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THE WORLD WITHIN THE WORD: A LACANIAN READING OF WILLIAM GASS'S *EMMA ENTERS A SENTENCE OF ELIZABETH BISHOP'S*

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ABSTRACT. Emma Enters a Sentence of Elizabeth Bishop's *by William H. Gass addresses the human condition in terms of desire and consciousness in fiction by depicting characters that are being suffocated under the force of circumstances. Application of Lacanian theories to Gass's novella sheds some light on the unconscious features of its main character, Emma, whose neurosis caused by her father's extremism in acting out his patriarchal role is presented in the form of disparate, metonymical chunks 'disseminated' through the narrative – itself fragmentary. Broken pieces of Emma's narrative put together through the medium of language highlight how her actions stem from her unconscious pathological motivations. Also discussed is the process through which she manages to find a way out of her plight.*

Keywords: William Gass's *Emma Enters a Sentence of Elizabeth Bishop's*, Jacques Lacan, word, world, patriarchal metaphor, neurotic subject's consciousness.

EL MUNDO EN EL INTERIOR DE LA PALABRA: UNA LECTURA LACANIANA DE *EMMA ENTERS A SENTENCE OF ELIZABETH BISHOP* DE WILLIAM GASS

RESUMEN. Emma Enters a Sentence of Elizabeth Bishop *de William H. Gass aborda la condición humana en términos de deseo y consciencia en la ficción mediante la creación de personajes que se sienten asfixiados por las circunstancias. La aplicación de las teorías lacanianas sobre la novella de Gass arroja alguna luz sobre las características inconscientes de su protagonista, Emma, cuya neurosis causada por el extremismo de su padre en la representación de su rol patriarcal se refleja en la forma de fragmentos metonímicos aislados y "diseminados" por toda la obra –ya fragmentaria de por sí. Cuando estos trozos de la narrativa de Emma son reunidos mediante el lenguaje revelan que sus acciones tienen su origen en motivaciones patológicas inconscientes. También se discute el proceso a través del cual Emma logra salir de su aprieto.*

Palabras clave: *Emma Enters a Sentence of Elizabeth Bishop*, William H. Gass, Jacques Lacan, palabra, mundo, metáfora patriarcal, consciencia del sujeto neurótico.

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1. INTRODUCTION

> To an almost measureless degree, to *know* is to possess words, and all of us who live out in the world as well as within our own are aware that we inhabit a forest of symbols; we dwell in a context of texts. (Gass 1997: 92)

Scholars hail William H. Gass as the philosopher of language whose most endeared occupation is the playful composition of words and their inscription on paper. Madera points out this fact by mentioning that "Gass is concerned with words, words, words—how they are the building blocks of meaning, how, like numbers for mathematicians or pigment for painters, stories are the very raw materials for narrative construction" (2013: 4). Out of these seemingly simple constructions of Gass's words, a plethora of characters and events march forward to penetrate deep into their reader's consciousness. In his works of fiction and non-fiction, Gass has never failed to indicate the importance of words as the constituents of the world as we know it. To him, "literature is language […] stories and the places and the people in them are merely made of words as chairs are made of smoothed sticks and sometimes of cloth or metal tubes" (Gass 1970: 27). *Cartesian Sonata and Other Novellas* is no exception.

In four novellas, Gass has presented us with an "exuberant prose with sly postmodern speculations on the nature of desire, fiction, and the soul" (*Kirkus Reviews*). Furthermore, in each of these meticulously planned pieces, a subject is put to extensive study. *Emma Enters a Sentence of Elizabeth Bishop's* can be definitely "the grimmest tale" (*Kirkus Reviews*) of this collection which "features a desiccated would-be poet who tries, quite literally, to plunge into the lines, to virtually become the words, of her favorite poet" (*Kirkus Reviews*). Playing the role of a frustrated would-be poet, Emma tries to reduce herself to almost nothing so that she could lie in a line of Elizabeth Bishop's poetry. The story is delivered in the form of a highly individualistic reportage of the fragmented daily experiences of this girl known as Emma Bishop. The narrative takes the form of a diary recited through the third person perspective focalized through Emma, the "hyperprivate main character" (Hix 2002: 149).

Gass's passion for words from his philosophical point of view is shared by practitioners of psychoanalysis, notably Lacan, in the realm of psycholinguistics. To Gass, the "purpose of a literary work is the capture of consciousness, and the consequent creation, in you, of an imagined sensibility" (1970: 33). To Lacan, a text is the best place to study the unconscious desires because they manifest themselves in the text. Lacan regards language as signification and the symbolic as the realm of language. To him, the "word is not a sign, but a nodal point [*noeud*] of signification" (2002: 136). Evans summarizes some of Lacan's concerns as follows:

> Firstly, all human communication is inscribed in a linguistic structure; even 'body language' is, as the term implies, fundamentally a form of *language,* with the same structural features. Secondly, the whole aim of psychoanalytic treatment is to articulate the truth of one's desire in speech rather than in any other medium; the fundamental rule of psychoanalysis is based on the principle that speech is the only way to this 'truth' (1996: 100).

Though from different backgrounds, these scholars have in common the idea that words and their playful chains are what one needs to utilize to delve into consciousness. The present article will, hence, consider Gass's indirect highlighting and treatment of Emma Bishop's consciousness in the light of the psycholinguistic theories of Jacques Lacan in an attempt to show how Gass's tale meticulously depicts the subtleties of a perturbed psyche through the medium of language. The process through which the novella's protagonist manages to find a way out of her plight and get rid of patriarchal dominance will also be discussed in some detail along with the subtleties of the narrative form through which the story is delivered. To elaborate Lacanian concepts further, there will be occasional references to Lacan's major counterpart in the field of psychoanalysis, Kristeva, who shares

with Lacan the idea that the speaking subject is split between unconscious and conscious levels. Like Lacan, Kristeva also believes "[l]anguage as a symbolic function constitutes itself at the cost of repressing instinctual drive and continuous relation to the mother" (1980: 136). Therefore, through her approach known as "semanalysis", she attempts to analyze the ways in which the split within the speaking subject can be revealed.

2. DISCUSSION

Following Freud, Lacan has taken center stage in psychology and related disciplines. He is the seminal figure for many scholars and theoreticians of the field of psycholinguistics. His most important achievement in this field has been the introduction of the unconscious as structured like language and hence bringing together the two domains of language and psychoanalysis which were otherwise considered incompatible.

In the life of each individual Lacan distinguishes three orders, namely the imaginary, the symbolic and the real. The real is inaccessible for the subject who inhabits the symbolic. The imaginary is the primary, plentiful order the infant experiences as soon as s/he is born well up to the mirror stage – sometime between 6 to 18 months. In this primary stage of being, there are no desires because needs are satisfied before they even turn into desire. In the mirror stage two major events happen:

> In the 1950s Lacan described two moments of alienation and suggested that the subject was doubly alienated: first, through the infant's (mis)-recognition of itself in the other during the mirror stage and, second, through the subject's accession into the symbolic and language. Alienation is an inevitable consequence of the formation of the ego and a necessary first step towards subjectivity (Homer 2005: 71).

Lacan points out that during this stage we see "the slave identifying with the despot, the actor with the spectator, the seduced with the seducer […] It is in this erotic relationship, in which the human individual fixates on an image that alienates him from himself" (2002: 92). Through identification with the image in the mirror the child forms false ideas about her/his separate identity, enters the symbolic as a subject and starts using language. Therefore, the "position and identity of the subject is constituted by language" (Green and LeBihan 1996: 169). To Lacan, the imaginary depends on the symbolic because it finds articulation through the symbolic medium which is language. However, "[l]anguage never quite speaks the subject: it can only operate in metaphoric or metonymic terms" (Green and LeBihan 1996: 172). It is noteworthy that though both Lacan and Kristeva regard

the realm of language as associated with the masculine, the law, and structure, Kristeva departs from Lacan on the idea that even after entering the symbolic, the subject continues to oscillate between the semiotic and the symbolic. Therefore, rather than arriving at a fixed identity, the subject is permanently "in process" and is the site of "permanent contradiction between these two dispositions (semiotic/symbolic)" (Kristeva 1980: 140). Regardless of this difference, both Lacan and Kristeva agree that the subject that has been transported to the symbolic will always remain desirous. Language will be the only tool at the subject's disposal to articulate the loss of unity and the desire at the sight of lack s/he is constantly experiencing.

Another central concern of Lacan is neurosis, an originally 18th-century psychiatric term which came to account for a whole range of nervous disorders defined by a wide variety of symptoms. Neurosis is generally defined as a mental disorder involving symptoms of stress like depression, anxiety, and obsessive behavior. Lacan used "Heidegger's notion that human existence consists fundamentally in a question, and used it to define neurosis as a question posed by the subject concerning not only its existence but its sex" (Rabaté 2003: 41). Lacan believed that "'neurotic character' is the reflection in individual behavior of the isolation of the family unit" (2002: 134). In other words, a neurotic character is formed when the subject cannot successfully complete the mirror stage and hence experiences greater lack and imbalance in his symbolic existence. Equally remarkable is the fact that "Lacan sees neurosis as a structure that cannot be altered" (Evans 1996: 126). It should also be noted that a neurotic character does not undergo a radical loss of touch with reality. Rather, s/he constantly tries to compensate this lack through various strategies. Another important fact worthy of consideration in the case of a neurotic is that "its structure is particularly designed to camouflage, displace, deny, divide, and muffle aggressive intentions" (Lacan 2002: 88).

In Gass's *Emma Enters a Sentence of Elizabeth Bishop* the reader is introduced to a family of three including Emma, the title character, and her mom and dad. As the story progresses, the reader gets glimpses of Emma as a disturbed character; she is trapped within the unavoidable circumstances of her parents' dreary life. A young woman in a secluded "Iowa house, empty and large and cool in the fall. Otherwise inhospitable" (Gass 1998: 147), Emma finds herself struggling against the sense of losing touch with the world in an attempt to hold on to what little is left of her tenuous symbolic identity. What is apparent from the outset regarding all three of these disturbingly odd characters is their utter, suffocating loneliness which is aggravated by their own abstention from talking to each other and their avoiding almost any human contact including each other's company: "each

of them managed most marvelously to avoid one another" (Gass 1998: 172). In other words, the family is basically disintegrated, and is barely holding together because there are no proper inter-subject interactions between the three of them. The chief reason for this is the tyrannical father who beats the mother and dominates both female members of the household. Mother's role is also noteworthy: "Like her father, Emma's mother manages to damage her, but if her father harms Emma by his activity, her mother harms her by her passivity" (Hix 2002 :152). Through such a depiction, Gass has successfully portrayed the sense of suffocation which is dominant; there is nowhere to go. One is consumed with one's self.

The structure of this novella is designed on the basis of Emma's consciousness and entails detailed but un-chronological narration of events by an omniscient narrator. Emma's story is presented in bits and pieces, just like her life. Nonetheless, through the narrative a sense of coherence and wholeness, however provisional, can be obtained; the puzzle-like, seemingly discrete pieces need to be put together so that a picture of the plight of this lonesome girl and her attempt to find a way out of it could emerge. Since the story is complicated, putting the pieces in the right order requires close attention; however, the reader can manage to follow the train of thoughts of the central character. The story promises no happy ending. Neither does it offer any possibility of salvation. Finally, however, we find the central character alone and apparently un-burdened, as she always wished to be.

Emma proves to be a fine example of a Lacanian disturbed personality, somebody whose whole existence depends on words; "the words she read and fled from were all that kept her alive" (Gass 1998: 169). Emma's connection to the world, despite her ever-increasing reticence is defined in terms of the few books she has gotten hold of and reads to lose herself within her imagination and, therefore, escape from the ever-present abhorrence of her daily existence, for it is through fantasy that "the subject attempts to sustain the illusion of unity with the Other and ignore his or her own division" (Homer 2005: 87). In other words, Emma could be considered as a classic example of "word-drunk characters," to use the phrase coined by Madera (2013: 21).

To get a Lacanian picture of Emma, we should try to look into the origin of her condition as a traumatic character. To this purpose, the role her dad plays in developing her neurosis should not be ignored. He is supposed to have filled the role of a paternal signifier, on a symbolic level, to have let Emma pass on to the symbolic order after having experienced the mirror stage. Emma, however, has been subject to extreme paternal authority in her life, a fact which has led to her becoming a neurotic. The paternal metaphor, which should have helped her

enter the symbolic as a sound subject, has turned into her dad's tyrannical use of his authority in dominating her life. It has been taken to such extreme levels that even her body has not been safe from his inspecting gaze. Emma is constantly being harassed by her father's gaze, an experience which is expressed from the viewpoint of a prey toward a predator: "She was fearful for she felt the hawk's eye on her" (Gass 1998: 147). Emma hates her own body because it has been exposed; "she began to loathe any part of her that was uncovered, her face and hands first, her feet finally" (Gass 1998: 157). It is under the father's gaze that her body starts shrinking literally and metaphorically. Emma's own conclusion of her unfortunate situation is recounted as follows: "the life I missed because I was afraid, the hawk's eye" Gass 1998: 150). This experience corresponds with Freud's early hypothesis that "actual sexual abuse causes neurosis" (Rabaté 2003: 232). Furthermore, Emma is quite limited to her home and has almost no connection to the outside world (her father even goes so far as to impede her mail too). Endless suffering and being denied her essential needs have resulted in the emergence of the symptoms of a neurotic in Emma for whom the "necessity for words is born of deprivation" (Morris 1993: 104). As a neurotic, she "can derive a sustained pleasure in calling upon a fantasy" (Rabaté 2003: 204) to accompany her. She is incessantly seeking a way to escape. This finds expression in her desire to be de-bodied so that she can "enter" and "become" language, so that she can "embody" language. She believes that she can find her salvation through words, hence she seeks shelter in works of art and in poetic language where the semiotic "tends to gain the upper hand at the expense of the thetic and predicative constraints of the ego's judging consciousness" (Kristeva 1980: 134). Semiotic victory, and the subsequent victory of the unconscious desire over the conscious, through poetic language bestows upon Emma temporary refuge from the horrors of her life while simultaneously helping her maintain her identity through the poetic language she cherishes. This is because however "elided, attacked or corrupted the symbolic function might be in poetic language, due to the impact of semiotic processes, the symbolic function nonetheless maintains its presence" (Kristeva 1980: 134) and strengthens Emma's hold on the symbolic. Emma is willingly forsaking this material world in order to lose herself in the work of her favorite poet, Elizabeth Bishop whose growing dominance in Emma's psyche becomes apparent as the plot progresses. Monti sums up what happens to Emma as follows: "Emma Enters a Sentence of Elizabeth Bishop's," [is] the story of Emma Bishop's escape from her shallow life in the beauty of language and poetry. In her gradual loss of weight and her longing for lying down and dying in a line of Elizabeth Bishop's, one can see her progressive detachment from matter toward the non-corporeity of mind" (2006: 122).

Interestingly, the plot of the story degenerates along with the degeneration of the character it depicts. At the end of the plot, the family of three is reduced to only one; the girl, Emma, who may not survive for long. On a deeper level, of course, there is more to this plot than just a simple depiction of the main character's path to perdition. Once the reader enters Emma's consciousness, s/he faces an adamant will to survive and to be remembered echoed in her story; "Forget-me-not was a frequent sentiment" (Gass 1998: 178).

The disintegration Emma desires is what we can define in terms of death drive. The blame for Emma's anorexia is primarily "laid on her parents, especially her father, who attends carefully to, and comments lewdly on, her physical development" (Hix 2002: 151). Of course, Emma never goes after total annihilation; rather, her aim is physical dissolution for the purpose of integration with the very elemental chains of the ordering and the unifying system which forms consciousness, i.e. language. This is in line with Lacanian psychoanalysis in that Emma, as a neurotic, longs to "inhabit" language. Her strong defense is against the real world and the reality of the plight she is in.

Lack is a central theme in this story and a matter of vital interest to psychoanalytical theories. As already mentioned, in the initial state of being, there exists a sense of jouissance and fulfillment, for both the mother and the child, which precedes the consequent sense of lack and desire. Upon entrance to the symbolic order, the necessary absence of the mother triggers a state of helplessness for the child and transforms her/him into an eternally desiring subject. From then on, the once accessible jouissance is only disguised in language. Lack of the maternal other produces a quest for fulfillment. Desire resulting from this lack becomes the subject's companion from the moment of separation from the mother. To Lacan, as Homer explains, "[w]e are born into language— the language through which the desires of others are articulated and through which we are forced to articulate our own desire" (2005: 44). This subject needs to be able to use codes and symbols for the purpose of articulation because it is a way to come to terms with the world, through the medium of language. However, the real the subject is seeking lies outside symbolization because "speech can never articulate the *whole* truth about desire; whenever speech attempts to articulate desire, there is always a leftover, a surplus, which exceeds speech" (Evans 1996: 37). Despite all this, Lacan—like Kristeva— is after the play of unconscious desire manifest in the text since according to him, experience of life is captured within symbols.

As mentioned before, losing oneself in imagination is a fantasy which can help Emma compensate for her sense of lack or loss in life. Even her sexuality is defined and experienced in the texts she reads; however, her involvement in

excesses of imagination does not seem to enable her to sever her relation from the real world of the people around her, but only to provide a temporary refuge for a neurotic for whom language proves to be the only shelter.

Emma's escape from the reality of her sordid life happens through books. Emma knows letting go of words would lead to letting go of the world since her disintegrating body is also in need of "an identity, and it reacts, matures, tightens, like stone, ebony. Or else it cracks, bleeds, decays" (Kristeva 1980: 162). She *lacks* conversation and human contact, so she fills the gap by talking to books. This is helpful since "while we speak we live up there above our bodies in the mind, and there is hope as long as we continue to talk" (Gass 1997: 101). Her choice for reading is not haphazard. Besides other books by female authors, her infatuation with the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop and her desire to be reduced to a line of Elizabeth Bishop's stems from the fact that she identifies with this poet as her double on a symbolic level. She is, in short, obsessed with Elizabeth Bishop. Used to living in a featureless world, Emma finds her situation overwhelming and attempts to be involved in a fantasy world of her own. "[S]he herself is slowly losing her corporeity and distancing herself from matter, in order to be able to slide into the pure world and be finally part of it" (Monti 2006: 127). Hix further pinpoints Emma's deliberate intention by highlighting the significant difference in her treatment of her house and her body: "Her careless neglect of the house, that square, once-sturdy body to which she is wholly indifferent, contrasts with her studied neglect of her own body. Her neglect of the house is passive, but her neglect of her body is active" (2002: 150). He also adds that: "The house can decay into she-cares-not-what, but she wants her body to become something very specific" (Hix 2002: 150).

The dependency of Emma on Elizabeth Bishop is shown not only early in the text, in the very opening sentence, but also through the many inter-textual references to her and to the other women poets who were able to cope with language and consequently with their status within the symbolic order. In Fogel's words, the "toughness of Elizabeth Bishop's verse, its resistance to cliché and comfortable language, draws in and unnerves Emma Bishop whose life is as remote from ease as is most of Elizabeth Bishop's poetry" (2005: 22). Elizabeth Bishop's relationship to Emma is, in fact, that of the ubiquitous presence of the symbolic other, the overarching spirit and the double which makes Emma's life simultaneously miserable and meaningful.

Great care is taken to incorporate inter-textual details of Elizabeth Bishop's life into the story. This is, of course, for a good reason. Emma Bishop vs. Elizabeth Bishop is echoed throughout this novella. Elizabeth is Emma's double, her symbolically successful side, and what she has always dreamed of being and

becoming. Yet, Elizabeth is also Emma's worst nightmare; she is what Emma has failed to be and the source of her fear. The first line of the story sets up this ambivalent attitude: "Emma was afraid of Elizabeth Bishop" (Gass 1998: 144).

As mentioned before, Emma has been depicted as a disturbed, forlorn character trapped within the cruel net of the circumstances to which she was born and in which she has been brought up. She cannot openly connect to the world. Compared to Elizabeth, with her give and take relationship with the world, Emma has no effect on and displays no signs of rapprochement with her environment. She is as weightless as a shadow, as non-present as "a mantis […] on a leaf" (Gass 1998: 162). Unlike Elizabeth, Emma is unable to connect to words in a way that would guarantee her salvation by helping her out of her neurotic state. She is entrapped within a self-constructed mirror stage in which she finds a double for herself. The mirror stage for her is symbolically repeated in the form and person of Elizabeth Bishop. Like the image in the mirror, she identifies with the famous poet and soon apprehends her great difference and tries to overcome this difference by taking refuge in a line of her poetry. She is afraid of the resemblance— and simultaneous difference — between the two of them. Even when she is reading, all she can remember are the first few pages of the books she picks up and nothing more. Her own occasional writings are limited to some sentiment cards.

Emma's double is more capable of connecting to her world through her words; a traumatic subject of the symbolic who lost her father to death within a year of her birth and her mother to insanity when she was only five, Elizabeth Bishop is significantly more successful than Emma: "Emma was afraid of Elizabeth Bishop because Emma had desperately desired to be a poet, but had been unable to make a list, did not know how to cut cloth to match a pattern, or lay out night things, clean her comb, where to plant the yet-to-be dismantled ash, deal with geese. She looked out her window, saw a pigeon clinging to a tree limb, oddly, ill, unmoving, she. the cloud" (Gass 1998: 146).

Elizabeth Bishop is capable of connecting to life the way Emma cannot. In an interview with Madera, William Gass explains that "her [Emma's] love of the line of verse is her love for something done right, ordered correctly, and having that be a specific thing. That's her casket, so to speak" (2013: 59). Elizabeth is able to idealize the common and the mundane in her poetry because she can form connections with them, a fact which sets her in sharp contrast to Emma who is unable to do so. Elizabeth is precise and metaphoric. Emma, on the other hand, is incapable of connecting to things surrounding her to shape precise metaphors and her use of words remains fragmented to the end. Rather, she pursues Elizabeth passively trying to idealize her as a powerful presence who can bring about changes in her life. Regardless of ethical considerations, it is through her imaginary

friendship with Elizabeth that Emma is finally able to take up an active role in her passive life and affect a change in her circumstances by removing the impediments to her sense of tranquil loneliness.

Another important signifier in Emma's life is the ash tree under which she reads her books and loses herself in her imagination. To her, the tree is the symbol of tranquility because it functions as a shelter under which she takes refuge from the cruelty and barrenness of the world surrounding her. The tree has religious and traditional significations as well. Emma's father likens the tree to the tree that caused the fall by leading the snake into heaven and hence hates it. This fact reinforces the symbolic identity of the ash tree which also has other significations. "But anything that can grow, 'flourish,' bear 'fruit,' and die might be likened to a tree: a person, a family, a nation, a cultural tradition […] The two most important trees in the Bible, of course, are 'the tree of life' and 'the tree of knowledge of good and evil' (Gen. 2.9)" (Ferber 1999: 219). A tree in western culture is indicative of growth, expansion, and higher perspective. Therefore, when Emma's father brings the tree down, he not only removes a universal symbol, but also strikes another decisive blow to the soul of his victim, Emma. We hear Emma mourning the fall of the tree: "I have lost this, lost that, am I not an expert at it? I lost more than love. I lost even its glimpse. Treefall. Branchcrash. That's all. Gave. Gave. Gave away. Watched while they took the world asunder" (Gass 1998: 152). The resonance found in these lines is the consequence of Emma's poignant altered recitation of Elizabeth Bishops' poem "One Art", the starting lines of which read: "The art of losing isn't hard to master; / so many things seem filled with the intent / to be lost that their loss is no disaster" (2011: 1-3).

This cruelty finally leads Emma to take action against the one whom she holds responsible for all she has lost. Emma has become neurotic under the castrating power of her father, the powerful reminder of which is his gaze. She needs to overpower it so that she can be un-burdened. To do this, the first step is to get rid of his constant inspection of her, an action which has reduced her to nothing but a piece of property in his materialistic eyes: "He watched me grow like a gardener follows the fortunes of his plants […] Well, he was a farmer. And I was crop. Why not?" (Gass 1998: 154). The father's constant inspection ends once she returns his gaze and puts an end to his exploitation of her body. "Maybe her father stopped inspecting her when he saw her watching, simply watching him; when his naked face and naked gaze were gazed at, gazed at like urine in the pot, yellow and pearly" (Gass 1998: 156).

Killing the father is the next step in opposing patriarchal power. The fight started by returning the father's gaze is won by Emma once she kills him with his own shovel. His own tool is used against him; metaphorically speaking, the

shovel — obviously a phallic symbol — is a masculine tool to plow the farm, a feminine symbol of the womb. When killing her father, Emma does not confront him. She has practiced this scene hundred times before by killing him in her mind. An indicative of this fact is when she asks her mom to do this, but meets her refusal. This leads Emma to take revenge on the mother too because it is due to her mother's failure in resisting the father's tyranny that Emma has become so alienated and helpless. The reality and jouissance she seeks to achieve as a neurotic is brought to her through the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop, her strong double whose "rivers ran across Emma's country, lay like laminate, created her geography: cape, bay, lake, strait... snow in no hills" (Gass 1998: 147). Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art" is once more used a few pages later; this time, the first line of the poem becomes the the introductory sentence of the section set off by the phrase *snow in still air* to add more significance to the inspiration Emma receives from Elizabeth Bishop's poetry: "The art of losing isn't hard to master. Emma remembered with gratitude that lesson" (Gass 1998: 161). Losing is what Emma decides to choose; Losing mother, father, and ultimately herself in a line of poetry.

Emma's reality, like any other symbolic subject, depends on language. Emma is in an unconscious pursuit of jouissance, impossible fantasy of contact with the real defined for her in terms of "her decision to lie down in a line of verse and be buried there" (Gass 1998: 148). By penetrating into the symbolic order represented by Elizabeth Bishop's poetry, Emma tries to cross over to find her own version of reality. She obsesses over certain facts of her life and is terrified to find them within language: "Certain signs, certain facts, certain sorts of ordering, maybe, made her fearful, and such kinds were common in the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop" (Gass 1998: 146). This is due to the fact that desire manifests itself through language. After all, the reality she sees in Bishop's poems is the reality she wants to have:

> Some dreams they forgot. But Emma Bishop remembered them now with a happy smile. Berry picking in the woods, seeing shiny black wood-berries hanging from a bough, and thinking, don't pick these, they may be poison… a word thrilling to say…*poison*…us. Elizabeth Bishop used the phrase *loaded trees*, as if they might like a gun go off. At last … at last … at last, she thought: "What flowers shrink to seeds like these?" (Gass 1998: 191)

Finally her dream world is delivered through words*;* she gets her own version of reality from what she reads. Bishop's text acts as a mirror in which Emma sees the reflection of her desires. It is within the lines of Elizabeth Bishop's poetry that she finds echoes of her murderous plan.

Immediately after poisoning the mother, she carries out the task of killing her father in cold blood. Approaching the father in the field, she lowers the shovel hard; "Emma struck her father between his shoulder blades with the flat of the spade. She hit him as hard as she could, but we can't suppose her blow would have amounted to much. She heard his lungs hoof and he fell forward on his face" (Gass 1998: 190). The action of killing the father is like swatting a fly, an act in which, we are told in the story, Emma is an expert; her dad does not expect it. He is hit on the back into the dirt which Emma identifies with him: "Her father fell over in a field. Nose down in the dirt. A dog found him" (Gass 1998: 159). The account of Emma's apparently unperturbed thoughts after her successful murders shocks the reader while simultaneously echoing Elizabeth Bishop's effect on Emma's mind once more: "Now that she hadn't had to poison her mother or strike her father down in the field with the blade of a shovel, but was so alone even the chickens unfed had wandered off, she could have sung without surprising anyone, or sworn without shocking her father with unladylike language. She did sing sometimes inside herself. 'In the cold cold parlor my mother laid out Arthur…'" (Gass 1998: 167-8). This time, the recited piece is from Elizabeth Bishop's "First Death in Nova Scotia,"[1] a short poem which tells of a child's — and Emma's — first experience of death while attending a relative's wake. Once her father falls to the dirt, Emma has successfully carried out her revolutionary plan of killing the patriarch and is set free.

Last but not least is Emma's final narrative which is delivered by putting together all the phrases or short sentences that are scattered throughout the main narrative. This is in accordance with the Lacanian idea that the unconscious has the same method of functioning as language. Lacan suggests, Fredric Jameson explains:

> Meanwhile, this conception of desire as a proto-linguistic demand, and of the Unconscious as a language or "chain of signifiers," then permits something like a rhetorical analysis of psychic processes to come into being. As is well known, not only is desire for Lacan a function of metonymy, the symptom is a product of metaphor, and the entire machinery of the psychic life of the mature subject, which consists, as we have seen above, in the infinite production of substitutes (1977: 367-8).

[1] Here is the first stanza of the poem: In the cold, cold parlor / my mother laid out Arthur / beneath the chromographs: / Edward, Prince of Wales, / with Princess Alexandra, / and King George with Queen Mary. / Below them on the table / stood a stuffed loon / shot and stuffed by Uncle / Arthur, Arthur's father.

Lacan joined the two Freudian terms of condensation and displacement to Jacobson's concepts of metaphor and metonymy. Through these devices, Lacan and, later, Kristeva claimed that the forbidden can enter the symbolic in a sublimated manner: "A metaphor operates by substituting one term for another whereas a metonym operates by connecting one term to another" (McAfee 2004: 31). To Lacan, such "analogies and connections […] often operate in the unconscious. Thus, we can see the effects of the unconscious in language: metaphors are evidence of condensation and metonyms are evidence of displacement. Such insights prompted Lacan to say, famously, that the unconscious is structured like a language" (McAfee 2004: 32).

These pieces of Emma's unconscious utterances are so subtly and obliquely presented that they may be overlooked at first. However, they finally come together and attract the reader's attention as having a possible meaning. If the reader puts these broken segments of sentences and phrases together, the final narrative will be handed in. Intriguingly, this final piece, not longer than four lines, is the story of Emma and what happened to her. Finally, she is able to put her own narrative together and depict what she has been through in her lonely experience of life in the "bleak midwestern landscape" (Hix 2002: 149) of Iowa. The reader sees her narrative in complete form only when the pieces uttered by her, which are scattered all through the novella, are put together:

> The slow fall of ash (144) far from the flame, (152) a residue of rain (154) on morning grass, (158) snow in still air, (161) wounds we have had, (164) dust on the sill there, (167) dew, snowflake, scab: (171) light, linger, leave, (176) like a swatted fly, (181) trace to be grieved, (184) dot where it died. (191)

Metonymic elements in the few sentences offered here and there in her narrative are finally to join and form a whole, a metaphorical account of how Emma has lived and how she manages to free herself. Each phrase or chunk depicts a part of her life and highlights her thoughts or feelings regarding that specific moment or event. This is Gass's way of using language to signify. By creating Emma's identity through a narrative which progresses and retreats in time, Gass underscores the prismatic nature of subjectivity, and emphasizes that a unified identity is unattainable. Furthermore, he shows how identity is formed by lack and desire and how the subject may seek ways to free herself, not only by actual flight from tyranny, but also by taking refuge in the medium of language and connecting her world to her words.

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