

Fiction and the Figures of Life

Essays by

William H. Gass

DAVID R. GODINE

Publisher • Boston

Acknowledgment is gratefully made to the following publications which first printed these essays, some in slightly different form:

New American Review, # 7—"The Concept of Character in Fiction"

New American Review, # 10—"In Terms of the Toenail: Fiction and the Figures of Life"

The New York Review of Books—"The Leading Edge of the Trash Phenomenon"; "Mirror, Mirror"; "Imaginary Borges"; "In the Cage"; "Cock-a-doodle-doo"; "From Some Ashes No Bird Rises"; "The Evil Demiurge"; "The Stylization of Desire"

The New York Times—Vol. 119, No. 40811 "Pricksongs and Descants"

The Philosophical Review—"The Case of the Obliging Stranger"

Book Week Magazine, *The Chicago Sun-Times*—"Russell's Memoirs"; "A Spirit in Search of Itself"

The New Republic—"A Memory of a Master"; "The Artist and Society"

The Nation—"The Medium of Fiction"; "The Bingo Game at the Foot of the Cross"

The Philosopher-Critic—"Philosophy and the Forms of Fiction"

South Atlantic Quarterly—"The Imagination of an Insurrection"

Reprinted by permission of The Duke University Press.

Accent—"Gertrude Stein: Her Escape from Protective Language"; and "The High Brutality of Good Intentions"

Reprinted by permission of The University of Illinois Foundation.

Frontiers of American Culture—© 1968, Purdue Research Foundation "Even If, By All the Oxen in the World"

Reprinted by permission of the Purdue Research Foundations.

—"The Shut-In"

This is a NONPAREIL BOOK first published in 1979 by David R. Godine, Publisher, 300 Massachusetts Avenue, Boston, Massachusetts 02115

Copyright © 1958, 1962, 1966, 1967, 1968, 1969, 1970, 1971 by William H. Gass

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

LC 78-58453

ISBN 0-87923-254-4

Manufactured in the United States of America.

Third printing, April 1989

to
Lynn Nesbit
and
David Segal
for believing

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I WANT TO THANK THE EDITORS OF THE FOLLOWING PUBLICATIONS for permission to reprint the pieces collected in this book, although a number appear here in a somewhat different form: *The New York Review of Books* for “Cock-a-doodle-doo,” “The Leading Edge of the Trash Phenomenon,” “Mirror, Mirror,” “From Some Ashes No Bird Rises,” “The Evil Demiurge,” “In the Cage,” “The Stylization of Desire,” and “Imaginary Borges and His Books”; *Accent* for “The High Brutality of Good Intentions,” and “Gertrude Stein: Her Escape from Protective Language”; *The New American Review* for “The Concept of Character in Fiction,” and “In Terms of the Toenail: Fiction and the Figures of Life”; *Book Week* for “A Spirit in Search of Itself,” and “Russell’s Memoirs”; *The Nation* for “The Medium of Fiction,” and “The Bingo Game at the Foot of the Cross”; *The New Republic* for “A Memory of a Master,” and “The Artist and Society”; *The South Atlantic Quarterly* for “The Imagination of an Insurrection”; *The New York Times Book Review* for “Pricksongs & Descants”; the Southern Illinois University Press for “The Shut-In”; The Purdue University Press for “Even if, by All the Oxen

Acknowledgments

in the World”; *The Philosophical Review* for “The Case of the Obliging Stranger”; and Robert Scholes for “Philosophy and the Form of Fiction.”

PREFACE

IT IS EMBARRASSING TO RECALL THAT MOST OF PAUL VALÉRY'S prose pieces were replies to requests and invitations, just as attendance at a wedding is. The card is from a couple you scarcely know perhaps, yet you dress and go, a decision which seldom springs from the deepest sources. Whether his were prefaces, lectures, addresses, or reviews, whether they appeared in journals or gazettes, in periodicals as different as *Art et médecine* and *La Nouvelle Revue française*, he enjoyed the challenge of his limitations; length, topic, audience, appropriate tone: he allowed each a seat at the center of his method and his method's meditations, and brought his clear and graceful mind to every occasion. He created, in himself, opinions—often fragile, momentary blooms, often ones as tough and as continuous as ivy. He dared to write on his subjects as if the world had been silent; and because he was so widely reflective, because he looked upon the arbitrary as a gift to form, he turned the occasions completely to his account, and made from them some of his profoundest and most beautiful performances—the *Eupalinos*, for which no praise will suffice, "Poetry and Abstract Thought," or "Man and the Seashell"—shaping subtle, elusive lines of thought like the silvered paths of fish, and with

Preface

his calm, poetic style, robbing the reader of his breath.

The recollection is embarrassing because the reviews and essays gathered here are responses too—ideas ordered up as, in emergency, militia are. Though ill-equipped and ragged, the call comes, and they are sent out willy-nilly. Valéry's hands were so strong, he could hold his views lightly, offering his thought as he might offer feeling. Rarely was he cruel, defensive, or angry—never smart aleck. He spoke easily to widely separated minds—painters, dancers, doctors, poets, politicians, humanists, men of science—because he had their interests too, but none of their disunity. One of the more obvious characteristics of my essays, however, is the evidence of a struggle in them to find such a calm and confident single voice. Instead—strange spectacle—we observe an author trying to be both philosopher and critic by striving to be neither. Here is one who puts out his principles like flags, and then lowers the flags to half-mast; one whose views seem stretched like wet string between passion and detachment, refusal and commitment, tradition and departure. In another sense I see them as the work of a novelist insufficiently off duty.

If there is not, among these pieces, the promised community of the completed jigsaw, I have tried, with revisions and arrangements, to make it seem so. I don't believe I go back on my words very often, and I would suggest to any reader with the idleness and inclination to pursue it, that he will find shifts of emphasis, mainly, not basic alterations in ideas.

Ideas or themes? motifs? metaphors? I see that I circle around a good many without ever quite coming to grips, as though they all had cold hands. I notice, too, that some are regularly accompanied by a surge of feeling, while near others I find myself calm. Perhaps I am too suspicious of public speech, of the manufacture of opinions, the filling of

Preface

orders for views. I ought to doubt my own reasons for accepting these invitations to lecture or review, then. It may be that one's thought should be carried out in the same privacy as good poetry and fiction is, in full indifference to daily hoopla, at a distance from every audience, and apart from any causing occasion, for its own sake only, just as the purest philosophy; but possibly Valéry himself, recognizing as he did that poetry was composition, refinement, silence, that it was not outcry, not communication, felt the nag of that lack as a man of words might, felt the need to write about his trade the way Flaubert wrote of his; and that stirred by this—perhaps no nobler itch than any—said in reply to yet one more request: Dear sir, I shall be happy to lecture to your group on the day you suggest; I shall speak on the subject . . . well, I shall speak on any subject that you like.

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	<i>ix</i>
PREFACE	<i>xi</i>

PART ONE

Philosophy and the Form of Fiction	3
The Medium of Fiction	27
The Concept of Character in Fiction	34
In Terms of the Toenail: Fiction and the Figures of Life	55

PART TWO

Gertrude Stein: Her Escape from Protective Language	79
The Leading Edge of the Trash Phenomenon	97
Pricksongs & Descants	104
Mirror, Mirror	110
Imaginary Borges and His Books	120
The Bingo Game at the Foot of the Cross	134
The Shut-In	140

PART THREE

A Spirit in Search of Itself	157
In the Cage	164
The High Brutality of Good Intentions	177
The Stylization of Desire	191
Cock-a-doodle-doo	206
From Some Ashes No Bird Rises	212

PART FOUR

The Case of the Obliging Stranger	225
Russell's Memoirs	242
A Memory of a Master	247
The Evil Demiurge	253
The Imagination of an Insurrection	263
Even if, by All the Oxen in the World	268
The Artist and Society	276

PART ONE

PHILOSOPHY AND THE FORM OF FICTION

So much of philosophy is fiction. Dreams, doubts, fears, ambitions, ecstasies . . . if philosophy were a stream, they would stock it like fishes. Although fiction, in the manner of its making, is pure philosophy, no novelist has created a more dashing hero than the handsome Absolute, or conceived more dramatic extrications—the soul's escape from the body, for instance, or the will's from cause. And how thin and unlaced the forms of *Finnegans Wake* are beside any of the *Critiques*; how sunlit Joyce's darkness, how few his parallels, how loose his correspondences. With what emotion do we watch the flight of the Alone to the Alone, or discover that "*der Welt ist alles, was der Fall ist*," or read that in a state of nature the life of man is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." Which has written the greater *Of Human Bondage*, or brooded more musically upon life's miseries, or dwelled more lovingly upon the outlines of its own reflection? Is it not exhilarating to be told that the "desire and pursuit of

the whole is called love"? And if we wish to become critical we can observe that Descartes' recourse to a gland in the skull to account for our intercourse with ourselves is a simple failure of the imagination, and that for the philosophers, God is always in His machine, flying about on wires like Peter Pan.

Novelist and philosopher are both obsessed with language, and make themselves up out of concepts. Both, in a way, create worlds. Worlds? But the worlds of the novelist, I hear you say, do not exist. Indeed. As for that—they exist more often than the philosophers'. Then, too—how seldom does it seem to matter. Who honestly cares? They are divine games. Both play at gods as others play at bowls; for there is frequently more reality in fairy tales than in these magical constructions of the mind, works equally of thought and energy and will, which raise up into sense and feeling, as to life, acts of pure abstraction, passes logical, and intuitions both securely empty and as fitted for passage as time.

Games—yet different games. Fiction and philosophy often make most acrimonious companions. To be so close in blood, so brotherly and like in body, can inspire a subtle hate; for their rivalry is sometimes less than open in its damage. They wound with advice. They smother with love. And they impersonate one another. Then, while in the other's guise and gait and oratory, while their brother's smiling ape and double, they do his suicide. Each expires in a welter of its own surprise.

Philosophers multiply our general nouns and verbs; they give fresh sense to stale terms; "man" and "nature" are their characters; while novelists toil at filling in the blanks in proper names and at creating other singular affairs. A novelist may pin a rose to its stem as you might paper a tail to its donkey, the rose may blush at his command, but the philosopher can

Philosophy and the Form of Fiction

elevate that reddening from an act of simple verbal predication to an angel-like ingression, ennobling it among Beings. The soul, we must remember, is the philosopher's invention, as thrilling a creation as, for instance, Madame Bovary. So I really should point out, though I shall say little more about it, that fiction is far more important to philosophy than the other way round. However, the novelist can learn more from the philosopher, who has been lying longer; for novelizing is a comparatively new, unpolished thing. Though philosophers have written the deeper poetry, traditionally philosophy has drawn to it the inartistic and the inarticulate, those of too mechanical a mind to move theirs smoothly, those too serious to see, and too fanatical to feel. All about us, now, the dull and dunce-eyed stool themselves to study corners.

Souls, essences, the bickering legions of immortals, the countless points of view which religion and philosophy have shaped, are seldom understood as metaphorical, as expressions of our wishes and our fears, as desperate political maneuvers, strategies of love or greed, as myths which make a sense which some men may, at moments, need; for the celebrated facts of life, whatever they are, are not very forceful, and even the most stubborn and most brutish ones (that man must eat to live, for instance) allow an indefinite number of attitudes and interpretations, including vegetarianism or solemn pronouncements in favor of fish or stern edicts against pork and beans.

If games, then sometimes dangerous ones. Let us suppose for a moment that both our Russells and our Becketts are engaged in telling us *how it is*, that the novelist and the philosopher are companions in a common enterprise, though they go about it in different ways. The objects I see and sometimes label—pencil, paper, table, penny, chair—each

William H. Gass

seems solid yet is pocked with spaces, each seems steady yet is made of moving pieces: shape, steadiness, solidity, and color . . . are these illusions? I call the penny round, but I'm reminded I see an ellipse. I say the pencil's yellow, yet perhaps the yellow's painted in by eye, the yellow is the reading of a signal maybe, although the reading does not reside within the receiver, and possibly its actual home is in the mind. The what? The mind. Who, or what, is that? A character. Like Micawber. Going on in the firm belief that something will turn up. Hasn't he made my world strange, this philosopher? I find I have a body, then a mind. I find that the world I live in, the objects I manipulate, are in great part my constructions. I shortly come to believe in many invisible beings, gods and angels, wills and powers, atoms, voids. Once where I thought an anger "out there" like a demon, a color "out there" in an object, connections "out there" holding hands with things, I now think otherwise. Loose bundles of affections and sensations pass me like so many clouds of dust in space (and, dear heaven, who am I?).

Beckett tells us that we live in garbage cans; sit at the side of empty roads, in emptiness awaiting emptiness; crawl blindly through mud. My skin is the tattered dirty clothing of a tramp, my body a broken bicycle, my living space is earth to just beneath my shoulders, my speech the twittering of an unoiled pump. Hasn't he made my world strange, this novelist? No, of course our lives are not a muddy crawl—*apparently*. But that is mere appearance. We're fooled constantly. We think our emotions fine when they are coarse; we think our ideas profound when they are empty, original when commonplace; we think at first we are living richly, deeply, when all we possess is a burlap bag, unopened tins, dirty thoughts, and webby privates.

I cannot help my home still looks well furnished, or my

Philosophy and the Form of Fiction

body trim; I cannot help the colors which I seem to come upon, or the unflinching firmness of my chair; I cannot help I glory in my sex or feel and think and act as one and not as a divided community; for I'm incurably naïve, incurably in love with deception; still, I can be taught, I can learn suspicion, learn that things aren't really what they seem; I can learn to hate my pleasures, condemn my desires, doubt my motives, deny my eyes, put unseen creatures in the world and then treat them with greater reverence, give them greater powers than those I innocently know—to bow and bow and bow in their direction; I can replace my love for people with a love for principle,¹ and even pursue a life beyond the grave as a program for the proper pursuit of this one. Bravo, novelists and philosophers; good show.

Save the appearances, Plato said. Then make them all realities. No better way. Yet without that splendid distinction, the novelist as philosopher and the philosopher as novelist would both be out of business.

2

The esthetic aim of any fiction is the creation of a verbal world, or a significant part of such a world, alive through every order of its Being. Its author may not purpose this—authors purpose many things—but the construction of some sort of object, whether too disorderly to be a world or too mechanical to be alive, cannot be avoided. The story must be told and its telling is a record of the choices, inadvertent or deliberate, the author has made from all the possibilities of language. Whether or not it was correct of Aristotle to rea-

¹ This point is developed at length in "The Case of the Obliging Stranger."