

Point of View, Telephones, Doubling, and Vicarious Learning in *The Great Gatsby*

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HAVE WE NOT all been witness, if not to an execution, then to some memorable experience worth reporting? In addition to our own eyewitness accounts, we often find it necessary to seek other points of view if we wish to expand or embellish the subject. We cannot, like a novelist, call on omniscience. Our most likely sources of information, then, will be other witnesses, whose accounts we gather through conversations, letters, emails, telephone calls, and similar means.

But suppose that we have exhausted all our sources and still need to round out the picture. Have we not at times lapsed into empathetic identification and found ourselves saying something like the following: "I gather that the speaker was thinking of . . . or feeling that . . ."? In other words, we put ourselves in another's place, seeing the world through his or her eyes, vicariously.

Slipping into the skin of another and trying to experience that person's life is to be admirably human. Some of us, in fact, become so comfortable in our new skin that we imitate the person's behavior and speech. Imitation is not only the sincerest form of flattery, but also a shortcut to understanding a person's psyche and the reasons or motives behind it. To achieve psychological depth, writers enter vicariously into the lives of their characters; a few also allow a character to enter into the person of another. Such is the case with the novelists Chuck Palahniuk and William Kennedy.

In Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, a recent novel and movie, the narrator tries to find relief from insomnia by impersonating a seriously ill person. A more famous example, though, is

William Kennedy's novel *Legs*. Here the narrator, Marcus Gorman, tells the reader what he sees and what others have seen of the gangster Jack "Legs" Diamond, even delving into Jack's Catholicism, a religion Marcus shares. But when Jack dies, Marcus has no way of knowing Jack's final thoughts: reminiscences that are necessary for Marcus to complete the "Legs myth." To effect this scene, the narrator becomes the dying gangster and shares his memories with the reader, thus fulfilling the narrator's opening line of the book, "I really don't think he's dead," and Legs's ostensible closing line of the book, "I really don't think I'm dead." Legs lives in the narrator's telling.

William Kennedy learned this trick of having one character slip into another's point of view from the example of Nick Carraway, the first-person narrator in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. So great was Kennedy's anxiety about Fitzgerald's influence that Kennedy made sure to sprinkle in his novel the names Fitzgerald and Gatsby, as if pleading *nolo contendere* and asking the reader to judge not the morality but the artistry of his borrowing.

For those of us interested in social learning through vicariousness, Fitzgerald's novel is instructive. Let us therefore look at *The Great Gatsby* and the workings of the point of view.

Whenever Nick conveys Gatsby's thoughts, as he does on Gatsby's return to Louisville at war's end, or imparts suppositions, such as "[Gatsby] must have looked up at an unfamiliar sky through frightening leaves and shivered as he found what a grotesque thing a rose is and how raw the sunlight was upon the scarcely created grass" (126), the reader would be perfectly justified to ask: How can Nick possibly know what Gatsby is thinking? These implausible moments, which increase in number towards the end of the novel, indicate the problem that Fitzgerald encountered with the witness point of view and its limited avenues of information.

For the witness point of view to work with the least

amount of awkwardness, the sources of information must appear natural, reasonable, and perhaps even inevitable—and the narrator must be wholly in control of the information. Henry James speaks to this point in the “Preface” to *The Golden Bowl*.

Beset constantly with the sense that the painter of the picture or the chanter of the ballad (whatever we may call him) can never be responsible *enough*, and for every inch of his surface and note of his song, I track my uncontrollable footsteps, right and left, after the fact, while they take their quick turn, even on stealthiest tiptoe, toward the point of view that, within the compass, will give me most instead of least to answer for. (328)

Once the narrator's sources of information invite the reader's disbelief, this particular point of view fails. The gold standard, of course, is to invent ways that harmonize with the story's environment. Nick's principal sources of background information are Jordan Baker and Jay Gatsby, both of whom enrich the point of view with their perceptions, misperceptions, fantasies, and revealing tales. But to progress beyond the borders of overheard conversations and coincidence, like Jordan's presence in Daisy's room half an hour before the bridal dinner, or the need for discovered documents, like notes on a flyleaf, Fitzgerald artfully expands the witness point of view and the progressive discovery pattern, or in Fitzgerald's words, “the retrospect of Gatsby's past” (270), by resorting to that cutting-edge communication technology the telephone, and, in a daring coup de théâtre, by having the verbal artist Nick double for the inarticulate Gatsby.

In 1922, the year in which the action takes place, private telephones were still a rarity. Party lines were the norm. Only the very rich could afford single lines, a necessity for Tom Buchanan and Jay Gatsby, since they are both engaged in illicit affairs and cannot risk having neighbors eavesdrop on their conversations. (Tom, let us remember, has a history of affairs—he had to leave Chicago owing to a particularly notorious incident—and Gatsby has a history with Wolfsheim, his link to rum running and tainted money.) The novel is silent on whether Myrtle also has a private line, an unlikely luxury.

If she does not, others may well have known about her behavior, a point that Fitzgerald chooses to omit. Even a public telephone was not safe from prying operators. The potential danger of telephones is subtly reinforced throughout the novel by their choric ringing; in fact, the phone bell is usually a harbinger of trouble, for example, Myrtle Wilson invading the privacy of the Buchanan's house or a gangster in trouble.

But phones also enable Fitzgerald to solve several structural problems: how to introduce the affair between Tom Buchanan and Myrtle Wilson, how to move people in and out of the scene when Fitzgerald wants to isolate his characters (for example, Jordan and Nick), how to keep before the reader the fact that Gatsby is a gangster, how to elicit character traits that would not otherwise be evident, and how to use the past to propel the action forward.

Let us take these points in order. The first time the phone rings, Daisy conveniently excuses herself from the garden—presumably to eavesdrop—while Tom is in the house talking. The absence of both Buchanans allows Jordan to tell Nick “Tom's got some woman in New York” (15). In fact, most of the exposition bearing on Tom and Myrtle's affair comes through telephone conversations overheard by Daisy and Jordan. To have introduced Myrtle into the novel prematurely would have vitiated the train scene in which Nick makes her acquaintance and hears, in the rhythm of the train wheels, her account of how she first met Tom. By initially keeping her voice off stage and unheard, Fitzgerald dramatically heightens our interest in this mystery woman. Thus, her first telephone call tantalizes, and, without even appearing, Myrtle suddenly stands front and center, as Daisy suspiciously exits, allowing Jordan to whisper her all-important gossip.

The frequent phone calls that Gatsby receives from Chicago, as well as one from Philadelphia, invite the reader, at first, to wonder about Gatsby's business “gonnegtions.” Meyer Wolfsheim was recognizable to many of Fitzgerald's readers as a portrayal of Arnold Rothstein, the most celebrated gangster of the 1920s and the man reputed to have put

the word "organized" in organized crime. Fitzgerald's audience would also have known that "drugstores" were often allowed to sell "prescription alcohol" either for religious purposes (wine for the Mass or for Friday night Jewish services) or for medical reasons. As a conduit for legal alcohol, drugstores were a natural outlet for bootlegged liquor. Each telephone call from Chicago, a city associated with gangland activity, is like a bell tolling in the background to remind us that Gatsby is a racketeer.

Character traits elicited through telephone calls include Tom's gruffness and Nick's transformation from an indifferent observer and indolent lover to a man dedicated to Gatsby's memory. In his telephone conversations with Myrtle, Tom reveals his true nature as a truculent bull and a restless sexual predator. His clipped and angry telephone voice, whether speaking to Myrtle Wilson or George Wilson, contrasts sharply with the civil and courteous manner in which he speaks to Daisy and Nick. His disregard for Myrtle is first apparent on the telephone and then surfaces again in Myrtle's small apartment (Chapter Two), where he is ironically expansive in its confinement, though constrained in the spaciousness of his own home. For Nick, the telephone enables him to express an assertiveness that would be unlikely to surface among people of his own class or in public. Perhaps because he "found [himself] on Gatsby's side and alone" (127), Nick exhibits a tenacity previously missing and calls West Egg and some of Gatsby's acquaintances in the hope that they will attend the funeral:

I wanted to get somebody for him. I wanted to go into the room where he lay and reassure him. "I'll get somebody for you, Gatsby. Don't worry. Just trust me and I'll get somebody for you—" (128)

With each failed "connection," Nick's realization grows that owing to the indifference of others, he is now "responsible" for Gatsby. His cynical comment at the start of the novel that "reserving judgments is a matter of infinite hope" (5) has now been fulfilled. Gatsby alone has justified that hope.

Not least important, the telephone builds on past information to propel the action forward: George Wilson's telephone call establishes his interest in cars and foreshadows Tom and Gatsby switching automobiles. The telephone brings to the Buchanan house all the parties who will be privy to the exchange of cars and present at the Plaza Hotel.

He was calling up at Daisy's request—would I come to lunch at her house tomorrow? Miss Baker would be there. Half an hour later Daisy herself telephoned and seemed relieved to find that I was coming. Something was up. (89)

Jordan, too, telephones Nick: to invite him to join her in Southampton. It proves a portentous call, one that concludes their relationship and one in which, given Nick's central role as the observer, we actually hear the words of the person on the other end of the phone (121).

When the phone fails to ring or a call is cut off, death or deceit is afoot. Gatsby waits for Daisy to call; but resigned to the fact that she will not, he takes a towel and heads for the pool, where he is later found dead. And Nick's attempt to reach Daisy ends as abruptly as Daisy's decision to drop Gatsby and leave town. "I called up Daisy half an hour after we found him, called her instinctively and without hesitation. But she and Tom had gone away early that afternoon, and taken baggage with them" (128). The last telephone call in the novel comes from Klipspringer (131-32), and perhaps rightly so, because from his name to his residence in Gatsby's house to his current stay in Greenwich, Connecticut, he remains a shadowy figure, a man whose history, try as we may, remains long distance.

The one figure whom Fitzgerald cannot leave in the dark is Jay Gatsby. But having no plausible way to tell the reader what Gatsby feels on his return to Louisville after the war, Fitzgerald resorts to a breathtaking coup de théâtre. He has Nick become Gatsby, a doubling even more daring than Conrad's in *The Secret Sharer*. Normally, doubling refers to the practice on stage where one actor plays two or more roles. In a brilliant technical move Fitzgerald, a frequent theatre-

goer, makes the technique his own to solve the problem of access to information. This doubling takes place practically unnoticed because throughout the novel Nick has essentially been speaking for Gatsby, whose own language is limited: "I had talked with him perhaps half a dozen times in the past month and found, to my disappointment, that he had little to say" (51); "The very phrases were worn so threadbare" (52).

When Gatsby makes his famous pronouncement, "Can't repeat the past? . . . Why of course you can!" (86), Nick "[gathers] that [Gatsby] 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. . . ." Rarely have four periods ended one paragraph and three begun the next to indicate such a radical switch as the one that Fitzgerald pioneers here (86). Confronted by the limitations of an observer point of view, Fitzgerald seems to have painted himself into a corner. Gatsby's reflections require a source, but he has been ruled out as a man of words, and found to be "confused and disordered." Both Fitzgerald and the reader need Nick, in his own soaring language, to imagine Gatsby's thoughts. But for Nick to wax lyrical and render the moment poignant, he has to become Gatsby's double. Thus begins one of the most poetic prose passages in all of American literature: "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. . . . Then he kissed her. At his lips' touch she blossomed for him like a flower and the incarnation was complete" (86). Fittingly, the doubling performs a double service. It enhances and lyricizes the exposition, and it signals the moment when Nick begins to live vicariously through Gatsby. From this point forward, Nick's investment in Gatsby is, as the former might say, more than personal; it is aesthetic.

The novel's ending words, "So we beat on . . . borne back ceaselessly into the past," redouble the doubling, a re-

minder that the past is prologue and that a "retrospect of Gatsby's past" has, while we lived Gatsby's dream through Nick, come upon us, too.

Nick's life is impoverished; he enriches it by becoming Gatsby. We enrich our lives by entering the experience of our children, our spouses, our role models. In fact, according to the Stanford psychologist Albert Bandura, the founder of social learning theory (famous for his 1961 "Bobo Doll" experiment, in which children, following the lead of an adult who has abused a doll, do the same), we learn by observing others and then replicating or modeling their behavior; in short, we imitate or become them. Called observational or vicarious learning, the act of watching and copying others enlarges our frame of reference and contributes, for better or worse, to our development. Fictional characters, too, learn through vicariousness.

Nick Carraway's initial impression of Gatsby, "[he] represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn" (Chapter One), changes in light of Gatsby's capacity for love and wonder. The last time that Nick sees Gatsby, he shouts across the lawn: "They're a rotten crowd. . . . You're worth the whole damn bunch put together" (Chapter Eight). It is this new-found respect that impels Nick to tell his story, the sum of which is *The Great Gatsby*.

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