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Mad Meg

William H. Gass

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then they have *less* to deal with. They do. I mean less to deal with than even a horseback rider concentrating on his ride, his technique. Nothing gets in the way. All music drives all other music out.

G: Well, it has less to deal with in the sense that it has fewer impurities. It has less extraneous material to fight with. The artist therefore can approach his stuff with fewer of these kinds of problems. But novels and novelists are having greater difficulty in reaching an audience, and that is in fact part of a sign—just part—of their increased excellence and sophistication. Because the movies have taken away a great deal of the audience that would have ordinarily read novels.

E: Screw the audience. Novels *are* better now.

G: And that's because fiction is becoming increasingly an art, and that means fewer people are going to be interested beyond the ordinary run of crap. The writer's responsibility is to turn out good writing, to do what he is required to do, not by them, but by the demands of the art he's practicing. It's like achieving a proof in mathematics: if it's proved it's proved, and there it is. That's the whole point of the artistic adventure, to achieve something that says it for itself, that proves itself.

E: Okay. Yes. Certainly. Right. Let men make good sentences. Let them learn to spell the sound of the waterfall and the noise of the bathwater. Let us get down the colors of the baseball gloves—the difference in shade between the centerfielder's deep pocket and the discreet indentation of the catcher's mitt. And let us refine tense so that men may set their watches by it. Let fiction be where the language is. Let it *be* a language, as French is, or Bantu. And let it be understood that when we talk about fiction we are finally talking about the people who write it, about all those special talkers in tongues like Shakespeare or Faulkner or Melville or Gass. Let us enlist in Vocabulary, Syntax, the high grammar of the mysterious world.

Mad Meg / William H. Gass

From *THE TUNNEL*

Yes, I've sat too long, no wonder it's painful, though this is the great Tabor's own chair, which I had shipped from Germany. It swivels smoothly, tips without a sound. In the mornings he lectured at the University. Scholars, statesmen, writers, filled his afternoons. My day commences, he said to me once, his fingers grazing on a slope of papers, when I come to rest in here at the end of an evening and begin making Greek and Roman his-

tory up out of German words, French wit, and English observation. He scrawled his famous smile across his face, hastily, like an autograph; but he was old, already ill, and his hand trembled. German words, he said, not German feeling. Tabor spoke ironically, of course, yet what he said was true: he woke because his neighbors slumbered; he spied upon their dreams; he even entered their dreams eventually, and brandished a knife in the nightmares of Europe. Magus Tabor. Mad Meg, they called him. He wore his decade like a diadem, they'd say one day. His baldness glistened like a forest pool. There's been times when this chair's been my only haven, he said, and his lids closed over his protruding eyes. Night had fallen behind them—in Mad Meg's head. You see how obedient it is; how swiftly it turns, like fortune in history? He spun the chair hard, his eyes still in lids. So I find it easy to reverse my position. He laughed with the stutter of an angry bird and I managed a low social chuckle. It really *was* a dream for him, all this: our conversation, the lecture of the morning, the interrupting applause and tumult of shouts at the end, the famous and powerful who waited for him while he spoke with an unimportant, young, and dazzled American. Those deeply curtained eyes reminded me that we were drifting through the middle of his sleep, and that I was just a wraith who would evaporate the instant he sank into his circuiting chair—sank into the past—into death—into history.

The study of history, gentlemen

the study of history

The hall was full. There were hundreds—crowds in the doorways, everyone still. The heads of the great grew like blossoms from the pillars lining the walls: Lessing, Herder, Hegel, Fichte, Schelling, Möser, Dilthey, Ranke, Treitschke, Troeltsch. My first time in that room I had sat by the bust of Treitschke and read the inscription plaqued beneath it on the column:

Only a stout heart which feels the joys and sorrows of the Fatherland
as its own can give veracity to an historical narrative.

It was longer than I care to admit before I realized that for Mad Meg, too, truth was the historian's gift to history.

no

That's not nearly strong enough. And my—my what?—my naiveté? my admiration? my vanity?—something—prevented me from understanding what he wrote—he preached—so many times so plainly.

Drafts lapped my neck. I cobble history, Tabor shouted when he saw me again, placing his huge, rough-knuckled fists against my chest. We met at a large impersonal affair, a reception held at a chancellery, and I had finally burrowed to the stair to scan the crowd, perhaps to find a friend or two,

when I observed him in the middle of the room, over his head in hair and shoulders, burning quietly, the only thing alive among the potted ferns and suits of armor. The icy marble floor was flopped with oriental rugs and steadily enlarging spills of people. He was alone, ill. I was astonished to see him in such a place. I cobble history the way a cobbler cobbles shoes, he said. Wretched fellow, I thought; in the midst of this crush you've been composing a lecture. If it were not for me the Roman Empire—here he made a hard white ball of his hands—would not, an instant—I heard his harsh laugh bubble from the crowd—stay together—and his hands flew apart with startling violence, fingers fanned. There was a terrible energy in that gesture, although he was, by this time, a sick old man, so weak he tottered. His ears seemed unnaturally fastened to his head, and his arms emerged from the holes of his sleeves as if the flesh had remained as a lining. I swaddled my neck in my arms and would have turned my collar if I'd dared. Light spewed from the chandeliers. Countless pairs of glistening boots re-echoed from the marble squares. Then an angry woman in a powdered bosom passed between us, and I was glad to be carried away. Poor Tabor. His lips were still moving when he disappeared behind a heavily forested Prussian chest. Champagnes sailed by on silver trays. Since coming to Germany and manhood at the commencement of the thirties, I had known few such opulent days. There were so many bits of brilliant metal, so much jewelry, so many cummerbunds and ribbons, a gently undulating sea of silk-tossed light, that the gilded ceiling drew away like heat and seemed a sky. Thus I beheld him for the first time (or anyway eyed him out); and I felt the smile I'd pencilled in above my chin fade like a line beneath the last rub of an eraser. Never mind. Never mind. Tell on him. Describe the scene to your friends, Link, Hintze, and Krauske—how rich, what fun—Mad Meg in the Maelstrom . . . I faced the four corners, cupped the bowl of my glass like a breast, began the construction of my anecdote, and let the wine die.

Mad Meg

Ah, my American, my Yankee, my rabbit in a den of thieves, Tabor would later shout each time he saw me, wickedly mixing his words in a way he fancied was amusing.

Ah, my Connecticut, my apple in a world of worms . . . We do things differently. Now don't protest, it's true. You organize. You tabulate. You codify. Interpret. You explain. All this, in Germany, we take for granted—no nonsense, Kohler—we assume. He gently pinched the tip of my tie (and I was no longer quite certain whether what he said wasn't true.) Instead we show them what it is to have a feeling. Don't you see? I was quick to say I saw for otherwise he'd bellow: you have no ears to be still wet behind! I lit my eyes. I nodded as one bows. I saw. History must move—it must be moving! And his voice was like a release of steam. To the ordinary

German student, or to our Folk—our immortal German people—what—I give you the hackneyed example—what is the betrayal, say—the stabbing—the murder—of Julius Caesar? Tabor sighed angrily and threw his arms down the way you drop logs. A celebrated illustration. Think of it, Kohler. A trite old story. A dreary anecdote dressed like a schoolboy for a play. Sick-en-ing: the Rubicon, the die is cast, the Ides of March, the proffered crown—portents, saws, and attitudes—sick-en-ing. In deep preoccupation, eh? he goes with haste to the Senate. There: a press of people, petitioners, another scroll—what suspense—*yes, yes, but read it, Caesar!* Oh, they are a joke, these gentlemen in sheets who stand about so awkwardly. Look at their hair: rows of uncomfortable knots, precisely arranged, laid out like cultivated fields, each curl a cabbage. *Et tu, Brute*, then. What divine conjecture—that’s poetry sanding history smooth. Imagine. Muffled in his cloak, wounds raining on him, rough Caesar speaks like Jesus. What a pallid picture book! such insipid English tea! It curdles—it sours—it quite un stomachs me. Why shouldn’t Brutus be among the mob who daggered him? Wasn’t Brutus a student of philosophy and one who knew how beautifully to use sweet reason and religion—divinity, high principle—to be cruel? And as our students’ sleepy eyes depart these ghostly figures—*can Cassius really know what he’s doing, he stumbles so strangely*—first the sandals are unthonged, the steps dissolve, then columns of the Capitol are nibbled away, roofs crumble, vistas fill, streets cloud, and the whole city is swallowed in a fog of ignorance—there was never a sky—and this—this signal event (catching the sense of his own words, Mad Meg begins to burn like Clytemnestra’s beacon)—this eternal recurrence—this erasure and removal of greatness from the world—this, ah! murderous subtraction of the large by the small—is rewritten as a dream, an erotic comedy despite the knives: tangled bedclothes, cosy kisses, maiden blood, and all the manual enjoyments of clichés. Afterward: emptiness. After he bleeds. And before—what is there? Vacant time. No, Caesar, you were born with the blades in you. (Tabor is spitting.) Kohler! my dandy doodle . . .

Wieland said of Herder that he was like a great cloud charged with electricity.

The conspirators are sixty, Caesar; they will close around you like a dial, and stab the sun.

Mad Meg

Tabor limped hurriedly through the door to the podium, pausing slightly to glare at us. Then he came down from the podium past the Schiller, the Herder, the Goethe pillar, stood a moment to stare out the narrow oblong window which framed the statue of Frederick in the square, and finally stumbled along the first open row of chairs, clutching wraiths like awkward bundles to his chest. Dulle Griet? Yes, you would have

thought him mad; put a pot on his head. And that was plunder—brooches, earrings, bracelets, gold and silver boxes, candlesticks, the family plate—he held near his breast.

Suddenly he stops. There is something confronting him, there is something in the air in front of him, invisible to us (and who are we? what can we see? born in Iowa, in present-tense America? what can anyone of us (the whole of France, the whole of Germany) alongside Mad Meg see? for remember, he reminds us, Machiavelli believed in invisibles, swept spirits out of doorways with an elegant hand), and Tabor faces it. It? What would we historians say? (in all of Italy or England) that he was facing a fact? Ah, he exclaims, ah . . . There's amazement, too, in his voice, for a fact (as we know, we've been taught, are now to be taught again) is a permanent unlikelihood, a counterfeit miracle, a wonder which nature can never have honestly produced. A fact . . . He feels tenderness for it, wonder and tenderness, a wonder such as children have for butterflies and flowers, sweet bright fluttering evanescent things; but can this fact, this marvel, truly be? FACT? The noise bursts from him. What is a fact, he roars; and of course we cannot answer him; we dare not answer him.

It's one of those black tales which students tell when bladdered with beer—that once when Mad Meg asked he was answered, that once a cadaverous tall man in a red shirt unaccountably rose from the front row and replied (something curt, of course, and probably incendiary, though neither the question nor its answer is a part of the story) and that after a moment of shocked, unbelieving silence, Mad Meg ran at him screaming, tore across the pale man's face with his nails, and then commanded the students to thrash him thoroughly and throw him from the hall, which—agreeable—they did, blood from brow to ankles; however the students always add that Tabor was younger and stronger in that fabled and fantastic time, not ill and old and frail as he is now, so that now, they say smiling, there's no danger—no direct, immediate, physical danger, that is—from Mad Meg himself, the students say, covering their grins with foam.

Mad Meg peers at us expectantly. We know he does not want an answer. He inspects us calmly. He has no wish to see us, and we know he is not calm. Angrily, he waits, but we know he is not waiting our reply. He is not calm, not angry, not expectant. Nevertheless we shift uneasily in our seats until he finally says, with weariness, from resignation: never mind. oh. never mind. It's no use, he implies; it's discouraging; it's sad, our ignorance is sad, deplorable, a bit disgusting, too; but there's no help for it, we are stupid, absurd, unfeeling, we aren't wise; that's that.

Tabor's attention is attracted by another phantom, another fact. He scuttles across the platform, one arm trapped on his chest and struggling like a hare. The apparition might escape him, hide. Or is there someone else in search of it—this fact, this dodo—a sociologist perhaps? Tabor is wary. But the datum, the wraith, appears to be bulky and difficult to manage. Indeed, it is fat. You are gross, he says, repulsive. Furious, he heaps insults on it. Whore, he shouts, you will give yourself to anyone. Despite this, he draws it from the air with his free hand and hugs it to him, driving out groans. We can see that it's ugly, has sores which are oozing, flesh that flops. Suddenly he straightens like a soldier. He's seen something; his nostrils quiver. He is an Indian from the movies. There . . . over there . . . there's one that's lonely, he announces, pointing. Shy as maiden . . . Reluctant . . . Dim . . . Dim as a dead bulb. Still it wishes to be eliminated. Tabor moistens his lips. Then he rushes toward us to pull a length of Greece or Turkey, God knows what, from someone's skittish, retractive lap.

Magus Tabor. Mad Meg. He holds up a ghostly bucket. Full of them, he says—facts which we've seen him gather—little ones like pebbles, snails. Or like beads or buttons or bottlecaps. Coins. He rattles them around in the pail while we listen. Little lives, he says. Small deaths. Like marbles or matchcovers. Prizes in crackerjack. A soupçon . . . a soupçon of souls. Paperclips, knucklebones, candycorn, nails. Left over from the Franco-Prussian War. Jean André Veau, for instance. Heinrich Klein. Are they historical? Tabor is menacing. He waits, hands on hips. The little lives, their deaths—impatiently he taps with the toe of his shoe as he ticks them off: a, b, c, d, e, f, endlessly, g, h, i, j—are they historical? lives lost at Cannae? or a man who might have died in Paris Sunday of the itch? And before this question, as before the others, we remain silent, watchful . . . silent.

Tabor's on to something. It's lightly verdigrised, vast and reticular; yet he envelopes it. The next one is craven; the next one is blue; the next one is badly barbered. He discovers more; he captures another; it's long and thin—so thin and long he reels to to his thumb as though he'd cast it fishing. He hugs them all, gathering every kind together, while we sit mute . . . mesmerized. Why didn't we laugh? why didn't we howl and shake and topple from our seats? No one in anger cried clown. He might have been Oedipus after his eyes, or Antigone mourning her brother . . . when he measured and he counted for us: k, l, m . . .

Strange, don't you think, that their deaths should be larger than their lives, as if there were more in their lack of Being altogether than in their ever having been at all; so much more, indeed, that existence seems to have reduced them, since before they lived their deaths were not only infinite, as all deaths are, but also unbroken, continuous . . . mark the n there, mark the o, the p . . . Again . . . again speech has spoiled silence . . . q, r, s,

t . . . One thing—one thing exceeds the eternity of the star, he cries, and that is the dark which surrounds it.

Tabor packs these trifles in the balls of his fists. Larger lumps emerge. They go packing in with the rest. I am asking them to surrender, to throw down singularity, he shouts, a new mood invading his face like a troop of horse with bugles, cracking flags. They must lose their beggarly independence—give over, I say—they must give up the pride they take in their regal isolation, the value they put upon particularity and foolish Polish uniqueness—every splash of spittle is unique, so what of uniqueness?—give over, I say—and they must banish that vanity, gentlemen, and give it over, give over, for one death is nothing, one pain, one disappointment, one moment's triumph, taste of joy, is nothing, but ten thousand wounds are a battle, gentlemen, the assassination of a king, the ruin of an empire possibly, blood for a continent—in consequence, give over—for history, gentlemen, is American or Mongol, and likes both size and winning; so I'm insisting they unite, come out of their loneliness like sea lions from the sea; I am pressing against them with all my strength, rounding individuality, flattening character and region, sponging wind and shadow; I am *for-for-forcing* them together; I am ComMANDing them to merge.

And we see his face flush and his whole body strain with the effort. He cannot swallow the air in his mouth. Swaying beneath his burden he mounts the podium to unbosom and relieve himself. Abruptly his cheeks cave, gratefully he straightens, his arms fall like loose sleeves, and he looks down at his feet where we believe we perceive them too, now in one unsightly bundle, quite invisible and crossed with lines like ropes where they've been squeezed. Tabor inspects the result. He steps around it as around a puddle. He's thoughtful, frowns. Gently he consoles his eyes. His fingers carefully remark his chin. The fragments hold together, he's pressured them so strongly, but the lump's unmelodious—a simple din of data. He takes another turn in silence and then extends toward us a hand expressive as his face; we are to see for ourselves—examine, verify. And so we do—incredibly we sit forward to scrutinize more closely his pliant little piles of space. Tabor pulls and pats the air a bit—they are kindly motions—as he considers the configurations of his material, as he wonders, ponders, paces, calculates, construes. Suddenly—swiftly—he kicks it—once, twice—powerful, thrusting kicks which force him to snort as he delivers them, and then he falls on the area in a rage, pounding it with his fists, gouging and tearing, pulling off chunks and hurling them over his shoulder toward the places where we sit like bumpkins before a balancer—stupefied, enthralled, amazed. At last he retires from his fury, smiles, wags his head in a winning way, and says very soberly, in a mood of quite de-

liberate anti-climax: that is how you must work if you would give shape and life to history.

Mad Meg

The study of history, gentlemen, the study of history is not the study of people and events, forces and movements, wars, and revolutions . . .

bradypepsia = slowness of digestion

crudities = undigested matter in the stomach

oppilations = obstructions

cachexia = defective nutrition; a depraved condition of the body; a depraved habit of mind, of feeling; a depraved condition of the State

Life in a chair the chair of History

kakos

Now I remember where I came onto it: that idea of the novelist as an historian of little lives—lives lost at Cannae, etc. It's Eliot closing *Middlemarch*.

. . . for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.

What of those, though, who were simply consumed?

If the camel's back is broken, a detailed "history" of the straw (how its seed was sown, the earth encouraged, stems mown, threshed, spread out to dry, raked back and stacked, and each straw carried to the animal) will not render an account of it: that's what she means.

If the camel's back is broken, as Mad Meg might have said, how the burdensome straw was planted, grown, cut, flailed and sifted, baled and tied, cannot matter to the weight, cannot add its bulk to the load as the straw adds straw to straw, its light to light, until the snap, so if the camel's back breaks, cracks at last, and halves of him fall dumpily in facing ditches, no single straw is responsible, not the first straw or the last; for in adding a column, though we reach the sum in a certain way (top to bottom as it may be our habit to begin, or bottom to the top first, as our fancy takes us), the amounts in the total, as mere amounts, are disposed in no order, are quite anonymous, have no separate life and no sort of priority, in fact aren't even straws at all but only thin disguises of that dullard, Mass, and its, in this case, insupportable gravity.

One Jew destroyed then, two, a dozen, thirty-five, and it is normal, ordinary daily—it is war—but murder hundreds, cinder thousands, and these longer, therefore grander, numbers weigh upon us, since (straws the same as pigs of iron) Jews weigh too; for we have paid in thousands for our cars and houses; we understand such sums, and they invite terror into our imaginations: this is human, we wonder; this is German? while

by simple repetition, by passing mechanically beyond the thousands and numbering their deaths like stars, the very multitude of the corpses makes the murders magical, fabulous—heaven help us, heroic even—as the years and battles of the Trojan War or Saturn aswallow his children; and the barbarous Germans recede to Olympus or make earthquakes in Thessaly, throw Titans into Tartarus, and their acts partake of the terrible, the awesome Sublime, like storms at sea or an avalanche in the Alps, thundering relentlessly across some movie's patient screen; and I wonder what Jew should be chosen to represent the death that went too far, the one too many that brought the cost home to us like general conscription or a fresh rise in our taxes: the ninety-first, four hundredth? thousand and third? and I wonder again what other one it was that, as his body turned into a rope of smoke, took from us all sense of tragedy and disaster, because that Jew should be commemorated too, in as much as the final solution and settlement of the Jewish question was a monumental undertaking, an immense memorial to death, like one of the pyramids, and don't we stand cameled in their shadow now, the slaves erased by sublimes of time, to tourist at their size?

Mad Meg

His voice was rather high, always precise, very measured and penetrating, never sweet, at its worst hard and shrill as a metal whistle, and initially his repetitive declamatory style was annoying, with its tendency to accelerate and to wind itself up like a mechanical spring; but later one realized that speaking without notes as he did, as if spilling his heart, simply spilling his heart like a tipped cup, he could not have formed his sentences so surely, involved as they sometimes were, or deepened his thought like rivers wear a channel, if he had not composed in the manner of Homer, chanting an earlier formula while his mind flew over the flood ahead, wound like a hawk to its tower, searching for a bit of land to cry, and anything alive.

It's not the study of kings and princes, gentlemen . . . the study of history. He wore drab black clothes for the most part. It's not the study of classes. His tie would be crookedly knotted, and as his illness wore on, his clothes fit less well, and were put on badly. Gentlemen . . . It's not the study of forces—laws or causes . . . history. He pulled the same bells—his whole weight on the ropes—the mind could not penetrate their ringing, penetrate to Tabor. Tabor kept a wad of handkerchief in the side pocket of his coat and from time to time he would take it out and stopper his mouth. Clan or family?—no. Genius, fate or fortune?—no. Gods?—no. Heroes?—never. Neither time nor time's occasioning. It was as if he were putting a curb on himself, as if there were something inside himself speaking, so that he, in a sense, always both spoke and listened, was both moved and shocked, honestly surprised by what he heard, shaken by the import of it, frightened and angered, driven by feeling from word to word like

a sled at great speed, like a bob down a steep twisting run; for it was never the track which terrified, the place of the turns which amazed, but the hurtle at which they were taken, the recklessness of the drive, and the constant danger of the passage down in consequence, which terrified; and he took us all with him when he went, that was the worst of it; he laughed at our laughter, our skepticism, our rejection in principle of such effects, of these tirades in the classroom, the demagoguery of Mad Meg, and he swept us along through absurdity, dazzled us like country maidens with glass and glitter, frightened us with heights we hadn't thought we'd scaled to, and caused the hair on our napes to rise, to run from its roots, when he looped us down the long slopes of his speech.

I never learned much about his private life—his women weren't private—so I never knew how he spent his time, or what he thought about when he wasn't working, and perhaps he hadn't a private life at all, but aside from sex, maybe he was only an historian and orator. In a way, though, his whole life was secret, for what he really thought, what he really believed, he kept hidden like the dreamer hides his dream. He ate greedily, and that was the manner, I always imagined, in which he made love, but you could be certain of nothing with Tabor, for he was an absolute actor, and perfectly capable of raising and sustaining a purely rhetorical erection.

He entered, his hands already clasped behind his back, and when he began to speak it was not from the rostrum, but from a corner of the hall by a window, quietly, unceremoniously, his attention given utterly to the five or ten who happened to be nearest him. Then as he talked he moved, almost idly, always slowly, concentrating first on this group, then that, so that by degrees he had reached, touched, captured, every man in that crowded hall. The study of history, gentlemen, he said, smiling sadly as he broke the news, the study of history is not the study of people and events, forces and movements, wars and revolutions, the reigns of kings and princes. Tabor's gray hair hung about his ears; his baldness glittered like a forest pool. One day they'd say he wore the decade like a diadem. How I hate this life I never want to leave, he often said to me while turning his chair in slow rocky circles like a dying top. It is not—I am sorry—but it is not the study of the past. How can we study the past? There is nothing—no indeed—there is nothing to study. Tabor really regrets this. But. He shrugs in French. No help for it. Too bad. That's that. Birth, my boy, he often said—the last ejaculation. And he would sigh and shake his head then, too, and squeeze my arm as though I needed consolation. If I hold a rock, a mineral, a piece of prehistoric time in my palm—where, in what age, is the soft plain . . . he peers quizzically . . . the soft plain, he murmurs, his voice subsiding like a water jet shut slowly down . . . the soft white plain, he coos, the soft white plain of my hand? Tabor's

old. He's history. The arm he extends toward us trembles. What is wearied by the weight of this stone, he asks; but we know that everywhere his flesh hangs badly on his bones. This stone, he says quietly, after a long pause, this stone is in the present; my palm here, too, is in the present; and I am here PRESENT! before you. Tabor's shouts were always calculated, but as often as I heard him and as well as I got to know his style, I was never really ready for them. He was master of the sudden shift: of tone, of mood, of speed or pitch, the quality of language, falling in a blink from *Geist* to *Scheiss* like one of the exiled angels. He would bully and hector us; he would cajole. He would scream and swear and throw himself about. No one snoozed when Mad Meg lectured. He rolled his bulbous Socratic eyes. They found and they fastened on every one of us, so that we felt he had noted our always special presence, registered the fact of our particular existence: *you*, his eyes said, *you*, I see *you* there listening, filling the hall with your attention; and though he was small and crippled and pale and tattered, he seemed, on the platform, both powerful and dangerous—liquid—delicate and frail as nitroglycerine, as if he might crack open at any moment and release the visions within him to rush upon us—every nightmarish thing—cover us with what was coming; for it really was the future, the future he seemed full of, although the present tense of history was his favorite theme. At first you weren't aware what it led to. He would say: the track of the deer by the river allows us to dream of a deer, to conceive him. The deer drinks, and there is an image of his antlers in the stream. But our deer is mere conjecture until we shoot him; he is a wraith, less real than the water he colors with his face. The hall was full. There were hundreds—crowds in the doorways. We have no choice, he'd say. The study of history must be the study of documents and records, of recipes and regulations so to speak, of laws and lists, speeches and plays, paintings and maps . . . of remains—whatever remains. Perception, Tabor tells me, and his finger bores a hole in the air, perception is a form of inference along a line of causes. That sexual look. The occasion is less public than a lecture, or at least less ceremonious, since I do recall we were at a party and Tabor was shouting at me across a cold buffet. The wine rolled in his glass. There's no difference—in principle—between—what the eye does . . . I remember Tabor rounding toward me, the corner of a napkin crooked in his collar and hanging like a bib beneath his chin. The eye—when it translates its stimulations into cloth, chairs, silver, cookies, glass, plate, tables—or the nose—the nose when it scents the sausage—they all take effect for cause . . . Tabor has sailed in close. His small head leans against my chest as I back off. They see—they sniff—not themselves, eh? but the caumff . . . And I think, hearing him shouting a sort of Schopenhauer, pushing caviar into his mouth on rafts of toast and butting me in the bargain, that he's insane, a madman;

yes, that he's Mad Meg, and his insanity is infecting me. Kohler, he cries . . . Canapes line his hand like a tray, are stacked on his wrist. I have this disease, he tells us. It has entered me, entered my veins. He is pacing the platform. But, gentlemen, it is the present position of the bacilli that matters, not the door through they've entered. (I believe I have rendered the construction of the phrase.) Crackers shatter. Genius is a faculty some have for seeing—I have extraordinary seeing—I see distinctly through these little holes which drain the present to the past—darkness circles my sight like a leg in a bandage—to the life that's burning at the bottom here—coin at the end of the tunnel. He smears paté on my vest, loudly curses France in the name of Germany, and from the middle of all eyes winks his own eye saucily. This disease . . . this *dis-ease* . . . he would insist on saying. I am entered like a woman. It has entered me. We wriggled with embarrassment and gave up any attempt to follow. Soon, we knew, the weather would change, Tabor would become his subject, and the sick shabby little man before us would vanish like an elf or fairy, his thin tones would round and come at us like shot from a cannon, there'd be glorious strife and destruction again, and we would stamp our feet and pound our books to convey our approval, our appreciation—I as loudly as any—before rushing from the hall for a drink—a sentimental song, too, I'm afraid—at the end of his harangue, at the end of our applause.

Before beer, an oration. There are other remains, gentlemen, more or less human ones: walls and pots and colored images and bones. I remember. There is history. There is history remembered. Which is history too, the second time around. My mother's powdered forehead, for instance. Tabor chews fiercely. Stars, he exclaims, gazing up. And now we begin an old game, though I am weary of playing it. Weary of weeding in the hot sun. Weary of sitting alone, silent, nearly asleep on the cheeks of my book. Weary of starting cars on cold mornings. Weary of jolly enjoyments: teaseless undergarments, bedspreads, fraufat. On that afternoon I was weary. I abandon the cucumber sandwiches, the salmon and the mayonnaise, while Tabor's gestures remove the ceiling. The moon is down. The second time around. The night sky sparkles like black champagne. All these dots, he exclaims, exchanging his empty glass for a full one and advancing on me like a multitude of people; like a multitude of people, he exclaims, all these dots have a different age. As my memories have . . . and my book's pages. My life jerks through me like an old time movie (in fits and Sennetts, cries Planmantee, his glasses wagging). A sliver of lobster slides away. On this afternoon I am weary. Sunning through the blinds and shuttering the bed, she was striped like a zebra. I remember a run of light across your breast, Lou—the Venetian sensations you gave me. Human history. Suppose, Kohler, there *were*—there *were* such an historian, and all the events of history lay before him, to be seen as scenery—

in a form—like stars—and time was sky. We were at a party, in a planetarium, in a chancellery, in Mad Meg's head, in a dream, in a trance, in a spell, in a daze. He's gestured away the ceiling. How I hate this life, like Tabor, I never want to leave. I am weary now of empty amusements, of heavy overcoats, of cigarettes and study. The passage of the years, like a train through a tunnel, only dirties the cars. And I am weary of dinner tables and dinner table prattle and the whole of life in chairs, in families, in national places. An oration. oration. Tabor rolls wine in his mouth. You can feel the fizz in your nose. Brandy burns in crystal decanters. An oration. Before beer—an oration. Dark sleeves like tornadoes suck up sausages and ham. I see them clearly, Kohler, oh, my Valley Forge, there: the ranges of history, spread out before me like a welcoming woman—like this buffet table with its clamorous platters . . . their amorous cuisine. The geography of heaven, don't you see? the geography of man. It's beautifully proportional. Tabor swallows his fingers—alternately—and returns to his feed. I'm let off, reprieved. No more lessons in astronomy today. But his voice can come from anywhere like a wind. The study of history is essentially the study of symbols and markers, of verbal remains—symbol middens, shall we say?—and tombs. Our study, gentlemen, the study of history, is really a study of language. Only words speak past the present; only words have any kind of honest constant *visual* life. These voices shine their distance like the constellations. Young Alcibiades. The beautiful. Or the words for Caesar's wounds. His hands fondle a cigar clipper, a pen, a pink eraser like a piece of lip. You are pinned to his lapel, rosetted there. He spirals, pendulums. Yet there are so many signs . . . so many. What words, whose words, should we study and love? The hall was full. There were hundreds. There were crowds in the doorways—everyone still. Flags like trumpeting flowers lined the aisles in stiff stands. Functionaries, all in uniforms and medals, formal trousers, leather cases, sat fatly in the first rows. Tabor's hair concealed the puddle in it, he tossed his head so. No one shuffled. Tabor gazed at distant windows—incautious birds.

Pale Alcibiades, my boy, says Meg, winking lewdly: penis in the hand of Socrates. His desk was leafed with paper like the floor of a forest.

I, Thucydides, an Athenian, made this war to be, and I conceived it as a great one, that I should be esteemed, honored, and forever studied: my battles, heroes, speeches, and my mind.

Tabor squeals with delight as he twirls in his chair, the chair I teeter in now so quietly. Kohler, he says, grabbing my coated arm, ideas—ideas are exciting to me. They make me want to take them in my mouth.

What an in-cred-ible question, Mad Meg shouted. Who makes our history for us? Do we? do we make our history, turn it out on some machine? Of course not. Vain-glorious rubbish. Childish twaddle. It is

Tacitus who does it. It's Thucydides. Historians make history. *Agricola's story has been told to posterity*, Meg declaims, *and by that he will live*. Who poisoned this paragon, Agricola? Domitian? Ha. No. His creator Tacitus, with sly suggestion. Meg stalked back and forth like a raven. Between the flags men were sitting, holding their knees. Eagles gleamed on the peaks of the standards. Wretched men in wretched cities, Mad Meg said, stupid combats, needless suffering, regardless death: did they compile that war on the Peloponnesus? The war is Thucydides, I tell you. He waged it when he wrote. And if it were a fiction, if we found it thick with lies tomorrow like bad beef, it still would be our past, the past we've lived—unaltered. That cruel fools' war has changed us—I mean the man who, with it, made our memories, he changed us, for when he writes, we *feel* before we *see*.

I never saw Magus Tabor undertake an ordinary task. Perhaps he had no daily life at all but bounced from note to note in that eternal song of his like the little dot which directed our singing in the movie houses of the thirties. When those black balls reached the end of the line, I recall, they marked time by bobbing, as though afloat on nervous bladders, rapidly, straight up and down. He walked in the park while he could; he wrote; he read; he talked; he was consoled by women provided for him by his secretary—a man Tabor rarely spoke to and toward whom he displayed an almost absolute contempt; he attended few parties; he was ushered into important chambers; he cursed a lot, with a heat exceeding his invention. Whatever feelings he provoked were always strong. Meg had no delicacy at all. When he had a cold, for instance, he let his nose run without caring. Crumbs clung insecurely to his mouth. Occasionally he dragged a garter. Wax affected his hearing, and vocal indistinctness made him angry. He yanked on your tie as he yanked on his own, and he pulled at sleeve or sweater ravellings in a fury. Still there must have been some time when he brushed his teeth or put on clothes, though his clothes looked slept in, and his teeth were faintly green like a blooming pond. He would ask you any question whose answer he wanted to have—and no other kind, regardless of the indiscretions these demanded, or your embarrassment; and if your reply were hesitant, stiff, evasive, slow, unimaginative, forceless, dull, or uninformed, he would interrupt by shouting *shit*, a word wrapped often with his spit and delivered in a spray point blank, as though he were a member of a boarding party, whereupon he'd spin his back to you and glare at his row of Goethe, the volume numbers large and gold—in Gothic. Why he bothered with me I cannot imagine, I was so small an audience—not even, I suspect, a very good one. He stirred me—yes. My deepest layers rose, and my consciousness became clouded with dregs which have never settled. This, perhaps, was it—this cloudiness—for he shattered his surroundings and left you to

restore his ruins when he left; yet you could seldom quite do it, and the old world you'd known was gone, the new one displaced from it—rearranged, repopled—as if instead of pipes and persons, chairs and tables, ideas were being smoked or sat on, and emotions wore tuxedos. There in the hall that morning it was hot; the sky outside was threatening, and we sank like spent swimmers, everything and everyone but Magus Tabor at an utter stop. Medals smeared the chests of the dignitaries. Moment by moment their clothing seemed less soldierly. Faces were alternately pink and pale, even the smallest moustaches looked worried, while heads made helmets of their hair. Was it sweat which was salting their eyes? Who wore thick glasses? Feet sat like good dogs, firmly floored, and the good soldiers kept their noses reverently elevated. I wonder, really, just how much they heard, or just how much they understood. Their military grays were gluey, booth leather darkly slickered as for rain. The bodies of the pigeons deepened as Tabor talked.

What is a wound we've suffered in a war, an arm that's been fiercely slendered from us, but a sight for gawkers on the city square, the minutest memorial? We are a sleeveless veteran of events which subsequent days have dried without a trace—drawn up the sunshine into air. How can we return that severed member to our shoulder, have it circle a waist or hold a sword once more? We cannot shout: arm! . . . arm! . . . and make it flesh again. Instead, with tales of hand-to-hand, we hold the ears of children. Some—for what time?—may remember them. But they will dwindle too, and disappear, the children and their memories, as all our feelings . . . daily.

There was nothing but the gray sun we were boiling in and Mad Meg's childish prance . . .

When we think of history, we think of a chain of causes, don't we? long lines of barges pulled along by God. We've simple minds. Events in nature, in our lives, have little power; our, at most, like rockets dimming even as they flame . . . to shatter insubstantially against an insubstantial darkness. Certainly we'd like to think that our stubbed toe or ulcerous belly makes a painful claim on the world's body. We've simple prides. The fire show's inconsequential, but what of our awareness? what burns in *us* as *it* burns? We never come alight. Our pictures die as quietly as grass is. Oh, consciousness as consciousness . . . it's entirely superfluous, a victim of entropy—the pain of a whole people will not fill a pillow. So to the world which no one's mind is in: goodby.

Goodby, dear Lou. We've loved. I suppose that is enough. There is so little here to care for that I cry over kittens, smothered by the sacks they're born in. You left me for your life, a treachery so natural and right I've no response but howling, cries without plan or purpose. The wind might have made them. Lou. Your name is all I have now.

Words, however, gentlemen, WORDS! words do more than fly from

their tails, burning like the peacock. The words I mean were meant for grander sounds than the groans of the stoically wounded, for half-whole fathers by their fires—to warm the children's bedtime toddy. I mean those words which, when beautifully contrived and drawn together by an Angelo, stain the sky they're shouted at, outshining any sunset. With words we hold back all that going, save all that can be saved from our Niagara. And when we put our thoughts together well, men think well of us; when our speech is passionate, they feel strongly; when our vision has become entirely verbal, it will be as if we'd lifted covers from the blind; they'll canary in their cages, and there'll be daytime always. In defiance of nature and every law, night will die neglected. Words, then, gentlemen—not in mother's homesweet mottoes, but in the miseries of history—those that go like loneliness through the soul: these are the words I mean.

And I wished for an interruption, a catastrophe, a cave-in under our seats; I wished all those cool cellars where barrels of beer were stored would open their mouths and quaff us until we were quenched.

Think of the safety a word sets before us. Does the word "prick" stick us? what bumps when "bump" is spoken? is there any blood in "bleed"? And they are just a beginning. We've plain desires, but complicated cookery. Men look at them—these words—and see . . . salvation. Soon then, so beautiful they seem, so full of peace and promise—whatever their subject—we read to praise; upon our sentences stand others nearly as lovely; we take an almost holy office from their Being, and in this heedless way, continue into commentary. Thus the thief consoles his paid-for dinner with a pilfered fork. There's no end to this ludicrous folly. Accounts again are rendered; thought takes thought, not things, for substance; language replaces life; history usurps the past, and we make sounds about sounds without limit; we steeple up a church to worship all the names we've given Time.

Mad Meg. Mad Meg. His hot hall held up like a thermos.

. . . *un mot meilleur, et meilleur que meilleur* . . .

So you seek safety in your sentences? Well, they seem safe, safe as sofas. Safe as sticks before they detonate. For if some smooth Bible-shiter mistranslates his text, for instance, sick from what he's eaten maybe, who knows? does it matter? can we care? he may alter history for a thousand years—hence for a thousand thousand—hence forever. My good German gentlemen, consider. This false text, this shabby botch, this piece of presumptuous incompetence, this snot from a Jew's nose, *this*, and not the true text—this is what we worship, found our church on; it's the wind we use to pump up our philosophy; it's the banner we go to war with; it's the lance with which we run a million through, and in whose name—isn't it?—and with a clear conscience—haven't we?—always with the best intentions—aren't they?—as simple servants of the Lord—aren't

we?—for the general welfare and the greatest happiness—don't we cheat and lie and steal and jail and shoot and hang, electrocute, and break and smash and burn, confine, and rape and flay, interrogate, and blind and wound and murder, bomb and cannon, confiscate? It's not the pen that's mightier than the sword. It's not the ink or printing press or sudden plentitude of paper, but the spiritual system which these invoke, as patricide once figured forth the Furies—concepts, gentlemen, Plato's pitiless angels, the featureless Forms; so that now even a dense dry cold book—*Das Kapital*—can consume a city. Whole families, countless generations, can be impaled upon a verb—fried, boiled, quartered by the Word . . . the word which was with God from the beginning.

Silence fell from his slowly tipped-over hands. I thought I would do sums to keep my sanity, as men long in solitary.

Myths . . . Myths grown fat and syphilitic . . . Myths are history, and myths are made, preserved, and propagated in some language. Now then, my pure, young, decent countrymen: whose tongue shall be the one to wag?

Tabor took hold of his tongue with his fingers and pulled it roughly through his mouth.

Just listen to me, would you. What am I saying? What is fake or false about a tidal wave? I denounce one text to turd you with another. Mine, I say—ours, we cry—is the true text. Heedle-deedle-da-ha. What is this Truth we so freely prattle of—whose coming will cure plagues, throw extra walls around beleaguered cities, turn the spear's bite into a tummy tickle? Honestly now . . . my good blond blue-eyed gentlemen of Germany . . . we do not care, give a soft stool for the august verities if what we believe is convenient, if it dashes our enemies to the ground; if it makes us rich; if it fends off our fears; puts us in bed with women, kicks others out, deprives men of the pleasures which, from some inadequacy, we cannot share. What trivial nonsense truths are, how false in fact their elevation. It's a mere name, yes, a flattering designation, a title like Right Reverend, the Honorable, or Most High (any baron's is better), a pure canard, this Truth; it's Descartes' deceitful demon set in his cups to dream a doubting I—yes—it is a cacofogo's gloat then, just one more tasteless jape of Nature or, if you like, the last ittybitty fib of God.

Tabor grins, claps his hands, applauds. Nevertheless, he says, more than Trismegistus, he declares, more than Cagliostro, he insists, it's both the magic and the magician.

You shall listen. I shall tell you. It's a war of lie against lie in this world where we are, fancy against fantasy, nightmare constricting nightmare like two wedded anacondas, and anyone who's taken in is nothing but a bolo and a bumpkin. But that's just what we all are—hoddydoddies—aren't we? Aren't we all so hungry, anxious, eager, to believe? like men in prison, aren't we skinny to be screwed? and don't we think that we've

escaped to freedom when we drink our wits out, dance our reason loose, and crack our nuts between the fat legs of some four-mark whore.

Nothing in the manner of the time prepared you for Mad Meg's little obscenities, but going to his classes was like going to a circus or a carnival, a brothel even; certain standards were suspended for the visit. He *was* unreal, something to be stared at from a distance, something happening in quite another space; just as the space of cages, where monkeys calmly fondle themselves, seems removed by even more than species from ourselves. Meg was an aborigine on display, and you lined up to see him. But if we did not take him seriously, weren't we moved? He was bottled in his lecture hall, a specimen, or kept there like a creature in the zoo, and it was precisely this which allowed him to reach us. When the panther can't pursue and take us, and we're safe behind his lines, when even his eyes are painless, and

Sein blick is vom Vorübergehn der Stäbe
so müd geworden, dass er nichts mehr hält,

then we can begin to admire his strength, his lazy grace, and lose ourselves in his beauty. Well, there was nothing exactly beautiful about Magus Tabor; he had no grace; but he did have uniqueness; he was one of a kind, and you felt the authorities, like scientists, were studying him too. So Tabor was not a dangerous explosive as he liked to hint, though that is indeed what he passed for. He was merely a fuse. While the sky outside collected its energy, inside, Mad Meg loosed the storm.

You all want fine degrees to dangle between your legs, gentlemen, don't you? Desirable. Correct. But proof of what virility when this fresh phallus sprouts from your head like a sniffly nose? In any case, it isn't reason that's the slut; it is not learning. It's the Truth this learning lusts for that's the royal pig; and we are pulled behind our skull's cock like a carriage—powerless, without it, we mistakenly think, to reach a destination.

Wahr-heit, he'd say, coming down disdainfully on the final *t*. On any journey, she's a cold, infested inn with fine signs. *Dich-tung und Wahr-heit*. Which one's the man and which the wife? Ah, she's an easeful prostitute, this handsome doss we long to lie our minds with, for she will bed bite, infect us with a slow and deadly sickness. What a price—to have a climax like the mayfly's.

You shall listen a little longer. My unravellings reach their end. What I've said to you today, and every day so often through the year, is very obvious, very plain, very easy, very simple and straightforward, very clear. Gentlemen: now I close. If the study of history is the study of language in one form or another, and if we really fabricate our past, not merely—weakly—live it; then we can begin to see how the world was

Greek once, or was Roman, since every page of consciousness was written in these tongues then. All the central documents—laws, plays, poems, reports, abiding wisdoms, letters, scientific learning, news—were couched in Greek or Latin phrases, and the chief historians consulted them, composed their chronicles from the same speech. Don't you see that when a man writes the history of your country in another mother-language, he is bent on conquest. If he succeeds, he will have replaced your past, and all your methods of communication, your habits of thinking, feeling, and perceiving, your very way of being, with his own. His history will be yours, perforce. Per-force! I say make others—why be made. I say that we, after adolescent stresses natural to growth, and now arriving finally at our militant majority, should accede—we should invade! capture the Kingdom, take our rightful place, recompose the world in our, not someone else's image, and impose our way of seeing on the rest of this poor aged blindness men call Europe. And what is Europe for us? a beginning! Our hemisphere's been Hellenized, Romanized, and wrapped in Christianity like a shroud. We wait—wait—wait—wait—wait—wait. Tabor kept the cadence with his fist. When will our turn come? Gentlemen, our circle has squared. Our turn is here. Thus set, we lean into the mark, and we must leap with all our energy and learning toward the tape. Conquest via history is the only kind with any permanence. But we must, to succeed, believe in ourselves, believe we are magnets, centers, sources. Then all shall be drawn to us. Why? How can we do this? We can because we have a dream round our head like a halo, a crown. It is the dream of all men: to recreate Time. Don't you feel it? It's like a cloud—those dark thunderheads outside—clouds zebra'd with lightning. To call the cuckoos from their clocks, halt heaven with an upraised palm, hold the sun from its horizon: only we can do it!

Oh, gentlemen, it has been Sunday in our country far too long.

The students were murmuring, stirring in their seats. I saw several in tears. Meg regained silence with outstretched sleeves.

Could any history of Western Europe, written in Roumanian, become a classic? The dying states, the Spains, can they produce it? or the little and the lost—Albanias or Belgioms?—the chronic losers—Polands—can they call up the necessary visions? Nor can the parasites of war, the Swiss or Swedes, who always feed in safety (for they've no gumption in them, no divinity), lift their weight up the steps toward empire. To undertake such a task, alone succeed in it, requires in the historian a sense for the inevitable destiny of his people and the importance, in furthering their aims, of dominating, assimilating, altering everything, of replacing the customs of the nations to be conquered with the folkways and traditions, the laws and literature, the confident future of your own. Enlist yourselves in this army. Give up small loves and local loyalties for this; sign your

fortunes over to it, never waver; in the face of every enemy persist; and then I promise you, young gentlemen, that the future—the future shall speak only German!

German German German German came the reply, the shout—the students standing in their chairs. German German German German. The dignitaries rose and faced us in a line. German, they cried. GERMAN! was our antiphonal response. German . . . GERMAN! German . . . GERMAN! Magus Tabor had disappeared—he had not engineered this demonstration for himself—but it was a long time, and a few seats were broken, before we filed out and struggled through the raining streets to soothe our tired throats with beer.

CRITICISM / NED FRENCH

Against the Grain: Theory and Practice in the Work of William H. Gass

The times are full of contradictions. People *feel* happy and tell you as much, but they are not. Classes are at war, and so are friends and lovers. Families and workplaces are at odds with each other—and with us. Such contradictions, which slip in among the products of our work, have become the subject and the fact of our best fiction—making it complicated, ambivalent, and too often inaccessible. Some of this fiction is written by William H. Gass.

Of course, ever since the novel came to birth amid the contradictions of a rising capitalism, it has been what Lukács, Auerbach, and Goldmann have aptly called the “problematic” genre. It has always contained tensions between realism and romance, mimesis and illusion, type and individual, description and prescription, content and form. But today the situation is intensifying: the novelist is both more cut off from society and more involved in its contradictions. We shouldn’t be surprised, therefore, to find in Gass’s work a major discrepancy between the theory of his essays and the practice of his fiction—a discrepancy that also makes for difficulty, disturbance, and beauty within the fiction itself. Richard Gilman detected this problem when he wrote that *Omensetter’s Luck* was caught between “ambitions and recalcitrances,” “discovery and nostalgia.”¹ And Gass himself has warned us