In “The Storyteller” (1936), Walter Benjamin juxtaposes the plight of the modern novelist, his text produced in isolation and consumed in private, with the idyllic situation of the oral storyteller: physically present to an audience, engaging his responsive “community of listeners” in the process of narration, and leaving traces of his presence in his story like “the handprints of the potter” on his pot (91-92). The Great Gatsby (1925) reflects Fitzgerald’s concern with a series of analogous oppositions: with stories written and told, absent and present authors and listeners, voices converted into inky “excretions,” and voices emanating from physically present bodies in a network of ongoing relationships.

These oppositions are implicit, to begin with, in the contrast between Nick’s story itself (written, like Fitzgerald’s, for anonymous readers) and stories exchanged by individual characters in the course of the novel. Every imagined relationship between writer and reader is shaped by the silence, the distance, and the elliptical sequences of narrative. The Great Gatsby highlights the disjunctions of the writer-reader interaction through a recurrent focus on the direct contact and personal exchange of face-to-face narration. Throughout Gatsby, characters in close proximity to one another swap stories in person rather than in print. Such stories are seen to derive at least part of their meaning from the interaction of teller and listener as visible, physical presences, temporarily bound to one another as well as to the tale being told.

In This Side of Paradise, the act of reading—particularly reading aloud—becomes the basis of emotionally satisfying, intensely binding human contact. Amory Blaine and his roommate virtually dispel the devil one night by reading aloud to one another till the dawn (119). Fitzgerald’s rendering of Amory’s last love affair, moreover, becomes a kind of meditation on certain particularly intense, if somewhat uncanny, rewards of the reading experience.

There was something most passionate in Eleanor’s reading aloud. [She and Amory] seemed nearer, not only mentally, but physically, when they read, than when she was in his arms... (231)
This passage provides one of the earliest and starkest examples of a recurrent motif in Fitzgerald's work. From the start of his career Fitzgerald associates the "scene of reading" with the notion of physical proximity, even intimacy. In *Paradise*, the figure of Eleanor, a kind of "double" for Amory from the outset, is naturally his most receptive reader. (Years later, Amory and Eleanor still send each other their poems.) As a figure for Fitzgerald's own reader, however, Eleanor projects only part of the story, a young author's idealized image.

*The Great Gatsby* is written by a more cautious and skeptical Fitzgerald; the later novel reflects a more complex and oblique (if no less intense) imagination of the pleasures and pitfalls of writing, reading, and being read. Like other authors in the heyday of the best-seller and writer celebrity, Fitzgerald conceived of his readers as distant and alien on the one hand; as particularly close, indeed too close for comfort, on the other. In late nineteenth-century America, the rapidly changing conditions of professional authorship had multiplied the novelist's opportunities for publicity and profit even while increasing the writer's sense of isolation, anonymity, and exposure. By the 1880s the discomfort created by the growing distance between the "celebrated" author and the anonymous public was inscribed within texts of the period. Numerous motifs within realist fiction reflect a profound yearning for and fear of contact with the reader (Hochman, "Rewards" and "Portrait"). After the turn of the century as the reading public continued to expand (and to grow more heterogeneous), it came to seem ever more distant, unknowable, invisible. Fitzgerald himself was acutely conscious of these changes but uncertain as to their implications for himself either with regard to the marketing and advertising of his fiction or with regard to his own narrative posture within it.

*The Great Gatsby* reflects Fitzgerald's mixed feelings about an author's public visibility, but it reflects a still deeper uncertainty about the status of a writer's voice both in relation to a written text and in relation to "the stranger reading it" (*Letters* 308), that "stranger" in whose "mouth" Fitzgerald sought to "leave the taste of the whole book" (*Letters* 152). As I will show, Fitzgerald shared Benjamin's concern with the isolating properties of the novel and repeatedly groped, like Benjamin, for a way to elicit the feel of human interaction from the activity of reading. Thus *Gatsby* itself can be read as Peter Brooks has read Benjamin's "Storyteller": as an expression of discomfort with "the decontextualization of discourse" and an attempt "to rediscover certain contextual coordinates of narrative in narrative voice . . . in the transaction . . . that takes place every time that one recounts something to someone" ("The Tale" 289-90). Throughout *Gatsby*, Fitzgerald's uncertainty about his position not only vis-à-vis the reader, but also within his own text is reflected in a recurrent focus on what Brooks calls "the communicative situation" ("The Tale" 290). For Fitzgerald, as for Benjamin, there is nostalgia attached to "the spirit of storytelling" and the "companionship" implied not only by oral narration but also by "the gift of listening" that it fosters (Benjamin 89, 100, 91). Yet Fitzgerald is ultimately
as skeptical about spoken as about written discourse, alive to the dangers and disjunctures that inform face-to-face interactions no less than written exchanges.

Fitzgerald knew that the process of conveying meaning is far from instantaneous or automatic, whether on paper or in person. On the one hand, *Gatsby* dramatizes the distinction between speech and writing as if Fitzgerald, anticipating Benjamin, privileges the "lived exchange" of spoken discourse (Brooks, "The Tale" 290). On the other hand, Fitzgerald knew as well as Bakhtin or Derrida that the spoken word itself cannot guarantee simple, direct, univalent exchanges of meaning. Indeed, throughout *Gatsby*, spoken voices are seen to generate considerable complications of their own. The Great Gatsby thus dramatizes the intricacies of all narrative transactions. By repeatedly underscoring the illusion-destroying, disenchanting effects of bodily presence, the novel demonstrates the strategic advantages of written over spoken language; yet there is no gainsaying the text's recurrent celebration of the spellbinding, "inexhaustible charm" of Daisy's speaking voice, that "cymbal's song" (120), the "deathless song" of a voice "that could not be over-dreamed" (97).

Nick's recurrent emphasis on the ethereal and mesmerizing qualities of Daisy's voice at once deflects and betrays his implicit awareness that this voice is inseparable from a mortal, sexual human being. While Nick himself attempts to deny the interdependence of voices and bodies, *Gatsby* repeatedly dramatizes the fact that voices tend to be inextricably bound to the bodies from which they emerge. The most spellbinding voices—spoken or written—always have an admixture of the earthbound and material. Thus Fitzgerald's own sense of himself as "a sort of magician with words" becomes merely "an odd delusion" when he recalls how "desperately hard" he has "worked . . . to develop a hard, colorful prose style" (Letters 16).

Is Fitzgerald a magician or a hardworking craftsman? Does he produce illusions by virtue of effortless magic or through painstaking labor? How does fiction manage to transcend its own physical status as a book, "one of those things that look like a brick but open on one side" (Letters 115). Such questions are clearly inscribed in the imagery and structure of Fitzgerald's most self-consciously crafted work. I will be suggesting that *Gatsby* is pervaded by Fitzgerald's sense of analogy between Gatsby's (or Daisy's) illusion-making effects and his own. While the text is surely informed by Fitzgerald's enduring commitment to certain kinds of magic (dreams, voices, fictions), it is also informed by his preoccupation with the difficult and delicate process that brings illusion into being to begin with, that sometimes sustains it against considerable odds, and that is always in danger of calling attention to its own dynamic and its own constituent parts, thereby subverting the effect of enchantment.

In an early draft of *Gatsby*, Nick is said to "read" Gatsby himself as if he were a character in a magazine within which Nick is "reading the climaxes only" (qtd. in Eble 90). The logical impossibility of a story made only of "climaxes" reflects Fitzgerald's sense of narrative as precisely the opposite: a structure that
depends for its effect upon a finely differentiated process of modulation and pacing. Fitzgerald repeatedly renders the "communicative situation" as a complex, dynamic interaction unfolding in time. His keen sense of both telling and listening as time-bound transactions pervades the narration of *Gatsby*.

Like Benjamin's "Storyteller," *The Great Gatsby* reflects a concern with the nature of reading; but the idea of reading that emerges from Fitzgerald's text is more ambivalent, less nostalgic, than Benjamin's. Brooks suggests that Benjamin's figure of the oral tale "challenges the novel to reclaim something that it has largely lost from its heritage: the situation of live communication, the presence of voice" ("The Tale" 291). It would be difficult to find a text more responsive to this challenge than *Gatsby*. Yet, as I have begun to suggest, for Fitzgerald the presence of voice always ends up implying the whole range of mortal, physical being. By the same token, the act of writing becomes an act of separation, of distancing, with considerable advantages of its own. Thus as I will show, Nick's wish to separate voice from body can be related both to his motivation for telling his story in writing and to the functions, for Fitzgerald, of employing the figure of Nick as his own voice, his primary narrating presence in this book.

**STORYTELLING VOICES**

From the start of the novel Nick is highly responsive to the sound of speaking voices. Particularly intrigued by Daisy's voice, he repeatedly renders it in writing. Gatsby's notorious statement about Daisy—"her voice is full of money" (120)—has long overshadowed Nick's descriptions of that voice. But Gatsby's famous definition is framed by Nick Carraway's comments:

"She's got an indiscreet voice," I remarked. "It's full of—" I hesitated.

"Her voice is full of money," [Gatsby] said suddenly. That was it. I'd never understood before. It was full of money—that was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the cymbals' song of it. . . . High in a white palace the king's daughter, the golden girl. . . .

(120)

If Gatsby says tersely that Daisy's "voice is full of money," Nick, for his part, elaborates the magical, musical, fairy-tale potential implicit in Gatsby's words. Here as elsewhere, the juxtaposition of Gatsby's language with Nick's exposes the discrepancy between material object and metaphoric resonance, the incommensurability between an object and the "capacity for wonder" (182) it elicits. That discrepancy or incommensurability is thematically central throughout the text. Daisy Buchanan of Louisville and East Egg cannot justify the devotion her image inspires in Gatsby, as the twentieth-century America of the novel fails to sustain the promise implicit in Fitzgerald's well-known image of the awestruck...
Dutch sailors who contemplate the “green breast of the new world” (182) for one “transitory, enchanted moment” (182).

The disjuncture between vehicle and tenor gains further resonance when considered in relation to the act of reading (and writing) itself. Fried characterizes “the ontological status of writing for the writer (and on somewhat different grounds the reader)” as a “hovering between animateness and inanimateness” (123). The reading process confronts every reader of fiction with the need to negotiate a movement from the concrete or visible material of the printed page to the imagined or invisible “represented space” of the fictional text. This movement may have seemed particularly treacherous in late nineteenth-, early twentieth-century America. Fitzgerald’s preoccupation with the hazards of the inky passage to and from imagined worlds is inscribed throughout his work.

“All good writing,” Fitzgerald says in a letter to his daughter, “is swimming underwater and holding your breath” (Letters 101). This image suggests, for one thing, smooth progression within a medium that allows the stages of the journey to “blend” into one another “indissolvably” (like “the thing you have to say” and the “way of saying it” in another of Fitzgerald’s formulations [Letters 11]). The motif of holding one’s breath recurs several times within Gatsby, each time associated with some near-sublime aspect of the telling-listening-writing-reading situation (14, 15, 18).

Yet the notion of writing (or reading) as cool, quiet, frictionless “flow” indicates only the tip of the iceberg (to adapt Hemingway’s famous metaphor). The underside may be glimpsed in my opening epigraph, Fitzgerald’s outburst to Perkins: “[I]nk . . . the ineffable destroyer of thought that fades an emotion into that slatternly thing, a written-down mental excretion” (Letters 148). To juxtapose this comment with Fitzgerald’s idea of writing as swimming underwater is to reveal two poles of the writing experience as Fitzgerald conceived it: timeless, seamless glide and time-bound struggle with resistant material; smooth, swimmable water and recalcitrant, even grossly repulsive ink. In the latter formulation, mental process is converted not only into a more opaque liquid than water, but into one that implicitly (as “excretion”) seeps out through the body rather than supporting it. Within Gatsby, related tensions inform the act of face-to-face narration as well. The occasional “magic” of the living human voice is itself threatened by disjunctures of all kinds.

Nick’s ambivalent responsiveness to Daisy’s voice exemplifies the problem of verbal exchange. On the one hand, Daisy’s voice is for Nick a “wild tonic in the rain” (86), a source of “warm human magic” (109), an elusive temptation, rivaled only by Gatsby’s smile. On the other hand, Nick’s relationship to Daisy’s voice is repeatedly subject to hesitation and doubt. The more completely Daisy’s voice enchants him, the more intense is his eventual disappointment and mistrust.
In addition, despite his emphasis on the “inexhaustible” promise and “deathless” magic (97) of Daisy’s voice, Nick’s descriptions repeatedly include not only a sharp sense of inevitable endings, but also a finely differentiated sense of process or cycle in which Daisy’s voice is seen to crystallize and fade, fade and reemerge. Nick’s depiction of this process is informed by a highly concrete sense of stages and transitions (beginnings, middles, and endings) such as mark not only lives and human relationships, but, still more palpably, works of fiction. Thus, as recurrent motif, Daisy’s voice is associated with the process of sustaining what Nick calls “attention . . . [and] belief” (18) through story telling, through the often spellbinding, sometimes highly crafted, and always relentlessly time-bound sequences of words, told and written, that join narrator and narratee in a dynamic and reciprocal relationship.13

To understand Nick’s ambivalent responses to Daisy’s voice is thus to clarify his relationship to narrative. Nick’s recurrent cycle of involvement with and recoil from Daisy’s voice provides a paradigm for the way readers and listeners become first implicated in, then detached from, a narrator’s story.

THE VICISSITUDES OF NARRATION: LISTENING AND READING

Whatever else Nick may be, he is (like Fitzgerald) a storyteller, more precisely the author of a book (2). Nick’s status as a writer is explicitly, if intermittently, noted: he rereads what he has written, tries to correct any misleading impressions he might give (56), and explains his rationale for “put[ting] . . . down” particular bits of information when he does (102). We can take Nick at his word then: he is a writer and, like all writers, he is implicitly writing to be read, dependent on a reader for coherence.14 Again like any writer, he is both hidden and represented by the story that he tells.

Nick’s implicit stake in the act of narration is not confined to the art of telling (or writing) however. Nick repeatedly listens to stories, stories told by Daisy, Gatsby, Jordan, Myrtle. Presented not merely as writer and storyteller, but also as a recipient of other people’s stories, the figure of Nick illuminates numerous facets of narration: its motivation, its impact, its rewards, and its dangers. Through metaphoric implication and analogy, the recurrent image of Nick as sometimes skeptical, but always intensely responsive, listener also provides a model for Fitzgerald’s own wished-for, potential, ideal reader.

NICK AND DAISY

For Nick, all narration involves a tension between open invitation and manipulated design. Nick’s rendering of Daisy’s voice epitomizes this tension. When Nick listens to Daisy, his reactions range from euphoric delight to the
feeling, on the contrary, of being cheated and betrayed. Nick’s first description of Daisy in East Egg emphasizes the attraction of “her low, thrilling voice”: “there was an excitement in her voice that men who had cared for her found difficult to forget; a singing compulsion, a whispered ‘Listen’” (9). Two vignettes in chapter 1 exemplify Nick’s own “compulsion” to “[l]isten” to Daisy while projecting a paradigmatic contrast between two kinds of listener: one expectant and satisfied, the other suspicious and disappointed.

Early in chapter 1, Daisy asks Nick if he would like her to “‘tell [him] a family secret,’” the story of the butler’s nose. Nick responds enthusiastically, and Daisy’s tale affords Nick a highly satisfactory experience. He is repaid for his attention and willing participation with a sense of involvement, gentle separation, and closure. As Daisy ends her story, Nick feels a sense of loss—of regret—yet not of a painful rending:

'The last sunshine fell with romantic affection upon her glowing face, her voice compelled me forward breathlessly as I listened—then the glow faded, each light deserting her with lingering regret, like children leaving a pleasant street at dusk. (14)

“Compelled . . . forward . . . as [he] listen[s],” Nick is “breathless.” Yet he is enchanted not primarily by the peculiar content of the tale; he is “compelled” by Daisy’s whispering voice and “glowing face” until, “like children leaving a pleasant street at dusk,” Daisy’s voice slowly fades, and Nick’s attention is gradually withdrawn.

These satisfying moments are soon followed, however, by a listening experience that stirs anger and conflict in Nick. Toward the end of the section, when Daisy recounts her own “turbulent emotions,” the process of telling culminates in a violent reaction on the part of the captivated listener:

The instant her voice broke off, ceasing to compel my attention, my belief, I felt the basic insincerity of what she had said. It made me uneasy, as though the whole evening had been a trick of some sort to exact a contributory emotion from me. I waited, and sure enough, in a moment she looked at me with an absolute smirk on her lovely face. . . . (18; my emphasis)

Nick’s feeling of being coerced, trapped, cheated into going along, staying longer, or giving more than he had intended is absolutely characteristic of him. In the context of the questions raised by telling, listening, and believing, however, the above passage points beyond Nick’s character to the problems of sustaining and ending a narrative.

When Nick renders the last moments of Daisy’s “confession,” he at once chronicles the breakdown of reciprocal attention and anticipates the final passage of Gatsby itself with its Dutch sailors, who, Nick assumes, “must have held [their] breath . . .” in the encounter with “the new world, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation [they] neither understood nor desired” (182; my empha-
ses). Like the Dutch sailors, Nick himself is repeatedly “breathless” when “compelled” into spellbound attention, not to “worlds,” but to “words.” Unlike the breathless sailors, however, Nick generally bridles at the sense of having been “compelled” into rapt admiration or trust.

A recurrent factor in Nick’s sense of coercion and betrayal by a speaker is the speaker’s physical presence. Here, it is Daisy’s smirk that remains when her voice “breaks off.” It is her voice and smile—not her words—that “compel [Nick’s] attention [and] . . . belief” in the first place. It is her “smirk” that convinces Nick he has been had. Nick’s sudden awareness of Daisy’s physical presence breaks the spell of her narrative, creating a sense of disjuncture. Such disjunctures—between words and the voice behind the words, the smile behind the voice—are repeatedly underscored in the course of Nick’s narration. If Daisy’s voice often promises human contact, even intimacy, it intermittently detaches itself from the body it seems to represent, leaving Daisy (like her listener) disoriented, isolated, and exposed. Gatsby strains unsuccessfully toward Daisy’s disembodied presence, “trying to touch what was no longer tangible, struggling . . . toward that lost voice across the room” (135) moments before the fatal car ride. At the New York Plaza, the motif of voice repeatedly dramatizes Daisy’s warring impulses: whether to contain, conceal, or reveal an inner state. Here Nick’s description of Daisy’s voice again anticipates the closing passage of the novel: “Her voice struggled on through the heat, beating against it, molding its senselessness into forms” (118-19). Daisy’s attempt to “mold . . . senselessness into forms” is a bid to use her voice as an effective shaping force. Failing to control the implications of her own words, however, Daisy betrays herself:


Their eyes met, and they stared . . . at each other. . . .

“You always look so cool,” she repeated. She had told him that she loved him, and Tom Buchanan saw. He was astounded. (119)

This is the exchange that impels Nick to call Daisy’s voice “indiscreet.” Daisy’s physical presence here fills the gaps between voice, words, and meaning, turning the words “you always look so cool” into a declaration of love.

In an early passage Nick feels “as if [Daisy’s] heart was trying to come out to you concealed in one of those breathless, thrilling words” (15). The suggestively vague concept of an “indiscreet” voice is partially concretized in this figure of “breathless . . . words” that at once conceal and reveal a heart trying to leave a body. Other characters find themselves similarly thwarted and disjointed in the effort to control words and voice, compelled by other aspects of their being to give themselves away. The novel suggests that we all struggle on, like Daisy’s voice, “through the heat, beating against it” in a desperate effort to make (or conceal) meanings. In this context, Nick’s famous last words suggest
the typical disjunctures of all communication: "we beat on . . . against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past" (182).

Nick and Gatsby

Throughout *Gatsby*, characters encounter the gaps between voice and body, intention and expression, expression and response. The frustration suggested by these encounters—ineffective human struggles "through the heat" or "against the current"—stand out sharply in relief against the imagery of primal unity or satisfaction that Nick associates with the culminating moments of Gatsby's dream. The well-known image of Gatsby waiting to "suck on the pap of life, gulp down the incomparable milk of wonder" (112) evokes a moment unusually free of the disjunctures that threaten all desire, all human interaction, and all efforts to make narrated meaning in the novel.

In the suspended moment during which Gatsby holds back "a moment longer" before kissing Daisy, he is engaged in the activity of "listening": "alone" with the vibrations of "the tuning fork that had been struck upon a star" (112). A similarly sublime (and silent) "enchanted moment" (182) is projected in the final passage of the novel, where the Dutch sailors, having come upon the "green breast of the new world," are held in the grip of "aesthetic contemplation." An obvious source for Fitzgerald's sailors is relevant here. The final image of Keats's "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" evokes the sudden, "wild surmise" of Cortez "and all his men/ . . . Silent, upon a peak in Darien." When one recalls in this context that Keats's speaker renders the sublime silence of Cortez's men for the explicit purpose of representing the effects of a literary experience—reading Homer—a set of analogies emerges.

I have linked the image of Gatsby (listening to "the tuning fork that had been struck upon a star") with Fitzgerald's sailors ("compelled into . . . aesthetic contemplation"). To consider Keats's sailors in this context is to uncover additional connections among Fitzgerald's sublime moments. While only Keats's image points directly to the experience of reading, I suggest that Fitzgerald's sailors, like the figure of Gatsby (and Nick), are informed by the same concern.

Nick Carraway experiences no moment comparable to Gatsby's (or the sailors') silent epiphany. Nick tends to be extremely cautious and skeptical about giving himself over to experience of any kind. Yet nothing elicits Nick's own "capacity for wonder" more consistently than Gatsby himself. Like Daisy, Gatsby repeatedly solicits (or "compels") Nick's "attention [and] . . . belief." Despite his resistance, it is as a listener to and observer of Gatsby that Nick eventually achieves his own most satisfying, even ecstatic moments, moments linked by association and analogy to the paradigmatic experience of a reader. We have noted that Nick is explicitly figured as a "reader" of Gatsby in Fitzgerald's original manuscript. He remains, metaphorically, the quintessential reader.
Nick is necessarily a listener to and observer of Gatsby before he is a narrator. Before he can tell Gatsby's story, Nick suspends disbelief and enters Gatsby's world, accepting his terms of discourse. Still, Nick's relationship to Gatsby (as to Daisy) is informed by a pattern of alternating faith and doubt. It is precisely by articulating both his faith and his doubt about Gatsby that Nick becomes a model for the reader in addition to being a writer and storyteller. For Nick, as for the reader of Fitzgerald's text, acceptance of Gatsby depends on the "transitory" condition of "enchantment" (182) or belief. Fiction itself, of course, is always something one simultaneously believes and disbelieves. That doubling, like the fluctuation of Nick's belief in Gatsby, is an indispensable component of all fiction reading.

In the course of narration, Nick presents himself not only as Gatsby's best believer, but also as one of Gatsby's biggest skeptics. While Nick's faith in Gatsby thus encourages the reader's own receptivity (Cf. Kenner 37; Michelson 570-71), Nick's reservations prevent the reader from going overboard, from accepting Gatsby's magic too naively, believing too completely in his smile. Like Nick's opening description of Daisy, his initial rendering of Gatsby suggests both the persuasiveness and the limits of Gatsby's appeal. Like Daisy's "thrilling voice" and charming murmur in chapter 1, Gatsby's smile implies intimacy and reciprocity. The smile disappears, however, just at the moment of its greatest promise. "[P]recisely at that point" it confronts Nick with a sense of strain, disjuncture, disbelief.

It was one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it.... It understood you just as far as you wanted to be understood, believed in you as you would like to believe in yourself, and assured you that it had precisely the impression of you that, at your best, you hoped to convey. Precisely at that point it vanished—and I was looking at an elegant young roughneck, a year or two over thirty, whose elaborate formality of speech just missed being absurd. (48)

When Gatsby's smile vanishes, doubt creeps in, subjecting Nick to a backlash of disappointment and anger. Whenever Nick doubts Gatsby, he feels exploited, taken for a ride, seduced by false pretenses. Nick's anger at Gatsby under these conditions recalls his earlier attraction to and recoil from Daisy's voice. With Gatsby, however, Nick's sense of betrayal, or doubt, is frequently offset by reaffirmations of faith. Where Gatsby is concerned, Nick's metaphoric elaborations and his narrative sequences repeatedly culminate in a burst of affirmation.

During Nick's first excursion with Gatsby, Gatsby decides to "tell [Nick] something about [his] life" (65). "'I don't want you to get a wrong idea of me from all those stories you've heard,'" Gatsby says (65). As Gatsby outlines his career in the war, in Europe, at Oxford, Nick listens with increasing skepticism. Indeed, it is only with "an effort" that Nick "manage[s] to restrain [his] incredulous laughter" when Gatsby explains how he
Nick is particularly disturbed by what he sees here as the failure of Gatsby’s rhetorical power. Gatsby’s “very phrases,” he complains, “were worn so threadbare that they evoked no image except that of a turbaned character ‘leaking sawdust at every pore as he pursued a tiger through the Bois de Boulogne” (66; my emphases). When Nick is seen as a figure for the reader, his criticism makes good sense. He has expected more of Gatsby, if not as truth teller, at least as storyteller.

In due course, Gatsby does fulfill Nick’s expectations. Nick’s most satisfying moments are precisely those in which he can affirm his “renewed faith” in Gatsby’s image despite his lingering doubts or “disapproval.” Nick’s moments of belief in Gatsby depend upon the rhythms of the story-telling process, shored up by the personal interaction between speaker and listener. As Daisy’s glowing face and telltale smirk alternately entice and disillusion Nick, so Gatsby’s physical presence (voice, nodding head, radiant smile) is indispensable to his narrative performance.17 Fittingly, Gatsby clinches his young rajah account with corroborating evidence (medals, photographs): two bits of material “proof” that deal a final blow to Nick’s defenses. In a sudden leap of faith (“then it was all true”), Nick caps his acceptance of Gatsby’s tale with his own fanciful contribution to the story: “I saw the skins of tigers flaming in his palace on the Grand Canal; I saw him opening a chest of rubies to ease, with their crimson-lighted depths, the gnawings of his broken heart” (67). Nick’s language here is at least as extravagant as Gatsby’s claims, which is perhaps as it should be, since Nick is participating in an account that has precious little to do with logic, consistency, or “proof.” As Weinstein puts it, the issue is one of “belief rather than truth” (24; cf. 31), and if Gatsby is the “consummate fiction maker” (38), Nick, by the same token, is the optimal, responsive, participating reader.18

Nick intermittently functions, then, both as a lightning rod for the reader’s disbelief and as a model for such reader response as Fitzgerald himself may have sought. If discord between text and reader is represented metaphorically in the scene of Daisy’s smirk, Gatsby’s physical presence, especially his smile, creates temporary harmony when words fail to persuade. Nick’s most gratifying moments as a listener are just those moments when Nick (as in the “young-rajah” episode) can be persuaded by Gatsby, without necessarily believing him. Under these conditions, Nick is free to believe and disbelieve at once, free (like a reader of fiction) to believe without regard for verisimilitude. In these paradoxical moments, Nick’s “attention” and “belief” are at once “compelled” and freely given.

Nick’s final face-to-face confirmation of Gatsby reproduces the delicate balance of resistance and receptivity indispensable to the reading process and characteristic of Nick’s relationship to Gatsby. As I have noted, Nick’s fluctu-
ating responses to Gatsby often culminate in a provisional assertion of love or loyalty. "They're a rotten crowd," Nick calls across the lawn at the moment of parting from Gatsby:

"You're worth the whole damn bunch put together."

I've always been glad I said that . . . because I disapproved of him from beginning to end. First he nodded politely, and then his face broke into that radiant and understanding smile, as if we'd been in ecstatic cahoots on that fact all the time. (154)

Like the "renewal of complete faith" in Gatsby that Nick experiences at the Plaza (131)," the sense here of Nick and Gatsby in "ecstatic cahoots" is striking, the more so because Nick's own responses so rarely suggest the "ecstatic." Nick's description of his final contact with Gatsby culminates in a sense of delight, reflected in Gatsby's familiar smile. Yet as we know, Gatsby's smile, buoyant source of "eternal reassurance" (48), tends to vanish in due course, giving rise to doubt in turn. Further consideration of this cycle can clarify Nick's wish to tell Gatsby's story in writing.

THE VICISSITUDES OF NARRATION: TELLING AND WRITING

If Nick experiences the pleasure of giving attention and approval only when he does not feel "compelled," coerced, it is not surprising that he validates Gatsby's story by telling it only after Gatsby's death. To Nick, sooner or later, presence always means coercion or deception: a smirk, a voice that "br[eaks] off," a smile that disappears.

Thus it is only after Gatsby's death that Nick feels fully committed to Gatsby—determined to invest himself—to "get somebody for him," to "reassure him" (165) as Gatsby's smile once reassured Nick. By telling Gatsby's story only after his death, Nick protects himself from all further demands or betrayals on Gatsby's part. By doing so in writing, Nick also protects himself from any awkward entanglements with the recipient of his tale. Alone with Gatsby's dead body Nick finds himself "on Gatsby's side, and . . . interested—interested, I mean, with that intense personal interest to which every one has some vague right at the end" (165). While Nick's story may be seen in this context as an effort to create "intense personal interest" on Gatsby's behalf, Nick's story telling also expresses considerable uncertainty about just whose tale this really is. If according to Nick "everyone has some vague right [to intense personal interest] at the end," we may well ask who bestows such interest on Nick Carraway himself. Surely the answer is no one, no one, that is, within the represented world of the text. Perhaps, then, Nick tells his story not just as a tribute to Gatsby, but also to create some "intense personal interest" on his own behalf: to "get someone" not only for Gatsby, but for himself as well. This hypothesis is supported.
by the uneasy balance sustained throughout the text between Nick's evocation of Gatsby and his own self-presentation in narrative.

A curious shift in focus toward the end of chapter 3 exemplifies the tenuous balance by virtue of which Nick's story telling (like Daisy's or Gatsby's) raises questions about the relationship between the words of a story and the articulating presence behind the words. After Nick's description of his first party at Gatsby's, a typographical break in the text is followed by some retrospective reflections on Nick's part:

Reading over what I have written so far, I see I have given the impression that the events of three nights several weeks apart were all that absorbed me. On the contrary, they were merely casual events in a crowded summer, and, until much later, they absorbed me infinitely less than my personal affairs. (56)

This assertion foregrounds the fact that Nick is writing a narrative, while shifting the focus of interest from "The Great Gatsby" to Nick himself. The figure of Nick takes shape here both as writer and as a man with his own "personal affairs." The rest of this chapter, indeed, stresses Nick's own activities, professional and personal. In the following chapter, Nick reappears in the (by now familiar) position of spellbound listener. Here, with Jordan Baker as storyteller, the pleasures and pitfalls of the "narrating instance" (Genette 212) gain heightened corporeal reality: Jordan's narration leads Nick to a rare moment of physical passion.

While chapter 4 begins with Gatsby's young-rajah presentation of himself, it ends with Jordan Baker's account of Daisy and Gatsby as she had glimpsed them before the war. Jordan's narrative is unique within the text not only because of its length (over four pages) but also because it is rendered entirely in Jordan's own words. Jordan ends her tale by linking Jay Gatsby of West Egg to the officer whom she once glimpsed with Daisy in Louisville. "'Gatsby bought that house so that Daisy would be just across the bay,"' Jordan explains.

Then it had not been merely the stars to which he had aspired on that June night [Nick comments]. He came alive to me, delivered suddenly from the womb of his purposeless splendor. (79)

Jordan's story brings Gatsby to life for Nick, giving "form" to "senselessness," bestowing or creating life, as direct personal contact has not. In addition, Nick's climactic sense of Gatsby "c[0]me alive" soon generates intimacy between Nick and Jordan:

I put my arm around Jordan's golden shoulder and ... [s]uddenly I wasn't thinking of Daisy and Gatsby any more, but of this clean, hard, limited person, who ... leaned back jauntily within the circle of my arm. ... Unlike Gatsby and Tom Buchanan, I had no girl whose disembodied face floated along the dark cornices and blinding signs, and so I drew up the girl beside me. ... Her wan, scornful mouth smiled, and so I drew her up again closer, this time to my face. (80-81)
Jordan as storyteller is here replaced by Jordan as love object. If her story in a sense engenders Gatsby for Nick, making him “come alive,” “delivered” from a “womb,” her story telling subsequently engenders—and eroticizes—the figure of Jordan herself. To put this differently, if at first it is Gatsby who “c[o]me[s] alive” for Nick through Jordan’s story telling, soon it is Jordan herself who comes alive for her listener.

This curious aftereffect of Jordan’s story—a kiss for the storyteller—raises more questions about the function of narration, its rewards and dangers, not only for Nick but perhaps for Fitzgerald himself. Jordan’s story not only “engenders” the figure of Gatsby, but generates new possibilities of contact as a result of the narrating situation, temporarily binding teller and listener in “ecstatic cahoots.” What, then, we might ask in this context, are the implications for the story told by Nick or (for that matter) the story told by Fitzgerald?

One difference between Jordan’s story and that of either Nick or Fitzgerald is precisely the difference between stories told and stories written: stories told by a voice emanating from a physical body, heard by an actual ear, and stories in which teller and listener are replaced by writer and reader, joined (but also separated) by the silent, printed page. Unlike Daisy’s, Gatsby’s, or Jordan’s story telling, where narration depends upon the physical proximity of teller and listener, Nick’s tale enables him to keep his distance even while soliciting “intense personal interest” and “getting someone” for himself. If, by writing his story for anonymous readers, Nick invites that “intense personal interest to which everyone has some vague right at the end,” he is at the same time effectively protected from the risk that Jordan’s story exposes her to.

By telling his story in writing and in retrospect, Nick can evoke Gatsby’s presence and affirm his devotion most strongly just when there is no longer anything to fear from direct personal contact. Nick’s written narrative thus enables him to finalize his separation not only from Gatsby, but from all the other participants in the summer’s experience. Nick, that is, creates distance through his story, distance that makes, among other things, for safety.

The figure of Myrtle Wilson provides a further comment on this aspect of storytelling, exemplifying some potential dangers of too little distance, too little separation, not only between teller and listener, but also between teller and tale. Nick first meets Myrtle when Tom “literally force[s him] from the car” of the train near Wilson’s garage (24). A sense of entrapment pervades Nick’s description of the evening he spends at Tom and Myrtle’s New York apartment (chapter 2). Characteristically, Nick feels the wish, but not the ability, to escape: “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” (36). Nick’s sense of entrapment reaches a climax when Myrtle forces him to be a captive audience: “[S]uddenly,” as Nick describes it, “her warm breath poured over me, the story of her first meeting with Tom” (36), and Nick is compelled to listen to Myrtle’s account of
sexual attraction and involvement. According to her story, Myrtle (like Nick) is forced off a train by Tom but, unlike Nick, Myrtle is ready to enjoy being coerced:

When we came into the station he was next to me, and his white shirt-front pressed against my arm. . . . I was so excited that when I got into a taxi with him I didn’t hardly know I wasn’t getting into a subway train. All I kept thinking about, over and over, was “You can’t live forever; you can’t live forever.”

(36)

Rendered still more passive than usual by the story Myrtle “pour[s] over [him],” Nick feels increasingly smothered and trapped. This is a far cry from Nick’s best moments as a narratee. Too much insistence or intrusive presence on the storyteller’s part only stimulates resistance in the listener.

The final image of Myrtle dramatizes the danger implicit for the teller in unmodulated, uncontrollable outpourings:

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 at the corners, as though she had choked a little in giving up the tremendous vitality she had stored so long.

(138)

The question of storing “vitality” repeatedly surfaces in the course of *The Great Gatsby*. “The colossal vitality of [Gatsby’s] illusion,” Nick says after the Gatsby-Daisy reunion, “had gone beyond her, beyond everything. He had thrown himself into it with a creative passion. . . . No amount of fire and freshness can challenge what a man will store up in his ghostly heart” (97). If Myrtle is literally disembodied and mutilated in “giving up the tremendous vitality she had stored so long,” “the colossal vitality of [Gatsby’s] illusion” is inevitably diminished in the process of being released from “the ghostly heart” where it has been “store[d] up” and decked out with “creative passion.” What, the novel seems to be asking, is a viable form in which to “store up” or transmit vitality: a heart, a body, a dream, a voice, a written story?

“Vitality” seems inevitably to be lost—or at least diminished—in the process of being conveyed, released, or delivered. When Daisy’s heart “tries to come out” of her body, “concealed in one of those breathless, thrilling words” (15), an “absolute smirk” is what remains of the attempt. Moreover, the transition can be treacherous: Myrtle’s vitality bursts forth in violence, destroying the body that stored it. Gatsby, for his part, “throw[s] himself into” his “colossal[ly] vital” illusion, trying to live his dream as “son of God” (word made flesh?). He too dies in violence.

If, as Weinstein puts it, Gatsby himself is “the consummate fiction maker” (38), he is so primarily by making fiction in and of himself. No wonder he does not survive the attempt. Nick, on the other hand, through the distancing power of written narrative, can limit the “creative passion” (97) to words and safely “repeat the past,” even while soliciting “intense personal interest” on his own behalf. What then of Fitzgerald? If, as I have suggested, Nick functions as a kind
of "fall guy," deflecting the reader's resistance to Gatsby, he also functions as a ubiquitous presence, obstructing the reader's access to any embodied image of the novelist, surrounding the author with even more distance than Nick can establish.

We have repeatedly noted Nick's sense of being undermined by the voices and faces that surround him. When Nick kisses Jordan after her story telling, he implies that he does so because he himself has "no girl whose disembodied face floated along the cornices and blinding signs" (81). In the absence of a "disembodied" image, Nick makes do with physical presence. Over-involvement, passivity, betrayal—these are only some of the consequences of proximity. Distance thus emerges as an indispensable condition not only for safety, but for mystery, beauty, and hope: "The city seen from the Queensboro Bridge is always the city seen for the first time, in its first wild promise of all the mystery and beauty in the world" (69). Like the green light at the end of Daisy's dock or "the green breast of the new world," the city depends for much of its "promise" on the right amount of distance, imaginative and literal. A delicate balance is required to create an "enchanted object." With too little distance, Daisy's green light is only a light bulb; seen from closer yet it is a blur. Too much distance, on the other hand, and the green light disappears. Perception of an object in the distance requires a certain imaginative adjustment not unlike the act of reading (or writing) itself. To turn letters into words and words into "meaning" rather than "senselessness" requires what Edith Wharton, in a related context, calls "an adjustment of the mental vision" (House of Mirth 140).

NARRATIVE TRANSACTIONS: READING AND WRITING

The act of reading—opening a book, perceiving words and sentences, turning pages, suspending "disbelief"—is an indispensable part of the process by which fiction manages to make any meanings at all.21 The Great Gatsby is structured to elicit in the reader, through the process of reading, a condition that approaches Nick's intermittent "state of enchantment" in relation to Gatsby, or Gatsby's in relation to Daisy. Of course such a state depends upon many transformations beyond the conversion of letters into words.

We recall the pattern of Nick's belief and disbelief in the presence of various storytellers. We might say that Nick's difficulties listening to stories by Daisy, Gatsby, Jordan, or Myrtle are analogous to a problem encountered by every reader (or writer) of fiction: the problem of sustaining the "transitory" state of "enchantment," of "attention" and "belief." For Nick to sustain his illusion as a listener requires his imaginative or emotional disengagement from the smirk that betrays the voice, the smile that eventually vanishes, the storyteller who becomes more tempting than the story, the coercive and vitiating presence of the "warm breath that pours the story" over the listener.
Similarly, the illusion of a reader depends upon that reader's temporary disengagement from his or her own immediate circumstances and requires the reader to "forget" the surrounding context and material conditions of reading, including the fact that writing is just black and white marks on a page. In addition, for Nick (or Fitzgerald) to sustain the fictional illusion, they must deflect attention from the presence in the story of, say, "appalling sentimentality," "threadbare" phrases, and "character[s] leaking sawdust": the very deficiencies that nearly subvert Gatsby's "young-rajah" account for Nick.

For a story to enlist the belief of its audience, the manipulations of plot and language—the presence of craft—must not be readily apparent. Fitzgerald, moreover, as a writer of fiction (unlike Nick) needs to deflect the reader's attention from any impulse that the novelist might have to elicit "personal interest" on his own behalf. Here again Nick serves the function of lightning rod, obscuring issues of prime concern to the real author of Gatsby: issues of distance, personal need, self-exposure, reader response.

To preserve its credibility, fiction in a sense must conform to Nick's definition of "personality" as "an unbroken series of successful gestures" (2). In order to "compel" a reader's "attention [and] . . . belief," the signs of welding, the craft, the "leaking sawdust" must not show. Most important perhaps is to avert the reader's perception that, as a result of the reading process itself, the border between fiction and "reality"—the end of the book—is steadily approaching. How establish a sense of "ecstatic cahoots" between reader and text? How induce a reader to keep on reading? How avoid Nick's all-too-frequent sense of violent betrayal at the end?

One way, perhaps, is to deflect attention from the inevitable and painful fact that like people, dreams, and love affairs, novels "can't live forever." When does the end of a novel begin to become palpable? Certainly once the midpoint is reached, the end is virtually in sight. As we have noted, Gatsby delays the first kiss he gives Daisy for as long as he can. He tries to prolong the vibrations of that "tuning fork . . . struck upon a star" because

[h]e 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. So he waited, listening for a moment longer to the tuning-fork that had been struck upon a star. Then he kissed her. At his lips' touch she blossomed for him like a flower and the incarnation was complete. (112)

"Unutterable visions" like "colossal vitality . . . store[d] up in a ghostly heart" seem unbounded by either time or space. But Myrtle knows "you can't live forever; you can't live forever"; and Gatsby knows that once the "unutterable" is given a local habitation or a name, the end is near. Once the "incarnation [is] complete," the dream embodied, mortality has set in.

No sooner is the climax of Gatsby's reunion with Daisy achieved in chapter 5—the very center of the text—than Nick produces his well-known formulation
about Gatsby’s diminished “count of enchanted objects.” Once Daisy is present, able to “put her arm through his,” “the colossal significance of [the green light has] . . . vanished forever.”

Compared to the great distance that had separated him from Daisy it had seemed very near to her, almost touching her. It had seemed as close as a star to a moon. Now it was again a green light on a dock. His count of enchanted objects had diminished by one. (94)

At the very moment of culmination (incarnation, embodiment), the dream begins to fade. But this is just the dynamic of reading (and writing) a novel as well. *Gatsby* is cleverly made to deflect our awareness that enchanted objects (like pages) are numbered, that the result of reaching the climactic midpoint of the narrative is an inevitable vision of the end. Once the center is reached the remaining words and pages, like Gatsby’s enchanted objects, inexorably diminish. It is only a question of time before the reader—like Gatsby—will be “watching over nothing” (146).

“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” (12). Thus Daisy, in one of her seemingly arbitrary statements. The “two changes of the year” are invoked again, however, in the incarnation-tuning fork passage itself (112). And I suggest that if “watching over nothing” is a perfect description not only of the reader’s state at the end of a novel, but of reading fiction altogether, then one of Fitzgerald’s prime aims in this text is to get the reader involved in “watch[ing] for the longest day of the year” and then missing it.

It is, in other words, the novelist’s imperative to throw sand in the reader’s eyes lest the “unbroken series of gestures” that Nick takes for “personality” become a broken series of voices, gestures, “character[s] leaking sawdust,” “threadbare” phrases, diminishing enchanted objects. Fitzgerald’s triumph, through Nick, through the devious time scheme, and the metaphoric panache is precisely to locate all these dangers or failures elsewhere, diverting our attention from the presence of any such flaws in his own text. As a maker of images, enchanted objects, “colossal . . . illusion[s],” Fitzgerald himself is the “prime fiction-maker” even more than Gatsby, with whom (of all the characters in the novel) Fitzgerald is all but directly identified. All but directly identified, for if embodiment, incarnation, and “illusion” are Fitzgerald’s “business” throughout the text, *dis*-embodiment is his own position within it (*Letters*).

In this sense Fitzgerald seems more identified with what Frank Norris called “the book, [the] manuscript, the page to page progress of the narrative” (92) than with any single character or action represented in the text. Like Nick, Fitzgerald makes his story out of words rather than (like Gatsby) out of himself. We have seen how this move ensures a measure of safety, denied, say, to Gatsby and Myrtle. Releasing vitality into a book, however, Fitzgerald (like any novelist) encounters other problems. “I often think writing is a sheer paring away of
oneself," he reflects in a letter, "leaving always something thinner, barer, more meager" (*Letters* 70). Working on his text and letting go of it at last in the public arena, Fitzgerald himself becomes a voice without a body.

We have consistently pointed to the contrast between the concrete physicality of persons (or texts) and their more mesmerizing or ethereal attributes. When Daisy's voice is represented as "a deathless song" (97), "glowing and singing" (15), it is the antithesis of a written text that inscribes the inevitability of its own demise precisely as the culminating middle point is reached. When words are sung—apprehended as "cymbal's song" or "siren's song" instead of printed and bound upon numbered pages—the middle is hard to find, as hard to take hold of as the longest day of the year. Fitzgerald's presence in his text (unlike its material center) is equally hard to pinpoint, as diffuse as the "ripple of [Daisy's] voice . . . in the rain" (86). Authorial presence is at once palpable and invisible like the "definite, unfamiliar, yet vaguely recognizable" look that occasionally sweeps across Gatsby's face (121, 135).

I have been suggesting that the language of *Gatsby* reflects the multiple tensions between words and meaning, voices and bodies, tellers and listeners, readers and books. Many of Fitzgerald's formulations about particular characters and events in *Gatsby* seem uncannily applicable to the process of reading (or writing) itself. "I think [Daisy's] voice held [Gatsby] . . . most," Nick says, "with its fluctuating feverish warmth, because it couldn't be overdreamed" (97). Like Nick's responsiveness to Gatsby's smile or Daisy's voice, the reading process too is characterized by fluctuations. As Daisy's voice attracts and repels Gatsby and Nick, Fitzgerald's text elicits varying responses from readers: faith and doubt; receptivity and resistance; now a sense of contact, now of separation.

Fluctuations are inevitable wherever stories are told, whether by speakers to listeners or through the printed word. Fitzgerald knew that a story is never (like the hypothetical one Nick reads in Fitzgerald's draft) "climaxes only." However, Fitzgerald's very consciousness of the need for pacing and the tenuousness of illusion in fiction often comes dangerously close to deflecting attention from the events and the characters in his own story, all but foregrounding instead the very concern with artifice that a writer must hide in order to maintain the fiction. Thus, such manifest themes as "time" and "illusion," so familiar to every reader of *Gatsby*, are relevant not only to Gatsby's dream of Daisy or to that of the Dutch sailors, but also to Fitzgerald's own fiction-making procedures.

Indeed, *Gatsby* seems pervaded by a tension between the wish to project an effective illusion (a fiction) and the wish to call attention not only to that illusion as such, but to the illusion-making process itself. The fictional illusion seems repeatedly threatened by Fitzgerald's fear of revealing (or his impulse to reveal) the working procedures of the novelist, what Edith Wharton called "the threads on the wrong side of the tapestry" (*Backward Glance* 197, 324).²⁷ Benjamin's figure of the potter's handprints takes on further resonance in this context. For Benjamin, the "handprints of the potter on the pot" epitomize the
culture of artisanship, of a craft tradition passed on from generation to generation. In a preindustrial culture, handprints on a clay vessel—traces of the making process—confirm the existence of that harmony between artisan and artifact that in Benjamin’s view fosters oral narration as well. However, whereas the potter’s handprints become for Benjamin a precious sign of continuity and community, a sign that human work has gone on, the modern novel—printed, advertised, marketed—is, on the contrary, a finished product at some distance from its author (cf. Borus 67). In A Backward Glance (1935) Wharton’s image of “the wrong side of the tapestry” (324) underscores not the continuity, but the division, between the making process and the finished work. Moreover, a glimpse of Wharton’s tapestry threads (unlike Benjamin’s handprints) disrupts the self-containment of the aesthetic object.

Unlike Benjamin’s pot—and like Wharton’s novel/tapestry—Gatsby comes perilously close to creating irreparable disjunctures by calling attention to itself as a “worked artifact.” Insofar as inadvertent (or self-conscious) illusion breaking occurs in a work of fiction, it undercuts the presumption of verisimilitude and exposes the way that the language of representation intermittently points to its own nature or its own methods of embodiment rather than to the represented world in the text. By the same token, self-reflexive elements generate flickering intimations of a novelist at work and foreground the existence of the writer.

We have seen how the “inexhaustible charm” (120) and “deathless song” (97) of Daisy’s voice often seems antithetical to anything either mortal or material. Yet Daisy’s voice is also seen as “indiscreet” and “full of money,” highly earthbound attributes. Both the “indiscretion” and the moneyed “jingle” of Daisy’s voice, moreover, point to additional aspects of novel writing. Fitzgerald certainly meant, so to speak, to fill his own “voice” with money and never more so than when working on Gatsby. In pursuing that goal, Fitzgerald drew upon his own personality and private life both to write his novels and to promote them. Yet Fitzgerald often hesitated and even recoiled from the “indiscretion” of self-revelation and self-exposure in fiction.

It may seem grossly reductive to link the figure of voice in Gatsby to the most material and personal details of authorship, but that is precisely the point. Fitzgerald himself was never sure whether he had transmogrified or merely incriminated himself in the texts that he offered to his “own personal public” (Letters 158). The character of Gatsby “started as one man I knew and then changed into myself,” he wrote; “the amalgam was never complete” (qtd. in Weinstein 29). The Great Gatsby reflects Fitzgerald’s sense of the fiction writer as both sublime alchemist and weary toiler, immortal artist and wage-earning scribbler, alternately transmuted and rudely exposed in the process of converting “a great dream” (Letters 32) into publicly accessible words “excreted” onto a page.

I have suggested that Gatsby also reflects Fitzgerald’s uncertainty about the extent to which the time-bound process of “excretion”—the signs of a writer’s
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craft—are hidden or accessible within the finished narrative. As we have seen, these uncertainties generate recurrent motifs within the novel, creating a tension between absent and present narrators, embodied and disembodied voices, sustained (or sustaining) illusions and abruptly disjointed ones. If then, as Weinstein says, the “energy and power” of *The Great Gatsby* “mocks both closure and exposure” (38), it does so because Fitzgerald in this text so intensely imagines and implicitly intimates the dynamic processes of both.

**Notes**

1 For recent discussions of changes in the literary marketplace toward the turn of the century and thereafter, see Daniel Borus and Christopher Wilson.

2 Fitzgerald’s letters to his editor are full of advertising and marketing ideas intended to make his books more attractive to a reading public with rapidly shifting tastes and expectations (see *Letters* 157, 168, 169, 172, 184).

3 Bakhtin uses strikingly similar language to suggest that words are always permeated by a sense of other people’s being: “the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language . . . rather it exists in other people’s mouths [and] . . . contexts . . .: it is from there that one must . . . make [the word] one’s own” (294).

4 “I honestly believed that with no effort on my part I was a sort of magician with words,” he writes to Scottie in 1937 (*Letters* 16; Fitzgerald’s emphasis).

5 See Walter Ong on the difficulty of restoring the oral antecedents of language to a literate reading public. Ong suggests that the “pre-emptiveness of literacy” makes it virtually impossible for most readers to dissociate words from writing. See especially 13-15 and chapter 1.

6 Compare Michael Fried’s emphasis on “the role of . . . the writer as corporeal being . . . in the production of writing” (140).

7 At least since Lionel Trilling, Gatsby’s comment has been singled out as one of the few significant things he ever says in his “own voice” (112). Compare Arnold Weinstein’s discussion of Daisy’s voice (26-28).

8 Fried (esp. xiv, 100, 117-20), Walter Benn Michaels (esp. 3-28), and Mark Seltzer (esp. 3-21) have recently shown how late nineteenth-century American fiction is informed by uncertainties about the status of the material, particularly in relation to the idea of the self and the very possibility of representation. One aspect of this problem is realism’s underlying concern with the “materiality” or “physicality” of writing itself.

9 The bid for seamless unity implicit in Fitzgerald’s use of water imagery for the act of writing recurs. Compare his concern with stories that “flow . . . well in the reading” (*Letters* 93) and “sentences ‘that never leak’” (*Letters* 518).

10 Compare Bakhtin’s sustained emphasis on the novel as a genre dependent on “mute perception” (3) and his still greater emphasis on “voice” and even “sound” as a metaphor for what a writer writes (278).

11 In the pencil-draft of *Gatsby*, Nick “too h[0]ld[s] [his] breath” (like the Dutch sailors) while “brooding on the old unknown world” (qtd. in *Eble* 86).

12 See Weinstein on the analogy between voice and smile (29-30).
13 On the writer-reader relationship as dynamic and reciprocal see Wolfgang Iser (232, 274-75, 278-79) and Georges Poulet (47-49). Michael Steig provides a lucid rationale for the use of “a term like interaction or transaction” to describe the reading process (11-13).

14 As a fictional character, Nick is dependent on the reception of his story not only for coherence, but for existence: in more senses than one, he has no life apart from what he narrates.

15 Indeed, the imagery suggests a preverbal state of being.

16 Compare Weinstein’s link between “the power of belief” (36) and “the power of the dream or... of fiction” (30). Compare also Norman Holland on the state of “belief” and the reading process (75, 80-83, 103).

17 Early in this scene when Nick suspects Gatsby of “pulling [his] leg,” one “glance at [Gatsby], convince[s Nick] otherwise” (68). Soon Nick undergoes a further shift of mood from “incredulity to fascination.” This transition occurs when Gatsby “lifted up the words and nodded at them—with his smile” (66). Fascinated now, Nick is ready to believe what he hears.

18 Reciprocity is inherent in oral story telling for Benjamin (91-92). Compare Ong (59-60). Brooks emphasizes narrative as gift, with contributions to the story affirming that the gift has been received (“The Tale” 290-91).

19 The Plaza scene (129-30) reproduces the pattern where Nick, after much hesitation, embraces Gatsby’s version of himself. While Tom tries to expose Gatsby as a liar, the rest of the audience does not “mirror... his unbelief,” as he had hoped. Nick’s “renewal of complete faith,” rather than Tom’s “unbelief,” is “mirrored” by the scene. The exchange ends in a rousing victory for Gatsby’s version of himself (cf. Weinstein 33-37).

20 “I’m finishing my novel for myself...,” Fitzgerald writes Zelda in 1940. “It will be nothing like anything else as I’m digging it out of myself like uranium...” (Letters 131).

21 On the role of “disbelief” see Holland 80, 82-83. Reading theory has increasingly taken the material realities of reading into account. See Fish 74, 83, 85; cf. note 8 above. Fitzgerald’s letters display his own recurrent attention to such material features of his books as their type (Letters 143, 144), their binding (Letters 157, 188), jacket design (Letters 153, 168, 189), and so on. Many of his letters also foreground their own typographical state by explaining or apologizing for Fitzgerald’s use of a pencil, pen, or typewriter.

22 Fried would say “repress” (xiv). On related grounds Walter M. Kendrick stresses the need to “ignore” the fact that the realist text “is [made of] writing” in order for the reader to “look... through” the written page to the represented world (7).

23 Gertrude Stein’s formulation about sentences that “never leak” is worth recalling in this context. While Fitzgerald cites the phrase itself only in a late letter (Letters 518), he often mentions Stein during his work on Gatsby (Letters 165, 166, 169).

24 On the link between narration and death, especially the reader’s “resistance to the end,” see Brooks, Reading 23, 95, 103-04, 107-08. See also D. A. Miller 195-264.

25 Fitzgerald’s revisions reveal concern with the midpoint of the text (or its difficulties for him). Kenneth Eble notes variations in Fitzgerald’s revisions: “the beginning and end are comparatively clean, the middle most cluttered” (85). Compare Fitzgerald’s letters to Perkins regarding the middle of Gatsby (Letters 169, 170).

26 Compare Seltzer’s concept of “the realist tautology,” where the terminal point of realism is seen in a “minimalism that equates the consuming of paper and of the novel itself” (79) or where the realistic imperative of making things visible ends by “the making visible of writing itself” (111).
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27 Compare Amy Kaplan’s reading of this figure (100) as used by Wharton in an earlier form (*House of Mirth* 285) and Seltzer’s sense that, in realism, both “narration and characterization are everywhere threatened by their exposure as merely effects of certain practices of writing” (107).

28 The phrase is from Fried’s discussion of Thomas Eakins. Fried explores the tension between inviting a spectator into the represented space of the painting and, alternatively, drawing attention to the “worked artifact” as such (74).

Compare the tension in “realist [narrative] theory” between what Borus calls an “industrial and preindustrial conception” of the work of writing. “The industrial conception,” in Borus’s terms, “took as natural the existence of a commodity divorced from . . . human action. . . . The preindustrial or artisanal mode stressed the individual human touches necessary to demonstrating that work had gone on” (67; cf. chapter 4).

29 See Fitzgerald’s letter to Edmund Wilson quoted in Ernest H. Lockridge (105). Compare Fitzgerald’s letter to Thomas Boyd dated June 23, 1924 in Matthew J. Bruccoli and Margaret M. Duggan 143. On Fitzgerald’s finances prior to Gatsby, see Andrew Turnbull 141.

30 While Fitzgerald, as John O. McCormick puts it, was “a relentlessly autobiographical writer” (28), he often insisted on distinguishing between his characters’ experience and his own. We know of Fitzgerald’s resistance to having a figure that he felt resembled him on the cover of *Beautiful and the Damned* (Letters 153) and, in a letter to Scottie, of his disclaiming any connection between Zelda and a female protagonist she appeared to suggest (qtd. in Turnbull 131).

More than most narrative devices, a first-person narrator might seem to “embody” the novelist’s voice even while protecting it from being directly associated with the author. One can conceptualize the character of Nick without constructing an image of Fitzgerald himself. It is largely for this reason that the figure of Nick is so often given the credit for making *Gatsby* the most aesthetically “realized” of Fitzgerald’s works. Such praise suggests that in his other novels Fitzgerald himself is too thinly veiled, too obtrusively “present” in the text.

Works Cited


