

“Make It Old: Retro Forms and Styles in Literature and Music”

11th International Conference on Word and Music Studies

William H. Gass’s Piano Re-Vision of *Casablanca*

Experimental Narration as a Retro Form

Ivan Delazari

“Don’t Even Try, Sam” was first published in the forty-second issue of the magazine *Conjunctions* (2004) and collected in *Eyes* (2015)—the last book by America’s legendary metafictionist William H. Gass (1924–2017). The story is told by the old piano that was filmed in Michael Curtiz’s 1942 classic, *Casablanca*. The object talks to an explicit second-person addressee, the reader’s invisible and silent extension into the storyworld, who drops by the Hollywood warehouse, where the instrument is stored, and stops to press its yellowed keys. The narrator takes the visitor favorably for a curious interviewer, one of “You Q and A types” (Gass 2004/2015: 155), and eagerly shares an insider’s narrative about the making of *Casablanca*.

The device of the inanimate focalizer or narrator—*a là* Byron the Bulb of Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity Rainbow* (1973)—is in line with postmodern experimentation of the 1960s and 70s, Gass’s heyday in the American letters. In addition, non-human storytellers date much further back to earlier narratorial extravaganzas, such as Leo Tolstoy’s horse theorized as a major sample of defamiliarization in Viktor Shklovsky’s “Art as Technique” (1917/1965) or the coins and banknotes of the 18th-century English circulation novels (Alber 2016: 73-79; Blackwell 2007). “Unnatural narratologists,” who specialize in “narratives that depart from and challenge everyday cognitive parameters, including those involved in so-called literary realism” (Alber et al. 2018: 429), would qualify Gass’s piano as a case among “impossible narrators”—beasts, body parts, talking objects, telepaths, and storyworld know-alls (Alber 2016: 62). Decades of

postmodernism's omnivorous appropriation of any literary techniques, both mimetic and anti-mimetic, have deprived object narration of much of its strangeness: in the 2000s, Gass's vignette is hardly as innovative as it would have been perceived some forty years before.

In "Don't Even Try, Sam," as I argue in this paper, the device of the talking piano is a nostalgic retro form. It allows Gass to make a metafictional statement, which one would overlook by dismissing the non-human narrator as merely a method of defamiliarized representation. While unnatural narratologist Jan Alber points out that many of the impossible narrators are instrumentally intended to "satirize certain problems of the capitalist system" (Alber 2016: 77), recognizing Gass's piano as a pragmatic means of revising *Casablanca* satirically from an estranged perspective would go counter Gass's aesthetic tenets, missing not only "the music of prose" acclaimed in his eponymous essay (Gass 1996: 313-326) but some thematic "make-it-olds" of the story. For instance, in ridiculing certain aspects of the Hollywood classic, Gass's narrator remains an integral part of what it mocks. Therefore, it is shown to reduplicate such *Casablanca's* vices as its hypermasculine representation of women. In its conservative grumbling, the piano cares nothing for political correctness: it is as old as its author but, unlike the author, it is uncomfortably and disagreeably old. Piling up oldness, Gass indicates a revisionary alternative to the writing and reading manner he defines as "references and gists" (LeClair and Gass 1977/2003: 22). His alternative is new in its oldness insofar it is recontextualized within a different set of literary and linguistic conventions of the early 21st century. Mediated by a presumably musical agent (a piano), Gass's sonorous writing "by the mouth for the ear" is less a sample of reactionary elitism and highbrow aestheticism than a self-ironic and down-to-earth manifestation of "the music of prose" metaphor.

In "Don't Even Try, Sam," the piano's memories about *Casablanca* in the making are presented in a series of anecdotal fragments focalized from the film sets. The narrator's bitterness results from the fact that its musical activities have always been minimal. This piano does not play,

and it is hardly ever played either—it sees, reflects, and reports instead. The movie-making activities that it used to witness on multiple occasions are like battle scenes in Stendhal or Tolstoy: “No one has hold of a whole. There aren’t even pieces”: it’s “more like, what do they call it? . . . collage” (Gass 2004/2015: 159). “I have never seen a movie,” the piano says, “I’ve seen movies being made. Parts of them anyway. Parts in. Parts out. Parts private” (154-155). Details of the *Casablanca* shooting picked randomly and alternated with sketches of the narrator’s cinematic appearances in Westerns are presented in the iterative mode, in a Proustian fashion. Like in Proust, a world war is out of the story, although “actors would disappear, too, sucked up by their commissions. Of course I get no news in the warehouse. The world could’ve been coming to an end and all of us there would’ve just sat still for it. That is the life of a saloon piano. Sitting. It was what I was built for. Sitting. For silence, not music” (158). The narrator, who “once played a stretch of Chopin” (157) but “never did do a note of Liszt” (160), has to content itself with silent and passive witnessing of the mess on the film set. This deprivation from and nostalgia for music thematically correlates to Gass’s stubborn perseverance with a “slow” and elaborate style cursed with the inescapable necessity to narrate *something*. Literature cannot narrate nonreferentially, as absolute music does, and as Gass would like it to.

The story’s rather speculative musico-literary intermediality—*very* covert intermediality, to stretch Werner Wolf’s (1999: 44) term—is totally dependent on the reader’s capacity to allow that what we read is some kind of translation from Pianish, perhaps even Thingish, into English. Provided the narrator is reliable, so that the narrative situation is reported accurately, and there *is* a diegetic narratee who presses the keys for the piano to tell its story, some kind of music-making is involved in the diegetic universe. There is no indication that the storeroom visitor is a pianist, or plays anything beyond random notes. But insofar as the anonymous visitor occupies the reader’s position as the narrator’s diegetic listener, we may feel free to picture whatever auditory means of expression(including actual passages of piano music) we find plausible. Just like Laurence Sterne

leaves a blank page for the reader to draw a portrait of Widow Wadman in *Tristram Shandy*, Gass makes it totally our responsibility to solve the translation-from-Thingish problem: is there a realistic way to interpret any sound one could extract from a piano as a full-scale verbal narrative? Realism, of course, is the thing Gass would be least after.

As cognitive narratologists Marco Caracciolo reminds us, “a narrator cannot be strange in and of itself: strangeness is always a matter of experiential and interpretive negotiation between particular readers and particular texts” (Caracciolo 2016: 1). The “character-centered illusion,” a subclass of Wolf’s (2004) aesthetic illusion, is our “feeling of relating to, or accessing, a character’s mental processes as if they were real” (Caracciolo 2016: 17). How we read a narrator or character epistemologically matters more than how “strange,” “impossible,” or “unnatural” it ontologically is. In Gass’s case, our “cognitive dissonance” (Caracciolo 2016: 34-35) may be triggered by the fact that an extremely sarcastic *and* nostalgic account of *Casablanca* is made by a piano talking by its keys played by someone—figuratively, by ourselves. Whenever a yellow key is pressed that “is reluctant to recover” (Gass 2004/2015: 153) and causes a sentence parrotlike repeat, or when another one lisps “wicz” every time “wiser,” “wise” or “otherwise” are targeted (154, 157), or yet another key is signified as “my G-spot” (154), we comprehend the metaphor easily and picture this anthropomorphic piano vividly. But rationalizing how the narrator’s language physically works takes us nowhere: does each key stand for a sentence or a syllable? Neither is arithmetically plausible, considering the ratio between the number of keys to the number of either syllables or sentences in the Gass story. The reader thus has to leave the Pianish-into-English issue unresolved. Similarly, we may notice, there are no *exact* words to render a piece of actual instrumental music—there are only approximations of form and analysis, of program notes, and of what Steven Paul Scher termed “verbal music” (Scher 1970/2004).

The apparent reason why Gass would not give us a chance to read “Don’t Even Try, Sam” as verbal music—“any literary presentation . . . of existing or fictitious musical compositions,” in

Scher's definition (1970/2004: 26)—is that Gass may not be a believer in such. It is apparent from the narrative situation established in "Don't Even Try, Sam" that the narrator speaks by means of its sounds inflicted by the narratee, but the back translation from words to music is impossible. There is, however, plenty of auditory s(t)imulation in Gass's ornamental prose, with its alliterations and other sonic parallelisms, which corresponds to another category in Scher's taxonomy of melopoetic relations, the "onomatopoeic effects" of "word music, which is exclusively an attempt at literary imitation of sound" (Scher 1970/2004: 26). "I take a hint better than a holler" or "What a bore. Bar as long as a Pullman car" (Gass 2004/2015: 153): Gass's text abounds in such witticisms that confirm the writer's reputation as primarily a stylist. A musical piece gets directly imitated in the piano's narrative and punned around by its thinking side: about the song "My Gal Sal," the narrator judges, "I go dum diddily dum dum but I don't feel dum diddily dum dum. People hear dum diddily dum dum but they don't feel dum diddily dum dum either. Dum dum don't mean diddily for them" (158-59).

Gass writes "for voice, in which you are imagining a performance in the auditory sense" (LeClair and Gass 1977/2003: 22). In the essay "The Music of Prose," he insists that "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; there is a proper method of pronunciation, even if it is rarely observed" and goes on for another fifteen lines (Gass 1996: 314). The piano's complaint in "Don't Even Try, Sam" about staying silent most of the time echoes the 1996 essay:

Since the music of prose depends upon its performance by a voice, and since, when we read, we have been taught to maintain a library's silence, so that not even the lips are allowed to move, most of the music of the word will be that heard only by the head and, dampened by decorum, will be timorous and hesitant. That is the hall, though, the hall of the head, where, if at all, prose (and poetry, too, now) is given its little oral due. (314-15)

The reader's "hall of the head" is where Gass's strange narrator—the silent musical instrument that has to act as a musical instrument instead of actually being one—may, or may not, succeed as a real piano, depending on how we cope with the cognitive dissonance involved.

Gass's 2015 collection, *Eyes*, which accommodates "Don't Even Try, Sam" among its stories and novellas, contains a number of photographic images, which makes it akin to what some theorists recognize as a multimodal narrative interface (Hallet 2014). The shot from *Casablanca* at the story's opening portraying Sam singing "Knock on Wood" with Rick leaning on the piano may launch the film's recalled soundtrack in the reader's "hall of the head," reaching instantaneously from the visual to auditory sensory modality. The transition involved here is thematized at once: "Most storerooms are more song and story than these movies I was made for," the piano tells us (Gass 2004/2015: 153). The connection between different modalities, and the possibility of transcending one for another, is the foundation of Gass's Thingish: stories can be extacted—inferred—deduced from the looks and spatial arrangement of silent physical objects, from the way they sound, feel, or taste. Unless one knows that this piano starred in *Casablanca*, Gass's retro narrative and music is impossible to recover. But considering the presence of a narratee within the storyworld, the idea that the piano could have told this particular story feels less counterintuitive. Unnatural narratives get naturalized through the reduction of the initial cognitive dissonance as we read on.

A natural way of reading the story is by a mental (covertly intermedial) juxtaposition of the movie and the text. Gass's title is the antipode of the most celebrated line from *Casablanca* pronounced in the film by Ingrid Bergman: what was then "Play it, Sam" is now "Don't Even Try, Sam." In the Gass story, the character Sam is referred to as Dooley, i. e. the actor Dooley Wilson, whom the narrator exposes as a faker of piano skills: ". . . the worst was when I realized this darkie couldn't play me" (156). More racist and sexist discourse makes the piano sound like a white male:

And they—who are they? the invisible studio gods—the memo brothers—wanted a horny cottonclub girl to sing alongside, but I bet she couldn't finger me any better

than Dooley, is it? who don't. You know what I heard about him? I heard he specialized in Irish songs sung in whiteface! That's worth a concluding chord! At sixes and sevens is where they all were. We had extras left over from the last French-fried colonial film parked at every table including gaming I guess, and Jews were doing Nazis like they wished they were. So why not a darkie who can't dance. (157)

Together with the narrator's explicit address to a second-person entity in the story—the warehouse tourist—the imperative “Don't Even Try, Sam” of Gass's title puts the reader in Sam's shoes. Once our diegetic deputy doubts the narrator's authenticity as a piano: (“What do you mean I'm a mockup like the [balsa and cardboard] plane?” (166)), the narrator returns the insult: “You can't play either, honey” (167). It is the narrator's conviction that “music does not acknowledge the barrier of tongues” (167), hence its capacity to comprehend and gain indirect knowledge from other items of the Casablanca set—namely, the Vichy water bottle that updates the narrator about the movie's ending. “Pianos don't explain” (168), but this one can see, understand, remember (153); it knows some German (163) and French (164); it has “toes, feet, legs, sides, bottom, belly, cheeks, spine” (166) and a mockingly vaginal “mouth of teeth” (169) with a G-spot (153), by which it communicates to the reader's inner ear in response to a Sam's rather incompetent musical stimulation. Based on homophony and wordplay, it even has an eye—the first-person narratorial *I* that sees, remembers, and narrates.

Gass's use of object narration in “Don't Even Try, Sam” is an old-timer's stubborn resort to preferred retro forms, an aesthetic gesture to confront the speedy trendiness of the information age and encourage the rushing reader not to “race like a motorcar across the page, taking turns on two wheels, the head as silent as an empty house, eager for the general gist,” but to “read in the old-fashioned, hesitant, lip-moving way—by listening rather than by looking” (Gass 1996: 370). As a narrative device, the piano is the last witness: “I know why you want to talk to me. It's because everyone else is dead” (155). And it hates to see its visitor go, so that the closing line of the story, counter the title opening it, is a plea for a replay: “Try that one again” (169).

References

- Alber, Jan (2016). *Unnatural Narrative: Impossible Worlds in Fiction and Drama*. Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press.
- Alber, Jan, Marco Caracciolo, Stefan Iversen, Karin Kukkonen, and Henrik Skov Nielsen (2018). "Introduction: Unnatural and Cognitive Perspectives on Narrative (A Theory Crossover)." *Poetics Today* 39.3: 429-445.
- Blackwell, Mark, ed. (2007). *The Secret Life of Things: Animals, Objects, and It-Narratives in Eighteenth-Century England*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press.
- Caracciolo, Marco (2016). *Strange Narrators in Contemporary Fiction: Explorations in Readers' Engagement with Characters*. Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press.
- Gass, William H. (1996). *Finding a Form*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- (2004/2015). "Don't Even Try, Sam." *Eyes: Novellas & Short Stories*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Hallet, Wolfgang (2014). "The Rise of the Multimodal Novel: Generic Change and Its Narratological Implications." *Storyworlds across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*, edited by Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon, pp. 123-138. Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press.
- LeClair, Thomas, and William H. Gass (1977/2003). "William Gass: The Art of Fiction LXV." In *Conversations with William H. Gass*, edited by Theodore G. Ammon, pp. 17-38. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Scher, Steven Paul (1970/2004). "Notes Toward a Theory of Verbal Music." In *Essays on Literature and Music by Steven Paul Scher*, edited by Walter Bernhart and Werner Wolf, pp. 23-36. Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi.
- Shklovsky, Victor (1917/1965). "Art as Technique." In *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, trans. by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis, 5-24. Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press.
- Wolf, Werner (1999). *The Musicalization of Fiction: A Study in the Theory and History of Intermediality*. Amsterdam/Atlanta: Rodopi.
- (2004). "Aesthetic Illusion as an Effect of Fiction." *Style* 38.3: 325-351.