"A Fragment of Lost Words": Narrative Ellipses in *The Great Gatsby*

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As a great short novel, *The Great Gatsby* gathers force and power not only from what it says, but also from what it chooses not to say. Nick Carraway, Fitzgerald's enigmatic narrator, relates Jay Gatsby's story in a manner that is at once concise and elliptical. These two qualities are not at odds with each other; in fact, the more concise one is, the more one must leave out. Such narrative elisions—the places in the text where Nick omits important information or jumps over some event in Gatsby's life or his own—might draw the reader's attention to the process of selection that is at work in the novel as a whole. Every narrative has elisions. Wolfgang Iser terms these moments "gaps," and argues that differences in interpretations arise from readers filling the narrative's gaps in different ways:

> One text is potentially capable of several different realizations, and no reading can ever exhaust the full potential, for each individual reader will fill in the gaps in his own way, thereby excluding the various other possibilities; as he reads, he will make his own decision as to how the gap is to be filled. (280)

Such gaps are of particular importance in *The Great Gatsby*, for the novel's brevity (180 pages in the Scribner edition) is predicated on its narrator's selectivity, on his readiness to leave some things unsaid. Nick has powers of concentration and elimination that one might more readily associate with the lyric poet than with the novelist. The work of Iser and other narratologists suggests that Nick's process of narrative selection and elision is an essential part of the story he tells. To understand what Nick says about Gatsby and himself, one might study not only Nick's words, but also his elisions, omissions, and silences.

Before turning to the narrative of *The Great Gatsby*, it may be worth

defining narratology itself. Narratology might be thought of as an emerging field of study, a critical approach to literature, film, and other media that coalesces around Roland Barthes' writings of the 1960s and Wayne Booth's seminal 1961 study, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Yet one could also trace the discussion of narrative elements back to Aristotle's writing on drama, seeing the work of Barthes, Booth, and their contemporaries as continuing a conversation that is several millennia in the making. The early twentieth-century writings of the Russian formalists, notably Vladimir Propp and Mikhail Bakhtin, both of whose work began to appear in English translation in the 1970s, are likewise vital to this conversation. Narratologists also draw on the reflections and theories of English and American novelists, such as E. M. Forster and Henry James. Narratology is therefore a polyglot and heterogeneous school of theory. Its practitioners take a magpie's approach to literary criticism, making use of whatever material serves their needs.

It is appropriate that narratology should be a heterogeneous mode of criticism, for the literary form that is most commonly its subject—the novel—is itself profoundly heterogeneous. The novel is a mixed form, one that, in the hands of a good writer, is pliable, inclusive, and expansive. Its formal elements are so loosely defined as to seem infinitely responsive to the warp and woof of its themes and its subject matter. Its very name speaks of its "newness"; every great novel is a novelty. To see how widely novels vary in structure, one need only compare a collection of novels to a collection of, say, sermons, sonnets, fairy tales, or epics. Narratology may in fact be a response to the heterogeneous nature of the novel; it is an attempt to find a common language for discussing commonalities across radically different novels. The narratologist's focus on literary elements (such as plot or setting), on the representation of time and action, and on the relationships among author, narrator, character, and reader might be seen as an effort to develop a poetics of fiction.

Narratologists of all stripes would make a series of distinctions between author and narrator and between the text of the novel and the

world that the text describes. In the case of *The Great Gatsby*, Nick Carraway is not F. Scott Fitzgerald—even if Carraway has at his disposal the full range of Fitzgerald's lyrical powers and even if he, like Fitzgerald, uses those powers to tell Gatsby's story. This distinction between author and character is an elementary one that most students learn by the time they enter high school. The second narratological distinction, on the other hand, is a bit more subtle, requiring that critics settle on some common terms. In the world which Nick Carraway inhabits, a series of events occurred in the summer of 1922—and in the years leading up to that summer—that ultimately led to Jay Gatsby's death. These events, as listed chronologically and causally, might be termed *the story*: Gatsby meets Daisy, loses her to the wealthy Tom Buchanan, resolves to reinvent himself as a wealthy and powerful man, follows her east to Long Island, buys a house across the bay from her, prevails upon Nick to reunite him with Daisy, and so on and so forth. *The story* is the sequence of events in the order in which they occurred in the "real" (albeit fictional) world.

Yet many novels, *Gatsby* among them, do not follow this chronological order. Rather, they represent (notice the literal origin of the word: re-present, to show again) the story according to some other organizing principle. The order in which a given text represents its story might be termed the "narrative discourse." The distinction between story and discourse becomes clear when one thinks of a prototypical mystery novel, where the identity of the murderer and motive for his or her crime—in other words, the events that set the story in motion—are not revealed until the end of the novel. In a similar vein, *The Great Gatsby* does not begin with Gatsby meeting Daisy, but rather with Nick moving to Long Island. Because Nick is the novel's narrator, he presents information on Gatsby in the order in which it was revealed to him. Charles Baxter calls this "the Ishmael Principle," after the narrator of *Moby Dick*, positing: "Gatsby can't tell his story, so Nick Carraway does . . . Gatsby doesn't have the necessary distance on his own situation even to begin to narrate it" (42). Baxter speculates about how un-

failingly bland and ridiculous Gatsby's own memoir, were he able to write one, would be. Nick brings to Gatsby's story the right degree of involvement and detachment; he has the poet's ability, as Shelley put it in his "to see life steadily and see it whole."

Yet in order to see Gatsby's story steadily and whole, Nick must exclude from his narrative almost everything that does not speak of Gatsby and his world. He glosses over many of the quotidian details that would have comprised his life and occupied his mind during his time in New York City and on Long Island. The specifics of his bond-office job, the girl from Jersey City whom he dates for awhile, and any number of similar incidents are given only minimal attention. Some novels are omnibus constructions, like the sprawling multi-plot Victorian works that Henry James termed "loose and baggy monsters." A three-volume Dickens or Thackeray novel can expand to incorporate multiple plot lines, incidents, and moods. Fitzgerald's novel, however, functions according to a very different aesthetic. *The Great Gatsby* is a study in concentration of effect and unity of form. Fitzgerald was well aware of the process of selection by which he constructed his novel. Reflecting on his process of composition in a personal letter, he wrote, "in Gatsby I selected the stuff to fit a given mood of 'hauntedness' or whatever you might call it, rejecting in advance in Gatsby, for instance, all the ordinary material of Long Island" (Fitzgerald 1963, 550–51). Seeing life whole requires one to focus wholly on the life one is seeing: Gatsby's, in this case. If a particular aspect of life on Long Island did not fit into this vision, Fitzgerald's narrator would simply omit it.

Yet Nick's narrative selectiveness derives not only from his desire to tell Gatsby's story, but also from his wariness of telling his own. At times, Nick's guardedness makes him what critic Wayne Booth termed "an unreliable narrator." Because he himself is so closely involved with the story he tells, Nick has an interest in leaving gaps between his narrative discourse and the "real" story. This is particularly true when the topic turns to his own biography. Early in the novel, his cousin

Daisy says, "We heard that you were engaged" (19). Nick's response is typically elliptical, after which he tells the reader:

> Of course I knew what they were referring to, but I wasn't even vaguely engaged. The fact that gossip had published the banns was one of the reasons I had come East. You can't stop going with an old friend on account of rumors, and on the other hand I had no intention of being rumored into marriage. (19)

This is a marvelously laconic description of a love affair turned sour. Had Daisy not asked after his rumored engagement, it seems likely Nick would not have mentioned it at all. One could argue that Nick recognizes that his failed affair is only tangentially related to the story he tells, and that he therefore relates it in a concise manner. Yet the incident may be more important to Nick than he lets on to his reader. That Nick has fled in the face of rumors that he was to marry a woman raises a host of questions about his own role in the relationship, about his character, and about the set of interests and preoccupations that he brings not only to his budding relationship with Jordan Baker, but to his relationship with Jay Gatsby as well. There is an interplay between his own story and Gatsby's, for both men have come from the Midwest to New York because of women: Nick in flight from one, Gatsby in pursuit of another.

Nick is similarly laconic when talking about his war experience. He mentions it in passing as his excuse for not attending Tom and Daisy's wedding, but it is Gatsby who really introduces Nick's World War I experience into the discourse. His first question to Nick, the two men not having yet been introduced, relates directly to the topic: "'Your face is familiar,' he said, politely, 'Weren't you in the Third Division during the war?'" (47). As with the engagement, it is not at all clear whether the topic of Nick's service would have made its way into the narrative had someone else not introduced it. Though he faithfully records Gatsby's question, Nick summarizes their subsequent conversation:

"We talked for a moment about some wet, gray little villages in France" (47). Aspiring writers are often given the advice to show, not tell. One could imagine the students in a fiction writing workshop objecting to Nick's line as an example of "telling," and suggesting that the author ought to "show" the two veterans discussing their war stories. In not mentioning the specific towns the men talked of and the action they saw, Nick deflates this opening conversation with Gatsby. Of course, this is precisely the effect Nick intends: he is uncomfortable being at the center of the story (or narrative discourse, to be precise), and moves the discourse speedily over the events that illuminate his own story rather than Gatsby's.

Nick is acutely observant and accurate in chronicling the dreams and desires of the people around him, and it is not entirely wrong for him to claim, "Every one suspects himself of at least one of the cardinal virtues, and this is mine: I am one of the few honest people that I have ever known" (59). Yet he is far less scrupulous when it comes to the facts of his own story. Biographical details of his life enter the text only because other characters ask after them. In his conversations with Daisy and Gatsby, Nick finds himself in a narrative double-bind: while he would prefer to omit information about himself, he feels bound faithfully to represent the conversations he has had with his cousin and his neighbor. Nick's strategy, therefore, is to summarize and compress his responses to these questions so as to give them as little space in the discourse as possible. Having seen this process at work twice, the reader ought to begin wondering what else Nick has chosen to omit from his narrative, what else might come to light if only someone were to ask him about it.

One might chalk these omissions up to modesty, were it not for Nick's taking a similar approach when he and Tom come upon the scene of the car accident toward the novel's climax. Nick, who has always been reticent to talk about himself, chooses not to talk to the police or to Wilson of what he knows. Assuming the role of passive witness, he allows Tom to deflect Wilson's suspicions away from himself

and onto the owner of the yellow car—Gatsby. Tom lies by omission, saying "That yellow car I was driving this afternoon wasn't mine—do you hear? I haven't seen it all afternoon" (140). In point of fact, Tom has seen the car and knows who was driving it: either Gatsby or Daisy. Tom's insistence that he doesn't own the car is irrelevant. Yet Nick says nothing to naysay Tom's assertion; he simply watches and listens as Tom tells the lie that will eventually lead to Gatsby's murder. Perhaps this should not come as a surprise, for Nick has always seemed to think that he can omit the truth without compromising his basic honesty. Jordan Baker will challenge Nick on these grounds during their last conversation. Rebuffing him for "throwing her over," Jordan says, "I thought you were rather an honest, straightforward person. I thought it was your secret pride" (177). Nick's response, "I'm thirty . . . I'm five years too old to lie to myself and call it honor" (177), is equivocal. Does he mean to deny or confirm her charge? And if breaking off his relationship with Jordan was an act of honesty, then was initiating the relationship in the first place an act of dishonesty?

Other gaps in Nick's narrative may stem not from his unwillingness to talk about himself, but rather from his inability to do so. One such episode comes at the conclusion of the chapter in which Nick has spent the afternoon and evening drinking heavily at the Upper West Side apartment Tom keeps for his mistress, Myrtle. At the end of the evening, Nick rides down in the elevator with Mr. McKee, who invites him to "come to lunch some day":

> "All right," I agreed, "I'll be glad to."
>
> . . . I was standing beside his bed and he was sitting up between the sheets, clad in his underwear, with a great portfolio in his hands.
>
> "Beauty and the Beast . . . Loneliness . . . Old Grocery Horse . . . Brook'n Bridge. . ."
>
> Then I was lying half asleep in the cold lower level of the Pennsylvania Station, staring at the morning *Tribune*, and waiting for the four o'clock train. (38)

To return to Iser's theory of narrative inexhaustibility, how a reader fills in the gap between Nick's conversation in the elevator ("I'll be glad to") and his finding himself in the bedroom of the undressed Mr. McKee (". . . I was standing beside his bed") will make a great deal of difference to one's interpretation not only of this scene but of the novel as a whole. Are Nick's ellipses a form of self-censorship, by which he elides a homosexual encounter—or perhaps only the possibility of one—with McKee? Or do the ellipses mimic the gaps in the memory that can result from drinking too much? Nick would certainly not be the only person in this novel to suffer alcohol-induced blackouts.

In his primer on narrative theory, H. Porter Abbot distinguishes between narrative gaps and narrative cruxes: "In criticism, a crux is an oft-debated element in a work that, depending on how we interpret it, can significantly effect how we interpret the work as a whole" (86). In the case of *The Great Gatsby*, some critics have seen the episode with Mr. McKee as evidence enough that Nick is a homosexual. Such a reading subtly—or not so subtly—shifts Nick's relationship with many of the novel's other characters, particularly Jordan Baker and Jay Gatsby. This interpretation helps explain Nick's horror at finding himself "rumored into marriage," the coolness of his relationship with Jordan, and, of course, the fascination that Gatsby holds for him. To the objection that Nick never declares himself to be gay, one might answer that Nick also does not speak of his rumored engagement or of his war experience. Not identifying himself as gay would be in keeping not only with the general tenor of the times, but also with Nick's typical caginess regarding his personal history.

Yet to conclude that the incident with Mr. McKee establishes Nick's homosexuality would probably be a case of what narratologists call "overreading." Abbot defines overreading as "the act of importing into the text material that is not signified within it" (194). The fact that Nick finds himself in McKee's bedroom is not really enough justification to conclude that Nick has (or is going to have, for notice that there is another narrative gap immediately after the scene with McKee in bed:

"Then I was lying half asleep in the cold lower level of the Pennsylvania Station") any kind of sexual encounter with him. For if Nick's ellipses are a form of self-censorship, then why would he not censor himself more extensively? Why include any mention of being in McKee's apartment at all, if he is in fact at pains to hide from the reader his sexual identity? Perhaps more to the point, Nick's sense of time and of continuity is beginning to fray well before he leaves the apartment. Some two pages earlier, he says "It was nine o'clock—almost immediately afterward I looked at my watch and found it was ten" (36). Later he describes the scene this way: "People disappeared, reappeared, made plans to go somewhere, and then lost each other, searched for each other, found each other a few feet away" (37). While Nick continues to write in the past tense, the repetitive phrasing of the sentence suggests a present-tense, stream-of-consciousness account of the party. Nick's phrasing now (as he narrates events some two years gone) mimics his drunkenness then. Seen in this context, the ellipses that precede Nick's finding himself in McKee's apartment and the abrupt "then" that serves as a transition between the apartment and the train station speak not of self-censorship, but of the hampered perceptions and disjointed memories that drunkenness can produce. These are instances not of Nick exerting control of his narrative, but rather of his losing control of it.

Elsewhere in his narrative, Nick uses ellipses to a different effect. In talking with Jay Gatsby about his plan to marry Daisy, for example, Nick creates the illusion that his present-day conversation has given way to a scene from the past:

> I gathered that he wanted to recover something, some idea of himself perhaps, that had gone into loving Daisy. His life had been confused and disordered since then, but if he could once return to a certain starting place and go over it all slowly, he could find out what that thing was. . .
>
> . . . One autumn night, five years before, they had been walking down the street when the leaves were falling, and they came to a place where there were no trees and the sidewalk was white with moonlight. (110)

While the voice in the second passage is still Nick's, it is Nick's voice as lent to Gatsby. The third-person pronoun does not change ("he" becomes "they" as Daisy joins Gatsby for a moonlit walk), nor does Nick lose his characteristic lyricism. Yet because the scene is set five years before Nick met Gatsby, Nick himself is effaced; he is no longer a witness, but an amanuensis. Stephen Dedalus, Joyce's young artist, argues that a narrator should be "refined out of existence" (Joyce 2000, 119). Nick approaches such refinement here. Without changing pronouns, Nick changes his relationship to the pronoun. He is not just repeating the story Gatsby told him, but retelling that story by applying some of the techniques of first person narration to a third person passage, as here: "His heart beat faster and faster as Daisy's white face came up to his own. He knew that when he kissed this girl, and forever wed his unutterable visions to her perishable breath, his mind would never romp again like the mind of God" (110). The diction and syntax are Nick's, but they are bent toward recreating and bringing to life an event from Gatsby's life. This is not quite an instance of free indirect discourse, for the "he knew" makes it clear that a narrator is relaying Gatsby's inner thoughts. Nor would it be quite fair to say that the point of view has changed, for Nick is the narrator and Gatsby the character in both the conversation before the ellipses and the imbedded narrative that the ellipses introduce. Perhaps a better term to apply to the passage is one coined by critic Mieke Bal: "focalization." The narrative is focalized or filtered through Gatsby's consciousness, and the effect is to elide the difference between the "I" of the narrator and the "he" of the character, so that the one briefly gives way to the other.

Five years ago, Gatsby kissed Daisy and "wed his unutterable visions to her perishable breath," while in the present day, Nick listens to Gatsby's story and finds some unutterable vision of his own flitting at the edge of his consciousness:

> I was reminded of something—an elusive rhythm, a fragment of lost words, that I had heard somewhere a long time ago. For a moment a phrase tried to take shape in my mouth and my lips parted like a dumb man's, as though there was more struggling upon them than a wisp of startled air. But they made no sound, and what I had almost remembered was incommunicable forever. (111)

Here is another of the novel's cruxes, for there is no way to determine just what the phrase is that escapes Nick's mind and fails to issue from his lips. One can assume it would be some kind of epiphany about Gatsby or himself, but there is no way to reconstruct what that epiphany might be. It is loss made manifest, an absence that fills the room and the narrative with its presence. The "fragment of lost words" and "incommunicable . . . phrase" are a bit like the "overwhelming question" that T. S. Eliot's Prufrock refers to but never specifies. Nick might sympathize with Prufrock's complaint that "It is impossible to say just what I mean." Perhaps this incommunicable phrase is a fitting way to conclude a chapter that centers on Gatsby's loss of Daisy. In gaining Daisy, Gatsby gives away "some idea of himself," and when Daisy abandons him for Tom Buchanan she takes that part of him with her (110). Listening to Gatsby's story, Nick experiences a similar sensation of loss. Perhaps in both cases what has been lost is the sense of possibility. Actual women, actual events, and actual words drive out and replace the host of possibilities that once stood as their placeholders. To return to another of Stephen Dedalus's maxims, history is "lodged in the room of the infinite possibilities which it has ousted" (Joyce *Ulysses* 2. 50–1). Just as Gatsby fixes his desire on a single girl, so Nick fixes his narrative discourse on a single chain of events that explains his enigmatic neighbor. He gains a thorough knowledge of Gatsby's life story, but in so doing he loses the sense of manifold possibilities and mystery that his neighbor once held for him. Nick muses, after arranging for Gatsby and Daisy to be reunited, that the light at the end of the Buchanan's dock would no longer hold the "colossal signifi-

cance" it once did (93). He says, "Now it was again a green light on a dock. His count of enchanted objects had diminished by one" (93). Something of the same effect may be at work for Nick himself, for Gatsby, in telling his story, becomes an ordinary man rather than an enchanted figure of infinite possibility.

At the novel's conclusion, Nick uses ellipses to a different effect, indicating neither time lost to a drunken blackout nor a transition between his own "present tense" narrative and the imbedded narratives of Gatsby's past. In his last encounter with Tom Buchanan, ellipses instead speak to the tension between Nick's impulses toward reflection and narration. A narratologist might take his terms from Aristotle, calling these two elements of the narrative discourse *diegesis* (commentary) and *mimesis* (representation); a layman might term this the distinction between telling and showing. Nick encounters Tom by chance on Fifth Avenue in October. Tom spots him and thrusts out his hand, asking, "What's the matter, Nick? Do you object to shaking hands with me?" Nick tells him he does, and asks Tom whether he told Wilson who owned the yellow car. Tom defends his actions, saying "What if I did tell him? That fellow had it coming . . . He ran over Myrtle like you'd run over a dog and never even stopped his car" (178). Nick knows the truth of the matter—that Daisy, not Gatsby, was driving—yet he chooses not to tell Tom. He muses, "There was nothing I could say, except the one unutterable fact that it wasn't true" (178). Again and again, Nick has chosen to keep silent. He does so again here, perhaps feeling that no facts, no matter how true, could shake Tom's opinion of himself as "entirely justified." He thinks:

> They were careless people, Tom and Daisy—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 made. . . .
>
> I shook hands with him; it seemed silly not to, for I felt suddenly as though I were talking to a child. (179)

The ellipses that separate these two passages may serve several purposes at once. They show the passage of time, for Nick's realization about Tom and Daisy is not one that came to him months or years later, in writing his account, but rather one that struck him right there on Fifth Avenue on an October afternoon. Thought moves quickly, but it nevertheless moves in time, and some moments must pass while Nick imagines Tom's own sense of self-justification, characterizes Tom and Daisy as "careless people," and decides that he will nevertheless shake Tom's hand. The trailing ellipses indicate these fleeting moments. Fitzgerald—or Nick—has used ellipses this way before. When McKee shows Nick his photographs, for example, each set of ellipses indicates the time in which he turns the page or in some other way draws Nick's attention to a new shot: "Beauty and the Beast . . . Loneliness . . . Old Grocery Horse . . . Brook'n Bridge . . ." (38).

Yet in the final scene with Tom, the ellipses mark more than a passage of time: they indicate an interrupting of the interior monologue to return to a description of external circumstances. There is an abruptness to this transition, as if Nick needs to break off his interior monologue in order both to shake Tom's hand in the "present moment" of the October afternoon and to resume the forward momentum of the story he is narrating some years later. The ellipses indicate that were there time enough to do so, Nick could keep thinking in this same vein, extrapolating out all of the implications of Tom and Daisy's carelessness. Instead he cuts his reverie short, returning to the exigencies of his narrative's plot. He interrupts an instance of diegesis, or telling, in order to return to mimesis, or showing. In shaking Tom's hand, Nick shakes off an interiority that threatens to stall his narrative in its final pages.

Perhaps this breaking off of the interior monologue is explained in part by what Frank Kermode calls "the sense of an ending." The narrative discourse takes on a sort of momentum as it approaches its conclusion. Like a man on his deathbed, a narrator at the end of his story is often gripped by a desire to set his house in order. Nick has his final conversations with Tom, Jordan, Wolfsheim, and the novel's other

principal characters. He makes a last visit to Gatsby's mansion. And he tries one last time to draw some conclusions from Gatsby's story:

> Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes from us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter—to-morrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther . . . And one fine morning—
>
> So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past. (180)

Here Nick uses first a long dash and then a set of ellipses to suggest a breaking away from the present and a reaching out toward a promised, idealized future. Note the shift from "Gatsby" in the first line to the first-person plural "us" and "we" in the second. Nick, his protagonist, and the reader are folded together into a confederacy. The trailing ellipses after "stretch out our arms farther" are falteringly optimistic, the trailing off in midsentence of someone who sees a vision on the horizon. "One fine morning" marks the beginning of the vision itself: the imagined day on which the much-anticipated, orgastic future comes into being. But then a long dash follows, ending this reverie and dashing the dreamer's vision by bringing him back not only to the present, but to a present informed by and drawn back into the past. The novel therefore concludes with Nick caught between an elusive future and an irredeemable past, his narrative voice hovering somewhere between Gatsby and himself, between then and now, between speech and silence.

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