

# Musical Patterns in William H. Gass's "A Fugue" and *The Pedersen Kid*

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## Abstract

This article aims to investigate musico-literary intermediality in William H. Gass's works by examining both "A Fugue", a passage from *The Tunnel* (1995) and his novella *The Pedersen Kid* (1961). The paper focuses on Gass's conception and use of language, musicality and musicalization. One of the questions raised is to what extent texts that do not necessarily present a direct link to music can be given a musical reading. By analyzing Gass's novella the article demonstrates that the intermedial context conveys semiotic meanings that may allow a better understanding of the contents relating to initiation and rites of passage that the story draws upon, thus providing a new reading of Gass's text. On a more general level, the article reflects upon the textual effects produced by musico-literary intermediality and their impact on time structures in fiction.

**Key-words:** William H. Gass, *The Pedersen Kid*, *The Tunnel*, fugue, round, canon, initiation, rite of passage, intermediality, musicality, musicalization of fiction

When speaking about his novella *The Pedersen Kid* (1961), American writer William H. Gass once declared: "I've used a fugue, literally" (Castro, "An Interview with William H. Gass" 2003: 76). But then, how *literal* can this inter-artistic rapprochement be in a text that does not even mention music? The reader may well be forgiven for overlooking the musical structure Gass refers to, since the text carefully bypasses any single thematization of the fugue. Intermedial reading clues are somewhat more obvious in "A Fugue" subsection of Gass's novel *The Tunnel* (1995). These two texts belong to two different types of musico-literary intermediality, as defined by Werner Wolf (Wolf, *The Musicalization of Fiction*, 1999: 35-70): on the one hand, *The Pedersen Kid*, implying a covert, non-thematized form of interrelation between music and literature that can only be inferred from extratextual or contextual sources; on the other hand, "A Fugue," where a slightly more overt, not thematized, but at least a more direct interrelation between the two arts is brought into life.

This article aims (a) to bring the musical influence in Gass's works to the fore by examining both "A Fugue" passage from *The Tunnel* and *The Pedersen Kid* novella in

compliance with Gass's conception of language and its musicality; (b) to assess ways in which texts that do not necessarily manifest a direct link to music can be given a musical reading by focusing on intermedial time patterns; (c) and to demonstrate that the musical undertext conveys symbolic, iconic or even allegorical meanings that, in the case of Gass's *The Pedersen Kid* allow a better understanding of initiation and rite of passage paradigms the story draws upon.

In fact these two texts offer ample opportunity to raise questions about the interplay of temporal and symbolical contents between different media. Gass's fiction provides an example of intermedial intersections tied to a specific conception of language and thought. Intermediality thus plays a role in construing textual temporalities. Such *transtemporality* is conducive to a new understanding of motives and patterns in Gass's creative oeuvre.

One of the most crucial aspects of Gass's writing lies in the author's stance on language and words. Linguistic formalism – motives and patterns – are a token of musical presences within the text, bringing the aesthetic side of language into the spotlight. At a public reading (Gass, "William Gass with Michael Silverblatt", 1998), Gass suggested that readers should feel language physically in their mouths. Such formal and concrete approach to language is brought to bear on the musical condition of Gass's texts.

In *The Pedersen Kid*, a formal structure is immediately perceivable owing to the division of the text that unfolds in three stages, each of which is further divided into three subsections. This distribution is evocative of proportional architecture. and it comes to symbolise circular movement. Furthermore, the author points to a formal, strict constraint the text is modelled upon: "I tried to formulate a set of requirements for the story as clear and rigorous as those of the sonnet" (Gass, "A Revised and Expanded Preface" 1981: xxv).

Both in his essays and in the interviews he gives, Gass makes references to the musicality of language. With varying degrees of literalness, language is thought of as a locus of a character's existence – an individual's life dependent on language or even a subject being dominated and overwhelmed by it. In "Emma Enters a Sentence of Elizabeth Bishop's" (1998), the reader will find a humoristic instance of such relationship of the character to language. In his preface to *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country*, by resorting to the idea of 'possession,' the author underlines the role language plays and the way in which it can become a commanding presence:

Rhythmic, repetitious, patterned, built of simple phrases like small square blocks [...] with magical and imaginary logic [...] these stories were fond possessions which fondly possessed their possessor [...]. And the best ones were those which sounded, when you heard them for the first time, as if you had heard them many times before. (Gass "A Revised and Expanded Preface" 1981: xxii)

If words create that sense of familiar but mesmerizing effect, it is because they combine and by forming networks and interrelations, just as musical sounds do, they form full-fledged worlds and realities to be inhabited:

[...] I knew that words were communities made by the repeated crossing of contexts the way tracks formed towns, and that sentences did not swim indifferently through others like schools of fish of another species, but were like lengths of web within a web, despite one's sense of the stitch and knot of design inside them. (Gass "A Revised and Expanded Preface" 1981: xxxiv)

For Gass, the musical quality of a text seems to have its roots in such precedence given to language. In an interview, the author highlights the interrelationship between writing and musical composition:

When I'm practicing writing, I'm not visually oriented but auditory, so the writing of it – word by word, line by line – is done by ear, and in that sense music is the dominant art. You actually have both elements: the linear, serial problem – literature does unfold one word at a time – but the completed object has to be conceived as a whole. Those two aspects are interacting, and there's really a tension between them that can be used. (Castro, "An Interview with William Gass" 2003: 75)

Hence, the acoustic side of language plays a crucial role in the very process of writing, showing something about the genetic aspect of Gass's works – the way in which texts get written, but also the way in which Gass imagines them being read. In addition, what is at stake here is the relationship between thought and language, where language itself seems to prevail. In his essay "Finding a Form," Gass broaches his experience of writing, depicting it as a perfect fusion of language and thought: "To see the world through words means more than merely grasping it through gossipacious talk or amiable description. Language, unlike any other medium, I think, is the very instrument and organ of the mind. It is not the representation of thought, as Plato believed, and hence only an inadequate copy; but it is thought itself." (Gass, "Finding a Form" 1996: 35-36) Language is thus liberated from its subservience to thought and made coterminous with it. In another essay, "The Music of Prose," Gass examines the notion of musicality, homing in on sound patterns and rhythmical schemes in prose and drawing musical comparisons:

Yet no prose can pretend to greatness if its music is not also great; if it does not, indeed, construct a surround of sound to house its meaning [...]. For prose has a pace; it is dotted with stops and pauses, frequent rests, inflections rise and fall like a low range of hills; certain tones are prolonged; there are patterns of stress and harmonious measures; [...] alliteration will trouble the tongue, consonance ease its sound out, so that any mouth making that music will feel its performance even to the back of the teeth and to the glottal stop, [...], vowels will open and consonants close like blooming plants; repetitive schemes will act as refrains, and there will be phrases – little motifs – to return to, like the tonic; clauses will be balanced by other clauses the way a waiter carries trays; [...] clots of concepts will dissolve and then recombine, so we shall find endless variations on the same theme; a central idea, along with its many modifications, like soloist and chorus, will take their turns until, suddenly, all sing at once the same sound. (Gass "The Music of Prose" 1996: 314)

What seems especially relevant for the purpose of this paper is the fact that Gass frequently compares prose-writing to musical composition and auditory experience. The author goes as far as envisaging himself as a composer rather than a writer: "A lot of rhetorical structures are musical, with their parallelisms and so on. There is also the possibility of carrying on many voices – of polyphony. Most of my own images come, I think, from opera. I have a fondness for the catalogue aria. Often, too, I find myself talking about things in poetic forms. This stanza, I'll say to myself, is giving me trouble, instead of this paragraph. I think: this aria, this duet. (Castro "An Interview with William Gass" 2003: 76)

Several parameters combine to foster musicality of prose language: rhetorical devices, repetitive patterns, rhythmical schemes as well as sound echoes. When writing about his collection of stories, *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country*, Gass reflects on the musicality of language with regard to poetry: "In any case, during the actual writing, the management of monosyllables, the alternation of short and long sentences, the emotional integrity of the paragraph, the elevation of the most ordinary diction into some semblance of poetry, became my fanatical concern. (Gass "A Revised and Expanded Preface" 1981: xxvii)

What then is musicality in Gass's prose? Noticeably, there is a sort of playfulness with language his texts are deeply imbued with, springing from phenomena related to parallelisms, repetitions and rhythmical patterns. It also has something to do with Stephen P. Scher's distinction between 'word music' and 'verbal music' (Scher "Notes Toward a Theory of Verbal Music" 1970). Syntactic mirroring (hypozeugis), for instance, singles out some structural patterns in "The Pedersen Kid." In the following excerpt, the hypozeugis is based on {a and b} coordination (underlined) whereas verbatim repetition (italics) allows some of the words to stand out: "Hans had laid steaming *towels* over the *kid's* chest and stomach. He was rubbing *snow* on the *kid's* legs and feet. *Water* from the *snow* and *water* from the *towels* had run off the *kid's* table where the *dough* was, and the *dough* was turning pasty, sticking to the *kid's* back and behind. (Gass *The Pedersen Kid* 1981: 6, my emphasis) It is noteworthy that the two elements are first exposed {(X: *water* '!' *steam/towels*) and (Y: *water* '!' *snow*)} and then interweaved {X+Y: *snow and towels*}.

Such musicality is far from constituting a purely harmonious aspect of prose. Quite the opposite, since in Gass's novella the narrator's voice is that of an adolescent whose language is predicated on both oral attributes and a subjective frame of consciousness, musicality is a matter of conveying a non linear, not necessarily logical, and a cyclical and repetitive linguistic temporality. The subjective consciousness is, as it were, possessed by language, overwhelmed by it, inhabiting the sentence. Consequently, the musicality of language chimes with emotional aspects. Resorting to a musical metaphor, Gass writes that "the mental representation must be flowing and a bit repetitious; the dialogue realistic but musical." (Gass "A Revised and Expanded Preface" 1981: xxvi)

Dialogues, too, are dependent on specific patterns. In the following excerpt, repetition is magnified due to epizeuxis, which provides a pattern of subsequent

repetition, as well as hypozeuxis emerging in the use of both the infinitive and the negative (“neither”, “not”, “nothing”): Pa *don’t* care about the kid. Jorge.

Well he *don’t*. He don’t care at all, and I *don’t* care to get my head busted neither. He *don’t* care, and I *don’t* care to have his shit flung on me. He *don’t* care about anybody. All he cares about is his whiskey and that dry crack in his face. Get pig-drunk – that’s what he wants. He *don’t* care about nothing else at all. Nothing. Not Pedersen’s kid neither. That cock. Not the kid neither. (Gass *The Pedersen Kid* 1981: 6, my emphasis)

There is a ritualistic or even religious and mystical dimension to musicality, insofar as oralisation and repetition create lists and aural patterns that may remind one of litany-like, obsessive or impassioned prosody. “A ritual effect is needed” (Gass, “A Revised and Expanded Preface” 1981: xxvi), and which has something to do with the role of the body in narrative. On the one hand, the body is reflected within the narrative voice, or the necessity to find an adequate voicing for a story: “[...] few of the stories one has at the top of one’s head to tell get told, because the mind does not always possess the voice for them” (Gass, “A Revised and Expanded Preface”, 1981, xiii). On the other hand, the corporeity of the verb relates to what Gass describes as an “iron law of composition” that consists in “[...] the exasperatingly slow search among the words [...] written for the words which were to come, and the necessity for continuous revision, so that each work would seem simply the first paragraph written, swollen with sometimes years of scrutiny around that initial verbal wound” (Gass “A Revised and Expanded Preface” 1981: xxv). Such verbal wound is the bodily engagement with the constant reprise – the author’s rewriting of the text as well as its repetitive unfolding for the reader. While such corporeity suggests a textual growth/outgrowth, the author evokes an almost organic inception of his texts: “They appeared in the world obscurely, too – slow brief bit by bit, through gritted teeth and much despairing; and if any person were to suffer such a birth, we’d see the skull come out on Thursday, skin appear by week’s end, liver later, jaws arrive just after eating.” (Gass “A Revised and Expanded Preface” 1981: xix) Thus, textual musicality in Gass is grounded in traits related to rhetorical and prosodic devices, rhythmical and sonorous patterns, and the author’s specific conception of thought and language. Written at the edges of its own mediality, building up from that swelling verbal wound, the text is formed out of derivation, extension and expansion.

Gass’s technique of extension/expansion may be understood in compliance with musical structures, as is the case in one of his more overtly musicalized texts – “A Fugue” passage in *The Tunnel*. This excerpt may be considered a piece of evidence bringing out Gass’s interest in formal musical transpositions in literature and as an interesting example of how such musicalization may be brought into being. Gass’s insistence on the centrality of the material aspect of language – its musicality – finds its verification in musicalization, defined as a form of “transformation of music into literature” (Wolf *The Musicalization of Fiction* 1999: 51) at a structural level, so that “the verbal appears to be or become [...] similar to music or to effects connected with certain compositions” (Wolf *The Musicalization of Fiction* 1999: 51), thus imitating music.

Musicalization here is modeled on a specific type of composition – the fugue – characterized by (a) its polyphonic texture, (b) its monothematism, (c) and its specific

extension of the initial theme. It is defined as a “composition, or a compositional technique, in which imitative counterpoint involving one main theme is the most important or most characteristic device of formal extension” (Bullivant “Fugue” 1980: 9). The main point is that a fugue is not necessarily a form, but rather a type of polyphonic movement, contrapuntal technique, or simply a type of texture: “Fugue has fairly been called a procedure (or even a texture) rather than a form; and fugal treatment is found in many large works in various forms, among them ritornello and sonata” (Bullivant “Fugue” 1980: 9). What is meant by musical texture (the word itself stems from Lat. *texere*, meaning “to weave,” thus evoking a specific type of fabric) is the nature of the combination of elements (voices) within a composition, so that, overall, one distinguishes between monophonic texture (melody without accompaniment), homophonic texture (accompanied melody) and polyphonic texture (several intermingling melodies or voices). The fugue is dominated by the latter: at least two “parts” or “voices” combine in the unfolding of the composition.

Equally important is monothematism. Even though fugues for more than one theme do exist, they are more commonly monothematic, which means that there is usually one main theme, called the subject (S) that is taken up, by dint of modifications and mirroring, by other voices. Crucial here is the process of extension and expansion of that single, initial material that will undergo variations by virtue of imitative techniques (imitation). Such extension usually abides by a rather strictly defined process, starting with an exposition, when the subject is announced by all the voices, usually at different pitches. The subject is likely to be easily recognizable, which is why its first entry is frequently unaccompanied. After the subject is announced by the first voice, comes the answer (A), which is either understood as a real answer, that is to say “a repetition of the subject in a different key” (Williams “Fugue” 1906: 116), or as a looser form of imitation of the subject. As a counterpoint to the answer, there is usually a theme which is called the counter-subject (CS) and free parts may be played by other voices (FP). The exposition comprising the statement of the subject by all the voices is the most essential part of a fugue (Boyden, *An Introduction to Music* 1959: 62):

	<b>II</b>	A	CS	FP
<b>I</b>	S	CS	FP	FP
	<b>III</b>	S	CS	
		<b>IV</b>	A	

### Fugal exposition

The middle section of a fugue – made up of *episodes* – is freer in terms of its organization, although it commonly consists in a modulated statement of material based on the subject and the counter-subject. However, the composition remains monothematic and contrapuntal all through. It ends with a denser polyphonic part called the *stretto*, and, finally, a *coda*.

In literature, polyphonic texture remains a metaphor that can only be vaguely rendered by a text being read aloud. This impossibility has often been underlined by

critics studying musicalization. Even though Gass writes that “[t]o speak of the music of prose is to speak in metaphor” (Gass “The Music of Prose” 1996: 313), his “A Fugue” can be viewed as drawing on the fugal musical technique. By overtly borrowing a musical title, the passage calls for a structural analogy with music.

But then, what elements and parameters create the effect of musical formalism? As far as musicalization is concerned, three levels should be clearly distinguished: (a) the level of concepts and ideas; (b) that of voices; (c) and that of words and their interrelations.

In terms of concepts, it could be considered that the subject matter dwells on a “refusal”: [S] {not – dog}. The text is monothematic just like a fugue. The refusal is echoed by the father’s order not to feed the dog at home, from which a secondary theme is derived, or a *counter-subject* [CS] {feed – dog – elsewhere}. The subject and the countersubject lead to yet another idea which constitutes the answer – the mother feeding or “poisoning” the dog on gin [A] {mother – feed – dog}. The three fugal elements are closely intertwined.

It should be borne in mind, however, that the assignation of any one such textual parameter in view of an analogical correspondence with fugal components, is very arduous and verges on the arbitrary. The question of a problematic identification of musico-literary analogies – should one consider a fugal *subject* in a text to be a narrative voice? A theme? A simple sentence? A cluster of words? – has arisen in many musicalization studies (e.g. Witen 2010), which only underlines the difficulty that structural intermediality is confronted with. Gass himself makes use of the term “fugato,” suggesting a loose fugue-text relationship (Gass “William Gass with Michael Silverblatt” 1998).

As to the *vocal* level, the text foregrounds a narrative polyphony. Two voices combine: a first person narrator (the son) and the second, more indirect source of utterance (the father). Whereas the mother’s words are reported only indirectly, the father’s voice may be viewed as a quasi-autonomous narrative source, since it is set up through reported speech and free direct speech. The text thus pits one voice against the other.

As far as the linguistic level is concerned, it is possible to point out: (a) parallelisms and echoes; (b) emphatic articulation through polysyndeton (the coordinating conjunction “and” is used 16 times, “or” 7 times, and there are 8 concessive conjunctions); (c) negativity (17 negative words such as “not” or “never”); (d) word recurrences: “dog,” “father,” and “mother” (“dog” appears 23 times, but together with its synonyms – “pal,” “spitz,” and “mutt” – there are 42 occurrences).

By combining the voices (V1, for the son, and V2, for the father), the subject and the derived concepts, a clearly perceptible two-step pattern emerges as an exposition:

[S] {V1} My dad wouldn’t let me have a dog. {V2} A dog? A dog we don’t need. [A] {V1} My mom made the neighbor’s spitz her pal by poisoning it with the gin she sprinkled on the table scraps. [CS] {V2} Feed it somewhere else, my dad said. A dog we don’t need. [S] {V1} My dad wouldn’t let me have a dog. {V2} Our neighbor’s spitz –

that mutt – he shits in the flower beds. Dog doo we don’t need. [CS] {V2} At least feed it somewhere else, my dad said. [A] {V1} My mom made the table scraps tasty for her pal, the neighbor’s spitz – that mutt – by sprinkling them with gin. (Gass *The Tunnel* 2012: 239-240)

The pattern may be synthesized as follows, with [S] appearing twice in the two voices, followed by the derived elements [A] or [CS]:

I [S] {V1} {V2}[A] {V1}[CS] {V2}

II [S] {V1} {V2} [CS] {V2} [A] {V1}

Next comes a part that is structured through a combination of elements and then their alternation with a return to the subject and its derivatives:

[A+S] {V2} You’re poisoning Pal, my dad said, but never mind, we don’t need that mutt. [A+S] {V1} My mom thought anything tasted better with a little gin to salt it up. That way my mom made the neighbor’s spitz her pal, and maddened dad who wouldn’t let me have a dog. [~S] {V1} He always said we didn’t need one, they crapped on the carpet and put dirty paws on the pant’s leg of guests and yapped at cats or anyone who came to the door. [~S] {V2} A dog? A dog we don’t need. We don’t need chewed shoes and dog hairs on the sofa, fleas in the rug, dirty bowls in every corner of the kitchen, dog stink on our clothes. [A] {V1} But my mom made the neighbor’s spitz her pal anyway by poisoning it with the gin she sprinkled on the table scraps like she was baptising bones. [CS] {V2} At least feed it somewhere else, my dad said. [S] {V1} My dad wouldn’t let me have a pal. (Gass *The Tunnel* 2012: 239-240)

This part may be considered as a transition leading to episodes, where the subject is re-announced, modified, as is shown the following scheme:

III [A+S] {V2} [A+S] {V1}

IV [~S] {V1} [~S] {V2} [A] {V1} [CS] {V2}

The last part seems to echo the episode section [E] in a fugue where the initial material is modulated and further transformed:

[E1→S] {V2} Who will have to walk that pal, he said. I will. And it’s going to be snowing or it’s going to be raining and who will be waiting by the vacant lot at the corner in the cold wet wind, waiting for the damn dog to do his business? Not you, Billy boy Christ, you can’t even be counted on to bring in the garbage cans or mow the lawn. [E2→S] {V2} So no dog. A mutt we don’t need, we don’t need dog doo in the flower beds, chewed shoes, fleas; what we need is the yard raked, like I said this morning. No damn dog. [E3→A+CS] {V2} No mutt for your mother either even if she tries to get around me by feeding it when my back is turned, when I’m away at work earning her gin money so the sick thing can shit in a stream on the flower seeds; at least she should feed it somewhere else; it’s always hanging around; is it a light string in the hall or a cloth on the table to be always hanging around? [E1+E2→S] {V2} No. Chewed shoes, fleas, muddy paws and yappy daddle, bowser odor: a dog we don’t need. Suppose it bites the postman: do you get sued? No. I am the one waiting at the corner vacant lot in the rain, the snow, the cold wet wind, waiting for the dog to do his damn business, and I get sued. You don’t. Christ, you can’t even be counted on to clip the hedge. You know:

snick snack. So no dog, my dad said. [E4→E1+E2+E3] {V1} Though we had a dog nevertheless. That is, my mom made the neighbor's pal her mutt, and didn't let me have him for mine, either, because it just followed her around – yip nip – wanting to lap gin and nose its grease-sogged bread. So we did have a dog in the house, even though it just visited, and it would rest its white head in my mother's lap and whimper and my father would throw down his paper and say shit! and I would walk out of the house and neglect to mow or rake the yard, or snick snack the hedge or bring the garbage cans around. [S] {V1} My dad wouldn't let me have a dog. {V2} A dog? A dog we don't need, he said. So I was damned if I would fetch. (Gass *The Tunnel* 2012: 239-240)

Voices first derive elements from the subject, the counter-subject or the answer, only to go on and to combine those elements, as though the text were modelled on a denser polyphonic texture, reminiscent of the *stretto* part in a fugue. The end brings yet another return to the subject, followed by a *coda*:

V [E1→S] {V2} [E2→S] {V2} [E3→A+CS] {V2} [E1+E2→S] {V2} [E4→E1+E2+E3] {V1}

VI [S] {V1} {V2}

A less linear reading of the text – provided that one imagines a simultaneous unfolding of two voices – lends itself to the following pattern:

{V1} [S] [A] [S] [A] [A+S] [S] [A]

[E4→E1+E2+E3] [S]

{V2} [S] [CS] [S] [CS] [A+S]

[S] [CS] [E1→S] [E2→S] [E3→A+CS] [E1+E2→S] [S]

What characterizes this passage is a highly structured network of patterns that take after the way in which fugal elements are exposed by means of mirroring and imitation. In music, the imitative technique is the basic operating principle of all contrapuntal works, such as fugue or canon. The musical materials undergo variations on account of mutual imitation of voices, achieved with the help of a variety of devices, some of which are enumerated below:

augmentation	notes values are lengthened
diminution	notes values are shortened
inversion	the subject played upside down
<i>cancrizans</i> /retrograde motion	the subject is given backwards
<i>per arsin et thesin</i>	the main beat is displaced

In other words, imitation allows voices to alternate varying the initial material – or part of it – and echoing each other by exchange and mirroring.

Similarly, in the fugal passage from *The Tunnel*, the first occurrence [A1] uses {(a) *the neighbor's spitz* (b) *her pal*} as (a) direct object (b) object complement; the second occurrence [A2] uses {(b) *her pal*} as an indirect object. While {*sprinkled*} in [A1] is the verb of the relative clause within the adverbial clause {*by poisoning it with the gin she sprinkled on the table scraps*}, it becomes a gerund in the second adverbial [A2] {*by sprinkling*}, whereas the adjunct {*on the table scraps*} in [A1] becomes the object of the main clause verb in [A2].

Other forms of variation are used in the text: displacements, like the emphatic “damn” ({*the damn dog to do his business*} → {*the dog to do his damn business*}); tense variations ({*it's going to be raining*} → {*in the rain*}, {*who will be waiting*} → {*I'm the one waiting*}); semantic variation on polysemy through antanaclasis ({*lap gin*} → {*in my mother's lap*}), through synonymy {*dog* → *mutt* → *spitz*}, or letter chiasmus {*lap* → *pal*}; sound variation through paronomasia ({*spitz* → *shits*, *crapped* → *carpet*, *maddened* → *damned*}), alliteration ({*my mom made*} or {*wet wind waiting*}), polyptoton ({*tasty* → *tasted*} or {*yapped* → *yappy*}), rhyme or homeoteleuton {*snowing*, *going*, *raining*, *waiting*}. The specific clipped rhythm of the text, partly due to an overwhelming majority of monosyllabic words, must also be pointed out (555 monosyllables out of 651 polysyllables – including contractions –, monosyllables thus accounting for about 85% of the words).

Only a limited number of elements forming the verbal material are used and transformed, and the text resorts to imitation, since fragments echo one another, and abundant use is made of variation and inversion. Clearly, what prevails is the general impression of a polyphonic structure obtained through imitative effects.

The analysis of “A Fugue” provides crucial bearing for examining the second text under study, *The Pedersen Kid*. First and foremost, it must be recalled that no direct and explicit mention of music is made within this text. Therefore, if one were to venture to propound that there is a solid link between this text and musical techniques, it would be a covert and indirect form of musicalization.

The mere structure of Gass's novella is telling. Anchored in snowy scenery and showing a purely masculine universe, steeped in misogyny, sexual abuse, alcoholism and violence, the story is organized around three stages, stemming from the tripartite structure of the narrative: Gass himself points to the structure revolving around (a) discovery, (b) efforts, and (c) escape. The initial point of reference is described as “evil as a visitation – sudden, mysterious, violent, inexplicable” (Gass “A Revised and Expanded Preface” 1981: xxvi). Hence, there seems to be a structural *mise en abyme* articulated on a pivotal form, connoting circularity and mirroring. An intertextual intermedial bond might even be asserted between Gass's choice of theme – evil as a sudden visitation – and one of the early musicalized texts, Thomas de Quincey's “Dream Fugue” (De Quincey *The English Mail Coach* 1849: 1968) whose theme happens to be sudden death.

At the onset of the story, the reader is presented with the discovery of the inanimate body of a teenager, Steve Pedersen. Almost frozen, the body is found at the Sergens' farm by the farm worker, Big Hans. Once he has been revived, Steve Pedersen tells his story: he has fled his parents' farm (the Pedersens) following the appearance of a strange man, armed and clad in green mackinaw, yellow gloves, and a black hat. Big Hans, Jorge, the narrator of Gass's story, and the narrator's father, leave the Sergens' farm to go and save the Pedersens.

Beset with obstacles as their journey turns out to be, they manage to reach the Pedersens' farm, whereupon the reader is presented with a series of eerie developments,

evoking dream or fancy: the owners of the farm are absent, the characters wait for the strange visitor, and then Jorge muses on a series of acts that seem to suggest he murders both Big Hans and his father. The end of the story brings us back to silence and snow: the travelers have all vanished into thin air – all but Jorge, who seems to be willing to stay at the Pedersens' farm.

The plot of the novella being very simple, the story reminds us of the monothematic nature of fugue. Gass states that “[a]ll should be subordinated to that end-” (Gass “A Revised and Expanded Preface” 1981: xxvi) but he also states that evil remains inexplicable: “The force has gone as it came” (Gass “A Revised and Expanded Preface” 1981: xxvi-xxvii). The idea of inexplicability may be associated with all forms of indeterminacy. If the source of evil remains unknown, so does the upshot of the story, so that the novella seems to end when it actually started, giving precedence to circular or spiral patterns. Inexplicability is also allied to the “covering the moral layer with a frost of epistemological doubt” (Gass “A Revised and Expanded Preface” 1981: xxvii). Perhaps the image of frost as a temporal paralysis has something to do with Rabelais's frozen images. Perhaps intermediality as well as such intangible presence, as if it were a hidden and undecipherable layer of text.

One of the readings that could be suggested for Gass's novella is attributable to its symbolical meaning as a representation of a rite of passage. The story, told from the first-person viewpoint of an adolescent narrator, Jorge, calls for a symbolical interpretation owing to its structure and the mysterious nature of the theme. The journey can then be envisaged as initiation embedded in the character's sense of heroism:

It was like I was setting out to do something special and big – like a knight setting out – worth remembering. I dreamed coming in from the barn and finding his back to me in the kitchen and wrestling with him and pulling him down and beating the stocking cap off his head with the barrel of the gun. (Gass *The Pedersen Kid* 1981: 33)

The itinerary revolves around symbolic components relating to conflict, which is frequently emphasized by the lexical field of hunting and fleeing: the Pedersen kid flees his parents' farm; the Sergens are after the stranger; the Pedersens seem to have fled; finally, Jorge's father and Big Hans disappear. The text constantly refers to agonistic lexis, as in the following excerpt where the hunt for a bottle of whiskey Jorge's father has hidden is described through repetition and polyptoton encapsulating the series “hide-hunt-find”:

Ma had *found* one of Pa's *hiding* places. She'd *found* one [...] while big Hans and I had *hunted* and *hunted* as we always did all winter, every winter since the spring that Hans had come and I [...] *found* the first one. Pa had a knack for *hiding*. [...] She'd *found* it by luck most likely but she hadn't said anything and we didn't know [...] how many other ones she'd *found*, saying nothing. Pa was sure to *find* out. Sometimes he didn't seem to because he looked and didn't *find* anything and figured he hadn't *hid* one after all [...]. But he's *find* out about this one because we were using it [...]. If he *found* out ma *found* it – that'd be bad. He took pride in his *hiding*. It was all pride he had. I guess fooling Hans and me took doing. But he didn't figure ma for much. He didn't

figure her at all. And if he *found* out – a woman had – then it'd be bad. (Gass *The Pedersen Kid* 1981: 8, my emphasis)

The insistence on the dichotomy fleeing/pursuing seems to recall the fugue, as though the lexis weaved an undertext, re-motivating the very etymology of the fugue. Indeed, the word itself comes from “the Latin form of the term, *fuga*, as well as [...] the French and Italian equivalents, *chace* and *caccia* [...]”. These designations described the ‘fleeing’ or ‘chasing’ of voices characteristic of fugue – the technique of imitation [...]” (Bullivant “Fugue” 1980: 9). In other words, the lexical field begets a network of concepts related to conflict, tension and passage, as if the musical form were secretly used to provide subconscious patterns for the protagonist's initiation journey.

The rite of passage translates into an affirmation of the self through rivalry. For the young narrator, conflict is predicated on sexuality (“I was satisfied mine was bigger” [Gass *The Pedersen Kid* 1981: 2]; “Even if his cock was thicker... I was here and he was in the snow. I was satisfied” [Gass *The Pedersen Kid* 1981: 72]) as well as emancipation of the self that the ultimate disappearance/murder symbolizes. Identity is shown to build on mirroring and projection, so that, here too, the fugal principle of imitation seems to lend the text a symbolical or even allegorical value. One of the paradigms of it is the idea of blinding, smacking of oedipal undertones that cannot go unnoticed: “Pa's eyes would blink at me – as if I were the sun off the snow and burning to blind him,” (Gass *The Pedersen Kid* 1981: 3); “As I turned my head the sun flashed from the barrel of pa's gun. [...] it flashed squarely in my eye when I turned my head just right” (Gass *The Pedersen Kid* 1981: 78). The initiation ends with a solemn and a quasi-religious climax, whereby the protagonist finds himself alone, proud of his achievements: “I have been the brave one and now I was free [...]. The kid and me, we'd done brave things well worth remembering. The way that fellow had come so mysteriously through the snow and done us such a glorious turn – well it made me think how I was told to feel in church.” (Gass, *The Pedersen Kid* 1981: 79)

Furthermore, if the lexical associations predicated on fight and hunt are evocative of initiation and reminiscent of the fugue, there seems to be a correspondence between symbolic structures of the text and fugal structures on yet another level. If we follow Van Gennep's tripartite division of a rite of passage – separation, transition, and incorporation (Gennep, *Les Rites de passage*, 1981) – we may distinguish three clear-cut stages in Gass's novella as well as three parts in a fugue, which creates meaning through the combination and convertibility between the musical composition, mythical structures and the text.

Zones of heightened repetition and denser mirroring further signal a musical intermediality in the novella so that the text is made to operate through layers of fluctuating intensity, revealing moments of greater interweaving of elements, which brings language itself to the fore and singles out key entities, fragments and phrases.

One major device used in a fugal piece that regulates its intensity and textural layering is the *stretto*, from Italian “narrow” or “tight”. The *stretto* may be defined as “the following of response to subject at a *closer* interval of time than first” (Corder

“Stretto” 1908: 720). It is a cumulative and climaxing event in a fugue “employed towards the end of a fugue, so as to give some impression of climax” (Corder “Stretto” 1908: 720). But the device does not necessarily emerge exclusively at the end of a contrapuntal piece, and might well be used elsewhere in the composition.

In Gass’s novella, there are several such zones of polyphonic densification. By tightening the textural density, the text lingers on some elements only, creating the impression of heightened speed and intensity. As a matter of fact, it does not quicken the speed of events, but provides foundation for an effect of heightened tension, as a means of zeroing in on tension itself rather than progress in narration. Stretto zones are stops – narrative silences where psychological distress is at its highest when the narrator is thrown into a panic and distress. The first zone that could bear comparison to the stretto technique appears just before the symbolic shooting, becoming a locus of uttermost tension:

The horse had circled round in it. He hadn’t known the way. He hadn’t known the horse had circled round. His hands were loose upon the reins and so the horse had circled round. Everything was black and white and everything the same. There wasn’t any road to go. There wasn’t any track. The horse had circled round in it. He hadn’t known the way. There was only snow to the horse’s thighs. There was only cold to the bone and driving snow in his eyes. He hadn’t known. How could he know the horse had circled round in it? How could he really ride and urge the horse with his heels when there wasn’t anyplace to go and everything was black and white and all the same? Of course the horse had circled round, of course he’d come around in it. Horses have sense. That’s all manure about horses. No it ain’t, pa, no it ain’t. They do. Hans said. They do. Hans knows. He’s right. He was right about the wheat that time. He said the rust was in it and it was. He was right about the rats, they do eat shoes, they eat anything, so the horse has circled round in it. That was a long time ago. Yes, pa, but Hans was right even though that was a long time ago, and how would you know anyway, you was always drinking ... not in summer ... no, pa... not in spring or fall either ... no, pa, but in the winter, and it’s winter now and you’re in bed where you belong – don’t speak to me, be quiet. (Gass *The Pedersen Kid* 1981: 73)

The text unfolds through a cluster of fragments and sentences. The sentences derive one from the other, as though they auto-generated themselves, as though language gave birth to more language. Repetition is enhanced: the sentences echo each other; they are repeated verbatim or with some variation; new bits are added and parts are cut off, inversed, fused, or lengthened. Like in “A Fugue,” one theme is singled out {11 occurrences of *horse*}, a few verbs stand out {*to be* (15 times), *to circle* (7 times), *to know* (6 times)}, polysyndeton is used {10 times *and*}; negation is brought to the foreground {15 times}.

At another level, the collusion of sentences also constitutes, just like in “A Fugue,” an overlap of voices, since fragments stem from previous dialogues, so that the aggregate reveals a polyphonic structure. Below are some of the echoes from earlier chapters:

They got a sense. (Gass *The Pedersen Kid* 1981: 24)That’s a lot of manure about horses. (Gass *The Pedersen Kid* 1981: 24)No it ain’t. Ain’t it? (Gass *The Pedersen Kid*

1981: 28) Horses have a sense. (Gass *The Pedersen Kid* 1981: 74)That’s all manure about horses. (Gass *The Pedersen Kid* 1981: 74)Not, it ain’t, pa, no it ain’t. (Gass *The Pedersen Kid* 1981: 74)

This polyphonic effect is reinforced by the fact that the dialogues in the novella do not contain any specific punctuation marks related to direct speech, but unfold as though they were part of the narrative. The only mark that may suggest dialogue is the page layout, as if in a list, suggesting oral exchange.

The second textual zone that may be associated with the stretto technique is also located at a moment of acute tension at the end on the novella. The story is drawing to a close and the character’s initiation is at its ultimate stage, so that the technique of the stretto becomes a means of conveying a maddened consciousness. The narrative takes after a form of ritual, and an almost religious tone, such as can be found in a litany:

The wagon had a great big wheel. Papa had a paper sack. Mama held my hand. High horse waved his tail. Papa had a paper sack. We both ran to hide. Mama held my hand. The wagon had a great big wheel. High horse waved his tail. We both ran to hide. Papa had a paper sack. The wagon had a great big wheel. Mama held my hand. Papa had a paper sack. High horse waved his tail. The wagon had a great big wheel. We both ran to hide. High horse waved his tail. Mama held my hand. We both ran to hide. The wagon had a great big wheel. Papa had a paper sack. Mama held my hand. High horse waved his tail. Papa had a paper sack. We both ran to hide. Papa had a paper sack. We both ran to hide. (Gass *The Pedersen Kid* 1981: 75-76)

The narrator’s consciousness seems to have worked itself up into a frenzy. There’s an element of fear and emotion, marked by typographical blanks. The protagonist finding himself alone, striving to keep quiet: “All that could happened was alone with me and I was alone with it.” (Gass *The Pedersen Kid* 1981: 75). Like a litany of consciousness, the interior monologue takes on a very emotional turn, plunging into frantic repetition.

Gass’s work toys with texture as a means of regulating time effects. While it has often been pointed out that polyphonic patterns cannot be used in a literary text, there seems to be a possibility of a transmedial transformation of both narrative time and sentence time (*transtemporality*). In literature, polyphonic texture remains a metaphor of simultaneity, but it is, in my view, the closest one could get to musical effects in a text. What is meant by “musical effect” is the possibility of regulating density and intensity of language so that the reader stumbles on zones when the text winds back on itself, dithers, revolves around a cluster of fragments.

Sentence time, then, is closely linked to memory questions: texture effects are predicated on what repetition allows us to have retained from a given zone. By repeating and centering on selected entities, the text asserts a polyphony that is at stake not within the text itself, but at that border line between the text and the readerly activity. The stretto clearly shows that texture is not only about how many voices are used and interwoven, but that also of zones, so that parts of text clearly contrast with one another. Like the *arsis* and *thesis* dichotomy, the stretto builds up larger contrasts between tension and release at a macrostructural level. This dynamic is not only quantitative,

but also qualitative, insofar as it emphasizes emotion. Hence, the stretto shows how time is handled through intersemiotic contrast.

But then, there is yet another word that comes to the fore and that the novella keeps reminding us of: the “circle” or the “round”. When Gass mentions having used the structure of a fugue in his text, he adds that “it is, of course, a question of constructing a round” (Castro “An Interview with William Gass” 2003: 76). It so happens that a round is a form of canon, closely related to a “catch”, also a form of canon:

Rounds and catches, the most characteristic forms of English music, differ from canons in only being sung at the unison or octave, and also in being rhythmical in form. [...] Amongst early writers on music, the terms ‘round’ and ‘catch’ were synonymous, but at present day the latter is generally understood to be [...] that species of round, ‘wherein, to humour some conceit in the words, the melody is broken, and the sense interrupted in one part, and caught again or supplied by another,’ a form of humour [...]. (Squire “Round” 1908: 165)

The original title of “The Pedersen Kid” was “And Slowly Comes the Spring,” which is quite reminiscent of the famous round “Sumer is Iucumen In,” one of the earliest canons in English. The whole fugal structure might thus have more to do with canonic rather than purely fugal patterns. Historically, and technically, the fugue is closely interlinked with the canon. The canon is characterized by its use of strict imitation, which means that parts are repeated identically. The word itself stems from Greek ‘canon,’ which signifies a rule or a standard, which means that the composition is “written strictly according to rule” (Ouseley “Canon” 1904: 455): “The principle of a canon is that one voice begins a melody, which melody is imitated precisely, note for note, and (generally) interval for interval, by some other voice, either at the same or a different pitch, beginning a few beats later and thus as it were running after the leader.” (Ouseley, “Canon” 1904: 455)

The leading voice is usually called *dux* or *antecedens* whereas the subsequent voice will be named *comes* or *consequens*. Just like there are many different ways of using imitative techniques in a fugue, there are many different sorts of canon composition which depend on the form of imitation: canons by inversion, diminution, augmentation, or *cancrizans*. But three types of canon are particularly interesting here: (a) the “infinite”, the “circular” or “perpetual” canons that do not come to a definite conclusion, but draw back to the beginning so that they might be executed without an end; (b) enigmatical canons that are notated cryptically rather than written in full so that the executioner must first decipher a riddle; (c) *cancrizans* canons or “crab” canons that are recursive, insofar as they operate “by retrogression, on account of their crab-like motion – from the Latin word cancer, a crab” (Ouseley “Cancrizans” 1904: 454).

Thanks to its tripartite structure and the indeterminacy principle, Gass’s text underlines the primacy of recursive and circular patterns and temporality, instead of definite, linear and teleological structures. Rather than the final return of the tonic in a fugue, it is circularity, recursiveness and uncertainty that are given precedence in the text. This allows us to ponder to what extent Gass’s novella might be a riddle canon or an enigmatic rite of passage.

It would seem that the text may be read – like some canons – upside down or from end to beginning, by reversal. The pivotal, tripartite structure allows us to fathom two parts revolving freely around the central pillar. A chiasmus found in the text highlights such reversal: “Jorge – so was I. No. I was.” (Gass *The Pedersen Kid* 1981: 74) The exchange in *The Pedersen Kid* incites one to read initiation as a circular process, predicated on exchange. At the end, the protagonist declares: “we’d been exchanged, and we were both in our own new lands.” (Gass *The Pedersen Kid* 1981: 73) The whole story may be read as an identity quest that comes back to where it started, as though through a spiral. A number of initial situations echo the ending and even some metaphors are used at both ends of the text: “I saw his head, fuzzed like a dandelion gone to seed” (Gass *The Pedersen Kid* 1981: 4); “where the dandelions had begun to seed” (Gass *The Pedersen Kid* 1981: 68). It may be stated that the text acquires two overlapping movements: (a) one, close to a palindrome or a chiasmus, based on permutation; (b) the other based on circularity and cyclicity, akin to strange loops.

The Pedersen kid seems to be replaced by the narrator. The initial snow and cold associated with the Pedersen kid turns out to have been Jorge’s experience of coldness – that coldness stemming from the failed relationship with the authoritarian father – as it appears within the narrator’s interior monologue: “I wanted a cat or a dog awful bad since I was a little kid. [...] I’m not going to grieve. You were always after killing me, yourself, pa, oh yes you were. I was cold in your house always, pa.” (Gass *The Pedersen Kid* 1981: 74) In this way, one could even go as far as to say that there is only one character and that – like in a monothematic fugue – all the other parts are only mirror images of the protagonist, so that the Pedersen kid might be considered as Jorge’s alter-ego or a wishful self. Thus, one might envisage the text through a form of a bi-directional spiral or strange loop. If the story has anything to do with music and the fugue, it appears that it is the case, above all, thanks to its looping patterns. This is what Gass underlines himself when speaking of the Baroque style of his writing:

Of course, you can’t write a fugue except in music. But certain patterns, sets of repetitions and returns, and methods of development in the prose, are characteristic of Baroque music. My style has been called Baroque. “The Pederson Kid” is stripped, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t Baroque. The Baroqueness comes in its organization, its repetition, its circling around: the people lost in the snow in that story don’t know where they are and circle around just as the language revolves about itself in slow loops. In that sense, the story’s prose employs certain Baroque structures though the language itself is plain and simple. (Castro “Interview with William H. Gass” 1995)

To summarize, both “A Fugue” and *The Pedersen Kid* are structured on musical polyphonic techniques, regulating textual intensity, texture, and temporal unfolding, lending voice to transtemporality. While “A Fugue” does so in a more overt way, *The Pedersen Kid* is a case of covert musicalization. Since the events – and thus the meaning – of that story are uncertain, marking epistemological doubt, it seems safe to consider than just as snow is a metaphor of the inexplicable covertness, the quest of identity and the rite of passage are kept at bay, and rather than being achieved by



means of a teleological pattern, they get back to the start. If Van Gennep's stages are operational here, the third one – incorporation – is only partly so, since the protagonist remains at odds with the community, as if *dis*-integrated. In other words, initiation does not follow a time's arrow, but folds up into a loop, and by doing so patterns itself on structures that have something to do with the fugue and the round, as though intermediality were a multiple deep-structure template.

Musicalization is not the only form on intersemiotic dimension in Gass's works. Intermediality may be more abstract in Gass and musical elements might well be related – abstractedly – to spatial, architectural or pictorial elements. Gass, makes use of an intermedial metaphor, by suggesting that his image of writing is both like an unwinding tapestry or a musical composition: “My image of a book is something created as a whole, as a complete thing, but one that can be apprehended a bit at a time. [...] a Chinese scroll you unwind; [...] a painting that you can't see all at once, [...], a piece of music.” (Castro “An Interview with William Gass” 2003: 75)

It seems interesting to acknowledge the iconic tension of intermediality as Gass does, rather than question the validity of intermedial transpositions, such as musicalization. It also seems rewarding to consider multiple intermediality. In “The Pedersen Kid,” each chapter contains an allusion to snakes (“[...] holding the bottle like a snake at the length of his arm” [Gass *The Pedersen Kid* 1981: 7]; “[...] like he was trying to kill a snake.” [Gass *The Pedersen Kid* 1981: 58]; “[...] I thought suddenly of snakes.” [Gass *The Pedersen Kid* 1981: 66]), and given the importance of the three male characters, I cannot help thinking about the *Laocoon* sculpture and Gotthold E. Lessing's essay. It might be that Gass's novella is a covert reassessment of intermedial thought, a suggestion of a larger *transmedial* subtext (Wolf “(Inter)mediality and the Study of Literature” 2011: 4).

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