Stein stuff, first editions. But along with that, a lot of serviceable books. I don't collect for rarity. Don't care. I mean, it's fun if you get it. This book [*points to the Mann*] is probably worth a little, but I would never sell it. Occasionally, I run into Stanley's stuff or mine going at a cut-rate. [Laughter]

**JM:** So do the face-outs you have here, do they change? I see a Walter Abish out.

**WHG:** Yes, they change as I have to—every once in a while I have to re-shelve everything. So I want the covers to stand out, to relieve the monotony. Oh, I had a grand notion—one always starts out like that—this would be American literature, and it would start with A, and then it would go B, C, etc., and then it would go all in order of their publication, so I could just look at the shelves and get a sense of the order of that history.

I'm trying to think of the name of the damn building in Spain, and it has a great library, where you go into it, and the light is coming through the windows, and there are all these books that have had gold-stained edges, and they're all turned out . . .

**JM:** The idea of "Emma Enters a Sentence of Elizabeth Bishop's" seems like an inversion of the admonition at the end of *Willie Masters'*: "YOU HAVE FALLEN INTO ART. RETURN TO LIFE." All this leads me to ask, if you could enter a sentence, what would it be?

**WHG:** Well, it would have to be in English, though there are some sentences of Rilke's that I know well enough that I could say it in German, yes, but it would have to be in English. I'm not sure, but I know that one of the candidates would have to be a Gertrude Stein sentence, like "It looks like a garden but he had hurt himself by accident." I love that sentence. Another that I've used several times is from [Laurence] Sterne: "A cow broke in (tomorrow morning) to my uncle Toby's fortifications." Now that sentence is interesting because it breaks, because there's an ontological crack, but the Stein, when you unpack it, is pretty straightforward, but it's like the rose is a rose model, which is always quoted out of context, and the full context is something about a civilization is a rose is a rose is a rose, and it's the same contrast that she's talking about in that other sentence, it looked like a garden, that is to say, it looked cultivated and planned, intended, but in fact his injury

was not that intended thing but just happened by accident. There's nothing ontologically crazy about that sentence, really, but what it does is change the kinds of concepts that are being used to say this. Then you have all kinds of other things that those sentences do. There are sentences which I couldn't quote, but there's one I do use in an essay on Henry James that's from *The Golden Bowl*, and it's one of my favorite sentences, a sentence albeit a paragraph long. It's when they're in the shop where they buy the golden bowl. I've actually done an architectural diagram on that sentence. It's so magnificently organized in every respect. He's just looking for something. Everything that he's offered in this shop is basically tasteless, tawdry, cheap, touristy, which says a lot about what else is going on. But there's one sentence there, the sentence that leads you into the shop, goes down a spiral staircase. The sentence goes down a hill, using "old" as the riser. You have a table or a tablet. It's the kind of sentence you read and then applaud and think, "Oh, that son of a bitch, he's just done it." There's a sentence like that, which I can't quote, like that from *The Fifth Queen* [a novel by Ford Madox Ford]—just riveting. There are tons of them. But I've always liked "It looks like a garden but he had hurt himself by accident." She's marvelous.

**JM:** You enjoyed sentence diagramming as a young student. Why?

**WHG:** I was interested, without knowing why, in the syntax of sentences, and then later, of course, I felt that just straight grammatical diagrams don't get how a sentence is organized, except in a primitive way. We got to get a set of symbols, a map that will do more justice to the sound patterns and all the other kinds of organizational principles, metrics, as well as conceptual elements. In the James piece, it's not simply the way, James, in the literal sense, describes, say, a button with an image of Napoleon on it or something like that. He'll use the language of society and taste, that of manners, if you like. There's a language of facial expressions, a language of carriage and walk, and so forth, but not only that but every word has a social status. Some words are used by all members

of society, the sort of basic English kind of thing. "He sat down" doesn't tell you that it was a duke. It could be anybody. But beyond that, you have a hierarchy of words for describing, presumably, roughly the same situation. So he knows how to do that perfectly. He works in what Roland Barthes talked about: in the language of custom and manners, and so forth. So then you have all kinds of layers that are used to organize one single, ultimately single, effect. And he knows how to mix the history of words, the Latin or French influence, and the Anglo-Saxon, and he of course heavily loves Latin origin stuff much more than the blunter Anglo-Saxon. He also knows, [Laughter] he knows everything! He also knows the paradoxes of the word that is long or short in physical character and is long or short in referential meaning, and sometimes in contradictory ways. That's a lot of fun to work with, open and closed vowels. One can see that in nests, in the language of smash, dash, crash, bash, hash, mash—they have a running connection of meaning, and then you get these clusters in which parts of the word carry some of the meaning from one construction or spelling to another. Things of this sort. And you're like a little watchmaker sitting there. All of these little details! Because that's where the secret is. Or as Valéry says, "No details in execution." Everything is essential. But those are the things that help achieve the sentence's verbal consciousness, controls the speed of which the words move in the sentence. All kinds of things of this sort, like the "back-referential" connections. You have a sentence where you're describing somebody as sitting in a sentence that bounces along. You've got a problem. You can use that, maybe, or do something with it. I love it when issues like that come up. There are just too many good sentences.

**JM:** The first time we hear from the titular character in Donald Barthelme's book *Snow White*, she exasperatedly says, "OH I wish there were some words in the world that were not the words I always hear!" Gary Lutz, another favorite writer of mine, has a character say, "I kept waiting for someone to say something in a language that wasn't shot." Similarly, many of your characters suffer, in

varying degrees, from fatigue from hearing the trite, the hackneyed, the banal. At the same time, your prose refuses to get mired down by this sentiment. In your *Paris Review* interview, you said, "I have no skepticism about language . . . I know it can bamboozle, but I am a believer."

By the way, was that interview composed?

**WHG:** It was not composed. He [Thomas LeClair] cleaned it up. Took out the kinks. I saw it, I remember, and may have made some improvements of some sort, but not much.

**JM:** There are some cranky moments in there. I'm hoping that I can get some of your crankiness in this interview.

**WHG:** It's funny, as you get older, you get more cranky, but your language doesn't, necessarily. It tends to be threatened with lack of energy. When you're young you're fighting the war, not only to find somebody to print who will print what you're writing. The particular demons that are driving you are very, very full of themselves. And if you had any chance to publish, and have been in the business, so to speak, a long time, then there's a danger that you're going to lose that edge. Also, you may have had your obsession—Gaddis used to say, "You just have to have an obsession, one thing, one issue, and you just repeat the problem over and over." I was trying to suggest something of that sort in *Middle C*. And I think Gaddis and I had a very similar obsession and . . . you also lose your train of thought when you get older. [Laughter]

**JM:** Regarding language, what is there to believe in? Are you still a believer? And what do you do to deal with the sorry state of language in writing today?

**WHG:** I mean that's all I have. You have to do something good with the language, to make something out of it. One is also aware that language is also used to deceive people all the time, and is used in rhetorical craft designed to do that. Certain advertisers may miss the boat, because they're not very good at their craft, but a good advertiser

is very precise. If you admire knife wounds, you can admire that. But it is being used in the wrong way. Ordinary language, on the other hand, just daily use of language, has to be imprecise to work. People are really not going to understand you very well if you speak complete sentences, properly comma-ed and so forth. Ordinary language is a floating kind of thing. In fact, you can see it as you go back in English literature, you see open season on spelling, punctuation, etc., as people were in the oral tradition and not getting down to writing. As soon as you get to writing, as Plato saw, you have also somebody who is responsible and those words are there still and haven't vanished with the flow of jabbering that we have.

Language is like all the other tools we tend to have, it can be used for good or ill purposes, but the point that's crucial is that when you're for art, as I see it, you're not trying to communicate or persuade, in the ordinary way. That means that you have to take, remove from ordinary language its enormous utilitarian function. Even when most of what we say is pointless, there's a point to it. [Laughter] Holophrastic language is what it's called, I guess, like "Hi. How are you?" I think a painter has to believe in the materials. And the response, as I've indicated in a lot of my essays, that you have toward language properly, artistically used is, "Say that again," not "I'll give you what you want."

**JM:** In the Introduction to *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country*, you wrote that your ideal reader

is skilled and generous with attention, for one thing patient with longeurs, forgiving of every error and indulgence, avid for details . . . ah and a lover of lists, a twiddler of lines. Shall this reader be given occasionally to mouthing a word aloud or wanting to read to a companion in a piercing library whisper? yes; and shall this reader be one whose breathing changes with the tenses of verbs? yes; and shall every allusion be caught like a cold? no, eaten like a fish, yes; and shall there be eyes and eyebrows raised at rhymes? . . . oh a sort of slowpoke singer, finger tracer, then, mover of lips . . . Let's imagine such a being. And begin.

Do you still consider this to be an apt description of your ideal reader?

**WHG:** I think so. I left out things. Do you know Michael Silverblatt? He's best reader that I've ever run into, a reader that I've gotten to know well enough to know how well he reads. It's somebody who retains the kind of total self-absorption, that, when you're young, you can get in a book. The reader's entire self is given over to the text. But then, as you get older, your self that you're giving to the text has to be getting better and better, as you become more learned and savvy about the world and all the rest of it. You should be giving to that text a better self, without losing the great enthusiasm and relish and commitment. You're giving, too—and the text has got to be good enough.

When I was a kid, I used to always read dime novels. *The Shadow*—god, I read all these dime novels...I certainly did become absorbed, I was just absorbed. I was absorbed by any damn thing I picked up. It was just hit and miss. You have to grow up and mature, so that you say, "Thomas Wolfe? Well, not anymore so much." But the same enthusiasm when you were a high school kid, say, and you started to read Wolfe, that's when to read him, boy. But they don't get old along with you. As a more informed and more mature person, you should be able to find that in that text. It grows with you.

There were certain texts I'd read when I was a kid that I didn't think I would possibly like as an adult, like *Treasure Island*. But this guy [Robert Louis Stevenson] can write. So, when I went back—I was going to read *Treasure Island* to my kids—I didn't try it on the girls, but my first set of kids, the boys. So I started to read it, and they were bored out of their skull, but I loved it. And it's the same thing with *Alice in Wonderland*—those are obvious examples.

That's the kind of reader that can still give while becoming better. The trouble is that as you get more sort of professional

in this business you read like you did in high school less and less; in fact, not at all, at least for me. I haven't read that way in a long time. I miss it enormously—just to pick up a book and read it. Now, I only pick up books I'm going to talk about or something. There's always a mission. It's hard for me to read a Henry James novel, because I can't get past the first few pages without having to think about every little thing. So, I tend to end up reading a biography about Henry James, instead. Mary [Gass] went through a phase of reading a lot of James. And it was wonderful, but I was very envious of watching her go through them and say, for instance, "*The Awkward Age*—it's really good!" And I thought, "Oh yes, once upon a time, I had that experience."

There are people who, basically, are very smart but couldn't do this stuff, write themselves, for whatever reason, psychological or I don't know, but, boy, can they read. There are people like that out there. You run into them, they've been abandoned in some English department somewhere. You go around the country giving lectures or readings and stuff. Most English departments are just awful. They don't know what literature is about at all and most of them hate it. But you get some readers, now and then, some readers. And you can spot that as soon as somebody is writing about you, too, or about somebody else you know something about. They can be one-sided and not see everything, but the zest, the vigor, is there. Dr. Johnson picks up the book and by god he's going to read the book; and he gives himself to that book, and it may be to tear it all to pieces, but by and large . . .

**JM:** He's inhabiting it.

**WHG:** Yes, that sort of thing.

**JM:** Patrick Maynard in his essay "*Professor Gass's Transformations*" suggested that for you the transformation of language into literature "isn't really discourse anymore" but

an assemblage, “no more than a piece of ‘junk’ sculpture made of bits of machine parts . . .” It’s negative tone, notwithstanding, this idea of likening the transformation of the materials of language into literature with the technique of sculpture brings to mind Vilém Flusser’s essay “The Gesture of Writing” where he posits:

If we may trust archaeology, writing, at least as far as the Occident is concerned, was originally an act of engraving. The Greek verb “*graphein*” still connotes this. Some place some time in Mesopotamia people began to scratch soft clay bricks with sticks, and then burned them to harden the scratched surface. And although we no longer do such a thing very often, it is this half-forgotten gesture of scratching which is the essence of writing. It has nothing to do with constructing. It is, on the contrary, a taking away, a de-structuring. It is both structurally and historically, closer to sculpture than to architecture. It is a gesture of making holes, of digging, of perforating. A penetrating gesture. To write is to in-scribe, to penetrate a surface, and a written text is an *inscription*, although as a matter of fact it is in the vast majority of cases an *onscription*. Therefore to write is not to form but to in-form, and a text is not a formation, but an in-formation. I believe that we have to start from this fact, if we want to understand the gesture of writing: it is a penetrating gesture which informs a surface.

This notion that literary language is a kind of verbal sculpture reminds me of something else you said: “My fictions are, by and large, experimental constructions . . . That is, I try to make things out of words the way a sculptor might make a statue out of stone . . .”

How do you distinguish this notion of likening the fashioning of language into literature to sculpture with the analogy you’ve drawn between writing and architecture throughout your essays, most notably in “The Architecture of the Sentence”?

**WHG:** Architecture is caught seriously between being a work of art and being a utensil. It’s got to be a screwdriver, but it’s got to be a beautiful screwdriver. And those things are very often at odds, and there are all kinds of economic conditions, and so on, that

intervene, plus the fact that the execution of the work is not in the hands of the architect but in the hands of contractors, etc. There's politics, all kinds of things. It's not as bad as theater, which is ruined in this way, I think. But, there is this tension. The great ones overcome it.

*House VI*, for instance, was a utilitarian nightmare. The stairs, you had to duck or you'd hit your head. There were posts in the middle of the dining area. It's like going to the ballgame and getting a seat right behind some stanchion. You would sit at the table and there would be a post instead of a person. Does someone really want a window that goes from the bedroom to the living room? But was it a terrific thing to be in? It was, in one sense, designed to be a cottage for a couple to get some respite from their jobs. It was a contemplative place. And as that it really did work, I thought.

Language has that same problem. It is a huge utilitarian instrument and it has its own rules on how it should be used, too, as I've mentioned over and over. And the first thing, as Valéry suggests—but he's not going to bother doing it with fiction, but poetry has to do it (Rilke thought the same)—is to transform every word, every thing in it, in that context, so that it is not seen as a daily life message of some sort. If you study philosophy, you know that you can contemplate meanings and systems of meanings, and love that system without in the least bit demanding that it be true. When you read—my favorite example is, say, Aristotle's *Physics*. Most of us are willing to grant that he's wrong about the major things, but Aristotle's mind moving through that text is absolutely exhilarating. And people are still reading that book and learning from it. He's wrong, but it's a far more reasonable account of physics for the everyday experience of it than physics is.

So you have to transform language into an object to be experienced and perhaps loved, but not necessarily offering a message, like, "Go live this way!" or "Do that!" And that's why I love abstract art so much, not because all art has to be abstract, but it's the abstractness of every painting, no matter what its subject is, that makes it great as art. And why should we look at a plate of pears that Cézanne has painted and say—we can't say, "Gee, it really gets pear-ness."

What does it “get”? I don’t know what it gets. Thank heaven, it doesn’t get anything. It just is. The idea is the Rilkean notion: to put something in the world that has reality, and Rilke thought that it [the art object] had more reality than the average things sitting around a person.

In contradistinction to what I’ve just been saying, the sonnet “Archaic Torso of Apollo” does say something to me as well as being a great sonnet, that it happens also, I think, to be true, namely, that that mutilated torso does say, “I’m beautiful and I have being.” And people come just to look at this stone. You better change your life—it’s scary! But I think that that’s my aesthetic in a nutshell: it’s to add reality to the world, not to say something about the world.

**JM:** Writers, unlike painters, let’s say, often take the materials of their craft, words, for granted. What do you attribute this feeling or tendency to?

**WHG:** It’s because that’s what language is for in the world. Mostly. And you’re going to be taught that and not the other. Eventually, you may go for another interpretation, and, just as in the case of the sonnet, there’s nothing that prevents the screwdriver from being beautiful. Some tools are beautiful, and we hang them on the wall. “Don’t use that!” they say. And for a million reasons we take and put the little stick that stirs the boiling clothes and put it in our entry, there it is sitting there. Why? In that case, not so much art but memory and nostalgia, and all kinds of other reasons for looking at something. But the moment we start treating something as art, we start moving out of the world of this and that. It may be the object’s life in the world and the scars that have been left, in fact, that lead you to regard it as art. Or if you pick it up, it becomes, if not art, then curious.

You can have mementos. But art? Why do we treasure it so much? Because it represents, I think, human consciousness at its finest objectified. It’s not enough to see the world in a certain way and transform it. You have to objectify that transformation into the object, and people will eventually, possibly, see the kind of

consciousness it gives you. Music is a perfect example, if you listen carefully. You're all ears. You're not hearing the rattle of something or the hum. You're just absorbed by the music. That music is your consciousness for a while.

I start the day with an aria that tells me, yes, it's possible to do this. It doesn't tell you how to live. It's why you live, I think. When Donne talks about salvation, the salvation he really should've been talking about was the poems.

**JM:** Isn't there a point in Rilke's poem where the narrator is looking at the torso and then the torso starts to look at him.

**WHG:** Yes. That's when it says, "You must change your life."

**JM:** How does that happen in or with language? When does the language start reading you?

**WHG:** Let's say you're reading a passage from Henry James. It is so nuanced, so observant, so emotionally calibrated that you realize how poor your own responses are. *This* is a response to a situation. It builds. And you just have to say, yes, it's a whole consciousness. The James paragraph, it's done only verbally but it's a whole consciousness. You can't actually live that way. It may be worth it to have those experiences, but of course you can't live that way, because we don't have the training. We would have to compose each thing as if we were reconstructing the James or Thoreau passage. These are constructs.

He [Thoreau] never actually felt that way. He built them. He's out on the pond and he's watching the people fishing. He didn't see it that way when it happened. He made it later. In the hurly-burly of existence there are too many distractions to get some situation, so of course he builds it up. But he sees it as he's building it. This wasn't there, but I'm going to put it in. That's alright. Now it becomes this verbal trip out into the pond. So easy to see that in philosophy—see a certain philosophical position and you say, it's like a great house you can live in. It's like going into a well-built

building, where you can tell what the rest of the building is from the little bit that you've seen of it. It's that composed. Or you hear a bit of music you've never heard before, but you know how it will go on, in some sense. It seems inevitable that—and so forth.

Schoenberg once just stopped and said Q.E.D. It goes on. That's taking it almost to an absurd position. So it's a realization of some ideal system of thinking and feeling in a work. I do that with my rust [an endearing term referring to an artwork hanging in Gass's home] every day. My god it's there. If I had a [David] Smith sitting out in a garden (I would love to!)—I love his sculpture. And it's a bunch of twisted, old, junk metal, maybe. We can like—go to Florence, to the Academy, and see the *David*, looking very human, only not, you know. See a Giacometti. And then, a bunch of geometric shapes. And we love all of them. You can say, well, the Michelangelo is better because it also says all these other things. We like to look at nude men, or whatever, and that's a pretty nice one. The David Smith is boiled down, so there are less other interests involved. I'm all in favor of many interests. The whole problem is if it's going to be a work of art, the aesthetic interests have to control it all. So you can have a campaign poster that's marvelously good at supporting a campaign and happens to be as if it were a Russian revolution. Some of those posters people are still putting up on their walls, and they're capitalists. They lose what they were and they become a different thing. That's the exciting thing—that transformation.

**JM:** If one were to reduce your fiction to its constituent elements they would have to include the following: disruption of narrative linearity, fragmentation, plot subsumed by recurring imagery and concepts, distribution of material under subject or topical headings, and the use of vast inventories. How do you feel about this characterization?

**WHG:** It does cover most everything. Yes. The only caveat would be that books don't have to be written that way.

**JM:** And that's something that I think some critics don't get when they're talking about your fiction. All they need do is look at your essays and see all of the disparate writers you celebrate, who write differently from each other and from you.

**WHG:** Oh, sure. Even in the time in which we had a bunch of people vaguely collected in a group, none of us wrote like the other.

**JM:** Coover, Hawkes, Barth, Elkin . . .

**WHG:** Or Vonnegut. Or whomever that was put into the pot. Pynchon.

**JM:** Even your friend and so-called nemesis John Gardner. He sometimes wrote in a mode that was very much different from what he was characterized as writing: *Michelson's Ghost*. *Grendel*.

**WHG:** I think that some of his best work is in absolute defiance of his position. But I've been charged with that crime, anyway. When Valéry was in a similar position and was called a Symbolist, he said, "But we all write differently. What is in common? We dislike the same things." That's true of this group, too. We share certain dislikes.

**JM:** What were some of those dislikes?

**WHG:** This is, of course, what leads people to think that you're deifying certain kinds of writing. And to do so in order to take properties of that writing and use it to support social and political positions. A lot of the traditional English novel was dealt with in that way. Dickens, for example—who was a very great writer—what he does brilliantly became what everybody had to do, or what we want. And it fell in with the mass. Dickens is not a writer for the bourgeois. But the stuff in there—I could go to a paragraph, it's so well-managed and so supremely done that you could put him in the same book with Henry James. It's a different doing, but it's

doing it right. A lot of those books were used to support certain kinds of linearity. And when the Marxists challenged those novels, they challenged it in terms of subject matter and attitudes, instead of the way Adorno insisted: Structure. The structure of those books supported a structure in society that the bourgeois appreciated. So you get *David Copperfield*, the rise and fall, and it goes through the ladder of events in people's lives. And Dickens is busy giving a lot of attention to children and their plight in society. Fine. Hooray for Dickens. But what are then the "right" ones? The "right" ones are all the steps that all of us are marched through. School, which is a fundamental image for all Victorian novels, is a laddered thing, and you proceed through the stages of life and through the stages of social existence in these ways, and finally you will get married, and then you'll have children, and governesses, and so forth, and you will treat children better, you hope. Why are you freeing your children? So they can go up the ladder, go through the accepted stages. And if you're opposed to this basic kind of social structure, then you should write books that aren't mirroring it.

Sartre, except for *Nausea*, wrote a whole bunch of "realistic" novels, which aren't realistic at all, none of these novels is realism. *The Tunnel* is realism—anyway . . . The rewards and punishments, the whole scheme, in order to oppose that, you have to oppose the omniscient observer. It's a technique and great novels have been written using it. Why throw it away? Not if it's the only one: the privileged position, it supports a certain kind of Berkeleyan way out of difficulties. God is seeing everything all the time, therefore it exists, that kind of thing. So, I'm on Adorno's side: that real change has to be structural or formal. And that's why he favored Schoenberg over Stravinsky. Stravinsky was a perfectly bourgeois composer, and he borrowed his motifs, and of course people held that against him, I don't—as long as you're good, that's fine. And Adorno and his friends are wrong to say he shouldn't do that.

Schoenberg had another structure, and that had, as it's merits, not being Stravinsky, or the tradition, the eclectic quality of Stravinsky, too. You take Schoenberg, however—he was dictatorial. The positive side of Schoenberg was not very good, I think, as a

model of other things. And to defend the twelve-tone system you just have to point to the fact that you can write masterpieces with it. It doesn't mean you have to use it all the time. Fact is, it's a rather a specialized occasion, type of formal design. It's like the Bauhaus: military, chilling, or the tendency of modern architects to say, "Live in my house! It'll be good for you!" These architects thought that they would make better people. Even Frank Lloyd Wright did.

**JM:** Does art make a person better? Can art make a better person?

**WHG:** No. It makes a person who has found something to live for. [Both laugh] But we know that—the Germans did a lot of damage, but they did clear away some bad arguments. Humanities don't make you better. You can have a horrible person play the violin beautifully. There are a lot of horrible people wandering around, whose opportunity for evil has not yet been realized. Those are the ones who are creepiest.

I hate ideologies, all of them. Any or all.

I had a brief acquaintance with a famous Indian seer, Swami Nikhilananda, and we had a conversation once, we were talking about absolute truth. And I said, one of the things that seem so unlikely is that absolute truth is untouchable, you can't falsify it. And he said, "Oh. Nothing could be easier." And I said, "How would you do that?" He said, "Organize it" [Both laugh] And I thought, yes. [Laughter] And that's what everybody does. Organize it.

**JM:** You've famously and indefatigably rejected mimesis as the sole criterion for literary worth. So then how does one measure literary or artistic worth anyway?

**WHG:** It's a formal process, formal relations. The crucial thing is not this thing and this thing, but their relationship. And those relationships in a work of art are internal, not external. When you get internal relationship, the full internal relationship, it transforms the terms. I have oxygen here, hydrogen here. It's the relationship between them that makes the liquid, transforms both

terms into a third thing. It is not the nature of oxygen or the nature of hydrogen, it has nothing to do with preferences or anything; these are basic elements, once in relationship—you get somebody like Hume, he thought that the fact that this was sitting here rather than here was an external relationship. Spatial relations were all external. Any move or change of that relation did not change the essential nature of the terms. But it also meant that we don't have an object here. This is where it is, but there is no new thing.

What an artist is trying to do, is, first, dissolve certain entities that would be situations, the stuff on this table say, dissolve that, move them around, and so forth. And you have to pick out the elements you are concerned with. I'm not concerned with this and this, but when this goes over here, it gets closer to this, and that's what I'm interested in, maybe. In any case, what I have to do is detach and reassign into new connections, and I know I got something when they make a new whole, and when they are actually transformed. This used to be the definition of organic form for a while. And which you said, well, the liver, if detached from the body, the body is destroyed, so the relationship between the liver and the body is an internal one, as opposed to the quarter in your pocket or in my pocket—same quarter. But now we know that a transplanted liver can be put in. There are even possibilities of making a mechanical one, and other things like it: mechanical hearts. What happens there? There's a nice metaphysical problem for you. A work of art, the ideal is, that all the elements have been taken from any function they've had in ordinary contexts and put into a new context, which creates a new object, a new entity, and that new entity transforms all its terms, which means, as Hegel thought was true about the world, that a change of any element changes everything.

**JM:** Let's say we've created two new entities, that is, that we've taken two things and made a new entity, and then we've taken two things and made another entity, how do we determine which one is better than the other, in terms of the artistic?

**WHG:** Well, usually it's a matter of degree of relatedness. You have

compounds, for instance, that are together and they make a new entity, but they're very fragile, unstable, I think the word usually is, and it can fall apart, or, like radiation, start coming apart. In fact, you know you have it, you put it together in a certain way when it starts radiating, it starts falling, not to some pre-established condition, but just, in effect, dying by coming apart. And it's usually just a matter of degree.

But there is something intensely satisfying, I think, to the human mind, when it sees a work of art where you have a lot of disparate elements suddenly brought together, especially in cases where we know that the elements were once a part of something else, and now have been rearranged, and so forth, that is, that you're now in a relation between parts which has not been forced upon. For example, if I'm making a hammer, I'm forced to make it in a certain way in order for it to do its job. When you get a sentence that's right, all the words are there because they're happy to be there, and they're happy to be there because it exploits them to their fullest nature, it allows them to shine. At the same time, they are in a combination which shines, and it's a free community.

**JM:** And it's a combination that doesn't fall apart.

**WHG:** That's right.

**JM:** And the way we determine that one sentence is better than another is that the lesser one, a sentence by Dan Brown, for instance, versus a Virginia Woolf sentence is by showing how the ill-thought-out relationships fall apart. You can show a sentence—

**WHG:** Or you could do the same job with other words. For instance, for him there are equivalences in other words, whereas for a work of art there aren't. It's like it's untranslatable. It only can be said this way. And not *what* is supposed to be happening.

**JM:** So what makes a translation a good translation is that someone has managed to make a new irreducible composite, somehow.

**WHG:** That works like that other, but makes its own great poem. We fail all the time, of course, but if you're going to translate a great poem, and you don't get a great poem translation, then obviously you didn't translate what was the thing that made you want to translate it in the first place. What happens is at best we see dimly the possibility that was there in the other. We get some of it. But it is really hard, and it is a creative job, in that sense, because you are putting things together the way nature puts things together. And that's what Aristotle meant by mimesis. He didn't mean copy something already in nature. He said, quite plainly, a work of art brings things into being the way nature brings things into being. That's the imitation. He was right. It's put so succinctly by him. That's how we made plastic. We took things apart that weren't anything like it; we put it together and we have a brand new thing. Nature never made plastics. And, indeed, they're hard to get rid of. [Laughter] There's a similarity, you know.

**JM:** Elizabeth Bruss, in *Beautiful Theories: The Spectacle of Discourse in Contemporary Criticism*, writes:

If the ordinary function of words is to name objects in the world (a narrow view, but one that Gass sometimes espouses), then literature—so the logic goes—seems fated to fill itself with antinames. Hence the long and baggy catalogs that have become the most prominent device in Gass's recent fiction, endless compilations of names that do not name, referring expressions that fail to refer. What these lists seem designed to do is defeat our hunger for mimesis with a surfeit of details so great that we cannot possibly digest them. We are to be at last forced to submit to the opacity of words, to feel them quantitatively as objects that cluster and disperse, like notes in a syntactic symphony . . .

There are several assumptions here that I find problematic, the major one being an assumed universal "hunger for mimesis." Also,

I don't read the lists in your work as any kind of betrayal of an ingrained expectation for verisimilitude. What are your thoughts?

**WHG:** It's the opposite of verisimilitude, actually. That style, which I adopt from time to time, is called a nominalist style, in contrast with the so-called realist position. The nominalist position is a Humean position, that is, there are no universals, really. So what can a term, like "man," refer to? For Hume, it can only refer to each particular man. So if you were to unpack the word "man," you would list Howard, James, Bill, Mary, etc., all these and that would be it, and so you have a name and for Hume and the particulars. So to get the connection it would be the telephone book for the human race. It would give you your name and address. It would be under "man." No platonic idea of "man." Now that's the extreme position of a nominalist. I'm not one, exactly, but when I write like that, I'm being one, so that instead of saying, "If you did that, it would be a disaster," I say, "If you did that, it would be an Alamo, a blank, a blank," that is, a long list. That's nominalism. There's a reason for using that, because of what it says about the reality or not of universals.

The story that Coover was nice enough to mention ["Emma Falls into a Sentence by Elizabeth Bishop"] is full of nominalism, because of this young woman who doesn't have a consciousness that deals with universals; and her love of the line of verse is her love for something done right, ordered correctly, and having that be a specific thing. That's her casket, so to speak. And so I have a page of weeds—weeds are very important in the meaning of the poem—and I could have simply used the universal, but if I used the particulars, I change the nature of the dish. Say we're going to have beans tonight, no, *these* beans tonight. There's an enormous difference. You may have valued these beans, have had them in this glass jar for twelve years, and liked looking at them, but tonight we're going to eat them. That kind of thing, the particularity in the lists. I did write a whole essay on the nature of lists ["I've Got a Little List"], and they have a lot of complex logic. You have to be careful, of course, and you can't avoid it when you're doing

criticism, you have to be careful condemning lists or you'll find yourself on Whitman's bad side, or Rabelais' bad side, or tons, because it's been used ever since . . . it's in the *Iliad*.

My only complaint about something like what Bruss wrote, is that something's bothering them, but they usually don't get the right reason why I'm bothering them. I wanted to bother people. It's like saying, again, taking the change out of my pocket, but it's this particular one dollar bill that makes the five, so to particularize something that is general through a list. But the paradox is that a list is made up of universals. You can't help it. Say a string of nouns. Almost everything you do has a philosophical history. There's a war going on between people who believe in universals and people who don't, or Aristotle who's always so nicely in between, who said that the universal does not exist apart from the particular. It is the structure of the particular. I think, right on, man! You got it right again. It's the structure of the particular.

JM: In light of your description of the novel as having "always been a sprawling genre, if even a genre," that it "goes in so many different directions, can do and contain an infinite number of things," that it can be a "long prose work," but can "like *A Thousand and One Nights* be broken up into a series of stories," that "it can contain poetry, other types of texts, actual pieces of other things in the world, and so forth," and that it "can become a scrapbook"; and also in light of your celebration of novelists like "Emilio Gadda, Calvino, Juan Goytisolo, Günter Grass," all of whose work you've described as "loosening and instructive," how then would you respond to Henry James's description of William Thackeray's *The Newcomes*, Dumas' *The Three Musketeers*, and Tolstoy's *War and Peace* as "such large loose baggy monsters, with their queer elements of the accidental and the arbitrary"? And how then would you respond to what these beasts of burgeoning "artistically mean"? Would you talk about the ways in which expansive novels may, as you say, "loosen and instruct"?

WHG: It was the last romantic view of the artist. Writing the great

book. And of course what one meant by that would vary from person to person. The sixties' novelists still believe that stuff. Barth has tried it several times, that sort of book. Coover's *The Public Burning*. Pynchon, and so forth. Those people didn't go to writing schools, where you didn't study the novel that much, because it took too much space, time. They teach short stories, because you can talk about them better. And then there was a flurry of interest in the short story. Some contemporary writers, they write long books because their egos are long. A deplorable situation, from my point of view.

But [David Foster] Wallace had that—I think that part of his torment was the impulse to do that sort of thing and feel about his work in that way and have the opposite attitude at the same time, disillusionment. When you put things on the margin, as poetry and fiction have certainly been, you free them in many cases, in many ways, and it's great to be over there, in a sense, but it also causes damage. It's a great incentive, if you're over on the margin and feel you should be the center, and then those who are on the margin, know they're on the margin, that's the way it's going to be, and they have their desperate little ways to pretend that the margin is really the center. And there's the final thing when the novel was in the center for a while, people like Dickens, and even up through late James. There was a sense of the social responsibility of the writer, the impact—people paid attention. Recently, in Latin American literature, novelists were attended to. A little anecdote: While talking to Carlos Fuentes about that sort of thing, and trying to get at why there was such an explosion in Latin American literature, he said, "We are making our literature. We are behind the times." Gertrude Stein said that the United States was the oldest country in the world because it's been in the twentieth century the longest. And they were just getting to this, and Fuentes was right. The novelists were celebrated people, and are, even still. The weight of being somebody who is attended to. [When a writer] came out on the stage, an athletic complex, usually, to read, the place would be packed with twenty thousand people. And when they finished reading, bouquets of flowers would be piled at his feet, and so

forth. And the writer, serious writers would be read by half the population.

In China, the same sort of thing. I was introduced to a young woman, whose first book had just come out, and she was sort of disappointed in its sales. She sold a hundred thousand copies of her first book of poetry. Everybody in China reads. You would see people everywhere, perched somewhere, reading. And they would run out of paper, the whole country would run out of paper there were so many. But the problem is that only in less developed societies are novelists and poets valued. The Russians are losing that fast. And they should be, because we writers don't know what we're talking about. Some writers are wise people, I guess, and have something of intellect to offer to society, but no more than any other group. You want to listen to Tolstoy? I don't think so. But then what? What are the young writers writing for? They're writing for their peers in their seminars, the workshops, that's who. It's pitiful.

Barth was writing for the greats of the past, whom he had read, and, again. Fuentes or Vargas Llosa, they read Don Quixote, I mean. And they're given ambassadorships, they run for president. They are important people, so they have to do important things. And now what we do to something important, we sign a petition not to arrest a Chinese radical. Big deal. I think it's naturally a very difficult thing.

One last thing, when you make less grand the activity, it becomes a hobby, and it actually multiplies the number of people writing poems, tons and millions of people are writing poems, all kinds of people are writing novels, because it's not hard. The Yeats poem "Adam's Curse," we're down on our knees scrubbing the kitchen floor. No, we're not. They're writing little poems about being mistreated by their husband or wife. At least the Restoration poets wrote about getting *into* bed.

**JM:** Who do you feel is currently pushing the boundaries of what the novel can do?

**WHG:** I'm not the one to talk on this, because I can't speak about

what's happening in this generation. I just can't keep up. I'm so concerned with trying to get things done before I die. Once upon a time, that was never a thought. Always had plenty of time. But now I don't have. So, I do still follow some of the things that the Europeans are doing, and so forth. I remember when *Invisible Cities* ran through the literary neighborhoods, like a fire.

**JM:** I just read complete *Cosmicomics*.

**WHG:** This guy was so good. Susan [Sontag] would send me lists, "Hey, don't lose sight of this person who's writing in Croatian." She was always good for that. She had a good eye. I would write things down on a piece of paper, and say, "Read this, Susan." She'd write things to me. I did what she said. But she'd never do what I said.

**JM:** Were you in dialogue with her throughout the years?

**WHG:** Not in dialogue really, but we saw one another for awhile, when I was more active on the circuit, so to speak, I saw a lot of her at conferences and things. We always got on very well. She could be a problem, and I was not a fan of her fiction at all. It's amazing how many times we ended up writing about the same people, say Danilo Kiš, and this Romanian writer, E.M. Cioran, who was very interesting. Coover's good at that; he sends messages out to people when he's spotted something. He's a good citizen in the world of literature. That's another thing that you have to decide about: whether you're going to be a good citizen or not. A lot of them aren't.

**JM:** More so than not, I would say. *The Tunnel* toys with the blurring of fiction and autobiography. I wonder what you thought of overt self-insertion in fiction, like Proust in *In Search of Lost Time*, and Borges throughout his fictions like "Borges and I," and recent examples like Gordon Lish in *Zimzum* and other fictions, and the work of Ken Sparling, John Haskell, and Ben Marcus (*Notable American Women: a novel*), to name a few.

**WHG:** People have done it and gotten away with it, but I disapprove of it, not on artistic grounds, because people can transform their stuff, and they can write great things in diaries and journals; that's a genre of art as well, and it can be wonderful, and it can be wonderful precisely because it's about actual people. It has different rules and regulations. But when you're putting yourself into a fiction, and then the question of, is this fiction or is this not, and so forth, arises, it's a way of escaping. If somebody knocks on one door, you go out the other one. "Oh, that was just fiction," you say, and so forth, or the other way around. I'm against the kind of autobiographical stuff that hurts people, and there's an enormous amount written just to do that. The angry wife who writes another goddamn novel about the husband and whatever. "I Was Kissed by Father," or some such stuff. That's garbage, but it's bad because it hurts a lot of people whom you shouldn't want to hurt. I used a specific town in Indiana, not anybody in it, as a setting for "In the Heart of the Heart of the Country." It was because I realized I was setting my stuff in time, in place, always at a remove, and I was wondering whether that might not be too much in the wrong direction. And in *The Tunnel*, I used things from my childhood, but that was it. Everybody referred to is dead, and they're only referred to in part. If you thought, as people sometimes do, that my father was like the father in this book, or he was only partly but the rest of it's made up—I was also suckering the people who want to do this. The reviewer who was reviewing *The Tunnel* for the *New York Review of Books* had their office call the International Writers Center to ask if I was fat.

**JM:** Fact checking it as if it were a memoir or something.

**WHG:** And I am. Fat. But when I started the book, and created the character, I wasn't. I was slim as you are. So watch out!

It used to be: "Vengeance is mine," saith the novelist, as he or she goes out to get even, or just borrows a neighborhood person. Stanley did that once. It was mean. He shouldn't have done it, but that's a moral objection. I don't believe in writing as that kind

of weapon. First place, it involves adopting a style that has to be newspaper realism, that is, people will recognize who it is from the kinds of things that would be in a newspaper or something. Those were never important [to me]. I think my wives, children, relations, etc., need not fear from me. They won't recognize themselves, because it's not there, and won't be. That's why I wouldn't write an autobiography either. That's not the only reason. First, you have to matter. My life doesn't matter at all, in that sense. I've been fortunate. It's been uneventful, in the ordinary sense.

**JM:** In one of his letters, Flaubert wrote: "Besides, I am convinced that everything is a question of style, or rather of form, of presentation." He also writes: "Nevertheless, the capital difficulty for me remains style, form; the indescribable Beauty resulting from the conception itself—and which is, as Plato said, the splendid raiment of truth." I found a parallel in something you once said where described yourself neither as a novelist nor as a critic, but as a stylist. Why?

**WHG:** Well, the problem is that I can't write things without turning them into a project. I don't write many letters because I start toiling over them. Even memos. And I treat the essays as demanding the same care as I would when I write the fiction. No difference to me. I often wished I could do a throwaway, and some stuff might come out looking like it, which is awful, but it happens, of course. It's bad when you look back, or you're forced to look back, and you see a disgraceful line. Of course you going to, bound to. Out of the thousands of lines that you write, most of them are going to be bad. Joyce is the exception. You might skip his play, the rest of it is essential stuff, whereas, I've got, say, eleven volumes of Wordsworth, and maybe twenty pages will do. Most of it: awfully bad.

**JM:** In your fictions, the writer is, like Flaubert proposed, like a "god in his creation," but a bit contrary to what he proposed, while still "all-powerful," the writer is oftentimes visible, and not only felt but seen. These aspects are manifested in your manipulation of the

visual aspects of the page, the materiality of the printed material, most overtly manifested in works like *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife*, *The Tunnel*, and "Emma Enters a Sentence of Elizabeth Bishop's." I first encountered this tactile play in your work, though, in "The Pedersen Kid" from your first story collection (*In the Heart of the Heart of the Country*). I'm referring to the caesuras, the elongated spaces between words to set phrases apart. Samuel Delany considers these spaces to be punctuation marks, and as "actual suspensions of sound." I thought of them more as intimating a suspension of time and space, the actual physical space wherein the action of the story is taking place, and may also indicate gaps in Jorge's thinking. Delany also writes about how he first encountered these extra-length spaces "in the poetry of Robert Duncan back in the 1950's." You can also find these pauses in poets like James Dickey and George Oppen. Did the work of any of these poets influence your inclusion of these spaces? Some other writer? And how would you describe the function of it in "The Pedersen Kid"? I was surprised and pleased to find it used once again in an excerpt from your novel-in-progress *Middle C*, namely, "Professor Skizzen Gets the Word."

**WHG:** Yes, there's some more of that in the novel. But in "The Pedersen Kid" it's a vestige of what I wanted to do but couldn't manage. I wanted pages that were mostly white. Snow. I ended up with little areas, because it just didn't read right, I couldn't get it to go the way I wanted at all. And there's certainly a big spatial connection, there's also a temporal one. So, you're right about that. And Delany's right about the suspension of sound. It's a rest, but I got it from Beckett.

**JM:** From *Ping*.

**WHG:** Yes. It's Beckett pauses. What it is is a musical pause, really. Longer than a dot, a period. The dying away punctuation, the number of dots, the trouble with that is that it's a dying away, the elision. And it didn't work. I didn't get it to work.

**JM:** So, originally, in manuscript you actually had pages set apart?

**WHG:** I had pages which were to be just blank. Snowy. And then I realized, I can't make them all blank, because there's got to be some footsteps through it or we don't get to the next area. [Laughter]

**JM:** Would you have had page numbers?

**WHG:** No. There were lot of things about that book, *The Tunnel, Willie Masters'*, this, everything. I had all kinds of things I wanted *Harper's* to do with the piece I did on Malcolm Lowry. They just don't have, or they don't want to, of course—they just don't have the room, the space, and they don't want to break their style. So, you settle or you just quit, after a while. [In "The Pedersen Kid,"] I wanted the pauses and the empty space, the snow. And then the type is just these prints. But, you know, if you do something like this, plan on dissolving the sentence, say, in the snow, it looks like a children's book, suddenly. I couldn't get it right. Finding the right notation for things like this, it's really important. And I've tried. I'm not any good at it. In the book now [*Middle C*], I have some double colons that I'm trying to use. Jose Garcia Villa, a comma guy, a student of Hopkins, used commas in conversations between people. Ford worked on it, used two dashes to interrupt conversation. I wanted thoughts interrupted, and other things.

**JM:** And you're doing that with double colons?

**WHG:** Yes, well, I'm trying. I don't know if it will work.

**JM:** Julia Kristeva, in *Powers of Horror*, examines Celine's highly individuated use of the exclamation point, and also the ellipsis, which you've also made extensive, expressive use of, and also the em dash. In your novella *Cartesian Sonata* you use the ellipsis but it's actually moving vertically.

**WHG:** They messed with it [in France], and my translator in French he's just furious. They didn't do the dots vertically.

**JM:** Typos annoy me to no end. Unfortunately, *Conversations with Gass* is riddled with them. When "The Pedersen Kid" was reprinted in *Best American Short Stories 1962* the typesetter removed all of the gaps, the caesuras. How do you feel about typos in general and what did you think about the snafu with "The Pedersen Kid"?

**WHG:** I just shrugged. I don't look at them anymore. There's nothing to be done about it. Well, you could fuss, but it's too late. Well, I just said to myself, that isn't the text. [Laughter]

**JM:** You've said that you have no advice to give to the writer, but you've also said: "My advice for writers is first to recognize that writers differ a great deal in their own natures and in the nature of their talent, and that little advice which is general can be of much value. Learn not to take advice. Look to yourself. Make yourself worthy of trust." Would you elaborate?

**WHG:** Let's say you're doubling up a word, used it too often in a series of sentences—and this is watched very closely by copyeditors—and the editor says, "Well, maybe you shouldn't repeat this word again so soon." When you run into that, the reader should be confident that it's not a mistake, that something is happening, that it's being used for a reason. In other words, anything that looks like a mistake, or even bad writing, if you've established your authority, the reader says, well, I'm going to believe that this guy knows what he's doing, until I'm just forced to think otherwise. And it's a real situation that comes up in a practical way if you're editing, say, copies of editions of Shakespeare. Is this a typo, or did Shakespeare mean this? Well, you start always by saying, "Well, of course, he did it." But of course it could be a typo. The establishment of authority that allows you to do certain things. A lot of young writers start out using the present tense: "I is." "I is sitting her at the bar and stuff." This better be written by a master, otherwise it's somebody

inept. Once the sense of ineptness comes in, you lose the reader. He becomes the judge of the work. Your authority, doing it the way you want for a reason, is very important to establish. It's another reason why the beginning of books or poems is so important. And often, of course, it's a disaster. After awhile you know when to stop reading this Faulkner because he's not Faulkner anymore. He's ranting again. Or Lawrence is off on his hobbyhorse. Particularly important in poetry, I think, because you only have no time at all to do it.

**JM:** How things have changed in terms of what people are reading, how much people are reading, and also what people are writing. You've written about this in "A Defense of the Book" and the Book as a Container of Consciousness."

If the book is a container of consciousness, then what are e-books and these electronic readers? What if I told you that you could take all of your twenty thousand and store them onto one of these portable devices? What do you think about what's happening?

**WHG:** They will change the psychological context of reading. The present psychological context of, say, those twenty thousand is they're sitting there waiting for somebody to come pull them off of their shelf. The person whose context for the book is going into the bookstore—I'm going browsing, seeing something, "Oh, this looks interesting," and so on; and a lot of us can remember when we first bought this, that, and the other book that was so important to us, and then the sense of taking it home surrounded by a newspaper because it started to rain or whatever, and then you get home, and when you can get at it—and sometimes it sits there for a month, and then you stumble back on it; and it has a history of just getting to it. That will change. It'll still be some way that you ran into this text, but it will be a different experience altogether. And I suspect it won't be the chummy kind of experience; it will be much more mechanical and accidental. But there are all of those elements. Opening a book and having the physical object. So, the text will be same but not the same, because the "pages" will all be

the same size. And these “books” will have no identity, because both *Two Flappers in Paris* and Carlyle’s *French Revolution* are the same objects, the object presents itself, everything in the same way. The type won’t have the same feel. There’s no solidity. It’s erasable. It’s fragile. It’s a different feel. Not necessarily a bad one. You can do things with machines, program it to do all sorts of stuff. You could, in fact, write a mystery with clues that evaporated while you’re watching them.

It’ll be different, that’s all. It will also be a device made to make the reading situation or possibility easy, and, therefore, not important. These things, texts, will not be important, once they’ve been shrunk to fairyland. They have no presence, no history. So, again it will be different. It will be appropriate for a totally marginalized art. Everybody will have it, and nobody will be using it, I think. But I don’t know, anybody reading the text is better than not.

**JM:** So what kind of consciousness is this electronic reader?

**WHG:** It’s a borrowed consciousness. It’s a manufactured, mechanical context, because it’s all of these consciousnesses in one place. Whereas with a book, here’s *this* consciousness, specific to the book, even specific to the state of art for the writer. But, now it’s all jelly. It’s the same thing. There will be no significance to its order or place. So, it’ll be different, and I think it will make the stuff less important, which, maybe, it will deserve to be, I don’t know. There’ll be a lot of sales at first, because, it’s like “Gee, I could have all of Thackeray?” You can have all of Thackeray on one of those devices, but it won’t have any substantiality, not like that complete edition of Dickens I have right down there [pointing to a row of volumes on a shelf]. It’s illusory. It creates an illusion. Unreal.

**JM:** Having a personal library for me creates a unique kind of pressure. All of these books are “staring” at me.

**WHG:** Oh, sure. Of course. And hence the glory of when you once in a while get your book done right—it’s very pleasing. There’s also

a whole social history to the book, from the way covers are designed, the paper yellowing, that make a book a companion, whereas it won't be. But it won't matter. The people who like books are still there. There are more books being published than ever. There are more small presses. You can get your book published for nothing. That's what's going to happen. Michael [Eastman] and I got tired of talking about a book. So we made our own book. We made it. So there! It's ours.

**JM:** Thank you for the interview.

**WHG:** You're quite welcome. I'm always amazed to have somebody who's actually read all my books.

**JM:** Well, now I feel like going back and rereading all of them.

**WHG:** I would recommend [Severo] Sarduy, instead. [Laughter] I danced in the road with him, once. We did it. I got out on a dirt road up in the Rockies. He said he had to "dance with Gass." He was a terrific man. A Cuban Marxist Buddhist. He was part Chinese, part black, and part white. He represented Cuba to a T. A young friend to great Cuban writer, poet and novelist, José Lezama Lima. Boy, *Paradiso* is some great book. I got to know a lot of these writers fairly well. I admire them immensely. Terrific writers, terrific people. Luisa Valenzuela is a terrific date. We had a lot of fun in Spain together. Coover is a friend of hers. Coover and I went to Columbia, you know. We both got the keys to the city, and I thought, "Keys?" but after five minutes of being there he had already discovered *the* restaurant. [Laughter] Best in town.

John Madera's work has appeared in *Conjunctions*, *The Believer*, *Opium Magazine*, *American Book Review*, *Bookforum*, *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, *Rain Taxi Review of Books*, and many other venues. He edits the online forum *Big Other* [[www.bigother.com](http://www.bigother.com)].