The Lyricism of Nick Carraway

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> The only picture was an over-enlarged photograph, apparently a hen sitting on a blurred rock. Looked at from a distance, however, the hen resolved itself into a bonnet, and the countenance of a stout old lady beamed down into the room.
>
> —Nick Carraway, in *The Great Gatsby*[1]

Among the works Fitzgerald read and re-read whilst writing *The Great Gatsby* were two that take their place among the most important of the great Modernist experiments in the novel, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Ford's *The Good Soldier*. Each of these was an exercise in first person narration, the author contriving a tale in such a way that the epistemological and psychological profile of the narrator becomes as meaningful an aspect of the narrative as any figure or incident within it. Such an effect was clearly in Fitzgerald's conception of his novel, yet Fitzgerald's Nick—who engages us so effectively that we are perfectly comfortable with him on a first name basis—differs in one important respect from Conrad's Marlow and Ford's Dowell: where each of them is aware that they can at best only approach the truth of the matter, Nick is aware that such a purpose is largely irrelevant to him. 'Reading over what I have written so far,' he writes, 'I see I have given the impression that the events of three nights several weeks apart were all that absorbed me'(p. 62). He goes on to explain that this was not the case, but the impression stands. He is perfectly aware that he is creating an impression which gives a view of, but does not accurately reflect, the reality of the matter, and he writes because writing is the medium that best suits the rhetorical art that achieves this effect. For *The Great Gatsby* is a novel vitally concerned with point of view, with the process of arriving at that view, and with the art of fashioning and transmitting that view.

When we first meet him, Nick takes a certain pride in *not* possessing a point of view. His first words are:

> In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I've been turning over in my mind ever since.
>
> 'Whenever you feel like criticizing anyone,' he told me, 'just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had.'
>
> He didn't say any more, but we've always been unusually communicative in a reserved way, and I understood that he meant a great deal more than that. In consequence, I'm inclined to reserve all judgment, a habit that has opened up many curious natures to me and also made me the victim of not a few veteran bores. (p. 7)

Throughout his life, then, Nick has tried to comprehend things from more than his own personal perspective: recognising that circumstance—social and historical as well as personal circumstance—is a crucial determinant in the composition of any individual, Nick is willing to allow that his view is the outcome of his biographical circumstance, and that other views are the outcome of other circumstances, and that there is a validity to all of these. That is the principle by which he has tried to run his life; and it is a principle of relativity.

We are made to understand from the outset, though, that the threshold of tolerance of Nick's reservation is somehow breached by the story of Gatsby—something in it compels him to judge those involved. He continues:

> And, after boasting this way of my tolerance, I come to the admission that it has a limit. Conduct may be founded on the hard rock or the wet marshes, but after a certain point I don't care what it's founded on. (pp. 7-8)

In other words Nick intends to relate here a story of men and women whose conduct occasioned a change in his typical moral reticence, and forced him to deal instead with unextenuated conduct itself. So while willingly acknowledging that any single view can only be a partial and provisional one, Nick

signals here that events will conspire to extort just such a view from him.

For the most part, though, it is Nick's initially announced relativism that centrally informs this novel, and this has some important effects. Relativity, of course, is a very unsettling principle. It disorients; it takes away our sense of stable foundations; it robs us of our sense of objective points of reference. It can precipitate us into a state of anxiety, uncertainty. And there is a particular moment in the narrative when all of these things—conflicting points of view, disorienting relativities, instabilities of self—are explicitly present, and we see their effect on Nick. He has been partying with Tom Buchanan, his mistress Myrtle Wilson, and some other lowlife friends; he has had too much to drink; and he recalls:

> I wanted to get out and walk eastward toward the park through the soft twilight, but each time I tried to go I became entangled in some wild, strident argument which pulled me back, as if with ropes, into my chair. Yet high over the city our line of yellow windows must have contributed their share of human secrecy to the casual watcher in the darkening streets, and I saw him too, looking up and wondering. I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life. (pp. 41-2)

There is Nick, adrift amid the contradictory swirl of his relativism, being literally pulled in different directions at once in a whirling conflict of perspectives, trying to take it in from his perspective but still capable of imagining that he is the object of someone else's point of view, some 'casual watcher in the darkening streets', and so he finds himself 'within and without', as he says, 'enchanted and repelled', all at the same time.

The Great Gatsby is not simply one person's account of a set of events, then; it is that set of events filtered through the singular consciousness of Nick Carraway, selected, ordered and elaborated by that consciousness as Nick seeks to compose his thoughts in order to make out what it all means to him, and

what he meant to it (being both 'within and without' he stands apart from but is equally a part of the story he tells). We have to understand a certain dynamic character in the writing, which I have just tried to indicate in my choice of words, because to compose, of course, means not only to organise but to make, to fabricate. As I have already implied Nick is both telling a story and making something of that story at the same time. From his relative but problematic position, both within and without, the best Nick can do is give his view of these events; and that view inevitably reflects not the facts of the matter as such, but what Nick has made of those facts, the interpretation he has given them, the perspectives he has upon them. And indeed, why would Nick even bother telling us this story unless it meant something to him, unless he sensed in it something meaningful which, by telling it, he communicates to us. So while the events of the narrative will recount the historical process whereby Nick arrived at a partial and provisional but singular point of view, the writing of the text must be understood as a rhetorical fashioning of and a wilful propagation of that point of view. It is a view that is deeply informed by Nick's own historical and poetical sense of things, and in the dynamic process of existential reflection and textual composition, figures and events organise themselves within Nick's consciousness in such a way as automatically to attract both a realistic and a figurative value—and the effect of this is that everything he tells us is effectively charged with additional meaning: every event, every character, every image tends to carry a kind of symbolic weight for him. Because—to anticipate—if the story of Gatsby and his 'greatness' makes any sense at all for Nick it does so as a complex symbolic drama which expresses his understanding of the deeply contradictory historical destiny of the United States of America.

So *The Great Gatsby* can be seen as a complex act of composition on Nick's part, a composing of his view which is dynamically set against the spectacle of decompositions recorded in the narrative of events—the violence, the deceit, the disillusions, the deaths. And that is one of the subtlest tensions running through the novel: the tension between composition

and decomposition, the tension between a creative act of mind and the destructive facts of reality with which that mind is working; a tension that arises from Nick's effort to make sense of events that are tragically senseless. So while on the one hand this book can be read as a story of characters and events, a historical drama, it can also be read as a drama of the individual mind and imagination. And these two dramas are occurring simultaneously as we read the text.

There is a moment where a whole complex of these themes come together in the vivid imagery of Nick's thoughtful composition of the scene. At the beginning of Chapter 2, in a famous description, Nick tells us:

> About half-way between West Egg and New York the motor road hastily joins the railroad and runs beside it for a quarter of a mile, so as to shrink away from a certain desolate area of land. This is 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 ash-grey men, who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air. Occasionally a line of grey cars crawls along an invisible track, gives out a ghastly creak, and comes to rest, and immediately the ash-grey men swarm up with leaden spades and stir up an impenetrable cloud, which screens their obscure operations from your sight.
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> But above the grey land and the spasms of bleak dust which drift endlessly over it, you perceive, after a moment, the eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg. The eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckelburg are blue and gigantic—their retinas are one yard high. They look out of no face, but, instead, from a pair of enormous yellow spectacles which pass over a non-existent nose. Evidently some wild wag of an oculist set them there to fatten his practice in the borough of Queens, and then sank down himself into eternal blindness, or forgot them and moved away. But his eyes, dimmed a little by many paintless days, under sun and rain, brood on over the solemn dumping ground. (p. 29)

This is an almost surrealistic passage. It describes a landscape of horror and Godless desolation, but the point is that Nick understands it as a landscape of horror and Godless

desolation, and it is Nick who represents it to us in all of its symbolic force as waste, the scorched remains of something that has been violently used up. Because that is what the valley of ashes is, and that is what those who inhabit it are: the used-up waste of America.

What is of special interest here, however, are the many references to seeing, to eyesight, to points of view, which are all obscured or distorted or in need of correction. People move 'dimly', tracks are 'invisible', 'impenetrable clouds of dust' are continually 'stirred up'; and above all there are the unseeing eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckelburg, or at least the iconic remnant of the real eyes which have themselves 'sunk into eternal blindness'; and Nick describes these massive, sightless eyes in excessive and wry detail, no doubt because, by way of ironic contrast, they are reminding him of something else, of something that may no longer be possible: that is, an all-seeing, and so an all-knowing, point of view—the unseeing eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckelburg are ironically reminding him of an absolute, and not a relative, understanding. It is the view, of course, one associates with the omniscient Christian God, the all-knowing God of the Republic in which this story takes place, the Divinity in whom the Pilgrim Fathers of America placed their faith at the time of the creation of the United States of America which, to people in sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe, was to be a kind of promised land, a new Eden. Poor George Wilson, a man who has inherited nothing, who had to borrow a suit in which to get married and who belongs to no church, nevertheless remembers something of that God of the American past, and recalls it in the midst of his psychotic distress after Myrtle's death:

> 'I spoke to her', he muttered, after a long silence. 'I told her she might fool me but she couldn't fool God. I took her to the window'—with an effort he got up and walked to the rear window and leaned with his face pressed against it—'and I said "God knows what you've been doing. You may fool me, but you can't fool God!"'
>
> Standing behind him, Michaelis saw with a shock that he was looking at the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckelburg, which had just emerged, pale and enormous, from the dissolving night.

‘God sees everything,’ repeated Wilson. (p. 166)

It is especially hard for Americans to forget that omniscient God from the past, because He is in everyone's pocket. His icon is inscribed on every dollar bill in America: that is, the ancient masonic symbol of the all-seeing God of human brotherhood depicted in the image of a pyramid surmounted by a massive, radiant eye. And it is there on the dollar bill as a reminder of the promise of freedom, democratic unity, and divine purpose, which Americans took as their birthright at the creation of the Republic of the United States of America. But that God is nowhere to be found here; and in His place there appears this grotesque and surreal parody of divinity, the unseeing eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckelburg, the oculist, which blindly survey this ‘valley of ashes’, itself a grotesque and surreal parody of what the new republic was meant to be. And we can be sure that none of the irony of this is lost on Nick Carraway; or, rather, we can be sure that, because of what he is observing and the way he is observing it, Nick Carraway wants none of the irony of this to be lost on us, because the irony is not so much of the situation as it is of Nick’s fashioning.

The fact is, Nick’s view has been profoundly informed by his experience of these events and, as he writes later: ‘After Gatsby’s death the East was haunted for me like that, distorted beyond my eyes’ power of correction.’ (p. 183) That is why Nick's description of this wasteland is full of symbolic resonance. Everything here stands in implicit contrast to the iconography of America’s sense of self, stands in implicit contrast to the imagery of what has come to be known as ‘the American dream’. Historically, that dream was first conceived when the wasted and unwanted of Europe imagined a New World across the regenerative waters of the earth. But where they envisaged the creation of a radiant new Jerusalem, an unmoving light shining out from the city on the hill, here there is only the fogging, drifting dust of the valley of ashes; and where they imagined themselves the free and equal chosen people of a God of Christian charity, here there is only the blind divinity of profit and the slavery of exploitative capitalism,

represented symbolically by the icon put there by the dead Doctor T.J. Eckelburg in order to 'fatten his practice in the borough of Queens'; and where they looked to America as a Garden of Eden to be found at the end of a voyage of redemption and rebirth, here Nick sees only the desolating dryness of ash and dust or, as he puts it, he sees a 'fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens', and where people are already ashen and dusty in anticipation of their final transfiguration.

Nick has come to the valley of ashes at the insistence of Tom Buchanan, because Tom wants to show off one of his gaudy possessions—his mistress, Myrtle Wilson, not an individual but a commodity for the pleasure-seeking Tom. On arriving they enter the garage of Myrtle's husband, George, and Nick notes:

> The interior was unprosperous and bare; the only car visible was the dust-covered wreck of a Ford which crouched in a dim corner. It had occurred to me that this shadow of a garage must be a blind, and that sumptuous and romantic apartments were concealed overhead, when the proprietor himself appeared in the door of an office, wiping his hands on a piece of waste. He was a blond, spiritless man, anaemic, and faintly handsome. When he saw us a damp gleam of hope sprang into his light blue eyes. (pp. 30-31)

Because cars in this story are predatory Nick describes the Ford—the very image of modern materialistic success—as 'crouching' in a dim corner; it is dust-covered, and so it is associated with the loss and hopelessness of the valley, but associated also with the devastation of Gatsby and his dreams, as Nick informs us at the beginning of the novel with these carefully chosen words:

> No—Gatsby turned out all right at the end; it is what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams that temporarily closed out my interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men. (p. 8)

Contrasting with that foul dust is the dream associated with the blue water of redemption (and note that dreams, here, leave a 'wake'). A vestigial remnant of the dream can just be detected

in George Wilson because, as Nick notices: 'When he saw us a damp gleam of hope sprang into his light blue eyes'—but the hopeful dream across the water has now been reduced to a forlorn hope in a tearful eye. The dust has already claimed George Wilson, and he appears symbolically identified with the devastated environment as he emerges, as Nick tells us, 'wiping his hands on a piece of waste'. Nick's description of him goes on to suggest the vampire-like relation between the wealthy and the exploited in this society: George is 'a spiritless man', he is 'anaemic', and his blondness merely accentuates his pale lifelessness, the fact that he has been drained of all vitality. When he finally comes to kill Gatsby he becomes fully identified with his desolate surroundings—he is 'that ashen, fantastic figure gliding towards Gatsby through the amorphous trees.' (p. 168) 'Ashen' and 'fantastic', George Wilson simply blends into the surreal desolation of the valley of ashes, just as, later, his wife is made violently to blend in with the waste and the dust:

> The other car, the one going towards New York, came to rest a hundred yards beyond, and its driver hurried back to where Myrtle Wilson, her life violently extinguished, knelt in the road and mingled her thick dark blood with the dust. (p. 144)

Nick, of course, was not present at this scene, and so he is literally composing it—he no longer needs to see, because he now has his view of the matter—and he continues:

> Michaelis and this man reached her first, but when they had torn open her shirtwaist, still damp with perspiration, they saw that her left breast was swinging loose like a flap, and there was no need to listen for the heart beneath. The mouth was wide open and ripped a little at the corners, as though she had choked a little in giving up the tremendous vitality she had stored so long. (p. 144)

Nothing can be 'stored' in the valley of ashes—it is always used up by, exploited by, the rampant pleasures of wealth, which is why the dying image of Myrtle is one of grotesque sexual violence, her left breast 'swinging loose like a flap' as if the heart has been literally torn out of her. So Myrtle dies as she

had lived: a pathetic object of sexual violence for the rich—first for Tom (who casually breaks her nose when she threatens to cross the threshold of class distinction), and then for Daisy (who cannot know she is killing her husband's mistress as she runs her down in Gatsby's car, but who nevertheless automatically accepts Gatsby's suggestion that he take responsibility for it).

At the beginning of the book, on reaching New York, Nick notes,

> I bought a dozen volumes on banking and credit and investment securities, and they stood on my shelf in red and gold like new money from the mint, promising to unfold the shining secrets that only Midas and Maecenas and Morgan knew. (p 10)

Despite the fact that the eye of God stares out from every dollar bill, Nick's early idolatry of the legendary American plutocrat J.P. Morgan, who sits beside those pagan legends of avarice and wealthy excess, Midas and Maecenas, suggests that these are the real divinities of modern America, and this is so because the American dream has come to be understood as able to be aquired through wealth alone. Certainly at this point it seems that Nick sees the acquisition of wealth as the means towards achieving the American ideal, the means towards pursuing happiness. But during the course of the novel he comes to deeply question this as a consequence of his encounters with the 'old money' of the Buchanans and the 'new money' of Gatsby. For the Buchanans, who have inherited their money, wealth disburdens them of the need to pursue anything—since happiness, or at least pleasure, is a purchasable commodity in this world—and what's more, it even allows them to 'retreat' from the world, as Nick tells us in his ringing condemnation of them towards the end of the novel. Wealth has made them free from care, and so they have become careless—which in this case means criminally irresponsible: 'They were careless people, Tom and Daisy,' writes Nick,

> they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever

> it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made (p. 186).

Nick might be inclined to reserve judgment, as he tells us at the beginning, but events have drawn this judgment from him. Yet his attitude towards Gatsby remains equivocal, unresolved. Nick certainly disapproves of him—he disapproves of his puerile deceits, of the gaudiness of his wealth and of the manner of its acquisition (Gatsby is, after all, the 1920s version of what we today would call a drug baron), he disapproves of his associates like Meyer Wolfshiem, a man who played 'with the faith of fifty million people' (p. 80) by fixing the World Series, who wears human molars for cufflinks, and who evokes a shady middle European diabolism with his Mephistophelian promises of a 'gonnegtion'—but yet Nick recognises in Gatsby a kind of New World innocence, recognises that everything he does is in the service of a transcendent romantic idealism. Or, rather, that is how Nick comes to *conceive* of him, and that is why Gatsby revives within Nick the memory of lost aspirations, revives within him the memory of the original promise of America as a Christian Garden, a new Eden of harmonised nature and romantic delight.

In Nick's imagining, the symbolic mingles with the actual. To a literary man such as him ('I was rather literary in college', he tells us early on—p. 10), the circumstances of his summer with Gatsby could hardly fail to signify in the way they do, because everything *does* signify, and what takes shape in his narrative reflection is a lyrical elaboration of this resonance. How could it be otherwise in a world where women's names irresistibly recall both the old Eden and seem to promise the new (Daisy, Myrtle, Jordan), where a self-made man can compose himself out of juvenile fantasies and yet take his place in the real world, 'a son of God' who 'sprang from his Platonic conception of himself,' (p.105) bearing only the Christian letter 'J' for first name but the menacing implication of the means by which he achieves his dream in his surname, Gatsby (that is, by 'gats', gangland slang for guns). How could it be otherwise when even the words of lazy, dishonest, careless golf players

echo down history to connect with the Puritan lyric poet and visionary seer of the new Garden and the Americas, Andrew Marvell? 'I love New York,' says Jordan Baker,

> on summer afternoons when everyone's away.
> There's something very sensuous about it--overripe, as if all sorts of funny fruits were going to fall into your hands. (p. 131)

Doubtless Jordan is unaware of her reference, but Nick would certainly catch the echo in her words of Marvell's'The Garden'—

> What wondrous life is this I lead!
> Ripe apples drop about my head;
> The luscious clusters of the vine
> Upon my mouth do crush their wine;
> The nectarine and curious peach,
> Into my hands themselves do reach

—and of his great poem about the New World, 'Bermudas', in which a boatload of mariners sing of how God

> ... hangs in shades the orange bright,
> Like golden lamps in a green night.
> And does in the pomegranates close
> Jewels more rich than Ormus shows;
> He makes the figs our mouths to meet;
> And throws the melons at our feet.

Against this background of symbol and echo and icon and travesty, how could Nick's experiences fail to reveal to him something essential about the Republic of which he—like every citizen—is a part? For that is precisely what they do: they reveal to him the vast contradictions at work in the history and the social reality of his country—contradictions which correlate with his final, unresolved view of Gatsby—and it is in this way that the events of this summer inspire Nick's final meditation. Composing his thoughts on what it all means, Nick is moved to imagine Long Island in its garden state, before the disfigurements of civilisation. He sees, that is, what literally cannot be seen, and yet he sees what his point of view now reveals:

> And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes—a fresh, green breast of the New World. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams. (p. 187)

The island 'flowers' for the sailors' eyes, its 'fresh green breast' presenting an image of romance, fecundity, maternal protection, pastoral innocence. But, in an ironic paradox, the trees must vanish for this contradictory pastoral dream to be realised, and the 'fresh green breast' that 'flowered' once has become hideously transfigured into the mutilated breast of Myrtle Wilson, flapping in the dust of the road. And with these images in mind Nick writes that he 'became aware' of 'the last and greatest of all human dreams'. Set amid florally named woman, vanished trees, and manicured lawns, what could this be but some Edenic longing, but he says the trees '*pandered* in whispers' to this dream, so perhaps it was corrupted from the start. In any event, meditating here on the story of Gatsby, Nick has come to the view that that 'fresh green breast' must have inspired the dream of a materialistic Eden—a garden paradise inspired by the idealism of transcendent faith, but built from an abundant wealth (and in America, of course, green—the colour of the garden—is the colour of money). In the end, only half of the dream was destined to be realised, and then, in any case, not for everybody: all that came of it was materialistic abundance for the few, like the careless Buchanans, and desolation for the many, like the care-worn Wilsons. That is why Nick writes of Gatsby's idealistic dream:

> He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night. (p. 188)

It is significant that the republic comes to Nick's mind here, for the point about a republic is that everyone is implicated in it

and responsible for it. And if it has gone hideously awry—if it has produced the odd spacious and airy mansion only at the expense of the waste of the valley of ashes and its population of lost ashen souls preyed upon by the lethal carelessness of the vacuous sons and daughters of the plutocracy—if it has gone hideously awry then that is something for which everyone, Nick included, must bear responsibility. No wonder there is a deep melancholy to Nick's tone as he reflects at the end on this state of affairs: within and without, enchanted and repelled, implicated in the republic but alienated by its bizarre and degenerate state, implicated too in the story of Gatsby[2] but now standing apart from it to try to make sense of it all—Nick at the end feels himself once more adrift, pulled in different directions, and suspended in the tragic paradox of America's historical destiny:

> So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past. (p. 188)

We are left with an imagery of poised ambivalence—a feeling of being pulled in different directions at the same time—no longer in an attitude of indecision, which had been Nick's initial state, but rather in a state of paradox, and with a deep sense of dilemma. That is what Nick's point of view ultimately discloses: that is what all of this *means*, for him if for no-one else, although clearly we can share his vision. And that is what it is: a vision, by which I mean both a point of view, and a revelation. That, I think, is what is fashioned in this text; but because of the mode of fashioning—the dramatic and, here, profoundly lyrical mode of first-person narration—we are able to share in and arrive at that vision with Nick.

And that is the final importance of point-of-view narration in *The Great Gatsby:* by having this level of psychological drama in his text Fitzgerald wants us to participate intimately in the dark dilemma that unfolds for Nick, and yet simultaneously recognise it as no more than a singular revelation in which we might, or might not, share. The greatness of Gatsby is nothing more than Nick's contentious view of the matter—and he, with characteristic ambivalence, 'disapproves of him from beginning

to end' (p. 160); but the greatness of *The Great Gatsby* has everything to do with its exploration of the dramatic texture of the act of narration.

[1] F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1950), p. 35. All other references in the body of the text are to this edition.

[2] To whom *he* might have pandered by providing him with Daisy.

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