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STANLEY ELKIN AND WILLIAM H. GASS:  
A SPECIAL FEATURE

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A Conversation with Stanley Elkin and William H. Gass /  
Jeffrey L. Duncan

*Stanley Elkin and William H. Gass are important American writers. Elkin regards himself as primarily a fiction writer, and in his work—stories, novels, novellas—he turns the conventions of fiction to new and significant account. Gass regards himself as primarily a stylist, and in his work—stories, essays, a novel, a novella—he turns the conventions of genre into new and wonderful forms. It was with this difference of perspective in mind that I asked them, not to submit themselves to an interview as such, but rather if they would have a conversation on various aspects of fiction, of writing, of art. They agreed. This conversation was taped one afternoon in June, 1975, in St. Louis. Elkin's new novel, *The Franchiser*, will be published this spring by Farrar, Straus & Giroux. Gass's work-in-progress, among other projects, is a novel, *The Tunnel*.*

—Jeffrey L. Duncan

I: Alfred Kazin has said that literary interviews provide the opportunity for the writer to realize "that he is being recognized as his ideal, a wholly individual artist-man, a unique force, a truly free man." What do you see as the purpose or purposes of interviews such as this?

E: It's an ego trip: that's the value of interviews such as this.

G: It's also an important way now by which historical data are manufactured, where they didn't exist before. A great amount of new material about writers is created out of nothing, in a sense.

E: All the talking that the writers do about themselves never amounts to anything more important than what Boswell did in his *Life of Johnson*. Except that Boswell didn't have a tape recorder. It seems to me that when a writer talks about himself he talks an awful lot of bullshit, and after I have been interviewed—see the thing in print—I think, oh God, what a jackass I am. So I ask, now, to see a transcript of what it is I've said and I put it into English. And it would seem to me that that is probably what most writers do. I'm sure that the *Paris Review* interviews are all rewritten. No one is that articulate, no one is that coherent, and nobody speaks dialogue the

way Bellow and Faulkner and all the people who've had at it in the *Paris Review* speak dialogue. And so, essentially what the writer is doing in an interview is just some more writing.

G: He's also, I think, aware that this interview conceivably could become a part of the *material* from which his work is approached, and therefore it becomes in certain ways a kind of camouflage, very misleading, because he's in an ideal context in which he's presumably talking off the cuff, and presumably is not preparing remarks.

E: Right.

G: But he is in fact conscious of a whole fad for such things these days, and he knows he's adding to the record. And he can get this in, you know, sort of *casually*. And so, though the material may be interesting sometimes, I think it has to be taken with a great deal of suspicion.

I: Leslie Fiedler has written that "*to fulfill its essential moral obligation, fiction must be negative.*" He explains that the writer's only positive obligation is to tell the truth, to describe or depict "the vision of an eternal gap between imagined order and actual chaos." How do you respond to that? I wonder if a writer doesn't have to earn his negations as much as his affirmations, and I wonder if assuming actual chaos is any more warranted than assuming actual order.

E: I think authors ultimately do say yes or no—really it probably doesn't make any difference what the hell they say, yes *or* no—but it seems to me that yes and no are the polar materials of all fiction. But what I say is reductive and what Fiedler says is reductive.

G: I don't think it says yes or no at all. I think *readers* say that the work says yes or no.

E: No, no, no, no. In my writing I'm consciously saying—

G: Oh yes, sure, but it again depends on whether or not you regard (that's why so much is assumed here) literature as fundamentally a kind of communication. If so, then the writer could make assertions that he regards as positive or negative. But I think that literature is not a form of communication.

E: I wouldn't use the word "affirmation." It seems to me there's a subtle distinction—almost an aesthetic distinction—between yes and affirmation. "Yes" is simply a kind of agreement to go along with the world. But "affirmation" is something far more ringing and rhetorical.

I: Does this allow for certain disparities, then, between the way you respond and the way readers respond to a section of your work, or an entire work?

G: Oh sure. The commonest thing for me is to have people tell me that I have written something that explored madness. That's said to me more than anything else, and I have never written about anything that was mad, yet—

I don't *think*. I don't see it that way. I think Stanley gets that kind of thing with people saying, "Gee, oh boy, was that funny."

E: A pregnant friend of ours said she laughed so hard she almost lost her water when she read the bear-fuck scene in "The Making of Ashenden." When I wrote that scene, and when I read it before an audience, I did not find it at all humorous. And it's not. Oh, there are a couple of lines here and there that are funny, but I meant to bring it off as a genuine love scene. Now when people accuse Bill of writing about madness, the only thing they can be referring to is Furber in *Omensetter's Luck*.

I: No. They refer also to "The Pedersen Kid," to "In the Heart of the Heart of the Country."

E: All right, but primarily it would be Furber because he has a kind of a breakdown. Still, the book is *not* an exploration of madness. In the final confrontation, when Furber goes to Omensetter's house and they bring in Pimber, Furber's making those wonderful noises, and the noises are the noises of collapse, madness only in a sense.

G: It's a moment. I wouldn't call it madness exactly.

E: I wouldn't either.

G: It's like being winded after a long run: sort of a mental puffing. But what happens, see, with the bear case is that people are embarrassed. Even in ordinary love stories, written straight, without irony, they are embarrassed. Those are hard to do, though, if you write them with a real feel for the relationship, a serious one. The bear scene is comedy in a certain sense, in the older sense of comedy, I suppose, but readers just get embarrassed, they have to laugh, because they can't accept the writing on the level that it's presenting itself. Now in my case, I don't think there's anything like that involved.

E: On the other hand, when I read *Omensetter's Luck*, I was genuinely moved, I mean moved to tears, when Furber gives that money for the boys' choir, or whatever, at the end of the book. This is what Al Lebowitz calls "a turning," a kind of emotional somersault; Furber would have been totally incapable of giving those few pennies to his successor earlier on. And you may regard my being moved as a misreading of the damned thing. On the other hand, I can say that *all* turnings must move people, *do* move people, and in a kind of way are cheats, because we all know (or at least some of us know), that people's characters do not change. Furber's character does change. I am not glad that his character changes, but when it changes, as it seems to me it does, I respond with tears.

G: Well, of course, characters can change, even if people don't, because characters aren't people.

E: That's right, that's right. Maybe that's why we cry, because those damned characters can do things we can't.

G: Sure. Characters can realize themselves in Aristotelian terms—their potentialities within their world can be fully realized. Whereas in our world it's very hard for us to lead a tragic life, say, because it's frittered away in pratfalls.

E: Right. It's not economical.

G: That's why of course an orgy in a porno book and an orgy in real life are so different, too, because in a porno book everything goes well.

E: Yeah, there's no sweat, no bad smells.

G: There's a great deal of importance in that aspect of it. But readers regularly get confused about this. I think that one of the greatest difficulties readers have in general—and this is one of the reasons why people would back off and laugh at Stanley's thing as pure comedy—is facing the reality of literature. It's very hard for them, given the kind of assumption involved in treating that relationship at a high level. It's like Faulkner's famous episode of the idiot and the cow—

E: Do you mean readers laugh?

G: They want to, they want to get out of that, they want that treated as either a case study in psychology—

E: I was going to say that it's mitigated by the kid's idiocy.

G: Yeah, it's either that or it's a big kind of joke.

E: And that makes the laughter even more uncomfortable.

G: Yes. Because to accept it as a real kind of love affair, well.

E: Years ago, Stanley, when I had just finished *A Bad Man*, I mentioned to you the scene in which Lurie comes up the cells, scrubbing the floor and shining the bars, and I said I thought it was funny. You looked at me in a puzzled way, and said, "I thought it was very moving." You seemed to be disagreeing with me, but I didn't see that the two had to cancel each other.

E: I think the two do cancel each other. I think that one can only accommodate one emotion at a time, and that if one is laughing, one is laughing, and if one is sober, one is sober. The twain can meet, but can't co-exist.

G: One of the best things that comics like Chaplin do—we call them comics—is make the twain co-exist: a lot of scenes in Chaplin are funny-sad, or at least it seems to me they are.

E: I cried at Chaplin in *City Lights* with the flower girl. That I thought was a very moving story. But it didn't make me laugh—I've never laughed at Chaplin.

G: Well, you're *odd*. Millions laugh at Chaplin.

E: I can only accommodate one thing at a time. Like our President, I can't chew gum and walk.

G: No. I think that what you usually call a particular emotion, laughter, or happiness, or joy, or fear, or whatever, is generally a mixture already, and you're just sort of picking a dominant ingredient, and that most feelings and

states of feeling are very complicated. It seems to me that the Shakespearian distinction of tragicomedy is a real one and that Shakespeare does it a lot.

E: You think there's such a thing as comic relief? Do you think Shakespeare ever said, "Well now, this is getting pretty heavy, I better bring on the clowns"?

G: Oh, no. Well, he may have, in terms of the pit and all of that stuff, yes.

E: I don't think so.

G: But as a dramatist he worked constantly with complex situations and one of the things that makes his comedy interesting, except in those moments when it does descend to just buffoonery, is the fact that it's always got this other edge, that it isn't sheer or mere.

E: Okay, but then it ceases to be pure comedy; it becomes something else which is itself a different emotion. Now there may be such an emotion as, say, "humidy," or "tragomic." But you cannot handle tragedy and comedy simultaneously. All I'm saying is that one follows the other, in a kind of movie-frame sequence, almost, but it's as impossible to be of two minds and hearts as it is to be in two places at the same time.

G: Well, I think we live in different worlds. It seems to me that it's so rare that I am reduced to only two. I mean it's usually seven, eighteen.

E: That's called "confusion."

G: And I think that in your work the humor that arises out of situations, and within situations, is completely mixed with pathos, for example, and other kinds of elements.

E: Actually I distrust comedy. When I try deliberately to be funny it comes out silly. For me it's a question of dynamics, of movement, of mixing speeds, not a question of whether the stuff is serious or not serious.

I: But much of your work *is* funny.

E: I suppose if there's anything funny in my stuff it's the notion of powerlessness—the sort of Lucky Jim faces the protagonist makes behind the enemy's back. That, it seems to me, is the single joke of contemporary fiction.

G: Now in TV situation comedy all the situation is for is the so-called joke. And whether the joke is enacted or spoken, it's with the same intent: it's just a trade of the language. But when you're working with a scene or a situation, you're not thinking about it as funny, tragic, or anything, you're dealing with the situation, and as a result certain kinds of elements, including humor, begin to emerge.

E: As a matter of fact, if the other elements weren't there, nothing would be funny. In *The Franchiser*, the book I'm working on now, the protagonist, Ben Flesh, calls up one of his god-cousins. Ben begins speaking as soon as the connection is made, then hears somebody talking to the god-cousin about him, saying that they don't need Ben anymore. Suddenly that voice

stops, and a Phonemate 270 recording comes on, telling Ben in the god-cousin's voice to leave his message after he hears the beep. So he listens to the beep and says, "Gus-Ira, this is Ben Flesh—your Phonemate 270 is all fucked up. You probably put the reels in backward. You were never any god-damn good with your hands. You never were mechanically inclined." Now, the guy's heart is absolutely broken, but there is something funny about him saying, "You were never any god-damn good with your hands," and there's something funny about the machine being screwed up. Ben has to overhear this stuff, as Polonius plans to overhear Hamlet, but it's too late in the game to intercept letters, it's too late in the game to stand behind an arras, so what I did was to modify and modernize all that with a fucked-up Phonemate. But it *wasn't* for the sake of the joke.

I: Flannery O'Connor said that the writer with Christian concerns uses violence to make the reader truly see the distortions of modern life. Do either of you do anything like this?

G: I think she's really making a fundamental aesthetic error. First she's trying to communicate according to her audience's reactions.

E: Absolutely. And even more important, she's worrying about her own reaction as a writer. She says the writer is repelled by X or Y or Z. I'm never repelled by X or Y or Z, and I doubt very much that you are.

G: No. You try not to be while you're a writer. There are plenty of times when you're repelled as a person, by—

E: The real world, yeah, but writing ain't the real world. Although for Flannery O'Connor it *was*. I mean, there is a major qualification there: she says a *Christian* novelist and I'm not a Christian novelist (or a Jewish novelist). And Bill's certainly not a Christian novelist; he's a pagan novelist. She regarded herself as responsible. I simply don't feel that same kind of responsibility. Do you?

G: No. As a writer I only have one responsibility, and that's to the language I'm using and to the thing I'm trying to make. Now as a person I have a lot of other responsibilities.

E: Right—exactly.

G: The problem may be managing those, but that's in your private life, not on the page. On the other hand that does raise the question related to the "bear" kind of response: it is true that a writer has to worry about management of tone, in order that his attitude toward the material that he is working with will not destroy the thing he's doing. And that's why a certain kind of uninvolvedness, a detachment—a negative capability, really—is essential. One of the differences for example between the way in which Stanley works and, say, someone like Roth (which makes Roth trivial, I think) is that Roth's approach to his own work is very much like the reader who *simply* laughs at the bear. Because Roth is often embarrassed by himself.

E: Roth? Embarrassed? How about *My Life as a Man*?

G: I haven't read that one.

E: It's the best thing he's done in a long, long time. It's so clearly preoccupied with Roth's feelings about Roth, so clearly an admission to that preoccupation (the word "narcissism" probably turns up more often in the book than "the"), so clearly autobiographical that Roth may be playing it very cagey here, stepping out from under your criticism by saying, "Okay, I'll not manipulate the reader, I'll not worry about society, I'll get *me* down on paper."

G: He manipulates *himself*, which is the subject of much of his work.

E: Well, all right. But never with this intensity. The book, as a result, is boring, but it's boring in a different kind of way than *Our Gang* or *The Great American Novel* is boring; it's boring in a more interesting way.

I: Both of you have styles in which the reader is very aware of your words—

E: Would it were true. I mean I'm aware of it, but I don't think the reader is. All I want from a reviewer—I say "reviewer" because critics will have nothing to do with me—is for the man to say, "This fellow writes well."

G: That's what they miss with Stanley, and I find it incomprehensible. I've had a much better response in that respect than Stanley has, but it seems to me a scandal. The critical scene is rotten; critics have been brought up on all these funny people—a whole string of funny guys—and, as a consequence, when they read a novel that is comic in a general yet genuine sense, they miss, it seems to me, what makes Stanley such an important writer. First, the fact that he writes with more complexity; instead of reducing fucking a bear to a big boffo, you know, he takes on something very serious and difficult. Beyond that, he manages the language as well as anybody. I don't think that's been noticed. It should be the first thing, and it is the first thing, it is *the* thing, that sets Stanley aside from all the others.

E: This man is absolutely right. This is an okay guy.

G: It upsets me, but I think it's also very characteristic of the way critics go at this. They're not interested in language, they're interested in other things, in these little stories, in gossip, in anecdote, in sociology, in cheap psychology, and so forth.

E: You know, in a way, that's what *is* good about Roth's last novel, because he focuses on the critics' assumption of morality—the moral superiority they assume—and that really is very entertaining to me. It's true, critics are the new priests.

G: And the writer is the god that the priests are interpreting.

E: They want shamans, and as George Eliot says—ours, not the other one—there's a distinct difference between the shaman and the writer. The shaman is there in person, and the writer is not a shaman—he's not—and people should be ashamed of making him a shaman.

G: That's right. Writers usually make very bad ones. But usually they don't

make themselves—they've got followers, the cult people, who come along and try to create them, but then the writers tend of course to be sucked in, and to leave writing for prophecy.

E: They want writers to say "Heal! Heal!"

I: Like Mailer.

G: Oh, Mailer's a different case. He's the Little Orphan Annie of the literary world, that's all.

E: Don't you think Mailer is prouder of his metaphors than his sermons?

G: Sure I think he's prouder—what he wants is a certain reaction, an adulation from the audience, and he didn't have the guts to get it the right way.

E: But then how do you explain those elaborate conceits in Mailer?

G: Which conceits?

E: I'm talking about the very, very elaborate conceits and metaphors that appear in all of Mailer's writing after those early novels, beginning with, say, *An American Dream*, where the guy is really writing his heart out. There are good sentences in *An American Dream*.

G: Gee, I missed them.

E: I'll lend you the book. I'll make little marks in the margin.

G: I found a couple of good sentences in *Across the River and into the Trees*, and I think I was the only one to do that, but I haven't found any in Mailer.

I: How then do you regard Fiedler's contention that literature should function as a communal activity, should unite us?

E: Gee, I think I know the answer to this one. I taught a course on the Cult Novel, and there isn't a novel you can name that has had forty-eight printings that I didn't teach in that course. I taught *Steppenwolf*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *The Bell Jar*, *Stranger in a Strange Land*, *Dune*, *Catch-22*. What didn't I teach? And I discovered something: the theme of every cult novel is, "We're all in this together." It's Heinlein, in *Stranger in a Strange Land*, who invented the term "groking." Now, to grok is to share water, as a kind of sacrament. And in every single fucking cult novel there's a water-sharing scene—astonishing!

G: I agree with you. Popular culture does teach you that we're all in this together, but real literature—

E: Says we're alone!

G: Yes! "I'm not in *your* boat, buddy." Now paradoxically, I think, that strain starts in an oral culture, and one of the things that Western Civilization can applaud itself for is the development of the individual, the sense of human difference, uniqueness. In Greek drama, which was the occasion for cultural unification, the theme was often that, the subject was often that; what those plays taught the Greeks was the sense of being an individual person. In Greek culture the notion of an individual soul comes to fruition in Socrates—and you can see it going on in the writing. What great



writing does is divide. Good books isolate you; they show how individual and unique and different—and the responsibility of that—experience is.

E: Right. If my books have a theme, it's the theme of self, the self and its diseases, and the disease as health.

G: But there are exceptions, too. Take the Victorian novels, which were popular culture: they created this kind of environment in which the reader, even if he was reading about the poor in London when he himself was rich, could feel, "We're all in this together; here we are at the human center." Now out of that emerged some great writers. But then there is Bartok's study of folk music, where he discovered that most lovely folk music is sung to aristocratic tunes, which have sunk down to the folk. One of the things that art seems to me to teach is that it is produced by people who spend their lives devoted to superb things—they've got talent, intelligence, craft, and skill—it doesn't come by accident—the folk don't go around creating in happy, joyous ignorance—they don't create anything, except more ignorance. It's a cheap sell-out to claim otherwise, because then you're trying to reduce, say, *Huckleberry Finn* to a pop novel.

E: Well, there's a lot of water-sharing that goes on in that book.

G: The function of pop culture is to bring people together. But real culture has always been the province of the handful, and it's a luxury: being a person is a luxury.

I: In your essay "In Terms of the Toenail," you talk about the weakness of much recent fiction as a fear of feeling, and you cite Beckett, Borges, and Barth. And you say they've been led too far towards Fancy, as Coleridge called it, "neglecting somewhat in the forming of their figures the full responsive reach of their readers. They are too much a passive term in this relation." Then you contrast Faulkner, Lowry, Lawrence, Bellow and Elkin. Now, there are some critics who would put Stanley in with Beckett, Borges, and Barth. Why do you include him where you include him?

G: Whether any particular one of these people fits in the category might be one kind of judgment; whether the distinction, the boxes, so to speak, are well-built, is another. I think it's always more important to build a good box than to get things in it. There's an important point here, though, and that is that we're complaining about work of the highest possible level. All of these writers are writers whom I esteem very greatly, so it's not a matter of saying the work is no good. But if you take any particular situation, say fucking a bear—let's imagine Nabokov handling that. Or Barth. I think both could handle it; they would be quite different, but what would be predictable is that they would *never* attempt to infuse into the situation a real love for the bear! They just wouldn't try that. Now Lawrence might have tried it.

E: I've been accused of plagiarizing the bear scene from *Giles Goat-Boy*, but I quit reading that book after the first hundred pages. Doesn't Barth try to bring off a love affair between the goat and—

G: Yes, he does, and he does it with pigs. There's a marvelously funny scene in *The Sot-Weed Factor*—

E: I read that passage and was very moved by it.

G: Oh Stanley is moved, moved, moved!

E: I used to be a bowel.

G: It's extremely funny, though, and it's treated with a certain kind of intellectual and ironic detachment; he's not making a particular kind of commitment. Nabokov never makes it, either. I admire Nabokov immensely, but there are certain kinds of things he just doesn't do, which is okay—

E: Right.

G: —why should he do everything?

E: He just chews his Swiss chocolates and writes his mouth off.

G: Now I think that what happens with Faulkner and Lowry, for instance, is that their passionate kind of commitment to other things means they're less concerned with the kind of control, intellectual skill, etcetera, that Nabokov has. Nabokov's commitment is of a different kind. I mean that he isn't going to treat certain areas of feeling. When he deals with love he's only going to deal with love as an object of trickery, deceit, pratfall—that's it.

E: He's not going to deal with love as it comes over the FM stereo and into the head-set: "Love is the Answer."

G: Yeah.

I: Earl Shorris wrote in *Harper's* that conventional fiction is second-hand life to the speaker, third-hand to the listener, in effect, and he says that your work, Bill, is moving away from this. Now, in these terms he says that *Omensetter's Luck* is wanting because it has "a plot drawn out of some prior conception of the novel."

E: I don't find *Omensetter's Luck* wanting, whether it has a plot drawn out of some prior conception of the novel or not, and I'll give you a very *practical* reason why I don't. When I was a graduate student at the University of Illinois Bill submitted a short story, which I did not get to read—Charles Shattuck read it—called "At Horseshoes." He gave the story a "Consider plus" (these were the days when people still got grades), which was a very high recommendation. Ultimately *Accent* rejected the story, but Chuck wrote a letter to Bill asking if he had any more material, and would he submit stuff again to *Accent*. He got a letter from Bill saying that, oh yes, indeed, he had more material, oh *boy* did he have more material: he had "The Pedersen Kid," 25,000 words; he had "Mrs. Mean," 15,000 words; he had "The Triumph of Israbestis Tott," 12,500 words; he had—

G: Astonishing memory, Stanley.

E: Well this is true, right? I'm not off by much. He had "The Love and Sorrow of Henry Pimber," 12,500 words or whatever, and if he cared to see more, why by God he would submit more. Well, Chuck Shattuck thought he was dealing with a crank, and you may not know this, Bill, but the letter

was put up on the bulletin board, with all these statistics. Chuck asked to see the stuff, and a large plain brown wrapper weighing ninety pounds came in and Chuck read the stuff story by story and said, *yes! yes plus, yes plus plus*, and by God *Accent* ended up devoting an entire issue to Cass. Now at the time I was unaware of the fact that "The Triumph of Israbestis Tott" was part of a novel. Whether this had been revealed to Shattuck or not—

G: No, huh-uh.

E: —I don't know, and now you tell me that it hadn't. Of all the pieces that Bill submitted, the ones I found weakest—and simply because they just didn't make sense to me; I mean I knew what was going on but I didn't know *why* it was going on—were "The Triumph of Israbestis Tott" and "The Love and Sorrow of Henry Pimber." I was all for publishing "The Pedersen Kid," I was all for publishing "Mrs. Mean," I was all for publishing the essay on Henry James, "The High Brutality of Good Intentions." And I was willing, simply because I trusted the writer and figured that the writer must know, since he clearly knew what was going on in "Mrs. Mean" and these other stories, he must know what was going on in Israbestis Tott and Pimber—I was perfectly willing to publish those too, although I was less satisfied with them. And then out came the novel and I saw this marvelous stuff working in its context.

G: But Shorris' objection—and it's also Richard Gilman's objection, I think he was the first person who made it—was that I was trying to work the result on the basis of a plot maneuver rather than on the basis of pure language. I think that it's a good objection, myself. Not that I feel there's something inherently *wrong* with the traditional conception of the novel—that's silly—but I think that it was a mark, in terms of my own approach to things, that I was uncomfortable with, that I handled badly, that I didn't digest, that is not *me*, in a certain sense. It is a theoretical flaw in the book. Some writers it wouldn't have troubled, it wouldn't interfere with their work. But it does mine, because I'm theoretically oriented.

E: Well what's so bad about Tott waiting on Pimber, Pimber waiting on Furber, till the whole thing can come together and make sense, which is of course the traditional notion of the traditional novel? One of the triumphs of *Omensetter's Luck* is its pacing: the book gets faster and faster and faster as it goes along. It's almost like a professional runner who is conscious of what he can do the first hundred miles and what he's got to hold back for the final forty-foot dash. Now it seems to me that a novel is simply the process of complicating a constant situation. Take *The Wizard of Oz*, for example: in *The Wizard of Oz* the Tin Woodman and the Scarecrow and the Cowardly Lion are walking along the yellow brick road to the Emerald City with Dorothy and Toto and they come to a precipice and can proceed no farther. So they start to worry about this, and the Cowardly

Lion, cowardly though he is, comes up with a solution to the problem: that Dorothy, Toto, the Woodman and the Scarecrow should get on his back and he will leap the precipice. Okay, they do that successfully, they continue on and they come to a wider precipice which the Lion cannot accomplish in a single bound, so they figure something out much more complicated, right? Then they come to an absolute abyss, a Grandest Canyon, and now the solution is for Dorothy to take off her right red shoe, rub the heel three times, spit, make a magic wish, and the birds come down and lift them in their beaks across the canyon. All right. Now, every damn novel ever written, from the simplistic *Wizard of Oz* to the complicated *Omensetter's Luck*, deals essentially in the same dynamic. In *The Wizard of Oz* they had one goal, to get to the Emerald City. I'm a little reluctant to spell out what the goal might be in *Omensetter's Luck*, but I assume there is one, and the solution to the particular problem becomes increasingly complicated, and since, you know, the demand for what the Supreme Court might call all deliberate speed becomes necessary, then that becomes a necessary concomitant of the novel's structure. And you do this so incredibly well in *Omensetter's Luck*. You actually bring *wheels* into the end of the book—the wagon, for example, is the major prop of the penultimate chapter—there are these wheels on that goddamn wagon, and all those people hurrying for Pimber and Chamley and so on and so forth: it's just incredible. It's as if the speed of light were a sort of grammar. So if you find this a flaw in your work, then it seems to me what you're looking for is a different kind of novel entirely.

G: What's crucial is not just going down the yellow brick road and having all the problems and getting over them. That's part of it; but doing it in such a way that the reader is going to take that same trip over and over, now that's an additional complication—creating a situation in which, when the solutions are known in advance, the interest is still there. Then there is the other aspect, whether the principal interest in a book comes from the plot-line, and it doesn't.

E: No, no, it doesn't.

G: So, then, you see, you begin to think, all right, if it doesn't come from the plot-line, then what is the function of the plot? I mean the narrative line in the traditional sense, and this has of course become the crucial question of a great deal of our fiction.

E: All right, hold on a minute. I talk plot, I also talk sentences. The problem solved by the sentence in chapter one has *got* to be solved by a more elaborate sentence in chapter two, and a still more elaborate or beautiful sentence in chapter three. There is *that* progression also. And when we say plot, we really mean the whole . . . is *gestalt* the word I want? I always thought that was something you put on bread—an ethnic dressing.

I: In *Willy Master's Lonesome Wife*, with the simultaneous texts, there

seems to be a different kind of progression, something akin to music. Yet, it seems to me that literature is fundamentally a linear art, whereas music, though it's linear too, is also simultaneous. Can literature achieve the effect of music?

G: Well, Joyce tried it, because of the meanings of words, the layers. But also, there's a distinction between the way an object is, or exists in the world, and the way in which it's apprehended. For example, let's suppose you have a big house; now that exists simultaneously—many floors, and sides, back, front, and so forth, but I can only experience it serially, one part after another. What happened in the past, I think, was that people treated literature as a serial thing, basically, because indeed it had to be, as music has to be, experienced serially. But the point is that a piece of music or literature is conceived as a totality. So while a work of literature is necessarily linear in apprehension, it doesn't necessarily have to be linear in its fundamental ontology. It can be apprehended one way, and *be* another way. And that interests me, basically, more than anything else about writing, a development within a formal system. It's like getting mathematicians together: at a certain point in developing a series of equations, all the mathematicians can just go "ah" as they *see*, you know, that it all follows because it's built into the earlier thing. It's my favorite story about Schoenberg that, at a certain point in writing a piece of music, he just wrote "etcetera." Because it all followed.

I: But in music, you can have sixteen instruments, all playing sixteen notes at the same time. Can literature approximate that?

G: It has an analogy: there's only one sound for any word, but there may be many meanings.

E: Yes, but once you put them in context, some of those meanings are eliminated.

G: Some of them, yes. Some contexts are designed to exploit and make the writing chordal, and others are not. Only one note can be sounded at a time, but the concepts are not identical, and the chordal register can be worked out in lots of different ways. You can work it out, not just at the single, simple verbal level, but at a structural level in a work, either symbolically or in terms of repetition—one scene of a novel can recall an earlier one, so that the two are packed in together. A gesture that you describe can be doing the same thing, sounding several themes or whatever at the same moment. It's analogous, not strictly the same. And I think it's bad to push an analogy too far, or try to make literature just music. Now the whole theoretical twist of fiction, or writing in general, particularly writing about ideas, involves the realization that the theory is all there at once, like most scientific theory, for example: it's a whole thing. But it has to be said serially, first this, then that, an expository order, whereas the theory being described is unitary, the sole object. So what a writer has to do is to establish first the

object, the architecture; then he has to take you on a tour that is dramatic, and has its own interest; and then he has to work out a third, the interrelationship between the two. You get those three elements fused into one new whole, because the work of art isn't just the architecture, and it isn't just the tour, it's the tour against the architecture, or the tour connected with it. That's the work you make. Every paragraph is devoted to that.

I: Ralph Ellison, in *Shadow and Act*, claims that putting a premium on method—art for art's sake—means accepting technological values, that the thing that counts is the way it's done, the means is the end, the method is all. How do you answer such a charge?

G: It seems to me that he is making a distinction that does not exist in art, although it does in other areas. People like Ellison (who has been crippled by his environment) think of writing as a situation in which you are using language to *do* something—so you've got a means-end relationship already. They think of technique quite wrongly as a means to an end. The distinction doesn't hold, it's the wrong way of viewing the whole matter. In art, the means is the end.

I: I've read some criticism, Stanley, in which it is strongly suggested that Feldman, the bad man, and Push, the bully, are actually good men, morally superior to their apparently good antagonists.

E: Energy is what counts. It is what is on the good side of the ledger for Feldman and for Push. Whoever has the better rhetoric is the better man, and since Feldman by and large tends to have the better rhetoric, he is as far as I'm concerned the more sympathetic character. And to the extent that Push has better rhetoric than John Williams, he is the more sympathetic character. But in moral terms I don't care whether these people are good or bad. What draws me is rhetoric, and the need for resistance, and of course the ability to do that.

I: Writers are sometimes designated either short story writers or novelists. Do you find any one fictional form more congenial than another?

E: I am criticized for what critics call the episodic in my work, and after a while I begin to believe them, believe I'm as bad as they say I am. So I begin to look to pure plot-line rather than to what my instinct is, and essentially my instinct is a short story instinct—

G: I disagree with that.

E: —although my novels are *better* than my short stories. I tend to admire what I cannot do, or maybe what I will not do. I rather believe it's that which I cannot do: to write within a sort of Agatha Christie *Mousetrap* structure, that is, from the end to the beginning, Mission-Impossibleville. But, to answer your question, the novella is certainly not my form more than the novel. It is my form more than the short story, which is not my form.

G: I would agree with you. Stanley has done some good short stories, but

that's not where he has done the things that have impressed me most. This whole point of episodes and episodic is absurd. Because you take somebody who is fundamentally a short story writer, like Powers, now he wrote a very fine novel, but that novel does have, I think, the signs of the short story writer making his closed fist, chapter by chapter. The episode has an open kind of feel, by definition; it's a bubble on a large balloon.

E: Or a bead on a string.

G: Okay. Stanley is episodic in the sense that he sets up certain situations in which he explores a certain thing, but almost every situation is metaphorically constructed, and then these metaphors are coordinated within the whole scheme of metaphors. When I go out and lecture and talk about Stanley's work, as I frequently do, I make a sharp distinction between those people who think Stanley's fundamentally a short story writer and those people who don't think he is. Because I *don't* think so; I think Stanley is fundamentally a novelist.

E: So do I.

G: And I think *I* am fundamentally a short story writer.

E: Really! That's an *amazing* statement.

G: No, I find there's a certain breath that one takes, and *Omensetter's Luck* is a series of pants. My natural length, I've discovered, runs about forty pages.

E: Is that why you do essays?

G: Well, yes, only my natural length in an essay is longer than is commercially feasible. It's a little shorter than a story would be: it runs twenty-five, thirty pages, whereas the story runs forty, forty-five, say, roughly. The short story, novella, whatever you want to call it, that's the breath that I tend to take. So if I have a longer piece to do, it tends naturally to fall into forty-page lengths. And these lengths tend to close. I find that it's hard for me to open up these lengths to a larger scheme, and that shorter things than that are very confining, very hard for me to work with. I don't know why that is the case, but I do think that most writers tend to have a kind of breath.

I: Do you see yourselves in a tradition when you're working? Any responsibility to the genre you're working with?

E: If you're asking if there's some kind of nobility in writing, then sure. However, I feel rather unworthy. This isn't false modesty: when I was a graduate student at Illinois I got my M.A. and then hung around for the Ph.D. because I figured there was nothing else I could do, even though I knew what I wanted to do—I wanted to be a writer. I had a course from Randall Jarrell—he was a great writing teacher, perhaps the best teacher of anything I've ever had. Jarrell gave me an A in the class, and I remember going up to him after the course was over, and I said, "Mr. Jarrell, do you think, you know, that I'll ever publish a story?" And he looked at me, and

he said, "I dunno." Well, I didn't know either, and when I started to publish, it astonished me that anyone wanted to print my stuff. It still astonishes me. I regard myself as very lucky. But I don't see myself in a tradition, and the responsibility I feel is to myself.

G: I don't see myself working in a tradition, because I don't feel there is much left of that. I would like to be in company with certain people, but they don't make what anybody would call a tradition because they belong in such widely different camps, and genres, too. My work is almost all anti-genre; I'm always exploring and moving against it. Everything I've done, including the thing I'm working on now, an essay, is that way, breaking down in a sense the divisions that used to exist between essays, stories, etc. So I don't have any fidelity to genre at all. But I certainly do have a sense of the others.

I: Kinship?

G: Kinship, yeah.

I: Rivalry?

G: No, well, the people I like I never feel rivalry for; it's not that kind of Hemingway "Who's champ?" crap. It's not that kind of competition, it's competition of a different sort altogether. I have a very strong sense of people, of the ghosts of the great. They matter a great deal to me, and I suppose that's one of the reasons why I write about writing as much as I do.

E: That's only because you regard yourself as one of the greats, you see, and I don't.

G: No, no, no. I want to be, of course, but it's also a part of my belief in the continuity, the contemporaneousness of language. When you talk about tradition you think of things in the past, and my feeling is that the writers that really matter to me are, their texts are, just as contemporary as the text I'm pecking out on the typewriter. It's the constant realization that they did *this*, and look what you're doing, you idiot. So that usually means that I go slower, do less, because you can't keep Rilke company every day, as I do, without feeling . . . it's a dismaying experience.

I: Are there writers you don't read while working?

E: I don't like to read Saul Bellow while I'm working.

G: There are a whole lot of people I don't read while I'm working—Faulkner's one, Joyce is another, James—anybody with a strong verbal music. I pick that up quicker than anything else, and respond to it quicker, and it can really ruin you, because you're in a passage where you're trying to develop a rhythmic pattern, and all of a sudden, in your head you're singing Faulkner or James or something. To establish your own music—when you do that you're really great. Handel has a style and everything's there; James has a style. When I want to define a voice—and I'm always trying to do that, and I think Stanley is, too—what defines the voice is not content or even words necessarily but a particular speech rhythm, and everything else



comes out of that. And when the voice hasn't got that rhythm going the writing is bad, it's just not generating. That really gave me a hard time with the Freud essays that I just finished. That's why I'm so anti-genre. To write an essay on Freud, and talk about symbolization of language in a particular kind of theory, and do it as if you were writing a story—it's murder. I've never succeeded, but I keep thinking it might be possible.

E: What's this essay that you're doing now?

G: Oh, it's a book which will be about eighty pages, I guess, called *On Being Blue*. It's about the word blue, as sexuality, melancholy, perception—that is, the color blue—and the imagination. The initial impetus is about the difficulty of writing about sexuality and the nature of blue language, but it's basically about the imagination.

E: How did you get the idea?

G: Well, I was asked once to do a lecture on sex and pornography and I thought, "Okay, I'll title it 'On Being Blue'"—and the title and the word were what interested me, not the subject. Trying to define a voice.

E: Well then it really makes no difference to you, since the voice can be there in your blue monograph, whether you're writing fiction or essays.

G: No, I've always been interested in writing as writing. My interest in the various forms is dominated by an interest in style as such. But I am also very much interested in the interaction of genre, in types and forms and things of that sort. That's why I've done one type of thing once, so far; I've been working on the other novel, *The Tunnel*, for a long time, but I haven't got it finished. One novel, one book of short stories, one collection of essays, this blue thing, children's stories called *Nail Soup*—

E: Can a child read *Nail Soup*?

G: No: better not. And a play called *The Cost of Everything*. The thing is, too, that I've always had a European dream about writing. The man of letters is a European thing, and it's a lovely thing.

E: Are you saying then that all of the things you've done are created equal? You wouldn't rather write a novel than . . .?

G: It's not a matter of writing a novel. It's easier, when you're writing a novel or short story, to let the language take over, do what you want it to do. In an essay or review it's a lot harder and more interesting, because it hasn't been done as much, writing something that's going to have its own form and so forth. I get intrigued with puzzles of that sort, unfortunately, because the journalistic occasions aren't worth the performance. It's like singing in a barrel. But, as I said before, I don't think of myself as a novelist. And if I end up ever being known as anything, it isn't so important to me that I be known as a novelist—I'll never be known as that—or a short story writer, but as a stylist. That's a precious kind of category, a lesser kind of thing, I suppose, but it is my interest. I want to be in any format that will let me play with language the way I want to. The traditional novel

doesn't really satisfy me for that reason. Nothing does. I just want to get in the words and go. But the novel says all the time, where's the story, who are the people? And in an essay people want a train of thought instead of a train of plot. It doesn't make any difference where I am—they want one thing and I want music.

I: I take it you don't feel the same way.

E: No. I regard myself as a man who writes novels, who writes fiction. Yet I used to be asked by *Esquire* magazine to do essays, forays into the world—a world I'm usually not in the least interested in—and I always accepted. I told myself I accepted because they paid well, or for the exposure, but they don't really pay well, and the exposure was never very significant. Maybe I agreed because it gave a change of pace to my life—they sent me to Detroit, to Chicago, once to Paris. But I think the real reason was an interview with Picasso I saw years ago in *The Paris Review*. I was impressed with the man's extraordinary energy. He was a man who would not say no to anything that he was asked to do. I don't know that anybody ever asked him to do a motion picture, but if somebody had he would have said, okay, I'll do a motion picture. If somebody had asked him to do a tapestry, okay, I'll do a tapestry. If somebody asked him to paint figures on piano keys, okay, I'll paint figures on piano keys. He said *yes* to absolutely everything. Not to please the people who asked him, you know, but almost in a John Wayne way. "A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do."

G: "Gimme the brush and them piano keys."

E: So I told Joan, "By God I am never going to turn down an assignment. I'm *never* going to turn down an assignment." Well, things get in the way and one does turn down assignments. Yet every time I've undertaken such a piece I've failed: I do it very badly because my ego has always got to take a back seat to the subject matter. Once *Esquire* asked me to do a piece on the Beatles and it was, if I may say so, a wonderful piece of writing, but it had very little to do with the Beatles, and because of that *Esquire* rejected it. So having learned that lesson, now when *Esquire* makes a request—and really this is rather academic because they have rather forgotten about me (they're holding a piece now which they commissioned, paid for, and will never run)—and I foolishly say yes, I've got to take that back seat, and it's "Smith thinks that," and "According to Smith." Well, who gives a shit about those jerrymandered non-issues? In fiction you don't have to do that—you can do just about anything you want. You're all the personalities, all the ideas: fiction is a one-man band.

I: You talk about subordinating the ego to the essay subject—isn't that also true in fiction?

G: When Stanley talks about his ego, he's not talking about his personal ego; he's talking about the demands of writing, which say, "Seize the possibilities in the thing you want to go with," against the subject matter, which

says, "Be trivial, be uninteresting, go pedestrianly on and hack." And then there are the readers, who say, "I want to know about the Beatles, I don't want to know about Stanley Elkin." And the editor, who says, "This guy's trying to put himself ahead of the subject—he's writing about himself." He's not writing about himself—he's creating. But they think he shouldn't be creating, he should be wasting his language talking about the subject, the Beatles. That's what they want, for him to forget the language.

E: I did a piece—it wasn't a very good piece—for *Esquire* on Jean Louis Trintignant, the actor. *Esquire* rejected it, saying, "Who are you to satirize the New Journalism?" I wasn't satirizing the New Journalism. Then *Oui*, a girlie magazine, took it and ripped it to shreds before they published it. It was nicer before it was cut. What I wanted to describe in that thing was Paris—I took a lot of notes and made up a lot of metaphors about the way Paris looked and smelled—and that's what they sliced out. So I put it in "The Bailbondsman" and called it Cincinnati.

I: One of the things that I see in your work, Bill, is an interest in the relation of aesthetic values and ethical values, and I don't know if I'm misreading, distorting, or if it's there.

G: Well, I think it's there, because I have *very* strong feelings about the independence of these two values, I guess you'd put it, in general. And I'm very much opposed to the tendency to impute *traditional* moral values—values, yes, but traditional *moral* values, things that are dubbed moral, no—to literature. Aesthetic stances and ethical stances seem to me quite different ones—about as different as football players at the line of scrimmage and ballet dancers. There are just different kinds of proficiency involved. The two things are so different that their mixture, or the importation of one into the sphere of the other, strikes me as, again, *ethically* very very very bad. That's one reason I admire Henry James; he explored better than anybody, I think, what happens when you put aesthetic qualities as ethical ones. When you start reading literature ethically it leads to censorship and much worse.

I: It seems that you often have characters who relate to others through metaphors, so that in a sense they are confusing the two, or mixing the two.

G: Yes, right. One of the things that I attribute to Furber is a general inability to contact people except through language. Now in a writer, as a writer, that's fine; in a writer as person it's a catastrophe. And I think one of the reasons why a lot of writers worry about this kind of problem is that it's a personal issue as well as a general kind of thing.

I: Like Hawthorne.

G: Oh, I think it goes right back, and you could find it, though phrased differently, in literature from the beginning. Because it's a problem of the relationship and status of symbols with respect to their referents, and what is now in the forefront of our consciousness—as it was in the past, though

not so much so—is, very prudently, the problem of which is more interesting, the symbols or the things that are referred to? Now for the artist I think the symbol, or the medium—paint, music, whatever—is much more interesting, much more important than the things to which it refers, and to the degree that the things to which it refers get in the way, they better be cut off.

E: Speaking of things, in England I went to the Victoria and Albert Museum with my kids, and we went into the tooth room, and all of a sudden I was absolutely overwhelmed by those goddamned teeth and I knew that I had to use them someplace, somehow, and though they had really nothing to do with the story—serendipity!—I made them the story. I'm talking about the bailbondsman and his tooth ardor. I swear to God, the tooth fairy gave them to me.

G: That's a case, though, Stanley, where the things didn't overwhelm, because all that they did, which is *everything*, was to suggest language to you.

E: Right!

G: Ah, but that's the function of things for an artist. The world, experience—its value is that it suggests words, and the words are what count.

E: Okay, but when someone is seldom touched by the goddamned world—I mean, I haven't been touched by the world, I don't think, *since*.

G: You don't need to be, you've got a store of *real* reality, and that's the language. I think there's a good case for the superior reality of language and symbol systems to things in general anyway, but I think it's generally retranslated by the reader as: "Gee, didn't Elkin see a lot in that room."

E: NO: It's retranslated as—as Joe Fox, my ex-editor, said—"Cut out all this shit about teeth."

G: Oh Christ, you should have got rid of him years ago! *I want to say that*. I think this is a case, though, in which anybody in the audience listening to you read it, or anybody reading the book, is not going to have those damn bones in his experience. He's going to have your words. And if you concentrated on the bones, it would be boring. I mean, it might be interesting to see the bones, but, hell, can you imagine some guy writing about bones?

E: Teeth! Not bones, teeth.

G: Teeth. Bare bones. And so all this kind of thing is translated into words, and that's what the experience of seeing this gave you, the stimulus for the words. And what counts is the words. They always count. That's all that counts.

E: Not everybody knows that, though.

G: Hardly anybody knows that, except other writers. But this easily becomes social snobbery. Sub-snobbery, really. The kind of thing in which one says—and it's a grand statement, lovely to make—X (or whatever the subject is) doesn't interest Gertrude Stein (which she used to say)—and it might

have been the Lisbon earthquake, it could have been anything. Sid Wells and some of the Bloomsbury group very frequently tended to look at the world—and I do, and I think most people do at moments—in terms of what *interest* it has, as a pageant, as a drama, as a literary thing, or just as anecdote or as gossip or as whatever will interest the kind of mind you have to take to it. And some things of immense moment and importance may not have any interest!

E: To speak of Roth again, he covers his tracks in *My Life as a Man* by saying, *all* the time, that I was so narcissistically involved with myself, A was happening, and B was happening, and A and B happened to be the killing of Kennedy and the Viet Nam War, and at the same time that the world is being pageant, and has all this dramatic quality, here am I, living this life out, enduring this marriage that I'm enduring though the world will little note nor long remember, and so on and so forth. And he plays one off against the other very very successfully.

G: I prefer words to anything, yet to treat people in terms of symbol systems *only* is a fundamental mistake. I think that is the basic insight of Kantian ethics, that you cannot do that. And also aesthetics, for that matter. For example, when I'm in the supermarket and I observe something funny, somebody breaking a jar of pickles, I may lift it out as a little scene in a very bad play to tell later as an anecdote. Yet even mere anecdote means to carve out and make a little playlet and ignore the reality of people. You don't worry about how you formulate your account of the anecdote, yet the ontological leap is unthinkable. I can remember occasions—possibly because one is this way—when in the midst of some really important emotional thing, a quarrel or something, bing! a phrase! and all I carry away from it will be that. Even if I don't use it. Somehow art is a magical business. Now I don't regard that as a particularly morally advantageous attitude. But it means somebody who is constantly in business. And I think that people who try to understand writers think that they're busy *observing* things, you know, to get *material*. Well, that's in a way true, but the material they're getting is the words that appear. And then what you get is a constant competition between your words and the event. If you decided for some reason to transform pickle-jar-breaking into something, your account would now be competing against the actual event, and if your account is any good, then the breaking of that jar of pickles will be transformed in your language, and will have real significance.

E: Right. When I was writing *A Bad Man*, about a hundred pages into the manuscript, I decided that I had best get me to a prison. I wanted to check a real prison against my prison in *A Bad Man*, and I was able to get into Walpole State Penitentiary in Massachusetts. At the end of the day, I was absolutely delighted: it couldn't have been a better experience, because

my prison of the imagination was so much better than their real prison.

G: That's the way it works, yeah.

E: On the other hand, look at the trouble Coover's in. I mean Watergate fucked him up: he's doing this novel on the Rosenbergs, in which Nixon is a character, and Nixon just outplayed him, in terms of his hand. Coover wouldn't dare to imagine the kinds of things that Nixon dared to *do*.

G: It's very similar to writing something in which the characters are going to be modeled on somebody. Now, if you happen to have the kind of line on nature that Virginia Woolf did—she'd lie about her friends in real life, make up stories about them.

E: That's okay.

G: Yeah, well, not in real life it's not—

E: Sure it is. Don't be so prissy.

G: —but in terms of fiction, yes. When she modeled on a person, she was just jumping off from, and she wasn't held back by the reality and facts of the person. But many people are. So if you start building and modeling on somebody, any real situation, and if you aren't an inherent liar, like Woolf or Ford Madox Ford, then you're going to be in trouble, because you're going to be held back by the details. And when you choose some fairly recent event to write about, like the Rosenberg case, you're in real trouble, because events are going to swim out and swamp you. You've got to move in a direction which will give your medium the supremacy.

E: Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* is a jolly good book on the Rosenbergs because it hasn't got a goddamn thing to do with them. He decided, you know, that the thing was all over and done with and he was going to go from there, and he wrote a good book. As a matter of fact, the proof of that particular pudding is that he's being sued now by the Rosenberg kids who are saying, "It wasn't like that at all! It wasn't like that at all!" Well, terrific it wasn't like that at all, but it is a good piece of fiction.

I: In a book called *The Fabulators* Robert Scholes says that because of the way movies can represent reality, fiction must abandon realism and "rely more on the power of words to stimulate the imagination."

E: Yeah, sure, but it has nothing to do with motion pictures.

G: No. Motion pictures are irrelevant. There are writers who *think* motion pictures are relevant, but they're not.

E: I mean, having written a motion picture, I realize what a disastrous dead-end that form happens to be. Motion pictures are *not* important because they get attenuated down to absolute nothing. I was given a free hand on an assignment by a man named Michael Ritchie from Columbia Pictures, which had owned the rights—can you imagine this?—owned the *rights* to Robert Capa's *life*, for something like seven years. They'd gone through three scripts, count 'em, three, and they finally came down to me. And Michael

said, "Look, you know these other pictures have been failures because they tended to be about how Robert Capa, the photographer of World War II, and the Spanish Civil War, and the Sino-Japanese War, and the French Vietnamese War, finally got to play the Palace." He was right, that *was* what was wrong with those scripts. And he had a notion: let's introduce Hemingway—Capa did in fact know Hemingway during the Spanish Civil War—and make the most of that relationship. Well, I'll tell you about that relationship, that relationship subsisted in Capa saying, "Hello, Mr. Hemingway," and Hemingway saying, "Hiya, Bob, how're they hanging?" And from there we simply made up stuff. Okay. Given that kind of license, I invented what I thought was a pretty good motion picture. One of your better five-hour motion pictures. And Ritchie said, "Well, now, this is a terrific script, Stanley, I mean we really are dealing here with a pure aesthetic, but . . . You know, five hours is a touch impractical for a motion picture, and we've got to cut it." He did, he cut it, he cut it, and cut it, until we were right back at square one, how Capa got to play Broadway.

G: But I wonder how much, Stanley, that's a problem of the industry, and the way movies as a mass entertainment—

E: It is! I think the medium is ultimately determined upon how long the human being can go without peeing.

G: That has the ring of truth.

E: If we could find a drug to eliminate peeing—eliminate eliminating—then we could make a motion picture that was high art, but, you know, they *do* have to go out and get their popcorn, they *do* have to relieve themselves.

G: The trouble is, you see, that coming to watch a movie and coming to read a book are completely different experiences. You know, if you had as little distraction reading a book as you have watching a movie, and if you had the same kind of awful passivity, not bothering to figure out the images and the words as they are coming at you—take two hours, hell, a lot could be done. But the movie is a fundamentally slow medium for developing things. Imagine a movie trying to give you the impact of a sonnet—how long would it take? It's a very slow medium; in fact, it's so slow, that as you were saying, pee-length is a good measure, because to give the impact of an ordinary short story, a movie would have to run about eight days.

E: Right. The writer's medium is the page, whereas the movie-writer's medium is that goddamned screen. Of course nothing is so flattering as the notion of all those people, all together, all at once, watching that particular image flicker. *What* an ego trip that must be! But, there's so much dilution between the sip and the lip that it ultimately turns out to have the solidity and roughage capability of cotton candy.

G: I think the form might be possible, but not the system in which the forms operate.

E: I agree.

G: And nobody understands the form, no one thinks about it, and no one understands what he's *doing* as a consequence. They're dependent, for example, on literature too much.

E: A guy named Larry Marcus called me up about eighteen months ago and said that he had written *Petulia*, with Julie Christie and George C. Scott, which I sort of liked as a film, and that he had just read "The Bailbondsman" and wanted to do it as a film. I said, "Terrific, get in touch with my agent, pay me money, do it." So often these things just get abandoned or shelved for the duration, but this time he did get in touch with my agent, and a contract was arranged. It turned out, once I actually signed it, that Warner Bros. money was behind it all, and not just the money of Larry-\$500-Marcus. Anyway, he called me up later when I was teaching at Iowa, and he said, "Stanley, the thing I can't lick is the love interest," and I said, "What love interest? There's no love interest in "The Bailbondsman."

G: That's it, Stanley, the one he can't lick!

E: And when he called me up originally he kept telling me, "We *mustn't dilute this for a minute*. We have to stick *word for word*." I can't understand it. You see, it seems to me that "The Bailbondsman" *could be* filmed word for word. Every image and every piece of dialogue could be up there on the screen, and there wouldn't have to be any love interest, and it could be a fairly good movie. But maybe these guys know better than I, for it turns out "The Bailbondsman" actually might be made into a film—the script is written—and Jack Lemmon is supposed to play Alexander Main. Marcus called me up the other day and said, "Now when you see this I hope you're not going to be mad at me, because I've written a love story." So he licked the love interest after all. Marsha Mason is the Gypsy Lady. There isn't any "Gypsy Lady" in the story. I asked if he had used *any* of the language of Main's speeches, and he said, "Well, to tell you the truth, very little." In order to make it into a movie he felt he had to run around the language, to *overcome* the language.

I: According to your essays as I understand them, realistic writing is essentially a verbal construct whether it purports to be or not.

G: That's right. *Whatever* it purports to be. *Whatever* it says, too.

I: So that in a sense, what we call realistic fiction is not dead; can it then do certain things that movies can't?

E: No. No, because movies have the blessing of color and music and air-conditioning and seats that go bump in the night. . . . Probably the happiest Joan and I have ever been in our married life—I'm gonna try not to cry over this—was one time outside Youngstown, Ohio, when we went to see a movie called *The April Fools*. We held hands and listened to all that music, and watched Jack Lemmon and his girl-friend actress carry on, overcome in



this brand new theater in this marvey new shopping mall in this gorgeous suburb of Youngstown, Ohio, and I turned to Joan and said, "What, what, what, in the history of civilization, could be better than what we, you and me, baby, are doing right now, with enough money to buy the candy and the time to watch this stuff?" And Joan said, "Nothing, darling, nothing." And there we were, all alone, outside Youngstown; it's absurd! Do you know what I'm talking about?

G: Yeah.

E: *Nothing* is better, nothing! To hell with words and language and art and all that stuff. I mean the flesh overcomes you every time.

I: Then what about drama?

G: I don't know much about drama, how it goes. My writing is so undramatic anyway. I've never had that passion for the theater; I don't go much, and I don't usually like most plays. Those I do like I could listen to on records—sure, a linguistic event again. There are exceptions, of course, but in general I find the movement of actors around the stage absurd. I can't help asking, "What are they doing up there, emoting and so forth?" Shakespeare manages great scenes by giving everybody great speeches, and the actors, at their best, get out of the way and let the words do their job.

E: I intend, after *The Franchiser*, to write a play sometime in which there will be several characters, and they will speak nothing but monologues. Now this may be very boring, it may be the square root of closet drama, but it's the kind of play I'd like to see. Indeed, the closer theater approaches monologue, the more exciting it is to me. Yes. Either that or a play where they bus in Hadassah ladies from Paramus, New Jersey, for Wednesday matinees and someone says, "Get your orange drink, get your orange drink here," in the lobby during intermission.

G: Well, I think theater's come, in a certain sense, from certain practitioners at least, full circle. Early Greek drama was that way. It could only have one actor at a time anyway, because that was the poet himself, and he would simply put on another mask or something. *Prometheus*, for example, is one big monologue after another. It took them a long time to face the characters around to talk to one another. Basically Beckett's drama is the breakdown of exactly that, facing the characters back around into monologues—they're all talking to themselves. And part of the effect comes from the characters turning away from that which was once turned in. I've finished a play, and there's no acting in it: it's a play for readers, for voices, and in order to circumvent actors, who are a terrible nuisance, I'm having the characters, the actors on the stage, revolve through the parts, and one particular part—the teacher (it takes place in a classroom)—will be spoken by all the actors in turn. I'm working on chanting, on making a sentence, for example, with gaps in it. If you think of a sentence as a series of holes, then you can have various people saying different things at the same time, in sequence,

so that it comes out as a continuous sentence said by different voices at once.

E: Choral effect? "Camera Three"?

G: Some of the things will be choral, simultaneous speech, but there are also situations in which every person is saying his own speech at the same time, only staggered. You hear one voice at a time, but they're put together so that it sounds like a single, continuous sentence said by different people following their own thoughts. It takes a good deal of reading skill and timing, but all of these things are basically undramatic in what we would call the theater of the nineteenth century. It's much closer to theatrical performances which weren't stage performances, in which there wasn't even a vision of stage. Early Greek rhapsodes were recitations, and the Greek stage is basically a reciter's stage. Greek theater was basically language, and Shakespearean theater, I think, was still basically language, but by the time you get to Ibsen it's not anymore, because Ibsen wasn't a very good writer. He had to have an actor, things had to happen on the stage—ridiculous things—and he had to have imported ideas, scandalous subjects and that sort of thing. There's just no way to get the interest in language in the theater back except by wild devices of some sort, as Beckett does.

E: Or you can go the other way and eliminate language altogether.

G: Then theater becomes strictly a visual spectacle, happening, whatever you want to call it. That's why the translation of novels and plays into movies just leaves me baffled. The only thing they can translate into movies is spectacle stuff; when they try to translate language, it doesn't work at all.

I: Why does language get in the way of the interplay between characters? You seem to set up an opposition.

G: It is a basic opposition—either you're creating speeches or you're trying to render people. People don't make speeches, generally. What your speech does—if you're trying, say, a Shakespearean speech—is to establish a creature who would have spoken this, though there's no such thing in the world.

E: Hamlet and Lear are language machines.

G: As soon as you start thinking, gee, I want to make a person, you have to start taking things into account like, "Would he say this?" The other way, he becomes the person who knows the word because he *spoke* the word. It completely inhibits you if suddenly you say, "But people wouldn't speak this way." Of course they wouldn't—nobody ever spoke this way.

I: Stanley, could you explain what you meant in your preface to *Stories from the Sixties* when you said that the short story is based upon situation and that the novel is based upon character?

E: The short story is about *acute* character, and a novel is about *chronic* character. A short story is like a myocardial infarction: you live or you die. A novel, on the other hand, you live, or you live and you live, or you die and die. The character's always the same, the situations change. Most good

novels don't depend upon a crisis situation, whereas the short story is *about* a crisis. Except in something like "In the Heart of the Heart of the Country," where there is no particular crisis suggested.

I: There's a tonal crisis.

E: There's a tonal crisis, yes, but it's more like a novel than a short story because it is about a chronic character, a character who would behave the same way every time out, no matter what the situation.

I: Do you agree with that?

G: I find that this is not my arena of discourse, because you're talking about character and situations and things of this sort, which isn't the way I would talk about it. The difference between a short story and novel is very difficult, and really an important kind of question to deal with. I don't know the answer to this, exactly, but I think what's involved is the crucial difference, in the literary sense, between a sentence and a paragraph. I want to junk all of this situation, character stuff. I think it's got nothing to do with it.

E: No, no, that's baloney. The man is wrong.

G: No, I just don't want to talk in those terms. I think that the distinction, for example, between a short story and a novel has got to do with the kind of metaphor that you're trying to construct.

E: If I were back at *Accent*, and we had to throw out one or two stories you sent in, I would throw out Tott, and I would throw out Pimber, and print the rest, because those clearly are not short stories, they are not ends unto themselves.

G: Yes.

E: They are dependent upon B and C and D. A short story isn't.

G: No, I agree, but it's like a large marble and a small marble: the small marble has the sense of being a whole because it's round, and the large one does too; it's a comparative thing. The question is whether it is round, so that you feel it's complete. And with fiction the question is, why is it that there are three separate categories—novel, novella, short story? I think they developed entirely in terms of size. The question is then, what does the mere size, as a characteristic, possess to dictate the quality and whole approach and so forth that the forms require? I think it does, I mean, one *feels* it, you know, but to hunt for the answer is very difficult. *Why* a short story, what distinguishes it? Because it's *short*: that's a stupid thing, short. But there's an *enormous* difference in technique, in quality, in approach and so forth from the novel. And yet very little has been done with it, partly because criticism's been on the wrong track. I think that the difference should be defined in terms of the way in which one defines complete symbol systems, representational—no, not representational—well, what in effect become mappings, metaphorical structures, and the development of metaphorical structures, and how rapidly you can develop a particular image,

for example, to the point of a Schoenberg “etcetera.” You want all of them to be closed and round, and have the form—total. But they’re quite different. In the very short story, the thing that Grace Paley tries to do, for instance, the thing that Borges carries off, I think, with frequent triumph in a space of four or five pages, there is an almost quantum difference from the ten-, twelve-, fifteen-page short story, let alone the novella or the novel. And I think those differences which are measured on the surface as page differences are fundamental. But the novel has come so few steps in the theoretical analysis that it’s about like identifying birds by the color of their plumage rather than the structure of their bodies.

E: Let us pooh-pooh: it comes down at last to, I feel, a matter of strength: how far A can fungo compared to B.

G: Yes, but the difference between a lyric and an epic—it wouldn’t be defined that way. It’s a problem of *why* a short fiction, a short poem, a short piece of music, a miniature painting, as opposed to a large painting; there are parallels: what are the differences? Now I think we have a lot better grasp, not entirely good, but a lot better grasp in poetry than we do in fiction. And one of the reasons is that we haven’t considered poetry in the same way, for a long time, as we still consider fiction. We consider poetry as an independent art, increasingly. Fiction has been a dependent art.

E: You said at one time that you felt that poetry is the most important of the literary arts.

G: Yes. I still do.

E: How come you don’t write poems?

G: Why, I can’t. Very simple. If I could write poetry I would. I wish—you know, poetry is what counts.

E: Gee, I don’t think that at all. There aren’t any people in poetry.

G: *Who cares about people!* You see, Stanley, you’re sinking back into the same kind of thing—

E: No I’m not. There just ain’t no people in poetry, nobody’s home. It seems to me that a poem is a—

G: A pure conceptual system.

E: —right—a conceit that occurs in a vacuum.

G: In a vacuum?

E: Yeah. Without the hard edge of personality.

G: Yeah, but that’s the point, you see.

E: I want balloons growing over all the heads.

G: That brings us to a fundamental difference, though, and it makes me an extremist. It’s the difference between what I would like for fiction and what fiction has been stuck with through its history, and has had to labor against, which is exactly this impurity. Poetry has achieved its purity, over a long period of time, and it had the same kinds of difficulties fiction has had. And ultimately the aim of fiction is to arrive at a form that is *fictional*,

and not borrowed from anything else. Fiction has always borrowed its forms from other forms.

E: Fiction has borrowed its *ideas* from other forms.

G: It has borrowed *everything*. It borrows its forms by copying fake lives—it writes autobiographies, it writes biography, history, journals, letters, and so forth. It has been very difficult for it to come up with a form that wasn't there ahead: notebooks, memoirs, name it. Now it has *moved* those things in the direction of its own thing, but while thumping constantly for a form that was its own. The ode does not owe its form to anything used in engineering handbooks.

E: So what difference does it make if fiction is simply a kind of residue of "the best which has been thought and said?" I mean, that doesn't bother me.

G: But it shouldn't be a residue.

E: But it's because of the very terms by which you've limited it that it becomes a residue.

I: Let me get this straight: Bill, you're saying that fiction is not independent.

G: It hasn't been.

I: Hasn't been. Okay. And you, Stanley, are saying that that's not true, that it has adopted *ideas* from other genres.

E: It doesn't adopt them—it gets them late. Fiction is not ever in the vanguard. I mean the fiction writer, like the good wife, is always the last to know.

G: Yes, traditionally, I would agree.

I: When Bill said that fiction is dependent in a way that poetry is not, I thought you said no, it depends upon other things for ideas, but not for—

E: All I meant was that fiction occurs within a context, and poetry, it seems to me, doesn't.

G: I think historically that is the case, certainly; and possibly that may be true of every medium. It depends upon how important they are in a social situation, and the more important they are, the longer they're going to remain impure. Now, that doesn't mean they won't be viable, marvelous, or whatever, but the amount of importation of other kinds of values will be greater. Nothing wrong with that, but it makes it difficult to identify what is essentially theirs—what really constitutes their aesthetic quality. And it's taken painting, it's taken music, it's taken poetry a long time, but I think progressively they have become increasingly—

E: Aryan? Pure? Haven't they less to deal with?

G: —irrelevant, in a certain sense, to life.

E: *Okay*, that's what I was saying.

G: Yes, but that is what it is to be an art!

E: All right. But to the extent that they can remain pure, to that extent

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-