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UNRELIABLE NARRATION IN THE GREAT GATSBY

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I know you will accept my remarks in the spirit in which they are offered—arrogance. I wish it didn’t have to be this way, but in what other spirit can I tell you how to read a novel you have already read? It is unlikely that we will ever agree even on the standard by which The Great Gatsby or any other literary work is to be judged. This novel, for example, has been interpreted as if it were metaphysics, sociology, and intellectual history. One would never know from much that is written on Gatsby that it is an aesthetic object (or better—process) standing, as Eliot said of the poem, somewhere between the author and the reader. The more critics I read the more convinced I become that standards are to literary criticism what faith is to religion. My argument, however, is neither a lament over the diversity of critical frames of reference, nor a plea for critical ecumenicalism. The warring factions among critics are, to me, a testament to the depth and the differences of human perception.

My argument, or article of faith, is that the understanding of a novel, the obverse of which is aesthetic pleasure, is most meaningfully achieved through an analysis of words, sounds, rhythms, and ideas—that which the novel is. The meaning such an analysis yields is the rhetoric of fiction, a phrase which, of course, brings to mind that brilliant and seminal book by Wayne C. Booth. The idea in Booth’s volume germane to The Great Gatsby is his concept of “distance,” “distance” between the author’s perception, or more accurately, the norms of the novel, and the perception of the narrator; or, to put it another way, the “distance” between the narrator’s perception and the reader’s perception. If this “distance” exists we have, to some degree, an unreliable narrator, and critics, as well as students, are reluctant to recognize this device since unreliable narrators, as Booth says, “make stronger demands on the reader’s powers of inference than reliable narrators do.” Although he makes only cursory reference to The Great Gatsby, Booth draws two conclusions, both of which, I submit, are wrong. He asserts that Nick has only a minor involvement in the events of the novel and that he “provides thoroughly reliable guidance.” A more extensive treatment of Booth’s methodology is found in “The Triple Vision of Nick Carraway” by E. Fred Carlisle in the Winter 1965-66 issue of Modern Fiction Studies. Carlisle corroborates Booth’s error by judging Nick’s perception as “mature [and] informed.”
While my view of Nick Carraway is new, it is not original. In 1966 there appeared independently two studies remarkably similar in evidence cited and identical in conclusions reached: “Against The Great Gatsby” by Gary Scrimgeour in the Autumn 1966 issue of Criticism and the Thirteenth chapter of Man’s Changing Masks by Charles Child Walcott. Scrimgeour sees the narrator’s unreliability as a mark of Fitzgerald’s confusion; Walcott sees it as part of the novel’s mystery. Rather than summarize, I refer you to these sources which examine the disparity between what Nick says and what he does, and conclude that far from providing “thoroughly reliable guidance,” the narrator is shallow, confused, hypocritical, and immoral.

If this view of Carraway is correct, the bulk of forty years of Gatsby criticism attests to our having been taken in by Carraway in somewhat the same way that Carraway has been taken in by Gatsby. A hypothesis so startling and so provocative cries out for further exploration. In short, I have tried to see Nick’s unreliability as an integral part of the book by finding ways in which the norms of the novel are conveyed independent of and in contradiction to the explanations Carraway offers.

We may be tempted to overlook those norms and to accept the explanations of a man who asserts his objectivity (“I’m inclined to reserve all judgments”), admits his shortcoming (snobbishness), boasts of his virtues (tolerance and honesty), and desires order and morality (“I wanted the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever”). But let us not be led into temptation by one whose objectivity is “in consequence” of his father’s influence—the advice that has so indelibly impressed Nick that he has “been turning it over in . . . [his] mind ever since”: “just remember that all the people in this world haven’t had the advantages that you’ve had.” In fact, Nick’s advantages, as he later snobbishly repeats, are “fundamental decencies” which are “parceled out unequally at birth.” Thus, an arrogant pride is revealed under the guise of objectivity and humility. Although he boasts of his tolerance, he thinks, after seeing the limousine “driven by a white chauffeur, in which sat three modish negroes, two bucks and a girl . . . anything can happen now . . . anything at all.” His shallow hypocrisy is further underlined when we recall that he has called Tom Buchanan’s pseudo-scientific belief in Nordic supremacy “nibbling at the edge of stale ideas.”

This instance is but one of many in which Nick himself displays the very qualities he finds reprehensible in others. Nick’s honesty and moral responsibility are manifested by his easy decision to play the panderer for Gatsby; it was “such a little thing.” His response to a similar situation in which he is not involved, the affair between Tom and Myrtle Wilson, is quite different: “my own instinct was to telephone immediately for the police.” Yet when the police should be brought in, Nick instead becomes an accomplice after the fact by concealing Daisy’s crime of manslaughter. His silence has an important bearing on the events of the novel; it results in Gatsby’s murder and Wilson’s suicide. We can hardly accept Booth’s contention that Nick’s role in the novel is one of “minor involvement.”
To explore further the pertinence of Booth’s concept of “distance” to the novel, I should like to compare it to Melville’s “Bartleby the Scrivener.” Critics have frequently called attention to the influence of Conrad on Fitzgerald as well as the influence of Melville on Conrad, thus suggesting a possible similarity between Melville and Fitzgerald. In fact, I believe that Melville’s unreliable narrator in Bartleby does shed light on Carraway. Bartleby represents total negation, “I’d prefer not to”; Gatsby, impossible achievement: “Can’t repeat the past? . . . Why of course you can!” Both narrators are simultaneously attracted to and repelled by the unequivocal absolutism to which they are exposed. We have the same “distance” between the narrator and Bartleby as we have between Carraway and Gatsby. The inadequacy of both narrators is accounted for by their shallow and morally irresponsible concern for order. “The easiest way is best,” says Melville’s narrator. Bartleby and Gatsby refuse to compromise no matter what the cost. Thus, to the narrators for whom facile compromise is a way of life, they are attractive enigmas. Carraway, in short, is attracted to Gatsby’s vision precisely because he has compromised with the absurdities which that vision exposes.

For Nick, too, the easiest way is best; compromise is his modus operandi. Thus, Catherine’s lie at the inquest is a mark of “character.” Nick allows Wilson to be “reduced to a man deranged by grief in order that the case might remain in its simplest form.” Nick continues, “But all this part of it [meaning the moral dimensions of Daisy’s crime and its consequences] seemed remote and unessential.” What Nick sees as unimportant, we see as appalling irresponsibility. Throughout the novel Nick reveals more than he is aware of. He is unaware of the shallowness of the belief that “personality is a series of unbroken successful gestures.” It is his easy conformity that dictates his choice of vocation: “All [his] . . . aunts and uncles talked it over as if they were choosing a prep school . . . , and finally said ‘Why — ye-es.’” And besides “Everybody [he] . . . knew was in the bond business.” Nick believes that “life is much more successfully looked at from a single window,” and his window is framed by shallowness, hypocrisy, immorality, and compromise. The window image pervades the novel. It is the limiting lens through which Nick confronts experience (“It is invariably saddening to look through new eyes.”) It is through windows (of trains, cars, and busses) that Nick views the ash heaps, Eckleburg’s eyes, Wilson’s station, his own middle west of tinsel and ornament, the green light, the pact between Daisy and Tom. By such devices Fitzgerald reveals the norms of the novel.

Or take that peculiar passage in the conversation between Nick and Gatsby:

(Gatsby) “I am the son of some wealthy people in the Middle West . . .”
(Carraway) “What part of the Middle West? . . .”
(Gatsby) “San Francisco.”
Nick’s response is “I see.” What in fact does Nick see? Is our response to Gatsby’s unbelievable ignorance of geography the same as the narrator’s? So far as I know, the only comment on this passage sees it as “an aspect of the ridiculous”—whatever that means. We all note something fishy about Gatsby’s house guests, particularly the Snells, Hammerheads, Belugas, Whimbait, and Fishguards. Obviously, Fitzgerald achieves effects both comic and serious by making puns with names. I submit that the connection between Gatsby and San Francisco is made by a pun more subtle and more serious than those made on the names of the houseguests. The name Gatsby is also a pun, Gat being the Anglo Saxon word for gate, by the Scandanavian suffix meaning town or city of. Now I suspect that a reader can get a good deal from the novel without recognizing the etymology of Gatsby’s name, yet I would also maintain that the connection between Gatsby and the City of the Gate is not fortuitous and that our response to Gatsby’s apparent faux pas is not necessarily the same as the narrator’s. There is a good deal that is fishy about Gatsby which Nick does not see. He seriously reports, for example, that Gatsby as a young man had spent over a year “beating his way along the south shore of Lake Superior as a clam-digger and salmon-fisher,” yet we know, as Fitzgerald must have known, that Lake Superior contains neither edible clams nor salmon. Once again there is distance between reader and narrator. But let me return to the Gatsby/San Francisco business.

The juxtaposition of Gatsby’s origin in the Middle West and San Francisco is a figurative compression of the frontier, a kind of spatial telescoping of a temporal experience. What was a fluid historical phenomenon becomes for our examination a static image embodied in Gatsby. Obversely, Gatsby is a temporal telescoping of a spatial experience: he is a descendant of the Dutch sailors for whom flowered the fresh green breast of the New World. Gatsby’s flower is a Daisy—and then there is the light at the end of her dock (which legally should be red but allegorically must be green).

An even more obvious connection between Gatsby and the romantic frontier interpretation of the American dream is his assumption of a new identity in a new land, that identity springing from his romantic idealism (his “Platonic [dare I say Emersonian] conception of himself”) and his exposure to Dan Cody (Daniel Boone and Buffalo Bill), that questing frontiersman, “a product of the Nevada silver fields, of the Yukon, of every rush for metal since seventy-five.” Further, Gatsby’s father unknowingly reveals and Carraway unknowingly reports that Jay has been nurtured on the Ben Franklin myth of success, his plan to achieve moral perfection significantly inscribed on the flyleaf of Hopalong Cassidy.

It has, of course, become a critical commonplace to point out that the West is a spatial metaphor of the historical American experience, and that the image of the West in this novel provides a measurement of that experience. Parenthetically, I suggest that, in addition to the rather obvious de-
tails just cited, Fitzgerald has compressed in the novel a judgment of still other elements of our heritage, for example, the eyes (blue and gigantic) of T. J. Eckleburg, that “wild wag of an oculist,” suggest the transparent eyeball of Emerson bathed in the blithe air above “gray land and the spasms of bleak dust, . . . a valley of ashes—a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and finally, with a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air.” The optimism of Emerson in the woods is measured by the twentieth century image of Eckleburg’s eyes brooding over the solemn dumping ground. The name Eckleburg itself traced to its German roots means burg or city of nausea, disgust. Eckleburg is to Emerson what Wolfsheim is to the Dutch sailors. The edge of that wild expansive ocean from which the sailors first spied the “fresh-green breast of the New World” has become “the most domesticated body of salt water in the Western hemisphere, the great wet barnyard of Long Island Sound.”

Still another way by which we can distinguish “distance” between the norms of the novel and the narrator’s perception is to examine Nick’s attitude toward Daisy, who for Gatsby is the embodiment of the American dream. To come right out with it I contend that Nick, too, is in love with Daisy. How else can we account for Nick’s failure to recognize her vanity and stupidity? Nick is charmed by Daisy’s laugh and irrelevant remark, which she thinks is very witty, “I’m p-paralyzed with happiness.” He finds a “singing compulsion” in her voice, that “low thrilling voice . . . that men who had cared for her found difficult to forget.” “It was,” Nick says, “the kind of voice that the ear follows up and down, as if each speech is an arrangement of notes that will never be played again.” For example:

Do you always watch for the longest day of
the year and then miss it? I always watch
for the longest day of the year and then miss it.

Daisy’s mind is as vestigial as her husband’s turning his garage into a stable is anachronistic. This bitter retrogression of American idealism is not only the object of Gatsby’s incarnation but also Carraway’s infatuation. Else how could Nick describe Daisy’s vapid anecdote of the butler’s nose with these words:

For a moment the last sunshine fell with
romantic affection upon her glowing face;
her voice compelled me forward breathlessly
as I listened.

But, with characteristic unawareness, Nick compromises with his feelings by using Jordan Baker as a surrogate Daisy and by having an affair with the girl from New Jersey who works in the accounting office of Probity Trust. Nick tells us that he is enchanted by thinking of entering the lives
of romantic women and adds, "no one would ever know or disapprove." And when the New Jersey girl's brother began throwing mean looks in Nick's direction, he lets the affair "blow quietly away."

In considering the novel as a criticism of the American dream, we have two mutually exclusive interpretations depending on our identification with or distance from the narrator's point of view. If we see Carraway as mature and informed, we believe with Nick that Gatsby turned out all right at the end, that the dream is good, and that it is what has happened to the dream, "what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams," that is corrupt. We accept Nick's judgment of Gatsby, "You're worth the whole damn bunch." Or to put it in the words of one critic who identifies with Carraway, "[Gatsby] represents the unending quest of the American dream—forever betrayed in fact, yet redeemed in men's minds. Gatsby is great because his dream—however naive, gaudy, and unobtainable—is one of the grand illusions of man."

If, on the other hand, we recognize the narrator's unreliability, we see that Nick's knowledge of Gatsby's corruption and his belief that the dream which he embodies is "incorruptible," is a paradox resolved only in our awareness of Nick's last and most serious compromise with truth. Finally, his moral responsibility is facilely explained as "provincial squeamishness" as he shakes Tom Buchanan's hand, erases a dirty word from the steps of Gatsby's house, and with his indomitable self-righteousness attends Gatsby's funeral. On the level of plot he knows more than he tells, but on the level of the novel's rhetoric he tells more than he knows. In truth, dream and object were never united, not even for the Dutch sailors. As Nick has pandered for Gatsby, so America has "pandered in whispers to the Dutch sailors' eyes." In short it is not what has happened to the dream, but the dream itself that is corrupt. There is here suggested an important conflict in American fiction: Is our failure in not ascending the Big Rock Candy Mountain or is it in our belief in the existence of the mountain itself? I submit that the answer makes a difference.

As I began by alerting you to the narrator's disarming ingenuousness on the first page of the novel, let me conclude by alerting you to his euphonious eloquence in the conclusion. If we bother to examine the simple logic of Carraway's coda, we find not a revelation of knowledge, awareness, or maturity, but a characteristic foil to conceal a seriously flawed and confused perception.

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.

The vehicle of the metaphor is a moving body of water; the tenor is the passage of time. The current, then, indicates direction and movement, past to future. If we beat on against the current, we are trying to move toward the past, and if we are borne back, we are moving into the future, not the "past."