

The Architecture of the Anti-Novel: William H. Gass's *The Tunnel*

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In his *Dialogic Imagination*, M.M. Bakhtin argued that the narrative of any novel unfolds within a constructed "chronotope," or time-space. Simply put, "plot," as a literary *succession of events*, requires a temporal-spatial logic with which to proceed, a logic which Bakhtin calls the novel's "organizing center," the generative mechanism that produces the literary event.¹

In this sense, the chronotope is a form of literary architecture, one which implicitly echoes the Foucauldian notion of the architectural "diagram." In his analysis of Bentham's Panopticon, Foucault defined architecture as the abstract machine through which a building structures the behavior and social relations of its inhabitants, implicating the subject in a civil milieu in which

Power has its principle not so much in a person as in a certain concerted distribution of bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes; in an arrangement whose internal mechanisms produce the relation in which individuals are caught up.²

As the Bakhtinian chronotope is to the novel, so the Foucauldian diagram is to the building: an organizing strategem, the system that constrains, defines, and orders action. In short, the novel and the building are equally architectural inasmuch as each requires the *inventive construction of a chronotope, the formulation of a temporal-spatial milieu that structures activity, actualizes event*.

In light of this, William H. Gass's 1995 novel *The Tunnel* poses a perverse inversion of the literary chronotope, achieved through an evasion of the architectural diagram and the spatial organization of social activity, as it figures within the representational field of the novel. *The Tunnel* hinges on the destruction of plot, on non-event; simply put, it is a novel in which *nothing happens*—its chronotope is *static* and *immaterial*. Unlike the plot-

driven novel in which time moves uni-directionally such that action *takes place*—literally, *assumes a spatial presence*—the narrative of *The Tunnel* remains in the mind of its narrator as an involuted display of disjunctive personal reflections. The novel's inactive chronotope constitutes an architectural foreground that isolates and ostracizes the character from any implication within a social stratosphere, dissolving the social engagement typically imposed on the inhabitant of a building.

The Tunnel opens as William Frederick Kohler, a middle-aged Holocaust historian, has just completed the manuscript that is to be his alleged magnum opus, *Guilt and Innocence in Hitler's Germany*, but is still struggling with writing its introduction. In a fit of writer's block, Kohler instead begins writing the disjunctive autobiography that becomes *The Tunnel*: roughly seven-hundred pages of synchronically juxtaposed impressions, recollections, and sensational memories from Kohler's life, related in the first-person voice. As one critic describes it:

The Tunnel is not structured to tell the story of Kohler's life, but to reveal his consciousness. All the events are described from within Kohler, the book purports to be his thoughts, a record—a stream—of his consciousness.³

As the pages of the introspective autobiography accumulate, Kohler secretly conceals them between the pages of the historical manuscript, so as to hide them from his wife. Meanwhile, and without explanation, Kohler decides to clandestinely dig a tunnel through the basement of his house, a futile act that echoes the same destruction of "plot" and "event" we find in the private, atemporal autobiography:

In an unpublished synopsis of *The Tunnel*, speaking about the action of the book, Gass himself admits that "There is scarcely any at all. The main action, aside from writing these pages, is the pre-

sumed, possible, digging of a tunnel by the narrator out of the basement of his own house. Since he could simply walk out of his front door, the pointlessness of this activity has to be stressed. The trapped character does everything symbolically, nothing actually⁴

Thus, Kohler's tunnel (ostensibly) destroys and evades the architecture of the domicile while his autobiography destroys and evades the structure of the narrative.

For its complete lack of event, of plot, of action, Gass's book has been called an "anti-novel." But the novel achieves this "anti" status through the destruction of architectural organizing principles, for which Kohler's tunnel is only a metaphor. On the whole, *the infinite inward spiral of The Tunnel is enabled by the dissolution of any architectural space in the representational field of the novel that could give rise to a categorically "public" or material event, outside the mental space of the character.*

FROM THE AGORA TO THE MIND: THE TURNING OUTSIDE-IN OF KOHLER'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY

A society's architectural organization of human activities informs its literary chronotopes inasmuch as it informs how "events" that warrant narration are defined, and at what temporal scale they unfold. Bakhtin explores how the architectural space of the Ancient Greek agora established a notion of the "public," which figured centrally in Greek civic life, and implied the visible, corporeal presence of a physical assembly of persons. The paradigm of the publicly visible *citizen* in turn gave rise to a publicly visible *subject*, absent any private, apolitical self or internalized consciousness:

In ancient times the autobiographical and biographical self-consciousness of an individual and his life was first laid bare and shaped in the public square. . . . here the individual is open on all sides, he is all surface, there is in him nothing that exists 'for his sake alone,' nothing that could not be subject to public or state control and evaluation. Everything here, down to the last detail, is entirely public⁵

The chronotope of the agora thus moves at the pace of *historical* time—the temporal scale of the political event as it unfolds in the public realm. The social architecture of the agora thus gave rise to the "encomium," a eulogy narrating the life of the Greek (public) citizen:

Classical forms of autobiography and biography were not. . . kept aloof from the concrete social and political act of noisily making themselves public. On the contrary, such forms were determined by events: either verbal praise of civic and political acts, or real human beings giving a public account of themselves. Therefore, the important thing here is not only, and not so much, their internal chronotope (that is, the time-space of their represented life) as it is rather, and preeminently, that exterior real-life chronotope in which the representation of one's own or some else's life is realized either as verbal praise of a civic-political act or as an account of the self. The real-life chronotope is constituted by the public square (the agora)⁶

Thus, in the encomium, the private time-space of subjective "duration," the particularities of an individual's temporal existence, (daily life within the domicile, private psychological unfoldings) were disregarded. Instead, an individual's life was given meaning by its intertwining with historicopolitical events. The chronotope of the agora thus ordered the chronotope of the biography: only the publicly visible, politically relevant aspects of existence served to configure the biographical narrative; in essence, the encomium was the turning "inside-out" the biographical subject.

If the public architecture of the agora engendered an externalized subjectivity, then in *The Tunnel*, it is Gass's exaggerated depiction of an intensely private, Postwar American suburb that generates the internalized, rambling structure of Kohler's autobiography. In contrast to the public concentration of the agora, the American suburb—as it figures in *The Tunnel*-- is a sprawling evasion of urban corporeal proximity, a milieu characterized by an introverted desire to establish an intensely secluded sense of the home. Throughout the book, Kohler never once exits his family home, nor comes into contact with his family members, depicting the domicile as almost a *space of the mind*:

I am aware of my weakness in philosophy, but were I a thinker of real thoughts, I think I would think only about the evanescent, and the character and condition of consciousness; because I know that is all I am, even if I feel I am standing in my living room (what a name for the family sofa) surrounded by a world wide as the world is, and that world oceaned in space, as alone in orbit as I am in mine, however minor mine is—up and down, desk to window, window to workplace, typewriter to tunnel. . . . So where am I, then, other than nowhere? my mind's eye? the ghost in the dream? where are we?⁷

From his situation in the suburban domicile, Kohler experiences a spatial and psychological "placeless-

ness" in the disorienting architecture of solitude, a placelessness that renders him unable to confirm the palpable, materiality of his existence. Kohler's domicile is a space of perennial opacity, refusing any light from the outside world that could illuminate the character's connection to it:

Even when a little sunshine is allowed to pass through her damn plum-colored drapes into the living room (or parlor, I should say), the shadows simply sharpen themselves, as if to dare me to enter them. I don't dare. To enter them. And the mirror that's set back in that swollen oak sideboard of hers, behind columns pretending to belong to a Palladian porch: it reflects only haze and dustlight, discolorations which graze upon discoloration like herds; and, since the glass is too low except rarely to register a face (and only if a person were to reach for a teacup or one of the nested teaspoons), one's hands and waist appear to be floating on a steaming and desolate lake of the sort found in Caspar David Friedrich: an abyss, a purple palm in a black cup⁸

This fragmented reflection of the body in the mirror refigures the social fragmentation that the house enforces on its inhabitant, with opaque windows and blocked visages onto any "outside."

In this architecture of isolated introversion, a material chain of events with public significance can scarcely be actualized, just as the subject's internal consciousness has no place in the Ancient Greek agora. We particularly see the conflict between the character's internal duration and the time-space of the political globe play out when the subject of "History" is addressed, a particularly pertinent theme in the novel, as Kohler is a historian. As he struggles to write the introduction to *Guilt and Innocence*, Kohler eventually pens the line, "This is to introduce a work on death by one who has spent his life in a chair," by which the historian reveals his own ironic and extreme detachment from the profound realities of material life, and particularly from their occurrence on a political scale: the profundity of the Holocaust is entirely alien to Kohler's own inactive and inconsequential private existence "in a chair."⁹

This schism between History and the historian—and the overriding of the political event by the mental event—is inextricably linked to the suburban reconstitution of the public sphere, particularly the dissemination of the "news event" in the Postwar suburban milieu. It has been said that "the television did for the city what the book did for the cathedral;" that, in the ever-expanding

suburbs of Postwar America, the typical nuclear family watched a simulacrum of historical events unfold from a television set that collapsed the spatio-temporal vastness of the globe and supplanted the architectural public space of the city with the private realm of the domicile.¹⁰ Television allowed for the overhauling of the formerly "public sphere" by the private sphere, enabling the chronotope of the single-family home (distanced from the temporal force of historical contingency, shielded from the visibility of the agora, subject only to *representations* of political event) to subordinate political history to its own temporal scale, such that the infinite minutia of domestic life strangled in its grasp the space-time of the globos.

Where the Greek public square, and its consequential biographical form of the "encomium," constituted a turning "inside-out" of subjectivity—a making public of the internal duration of the subject-- Gass's novel reflects this suburban effort to turn the events of the globos "outside-in," to relocate public, or political history, within the private space-time of the character. Gass explains in an interview:

I had the partisan desire to write a book which would undermine the ordinary organizational principles of fiction. . . . Traditional historical narratives are orderly and clear and as linear as string. . . . My book is meant to be the inside of the narrative, its pulp and seeds, not the rind. It is intended to undercut history, not only by misusing narrative techniques in general, but by revealing the mind of the historian¹¹

Here, in contrast to the agora-minded biographical narrative in which "the individual's consciousness of himself. . . . relies exclusively upon those aspects of his personality that...exist for others in the same way they exist for himself," Kohler's intensely private autobiographical recollections assimilate political history and collective memory to the introverted chronotope of internal, subjective duration.¹² The minute details of the domicile are the primary reality of the character's material life, while political history is presented as a secondary-- and even *consequential*-- outgrowth of this private milieu. In an imagined speech to his students, Kohler proposes that:

If we had the true and complete history of one man—which would be the history of his head—we would sign the warrants and end ourselves forever, not because of the wickedness we would find within that man, no, but because of the meagerness of feeling, the miniaturization of meaning, the pettiness of ambition, the vulgarities, the vanities, the

diminution of intelligence, the endless trivia we'd encounter, the ever present dust¹³

Thus, the subject's mental life—"a history of his head"—in all its infinite pointlessness, constitutes his "true and complete history;" in fact, Koehler argues, it is this "history of the head" that *generates* the political event. In the course of his hypothetical lecture notes, Kohler proposes that the Oedipalized, psychologically invented antagonisms that arise between members of a family in the domestic home are the self-same motivations for major worldwide warfare:

The students will never understand my passionate and detailed exposition of the origins of war or my claim that they are to be found in the domestic character of quarreling...Well, class, we were trying to make some sense of the quarrel the last time we met, you may remember, and the reason for our doing that was my belief that war works in history the way the quarrel works in a marriage, or somewhat the way a feud functions in a backward society. I never meant to suggest that nations at war must have been in love with one another once, but obviously every case of military conflict involves a vital relationship which has gone, or is going, sour. . . The next factor we are obliged to list (although we must awkwardly approach the bottom of the board) is the customarily trivial, deviously displaced, igniting little cause: some little stupidity which sets the explosion off and which puts its instigator immediately in a childish light and sounds the tantrum's tone¹⁴

For Kohler, the historical event, which assumed a primary importance in the public chronotope of the agora, is subordinated to an after effect of the social relations generated in the domicile. Kohler's suburban existence trumps History with the private time-space of the subject.

TUNNELING OUT OF GUILT AND INNOCENCE

The infinite introversion of Gass's novel is both perpetuated and symbolized as Koehler digs a tunnel through the basement of his house, an action which he suddenly and inexplicably undertakes:

TODAY I BEGAN TO DIG

I am enormously excited. Enormously. Today I began to dig; took my first bite of the earth; put in my first pick. Astonishing. That I have actually begun. Hard to believe. . . I shall split the earth asunder. HAH! I write YES!—with a heavy bulbous exclamation borrowed from the comics. POW! The very absurdity of my swing, its narrow place and expansive purpose, made the blow I struck like a culminating thrust. I've acquired a short-handled pick like my build. BAM! Well, it's dirty squatty work. But what a perfect location for the trip: bet-

ter than under a bed or beneath a stove; better than a shower or a john; better even than an attic, although going up to get down has much to recommend it. Of course I've been clearing away dirt and rust and ash, coal, clinkers and undefinable dusts, for quite a while—weeks—carrying out all kinds of wet gunk in two-pound coffee cans, and loads of crusty stuff like shale I've scraped from the bottom of the firebox (that damn cat has been shitting there, coming through a pipe, I suppose, who knows? And finding cinders suitable). It is a barfy business. UGH! But today I began to dig¹⁵

Ironically, in its physical destruction of the domestic home, Kohler's tunnel fully realizes the isolationism of the suburban milieu; the digging of the tunnel is Kohler's anti-social evasion of that already secluded social environment in which he exists:

My big book, like this big house, hangs over me as though it were the limits of the universe. . . a world of guilt and Germans, innocence and Jews, and like Cicero's, of murderers murdered. This house must have a cellar, a wrathkeller, Culp would certainly say: there must be an underworld under this world, a concealment of history beneath my exposition of it, a gesture which will symbolize my desperation. O my father! country! house of Kohler! hole up here! cling to the furnacy end of this hollow rope, relinquish the air for the earth¹⁶

The oppressive reality of political history—"my big book"—is psychologically bound to the material confines of architectural space—"this big house." To evade the legacy of the Holocaust and his responsibility to document it, Koehler seeks to entirely escape his membership to civil society. The "House of Kohler" created by the tunnel is a self-sufficient polis, an ironic reformulation of patriotism as narcissism achieved through the dissolution of architectural space, the tunneling out of the social implication of life in a building.

This extreme, characteristically suburban desire for a private and politically disengaged 'anti-architecture' reinterprets physical and social "ostracization" as a desirable condition, devaluing the individual's spatial-temporal presence within the social collective. By contrast, Paul Virilio relates the major importance of public chronotope in Ancient Greek participatory democracy:

Archaeological sites are littered with vestiges of democratic eloquence—with *ostrakons*, the remains of vast numbers of votes that often called for irrevocable decisions [to ostracize a citizen], potshards, carved shells on which the kinedramatic destiny of the polis was written, day by day, along with the necessity, for each and every person, of *being wherever the others are*, at the same point in space: the agora, theater, stadium,

or assembly¹⁷

What Kohler seeks in tunneling through his house is precisely a “liberation” from “being wherever the others are,” and a mitigation of his duty to assist in constructing “the kinedramatic destiny of the polis.” In effect, Kohler’s tunnel provides the spatial conditions for a voluntary, self-inflicted ostracization. Kohler in fact contrasts his private, entropic introversion with the public solidarity of an architectural monument: “Trajan’s Column is a solid tunnel turning through the sky, while my pillar will be made of air and go the other way; it will celebrate defeat, not victory.”¹⁸

THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE POST-HISTOIRE

If it is the role of architecture to organize, standardize, and socialize human activity, then Gass’s novel dismantles exactly this function of it, de-structuring his anti-narrative with its static and immaterial chronotope, generating an anti-architecture, a space-time where only the private, mental events of the character can unfold. Gass’s novel tellingly exposes of the Postwar American suburb, implicitly echoing the views of urban theorists such as Christine Boyer, who has argued that, in the contemporary era:

The city no longer evokes our involvement. . . . We are unable to develop architectural forms that are engaged politically with the urban environment. Perhaps this is simply the extension of the modern rationale that engenders a widespread disenchantment with the world and relegates art to the private sphere¹⁹

The Tunnel likewise depicts an apolitical and isolated architectural milieu that nullifies the meaning of the Historical event and the social relation of the citizen to the polis. Many urban theorists have speculated that new forms of public space that are less than literally spatial—those created through digital and audiovisual technological mediums, such as the internet and the television screen—have come to easily fulfill the social role of the modern “agora.” Yet Gass’s novel poses a profound question about the contemporary American suburb by asking to what our extreme physical isolation affords our socio-political efficacy. Kohler literally tunnels out of his obligation to History—particularly, moral History—by digging out of his house and his mind, leaving his manuscript, *Guilt and Innocence in Hitler’s Germany*,

incomplete and unpublished. While the suburban chronotope of placid stasis might in some way absolve us from our implication in urban social mores and political reality, the profundity of the Historical event is still its *material reality*, its potent capacity to *move* the globe, and we have yet to reconcile that with the illusion created by our architectures of perennial domestic equilibrium.

ENDNOTES

1. Bakhtin, M.M. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981, pp 250
2. Foucault, Michel. Alan Sheridan, trans. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York, NY: Random House, 1977, pp 202.
3. Hix, H.L. *Understanding William H. Gass*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2002, pp 92.
4. *Ibid*, pp 133-4.
5. Bakhtin, M.M. *The Dialogic Imagination*, pp 131-2
6. *Ibid*, pp 131
7. Gass, William H. *The Tunnel*. Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1995, pp 467
8. *Ibid*, pp 225
9. *Ibid*, pp 5
10. See Kwinter, Sanford. “Virtual City, or the Wiring and Waning of World,” in *Assemblage* No. 29 (April 1996).
11. Kellman, Steven G. and Irving Malin, eds. *Into The Tunnel*. Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1998, pp 14.
12. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, pp 137
13. Gass, William H., *The Tunnel*, pp 192
14. *Ibid*, pp 197
15. *Ibid*, pp 146-7
16. *Ibid*, pp 153
17. Virilio, Paul. Julie Rose, trans. *The Art of the Motor*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1995, pp 31.
18. Gass, William H. *The Tunnel*, pp 154.
19. Boyer, Christine M. *Cybercities*. New York, NY: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996, pp 119.