

Seeking the Doom of Self-Annihilation: The “Fascism of the Heart” and the Death Drive in William Gass’s *The Tunnel*

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William Gass’s *The Tunnel* tells of the excruciatingly difficult life of William Frederick Kohler. In fact, Kohler can no longer bear his own life because he has experienced a myriad of frustrations and disappointments by middle age and has fallen into a deep sense of disillusionment and despair. More important, as a professor at a midwestern university specializing in Nazi history, his thoughts and emotions have always been intricately linked to the horrors of Nazism. As he faces difficulty in writing an introduction to his latest work – *Guilt and Innocence in Hitler’s Germany* – he recollects his experiences and exhibits a fatal attraction to Nazi beliefs. In his research, he learns of numerous instances of evil and, disturbingly, takes sides with such evil. Moreover, he is so deeply affected by Nazism that he transposes its beliefs into a personal realm and develops a sinister attitude toward those who, he believes, are his enemies. His attitude instantiates what the author calls the “fascism of the heart,” and it is this problematic state of mind that this study intends to explore.

The “fascism of the heart” is not only threatening but also bewildering. It is bewildering because when Kohler shows his fascist tendency, his mind seems hopelessly convoluted and deliberately obscure. Calling attention to the novel’s “ethics of ambivalence,” Melanie Eckford-Prossor underscores its “qualities that require something other than a normative ethics—one that accounts for the engagement of the reader in the author’s text and that does not require the reader to be absorbed by the author’s text” (Eckford-Prossor 12). Though the novel is replete with evil thoughts and deeds, expressed through Kohler’s stream of consciousness, it does not explicitly denounce them nor does it offer authoritative, corrective perspectives. Instead, from beginning to end, Gass challenges us to navigate through the baffling instances of evil that he abundantly supplies and to examine them thoroughly on our own. In order to achieve that aim, I argue that in Kohler one can find intricate

relationships between evil and the death drive. Kohler's death drive can be considered a major factor that generates his bewildering evil. With a view to unraveling his psychological mechanism, this study will first investigate how a particular type of death drive propels him toward a glorious, tragic doom, and how he simultaneously approaches and circumvents the fearful void of death. In so doing, I shall also argue that his drive toward a doom is originally a critical challenge against the prescribed social norm that, he believes, masks evil and promotes hypocrisy. His death-driven aspiration enables him to seek the evil truth of the human race, but he is eventually defeated by the very evil he exposes. It is crucial to understand the manners in which he externalizes his own evil through projection and legitimizes his evil through denial. The acts of projection and denial ultimately induce him to generate self-indulgent masochism and to turn it into a fantasy of extermination. Examining his challenge as well as his subsequent failure, this study will try to determine what constitutes the specific type of fascism that corrodes Kohler's heart. Gass's text inspires us to cast new light on the implications of such a deeply disturbing phenomenon, one that continues to haunt us.

Against the Void: Disillusionment and the Drive toward a Doom

In the narrative present set in the 1960s, William Kohler contemplates how life has become unbearable for him and his wife and, in so doing, offers a number of reasons. While he reminds us of the hard facts of life, such as anguish, pain, and mutability, he divulges the devastating sense that "it's been wrongly lived, and hence lost; we are miserable outcasts on the mountains of the might-have-been" (286-7). Since he is disillusioned with almost every aspect of his life—a life that has bitterly betrayed him—Kohler is too powerless to generate any alternative, redemptive vision. Instead, he is quite often absorbed in daydreams, and it is in these daydreams that he fantasizes about what he calls the "Party of the Disappointed People," an imaginary organization for the likes of Kohler who have endured painful disappointments in life. The members turn their sense of disappointment into smoldering resentment against enemies in the hope that they themselves can survive. Taking such a sinister turn in his thoughts, Kohler declares:

[I]t's true, we would survive, for bad luck alone does not embitter us that badly, nor the simple presence of pleasure spoil the soul when pain also arrives, nor

does the feeling that our affairs might have been better managed move us out of range of ordinary disappointment; it is when we recognize that the loss has been caused in great part by others; that it needn't have happened; that there is an enemy out there who has stolen our loaf, soured our wine, infected our book of splendid verses with filthy rhymes; then we are filled with resentment and would hang the villains from that bough Watch out, then, watch out for us, be on your guard, look sharp, both ways, when we learn—we, in any numbers—when we find who is forcing us—wife, children, Commies, fat cats, Jews—to give up life in order to survive. It is this condition in men that makes them ideal candidates for the Party of the Disappointed People. (287)

Kohler bases this Party on the Nazi National Socialist Party—a typical gesture of a man who has earned infamy for his sympathetic views toward the Nazis. The psychological basis for Kohler's Party is the “fascism of the heart,” which is, as Gass himself explains in an interview with Heide Ziegler, “a corrupt state of feeling, a realm of impotent resentment” (“Interview” 19), a condition that involves disturbingly negative attitudes toward others, ones exemplified by envy, spite, malice, and bigotry, to name a few.

What is more disturbing is the fact that Kohler's loss is not caused by the people he calls enemies. To be sure, he has a number of enemies—including academics who criticize him for his pro-Nazi views—but it is Kohler himself who has ruined his own life. In fact, in order to avoid this unacceptable truth, he actively creates imaginary enemies and makes them responsible for his own failure. Deeply worried about this convoluted psychology, Walter Herschel, a colleague of his, implores: “[F]inish your book, but do not hate us because you aren't perfect or the world is unimprovable” (641). Despite Herschel's wish, Kohler cannot control his hatred. To be more exact, he thrives on self-generated hatred because he quite often feels that only hatred and vengeful thoughts can give him enough momentum to continue with his life. This irrational hatred, however, only destroys his life, as instantiated by his paradoxical act of “giv[ing] up life in order to survive” (287).

At the heart of Kohler's fascism of the heart, there lie dynamics between the death drive and evil. Terry Eagleton, trying to unravel such dynamics, underscores the underlying question of a void—a “terrible non-being at the core of oneself” grounded in a “foretaste of death” (*On Evil* 100). “It is,” he argues, “this aching absence which you seek to stuff with fetishes, moral ideals, fantasies of purity, the manic will, the

absolute state, the phallic figure of the Führer” (100). Likewise, William Kohler grapples with his fear of the “abyss” or “true not-being-there” (*Tunnel* 185). This abyss of non-being haunts him, and the impossibility of overcoming it excruciates him: “It is difficult to stop talking about the abyss because one is so fearful of it and because nothing can be said” (185).

He is at pains to fill this fearful void and, in so doing, aims to rely on the power of Nazi ideology. Yet the problem is that he cannot fully believe in such ideology because, as a postwar historian, he is certainly aware of its illegitimacy and heinousness. To find a way out of this predicament, he develops a paradoxical approach to the destructiveness of Nazi ideology. He takes advantage of its destructiveness in an attempt to cope with the fearful void of death. For instance, seeking solace in self-annihilation, Kohler imagines himself as part of the tragic “doom” of the Nazis: “I want a doom to go to. I aspire to the abyss” (185). “Adolph Hitler,” Kohler remarks, “could go to his doom because he had one. Only those who have made a pact with the devil have a doom. . . . Upon the tens of tons of anonymous millions, no judgment is pronounced. For them, there is death, of course, but no doom” (185). This allegiance to the self-destructive doom alleviates his fear of a meaningless death and even enables him to survive. In him, the grandeur of self-annihilation endows his death with tragic significance and his life with self-respect. To make matters worse, this twisted belief in the Nazi doom, pitted against the void of death, fuels his negative attitude toward others. As we have seen, he deliberately creates imaginary, evil others and wishes to inflict pain upon them. This act is, in psychological terms, a manifestation of evil as a “form of projection” (*On Evil* 107). It takes place “when those in what one might call ontological pain deflect it onto others as a way of taking flight from themselves” (*On Evil* 119). In this act of projection, Kohler generates a perverted view of others who, destined to die without a doom, embrace the ontological pain of facing this meaningless void. When Kohler aligns himself with the grand doom of the Nazis, he haughtily rises above such pain and such people.

Kohler further strengthens his self-destructive desire for the doom of the Nazis and his negative attitudes toward undesirable others. Remarking on his own pro-Nazi views of history, Kohler demonstrates a haughty contempt for people who write for the victims of Nazism, for the ones who do not have a doom:

Identifying with the victims, and hence engorged by pity, writers on the Third

Reich—before my example—have never troubled to put themselves in the villains' place, to imagine the unimaginable—it is easy to be a victim, you don't have to do a thing, you simply weep and bleed—but, ah, the beater, to be the beater is not a role whose easy mastery is readily admittable; sympathies in such a cause are not idly, not routinely, not frequently enlisted . . . (463)

His extremism is clear, and, more importantly, his identification with the Nazis involves another aspect of evil, one that Eagleton observes among certain romantics as well as modernists—who, disdaining petty-bourgeois morality, choose the path of evil. For these individuals, “[e]xperience at an extreme, even the knowledge of evil, is preferable to moral mediocrity” (*Trouble* 282). At the heart of their thoughts, lie “its suspicion of liberalism, materialism and mass civilisation, its elevation of a few rare human spirits over popular democracy and the triumph of mediocrity” (*Trouble* 284). Embracing their self-destructive impulses and tragic doom, they seek “authentic” life deliberately in crises and destitution, in marginal yet privileged realms outside the prescribed norm of bourgeois morality. These characteristics are shared by Kohler, who is ready to submit himself to the tragic doom of evil if he can rise above mediocrity. He forms an imaginary alliance with evil figures because he believes that figures such as “Hitler, Faust, Don Juan, Leverkühn, have dooms” (185). Inside Kohler, the grand dooms of the anti-social figures outweigh quotidian, small attempts at goodness.

When Kohler confounds the dooms of these romantic, rebellious figures with that of Hitler, he is making the crucial error made by so many, mistaking fascist ideology as a revolutionary force. As Roger Griffin puts it, within German fascism, one can observe a “perverse paradox that, however barbaric the connotations of the Swastika for the untold millions of victims of Nazi violence, for those mesmerized by its mythic power it symbolized not death but rebirth, not herd-like somnambulism but national reawakening” (105). Yet genocide disguised as a revolution can never bring rebirth or reawakening in the true sense of the term. Furthermore, it seeks only the survival of the elite few, together with their state apparatuses, for continued domination over its followers as well as victims.

Nevertheless, Kohler finds positive values in such a death drive, and it is the relationship between the death drive and ethics that poses a further challenge. Within the framework of Jacque Lacan's concept of the death drive, Eagleton argues that one that is grounded in the “Real”—the realm of death located outside the symbolic

structure of language and law—the drive can assume radical ethical qualities: “True ethics takes us beyond the superego, as the loyal subjects of the Real prove themselves ready to risk death for the sake of a symbolic rebirth” (*Trouble* 185). It is in their bold struggle for rebirth that those subjects embrace their death as well as their doom. They are willing to face the “Real” through their self-destructive attempts at dismantling the false systems of politics, law, and morality. In Lacan’s own words, within such a system, “[t]he true nature of the good, its profound duplicity, has to do with the fact that it isn’t purely and simply a natural good, the response to a need, but possible power, the power to satisfy” (234). Against this idea of the good, he pits the death drive, which he conceptualizes as “the unspeakable field of radical desire that is the field of absolute destruction, of destruction beyond putrefaction” (216-7).¹ When William Kohler, through his radical desire for destruction, challenges the contradictions of morality—arbitrarily determined by aspirations for power—he aims toward an ethical act. As he mocks, for instance, the public who turns a blind eye to the increasing militarization of the United States, he asserts boastfully, “The PdP will eliminate from national life our habits of hypocrisy” (300). By intentionally immersing himself in the evil of the PdP, he aims to explore the human capacity for evil and to expose the evil, duplicitous nature of the nation, hidden behind its false optimism. To return to Kohler’s fundamental identification with evil victimizers and contempt for victims, H. L. Hix insightfully comments: “Too absolute an identification with the victims of crimes rather than the perpetrators may express a noble sentiment, but it also self-deceptively denies one’s humanity, and falsely assesses one’s motives as incorruptible” (*Understanding* 99). His death-driven identification with evil, therefore, enables him to view humanity from a critical perspective. For this purpose, he immerses himself in evil.

This leads us to another aspect of the death drive that pertains to the acknowledgement of internal evil. Jacques Lacan, in his analysis of Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents*, exposes how Freud is disturbed by the Christian commandment: “Love thy neighbor as thyself.” According to Lacan, what is lurking behind Freud’s response is his pessimistic view of the voracious human drive toward aggression: “Man tries to satisfy his need for aggression at the expense of his neighbor, to exploit his work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to appropriate his goods, to humiliate him, to inflict suffering on him, to torture and kill him” (qtd. in Lacan 185). Lacan argues that Freud hesitates to embrace the above commandment not only because he recognizes the terrible evil within others, but

ultimately because he recoils from the same evil within himself. To surmount that limitation, Lacan claims that he “bear[s] witness to the idea that there is no law of the good except in evil and through evil” (190). This task, however, is excruciatingly difficult because it involves grappling with horrifying internal evil.

Kohler, nevertheless, investigates the condition of humanity “in evil and through evil.” Throughout the novel, Kohler digs a tunnel under his basement because, he claims, “I can tell myself the truth . . . because ordinary life is supported by lies, made endurable through self-deception; because in my illusion no illusions are allowed” (503). As he descends into the netherworld, he deliberately creates nightmarish visions of the human race so that he can thoroughly uncover its truth, heretofore masked by the illusions of conventional goodness. Hence, he proudly declares: “I write to indict mankind” (457). For instance, Kohler indicts his colleague Herschel, when the latter condones people who commit evil acts owing to their powerlessness. Regardless of Kohler’s criticism, “Still, he [Herschel] persists, for he believes the little people to be powerless . . . that’s what makes them little . . . so when evil’s done it’s never their doing . . . as if being powerless were without sin . . .” (483 ellipses in orig.). Kohler’s comment, shown above, significantly implies that when Herschel sympathizes with the powerless in that way, he ineluctably condones what Hannah Arendt would call the “banality of evil.” It is a type of evil exemplified by Nazi criminals, such as Adolph Eichmann, who committed heinous crimes because they were powerless to resist evil authorities.² Kohler thus disdainfully rejects Herschel’s stance and deliberately sees evil in everyone and everything. Yet he eventually fails in performing this task, and when he fails, he exhibits crucial problems in his approach to the question of evil.

Fundamentally, Kohler’s penchant for evil is problematic because it is grounded in his failed idealism. This problem becomes clear when seen from his wife’s perspective. “Let me explain you to you,” says Martha, “what you honestly are is a dealist, a topian [sic]. You want a world that perfectly meets your nutty specifications, and when it doesn’t, you say fuck it. . . . If you can’t have King Reason and all his rational kin ruling absolutely in your realm, you’ll have the random and its rascals” (453). His idealism is crushed primarily because, in his history research, Kohler keeps encountering endless human brutalities. However, instead of grappling with the painstaking task of fortifying his idealism, he almost succumbs to the overwhelming presence of evil. He thus asks in reckless desperation: “[H]ow long will man’s savagery deface our so-called human look and make a mockery of us? To what limit,

to what an ending, will you go? Who of us is any longer in doubt of our depravity . . .?" (153). He deliberately magnifies the helplessness of human savagery and depravity because it is easier for him to lament than to overcome such evil. Eventually, he perverts this failed idealism into his obsession with the glorious doom of annihilation. The doom, situated at the top of the hierarchy of evil, provides him with a quasi-transcendental quality, an illusion that compensates for the loss of idealism.

Furthermore, in his view of evil, Kohler is heavily influenced by Magus Tabor—a professor of history specializing in ancient Greece and Rome—with whom Kohler worked as a student in 1930s Germany. Behind Tabor's belief, we can observe his deep doubts about the human race, especially about the masses: "Everything's in them already . . . Every desire has its own fat seed and every seed its dirty place. I don't exclude their embrace of misery, their need for lovelessness, their liking for their fallen lot. They revel in the ruins of themselves. Despair they embrace like a whore . . ." (127). Because of his intense hatred of the depraved masses that he imagined himself, Tabor magnifies the self-destructiveness inherent in the human race. Crushed, in turn, by his own bleak vision, he comes to believe the predominance of such a destructive drive throughout history and to despair of the future for the entire human race: "There is no end to human foolishness, Kohler, no end, no end, no end; our black hearts have no bottom, and literally there is no end; there will be no end until we all end, and mankind murders itself in a fit of just deserts" (257). His despair triggers a sinister death drive that wishes for the end of humans. Since, in his logic, "there will be no end until we all end," only a total extermination of the human race can solve the problems of human evil. As we shall see, the master's view of evil powerfully molds Kohler's mind. Keeping Tabor's ideas in mind, this analysis will investigate why Kohler fails as he grapples with his own internal evil and eventually develops a destructive fantasy of total extermination.

Denial, Masochism, Reckless Extermination

Kohler's deeply flawed attitude toward his internal evil is evident, especially in an episode about *Kristallnacht*, a night of violence orchestrated against the Jews in 1938, a brutal incident that involved the destruction of Jewish properties, looting, false arrests, and massacres. *Kristallnacht* is a crucial incident for Kohler both as a historian and as an individual because, historically, it played a critical role in accelerating

massive violence against the Jews and, personally, because he was directly involved with the incident. That night, roaming about the city with his friends, Kohler throws a brick into a greengrocer's store and, confusingly enough, takes the trouble to retrieve it.

I admit I retrieved my “brick.” It sailed well into the store, landing upon a counter where I suppose vegetables were normally binned but which was now bare of roots, fruits, and leaves. It wasn’t easy to find, and I stumbled about a bit before I caught sight of one of its harsh corners, lit by a fire just begun on the block. My intention, I vaguely recall, was to keep it as a souvenir, even though I couldn’t then know this was *Kristallnacht*. And would remain *Kristallnacht* for all time. Two o’clock on *Kristallnacht*. When the Jewish watches stopped. (332)

Analyzing Kohler’s involvement in the incident, Watson Holloway writes: “Although neither the brick nor the beebees caused serious physical damage, the mentality that produced Kohler’s acts was responsible for millions of deaths” (106). The problem with Kohler is that he is oblivious of this mentality and its grave implications. For instance, when, as the first-person narrator, he relates the episode, his tone is that of nonchalance—devoid of guilt or remorse. Regardless of the significance of the incident, he offers us only an impoverished account composed of minimum situational and psychological details. It is primarily because when young Kohler blindly participated in and accelerated the heinous crime, he lacked any serious concern about the motives or consequences of his act. Even in the narrative present, he shamelessly insists: “It was a youthful prank, our smashing the windows of the Jews. We mimicked, for a moment, the manner of the mob . . .” (332). Yet, in reality, Kohler and his friends are nothing other than the mob. In this case, there is no demarcation between pranks and mob violence, especially for the victims of the vandalism.

Over and above the episode about the greengrocer’s store, he tells of how he threw a block into a confectionary. As Kohler recalls, “I remember my relief when my paving block broke the pane of that second shop, the shop of a goy. You see, I said to my cold soul. For my part, it wasn’t just Jews” (334). Surprisingly, through his convoluted thinking, he mitigates the wrongfulness of his act. Note how he employs the term “goy” to identify himself partly with the Jews and how he, on the grounds that he destroyed the property of a Christian, distinguishes himself from the Jew-hating mob. His twisted logic ultimately serves to justify his involvement with the

violence, and what is worse is that he exhibits a tendency to seek a solution to violence by means of excessive, irrational violence.

Kohler further twists his interpretation of Kristallnacht and thus of his role in the incident, when he ponders on Herschel Grynszpan, a Polish Jew exiled in Paris—who assassinated the German diplomat Ernst Vom Rath after the Nazis had deported his family—and who allegedly triggered Kristallnacht. Reflecting on the connection between the two incidents, Kohler shrewdly recalls Tabor's view of history: “As my mentor, Magus Tabor, said, half of history is revenge, the other half is its provocation” (332). According to this claim, Grynszpan is the one who provoked the violence of Kristallnacht. This certainly is an example of “denial,” a case that Stanley Cohen would call a “denial of the victim” in which “the victim was the original wrongdoer” and “what I did—vandalizing the property of an unfair teacher or a crooked shop owner—was only rightful retaliation or punishment” (61). Taking advantage of such a view that turns the victim into the wrongdoer, Kohler finds another way to justify his violence in Kristallnacht. Although Kohler deliberately sees evil in others in order to delve into the evil nature of human beings, he denies evil within himself. Recoiling from his own evil, he projects it upon the victims—Grynszpan as well as the shop owners whose establishments he damaged—and turns them into original wrongdoers who deserve punishment.

While he denies responsibility for his involvement with the Nazi violence, he paradoxically desires the doom of Nazism. Yet, as his failure in grappling with evil seriously undermines his self-esteem, he starts doubting the possibility of having such a doom. His doubt manifests itself strongly in his fantasmatic obsession with Susu, a female French singer, as well as a Nazi commandant's woman, whom he met as a student in Nazi Germany. After the Second World War, going through Nazi documents in his research, he discovers the fact that she “roasted the thumbs of a dozen Jews and ate them while they watched” (115), and that she was later beheaded by Nazi officers who found out that she had Gypsy blood. Throughout the novel, he repeatedly speaks to the spectral memory of Susu, saying: “I approach you in my dreams” (126). His obsessive thoughts about her gradually reveal that in Susu's death lies the disturbing truth about his own doom. In fact, Susu belies the reliability of the fascist doom because even though she was an ideal subject of Nazi rule, she was turned into a victim and brutally executed by the Nazis. When Kohler says, “Sing Susu, through your severed head, through your severed arteries” (126), he wants the dark Muse to tell him about the truth of her death. The Muse lets him know that her brutal,

meaningless death foreshadows his own death. For instance, as Kohler sings what he calls Susu's crow song, "I'm carrion, crow— / how well you know me" (257), he imagines his own death in a most primitive, uncivilized way—his body discarded without proper burial and devoured by wild birds.

Since part of him fully anticipates such a meaningless death, he increasingly falls into a state of desperation, one that triggers in him a fantasy of apocalyptic violence. In this violent, deranged fantasy, he pleads with God: "[L]et him[God] smite us all, march everyone to the ovens or turn us under to fertilize the onions, yes, Susu's where I burn, a naked worm I go to her hole to be consumed . . ." (491). Here, he seeks punishment from God, not out of guilt but out of his self-indulgent masochism. Fundamentally, he is fantasizing about solving his own psychological problems by means of an apocalypse, one that is divinely justified. Most disturbingly, by using the sinister image of the "ovens," he imagines everyone, including himself, sharing the fate of the Holocaust victims. In this conceptual confusion that eliminates the boundary between victimizers and victims, he totally undermines the question of the Holocaust. Such is Kohler's vision of the final solution, developed out of his twisted desire for self-annihilation.

This fantasy also suggests that, in death, he wishes to be reunited with Susu, who now represents a womb as well as an oven that will burn him to ashes, yet he, in a last-ditch effort, finds another way to circumvent death and survive a little longer. This time, he seeks to ensure his survival through a scatological/eschatological fantasy. Note how Kohler, evoking the memory of Susu, stigmatizes her as "a slime of green down a lavatory wall" (475). Intensifying and extending this slime image, he remarks that "I see slime as our world's most triumphant substance; slowly slime is covering the earth, more of it made every day—more whiny people, more filthy thoughts, crummy plans, cruddy things, contemptible actions—multiplying like evil pores . . ." (435). By imposing these debased images upon others, he turns them into insignificant creatures like himself. What is remarkable is that, although he is defeated by the meaninglessness he discovers in himself and in the entire human race, he profits selfishly by the very meaninglessness. To draw on Eagleton again, "Evil brings false comfort to those in anguish by murmuring in their ear that life has no value anyway. Its enemy, as always, is not so much virtue as life itself" (*On Evil* 106). Kohler makes life, in general, totally meaningless so that he can justify his own meaningless life and take comfort from this illusion.

This mind-set induces him to violently trivialize the lives of others as well as

their serious endeavors. As for his relationship with his wife, Kohler, digging a tunnel beneath the house, admits that “I’ve done nothing except fill her drawers with dirt” (*Tunnel* 468). Fully aware of her passion for antique furniture, he wants to defile it and, with it, her life. The wicked “enjoys being a constant irritant” (*On Evil* 117) to those who are around him. Likewise, at work, he constantly generates virulent diatribes against all his colleagues. Although the faculty seems to represent a variety of historical approaches, Kohler mocks and trivializes all of its members and their research. As Jim Barloon puts it, “Since Kohler can’t stand to think there might be individuals bigger and better than himself, he cuts everyone down to his own size” (9). According to Kohler, all his colleagues are nothing more than clowns: Oscar Planmantee quantifies all historical phenomena; Tommaso Governali dramatizes them like operas; Walter Herschel, despite his sincere belief in the value of facts and truth, is academically weak; Charles Culp uncritically idealizes minorities, especially Native Americans, and relies on limerick versions of history. In this way, Kohler stigmatizes their academic work so hyperbolically that he can make their life as meaningless as his own.

Near the end of the novel, as Kohler becomes fatally attracted to the memory of Susu, represented as the womb-oven, he must also grapple with the memory of his mother, whom he, as a fifteen-year-old boy, had committed to a state mental institution for good. He literally got rid of her mainly because she was seriously addicted to alcohol and adultery, a symptom resulting from her unbearable life with an abusive husband. As Kohler recalls, “she grabbed my hand so desperately while we taxied to the—well, what shall I call it?—to the hospital, asylum, snake pit, nut house, loony bin,” and also “I knew, in that hospital, my mother would shake and scream. All right. Perhaps she would only moan” (626). In addition to her, he hospitalized his arthritic father for good: “It was accomplished; they were gone for their good and I was glad” (626). Sending the undesirable to institutions is his way of dealing with the difficulties of living with others. Since Kohler eliminated the mother this way, he cannot, in his death-driven fantasies, imagine himself returning to the site of prenatal plenitude, one figured by the mother’s womb; instead, he has only Susu’s womb-oven in which he can burn himself with memories of his wrongdoings. Regarding his traumatic past, Jonathan Barron writes: “This I believe is the emotional center for Kohler: it is a place of almost pure existential pain, a place where the most distance is necessary” (8). Barron, however, notes how the novel superimposes the image of a crossword puzzle upon the traumatic passage about the institutionalization of his parents, and thus he

criticizes its lack of authenticity. The episode certainly involves Kohler's emotional pain, but the pain seems insignificant, for, when living with his parents, "I waited for them to die" (137). He cannot think of ways to fix the horrible past, nor does he intend to do so seriously. Here, the reader should recall another passage about his parents in which he blames them for laying a curse upon him: The father "taught me bigotry and bitterness" and "I caught a case of cowardice from my mother" (136). In reality, it is Kohler himself who fully developed those qualities, violently practicing bigotry and cowardly denying his own evil, as the Kristallnacht episode, among others, has shown. Yet, he projects his own evil upon his parents, blaming them for his own faults and making them, now burdened excessively with his guilt, disappear for good.

He thus spends the rest of his life haunted by the evil that corrodes his heart, corrodes everything that he sees and remembers. Because of his hopelessness, despair, and desperation, he joins what he calls "miserable outcasts on the mountains of the might-have-been" (286-7). It is a line he borrows and perverts from the poem "Exposed on the Mountains of the Heart" by Rainer Maria Rilke, a poet whom he admires and whose artistic heights he fails to achieve. In his book on Rilke, Gass himself stresses that, inside the poet, the hardships of life are essential to artistic creation: "[L]ife wasn't something the poet was simply to flee from, as if it were a grave dug out of trivial routines; it was to be closely approached—approached and accepted and praised" (*Reading Rilke* 25). Underscoring how the difficulties in the poet's life—anxiety, sadness, poverty, alienation, and the misery of war—prepare him to be a mature poet, Gass succinctly yet powerfully writes: "Desperation is another preparation for inspiration" (*Reading Rilke* 103). Unlike Rilke, Kohler lacks the strength to endure painstaking preparations in his life. Unable to sublimate the deep sense of desperation, Kohler reaches a point where he thinks he has nothing to lose. In such a state of mind, he asks himself, "so what would I be risking, really? what would I lose that I had not already lost? and for a while I would ride high, for a while I would be a winner" (462). He wishes to be a "winner," following Hitler's doom, but he finally recognizes that it is only an illusion. When the novel reaches its very end, he holds a "[r]evolver like the Führer near an ear" (652). At this point, it seems that he simply wants to kill himself to escape his terrible emotional pain, unable to accept the "Real" of terrible evil within himself. At the final stage of his "fascism of the heart," totally reckless, he is ready to victimize anyone around him. He cannot tolerate others because they are the projections of his own unbearable, internal evil. Kohler himself observes the negative effects of this act of projection, when he criticizes his father's

bigotry against minority neighbors. Kohler refers to them as “these alien people, shaped as strangely as his own insides would appear to him were he, in horror, to see them, like organs of his own laid out for scornful evaluation” (532). In its sheer nakedness, the unbearable otherness of the neighbors represents an internal, evil kernel of his father and himself, a kernel that Kohler must accept as an essential part of himself. Though this evil generates a deep sense of desperation, he must find a way to live with it, if he truly wants to survive. He must, like Rilke, strive to embrace and surmount this desperation. The denial of his own evil and its projection upon others might temporarily sustain his personal survival. Yet this denial, as the novel has shown, can lead to a violent fantasy about exterminating others with a view to eliminating evil from oneself as well as from one’s community. Kohler’s vision of the final solution in the oven, which exterminates everyone including himself, suggests that when he fantasizes about murdering evil others, he is desperately trying to jettison his own evil. No matter how many others he murders, the horrible otherness of evil returns “like organs of his own laid out,” as his innermost being. Without seeking such false relief from his desperation, Kohler must create a vision of otherness, one that is not stigmatized by his own evil and that powerfully resists the reckless drive toward annihilation.

Notes

1. Lacan’s concept of ethics, grounded in the death drive, requires elaboration. In his exploration of ethics, he urges us to find a “crossing point, which enables us to locate precisely an element of the field of the beyond-the-good principle. That element, as I have said, is the beautiful” (237). The act of crossing the limit of the good and discovering a beyond is essential to Lacanian ethical acts, acts that he connects with the beautiful. Basing his claim on the Kantian concept of the beautiful or the good, Lacan argues, “the forms that are at work in knowledge, Kant tells us, are interested in the phenomenon of beauty, though the object itself is not involved” (261). Lacan stresses the quality of “fantasm” that inspires us to imagine a realm beyond the objects that are culturally and socially determined, and it is in such a bold act that one can reach the realm of Lacanian ethics. The drive that leads one to the “Real” outside the symbolic or the imaginary opens up a possibility of ethics that is beyond the good.
2. The “banality of evil” is a term Arendt employs in her attempt to describe evil, a horrifying type

of evil exemplified by Adolph Otto Eichmann—a former Nazi S.S. official who, in 1961, appeared before the District Court in Jerusalem. Analyzing his testimonies—especially his motives for joining the Nazis and for the deportation of Jews to concentration camps—she fails to discover radical, demonic evil; instead, she sees only what she identifies as the “banality of evil.” She refers to the evil that he exhibits as “banal” mainly because it lacks emotional, intellectual, and moral depths. Also, as she reports, Eichmann does not suffer from serious psychological problems: “Half a dozen psychiatrists had certified him as ‘normal’” (*Report 25*). The concept of the “banality of evil” is still very controversial. Though it is beyond the scope of my essay to discuss a variety of stances researchers take on the issue, here I would like to introduce several views that pertain to my investigation. Marcus Klein, in his critique of the banality of evil that *The Tunnel* exhibits, writes: “While to say that deep in his heart this tawdry Kohler is a Fascist, maybe even just potentially—like all of us—and is a vessel for the kind of guilt that made the Holocaust, is to put another construction on ‘banality of evil’ (and there are numerous indications in the novel that Gass has taken license from Hannah Arendt). It is to reduce the horror to a banality, and thereby to dismiss it” (127). It is fair to say that the particular “banality of evil” William Kohler demonstrates leads to the dismissal of the “horror” of the Holocaust. But it is also true that since such dismissal is what is truly disturbing about the banality of evil, it requires careful analysis. The critic Heide Ziegler claims that Gass’s message is that “there is always the danger that the fascism that lurks in our hearts might erupt, that we will become fascists” (“Is There Light” 80). Therefore, “*The Tunnel* is not about Germany or about Hitler. It is—potentially—about all of us” (“Is There Light” 81). Her position can be supported by Eric A. Zillmer and his co-authors, who have examined a number of Rorschach tests conducted on Nazi criminals from the vantage point of the late twentieth century. After examining the Danish Nazi Rorschachs, originally administered at the war crimes trials in Copenhagen in 1946, Zillmer and others comment: “Shallow, overly simplistic, and socially limited personality style [like that of Eichmann] also seems to play a part, suggesting that there may be some validity to Arendt’s characterization of the ‘banality of evil.’ Even so, enough highly complex Rorschachs exist in the Danish sample to indicate that banality also is not a sufficient explanation for the Nazi phenomenon” (119). Regardless of the insufficiency and specificity of Arendt’s banality, Zillmer and his co-authors also remind us that “Arendt’s theory . . . differs from those endorsing the ‘mad Nazi’ hypothesis in a very important way, for she suggests that the potential for behaving like a Nazi exists in each of us” (11).

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