

TEXTS AS BODIES/BODIES AS TEXTS: THE BARTHES-GASS CONNECTION*

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Postructuralism is epistemologically built around notions such as instability, openness and fluidity, and so it is an almost inevitable theoretical frame to explain the cultural phenomenon of postmodernism. William Gass's work consolidates some of the main tenets of the poststructuralist programme, and in particular, those of Roland Barthes; both authors write against the dogmatic construction of all forms of knowledge, and they enhance the sensuous potential of language when treated not as a vehicle but as an end in itself. For Gass, texts can be "bodies" –texts of "jouissance" or "bliss" for Barthes– when their most sensual verbal qualities are realized; but bodies can be "texts" –texts of "plaisir" or "pleasure" for the French theorist– when they are translated into the language of consumption and collective control. It is the aim of this article to show that Barthes and Gass earnestly speak up for the eroticism of writing, and that they likewise converge in their wish to expose both pleasure and popular artistic creation as cultural constructions.

Keywords: *poststructuralism, Roland Barthes, readerly/ writerly, postmodernism, William Gass.*

El postestructuralismo se construye epistemológicamente en torno a conceptos como inestabilidad, apertura y fluidez, por lo que es un marco teórico casi inevitable cuando se trata de explicar el fenómeno cultural del postmodernismo. La obra de William Gass consolida alguno de los principales dogmas del proyecto postestructuralista y, en particular, los de

Roland Barthes; ambos autores escriben contra la construcción dogmática de toda forma del conocimiento, y destacan el potencial del lenguaje cuando éste no se trata como un vehículo sino como un fin en sí mismo. Para Gass, los textos pueden ser “cuerpos” o textos de placer (“jouissance” o “bliss” para Barthes); pero los cuerpos también pueden ser “textos” y producir otro tipo de placer (“plaisir” o “pleasure”) cuando, según el teórico francés, se traducen al lenguaje del consumo y del control colectivo. El objetivo de este artículo es mostrar que Barthes y Gass abogan fervientemente por la erótica de la escritura, y que asimismo coinciden en su deseo de desvelar que tanto el placer como la creación artística popular son construcciones culturales.

Palabras clave: *poststructuralismo, Roland Barthes, William Gass, readerly/ writerly, postmodernismo.*

1. ROLAND BARTHES AND POSTMODERNISM

The central theories of poststructuralism have definitely marked all the literature –fictional or non-fictional–produced in the last forty years; particularly those concerning the relationship between author, text and reader have condensed a great part of the intellectual and artistic debate in the second half of the Twentieth Century. Many pages have been written since Roland Barthes published in 1968 his famous essay “The Death of the Author”, followed by Michel Foucault’s “What Is an Author?”(1969), which officially announced the departure of the person author from his or her text.

These theories have been a challenging but also a rewarding tool when applied to literary analysis, and they have proved very fruitful in the retrospective interpretation of works produced since the last decade of the Nineteenth Century; from the experiments with form of avant-garde and key modernist authors, intended to give their works the highest degree of “anonymity”, to the ironic and often disrespectful revision of art and history of the postmodernist period, to the most innovative digital literature of the Twenty-First Century,

poststructuralism has worked as a consistent theoretical frame on which many intellectuals have relied –and of which many others have disapproved, it cannot be ignored.

Poststructuralism defends the essentially unstable nature of the signifier, which Derrida abridges in the concept of *différance*; these theories highlight the linguistic fallacy on which our very existence is founded, and they expose our blind logocentrism. When applied to literature, poststructuralism tends to reject any notion of originality; words are preceded only by other words, texts are composed of previous texts, a book becoming thus an infinite tissue of signs. Texts are then open and plural, and signification is always in the process of its construction; the centrality of the author as a source of univocal meaning is radically discarded and supplanted by the centrality of the text itself.

The shocking terminology used by Barthes to explain this phenomenon caused certain discomfort and misunderstanding; he wanted to illustrate his idea that far from preexisting the text, the author is created in the very process of writing, and consequently the author must “die” in order for his text to be born (“The Death of the Author”, in *Image-Music-Text*). What was a painful and difficult metaphor for many, proved to be an effective and recurrent rhetorical strategy that serious literary criticism still validates. Less vehement but similarly compelling in this respect were the theories of Michel Foucault, who considered the category “author” to be an important part of discourse, but only as one more function of the text; the person author retreats and disappears from the text leaving a trace, and it’s on this trace of absence that the author-function is grounded (in Rabinow and Rose, eds.); the “dead” author and the “absent” author have become the two most popular metaphors referring to the disintegration of traditional authorial agency.

Accordingly, the unity of a text won’t be found anymore in its origin but in its reception; for poststructuralists, the text is the core of signification, but it needs to be “constructed”, so the space previously occupied by the author comes to belong to the reader: “No one, no ‘person’ says it: its source, its voice, is not the true place of the writing, which is reading” (Barthes 1978, 147). Similarly for Derrida our

reading must be intrinsic and remain within the text, for “there is nothing outside of the text” (Derrida 1976, 158); reading becomes another textual operation, necessarily performed *in* the text, not outside of it, so a fruitful new kind of dialogue is established between the origin and the destiny of signification.

Poststructuralism is then epistemologically built around notions such as instability, openness, fluidity, multiplicity, etc., which makes it an almost inevitable theoretical frame to explain the cultural phenomenon of postmodernism. Postmodernism reveals an incurable skepticism concerning the great western tales that rationally try to explain our world, and an obstinate suspicion of the grand myths and rites commonly shared by the members of a dominant culture. Postmodern art can be said to be a performance of this skepticism, and it explores hybrid forms as the only and last refuge for a genuine aesthetic experience; it is an art of the border, always dwelling on the unsteady limit that separates art and life, reality and fiction, high and low art, the different genres, and many other conventionally consolidated categories. For postmodern artists these limits are ephemeral and provisional, and they challenge them with strategies such as intertextuality, citation or parody among many others; metafiction itself involves a semantic suspension that marks the epistemological inconsistency inherent in the postmodernist project (see Piqueras 2011).

This open and unstable space where new forms of negotiation take place in postmodern literature –and art in general– can be puzzling and misleading, but it can also be enormously rewarding. Roland Barthes explained in his work *Le Plaisir du texte* (1973) that there is a kind of text that “contents, fills, grants euphoria: the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading” (Barthes 1975, 14), it’s what he calls the text of “pleasure” –“plaisir” in the original French edition. Contrary to that is the text that produces the more gratifying sense of “bliss” –“jouissance” in the original–, a text that doesn’t conform to common cultural conventions nor to the reader’s expectations, but dismantles instead the reader’s historical, cultural and psychological assumptions; it’s a text that discomforts and imposes a state of loss, bringing to a crisis the reader’s relation with language (*Ibid.*, 14). The

text of pleasure complies with the profound hedonism of modern culture, whereas the text of bliss opens spaces that defy the dogmatism of authoritative discourses.

Barthes's emphasis on the creative role of the reader, particularly in his later works, made him distinguish between the *readerly* and the *writerly* text. The *readerly* text demands of the reader not a productive gesture, but the blind acceptance of the univocal truth disclosed by the words, getting in exchange the "pleasure" of a coherent narrative; the *writerly* text involves subversive methods that incorporate multiple interpretations and truths, validating an open and polymorphic form of knowledge that supplants the rigidity and closure of *readerly* constructions. The *writerly* text has a plural nature, says Barthes, it's the language that speaks, nothing more (Barthes 1974, 41), and the reader is invited to discover the multiple voices embedded in the words, so that "the subject gains access to bliss by the cohabitation of languages working side by side" (Barthes 1975, 4).

At the core of postmodernism there is a permanent problematization of the notion of authority and originality, and one of the central concerns of postmodern writers is the relationship between writer, text and reader, permanently showing how ephemeral their confines are. Very popular were the narrative experiments initiated by Borges and Cortázar and followed by John Barth, Robert Coover, Italo Calvino, Raymond Federman or Michel Butor among others, where the reader "chooses" among different alternatives –that can adopt the form of paths, versions, or pieces of a model kit– creating thus his or her own text in the very process of reading. The book is then many books; it is open, unlimited and multilayered, and literature becomes an equivocal domain where writer and reader mix up, and where the fictional illusion is definitely shattered. This space that is ontologically abstruse becomes an ideal site for the performance of different forms of cultural resistance.

Many postmodern works can be studied from this prospect of resistance as formulated by Barthes in the duality *readerly/writerly* texts, and the works of the American author William Gass are interestingly congenial, both chronologically and conceptually, with Barthes's theories.

Gass's work is a clear example of the art on the limit above mentioned; his production is marked by epistemological tensions and irreconcilable dualities, some of them originated in his double role as fiction and non-fiction writer. As he declares in his book of essays *Finding a Form*: "My stories are malevolently anti-narrative, and my essays are maliciously anti-expository" (Gass 1996, 46). Indeed his novels are often an exuberant metaphorical display of his theories, whereas his essays read like poetry in their careful and sensual expository elaboration. An adept representative of the "linguistic turn", language is the central theme in Gass's production, and his artistic world is fundamentally logocentric, as his words reveal:

(...) The referent doesn't exist. (...) If I were trying to describe a thing in the world, the description would soon replace the thing, and it does all the time in a work of fiction. So then, the question is, you never did have a pen, what you have is the description of a pen, and the description has its own system, its own significance. And the pen, as a pen, is in no way phallic, but when I get it into a description, it can become (Piqueras 1995).

For Gass, the distance between art and the "real world" is unbridgeable, and the previous quotation echoes Barthes's idea that "(...) in the most realistic novel, the referent has no 'reality': (...) what we call 'real' (in the theory of the realistic text) is never more than a code of representation (of signification)" (Barthes 1974, 80).

As Stanley Fogel explains:

Although Gass nowhere refers to himself as a postmodernist or, especially, a deconstructor, he has, as much as possible as Jack Derrida, Barthes, or any other of their acolytes, helped to foster an intellectual climate in which the primacy of language, with all its indeterminate qualities, is valued over its referential properties; the formal limits of genre are resisted and exceeded; a critical vocabulary situated in continental notions of aesthetics (and stimulated by the interpretation of continental philosophers such as Hegel

and Heidegger) has supplanted the discourse of New Criticism; the boundary between literature and criticism has been dissolved or at least miscegenated; the critic's role as a handmaid to the arts has been transformed into the kind of performative role that suits Gass's (not to mention Derrida's) theatrical style (Fogel, 11).

Together with the work of other fellow experimentalists like John Barth, Raymond Federman, Robert Coover, Ronald Sukenick, Donald Barthelme, John Hawkes, Ishmael Reed, etc., who were writing actively from the 1950s to the 70s in the United States – and all of whom reject, as Fogel puts it, the mechanical deployment of plot and narrative (Fogel, 9)– Gass's oeuvre has largely consolidated some of the main principles of the poststructuralist programme.

William Gass works in the slippery realm of metafiction, a self-reflective domain where fiction mirrors itself, highlighting the artificial processes by which discourse constitutes its object, and challenging the official discourse of the political and literary establishment. Gass would easily endorse Ronald Sukenick's point that "One of the tasks of modern fiction, therefore, is to displace, energize, and re-embodiment its criticism –to literally reunite it with our experience of the text" (Sukenick, 1985, 5).

Gass's literature is a remonstrance against the rigidity of the linguistic codes and conventions on which the medium of literature is founded, and by extension, against the noxiously dogmatic construction of all forms of knowledge; but it is also a chant of hope in the sensuous potential of language when treated not as a vehicle but as an end in itself, when conventions are demolished and the evocative power of words reappears in the free association of semantic categories and structures. Gass's project claims that there's a place for poetry on the fringe of convention.

2. TEXTS AS BODIES

For William Gass poetic pleasure is then to be found in the limit, which resembles Barthes's theories of the *writerly* text and the

“bliss” bestowed by subversive methods. Interestingly coincidental was the publication in 1968 of William Gass’s work *Willie Masters’s Lonesome Wife* with that of Barthes’s “The Death of the Author”, two years before the publication of *S/Z* and five years before *Le Plaisir du texte*. The curiosity comes from the fact that Gass’s “essay-novella”, now a postmodernist classic, can be interpreted as a parallel fictional formulation of the Barthesian theories of the dead author and the *writerly* text, and something similar to what Barthes propounds in a conceptual way can be seen “staged” by Gass in the pseudo-theoretical framework of metafiction. Although the American author keeps a tight control of his writing—which is often as abstruse as that of some of the modernist masters—he leaves big gaps to be filled by the reader, opening ludicrous and ironic spaces of negotiation between both that make the reader confront his or her absolute dependence on the conventions that construct signification. The *writerly* text stops being a mere textual entity, it leaves its material essence to reach a higher ontological dimension; as Barthes says, “the writerly text is *ourselves writing*” (Barthes 1974, 5).

The text is thus conceived as having a pseudo-biological status, and this is performed by Gass by means of the metaphor of a body-text in his hybrid work *Willie Masters’s Lonesome Wife*. It is the tale of Babs Masters, a solitary lady that desperately yearns for a lover-reader to have a fulfilling encounter with; hers is a textual corporeality, since Babs is no other than language itself speaking, and the result is a permanent transgression of ontological boundaries in the narrative that involves an identification of the concepts of body and text as mutable and transitory sites constructed by discourse. Babs confesses to be only a string of noises, “(...) an arrangement, a column of air moving up and down, (...) imagine the imagination imagining... and surely neither male nor female—there is nothing female about a column of air (...)” (Thirty-fourth page with text)¹, which coincides with Barthes’s conception of literature: “We see that literatures are in fact arts of ‘noise’; what the reader consumes is this defect of communication, this deficient message” (Barthes 1974, 145). Babs’s textual body lacks a specific mark of gender² because it cannot be identified with any unequivocal voice, there’s not a message or a *signature*—in Barthesian terms— behind it.

Brian McHale detects a new form of eroticism in the violation of ontological boundaries in postmodernist narrative:

It should be clear now what I mean when I say postmodernist writing is 'about' love. I am not so much interested in its potential for representing love between fictional characters, or for investigating the theme of love (although it can do both of these things), as in its modeling of erotic relations through foregrounding violations of ontological boundaries (for instance through metaleptic uses of the second person pronoun) (McHale 1987, 227).

McHale concludes that love in the postmodern novel is less a theme than a *metatheme*, since it characterizes not the fictional interactions within the text's world but rather between the text and its world, namely, its writer and its readers. Following this line, Babs's body is nothing but a *metabody* conceived to play up the thin and mutable limits that separate production from reception; *Willie Masters's Lonesome Wife* is much more than a novel, since it epitomizes the theoretical and formal principles of postmodern fiction.

Fully enjoying the rewards this textual body offers the reader implies an absolute commitment to its charms, which are the charms of pure language, the sensual dimension of words when liberated from the strictures of convention, as described by Gass in his pseudo-essay *On Being Blue*:

(...) there is an almost immediate dishevelment, the proportion of events is lost; sentences like *After the battle of Waterloo, I tied my shoe*, appear; a sudden, absurd, and otherwise inexplicable magnification occurs, with the shattering of previous wholes into countless parts and endless steps; articles of underclothing crawl away like injured worms and things which were formerly perceived and named as nouns cook down into their adjectives. What a page before was a woman is suddenly a breast, and then a nipple, then a little ring of risen flesh, a pacifier, water bottle, rubber cushion. Without plan or purpose we

slide from substance to sensation, fact to feeling, all *out* becomes *in*, and we hear only exclamations of suspicious satisfaction: the ums, the ohs, the ahs (Gass 1976, 32).

This satisfaction described by Gass echoes the Barthesian “bliss” provided by subversive texts, and it’s implicit as well in Babs’s promise of semantic/erotic fulfillment; for this solitary lady is no other than the poststructuralist authorless text, an intermediate space demanding completion among prospective readers/lovers, making herself appealing with a great variety of visual devices. No trace of a conducting subjectivity is to be found – where’s Willie the master? – and this metaleptic narrator/protagonist transgresses without control all the conventions of storytelling. Babs is a prototype of the *writerly* text, and narrative under these circumstances is, according to Barthes “(...) determined not by a desire to narrate but by a desire to exchange: it is a medium of exchange” (Barthes 1974, 90).

Babs makes herself available to everyone, but she can’t be easily satisfied; all the different visual devices are intended by this lady of words to test the reader’s –the real and the fictional– competence to deal with conventions properly, as when referring to the asterisks and footnotes she says: “*** A cliché of course ****. And did it catch you? Tisk. The image which immediately follows is a fake. Life is full of similar tests *****. Be more observant next time” (fourteenth and fifteenth page with text). An experienced lady as she is, she knows that most readers/lovers prove to be inattentive and careless:

They fall asleep on me and shrivel up. I write the *finis* for them, close the covers, shelf the book. But I don’t understand what excites them in the first place. It’s nothing about me; it’s not *me* they love (Fourth page with text).

She longs for careful use, but very few seem to delight in the simple pleasures of pure language, few seem ready to accept art on its own terms, and most prefer instead the immediate reward of a conclusive ending. According to Barthes, writing ‘the end’ betrays the *nature* of the discourse, it’s a sort of *crisis* on which all cultural models are based; denying endings is to dismiss the *signature*, a subversive

action against the foundation of Western thinking, and a duty of any *writerly* text (Barthes 1974, 52).

Unfortunately for Babs, her readers prefer the safety of an ending to the “bliss” of solvent poetic language. Her speech reveals everywhere an acute anxiety concerning her reception; and a similar anxiety permeates Gass’s discourse –either fictional or theoretical– since what Gass demands is, according to Stanley Fogel, “... someone whose love and engagement with language is commensurate with his own” (Fogel, 8).

Babs manages to attract a lover named Phil Gelvin, but this inept reader adopts a *readerly* attitude and misses her purely linguistic essence; Gelvin –and possibly the real reader as well– was looking for a well constructed plot, for facts, messages, an *origin*; “The usual view is that you see through me, through what I am really –significant sound– (...)” (Forty-third page with text). But, according to Barthes, what the reader must read in a *writerly* text is a countercommunication: “(...) the reader is an accomplice, not of this or that character, but of the discourse itself insofar as it plays on the division of reception, the impurity of communication: the discourse, and not one or another of its characters, is the only *positive* hero of the story” (Barthes 1974, 145). This reader has been incapable of becoming the accomplice of the rhetorical heroine; in this metafictional context, Babs’s body of discourse is pure metalanguage.

Willie Masters’ Lonesome Wife is a collage-like composition, partially made of phrases and fragments of works by authors like Joyce, Beckett, Hardy, Flaubert, Coleridge or Shakespeare; they are the “pens” who have previously visited Babs, leaving their inscriptions in her. She is thus an open and plural text/body, richly polyphonic and evocative; but only a skilful and committed reader will experiment the “bliss”, apprehending the lyrical potential of new –subversive would say Barthes– semantic connections and be aroused by them. This is the ideal reader, and the real author for Babs’s. As Barthes says: “Whereby we see that writing is not the communication of a message which starts from the author and proceeds to the reader; it is specifically the voice reading itself: *in the text, only the reader speaks*” (Barthes 1974, 151).

What this novella “stages” – for Fogel “‘Performance’ is the word that comes to mind when one thinks of Gass” (Fogel, 7)– is that the unity supposed to have been guaranteed by the old author has ended, the text conceived now as an endless circulation of texts; it is not determined by a unique consciousness, nor is it a textual absolute that the reader confronts passively, but an unsealed and unsigned verbal system waiting to be constructed.

All the metatheoretical formulations in *Willie Masters’ Lonesome Wife* are essential for a proper understanding of Gass’s text, and they can be considered a verbal realization of some of Barthes’s most influential theories; his famous phrase in *Fragments d’un discours amoureux* –quoted in French here for the sake of its beautiful resonance– “Le langage c’est une peau: je frotte mon langage contre l’autre. C’est comme si j’avais des mots en guise de doigts, ou des doigts au bout de mes mots” (Barthes 1977, 87) indicates that language acquires a sensual, quasi-plastic dimension when it becomes the vehicle of art. *Willie Masters’ Lonesome Wife*, in agreement with the theories of the sixties when it was published, is clearly intended to expose pleasure and mainstream artistic creation as cultural constructions.

3. BODIES AS TEXTS

The tension between the sexual and the textual in *Willie Masters’ Lonesome Wife* can be appreciated in the confrontation of images and words; the photographs of the naked lady clash with the text and establish a fruitful dialogue with it, but they also engage in a vibrant fight for space on the page. From the cover of the book, with the words of the title projected across a female chest and belly, language and body must partake of the paper.

The commerce of sex depends fundamentally on the image, and Babs is trying to sell herself and capture the reader/lover’s attention. The book opens with the picture of the lady swallowing the letter “S” of the first word “she” in the text, which highlights the supremacy of the visual over the textual, and from then on the nude woman’s torso appears as a parallel discourse, illustrating the story with

different positions and showing different parts of her body. The potency of the visual can't be matched, but Babs the text tries to make herself also appealing and emulate the images of the naked lady by means of the rich display of verbal shapes she adopts, such as the tree and the eye drawn with words.

The relationship between the sexual and the textual is a central motif in William Gass's theories and fictions, and it evinces his concern with the verbal construction of culture; for Gass, sex engages most people's attention, but the power of sex is insignificant compared to the discourse of sex. In his peculiarly poetic pseudo-essay *On Being Blue*³ he explores the relation between both and he establishes a theoretical frame for what he considers to be the eroticism of writing.

The voice in this essay tells the reader about his first glimpse of the snapshot of a naked woman in his puberty, and how the awkward realism of the photographic representation was ordinary and unmoving:

Too real to be pornographic, I saw not the forbidden image but the forbidden object of that image, the great mystery itself, the subject of a thousand dreams, a hundred thousand stories. I saw what all my organs seemed to stir for ... and I took fright. Were her breasts like ivory globes circled with blue, then? Were they a pair of maiden breasts like ivory globes circled with blue, then? Were they a pair of maiden worlds unconquered? Of course not, but I would have wanted to think so (Gass 1976, 38).

The sensuality of Shakespeare's description of Lucrece's body was infinitely more exciting for the young boy than the direct confrontation with the real image, language being the most powerful tool to stimulate imagination and to unchain feeling and emotion. Gass explains that there is an essential displacement from the world to the word that must necessarily take place in a well crafted textual construction; for him, true sex can be found in literature, "(...) in the consequences on the page of love well made –made to the medium,

which is the writer's own. (...) what counts is not what lascivious sights your loins can tie to your thoughts like Lucky is to Pozzo, but love lavished on speech of any kind, regardless of content and intention" (*Ibid.*, 43).

Content, the message conveyed by words, is the vehicle of intention; all the motivated discourses, whether scientific, philosophical or of any other sort, are necessarily determined by immediacy, –as Gass explains in *On Being Blue*–, a quality that has been identified in the first section of this paper with Barthes's *readerly* texts. A *readerly* text is a conventional construction, it is orderly and rigid, and it has a clear *origin* that is the essence of dogmas and theories; this kind of text is instrumental for specific purposes, and consequently it is a pernicious form of discourse for both Barthes and Gass.

Correspondingly, the kind of language we should embrace is defined by Gass this way:

Such are the sentences we should like to love – the ones which love us and themselves as well– incestuous sentences –sentences which make an imaginary speaker speak the imagination loudly to the reading eye; that have an orality transmogrified: not the tongue touching the genital tip, but the idea of the tongue, the thought of the tongue, word-wet to part-wet, public mouth to private, seed to speech, and speech... ah! After exclamations, groans, with order gone, disorder on the way, we subside through sentences like these, the risk of senselessness like this, to float like leaves on the restful surface of that world of words to come, and there, in peace, patiently to dream of the sensuous, imagined, and mindful Sublime (Gass 1976, 57-8).

This definition easily fits Barthes's idea of the *writerly* text, a plural and unsystematic verbal form that is often achieved by subversive methods that defy convention; it is that space between production and reception, it is the site of poetry, and the only strategy of resistance against ideological and imposed forms of knowledge.

But in the democracy of pleasure and desire that dominates modern societies there seems not to be a place for this kind of discourse; Gass states that in a world of utility and blunt satisfactions:

(...) objects are reduced to their signs (I am edible, I am drinkable, I am bedable), such signs are surreally enlarged and related, so that a woman is simply a collection of hungry concavities which must be approached warily but always with phallus aforethought (Gass 1979 (a), 255).

We consume language as we consume food, sex or other goods, even bodies become naked abstractions where we inscribe interested and most often conducted discourses.

Bodies then are texts. And as such they become the most recurrent objects of popular culture. For Gass:

The objects of popular culture are competitive. They are expected to yield a return. Their effect must be swift and pronounced, therefore they are strident, ballyhooed, and baited with sex; they must be able to create or take part in a fad; and they must die without fuss and leave no corpse. In short, the products of popular culture, by and large, have no more esthetic quality than a brick in the street. Their authors are anonymous, and tend to dwell in groups and create in committees; they are greatly dependent upon performers and performance; any esthetic intention is entirely absent, and because it is desired to manipulate consciousness directly, achieve one's effect there, no mind is paid to the intrinsic nature of its objects; they lack finish, complexity, stasis, individuality, coherence, depth, and endurance (Gass 1979 (b), 273).

Popular culture is for Gass a vehicle of collective control, and its products lack the esthetic potency and integrity of art, its texts can be defined as texts of "pleasure" in Barthes's terminology.

That's the reason why Babs refuses being approached as an object of popular culture, an instrument of immediate satisfaction; the rewards she offers aren't easily attained, for she is a body of poetry and her promise is that of a more spirited and lasting emotion, somehow analogous to the Barthesian "bliss". For Gass both popular culture and art shape consciousness,

(...) but 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. (*Ibid.*, 273).

Poetry can never be an instrument, poetry doesn't speak about life, because poetry is a verbal realm infused with life. As Gass states in *On Being Blue*: "It's not the word made flesh we want in writing, in poetry and fiction, but the flesh made word" (Gass 1976, 32).

NOTES

¹ *Willie Masters's Lonesome Wife* is a text without pagination, one more of the conventions this novella defies. Referring to this book is then a rather complicated issue, but given its reduced size, it is possible to ignore the pages which are occupied exclusively by pictures and count only the pages with text, which is the method chosen here for quotations.

² The lady chosen by Gass to illustrate the cover and some pages of this novella isn't very feminine, nor does she exhibit a trim, sexually appealing body like the ones found in pornographic magazines, but she appears instead to be rather careless and unconcerned about her physical imperfections.

³ This is another hybrid text where the color blue acquires the semantic entity and definition of a character, so this piece of nonfiction reads like a highly stylized narrative.

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