



Habitations of the Word

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For William H. Gass, language ensures authorial presence, and language lovingly wrought is the writer's stay against oblivion. In his criticism and his fiction alike, Gass contends that words do not merely replicate reality; they constitute worlds. Furthermore, when they are entered by readers with sympathetic imaginations, they are living worlds: Sentences are not fleeting, dispensable events but are, as the title of one of the essays attests, graced with souls.

Indeed, this preoccupation with the self-sufficient elegance and integrity of textual reality informs several of the essays published here. Moreover, when Gass chooses to focus upon particular authors--Ralph Waldo Emerson, Ford Madox Ford, Jean-Paul Sartre, Samuel Richardson, Henry James, Samuel Beckett, and Plato are salient figures in this book--his mission is to recruit them as kindred spirits who share his passion for sentences that sound in the mind.

Gass displays his philosophy even as he defends it. It is as though every expository subject were important primarily as an occasion for the release of Gass's own unique, luxuriant language. Whether it be a disquisition on international culture or an analysis of the personality of the word "and," Gass designs lavish rhythms, strikingly original metaphors, and witty alliterations and through them constructs hospitable environments for language to live in. Undoubtedly there will be readers who find that style overwhelms substance at times, but for Gass, the generation of the essay itself is always foregrounded. The nature of reading and writing is supremely relevant to every page.

Compelled by Emerson, Gass proclaims the essay to be meditative, unhurried--a graceful conveyance for unfolding consciousness. As practiced by Gass, the essay is once again a supple, creative form. Here words dwell adored.

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