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Intermedial Metareference  
Index and Icon in William Gass's  
*Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife*

*John Pier*

Literary works in their printed form are subject to double coding, both verbal and graphic. However, the potential consequences of this fact are not systematically exploited by writers, nor are they frequently taken into account by readers. With Gass's *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife*, the latent complexities of this double coding are forced out into the open, revealing the sometimes complementary and sometimes conflictual relations between the verbal and the graphic in a work that is a prime example of the metareferential turn in plurimedial contexts. Based on current research in intermedial relations and on the Peircean concepts of index and icon, this paper examines three dimensions of metaization that contribute to intermedial metareference in Gass's postmodern text. First is the clash between verbal and graphic codes in the use of paratextual forms (e. g., footnotes) that produce a 'salient foregrounding of the medium' through accentuation of contiguous indexical relations within the space of the page. Second is the 'salient iconic use of signs'. Despite the presence of photographs, the 'imaginal' or pictorial use of icons is limited. More prominent is 'diagrammatic iconicity', the mapping of formal relations from verbal onto graphic evocations of the heroine and vice versa. Finally, the third type of iconicity, metaphor, underlies the work's tropological macrostructure: on the one hand, the plurimedial text is equated with the physical charms of the heroine's body; on the other, Gass's work is a postmodern allegory that seeks to 'eroticize' the fictional text. These features are implemented in such a way as to trigger 'increased attention' to the work at hand, an awareness of the need for an interdisciplinary and transmedial framework of understanding and a 'conceptual leap' which, together, contribute to the pervading metareferentiality which renders Gass's novel a major index of the metareferential turn in the postmodern novel.

The rise of intermediality in cultural representations can be attributed to numerous factors which appear to have followed two main lines of development since approximately the end of the nineteenth century. One is a largely conceptual or epistemological evolution starting with the turn of esthetics from the classification of the arts to 'interart' or 'comparative art studies' and later when, in response to accelerating technical innovations in the media themselves, which were independent of the arts, the impact of the media on cultural representations

was taken more closely into account; then, in the 1980s, the theory of intertextuality, focusing on a single medium, began to merge with research on the various media, thus giving rise to intermediality, a paradigm which has contributed significantly to a deeper understanding of cultural representations that employ more than one medium or that must in some way be apprehended against the backdrop of or in relation to one or more media of a different kind. The other development contributing to intermediality, and to which this growing media awareness is partly bound, can be traced back to modernist movements in their multiple forms (futurism, Dada, surrealism, etc.) and recourse to plurimedial and hybrid practices (calligrams, montage technique, etc.) accompanied with an overstepping of the boundaries between high art and popular culture and destabilization of the traditional classifications (are dramatic performances to be counted among the triad of genres, or do we today not tend to regard them as plurimedial representations?). This development culminates with 'intermedia' as an artistic practice, defined by Peter Frank as "artwork which manifests characteristics of more than one art form, drawing on various of the otherwise distinct disciplines – the traditional, academically-defined practices of painting, musical composition, poetry, and other art forms – to establish an indivisible hybrid" (1992: 35).

It is indeed through the intensification of intermedial practices and the hybridization of media that the stage was set for so-called 'metaization', a phenomenon found in individual media as well as in transmedial contexts. Metaization, a process by which phenomena of a first level "self-reflexively become objects of reflection and communication in their own right" (Wolf 2009: 3) on a second or 'meta-level', occurs when, for example, a tale told by a mouse is fundamentally transformed from the moment it appears on the printed page in the form of a mouse's tail – a tour de force appreciated by readers of Lewis Carroll. The multiple syncretic meanings generated by Carroll's calligram result from the fact that the text's 'heteroreferential' bond to an external reality is displaced toward a 'metareferential' focus on the medium, viewed 'from the outside', as the verbal tale is converted into the graphic representation of a mouse's tail.

It is just such a process that William Gass capitalizes on in his *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife* (1968), a work that comes in line with what has been called "the phenomenon of ever increasing self-reference in postmodern culture" (Nöth 2007: 7). Employing an astonish-

ing array of graphic resources, this plurimedial 'essay-novella'<sup>1</sup>, as Gass calls it, bears affinities with a corpus as diverse as Carroll's or Apollinaire's calligrams, Mallarmé's "Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard" (1897), the montage technique employed by Dos Passos in *The Big Money* (1936) and, in the postmodern mode, Butor's *Mobile* (1962), Federman's *Double or Nothing* (1971), Brooke-Rose's *Thru* (1975) or Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000), to name but a few examples<sup>2</sup>. The graphic features of *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife* (hereinafter *WMLW*) stand out clearly, but in doing so, they build up a complex and oftentimes conflicting relationship with the verbal medium: indeed, the pictorial potential of the graphic dimension of the book that has frequently been employed by literature to illustrate various aspects of a work's content is here either greatly reduced or it is diverted to serve other ends, driving a wedge between the verbal and the visual in such a way as to unsettle the conventional compatibilities between discourse and image. Although an oral reading of Gass's text, including on the stage, would certainly have merits in its own right, such a performance, by amputating the graphic dimension of the text, would also confirm the high degree of interdependencies between the two media that the more pictorial use of graphic features by literary texts can normally forego. Thus, while Gustave Doré's illustrations may well complement La Fontaine's *Fables* (1668–1678) or in some way facilitate their comprehension, the fables as verbal artifacts can be read independently of the illustrations for their meaning and understanding. The plurimediality of *WMLW*, in striking contrast, allows little leeway for such accommodations, for through the process of metaization it highlights the metareferential nature of the work, accentu-

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<sup>1</sup> This classification is significant, for as Phelan has observed: "There is [...] a curious paradox about Gass's work as metafiction: in order for us to read it as fiction that focuses our attention on the medium of fiction, a substantial segment of it must be non-fiction, must resemble an essay more than it does fiction" (1981: 217). As we shall see, it is in large part the self-reflexive and metareferential aspect of the work that contributes to this hybrid between essay and novella. It is notable that Gass is one of the first to employ the term 'metafiction' (cf. 1970: 25).

<sup>2</sup> For further discussion, see McHale 1987/1993, chap. 12 "Worlds on Paper", where Gass's essay-novella is described as a "schizoid text" (190). For the impact of technological metareference on the printed codex in recent fiction, see Maziarczyck in this vol.; Alexander Starre's contribution to this vol. demonstrates how the typography, layout, and graphic illustrations in works such as Danielewski's *House of Leaves* transcend the limits of the standard book through materiality-based metareference.

ating a self-referentiality in which, as we shall see, verbal signs and graphic signs produce a clash of intermedial relations. The result of such a practice, in which the separation of two or more media from one another can only deform the work in question, is that “[a] media-product becomes an *inter*-media-product if a *multimedia* coexistence of different media-quotations and elements is transformed into a *conceptual intermedia* coexistence, the aesthetic refractions and faults (*Verwerfungen*) of which open new dimensions of experience to the recipient” (Müller 1996: 298; emphasis in the orig.). Gass’s text is a truly exemplary instance of the disproportionate use of metaization that Werner Wolf, in his introduction to this volume, has described as the hallmark of the metareferential turn.

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Before looking more closely at the theoretical issues raised by *WMLW*, a brief description of the work is in order. Gass’s essay-novella is a text of 59 unnumbered pages divided into four sections conspicuously marked, not by the conventional typographic means, but by four colors of differently textured paper: thin blue paper (pages 1 to 11); thicker ribbed olive-colored paper (pages 12 to 36); grainy red paper (pages 37 to 52); glossy white paper (pages 53 to 59)<sup>3</sup>. The device is not so fanciful or arbitrary as it might first appear, for the colors are chosen with close attention to the graphic design and content of the book. In fact, the colors mark the four stages in the principal action of the essay-novella: the sexual act of the protagonist, Babs Masters, a prostitute, striptease artist and sometimes actress whose husband’s name is reminiscent of the co-author of *Human Sexual Response* (1956) by William Masters and Virginia Johnson<sup>4</sup>. The blue chapter, a meditative monologue by Babs, occurs during foreplay, but the color blue is also the subject of an essay by Gass titled *On Being Blue: A Philosophical Inquiry* (1976), a reflection on the erotic nature of language; the olive section, ostensibly a dramatic text whose characters are Ivan and Olga, corresponds to coital excitement; the red sec-

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<sup>3</sup> Although the pages are unnumbered, I have numbered them for convenience’s sake, starting on the first page of the printed text.

<sup>4</sup> This connection has been noted in Wolf 1992: 270. The allusion, as we shall see further on, is significant in that it complements the metaphorical equation of the text of *WMLW* with Babs’s body.

tion occurs during the sexual climax; and the white glossy section corresponds to the post-coital phase containing some reflections by Babs (in fact, by Gass) on language.

Any reading of the work will demonstrate that the typographic and graphic resources of the printed page implemented by *WMLW* extend well beyond their impact on the ordering and segmentation of the codex book. This becomes evident right from the beginning with the use of roman, italic and bold type: roman type generally marks Babs's self-addressed reflections during the action although her discourse also refers to some related events or facts that are not contemporaneous with that action; the use of italics frequently coincides with free indirect speech whose spatio-temporal anchoring remains indeterminate; and passages in bold type contain reflections of a more general nature in a discourse that is partly narratee-oriented. The result of the blurring of boundaries between the different modulations of Babs's monologue, due in part to the abrupt shifts in type, is considerable difficulty in the ordering of narrative instances: a voice is speaking, but the paucity of spatio-temporal coordinates, accentuated by the use of various typographic styles (does a change of typographic style in the midst of a sentence signal a change of speaker?), tends to reduce her to a bare voice, seriously hindering any attempt to constitute her as a character situated within any clearly defined diegetic frame of reference. She is in a sense 'disembodied' by the typographic design of the work.

A closer look at Gass's essay-novella confirms, more generally, that the work is the product of a double coding. The typography employs a wide variety of fonts and type sizes, and it also combines these fonts and type sizes in different ways. Moreover, the lines are not always distributed on the page according to the conventional layout, but may be vastly oversized and undulating (cf. Gass 1968/1989: 12), veer away from the text so as to fall off the bottom of the page (cf. *ibid.*: 27), or curve deformedly as though refracted through the edge of a convex mirror (cf. *ibid.*: 33f., 36). Other typographic devices include a text in a bubble as found in comics (cf. *ibid.*: 18), placards reproduced on the page (cf. *ibid.*: 25) and calligrams (cf. *ibid.*: 33, 35) as well as the extravagant use of asterisks in various forms and sizes, a fragment of a musical score (cf. *ibid.*: 22), an inverted mirror-page (cf. *ibid.*: 4f.) and a page reproduced from an (apocryphal?) novel, *Passions of a Stableboy*. Also employed are more figurative uses of graphic means, as in several round brown-colored circles representing the stains of a coffee cup (cf. *ibid.*: 52, 58, 59), ten photos of a naked woman or of

parts of her body (presumably of Babs Masters), one of which shows her front side on the front cover, the other showing her back side on the back cover, and a chiaroscuro drawing of a woman folding her arms over her knees (cf. *ibid.*: 53).

The clash between the verbal medium and the (typo)graphic medium produced by this system of double coding appears at many points throughout *WMLW*. One example of particular interest can be found in the second section of the essay-novella where a farcical play in which two characters, Ivan and Olga (the latter “Played by me” says Babs near the beginning [*ibid.*: 13]), are having their breakfast coffee and roll. The action, which is an allegory of sexual foreplay, turns around the fact that Ivan finds a penis in his bun, while the dialogue, reduced to exchanges of single words and short simple sentences, skirts around any explicit statement of this fact. As it turns out, there is very little dialogue in this 25-page section which is dominated, rather, by two other types of discourse: 1) stage directions narrativized in Babs’s voice, but which also include a description of audience reaction as though an actual performance were taking place; 2) an extensive and peculiar use of footnotes marked by asterisks, footnotes being by their very nature incompatible with the dramatic text, and even more so with theatrical production.

At issue, in the first type, is a form of ‘intermedial transposition’ in which the printed text of Babs’s monologue seeks, with the use of paratextual marking, to incorporate the effects of media that are foreign to it by simulating those media. The narrativized stage directions thus provide a link between Babs’s discourse and the interpolated play, an example of the ‘simulating’ subcategory of what Irina O. Rajewsky has termed ‘system mention *qua* transposition’: through the verbal medium alone, the stage directions contribute to an illusionistic ‘as if’ by which the narrative ‘imitates’ the plurimedial qualities of theatrical performance (cf. Rajewsky 2002: 94–103, 117, 160)<sup>5</sup>. At the same time, the detailed stage directions prescribing the

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<sup>5</sup> Two additional subcategories of system mention *qua* transposition in Rajewsky’s theory of intermedial system reference – to which we shall return below – are ‘evocation’, as in ekphrasis, where a verbal description ‘evokes’ a non-verbal representation, and ‘(partially) reproducing’ system mention, as when in the ‘filmicization’ of narrative fiction a cinematographic cliché is taken over by a text without any form of intermedial marking. System mention *qua* transposition is distinguished from ‘explicit’ system mention, the express thematization of a foreign medium, as in a novelistic reflection on a film without, however, any attempt to produce an illusionistic cinema-

actors' gestures read like a present-tense narration, a story taking place before one's very eyes, further contributing to the drama-like character of Babs's discourse. Interestingly, however, this effect is somewhat illusory, for, as Monika Fludernik has noted with regard to the "Circe" episode of Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), the narrativization of stage directions tends to undermine the 'realism' of events as they would supposedly occur on the stage, untainted by narratorial intervention (cf. 2008: 375–377).

Before looking now at the role of the footnotes, the other paratextual feature contributing to the constitution of this section, it should be pointed out that the extent to which Babs effectively narrativizes the stage directions or to which her discourse convincingly simulates theatrical performance remains debatable, a situation due to the simple fact that the sole medium employed is that of language. From this perspective, and given that literary representation can be considered a language-based mode in its own right as opposed to the plastic arts or to music, the pages in question are thus not so much a variant of intermediality, which involves overstepping the boundaries between media, but are rather an instance of 'intramedial relations' occurring within a single medium. Such relations appear most prominently, of course, in intertextuality. However, with the expansion of the criteria of intertextuality to embrace the broader field of intermediality came

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tographic 'as if'. A form of system reference distinct from the three subcategories of system mention *qua* transposition is system 'contamination'. This occurs when the prescriptive/restrictive rules of a foreign medium modify the organizational principles of the receiving medium, as in the montage technique employed in narrative fiction (system reference *qua* translation) or, in medially unspecific/congruent cases, as in the Romantics' practice of switching back and forth between theater and life ('partially realizing' system contamination). Finally, it must be pointed out that the various forms of intermedial system mention are derived from the linguistic notion of 'mention' vs. 'use', the latter resulting, intermedially, in system contamination; intramedial relations (within a single medium) are broken down into system reference and system use ('Systemaktualisierung') (see Rajewsky 2002). Note that where Rajewsky speaks of intermedial as opposed to intramedial relations, Wolf adopts intermediality and intertextuality as two forms of intersemiotic relations (cf. 1999: 35–50). Wolf (see 2005, 2009) later divided intermediality into an 'extracompositional' form ('transmediality' vs. 'intermedial transposition': e. g., use of voice-over narration in the cinema) and an 'intracompositional' form (plurimediality as in the opera vs. 'intermedial reference': an 'explicit' or 'thematized' variant in contrast to an 'implicit' or 'covert' variant, the latter corresponding roughly to Rajewsky's system mention *qua* transposition).



the realization that analogous phenomena can be discerned in cinema, painting, music and in other media. It is widely recognized that the basic criteria for intramediality identifiable within any individual medium are 'individual reference' (from one text to another, from one film to another, etc.) and 'system reference' (e. g., from one genre to another, from one discourse type to another)<sup>6</sup>. Although inspired from intertextuality theory, it can nevertheless be objected that individual/system reference is not the only way of delineating relations within a given medium, nor is it typologically the most adequately differentiated.

It was in response to the bewildering array of contributions in this area that Gérard Genette reordered the conceptual field of intertextuality into a full system of 'transtextuality'. Defined broadly as "all that sets a text in relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts" (Genette 1982: 7), transtextual relations break down into five degrees of increasing abstraction, logical implication and inclusiveness. The first, 'intertextuality' properly speaking, is a relation of co-presence of two or more texts, as in quotation, plagiarism or allusion. 'Paratextuality', the category we shall be concerned with here, covers the intermediate zone between a text and its surrounding discourse which creates a space of transaction that heavily influences how a work will be read: on the one hand, title page, prefaces, footnotes, etc. included in the book ('peritext'), and on the other, correspondence, journals, rough drafts, etc. not included in the book ('epitext')<sup>7</sup>. The other forms of transtextuality are 'metatextuality' (the critical relation, as in commentary), 'hypertextuality' (the link between a 'hypotext' A and a 'hypertext' B, either by transformation, as in the transposition of the action of the *Odyssey* to twentieth-century Dublin, or by imitation through parody, pastiche, etc.) and 'architextuality' (the generic relation of a text, influencing its 'horizon of expectations'). All but absent from Genette's theory of transtextuality is the question of intermediality, dealt with in a few pages devoted to 'hyperaesthetic practices' in painting and music (cf. 1982: 435–446). Viewed from the perspective of intermediality studies, it would appear that in this intramedial system intertextuality and hypertextuality subdivide individual reference although, as Genette's extensive discussion of hypertextual

<sup>6</sup> See, e. g., Pfister 1985a, 1985b. Rajewsky applies this distinction to both intermedial and intramedial relations (cf. 2002: 69–77, 194f., 205f.).

<sup>7</sup> See Genette 1987 for a detailed study of paratextuality; for footnotes in particular, cf. 293–315.

practices shows, such practices can occur only with recourse to system reference; on the other hand, metatextuality, when it occurs within a work, may in some cases coincide with explicit system reference, and architextuality, to the extent it bears on genre, with system reference. Most important for the present context, in any case, is the connection between paratextuality and intermediality, an area left unexplored by Genette but which, in the layout of a work such as *WMLW*, is highlighted by the use of graphic resources.

The footnotes are mainly divided between comments of an editorial or metatextual nature (e. g., a quotation from Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* [cf. Gass 1968/1989: 15f.]; a comment in a note on the use of 'of course' in the previous note [cf. *ibid.*: 17]) and stage directions, often in the form of injunctions to the stage director<sup>8</sup>. An ambiguity is thus created in the footnotes between the allographic editorial comments, temporally subsequent to the dramatic text and attributable neither to a figural nor to a narratorial discourse but only to an indeterminate voice, and a discourse which at times seems to run parallel to and perhaps merge with Babs's monologue *qua* stage directions. Thus at one point in the dramatic text we read:

*Ivan: [slowly regaining command of himself, he lowers his legs; puzzled now, he stares for a moment at the figure of his wife, then bends a bit in the manner used before\*\*\*\*\* (...)] (Ibid.: 17)*

The twelve asterisks refer to a footnote found, not on the same page, but ... seven pages later:

\*\*\*\*\* The gestures of the actors are no more than words, mere words, the commonest kinds (I am hungry; I am tired; I'm full of fear; see me twist the stem of my cocktail glass, that signifies lost love, it signifies my loneliness, it means lust and debauchery [...]). (Ibid.: 24)

This footnote, whether the continuation of the stage directions, editorial elucidation, an evocation of the speaker's (ostensibly Babs's) own lust and debauchery or some combination of these three alternatives, is rendered even more striking by its spatial distribution in relation to the text it annotates, but also by the graphic means employed to mark the link between the two. And it is indeed such "salient foregrounding of the medium", spoken of by Werner Wolf (2009: 40) in a

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<sup>8</sup> E. g.: "You must instruct the actress playing Olga to emphasize the difference between her fist suddenly smashing through the newspaper, and the modest, dainty way she is to cover her knees, not to mention the delicate refinement of her coffee table manners." (Gass 1968/1989: 24)

comment on the typographical devices implemented in *Tristram Shandy* (1759–1767), that not only serves to highlight the double coding of verbal and graphic media, but also to underscore the metareferential dimension which pervades the novel as a whole, as we shall see later.

Four closely intertwined features contribute to this foregrounding in the eighteen pages of *WMLW* concerned. First is the use of asterisks, extending in number successively from one to twenty-five, to mark the footnotes. However, the length of many of the footnotes is such that (as in the example above) the notes are forced to appear several pages after the text they annotate. This obliges one to count with a fine-tipped pencil the number of asterisks in the text and then do the same in order to locate the corresponding footnote, failing which no coherent relation between text and notes can be established nor, indeed, between the notes themselves<sup>9</sup>. Second, as the footnotes grow in length, the stage directions become shorter and finally disappear. Moreover, the font employed for the first few notes is very small but progressively increases in size, dominating entire pages to the degree that the dramatic text is finally forced into the margin (cf. *ibid.*: 30f.); as for the asterisks, they grow on the last two pages to such a dimension that in the end they overwhelm the center of the page so that it is possible to fit in the final note only by reverting to the tiny font of the initial notes (cf. *ibid.*: 32). Lastly, the very particular use of font and asterisks together with the variable lengths of dramatic text, stage directions and footnotes in this example serves to underscore the extent to which footnotes (and, by extension, other paratextual practices) are bound to the ‘syntagmatics of writing space’. Such a syntagmatics, observes Roy Harris, is of far greater variety and complexity than the syntagmatics of speech, the latter widely thought of as ‘linear’, an erroneous metaphor in itself which is often misleadingly car-

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<sup>9</sup> The system is not entirely homogenous in that, for instance, the dramatic text has no passage with sixteen asterisks and that the footnote with sixteen asterisks (cf. *ibid.*: 26) ends with seventeen asterisks followed by a note that begins with seventeen. A somewhat similar situation arises with the two notes marked by eighteen asterisks (called ‘stars’); logically succeeding the two previous notes, one of them begins with the metatextual comment: “In addition, the stars interfere with the reading, pester the eye. (Why don’t you go to a movie?) More than that, one loses count – which goes with what, what goes with which” (*ibid.*: 27). No passage is marked with twenty-four asterisks, and the last two notes, both marked by twenty-five asterisks, comment punningly on a pun in the dramatic text, with the final note annotating indifferently the dramatic text and the previous note.

ried over to written texts. In fact, as Harris demonstrates in detail, the syntagmatics of writing, whatever form writing takes (hieroglyphs, Braille, the phonetic alphabet, but also graphs and non-glottic forms such as mathematical formulas or musical scores, etc.), is deployed on the space of a surface and thus far exceeds the possibilities of linearity Harris (cf. 1995: esp. 46, 121–127)<sup>10</sup>. Of special interest in this connection is 'internal' syntagmatics. The internal syntagmatics of writing involves how written forms are distributed relative to one another within a graphic space – a phenomenon of particular relevance when, as we have seen with the extract from *WMLW*, the graphic organization of the page serves to drive a wedge between the text and its accompanying footnotes<sup>11</sup>. It can be concluded that while paratextuality is usually defined intramedially, in *WMLW*, its reliance on both the graphic/typographic code and the internal syntagmatics of writing for its actual manifestation renders it inseparable from intermediality. As regards *WMLW* more particularly, the clash of intermedial relations produced, inter alia, by its system of annotation suggests that Gass's essay-novella must be regarded as a plurimedial phenomenon rather than as a 'verbal artifact' in the sense ordinarily thought of in literary contexts.

We thus arrive at the following situation. The stage directions, partially narrativized, are also designed in such a way that the text simulates the plurimedial effects of theatrical production and in this sense thus qualify as system mention *qua* transposition (see fn. 5 above). These effects are achieved thanks to paratextual marking, which identifies the pages in question as a dramatic text. Also introduced is a system of footnotes which, although in principle monomedial, in fact relies on the foregrounding of certain graphic features so as to create a highly particular set of syntagmatic relations within the space of the written page. Where the first case involves 'mention' of theatrical production through simulation, the second, incorporating an intramedial annotational function, is dependent upon 'use' of a medium that is not inherent to language per se, namely the graphic code

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<sup>10</sup> The principle of linearity of speech/writing is poorly served by a polygraph such as: LOUISIANA (cf. Harris 1995: 119).

<sup>11</sup> In contrast to internal syntagmatics, 'external' syntagmatics signifies by the relations of the written text to the world outside graphic space: a finger-post sign on the highway from Vienna to Graz pointing in the direction of Graz bears a very different message if the sign is turned 180 degrees.

(see fn. 5 above). The result is a plurimediality that pits the two codes against one another. Thus ‘contaminated’ by the salient use of typographical forms, the extract constitutes nonetheless “an indivisible hybrid” (Frank 1992: 35) of media as the footnotes take on graphic qualities that are foreign, at least in part, to their normal mode of presentation.

Here then, in the double coding of verbal and graphic media, lies the first dimension of intermedial metareference as it occurs in *WMLW*. If the dialogue between the characters in the play, structured to a large degree by recurrent syntactic forms, parallelisms, puns, etc., can be thought of in terms of first-level self-reference<sup>12</sup>, this framework of ‘intra-systemic reference’ is carried over to the second level: the stage directions and footnotes, characterized by their discursive ‘self-reflexive’ quality. At the same time, however, the graphic features of the footnotes, by radically reordering the conventional configuration of this paratextual practice, also serve to transform these notes through the introduction of intermedial metareference: by transposing the prescriptive and restrictive rules of the graphic code onto the verbal medium, a process of metaization is triggered that focuses attention on the paratextual function of the footnotes, at the same time eliciting a greater interpretive effort to determine the global configuration of the text in question<sup>13</sup>.

And finally, it is clear from these observations that the paratextual features included in *WMLW*, and in particular the footnotes, are heavily reliant on indexical relations. An index, according to Peirce, is a sign whose representamen is physically connected with or contiguous to its object, examples of which, among conventional signs, are proper names, relative pronouns and deictic expressions; characteristic of the index is the fact that although it commands attention, it asserts nothing: it indicates<sup>14</sup>. Such a process occurs in the footnote, whose mode

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<sup>12</sup> According to Wolf: “In a broad semiotic sense, self-reference can be defined as a usually non-accidental quality of signs and sign configurations that in various ways refer or point to (aspects of) themselves or to other signs and sign configurations within one and the same semiotic system or ‘type’ of which they are a part or ‘token’ rather than to (an element of) reality outside the sign (system).” (2009: 19)

<sup>13</sup> On the three conditions of metareference, cf. Wolf 2009: 20–32.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Peirce: “Indices may be distinguished from other signs, or representations, by three characteristic marks: first, that they have no significant resemblance to their objects; second, that they refer to individuals, single units, single collections of units,

of reference (numbers, asterisks, etc.), as Winfried Nöth has observed, is the 'indexical metasign' (2009: 97). This process consists in directing the reader's attention from one point in the graphic space to another and from one mental domain to another; its metareferential quality, however, is implicit and for this reason requires more reflection on the part of the reader than an explicit metareference such as "'The boy' is a noun phrase". In the case of *WMLW*, where the plurimedial nature of the system of footnotes intensifies this requirement of reflection, the impact of the indexical metasign extends well beyond the referencing between text and footnote, contributing to contamination of the verbal code by the graphic code and, as observed earlier, to the 'disembodiment' of Babs as a character in favor of her representation through the graphic space of the page.

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Partial analysis of chapter two of the essay-novella suggests that the foregrounding of typographical devices, by intensifying the indexical qualities of the printed page, plays a crucial role in metaization of the work as a whole. It not being possible to explore this hypothesis any further here, we shall now pass on to a related aspect of plurimediality in *WMLW* which also serves to metaize the work: the salient iconic use of signs. Iconic signs are of course associated with the representation of objects, usually in the visual sense, but in their less 'imagistic' forms they can also contribute to 'evocation' of one medium by another (cf. Rajewsky 2002: 91–94, 114–116; see fn. 5 above) or to 'formal intermedial imitation', as for example in the 'filmicization' of literature or in the 'musicalization' of painting (cf. Wolf 2005: 255). Now, with regard to *WMLW*, it will be seen that while the graphic dimension includes typography, it also extends to the photographs. Examination of the photographs will reveal, however, that they merge with non-pictorial uses of iconic signs. In this connection, reference can be made once again to Peirce, according to whom an icon is a sign that is perceived as being both self-representing and other-representing by virtue of a similarity or resemblance between the representamen and its object. On this basis, icons are broken down into 'images' (portraits, onomatopoeia, etc.), 'diagrams' (blueprints, musical scores,

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or single continua; third, that they direct the attention to their objects by blind compulsion." (1932: 172, § 2.306)

etc.) and ‘metaphors’ (e.g., ‘time is money’, ‘spend time’, ‘waste time’, ‘invest time’, etc., where the qualities of time are made to resemble those of money through a choice of verbs that normally pertain only to money)<sup>15</sup>.

*WMLW* contains photographs of a nude woman or of parts of her body, which thus qualify as images, i. e. icons by virtue of resemblance of the representamens to their object. However, the pictorial features of the images are relativized, subtly but significantly, by at least two factors.

The first is that, lacking a frame, the photographs fail to convey the message ‘This is a picture’, that is, a non-verbal variety of indexical metasign meant to assure the observer of the pictorial quality of the image (cf. Nöth 2009: 97). Delineated (except for the photos on the front and the back covers) only by the edge of the page and, like the printed text, devoid of any background customary of pictorial representations, the photos tend to merge with the typographic dimension of the book. Consequently, the indexical relation of these photos to the represented object is deflected toward the printed text so that they partake of the non-imaginal paratextual function of the footnotes studied above<sup>16</sup>. Clear examples of this dissociation of the photograph from its indexical bond with the represented object can be found on the page prior to the title page, where a woman’s forearm and hand are shown pointing at the title of the book (an arrow would serve the same purpose), or at the beginning of chapter three where a bare calf and foot are pointing at (or perhaps have just kicked over) the first letter of the initial word (cf. Gass 1968/1989: 37).

The second factor compromising the pictorial nature of the photos is that, despite spontaneous assumption to the contrary, there is limited evidence, beyond the physical contiguity of the text and the photos, to

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<sup>15</sup> For a fuller discussion of Peircean iconicity in the literary text, see Pier 1999 and Nöth 2001. Johansen provides an overview of icon, index and symbol (cf. 2002: esp. 29–42); on reading as iconization (imaginization, diagrammatization, allegorization), cf. *ibid.*: 326–341. Nöth 2007 studies the implications of the three categories for self-reference in the media.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Peirce: “this resemblance [to the objects they represent] is due to the photographs having been produced under such circumstances that they were physically forced to correspond point by point to nature. In that aspect, then, they belong to the second class of signs [i. e., indexical signs], those by physical connection.” (1932: 159, § 2.281)

suggest that the woman represented is Babs. Indeed, there are no descriptions or captions enabling one to conclude that the photos are illustrations of the individual who is the speaking and acting subject of the discourse. This situation is markedly different from the vast majority of illustrated literary works where identity between characters, places, etc. and illustrations is either explicit or can be justifiably taken for granted, and it thus runs counter to readers' received expectations. This being the case, and even though the photos are, in the final analysis, of a model who is not the fictional heroine of the essay-novella, it would be unjustified to state that the individual in the photos is categorically not Babs<sup>17</sup>. The tenuous coincidence between the verbal and the photographic representations on this point confirms once again the all but harmonious relations between the verbal and the graphic codes in *WMLW*.

Given these restrictions on imaginal iconicity and the relative accentuation of the non-photographic qualities of the images in favor of their graphic attributes as such, it is appropriate to determine what other forms the salient iconic use of signs in the work might take. We shall see, in two examples from the beginning of the book, that diagrammatic iconicity proves to be highly relevant. Now diagrams, in the semiotic sense, involve the mapping of relations from one domain onto analogous relations of another domain (as in Caesar's 'Veni, vidi, vici'), and since these relations are transposable from and to various instances (as in a grid on which the days of any month of any year can be entered), the patterns established are characteristically more abstract than sensory<sup>18</sup>.

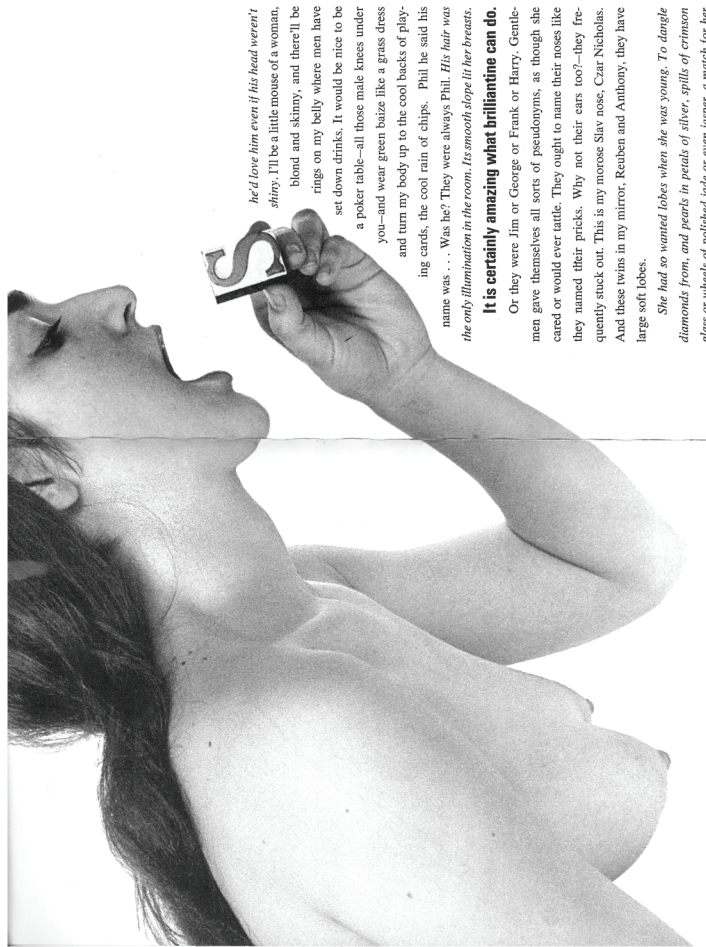
A case in point is the opening two pages of the essay-novella (see *Illustration 1*). The woman is leaning into the text at a 45-degree angle

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<sup>17</sup> The clearest evidence of identity between the photos and Babs is on page one, where she states "[...] there'll be rings on my belly where men have set down drinks" (Gass 1968/1989); this is illustrated on the last page where a photo shows a brown ring, possibly a stain from a coffee cup, surrounding a woman's belly button (cf. *ibid.*). On the other hand, the physical attributes of Babs alluded to on page 4 are certainly not those of the slim figure on the following page; nor does the statement "a bosom born but thirty years ago and plump as ever" (*ibid.*: 53) tally well with the photos.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Peirce: diagrams are icons "which represent the relations, mainly dyadic, or so regarded, of the parts of one thing by analogous relations in their own parts." (1932: 157, § 2.277)





he'd love him even if his head weren't shiny. I'll be a little mouse of a woman, blond and skinny, and there'll be rings on my belly where men have set down drinks. It would be nice to be a poker table—all those male knees under you—and wear green baize like a grass dress and turn my body up to the cool backs of playing cards, the cool rain of chips. Phil he said his name was . . . Was he? They were always Phil. *His hair was the only illumination in the room. Its smooth slope lit her breasts.*

**It is certainly amazing what brilliance can do.**

Or they were Jim or George or Frank or Harry. Gentlemen gave themselves all sorts of pseudonyms, as though she cared or would ever tattle. They ought to name their noses like they named their pricks. Why not their ears too?—they frequently stuck out. This is my morose Slav nose, Czar Nicholas. And these twins in my mirror, Rebhen and Anthony, they have large soft lobes.

*She had so wanted lobes when she was young. To dangle diamonds from, and rears in petals of silver, spills of erinson glass or wheels of polished jade or even Jasper, a match for her*

Illustration 1: William Gass, Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife, *Normal*, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1989, pp. 0–1.

from the left, the top of her head, like her trunk, extending beyond the edge of the page as her open mouth, slightly above and to the left of the first line, seems either to exhale onto, or about to take in, a block held in her hand containing an oversized letter 'S', the initial letter of the first word of the book. It can be seen that the form of this letter 'S' approximates the line that could be traced from the woman's upper lip, curving downward in the form of her open mouth and then follow-

ing her protruding chin where it turns back up toward her throat. Moreover, the text itself is in a sense framed in that the indentation of the first paragraph is aligned to the form of the woman's hand.

Were the line described above just that – a line following the form of the woman's mouth and chin with no analogy to the form of a letter of the alphabet – it would be an iconic image. This in part it is, but at the same time the 'S'-shaped line serves to bring out the metareferential patterning that spans the two media. The relevant fact is that, right from the beginning, a pattern of diagrammatic iconicity is set up which underlies *WMLW* as an instance of formal intermedial imitation based on relations of analogy between media rather than on imaginal resemblance between specific instances. In the absence of any verbal description of Babs, the work cannot be considered an ekphrastic evocation of her, and even the photographs, as already observed, possess graphic qualities that significantly modify their role as illustrations of Babs. A 'negative' ekphrasis, the essay-novella thus presents its object through a series of diagrammatic icons which are deployed intermedially: the one just examined, in addition to the indentation of the first paragraph miming the visual representation of the hand, appears to emblematically set the tone for this feature in other parts of the work. The hypothesis is that, overall, diagrammatic iconicity provides a key to the contours of intermedial metareference that emerge in the course of Gass's essay-novella between the verbal medium and the graphic medium.

The second example of diagrammatic iconicity is played out both textually and graphically, providing a vivid example of metaization (see *Illustrations 2* and *3*). In the final paragraph on page 2, continued on pages 4 and 5, a complex series of relations, both semantic and phonological, can be identified, the progressive unfolding of which produces a network of relationships exemplifying the process of 'diagrammatization'<sup>19</sup>. Partial informal analysis of these relationships reveals two principal semantic networks: 1) "breasts big as your butt" (attribute assigned to Babs by her father); 2) "smart ass" (although derived from 'smart alec', use of this oxymoron as a return compliment in the present context can be glossed: 'dad smart as your ass'). To each network can be added a sub-network: 1) "plump little lady"; 2)

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Johansen: "diagrammatization is a process whose contribution to text understanding consists in the progressive linking of parts in the unfolding of the text." (2002: 333f.)



hair. Waiting for her lobes to grow was like having an undescended testicle or a flat chest, she supposed—when, for god's sake, you wondered, would something show up—and she peered into the circle of the shaving glass which slanted on her bureau, tagging at her ears until they ached.

Her own nose was buttoxy.

Supposes, for instance, a stranger were to—oh, say you're laughing uproariously, and that's the occasion for it—split in your mouth, god forbid. Still, stably, they do worse. So here you are, you've cracked your face across—the ha ha haing—and someone—some enemy, some social scientist, some polisher of singular skills—fires it in suddenly. Well you've always had your own wash working for you, sloshing about—an inland sea foaming up against its rocks (how grand that's put, how grand, and you don't mind it. You don't go hissing and dithering, do you? meaning, do you? god, my god, my head is leaking, lord, my head is leaking through my mouth, my god, and down my throat and past my shoulders, all those tubes, good lord, and toward my shoes? In that case, then, you must be friendly to it. You're old chums. But hank blind on a table and you'll never tell your spatter from a thousand Queens. Boyfriends. Bums. If you have an experimental rent, try this expectorate into a glass—sufficiently—twelve times should do it. Do not tarry. Drink the spittle. Analyze your reluctance. And wonder why they call saliva the sweet wine of love.

There was never any doubt about my bosom, buddy; breasts as big as your butt there, nipples red and rubbery. A regular dairy, my daddy always said. **Babs' Sweet But-tory.** The smart ass. The hairy smart ass. Well, a smirk to his memory. This plump little lady, he used to say, shot up like a weed when she was eight. What a smart ass. May the tines in his skull ache. A milkweed, he'd about, and then he'd tickle my tummy and shatter with laughter. You're going to amount to something, baby, he'd say, shaping his hands, the smart ass; you're going to be as big this sway as you are the other. This

Illustration 2: William Gass, Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife, *Normal*, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1989, pp. 2–3.

“giving his worms gas, the beery s.o.b.” Babs is further characterized as “a milk-weed” 1) in reference to her breasts and 2) in analogy to the phrase ‘to shoot up like a weed’. These semantic networks are deftly highlighted and demarcated from one another through their phonological structuring: 1) alliteration with repetition of the voiced plosive bilabial /b/; 2) the voiceless alveolar fricative /s/ in initial and final po-



matic text commented on earlier. But the punch line, which has repercussions throughout the paragraph, phonetically and semantically, is: “you’re going to be as big this sway as you are the other.” The context would have it that “this sway” should be “this way”, suggesting that Babs will be as fat as she is tall. However, the phonetic proximity of the two variants, due to the voiceless alveolar fricative /s/ followed by the voiced labialized velar glide /w/, makes it impossible to distinguish between the two pronunciations of /θɪs we/ except by placement of the primary stress which, as an effect of the orthography, is unexpectedly transferred to the second word. With this displacement of primary stress comes 1) a consequent inversion of pitch for /θɪs/ (from high tone to mid tone) and the introduction of a falling tone (for /swe/) plus 2) a resultant shift of boundaries between morphological units. (Note that, in contrast, /lɪd lɛdɪ/ remains morphologically unambiguous whether the primary stress is placed on the first or the second word).

The orthographic-phonetic pun is elaborated on and somewhat disambiguated by recourse to further graphic means. Adjacent to the page with “this sway” on the bottom line is a page with a photograph that visually illustrates both ‘sway’ and ‘way’: the sway of the woman’s hips to the right specifies that “way” refers only to the horizontal dimension, ruling out the horizontal-vertical comparison of the original sentence, and it also serves as a kinetic indexical gesture to the reader to read on ‘this way’. The following two pages ‘illustrate’ the pun typographically in at least two ways. Written in italics to emphasize that not “way” but “sway” is meant, *sway* imitates the movement it signifies and thus becomes an imaginal icon. Moreover, it literally appears in two ‘ways’: as the first word of page 4, an inverted mirror-page, and as the first word of page 5, presented in the normal reading order. The result is that the two pages mirror each other by opening with symmetrically inverted typographical forms that ‘sway’ away from each other, an instance of intramedial self-reflexivity. By transforming the phonetically and semantically ambiguous sentence “you’re going to be as big this sway as you are the other” into a non-pictorial graphic medium with a differing set of constituent features, the pages in question thus suggest once again that *WMLW*, far from ‘describing’ Babs, acts as a ‘negative’ ekphrasis and that as a fictional character she is absorbed, to a significant degree, into the non-discursive graphic design of the book.

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The various metareferential devices we have observed in the essay-novella, manifested through a variety of complex relations between the verbal and graphic codes, clearly point to the materiality of the book itself and thus detract from the traditional practice of narrative fiction, which consists in portraying a world that lies outside the book and outside language. Gass, in an essay entitled "Tropes of the Text", has also taken an interest in this issue. Arguing, for instance, that prose fiction from the eighteenth century onward has strived to imagine that it is not a fiction but something else such as a "true history", a collection of letters, etc. ("a deception ardently desired by both reader and writer" [Gass 1983/1985: 144]), he adopts the position that the novel bears a figurative relation to the world. But it is with novels such as Nabokov's *The Defense* (1930), modeled after the game of chess, or Cortázar's *Hopscotch* (1963), whose readers are summoned to read the novel following the rules of that game, or *WMLW*, which "regards its text as the body of a woman of generous morals and much abuse" (ibid.: 158), that the text itself becomes a trope: "[t]hese tropes for the text, these spatializations, center themselves in the field of the page—the ontology of the *printed* or *written* word. However, the printed word is but a surrogate for the spoken one [...]" (ibid.: 153).

The terminology and concepts employed by Gass are not those that have been developed by intermediality studies nor those of meta-reference research. Even so, the questions he addresses seem to reflect the general tenets underlying the analyses in the present study, and in particular the impact on verbal storytelling caused by the highlighting of certain features of the graphic medium within the syntagmatics of the printed page. From this perspective, Gass's proposal to view certain types of texts, among them *WMLW*, as tropes, takes on a particular relevance. This is made explicit on the back cover of the book:

In this homage to the pleasures of language, William Gass equates his text with the body of Babs Masters, the lonesome wife of the title, to explore the relationship between a woman and her lover, as well as a book and its reader. Disappointed by her inattentive husband/reader, Babs engages in an exuberant display of the physical charms of language to entice both her new lover and the reader. (Gass 1968/1989)

By equating the text with Babs's body, the author in effect identifies the macrostructural metaphor for the entire work. What serves here as

a link between text and body is not an analogy of relations (as in diagrammatic iconicity), but “pleasures” or “physical charms”, qualities normally associated with erotic experiences. There thus occurs a semantic and conceptual transfer from one domain to another on the order of ‘the evening of life’ as a metaphor for old age, where a certain period in the time of day is singled out as being comparable to a certain stage in the life cycle<sup>20</sup>. The quoted passage follows a similar iconic pattern in that it effectively asserts that ‘the reader is to the book as the lover is to woman’. This metaphor, however, differs slightly from the previous one, for the emphasis here falls on Babs, not as an object of representation, but on the capacity of the female body to serve as a medium of textual communication, a body to be ‘read’ like a book. The macrostructural metaphor of the work thus plays on plurimediality and stakes out a framework for the modes of intermedial metareference peculiar to the essay-novella: in order “to entice” the lover/reader, a battery of “physical charms” is displayed by Babs/*WMLW* by putting into relief various graphic and other features, some of which are discussed above. In this way, the metaphor identified in the quoted passage constitutes (together with indexicality and diagrammaticity) the third dimension of metaization in the work, namely the macrostructural framework. It is at this level that, through formal intermedial imitation, the female body and the pleasures associated with it are evoked, the book becoming, metaphorically speaking, Babs’s body. *WMLW* is thus not so much a story that represents the actions of fictional characters or that develops the theme of the erotic pleasures of the female body as it is a way of modeling the fictional text after such pleasures. Similarly to what was pointed out by McHale (cf. 1987/1993: 227) with regard to love in the postmodern novel, it can be said that Babs’s body is a *metaobject* and that the erotic pleasures evoked in Gass’s text are its *metatheme*. It is, then, in its macrostructural dimension that *WMLW* most clearly qualifies as an example of metareference: “a special transmedial form of [...] self-reference produced by signs or sign configurations which are (felt to be) located on a logically higher level, a ‘metalevel’, within an artifact or performance [...]” (Wolf 2009: 31).

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. Peirce: “those [signs] which represent the representative character of a representamen by representing a parallelism in something else, are *metaphors*”. (1932: 157, § 2.277)

It is notable that this macrostructural metaphor of the text evoking the female body is made explicit, not in the work properly speaking, but on the back cover of the book, thus serving the explanatory editorial function of the preface or postscript. In the absence of this peritextual information, it may not be immediately clear that the text is meant as a metaphor for the female body, that text and body are linked by “pleasures” or “physical charms”; nor, without interpretive effort, will one conclude that the world portrayed in *WMLW* is a tropological world. Even so, a lengthier analysis than we can afford here will show that this metaphor is implicit and also, due to its extended or sustained nature, that it underlies the essay-novella as *allegory*. This can be explained by the fact that the diegetic parameters of the work, as we have seen, are relatively undefined, yielding, to no negligible degree, to the clash between the verbal and the graphic codes, and that this lack of specificity of the narrative world, together with the highlighting and salience of various features of the text in its materiality, intensifies the need to determine the nature of the connections between textual content and its material manifestation. It is at this point that the macrostructural metaphor becomes synonymous with allegory: the text evokes the sensuous qualities of the female body and the neglected and lonesome Babs longing for an attentive reading.

Allegory, according to McHale, has asserted itself in postmodern writing as a result of the ontological questions that are often focused on by writers of this type of fiction. With Kafka, Beckett and Joyce as forerunners, postmodern allegory is characterized by an unspoken and diffuse dual ontology that places demands on the reader to supply the missing literal frame of reference. It is also observed by McHale that, in contrast to the personifications of Good and Evil characteristic of traditional allegory, postmodern allegory is “Manichaeian”: its modalities are “the Nietzschean opposition between Apollonian and Dionysian principles, rational order vs. mindless pleasures”, the most “Manichaeian” of postmodern allegorists being Pynchon (McHale 1987/1993: 142). As for *WMLW*, marked by a more Dionysian form of allegory than can be found in Pynchon’s paranoid fictions, it explores the relations between the creative imagination and the erotic. This being the case, and although he does not use the term, Wolf in effect characterizes the book as a Dionysian allegory when he describes it as a “metafictional metaphor” in which sexuality is the vehicle and creative imagination the tenor (Wolf 1992: 290). He draws a connection between this metaphor and Babs’s seductive lures to the reader, on the



one hand, and between the same metaphor and Roland Barthes's 'pleasure of the text' or Susan Sontag's 'erotics of art' and 'sensuous surface of art', on the other, and he characterizes this phenomenon as the "sexualization" of the text (ibid.: 293)<sup>21</sup>. Finally, the erotic game generated through the materiality of the text is commented on in *WMLW* itself with a reference to Coleridge's conception of poetry which, according to Wolf, completes the metafictional metaphor of literature and sex with the active esthetic participation of the reader in "acts of the imagination" (ibid.: 294)<sup>22</sup>.

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An unmistakably plurimedial work, *WMLW* deploys verbal and graphic signs to produce a multitude of effects through intermedial metareference. The semiotic principles of index and icon provide a useful set of criteria for describing and analyzing these effects which result from the highlighting and salience of various aspects of the work, both in its material organization and in the structuring of its discourse. Diagrammatic iconicity appears to govern intermedial metareference in a number of ways. This was seen in an analysis of the opening pages of the book and would seem to suggest that plurimediality is a particularly rich terrain for this aspect of metareference. It is the phenomenon of diagrammaticity that opens the way to formal intermedial imitation when relations of analogy between differing media are at issue. It was also seen that formal intermedial imitation in *WMLW* in the form of metaphorical iconicity plays a crucial role. It is on this basis, notably, that the macrostructural metaphor of the work is elaborated and that intermedial metareference between the text of the work and the body of Babs takes form. At the same time, Gass's essay-novella is an allegorical work that evokes the female body metareferentially by seeking to eroticize the fictional text.

But why, now, have we chosen to examine the work in these terms? Gass himself, one of the early proponents of metafiction and author of a body of critical essays that spans several decades, seems not to have adopted the language and concepts of intermediality and

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<sup>21</sup> Wolf also discusses Barth and Fowles, some of whose works also reflect this 'erotics of art'.

<sup>22</sup> "Imagination is, as Sam said, the unifying power, and the acts of the imagination are our most free and natural; they represent us at our best." (Gass 1968/1989: 49)

metareference. And yet, his essay-novella, a vivid example of the meta-referential turn, lends itself readily to such an analysis, and this for several reasons.

The first is that, by putting the verbal and graphic codes into sharp and sometimes contrasting relief, *WMLW* brings to the fore latent features of the literary text as medium, drawing attention to a double coding inherent to all literature in printed form, but which is seldom taken into account – and indeed which rarely need be. Playing in novel ways on the plurimedial potential of the book, Gass's work tends, as already noted, and as the analyses confirm, "to establish an indivisible hybrid" (Frank 1992: 35). This, in turn, prompts 'intensified attention' on the part of the interpreter in an attempt to grasp and better comprehend 'a comparatively new object or object quality': such is one of the three conditions essential to the phenomenon of turn in any field of inquiry (cf. Bachmann-Medick 2006/2009: 25f.)<sup>23</sup> – a feature amply illustrated in the work in question. Indeed, only a cursory reading of it would fail to inspire such intensified attention.

The metareferential qualities of *WMLW* that stand out so emphatically thanks to its plurimediality have numerous implications that extend beyond the work properly speaking. Harkening back to modernist experimentation in the visual arts with their spillover into literary movements, for example, the pronounced graphic dimension of a work such as Gass's calls for an interdisciplinary framework of reception and analysis as well as for further elaboration of concepts and methodologies in transmedial research, marking a second characteristic of turns in the social and human sciences. In partial response to this need, examination of this highly particular work has resorted to a number of semiotic concepts to act as a possible interface between disciplines whose criteria remain largely monodisciplinary and monomedial.

Lastly, it can be said of this essay-novella that it is "a *multimedia* coexistence of different media-quotations and elements [...] transformed into a *conceptual multimedia* coexistence" (Müller 1996: 298; emphasis in the orig.). In this regard, the work meets the third criterion of a turn, a correlate of the other two in that it triggers a 'conceptual leap'. The conceptual leap involved in this particular case results from highly developed intermedial and metareferential features, and it appears to reflect some of the general characteristics of post-

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<sup>23</sup> For a discussion of Bachmann-Medick's criteria and their relevance to the meta-referential turn, see Wolf's introduction to this volume.

modern cultural representations. Two of them will be briefly mentioned here.

The first is that *WMLW* comes within the scope of a ‘literature of exhaustion’ or of ‘exhausted possibility’ (see Barth 1967/1984). At issue is not a literature that has petered out or withered away for lack of artistic imagination, as the provocative phrase has often been interpreted to mean (Barth in fact agrees with Borges, for whom literature can never be exhausted). Rather, it is a literature that has come in the wake of the “used-upness” of “the aesthetic of high modernism”, and it follows the general principle “that artistic conventions are liable to be retired, subverted, transcended, transformed, or even deployed against themselves to generate new and lively work” (ibid.: 205f.)<sup>24</sup>. The verbal-graphic configurations of *WMLW* correspond singularly to this description.

The other major dimension of the conceptual leap brought about by the intermedial and metareferential devices implemented in *WMLW*, eroticization of the fictional text, results from the novel means by which the female body is figuratively evoked. Metaphor, allegory and tropological worlds are, of course, among the age-old staples of literary discourse, and they are incorporated into this work, as well. What is unique in this case is that, from the macrostructural dimension down to local details, the plurimediality of the work, more than diegesis or theme, unsettle the boundaries between media, eliciting a metareferential leap in the recipient’s awareness.

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<sup>24</sup> Reviving the resources of the story-within-the-story, Barth’s short story collection *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968) contributes to the metareferential turn primarily through multiple concurrent distributions of these stories by exploiting the labyrinthine spatial potential of the book; for further discussion, see Pier 2011.

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