



Research Paper

Metalinguistic Discourse

Dr. Sunit Kumar Bera

Assistant Teacher, Kalai Gobardhan High School (H.S), WB, INDIA.

Abstract: *In Fiction and the Figures of Life, William Gass suggests that “In every art two contradictory impulses are in a state of Manichean War: the impulse to Communicate and so to treat the medium of communication as a means, and the impulse to make an artefact out of the materials of the medium and so to treat the medium as an end. “¹ These contradictory impulses are present in all art, as Gass indicates, and particularly in metafictional art, but those works where language is thematised and thus functions blatantly as both means and end, the conflict between these different attitudes toward the medium of fiction is most pronounced. In Willie Masters’ Lonesome Wife, for instance, Gass draws attention to his work as an artefact through the use of both self-referential linguistic structures and manipulations of the medium which emphasize the book’s physicality, while at the same time, he uses referential discourse in order to communicate to his reader a philosophical inquiry on the nature of language. Before considering the ideological implications of Gass’ novella, I will explore the techniques Gass uses in order to alter not just his reader’s expectations, but to alter the very experience of reading a text.*

Key Words: *Surfiction, non-linear, nonfictional, didacticism, metalinguistic, unhealthiness, metaphoric, libidinous.*

*Received 23 Jan, 2021; Revised: 04 Feb, 2021; Accepted 07 Feb, 2021 © The author(s) 2021.
Published with open access at www.questjournals.org*

I. INTRODUCTION:

In his introduction to *Surfiction*, Raymond Federman suggests that “The very act of reading a book, starting at the top of the first page, and moving from left to right, top to bottom, page after page to the end in a consecutive prearranged manner has become boring and restrictive”:

Indeed, any intelligent reader should feel frustrated and restricted within that preordained system of reading. Therefore, the whole traditional, conventional, fixed, and boring method of reading a book must be questioned, challenged, demolished. And it is the writer (and not modern printing technology who must, through innovations in the writing itself—in) who must, through innovations in the writing itself—in the typography and topology of his writing—renew our system of reading.²

I. Language as Both Means and End: Willie Masters’ Lonesome Wife

In many ways, Federman could be describing Willie Masters’ *Lonesome Wife*, a work which blatantly exploits the limitations of traditional methods of reading and interpreting literary works. Exploits the limitations of traditional methods of reading and interpreting literary works. Although the text does finally allow the reader to reconstruct it in a general way, it resists the reader who wants to start at the top of the page and move from left to right straight through. To begin with, Gass immediately draws our attention to the physicality of the text: not only does an outstretched arm and pointing finger direct us to the title of his work, but on the following page that title is superimposed on and conforms to the naked torso of a woman, a woman who is next shown eating the first letter of the text (an erotic act which also mimics the reader who devours books and reminds us that books are consumer products).³ Tony Tanner suggests that Willie Master’s *Lonesome Wife* “begins with body and ends with words, or rather, they seem to come together—the text corporatized, the body verbalized.”⁴ But the first images presented to us prior to entering the “body” of the text already depict this coming together of text and body and thus not only foreshadow a major theme of the book, but also work to establish the book as an independent art object to be viewed as well as read. In *Fiction and the Figures of Life*, Gass asks readers to view character in a work of literature as we would a “striding statue”:

...imagine the purposeful inclination of the torso, the alert and penetrating gaze of the head and its eyes, the outstretched arm and pointing finger; everything would appear to direct us toward some goal in front

of it. Yet our eye travels only to the finger's end, and not beyond. Though pointing, the finger bids us stay instead, and we journey slowly back along the tension of the arm. In our hearts we know what actually surrounds the statue. The same surrounds every other work of art: empty space and silence. (FF, 49)

The pointing finger on the tile page, of course, bids the reader to enter the work of art called Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife, a work which seeks not to reflect the world outside of itself, but to simply fill, like the sculpture, the empty space and silence, the void outside of art.

Although it is possible for the reader to seek in the first few pages of the text a psychologically realistic representation of the title character, Babs masters, a lonely ex-stripper engaged in an unsatisfying sexual act with a bland salesman, Gass' use of different type styles and varying discourses makes it difficult to view Babs mimetically, as one might, for instance, view Molly Bloom, another lonesome and unfaithful wife. But while Gass' play with different type styles in the first part of the narrative may draw our attention away from Babs as a realistic character to consider the ways by which the empty page is filled with print, the experimentation with type styles functions for the reader in another way: instead of randomly alternating types, Gass uses them in order to make it easy for the authorial reader to distinguish between different voices and discourses and to enter the multiple narrative audiences required of each type style. The italics of the first part, for example, are reserved for the voice that James Phelan has identified as a third person narrator who speaks "sometimes to remind us of the action that is happening as Babs speaks ..., sometimes to refer to Babs's memories of past desires," a voice which Phelan also suggests is a potentially valuable device to "emphasize Babs's distance from her actions."⁵ But as Phelan indicates, Gass is more interested in language, or as I would suggest, in the uses to which language is put, than in the depiction of Babs as a mimetic character, so he never fully exploits the potential of the italicized discourse to characterize Babs. Gass does, however, use this voice to emphasize the ways in which language can be used to distance us from experience. Rather than viewing this voice as one belonging to narrator who is independent of Babs, I view it as another variation of Babs' narration, a variation which allows Babs to view herself from a distance in the third person. The italicized discourse, the first the reader encounters, promises a romantic love story: "She'd love him even if his head weren't shiny...His hair was the only illumination in the room. Its smooth slope lit her breasts"(3). This is the voice of the dime store romance novel that promises transformation and fulfilment through sex, and Babs views herself as a character in such a romance, remembering how as a young girl she had wanted earlobes, "To dangle diamonds from, and pearls in petals of silver, spills of crimson glass or wheels of polished jade or even jasper"(3). The italicized voice represents romanticized literary discourse, and as such, it does provide its narrative audience with the most mimetic portrait of Babs: it recounts, for example, Babs's first "romantic" encounter with the railroad conductor, explaining that it "had been a rehearsal, most of it, the jouncing and the ramming, the torrent of noise...sure, it must have been a rehearsal, for what had her life been since but bumpy dump...bumpy dump and gicky" (8-9). But as other discourses intrude, the failure of literary discourse to transform the unsatisfying sexual encounter with Phil Gelvin (the bumpy dump and gicky) into a romance becomes apparent, and the italicized voice recalls Babs' role as a character in a play (another literary use of language); "She was eloquent, the way she walked, hands on her hips...She taps him on the shoulder with a sausage. He's kneeling in front of her, facing her navel. Rise, Sir Dick, she says, or something, tapping right and left" (12-13). Though Babs tries to imagine herself as an eloquent and jewel-bedecked romantic heroine, her literary language connotes finally alter the fact that she is more appropriately cast as a character in a bawdy play.

The reader is asked to enter a number of other narrative audiences in the first section of Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife, for Gass employs different discourses to illustrate the various uses—some deceptive—to which language can be put. After Babs's romantic comment about Phil's illuminating hair, a fragment of an advertising jingle intrudes in big, bold print: "It is certainly

Amazing what brilliantine can do"(3). Frequently, as in this example, the authorial audience is called upon to recognize the ironic implications of the juxtaposition of different discourses. At other times, however, Babs will illuminate ironies within a single discourse for her narrative audience. When, in the discourse that occupies the largest portion of the first part (the section presented in "ordinary" print), Babs contemplates the names men give their penises, she suggests that "It would be agreeable, certainly, if they arranged them as to size and age, breeding, blood, or social position; then skill, too, would be sensible—percy for some sorts, Raphael for others" (9); of course, she recognizes that the self-given names have nothing to do with size or ability to perform, and Babs' somewhat bawdy discourse thus foregrounds a concern with the discrepancy between sign and signified. Significantly, it is this discourse in which Babs tells her reader that she is like "imagination imagining itself imagine...as though a record might take down its turning and in that self-responsive way comprise a song which sings its singing back upon its notes as purely as purely as a mirror"(7). This metafictional impulse is supported not only by Babs' words--the "content" of her discourse--but also by the inclusion of a mirror image of the page on which her discourse appears. Although Babs uses words to convey meaning to her narrative audience, Gass's play with the text-as-mirror indicates a seemingly contradictory concern that the sign can ultimately only reflect itself, that imagination is tied explicitly to its medium.

Babs also considers the nature of metaphor in a more theoretical discourse distinguished by its bold type. She speaks directly to the narrative reader, asking him to imagine someone spitting in his mouth, then directs him, “If you have an experimental twist” to “expectorate into a glass—sufficiently—twelve times should do it. Do not tarry. Drink the spittle. Analyze your reluctance. And wonder why they call saliva the sweet wine of love” (4). The repulsiveness of the experiment she asks her narrative reader to make not only highlights the distinction between spittle and its metaphoric name, but it also forces the narrative audience of this particular discourse to consider language as theme. On the one hand, this direct confrontation of the narrative reader (later she directs him to “pick another’s nose, for instance” (8)) distances Gass’s authorial audience from Babs’ narrative audience, toward whom she clearly directs the disdain she feels for her insensitive lovers. But on the other hand, the foregrounding of linguistic concerns in Babs’ theoretical discourses (“There’s no woman who’s not, deep inside her, theoretical” (8)) suggests that the narrative audience and the authorial audience must consider similar questions, and the distance between the two is thus somewhat diminished.

Instead of flattering the authorial audience by indicating its distance from Babs’ implied audience, as for instance, Barth does when he employs a narrator to berate to berate his readers, Gass’s theoretical Babs collapses the distance between the two types of readers; as Babs contemplates the metaphors of love, discovering their inappropriateness to her experience with clods like Gelvin, the authorial audience is made to feel similarly disdained, since Gass must blatantly draw our attention to words as signs, as though his reader were, like Babs narrative audience, insensitive to the metaphoric richness of language.

The relative positions of the authorial and narrative audiences are further complicated in the second section of Willie Masters’ *Lonesome Wife*. Babs. Who has told us that she used to write the scripts for her bawdy strip-tease act, stealing “from the best, from the classiest greats, from books that only came in sets. They laughed just the same--for me or Gogol--they would yaw-yaw just the same” (10), presents a burlesque about a man who discovers his penis baked in his breakfast bun. The comedy achieves its effects through this situation, word-play, particularly double entendre, and the actors’ gestures, which Babs describes in her footnotes as another type of sigh: “The gestures of the actors are no more than words, mere words, the commonest kinds...Ordinary acting is like ordinary Prose” (26-27). The juxtaposition of the “low” comedy with Bab’s frequently serious and scholarly footnotes not only satirizes the academic apparatus, but it also raises questions about the audience for each discourse. Though Babs’ play is clearly presented for “all the bald bastards” (16) who typically watch strip-tease, its situation and characters--are designed to make this audience uneasy in its laughter. But Babs’ footnotes, with references to Locke and Stein, suggest an awareness of a more sophisticated and educated audience, and her commentary increasingly occupies more of the reader’s attention than the play itself, so much so that eventually the text of the play runs several pages behind the footnotes, thus disrupting the reader’s typical top to bottom reading strategy. The use of footnotes not only calls the reader’s attention to the text as body, to which these exterior “footnotes” are appended, but as a parody of scholarly pedantry (a word itself derived from the word foot), Bab’s footnotes mock a more sophisticated audience, suggesting again a lack of distance between the narrative audience of the bawdy play and the audience of the “theoretical” footnotes.

Indeed, Babs become increasingly hostile to her narrative readers, occasionally chiding them for their failure to read closely, as in these footnotes within a footnote: “*** A cliché one 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” (18). The text clearly mocks the conventional reader, described by Tanner as “the crude ‘literalist’ who, like a bad lover, can only think of plunging straight ahead in a crude non-linear manner. “⁶ Obviously, Gass’s many structural strategies (different discourses running parallel across the page, fragments from other writers’ work, different type styles, and so on) function to disorient this type of reader, but Babs as commentator similarly attempts to alter her narrative readers’ expectations. At one point she boldly (in both tone and print) uses her footnotes to assault her masculine lover/reader:

Now that I’ve got you alone down here, you bastard, don’t think I’m letting you get away easily, no sir, not you brother; anyway, how do you think you’re going to get out, down here where it’s dark and oily like an alley, meaning-less as Plato’s cave? Do you think you know the way? Well you don’t know anything, do you?... and as long as I talk to you, as long as I threaten you, as long as I bait you, as long as I call you names and blaspheme your gods and tease your pricks and promise to sugar my cunt like a bun for Easter, as long as I grin at you, spit on you, piss on you, piss on you, continue to hate—as long as I hate like a nigger, with a niggerish hate--then dear brother, lover, fellow reader--then I’ve got you deep inside me like they say in the songs, fast as a ship in Antarctic ice, and I won’t need to pinion your arms, lover, but you or knee, to pinion your arms, lover, but you or knee, you’ll stay, you’ll want to, you’ll beg me not to go and take my myth, my baffling maze, my sex, my veils, my art away, you simple sucker, down here looking for dirt like a schoolboy, down at the foot of this page, between throes of its body...(19-20)

Babs, who in the first part of the narrative acknowledges that her passivity provides her inept lovers with a “flesh-like copy...to keep them safe, to keep them clean of fact and fancy”(7), turns the tables on her

lovers. She is used by Gelvin and his kind--she essentially consents to be raped--but through her note, she aggressively, if only figuratively, rapes her reader, who not only consents to the rape, but requires her art. Babs revenges her illuse as lover through the art of her play (by depicting the male's loss of the instrument by which he plunges straight ahead) and by casting her reader into the roles of both victim and voyeur, roles her reader must play to enter the narrative audience. The "bald bastards" who watch strip-tease are clearly voyeurs, vicariously experiencing the erotic through art, but as Babs suggests in her notes, readers are similarly voyeuristic, seeking to discover meaning through art.

How does this second part of Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife function for Gass's authorial audience, and into what type of role is he casting us? Are we too imagined as "crude literalists" who typically plunge straight through a narrative? Babs is depicted as the protean narrator, able to create multiple discourses for multiple audiences: as Phelan indicates, "she employs at one point or another abstract diction of a philosopher, the hortatory tone of a school teacher, the abusive attitude of a bully, the peremptory tone of a play director, the tongue-in-cheek pose of a punster, and the concise eloquence of a poet."⁷ As Babs' commentary grows in length (as well as in type size) in proportion to the play itself, Gass's reader must abandon conventional narrative expectations (like consistency of character) and concentrate on Babs' ability to manipulate language, and finally on the flexibility of language itself. And as Babs assumes a variety of poses, it becomes increasingly difficult for the reader to distinguish between Gass as author and Babs as narrator and between his role as authorial reader and his role as narrative reader. In other words, as language becomes the explicit theme of the work, it becomes less significant as a speech act attached to an individual character and more important as a medium which marks the realization of both thought and imagination possible. Language, detached from its speaker, reveals an existence prior to and independent of an individual author, for as Gass suggests in *Fiction and the Figures of Life*, "when language is used as an art it is no longer used merely to communicate. It demands to be treated as a thing, inert and voiceless" (FF, 93).

Thus Gass, like Babs, "steals" from the best, placing, for instance, a fragment from Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* in a comic strip balloon, without, of course, crediting Hardy for "his" words. The words in the balloon simply present another fragment of discourse that coexists with a page from a imaginary manuscript, a quotation from *Tristram Shandy*, musical notes, and so on, but Gass expects his authorial audience to recognize it as a fragment from a serious literary work; placing it in the balloon alters its context, makes it comic rather than serious, and forces the reader to view language as something which belongs to no one and to all. The balloon functions, like the concrete poems included in this section to emphasize the medium as both a means of communicating (as Hardy's words do in the context of *Tess*) and as an art object, an artefact. As the voice of the poet tells us near the end of part two, "No one can imagine—simply--merely; one must imagine within words or paint or metal, communicating genes or multiplying numbers. Imagination is its medium realized" (35).

Babs' disdain for her readers is in many ways also directed toward the authorial readers, who must be manipulated and teased, and sometimes directly confronted, in order that they might view language as more than a means of communication, as more than a function of meaning. Were Gass's audience already sensitive to the magical properties of words, he could present his fragments, his artefacts, his multiple narratives without the aid of blatant discourses on the nature of language; but because his authorial audience includes readers who share the

Insensitivity of Babs' lovers, Gass must include his philosophical diatribes to alert them to the power of language. As Gass speaks in a voice that is closer to that of a nonfictional author/philosopher than to that of a fictional character, he does indeed use language as a means to communicate to his reader a theoretical interest in language, and though these discourses may make readers question the "fictionality" of the work before them, they are an intrinsic part of work that seeks to reveal multiple levels of language usage; ordinary prose, to use Gass's own rather sexist simile, is "like the gray inaudible wife who services the great man: an ideal engine, utterly self-effacing, devoted without remainder to its test" (FF, 93). The inclusion of non-poetic referential discourse suggests that language is indeed sometimes a means by which an author communicates with a reader, as well as a necessary agent for thought to take place at all.

How, then is the reader to interpret the communication provided by a voice of an author, later identified as Joe Slatters, at the beginning of the third section:

The muddy circle you see just before you and below you represents the ring left on a leaf of the manuscript by my coffee cup. Represents, I say, because, as you must surely realize this book is many removes from anything I've set pen, hand, or cup to ... A wall divides us like the wall which grew between Pyramus and This be on account of the quarrel of their families... All contact--merest contact--any contact--is impossible, logically impossible (there's not even a crack between us), though I have been invited to kiss many an ass through just such a barrier. (39)

Here, it seems to me, Gass begins to acknowledge the ways in which the metaphor of reader and writer as lovers must finally fail. Although this discourse clearly seeks to convey meaning—just, as Slatters' correspondents do indeed get their point across despite the impossibility of their request, that meaning indicates

the extent to which reader and writer are completely separate entities which reader and writer are completely separate entities which the “book,” the art object, does not and cannot unite. For the book itself is an object independent of both reader and writer, made as it is of language that finally belongs to no one. Though the text may indeed seduce the reader into a world that is not her own, she never makes contact with the author, just as Gelvin, though he penetrates Babs, never really touches her or alters her, carrying away, as he does, his “contraceptive sack.” The author, as known by the reader, is comprised only of signs and representative marks on a page: “When a letter comes, if you will follow me, there is no author fastened to it like the stamp; the words which speak, they are the body of the speaker” (580). Gass, then seems an exemplar of Roland Barthes’ “modern scribe” for whom “the hand, cut off from any voice, borne by a pure gesture of inscription (and not of expression), traces a field without origin--or which at least, has no other origin than language itself, language which ceaselessly calls into question all origins.”⁸

This emphasis on the text’s physicality and independence does not, however, make reading a work like Gass’s any less an erotic act, though it does alter the implications of the act. Language is not the means by which reader and writer make love, but rather, Gass suggests that it is a medium which should be used lovingly. In *On Being Blue*, a philosophical inquiry which shares many of the theoretical concerns of Willie Master’s *Lonesome Wife*, Gass details the ways by which sex enters literature, the most valuable of which is “the use of language like a lover...not the language of love, but the love of language--not the language of love, but the love of language...not what the tongue touches, but what it forms, not lips and nipples, but nouns and verbs.”⁹ The use of language like a lover, and not language itself, is finally the subject of Willie Master’s *Lonesome Wife*, a work which Charles Caramello criticizes for its chauvinism and solipsism: “Gass wants to leap, unified, into the dance of art, ‘leaving nothing of himself behind’; but he also wants to stage himself as a master, as a performing self, in a stripper’s dance.”¹⁰ Though Caramello indicates that the power of Gass’s work comes from the interplay of these two contradictory impulses. For the incompatibility Caramello describes is similar to that which Gass identifies as the difference between treating the medium as an end and using it as a means of communicating some ‘authorial’ meaning to a reader.

For Gass is indeed Barthes’ “modern scribe” in that he recognizes that the

...text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture...the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others’ in such a way as never to rest on any one of them, did he wish to express himself, he ought at least to know that the inner ‘thing’ he thinks to ‘translate’ is itself only a ready-formed dictionary, its words only explainable through other words.¹¹

Gass’s strategies of juxtaposing quotations and fragments, of highlighting the “forms” language takes, of gradually altering his audience’s reading experience in Willie Master’s *Lonesome Wife* suggest the extent to which the “author” participates in a system that is anterior to him, that shapes him in ways he cannot completely control, just as “the name a man has all his life must do something to him” (41). That is, the writer cannot escape the fact that he inherits a language that is both meaning-full and functional, or as Gass suggests elsewhere, “Words are properties of thoughts, and thoughts cannot be thought without them” (BB, 21). On the one hand, then Gass uses language as a means to an end: the education of readers regarding the more imaginative uses of language. That is, he must use language prosaically in order to draw our attention to his use of it poetically, to his mastering of its imaginative potential.

Barthes suggests that the writer’s awareness of the degree to which he merely mixes unoriginal discourses ultimately results in the birth of the reader at the expense of the death of the author, but Gass’s text suggests that both writer and reader ‘live’ by participating in a system that is itself originless and immortal. Thus Gass does not expunge the performing self (not does he want to) by creating multiple narrative voices and audiences, but he does make of the text a “playhouse” that enables the reader, as well as the writer, to play with language. For though Willie Master’s *Lonesome Wife* is a fugue in which Babs sings with many different voices, there is never any question about who orchestrates these voices; Gass is the maestro who composes, educates, juxtaposes, and celebrates artistic imagination. Gass draws his reader’s attention to his own verbal virtuosity and thus refuses to “die,” for he is “the man of imagination [who] dares to make things for no better reason than they please him--because he lives” (50). Despite this solipsistic performance, Gass is finally Barthes’ scribe who refuses to provide a single “theological” meaning for his reader; he confines his didacticism to that which he shows he has himself mastered: the use of language like a lover. By refusing to make Babs a mimetic character, he avoids telling us how to live our lives, how to act toward our husbands, wives, or lovers, how to react to experiences in the “real” world. If Gass is an author-god, he is the god of art, not the god of ultimate meanings.

More disturbing than the charges of solipsism directed against Gass’s strategies are these charges of sexism: “Gass does not unmake himself as master, does not subvert his own authority..., and does not disrupt

our cultural or sexual assumptions. ¹² A study which seeks to evaluate the effects of Gass's rhetoric must come to terms with what is on the surface a clearly sexist metaphor, one that suggests that language, like a woman, is a thing to be used. Does the suggestion that language must be used lovingly overcome the reader's aversion to this sexist metaphor, or is Gass in fact writing from a traditionally male literary point of view and thus pandering to the "male reader's fantasy because that reader... is his, seems to ignore the negative implications of this metaphor entirely in his mimetic reading of Babs Master, for e argues that Gass's work is really a response to the women's movement, a response which positively "helped to shape its literature, with plaint from a lonesome wife.":

Her self has been dismembered or eradicated, the archetypal female situation. This conception of the wife--a voice, unnamed, unpagged, unidentified--is Gas's triumph in the novella. He has, in this respect, helped to shape a conception of a plaintive woman; no a Medea but a modern-day Niobe. ¹⁴

Karl's view is somewhat naïve, overlooking as it does Gass's metalinguistic concerns in favour of a realistic reading of the "main" character; he suggests, for instance, that the "pouring in of other voices, on the other hand, is often arbitrary, lacking in associational value, full of cliches meant to call attention to themselves as platitudes but that, lacking wit, fall flat. ¹⁵ What Karl, and ultimately Caramello, fail to account for is what it is like to read Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife, for despite the sexism of the metaphor, the text finally subverts traditional "male" criticism and novel conventions, so that the metaphor, the nude pictures of the female form, the text as body tease the reader into an anti-climatic, anti-male text.

The chauvinism of the metaphor is, I would argue, secondary to the experience of reading the novella. At the end of Willie Masters' Lonesome wife, for instance, Babs voices a phallic plea for a more vibrant, living language: "it's not the languid pissing prose we've got, we need; but poetry, the human muse, full up, erect and on the charge, impetuous and hot and loud and wild like Messalina going to the stews or those damn rockets streaming headstrong into stars"(60). Both the language we've got and the one desired are described in terms of the penis--one is wimpy and the other strong, direct, and quick to take off, an image that would clearly appeal to a male narrative audience. While the authorial audience might be alarmed that Babs, the playhouse of language, is made to mouth this phallic plea, as text, she subverts this image of rockets streaming headstrong into the air. For Gass plays not only with the relationship between sex, death, and the conventions of the novel. As a representative of imagination's immortality, Babs dreams like Madame Bovary: "Only I don't die during endings. I never die. They fall asleep on me and shrivel up. I write the finis for them, close the covers, shelf the book"(7). The failure of Babs' lovers is the failure of the realistic novel, in which all lements, including character and language, lead readers directly toward a climax—an ending which returns them, in Barthes' terms, to the culturally secure findentity provided by a coherent system, Babs, however, finds Barthes' Jouissance--the readerly bliss of finding oneself dispersed through the text--through self-play; for unlike her lovers, for whom imagining is "a babyhood disease" which requires "a substitute in plasti-goop or blanket-cloth to keep them safe, to keep them clean of fact and fancy," Babs luxuriates in her ability to imagine, "reflecting on [her] worn revolving"(7).

Though Caramello suggests that Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife is "soft-core porn, ¹⁶ the reader who views entered only the narrative audience for whom Babs performs her striptease. The discourse that follows, for instance, is directed toward the audience searching for climax through art:

YOU'VE
BEEN
HAD,

Haven't you, jocko? You sad sour stew-faced son-of a bitch. Really, did you read this far? Puzzle you head? Turn the pages this and that, around about? Was it racy enough to suit? There wasn't too much plot? I thought the countess something fab. But, honestly, you skipped a lot. Is that any way to make love to a lady, a lonely one at that, used formerly to having put the choicest portions of her privates flowered out in pots and vases; and would you complain at having to caress a breast first, then a knee, to sink so suddenly from soft to bony, or to kiss an ear if followed by the belly, even slowly? Only a literalist at loving would expect to plug ahead like the high-way people's line machine, straight over hill and dale, unwavering and ready, in a single stripe of kiss and covering, steady on

FROM
START
TO
FINISH.(53)

The reader who searches for a climax through the text will undoubtedly be had, the unlike Babs as whore, who is passive and serves the needs of her unimaginative lovers, Babs as text does not allow this “male” narrative reader to be a literalist. Even this reads in more than one way, with the bold letters reading vertically as one single, abusive sentence, and reading horizontally as the beginning and end of the entire discourse which asks its jocko reader to abandon his straight ahead, start to finish reading approach.

Gass’s reader must enter a number of narrative audiences, including this sexist, macho audience who desires a sexual and textual quickie, the audience of Babs’ plea for sympathy and better treatment, to whom this sexism is disgusting, the audience of the footnotes, the audience of a bawdy play, and the audience of Hardy’s quotation. And the text finally resists any attempt by the authorial audience to construct a coherent whole from all these parts. That is, though we can safely say this text is a celebration of imagination expressed through the medium of language, the text resists any other attempt to attribute meaning to it; in other words, it resists both a single interpretation beyond this general statement of theme and a simple structuring that would lead to a traditional climax.¹⁷ Though it is possible to read Babs as a mimetic character, as the lonely wife who seeks to understand her situation--as Karl does--such a reading is finally a perversion of the text’s multiplicity, for it ignores the other voices in the text which work against the conception of Babs as a realistic lonely wife. The text, I would argue, finally does challenge our cultural and sexual assumptions by refusing to allow the reader to consume it (as Gelvin uses Babs or reduce it to a “meaning.” Instead of returning the reader to a secure cultural centre, Willie Master’s Lonesome wife leaves the authorial reader dispersed among the multiple audiences, part lover, part philosopher, part voyeur. And by celebrating his ability to speak in a variety of voices, Gass also celebrates our ability to enter these various audiences:

well then: there’s the speech of science and good sense—daily greetings, reminiscences and news, and all those kind directions how-to; there’s the speech of the ultimate mind, abstract, soldierly, efficient, and precise; and then there’s mine, for when you use me, when you speak in my tongue--the language of imagination--you speak of fact and feeling, order and spontaneity, sudden-ness and long decision, desire and reservation—all at once. (49-50)

The flexibility of language, its richness and variety, make it possible for all of these dualities to coexist, for the writer to speak in many voices, and for the reader to entertain these multiple voices by entering multiple audiences.

Gass’s achievement in Willie Masters’ Lonesome wife, believe, is not finally undermined by the sexism of his metaphor, for the experience of reading this particular text makes us challenge our assumption about what literature is, what it should be, and what it does. The intellectually erotic Babs coexists with the bawdy Babs, abusive Babs with teasing Babs, soft-core porn with philosophical diatribe, and the reader experiences his or her humanity by celebrating each use of language. And by challenging the conventions of the novel by creating an inconsistent character, by providing little plot and little action, by neglecting to “get description in” (51), by altering the type styles and our typical left to right, top to bottom reading strategy, Gass draws our attention to the frequently neglected medium of fiction and joyfully affirms its primacy..

II. Signs are Signs--And Some of Them are Lies.

If Willie Masters’ Lonesome Wife is finally a celebration of the medium of language as a means of expressing both imaginative and cognitive processes, Donald Barthelme’s attitude toward the medium of his fiction is much more ambiguous. Barthelme’s strategies frequently include disrupted narratives, lists, fragments, and puns that draw his reader’s attention to the medium and affirm the potential of language to create powerful images:

“Surely Florence Green is a vastly rich vastly egocentric old-woman nut! Six modifiers modify her into something one can think of as a nut.”¹⁸ But, as the self-reflexive second sentence suggests, Barthelme is also frequently uneasy about the power of language, both as it reduces complex emotions and ideas to simple signs, and as it distances us from experience and provides us with a false sense that we can “know” reality through language. The diarist of “Me and Miss Mandible, “for instance, is a thirty-five year old man who has erroneously been sent back to the sixth grade, but his re-experiencing of his education allows him to understand why he has failed as an adult. While the other students “believe that the American flag betokens a kind of general righteousness, “signs are signs, and that some of them are lies” (CBDC, 109). The problem with education (as with language), he suggests, is that “Everything is presented as the result of some knowable process, “but that no one “points out that arrangements sometimes slip, that errors are made, that signs are misread” (110). Much of Barthelme’s fiction, then, is directed at pointing out to his reader what the teachers fail too--that language is indeed powerful, but that part of its power comes from the fact that signs sometimes lie. That is, though Barthelme would agree with Gass that words embody concepts and that concepts cannot be thought without words, he does not celebrate this aspect of language as unequivocally as does Gass. For Barthelme, human consciousness is frequently trapped within language, making it difficult for us to know or experience anything outside of language.

The difference in attitude toward language between these two metalinguistic writers can be emphasized by contrasting the metaphors they choose to depict the relationship between reader and writer. For Gass, as discussed above, the relationship is imperfectly depicted as one between lovers, expressed through the medium of language; when the relationship fails, it is due to the inadequacies of the “user” of language, not of language itself. Barthelme, however, depicts the relationship as similar to the one between psychiatrist and patient. In “Florence Green is 81,” the author-narrator suggests that “the patient sees the doctor as a highly sophisticated consumer of outré material, a connoisseur of exotic behaviour”:

Reader, you who have already been told more than you want to know about the river Ob, 3200 miles long, in Siberia, we have roles to play, thou and I: you are the doctor (washing your hands between hours), and I, I am, I think, the nervous dreary patient. I am free associating, brilliantly, brilliantly, to put you into the problem. Or for fear of boring you: which?” (CBDC, 4-5).

The metaphor suggest that readers, like Snow White’s psychiatrist, are “in this only for grins” (SW, 21), and that writers, like patients, have a duty to establish their uniqueness, their entertainment value. In “Sentence,” however, the roles are reversed, with the writer attempting to wash the dirt of the city from his hands without soap before he examines his reader/patient, whom he verbally transforms from the you of the sentence, to a woman dressed only in a hospital gown; he decides only in a hospital gown; he decides to ignore the reader’s point of view, since “it is finally his own point of view that he cares about and not hers” (CL, 115). Doctors and patients have equally fragile and ‘hungry’ egos in Barthelme’s fiction, and more important than which role is assigned to reader or writer is the metaphor’s implication of psychological unhealthiness, of the brain damage that infects modern consciousness and makes it difficult to know our own problems, much less put ourselves into the problems of others. And discourse, rather than being a medium by which doctor and patient, writer and reader, come to know each other, is frequently, Barthelme suggests, a means by which “the self-armour[s] itself against the gaze of The other” (SW, 59). In other words, language is the means by which we keep ourselves safe knowing the other.

The difficulty of gaining knowledge through language alone is the explicit theme of “Views of My Father Weeping,” the first story in the collection *City Life*. The reader enters three different narrative audiences in this story. The primary narrative is the chronological presentation of the narrator’s attempt to discover the aristocrat whose carriage ran over and killed his father, but interspersed within this search for the truth are two other narratives: a son’s imagistic memories of his father in different situations (many of which depict him crying), and the son’s attempt to know his father, and to understand why he attempts to understand him, through these fragments of memories.

The voice of the first narrative is, as one critic has suggested, similar to “such nineteenth-century Russian realist writers as Ivan Turgenev or Nikolai Gogol,”¹⁹ and the reader of this narrative is led to expect a reconstruction of the aristocrat’s crime against a commoner. But the narrator does not particularly exert himself to discover the truth of his father’s death, since he is actually more inspired by the hope of compensation than by a desire for the truth. Although he interviews a few poor witnesses, one of whom gives him the name of the coachman, the does not actively seek out Lars Bang for fear of receiving a beating instead of a purse full of coins. As long as the coachman remained nameless, the narrator could imagine him and his master vulnerable, but the name puts him in possible possession of the truth, which he fears. But the coachman comes to him and when his story is over, the narrator is told that “Bang is an absolute bloody liar” (27); the narrator is finally protected from the truth by the discourse of the “tavern story” Lars tells. And the reader of this narrative is similarly kept in the dark, for the narrator ends his search, and his narrative, with Lars’ lies, which he is privileged to tell because he is the coachman of an aristocrat.

The voice of the other two narratives is clearly that of a twentieth-century narrator who mentions automobiles and televisions, but this son seems only slightly more interested in understanding his father than the commoner is in discovering the truth of his father’s murder. For the most part, the memories of the modern narrator are imagistic and depict his father behaving like a child:

My father has a red bandana tied around his face covering the nose and mouth. He extends his right hand in which there is a water pistol. “Stick’em up!” he says...

There is my father, standing alongside an extremely large dog, a dog ten hands high at the very least. My father leaps on the dog’s back, straddles him. My father kicks the large dog in the ribs with his heels. “Giddyap!”(16-17)

These verbal pictures are effective largely because they are presented so dispassionately, in simple language that reflects the childishness of the father’s actions. Because the reader is provided a portrait of a pathetic and senile man, the son’s angry attempts to ignore his father and to prevent the images from intruding upon his consciousness seem inhuman:

Why watch it? Why tarry? Why not fly? Why subject myself? I could be somewhere else, reading a book, watching the telly, stuffing a big ship into a little bottle, dancing the pig...He’s trying to embarrass us. He

wants attention. He's trying to make himself interesting. He wants his brow wrapped in cold cloths perhaps, his hand held perhaps, his back rubbed...I won't do it. (16)

Though there is no class system preventing the narrator from searching for the truth, he fears knowledge as much as his nineteenth-century counterpart. He resents his father for intruding upon his complacency, for drawing attention to his pain, for behaving in ways that are an affront to polite social discourse, for making the son suffer the pain of knowing another. His refusal to touch his father is the refusal to feel, and his rationalization of his father's actions is a doctor's response, not a son's.

When the son finally accepts that his father is indeed the man behaving so childishly and seems on the threshold of coming to an understanding of the old man's suffering, the narrator escapes into language:

Why!...there's my father!...sitting in the bed there!...and he's weeping! As though his heart would burst!...Father!...how is this?...who has wounded you...name the man!...why I'll...[...]*I'll run for a towel...for a doctor...for a priest...for a good fairy...is there...can you can I...a cup of hot tea?...[...]* who has insulted you?...[...]*ja slander is going around? ...an obloquy?...climb...every river...etc.* (p. 19-20, ellipses Barthelme's)

This speech not only reflects the paucity of the son's emotions, but also the ways in which language allows him to retreat from those feelings. The proliferation and artificiality of the exclamation points, for instance, suggest the superficiality of his feelings, a simple-mindedness likewise reflected by his ridiculous offers to fetch a good fairy or a joint or a brightly coloured jacket to ease his father's pain. Similarly, the son suggests that the cause of suffering must be in language—an insult of some kind—and that the cure must therefore be linguistic—the clichéd (and impossible) promise to move mountains. And the “etc.” is the greatest insult, suggesting as it does the son's complete abandonment to cliché and the distance language offers him.

The “etc.” is repeated at the end of this narrative collage, after Lars is revealed as a liar, and thus attains the same status as the other narrative discourses. This ending, the, suggests that the narrative could go on and on without either son discovering the truth about his father. The result of these juxtaposed narratives is finally more like a montage than a collage, for though the nineteenth-century narrator knows only what is not true and the twentieth-century narrator refuses to make sense of the images that intrude into his consciousness by retreating into language, the authorial reader is forced to experience the process of knowing as one that is not reducible to language or reason. In other words, Barthelme does not allow the story to be reduced to a “meaning,” but instead, as Klinkowitz suggests, “Process is the story itself.”²⁰ The etc. returns to the reader the responsibility for trying to know the father, not through language, but as the sum total of the multiple narratives, including those images presented as memories.

The role of literature--and off literary language--for contemporary reader is the underlying theme of “The Glass Mountain,” a story which employs many of Barthelme's typical rhetorical strategies. Using conventional symbols from fairytales, Barthelme tells the tale of a contemporary artist/knight ascending a glass mountain in the heart of the city in one hundred numbered statements (the numbers emphasize the linear progress/process of the climber/narrator and seem to suggest that the attainment of knowledge is, after all, the result of a step-by-step process). The narrator is typically deadpan as he relates in simple sentences not only his progress but also the events taking place on the ground. Despite his unemotional tone, the narrator's depiction of the crude acquaintances who offer “encouragement” by yelling “Shithead” and “Asshole,” persuades the narrative reader to sympathize with the artist and his lofty goals; though the artist seems to naively and inaccurately interpret the events of the narrative, his quixotic and romantic belief in a world that rewards and appreciates artistic effort is surely appealing to the reader of traditional literature.

The narrator's attempt to discover a new symbol to satisfy the crowd below does create some innovative verbal constructions which draw our attention to his use of language as a means of making art from the phenomena of city life. He describes, for instance, the glass building in terms of what it, in fact, is, which deprives it of its reality as a building and transforms it into a symbol: the “mountain towers over that part of Eighth Avenue like some splendid, immense office building” (68). As the narrative progresses, the distance between his poetic language and the objects it describes becomes increasingly striking: “The sidewalks were full of dogs hit in brilliant colours: ochre, umber, Mars yellow, sienna, viridian, ivory black, rose madder” (68). The narrative audience recognizes the knight as a romantic hero like Don Quixote, whose romanticism perhaps blinds him to the fact that dog faces are dog faces and not a painter's pallet, but whose quest to discover a beautiful enchanted symbol is nevertheless a worthy one. The authorial audience, however, recognizes the narrator as an overeducated, emotionally repressed intellectual who uses language not to create symbols that arouse the deep feeling that a symbol should, according to his quotation from *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*, but to deceive himself and to create an emotional distance from the sordidness of society. The narrator, for instance, fears the physical pain of the eagle's claws less than “the contempt” the acquaintances should show him were he to descend the mountain to get Bandaid's, so he continues his quest in large part to avoid the pain of their disdain. And after describing these acquaintances looting the fallen knights below, “collecting rings, wallets, pocket watches, ladies' favours” (71), the narrator resorts to conventional platitudes to convince himself

that all is well in the city; “66. ‘Calm reigns in the country, thanks to the confident wisdom of everyone’ (M. Pompidou)” (71).

Though the reader recognizes the ironic implications of the narrator’s quotations, the narrator himself seems oblivious to their inapplicability to the state of affairs he describes. Although he quotes Anton Ehrenzweig, who suggests that “A weakening of the libidinous interest in reality has recently come to a close” (70), an awkward way of affirming a renewed libidinous interest in reality, the knight does in fact turn the building into a phallic symbol, but the discovery that the enchanted symbol is, in reality, “only a beautiful princess” (73) fails to satisfy his libido. The acquaintances, to whom he tosses the failed symbol, can be relied upon to deal with the real woman the narrator discovers at the top of the building because they are the ultimate pragmatists; that is, though he fails to discover a symbol to arouse his feeling, the real woman is actually a fitting gift for this audience of acquaintances. And though the knight’s quest to find a symbol for his narrative audience is similarly unsuccessful, Barthelme has made the quest itself a symbol for the authorial audience, who must search for meaning among the numbered steps of the knight’s journey.

Barthelme’s parodic quest story raises questions about the relationship of art to the real world and about the nature of the languages of each realm. Whereas Gass intrudes at the end of Willie Masters’ *Lonesome Wife* to remind his reader that “you have fallen into art--return to life” (60), Barthelme’s strategies suggest that art and life are not quite so mutually exclusive. Unlike Gass, Barthelme does not use explicitly theoretical discourse to draw our attention to the imaginative uses of language or to express an “authorial intention” in “the Glass Mountain.” And though this story is composed of a number of different discourses--quotations from literary and philosophical works, clichés and exhortations voiced by the acquaintances, lists naming the fallen knights, the narrator’s seemingly factual statements of events—Barthelme’s numbering of these statements gives them all the same status and validity as linguistic units. The “meaning” of the story must come from the reader’s recognition of ironies created through juxtaposition of statements and the effect of the narrator’s repetition. A single cliché might not draw our attention to this hackneyed use of language, for instance, but when four are these statements not as conveyers of meaning, but language used to avoid thoughtful responses to the phenomena of the world. Similarly, though the narrator attempts to make an art object out of dog faces, the unusual description calls the reader’s attention to the ugly reality of the city sidewalk and makes him or her see the debris which is usually overlooked, particularly in literature. Though the narrator is a traditionalist looking for ways of transforming the world through metaphoric language and symbols, Barthelme is an innovator who frequently uses the rubbish of the world as signs in order to draw our attention to their reality. Barthelme need not exhort his reader to return to life, for his short fiction never allows us a comfortable escape into the ideal realm of art.

Barthelme, like his dwarves in *Snow White*, pays “particular attention, too, to those aspects of language that may be seen as a model of the trash phenomenon” (97-98), his negative lists (the knights who failed to climb the glass mountain, for instance) and his fragmented narratives frequently suggest the failure of language. But as one critic suggests, this negativity “serves to open, or keep open, the ‘rest’ of the world of possibilities; it keeps the sore festering.”²¹ An explicitly metafictional story like “Sentence” both shows the weaknesses of language and its structures and affirms the attempt to form things with words. Though the writer of this sentence recognizes its “temporary” existence in the mind of the reader, he makes the most of this temporariness by allowing the sentence to sprawl on for ten pages, and even then refuses to close it with the conventional grammatical period. As with “The Glass Mountain,” Barthelme parodies the form while using it to its best advantage, so that while he calls upon conventional wisdom which informs us that “short, punchy sentences were best” (CL, 112), he ignores this convention, suggesting that readers are “mature enough now to stand the shock of learning that much of what we were taught in our youth was wrong” (133). And within the sentence, he imagines the possibility of “a better sentence, worthier, more meaningful, like those in the Declaration of Independence, or a bank statement showing that you have seven thousand kroner more than you thought you had” (117). But despite the fact that his sentence is not like those sentences, he suggests that it will have a place in the history of man-made objects: a disappointment, to be sure, but it reminds us that the sentence itself is a man-made object, not the one we wanted of course, but still a construction of man, a structure to be treasured for its weakness, as opposed to the strength of stones (118).

II. CONCLUSION:

Structures like his imperfect sentence remind us of the fragility of human constructs, including language, but they also affirm the process by which language can be used to make us see into the structures of human thought and imagination. Because Barthelme’s stories expose the processes by which readers must search for reality through language, they finally affirm the process; affirm the quest of the artist and the reader, even those quests that are imperfect. Barthelme is like this character in “The Sandman,” who asks, “What do you do with a patient who finds the world unsatisfactory? The world is unsatisfactory; only a fool would deny it...you must be old enough now to realize that shit is shit” (S,85). Though Barthelme mocks the artist’s ability

to transform shit into art through language, he nevertheless finally celebrates the medium for its weaknesses as much as for its come home, and cheerfully” (S, 86).

NOTES

- [1]. William H. Gass, *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), P. 94. Further references to this work will be noted as FF in the text.
- [2]. Raymond Federman, “Surfiction--Four Propositions in Form of an Introduction,” *Surfiction*, ed. Raymond Federman (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1975), p. 9.
- [3]. Willie Masters’ *Lonesome Wife* was originally published as *TriQuarterly* Supplement Number Two (1968); the hardcover reissue (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971) used here, like the original, is not paginated, but I have supplied page numbers for the reader’s convenience. All further references to this work are cited in the text.
- [4]. Tony Tanner, “Games American Writers play,” *Salmagundi* 35 (Fall 1976): 110-140, p. 118.
- [5]. James Phelan, *Worlds from Words* (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 202.
- [6]. Tanner, p. 120.
- [7]. Phelan, p. 203.
- [8]. Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 146.
- [9]. William Gass, *On Being Blue* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1976), 11. Further references to this work will be noted as BB in the text.
- [10]. Charles Caramello, *Silverless Mirrors* (Tallahassee: Florida State University Books, 1983), p. 11.
- [11]. Barthes, p. 146.
- [12]. Caramello, p. 105.
- [13]. Carmello, p. 105.
- [14]. Frederick R. Karl, *American Fictions 1940-1980* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983), p. 436-7.
- [15]. Karl, p. 437.
- [16]. Caramello, p. 109.
- [17]. The celebratory nature of the text is perhaps not as safe an assumption as I suggest; Caramello, for instance, argues that “what disturbs is not simply its deferral of orgasm; it is that the deferral, the dance, also seems to lack an affirmative joy” (104).
- [18]. Donald Barthelme, “Florence Green is 81,” “Come Back, Dr. Caligari” (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1961), p. 14. Hereafter, the following abbreviations will be used for Barthelme collections: CBDC, *Come Back, Dr. Caligari*; CL, *City Life* (New York: Pocket Books, 1968); S, *Sadness* (New York: Pocket Books, 1970); SW, *Snow White* (New York: Atheneum, 1967 & 1972).
- [19]. Wayne B. Stengel, *The Shape of Art in the Short Stories of Donald Barthelme* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), p. 30.
- [20]. Jerome Klinkowitz, *Literary Disruptions* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), p. 72.
- [21]. R.E. Jhonson, “‘Bees barking in the Night’: The End and Beginning of Donald Barthelme’s Narrative,” *Boundary* 25 (1977): 71-92, p. 86.