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FIRST DRAFT
SENT FOR APPROVAL
OF CONCEPT

Marred by Obvious Suppressions

F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby is widely considered to be one of the most important novels written in the first half of the 20th century, and a work which most literary Americans are bound to come into contact with at some point during their education. The novel has a great deal to say about American culture in the 1920s, and, by extension, our own. The vast majority of readers find themselves disappointed in the manner by which Fitzgerald chooses to end his masterwork, though explanations for precisely why they feel this way are not always easy to elicit. It is common to hear condemnations of the species of vulture capitalism and crass materialism on easy display in the work, and there is certainly a great deal of truth to be found in the myriad Marxist critiques that have been penned over the years. Still, such evaluations seem somehow incapable of fully explaining the sense of disillusionment that one feels after learning of Gatsby's murder. One possible way of addressing this emotional confusion is to apply Jacques Derrida's analytical scheme to Fitzgerald's text. There are many possible avenues for this application - indeed, Derrida would say that there are an infinite variety of ways to deconstruct The Great Gatsby. By locating and then reversing the binary oppositions found between the characters of Jay Gatsby and Nick Carraway, we can see how it is not the former who is favored, but rather the narrator. Nick, after all, lives to tell the story, and in the process ultimately puts Gatsby himself under erasure. The disillusionment felt by the reader

Nice - I guess we could say that in addition to deconstruction,

finally becomes clear: it is the feeling of having been deceived by the narrator, the voice of god, the ^{or, word?} world we believed to have been immovably anchored.

According to Simon Glendinning, it is this quality of shaking the previously presumed-to-have-been-stable world which has caused such a furious reaction to Derrida's text. Some things, he says, are

things one thinks about [as] states of affairs in the world, states of affairs with respect to which one can feel very varied and sometimes violent emotions: happy, sad, angry, frightened, and so on. However, some matters for thinking are closer to home...they concern not the way the world one is in happens to be, but the way in which one understands one's own being-in-the-world. (9)

It was generally argued by analytical philosophers that his methods "massively violated the standards of rigour and clarity that academia should uphold, represent, and publicly honor" (10). Such was the resistance to his philosophy that when Cambridge University decided to give him the degree of doctor honoris causa, it provoked furious cries of "non placet" and plunged the entire affair into bitter controversy. "He was loved," writes Glendinning. "He was also reviled, hated, smeared" (7).

The reasons for this are complex, and far beyond the scope of any single paper or book. Some of the criticism lobbed at Derrida stemmed from misunderstandings of his text - which were easy to come by because Derrida wrote in a highly "vertiginous prose style, spinning itself out in multiple directions and at different speeds" in ways that challenge even the most generous and well-prepared readers ^{Glendinning} (8), and which at first glance (or second, or third, or twenty-seventh) appear to be sheer obscurantism. Philosophy is a discipline which has always prided itself on clarity, and Derrida was attempting to show that this clarity

was itself illusory. This was the root of the scholarly disapproval of his work: to a field comfortably ensconced within the stability of a logocentric universe, Derrida's text appeared to take the form of an incoming warhead, capable of leveling all certainty, destroying the history of a proud tradition.

In Critical Theory Today, Lois Tyson presents the reader with a highly comprehensible explanation of the deconstructionist's view of language. Taking ~~the~~ a look at the structuralist's conception of semiotics, she shows that language is too nebulous to fit easily into the "sign = signifier + signified" equation, that "any signifier can refer to any number of signifieds at any given moment" (244). Context usually helps us "to limit the range of possible signifieds for some signifiers," but "it simultaneously increases the range of possible signifieds for others" (244). Since no Platonic source for any object actually exists, the question then arises as to what we actually mean by a "signified"; deconstructionists point out that what we actually refer to is not a single object, but a long chain of additional signifiers.

This chain of signifiers is not a stable object, so language itself can never be stable. Instead, it is always fluctuating, one long, "never-ending deferral, or postponement, of meaning" (245). Meanings, therefore, are really only "mental traces left behind by the play of signifiers," and we are able to zero in on any specific meaning by contrasting the differences between objects (245). Derrida uses the neologism "différance" to describe this movement that produces the system of differences, a combination of the French words for "to defer" and "to differ." To Derrida, this is the only meaning that language can have (246).

The result of all of this is that there is no single meaning or conclusion that one can take for a text, that language itself

is totally ideological. One major implication of this is that one can remove consideration of the author and the reader from the equation when reading a work. The text becomes the authority. Indeed, Derrida believed that

all writing must be capable of functioning beyond the death of any (although of course not every) empirically determinable user in general. We can thus propose the following "law of writing": a mark that is not structurally readable - iterable - beyond the death of the empirically determinable producer and receiver would not be writing (Glendinning, 70).

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If writing can and must be able to do without the presence of the destined receiver, then the text is all there is, and the reader produces current subjective meaning from it during each iteration (when it is "played", in deconstructionist terminology).

Tyson notes that in order "to explore the specific ways in which our language determines our experience, Derrida borrowed and transformed structuralism's idea that we tend to conceptualize our experience in terms of polar opposites, called binary oppositions" (247). These binary oppositions are a direct result of logocentrism, and Derrida argues that one of these terms is inevitably placed higher in position than the other. This privileged orientation conceives of the second as a negation, complication, manifestation, or a disruption of the first. Reversing this hierarchy deconstructs the text, and gives the reader insight into the ideology which structured the original positioning.

This process is highly applicable to Fitzgerald's novel. Most readers enter into a narrated work by suspending disbelief towards the truthfulness of the chronicler; few are willing to immediately entertain the suspicion that the entire work in question is one gigantic fabrication. As a result, Nick Carraway is taken at his word, a position he sets out to bolster by pretending to be

scrupulously honest:

Everyone 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 (Fitzgerald, 64).

Nick seems a decent man, "inclined to reserve all judgements" (5). When he tells us that "Gatsby turned out all right at the end" (6), the reader takes him at his word and falls into a position of assuming that the protagonist of the story is Jay Gatsby. After all, the book has his name in the title in laudatory terms, and the story seems to center around his mysterious history, his palatial mansion, and, most importantly, his "green-lighted" dream. If one were to place these two characters in Derrida's logocentric prescriptive form, it would be expressed thusly: Gatsby/Carraway.

As one begins to delve into the text, however, one starts to notice that Nick is not as honest as he proclaims. Over dinner with Daisy, Jordan, and Tom, Nick is asked about a rumor that he had been engaged to a woman back in the midwest. He denies the story, calling it a "libel" (itself an error, as the correct term for a spoken slur is "slander"):

FWIW, I've long suspected Nick's account here. Usually it's unwed pregnancy that drives young men like Nick out of their

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 (24).

Even if one takes Carraway at his word, this still seems like a rather tactless way of discussing what was obviously a failed relationship. That he has fled to the east to distance himself from a potential marriage says a great many troubling things about his character, and about his view of love and women. That he has come east to escape from a woman when Gatsby has come to attain one is an obvious textual reference to the interplay

of power between the narrator and his creation.

This subject takes a decisive turn when Nick admits to the reader that he had "been writing letters once a week" to a "certain girl" back home and signing them "Love, Nick" (64). That he admits to this immediately after judging Jordan to be "incurable ~~and~~ dishonest" (63) (which in Nick's mind is somehow tied into the need to "satisfy the demands of her hard jaunty body") is important; that he does so also after admitting to beginning to like New York for its libertine sexual mores is insightful:

I began to like New York, the racy, adventurous feel of it at night and the satisfaction that the constant flicker of men and women and machines gives to the restless eye. I liked to walk up Fifth Avenue and pick out romantic women from the crowd and imagine that in a few minutes I was going to enter into their lives, and no one would ever know or disapprove. Sometimes, in my mind, I followed them to their apartments on the corners of hidden streets, and they turned and smiled back at me... (61, my emphasis)

The story regarding the woman back home would never have been proffered by Carraway had Daisy not asked for it; likewise, when Gatsby questions Nick about his experiences in World War I, he only responds with a very brief discussion of his time in Europe, saying merely that they "talked for a moment about some wet, grey little villages in France" (52). These biographical details were elicited only because other characters drew them out, which makes certain readers begin to wonder what other data is being hidden from view, what other realities are being "marred by obvious suppressions" (6). His seeming timidity at being in the limelight, his desire to keep the klieg lights of his narration focused on his wealthy and eccentric neighbor is another indication that there is some tension between the two.

It is a central feature of Nick's psychology that he can omit the truth without feeling that he is being dishonest; this

sort of amoral relativism allows him to actively participate in bringing Daisy and Gatsby together, and then to maintain his silence when Tom tells Wilson the lie that ultimately results in Gatsby's murder. This tactic seems to be one that Nick even uses to lie to himself. After having spent the day drinking with Tom, Myrtle, Catherine, and the McKees, Nick and Mr. McKee leave the chaos of the apartment and step to the elevator:

"Come to lunch some day," he suggested as we groaned down the elevator.

"Where?"

"Anywhere."

"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 (42).

Zero clarification is ever given for what appears to have been a homosexual liason between the two. Not only is Nick a dishonest narrator, he is inherently untrustworthy with his own understandings of why he came east in the first place, as we shall see.

Nick's perfidy is a lens through which we can begin to see a way of reversing the hierarchic positions in the Gatsby/Carraway relationship. If Nick is capable of lying to the reader, is anything he says true? By starting to see Nick as a story teller and not as an objective eyewitness, the tale changes drastically in nature, and the reader can see that it is actually Nick who has priority. It ~~his~~ his story, because he is the one who lives to tell it. Nothing turns out all right for Gatsby, and everything turns out all right for Nick. The reader cannot give Nick a pass on this, because he knows exactly what ^{he} is doing, being a literary man by his own admission:

I was a guide, a pathfinder, an original settler...There was so much to read, for one thing and so much fine health to be pulled down out of the young breath-giving air. I bought a dozen volumes on banking and credit and investment securities and they stood on my shelf in red and gold like new money...And I had the intention of reading many other books besides. I was rather literary in college - one year I wrote a series of very solemn and obvious editorials for the "Yale News" - and now I was going to bring back all such things into my life and become again that most limited of all specialists, the "well-rounded" man. This isn't just an epigram - life is much more successfully looked at from a single window, after all (8-9).

This "single window" is what he looks through as he begins to put Gatsby's character under erasure, rebuilding him as a tool of his own ideology. Although he later claims to have "disapproved of him from beginning to end" (162), and to see Gatsby as representative of "everything for which I have an unaffected scorn" (6), this damning judgment flies in the face of the positive portrayal he gave of his neighbor at the beginning of the book. There is clearly a difference in meaning at work here, and Derrida required one to focus on these moments in a text where a writer's language mis-speaks him, where intention is lost; these cracks, he believed, ultimately lead one to a fissure in the text which he called the "abyss." Tyson states that

by finding the binary oppositions at work in a cultural production (such as a novel, a film, a conversation, a classroom, or a courtroom trial), and by identifying which member of the opposition is privileged, one can discover something about the ideology promoted by that production.

In order to discover the limitations of the ideology that one thus has uncovered, Derrida observed, one must examine the ways in which the two members of the opposition are not completely opposite, the ways in which they overlap or share some things in common (247).

By recognizing that it is Nick who is truly favored, we see that the character known as Gatsby is merely the reinscribed trace

of the original memory of a character in Nick's mind, and we can begin to point out the ways in which the Carraway/Gatsby entities are not in total opposition. This is not so straightforward, as Nick seems motivated to destroy much of what inspired Gatsby. By showing us that Daisy was not worthy of Gatsby's dream, he pushes Gatsby into the abyss: "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...." (Fitzgerald, 187-188). Love itself is destroyed in the final scene between Nick and Jordan, as is the narrator's ability to claim the virtue of being honest:

"I thought you were rather an honest, straightforward person. I thought it was your secret pride."

"I'm thirty," I said. "I'm five years too old to lie to myself and call it honor."

Still, one commonality between the two is their pursuit of wealth. Though he claims to feel "scorn" for Gatsby, there is a not-so-subtle current of jealousy in Nick's attitude toward both Gatsby and the Buchanans. When inspecting the latter's estate, Nick finds it disconcerting that someone his age could own so much land. At multiple points in the story, Nick uses metaphors for capital wealth to describe natural objects: "The front window was broken by a line of French windows, glowing now with reflected gold" (11); "The rain was still falling, but the darkness had parted in the west, and there was a pink and golden billow of foamy clouds above the sea" (99). Nick himself refers to Daisy as "the King's daughter, the golden girl..." (127). When Nick attempts to describe Daisy's voice, Gatsby interrupts, saying that "Her voice is full of money" (127). Nick agrees:

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 cymbal's song of it....(127)

Wealth in this sense is a stand-in for the great American Dream, the "last and greatest of all human dreams" (189), and Nick's quest is actually seen to be very similar to ~~that of~~ Gatsby's. Though they both sought power and wealth as life's purpose, they wanted it for different reasons. Gatsby sought out a sort of immortality by reviving and freezing a moment from the past, and Nick seeks immortality in the future in the form of literary fame. Both end up pursuing their green lights, "the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us," and both end up "beat[ing] on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past" (189). Even though Nick claims to have "closed out [his] interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men" (7), it seems that it was his intention all along to immortalize the "riotous excursions into the human heart" (6) that he had experienced. This is yet another lie by Carraway, but it is perhaps the one that ultimately saves him from himself, at least a little.

There are massively important lessons to be found in this work, that makes it relevant to life in our day, which, too, is saturated with the values of a capitalism divorced from morality. No one gets out of this tale happy and intact: regardless of the motivations or ideologies of the characters, the quest for wealth reduces everything - dreams, people, love - to a market value. Liar though he is, Nick seems to be the only major character in the book to attempt some measure of self-awareness, but even he cannot see how his search for the American Dream has ruined him as a human being. "Human sympathy has its limits" (143), he states after watching the dream die on Gatsby's face. Perhaps

so. But until one learns to live for people instead of objects, one isn't really fit to speak of human sympathy in the first place.

Excellent paper, Thomas. I'm wondering if maybe the biggest omission or suppression of all in The Great Gatsby is Nick's choice to tell Gatsby's story rather than his own. Because of this choice, ~~we get~~ certain events that would seem crucial to all the changes N. went through that summer are merely glimpsed — his encounter with McKee, his relationship with Jordan, his possible trysts in the anonymity of the Big City, and maybe most important of all the failed relationships that drove him to NY in the 1st place. He clearly had ~~an~~ very eventful summer, yet the story he tells us is Gatsby's rather than his own. Is this because Gatsby's story is so intriguing, or is it a kind of evasion or suppression? Both Gatsby and Carraway seem to be masters of what today would be called "image management" (yet another way they're more similar than binary-opposed).

In your letter you asked about other accessible

⇒ recommend Stephen Bonneycastle's In Search of Authority — it has a good chapter on deconstruction, ~~it~~ but I'd recommend the whole book. It takes a very different approach than Tyson to literary theory generally and is quite readable and engaging, albeit not very systematic.

You've been an excellent student, Thomas, and I hope you've now graduated, and that you continue to find — or do you produce? — some sanity in the "nuthouse."

Works Cited

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- Glendinning, Simon. Derrida: A Very Short Introduction. New York:
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