# 10 The Art of Metafiction*

LARRY MCCAFFERY

This study of William Gass's novel *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife* establishes a definition of metafiction as 'a direct and immediate concern with fiction-making' within a fiction and continues to show that the novel represents a pure expression of this concern. Distinguishing the metafiction from the 'anti-novel', McCaffery argues that metafictions derive from 'meta-theorems' being developed in the 1970s in other disciplines which seek to contrive what Gass himself has called 'lingoes to converse about lingoes'. It is reasonable to assume that Gass and McCaffery have in mind here, among others, the disciplines of literary studies and history, both of which experienced profound transformations during the 1970s, particularly in America, as a result of the impact of meta-theorems, or discourses about discourses. McCaffery's point is that, primarily, Gass is interested in the problems of metalingual and metafictional discourse as an extension of his formal training in the philosophy of language. The purity of Gass's metafiction for McCaffery lies in a fascination with the idea that literature is made of words and only words. The analysis therefore concentrates on the way that the novel focuses on the materiality of words on a page, how they look, and how we read them. Once again the idea of a metafiction as a confusion of what lies within and outside of fiction becomes central as McCaffery analyses the way in which words are foregrounded by Babs, Gass's central character, who is herself conjured into existence only by words on the page, as a kind of surrogate author who parallels Gass's own self-conscious creation of a work from words.

As in every literary generation since Cervantes, the period since World War II has produced considerable discussion about the 'anti-novel'. It is most often regarded simply as any work of fiction whose intentions include some sort of defiance of the current norms of fiction: 'the anti-novel occurs whenever the novel loses faith in itself, becomes critical and self-critical, wishes to break with the established norms of the medium'.[1] Defined so broadly, the term may be applied to many innovative works;

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*Tristram Shandy* would be an obvious example, so would *Madame Bovary*, *Ulysses*, *The Counterfeiters*, and even *Don Quixote* itself. Although we can recognize a fairly clear tradition within the anti-novel, the past fifteen years have seen anti-novels proliferate to an extent not previously experienced in the brief history of the novel. Indeed, recent critics have begun the task of defining and clarifying specific categories and tendencies within the form. Examining certain implications of form in fiction, William Gass has remarked that most critics are far too eager to label any unusual work of fiction as an 'anti-novel': 'many of the so-called anti-novels are really metafictions.'[2] Like other critics who have adopted the term 'metafiction,' Gass is making a subtle but much needed distinction between anti-novel and metafictions. The present essay will discuss some implications of the term 'metafiction' and then examine Gass's own work, *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife*, a remarkably pure and interesting example of the genre.

By 1970, a certain type of work had begun to appear with insistent regularity, clearly belonging to the anti-novel tradition but maintaining a distinct unity of intention, approach, and subject matter. These works, represented by Donald Barthelme's *Snow White* (1967), John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968), Robert Coover's *Pricksongs and Descants* (1969), and Ronald Sukenick's *Up* (1970), are all highly self-conscious works which deal directly with the inadequacies and problems of current fiction writing.[3] Akin to Beckett's self-ruminating narratives and owing even more to the cerebral, intensely literary creations of Borges and Nabokov, these works also derived from the meta-theorems being developed in many other disciplines. Like the meta-theorist, the metafictionist had seen that only by creating a new form with its own referential language could he deal effectively with his original subject – fiction-making; as Gass has noted, 'Everywhere lingoes to converse about lingoes are being contrived, and the case is no different in the novel.'[4]

Although most of its practitioners would cringe at being associated with genres and traditions of any sort, the metafictionist can be readily identified and certain of his conventions and idiosyncrasies pointed out. Obviously, many of the things we can say about the anti-novelist will apply to the metafictionist. Metafiction resembles anti-novels of the past, for example, in tending to appear unconventional and experimental – except in instances when it relies on familiar conventions for parodic purposes; the defining characteristic of metafiction, however, is its direct and immediate concern with fiction-making itself. To a certain extent any anti-novel is 'about' fiction-making; any experimental work of fiction suggests attitudes about the art of fiction by the very acts of subverting or ignoring specific conventions and of introducing others instead. By his own choice of forms, the anti-novelist indirectly criticizes past forms and suggests new perspectives on the relationship between fiction, the artist,

and reality. When we examine a metafiction, however, we discover that fiction-making is not dealt with in such indirect fashion; instead, it takes as its main subject writers, writing, and anything else which has to do with the way books and stories are written. Not surprisingly, metafictions often present themselves as biographies of imaginary writers – as with many of Borges' tales, Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962), Alan Friedman's *Hermaphrodeity* (1972), Stephen Millhauser's *Edwin Mullhouse* (1972) – or even as autobiographical reflections of the authors themselves ('Ron Sukenick' is the main character in Sukenick's *Up*, Steve Katz appears as himself several times in *The Exaggerations of Peter Prince* (1968), and John Barth, balding and bespectacled, is by now a familiar element of many of his recent fictions). Metafictionists also frequently enjoy placing their readers in a situation once removed from the usual fictional stance by presenting and discussing the fictional work of an imaginary character (one immediately thinks of Gide's Edouard who is writing a book entitled *The Counterfeiters*); but contemporary fiction has produced an impressive variety of ingenious applications of the form – Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, Robert Coover's *The Universal Baseball Association* (1968), Raymond Federman's *Double or Nothing* (1971). These formal features, along with more blatant devices (such as having the narrator of a work engage the reader in a dialogue about the book he is reading), force us to consider the book we are reading *as an artifact*, undercutting the realistic impulses of the work and turning it into a 'self-reflexive' creation in that it not only takes art as its subject but tries to be its own subject.[5] To help clarify and illustrate the nature of the metafictionists' art, we will now examine an especially clear representative of the type.

Like all metafictions, *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife* deals with writing and its own construction in a self-conscious manner.[6] The work proves to be especially complex and ambitious, however, because Gass brings to it not only a literary viewpoint, but a background in the philosophy of language (a subject in which Gass received his Ph.D. from Cornell). *Willie Masters'* deals with the building-blocks of fiction – words and concepts – in a more direct and sophisticated fashion than most other metafictions; it is more explicitly experimental than just about any other work of fiction which comes to mind and can serve as a virtual casebook of literary experimentalism, since it appropriates almost every experimental device used by writers in the past and suggests a good many possibilities for future development as well.

Interestingly enough, *Willie Masters'* is actually only one section of a much longer and more ambitious book which Gass worked on periodically during the 1960s. Before he abandoned the longer work as being impractical – it was originally to have dealt metafictionally with almost every Western narrative mode – two other short excerpts appeared, 'The Sugar Crock' and 'The Clairvoyant'. Like *Willie Masters'* these pieces

are metafictional reflections on the nature of fiction-making, with self-conscious narrators pondering their relationship to their creations. They do not provide much background for *Willie Masters'*, although they introduce a few of the people who appear in the later work. Ella Bend, mentioned in passing in *Willie Masters'* (Red Section, 3), is the central character in both stories; we also meet Phil Gelvin, the unresponsive lover, as a rakish shoe salesman and 'Baby Babs' Masters herself, mentioned only in an unflattering comparison with another character ('fat in the belly like a sow, thick through his thighs like Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife'[8]).

Gass's basic intention in *Willie Masters'* is to build a work which will literally embody an idea he has elsewhere stated:

> It seems a country-headed thing to say that literature is language, that stories and the places and the people in them are merely made of words as chairs are made of smoothed sticks and sometimes of cloth or metal tubes. ... That novels should be made of words, and merely words, is shocking really. It's as thought you had discovered that your wife were made of rubber: the bliss of all those years, the fears ... from sponge.[9]

Gass never allows the reader to forget that literature is made of words and nothing else; here the words themselves are constantly called to our attention, their sensuous qualities emphasized in nearly every imaginable fashion. Indeed, the narrator of the work – the 'Lonesome Wife' of the title – is that lady language herself. Although the narrative has no real plot, the 'events' occur while Babs makes love to a particularly unresponsive lover named Gelvin – suggesting the central metaphor of the whole work: that a parallel exists – or should exist – between a woman and her lover, between the work of art and the artist, and between a book and its reader. The unifying metaphor is evident even before we open the book: on the front cover is a frontal photograph of a naked woman; on the back cover is a corresponding photograph of the back-side of the same woman. Gass, thus, invites one to enter his work of art – a woman made of words and paper – with the same sort of excitement, participation, and creative energy as one would enter a woman's body in sexual intercourse. The poet-narrator of Gass's short story, 'In the Heart of the Heart of the Country,' explains why the metaphor is appropriate when he says 'Poetry, like love, is – in and out – a physical caress'.[10] Babs puts it more bluntly: 'How close in the end is a cunt to a concept; we enter both with joy' (White Section, 4). Unfortunately, as we discover from Babs, all too frequently those who enter her do so without enthusiasm, often seemingly unaware that she is there at all.

As an appropriate extension of the metaphor, the central orderings of the work are very loosely the stages of sexual intercourse. In order to

embody these parallels more closely, Gass uses the color and texture of the page to indicate subtle alterations in Babs' mind rather than relying on traditional chapter divisions and pagination. Even the page itself is not ordered in the usual linear fashion; instead, typographical variations establish a different visual order for each individual page. The first eight pages, for example, are printed on blue, thin paper with very little texture; these pages suggest the rather slow beginning of intercourse and Babs' playful, low-intensity thoughts and remembrances. The next twelve pages are thicker, more fully textured, and olive in color; this section, which is also the most varied in typography and graphics, corresponds to the rising stages of Babs' sexual excitement and her wildly divergent thoughts. Next follows eight red pages, with paper of the same texture as the first section, suggesting the climax of intercourse and the direct, intensely intellectual climax of Babs' thoughts about language. Finally, the fourth section uses a thick, high-gloss white paper like that of expensive magazines; these pages parallel Babs' empty, lonely feelings after intercourse when she realizes how inadequate the experience has been.

Reinforcing the feelings produced by color and texture are the photographs of Babs' nude body throughout the book. The first section opens with a picture of her upper torso and face, with her mouth eagerly awaiting the printer's phallic S-block. As the book continues, her face becomes less prominent and her body itself is emphasized. The photo at the beginning of the White Section (4) shows Babs curled up in fetal position, with her head resting upon her knees in a position indicating her sad, lonely feeling of resignation.

By far the most intricately developed device used by Babs to call attention to her slighted charms is the wide variety of type styles and other graphic devices with which she constructs herself.[11] One of the functions of the typographic changes – at least in the Blue and Red Sections (1 and 3) – is to indicate different levels of consciousness in Babs' mind. The opening Blue Section, for instance, is divided into three monologues printed mainly in separate, standard typefaces: roman, *italic*, and **boldface**. With these typographic aids, we can separate the strands of Babs' thoughts roughly as follows: the roman sections deal with her memories about the past and her concern with words; the *italic* sections indicate her memories of her first sexual encounter; and the **boldface** sections present her views about the nature of fundamental body processes and their relation to her aspirations for 'saintly love'. The Blue Section (1) can be read largely as an ordinary narrative, from top to bottom, left to right; the different typefaces, however, enable us to read each level of Babs' thought as a whole (by reading all the *italics* as a unit, then reading the **boldface** sections together). In the Olive and Red Sections (2 and 3), however, the graphics and typography destroy any linear response; Gass's aim in using such techniques is to achieve, like Joyce in

*Ulysses*, a freedom from many of the language's traditionally imposed rules of syntax, diction, and punctuation. To help emphasize the incredible versatility of human consciousness, Joyce relied (most notably in the 'Cyclops' and the 'Oxen of the Sun' episodes) on linguistic parody of earlier styles. Like his fellow Irishman, Laurence Sterne, Joyce was quite willing to use unusual typographic devices to help present his parodies. The devices – Sterne's blank and marbled pages, Joyce's headlines, question-and-answer format, the typographic formality of the 'Circe' episode – are foreign to the 'pure' storyteller but are available to a writer by the nature of books and print alone. Hugh Kenner has persuasively argued that Joyce hoped to liberate the narration of *Ulysses* from the typographical conventions of ordinary narratives and notes that the linear, one-dimensional method of presenting most books simply could not do justice to Joyce's expansive view of language: 'There is something mechanical, Joyce never lets us forget, about all reductions of speech to arrangement of 26 letters. We see him playing in every possible way with the spatial organization of printed marks.'[12] Kenner's remarks are perceptive, although he overstates his point when he says that Joyce experimented with printed marks 'in every possible way'. Gass's work, written fifty years later (in the Age of McLuhan – himself a Joyce scholar), carries the methods of typographic freedom to a much fuller development.

Gass's intentions in *Willie Masters'* can be compared to Joyce's in other ways. Like Joyce's presentation of a parodic history of English styles in the 'Oxen of the Sun' section, Gass's work is practically a history of typography. One of Gass's original intentions for *Willie Masters'* was to reproduce the first-edition typeface of any lines quoted from other works; this proved impractical, but type styles are found from nearly every period since Gutenberg, ranging from pre-printing-press calligraphy to old German gothic, Victorian typeface, and modern advertising boldface.

In addition to mimicking typefaces, Gass presents many other typographic conventions, often with parodic intent. One amusing example is found in the Olive Section (2) in which a one-act play is presented with all the rigid typographic formality usually found in a written transcription of a play. Babs provides asterisked comments and explanations about stage directions, costumes, and props. These remarks begin in very small type, but as the play progresses the typeface becomes larger and bolder. Gradually the number of asterisks before each aside becomes impossible to keep up with, and the comments themselves become so large that the text of the play is crowded off the page – to make room for a page containing only large, star-shaped asterisks. Gass thus pokes fun at a typographic convention in much the same way as John Barth did (with quotation marks) in 'The Menelaid'. Gass also uses the asterisks for reasons we do not usually expect – for their *visual appeal*. As Babs notes, 'these asterisks are the prettiest things in print' (Olive Section, 2).

Throughout the Olive and Red Sections (2 and 3) are examples of many other typographic variations: concrete poems, quoted dialogue inscribed in comic-book style, pages which resemble eye-charts, a Burroughs' newspaper 'cut-up,' and even the representations of coffee-stains.

In addition to drawing attention to how words look, Babs makes us examine the way we read words. In particular, she reminds us that the Western conventions of reading – left-to-right, top-to-bottom, from first page to last – are all merely conventions. Indeed, as Michael Butor has pointed out, even in Western cultures we are probably more familiar with books which do not rely on linear development (like dictionaries, manuals, or encyclopedias) than we realize: 'It is a misconception for us to think that the only kind of book are those which transcribe a discourse running from start to finish, a narrative or essay, in which it is natural to read by starting on the first page in order to finish on the last.'[13] In *Willie Masters'* especially in the Olive and Red Sections (2 and 3), Gass typographically makes ordinary reading impossible. In the Red Section (3), for example, Babs begins four or five narratives on a single page. In order to follow these largely unrelated narratives, each presented in a different typeface, we cannot begin at the top of the page and read down; instead, we are forced to follow one section from page to page and then go back to the beginning for the second narrative. Like Joyce who forces us to page backwards and forwards to check and cross-check references, Gass is taking advantage of what Kenner has termed 'the book as book',[14] the book's advantage lies in the fact that we can go backwards and forwards rather than being forced to move ever forward – as we are with a movie or a spoken narrative. The use of asterisks and marginal glosses indicates Gass's willingness to take advantage of the expressive possibilities of Babs' form as words on a printed page; he uses a typographical method to deflect the eye from its usual horizontal vertical network. Kenner has defined the effect in discussing the use of footnotes:

> The man who composes a footnote, and sends it to the printer along with his text, has discovered among the devices of printed language something analogous to counterpoint: a way of speaking in two voices at once, or of ballasting or modifying or even bombarding with exceptions his own discourse without interrupting it. It is a step in the direction of discontinuity: or organizing blocks of discourse simultaneously in space rather than consecutively in time.[15]

Especially in the Red Section (3) of *Willie Masters'*, our eye is never allowed to move easily on the page left-to-right and top-to-bottom; instead we turn from page to page, backwards and forwards, moving our eye up and down in response to footnotes or asterisks, from left to right to check marginal glosses, and occasionally 'standing back' to observe the

organization of the page as a whole (as when we note that one is shaped like a Christmas tree, another like an eye-chart). The effect achieved here is remarkably close to Kenner's description of 'blocks of discourse' organized 'simultaneously in space rather than consecutively in time'.

The last – and most significant – method used by Babs to call attention to herself is also probably the least radical of her strategies. It is produced by the sensual, highly poetic quality of the language which she uses to create herself. This non-typographic method of focusing our attention on the words before us is often used by poets. In ordinary discourse and in the language of realistically motivated fiction, words do not usually call attention to themselves. The reason, as Valéry has explained, is that calling attention to words *as words* defeats the utility-function of ordinary language:

> Current, level language, the language that is used for a purpose, flies to its purpose, flies to its meaning, to its purely mental translation, and is lost in it ... Its form, its auditive aspect, is only a stage that the mind runs past without stopping. If pitch, if rhythm are present, they are there for the sake of sense, they occur only for the moment ... for meaning is its final aim.[16]

In ordinary discourse and in most fiction, words are used mainly as vehicles to refer us to a world (real or imaginary), and the words themselves remain invisible: as Babs says, 'The usual view is that you see through me, through what I am really – significant sound' (Red Section, 3). Babs, however, resembles the stereotyped woman in being vain about her physical qualities and resentful when she is used but not noticed. Babs shares with Valery (to whom Gass seems to owe much of his esthetics) the view that when words are placed in an esthetic context (as in a poem) their utility is sacrificed in favour of a unity of sound and sense:

> Again there is in every act of imagination a disdain of utility, and a glorious, free show of human strength; for the man of imagination dares to make things for no better reason than they please him – because he *lives*. And everywhere, again, he seeks out unity: in the world he unifies both sound and sense; ... between words and things he further makes a bond so that symbols seem to contain their objects.
>
> (Red Section, 3)

Like Barthelme's Snow White, who wishes 'there were some words in the world that were not the words, I always hear,'[17] Babs is bored with her own existence as she usually finds it: 'Why aren't there any decent words?' she exclaims at one point in the Blue Section (1); and in a footnote to the play in the Olive Section (2), she compares the 'dreary words' of ordinary

prose to ordinary action, which often loses all subtlety and beauty as it strains to make itself understood to an audience 'all of whom are in the second balcony.' Too often, claims Babs, writers – and readers – seem unaware that words make up the body of all literature. At one point she comments on the necessity of the writer accepting the medium in which he works. The passage is typical of the lyrical, highly 'poetic' language favored by Babs throughout her monologue:

> You are your body – you do not choose the feet you walk in – and the poet is his language. He sees the world, and words form in his eyes just like the streams and trees there. He feels everything verbally. Objects, passions, actions – I myself believe that the true kiss comprises a secret exchange of words, for the mouth was made by God to give form and sound to syllables; permit us to make, as our souls move, the magic music of names, for to say Cecilia, even in secret, is to make love.
>
> (Olive Section, 2)

These remarks not only direct our attention to the nature of the words on the page but also reinforce the sexual parallels that have been suggested. Even as we read these words, we have 'in secret' been making love – and hopefully our response has been better than Gelvin's.

If poetry is the language which Babs is trying to realize herself in, she admits that she rarely finds lovers appreciative enough to create her properly. When Gelvin leaves, she says: 'he did not, in his address, at any time, construct me. He made nothing, I swear. Empty I began, and empty I remained' (White Section, 4). Indeed, she even observes some inadequacies in our own response when she asks: 'Is that any way to make love to a lady, a lonely one at that, used formerly to having put the choicest portions of her privates flowered out in pots and vases' (Red Section, 3). The main problem, as Babs observes, is simply that we have forgotten how to make love appreciatively:

> You can't make love like that anymore – make love or manuscript. yet I have put my hand upon this body, here as no man ever has, and I have even felt my pencil stir, grow great with blood. But never has it swollen up in love. It moves in anger, always, against its paper.
>
> (Red Section, 3)

Today readers and writers alike approach lady language in the wrong spirit. The pencil, the writer's phallic instrument of creation, grows great nowadays only with blood, never with love. After intercourse, Babs is left alone; she sits and ponders her fate: 'They've done, the holy office over, and they turn their backs on me, I'm what they left, their turds in the

toilet. Anyway, I mustn't wonder why they don't return. Maybe I should put a turnstile in' (Red Section, 3).

Lonely and often ignored, Babs spends a good deal of time considering her own nature. Like many twentieth-century philosophers, she is very interested in the relationship between words and the world. In the Olive Section (2) she quotes (or quasi-quotes) John Locke's discussion of the way in which language develops from sense to impression to perception to concept. Locke shows the way our understanding sorts out our perceptions, and then concludes that we give proper names to things 'being such as much have an occasion to mark particularly'.[18] Babs has obviously taken Locke to heart, for she is constantly musing over the appropriateness of names in just this fashion. She wonders, for instance, why men do not assign proper names to various parts of their anatomy:

> They ought to name their noses like they named their pricks. Why not their ears too? – they frequently stick out. This is my morose Slav nose, Czar Nicholas. And these twins in my mirror, Rueben and Antony, they have large soft lobes ... If you had nice pleasant names for yourself all over, you might feel more at home, more among friends.
>
> (Blue Section, 1)

The passage shows that Babs confers upon language the same magical potency which Stephen Dedalus gave it in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: she exalts the habit of verbal association into a principle for the arrangement of experience. Of course, she is right – words help arrange our experience and often exhibit the power to make us 'feel more at home, more among friends'. Naming something gives us a sort of power over it, just as we become the master of a situation by putting it into words. On the other hand, Babs confronts 'the terror of terminology' (Blue Section, 1) when she considers specific occasions when words fail to suggest what they are supposed to. As might be expected, Babs' example of an inappropriate word is drawn from a sexual context: 'Screws – they say *screw* – what an idea! did any of them ever? It's the lady who wooves and woggles. Nail – bag – sure – *nail* is nearer theirs' (Blue Section, 1).

Because of her envy of poetic language, Babs is especially interested in circumstances – as with the language of Shakespeare or any great poet – where words become something more than simply Lockean devices for calling to mind concepts. Babs thinks a good deal about the 'poetic ideal': the word which lies midway between the 'words of nature' (which constitute reality) and the words of ordinary language (which are nothing in themselves but arbitrary symbols which direct our minds elsewhere). Babs explains her view of what qualities ordinary words have:

> What's in a name but letters, eh? and everyone owns *them* ... the sound SUN or the figures S, U, N, are purely arbitrary modes of recalling their objects, and they have the further advantage of being nothing *per se*, for while the sun, itself, is large and orange and boiling, the sight and the sound, SUN, is but a hiss drawn up through the nose.
>
> (Olive Section, 2)

At times Babs tries to exploit the sound of words at the expense of their sense (or referential quality) in a way which may remind us of the symbolist poets. For example, she takes one of her favorite words ('catafalque') and repeats it for several lines; she follows up by creating a lovely-sounding but totally non-sensical poem: 'catafalque catafalque neighborly mew/Ozenfant Valery leonine nu' (Olive Section, 2). What Babs is obviously looking for, especially in creating herself, is the kind of fusion of sound and sense found in the best poets. She says admiringly of Shakespeare at one point that 'Now the language of Shakespeare ... not merely recalls the cold notion of the thing, it expresses and becomes a part of its reality, so that the sight and sound, SUN, in Shakespeare is warm and orange and greater than the page it lies on' (Olive Section, 2). Nearly all the strategies of *Willie Masters'* are closely related to the idea that in literature words should not merely point somewhere else but should be admired for themselves.

*Willie Masters'*, then, is a remarkably pure example of metafiction. As we watch 'imagination imagining itself imagine' (Blue Section, 1), we are witnessing a work self-consciously create itself out of the materials at hand – words. After Babs has endured still another unsatisfactory encounter (with Gelvin – but possibly with us as well), she sums up some of the problems she faces by quoting Dryden:

> The rest I have forgot; for cares and time
> Change all things, and untune my soul to rhyme.
> I could have once sung down a summer's sun;
> But now the chime of poetry is done;
> My voice grows hoarse; I feel the notes decay,
> As if the wolves had seen me first today
>
> (White Section, 4)

Babs finishes the poem by adding a final, optimistic line of her own – she will 'make a start against the darkness anyway'. In the concluding pages Babs makes an eloquent plea for a new kind of language capable of provoking the kind of loving response she so desires. Her plea concludes her narrative and provides a brilliant example of the sort of language she is calling for:

> Then let us have a language worthy of our world, a democratic style where rich and well-born nouns can roister with some sluttish verb yet find themselves content and uncomplained of. We want a diction which contains the quaint, the rare, the technical, the obsolete, the old, the lent, the nonce, the local slang of the street, in neighborly confinement. Our tone should suit our time: uncommon quiet dashed with common thunder. It should be as young and quick and sweet and dangerous as we are. Experimental and expansive ... it will give new glasses to new eyes, and put those plots and patterns down we find our modern lot in. Metaphor must be its god now gods are metaphors ... It's not the languid pissing prose we got, we need; but poetry, the human muse, full up, erect and on the charge, impetuous and hot and loud and wild like. Messalina going to the stews or those damn rockets streaming headstrong into stars.
>
> (White Section, 4)

As the best metafiction does, *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife* forces us to examine the nature of fiction-making from new perspectives. If Babs (and Gass) have succeeded, our attention has been focused on the act of reading words in a way we probably have not experienced before. The steady concern with the *stuff* of fiction, words, makes Gass's work unique among metafictions which have appeared thus far. At the end of the book, we encounter a reminder from Gass stamped onto the page: 'YOU HAVE FALLEN INTO ART – RETURN TO LIFE.' When we do return to life, we have, hopefully, a new appreciation – perhaps even love – of that lonesome lady in Gass's title.

## Notes

1. JEAN ROUSSET, '*Madame Bovary*: Flaubert's Anti-Novel,' in *Madame Bovary*, ed., PAUL DE MAN (New York: W.W. Norton, 1965), p. 439.
2. WILLIAM GASS, 'Philosophy and the Form of Fiction,' *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 25. Two critics who have recently used the term are ROBERT SCHOLES, 'Metafiction,' *'Iowa Review*, 1 (Fall 1970), 100–15, and NEIL SCHMITZ, ROBERT COOVER and the Hazards of Metafiction,' *Novel*, 29 (Spring 1974), 210–19.
3. Among significant additions to the list would be STEVE KATZ's *The Exaggerations of Peter Prince* (1968), EARL M. RAUCH's *Dirty Pictures from the Prom* (1969), RON SUKENICK's *The Death of the Novel and Other Stories* (1969), RAYMOND FEDERMAN's *Double or Nothing* (1971), ALAN FRIEDMAN's *Hermaphrodeity* (1972), STEPHEN MILLHAUSER's *Edwin Mullhouse* (1972), GILBERT SORRENTINO's *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things* (1972), RON SUKENICK's *Out* (1973), and JERRY ANDREWS' *The Story of Harold* (1974).
4. Gass, p. 24.

5. ROGER SHATTUCK, 'The Art of Stillness,' *The Banquet Years* (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 328.
6. WILLIAM GASS, *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife* (designed by Lawrence Levy and photographed by Burton L. Rudman) was first published in *Tri-Quarterly Supplement*, 2 (1968); it was re-issued by Alfred A. Knopf in 1971. All the special effects of the original edition (differences in page texture and color) are not present in the Knopf edition. Although neither edition has pagination, the book is divided into four clearly distinct sections or chapters. In the *Tri-Quarterly* edition these sections are easily distinguished by differed page colors; in the Knopf edition the first three sections cannot be distinguished by color or texture (the fourth section has the same white glossy finish as the first edition), but the divisions are still fairly evident: the first section (the 'Blue Section') ends with the picture of the nude woman with the caption, 'OO-OOO-OO my Mister Handsome how could you?; the second section ('Olive Section') consists largely of the closet drama and concludes on the page before the appearance of the picture of the woman's leg and representation of the coffee stain – which opens the third section ('Red'), concluded in both editions when the white, glossy fourth section begins. References here indicate both the section color and number (the Blue Section is 1, the Olive 2, the Red 3, and the White 4).
7. William Gass, 'The Clairvoyant,' *Location*, 1, 2 (1964), 59–66; and 'The Sugar Crock,' *Art and Literature*, 9 (1966), 158–71.
8. Gass, 'The Clairvoyant,' p. 62.
9. WILLIAM GASS, 'The Medium of Fiction,' *Fiction and the Figures of Life*, p. 27.
10. WILLIAM GASS, 'In the Heart of the Heart of the Country,' *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country and Other Stories* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 202.
11. Among contemporary works of fiction which have used typographic experimentation, the most interesting are MICHAEL BUTOR's *Mobile* (1963), STEVE KATZ's *The Exaggeration of Peter Prince* (1968), RAYMOND FEDERMAN's *Double or Nothing* (1971), and KOBO ABE's *The Box Man* (1974).
12. HUGH KENNER, *Flaubert, Joyce, and Beckett: the Stoic Comedians* (London: W.H. Allen, 1964), p. 47.
13. MICHAEL BUTOR, 'The Book as Object,' *Inventor* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), p. 44.
14. Kenner, p. 47; Butor refers to basically the same thing with his term 'the book as object'.
15. Kenner, p. 40.
16. PAUL VALERY, 'Discourse on the Declamation of Verse,' *Selected Writings* (New York: New Directions, 1964), p. 157.
17. DONALD BARTHELME, *Snow White* (New York: Atheneum, 1967), p. 6.
18. JOHN LOCKE, 'An Essay Concerning Human Understanding,' (Book II, Chapter XI, Section 9), *Selections* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1956), p. 144.