

“ . . . IN ECSTATIC CAHOOTS ”: NICK ’S AUTHORIZING OF GATSBY

Winifred Farrant Bevilacqua  
*Università degli Studi di Torino*  
winifred.farrant@unito.it

After pointing out how, in *The Great Gatsby*, Nick presents three artistic visualizations of Jay Gatsby – as a young man from the provinces, as a would-be carnival king and as a romantic character (in the Bakhtinian sense) – I narrow my focus to the third of these visualizations. I argue that Bakhtin’s theories in ‘Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity’ (1924-1927) give us the concepts and patterns that best enable us to understand Nick’s strategies in the strand of his narrative that traces the process by which he achieves and gives form to his understanding of Gatsby’s inner self.

Keywords: Fitzgerald, F. Scott; *The Great Gatsby* (1925); Bakhtin, Mikhail; “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity” (1924-1927); novel

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“... EN EXTÁTICO ACUERDO”: GATSBY INVENTADO POR NICK

Tras señalar cómo, en *The Great Gatsby*, Nick presenta tres visualizaciones artísticas de Jay Gatsby – joven provinciano, aspirante a rey del carnaval, y personaje romántico (en el sentido de Bajtín) – me centro en la tercera de estas visualizaciones. Sostengo que las teorías de Bajtín en ‘Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity’ (1924-1927) nos marcan las pautas para comprender las estrategias de Nick en el hilo de su relato sobre el proceso conformador de su percepción de la personalidad más profunda de Gatsby.

Palabras clave: Fitzgerald, F. Scott; *The Great Gatsby* (1925); Bajtín, Mijail; “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity” (1924-1927); novela

And, since you know you cannot see yourself  
 So well as by reflection, I, your glass,  
 Will modestly discover to yourself  
 That of yourself which you yet know not of.

William Shakespeare *Julius Caesar* Act I, Scene ii

Many a man has cherished for years some vague shadow of an idea, too meaningless to be positively false; he has nevertheless, passionately loved it, has made it his companion by day and by night, and has given to it his strength and his life, leaving all other occupations for its sake, and in short has lived with it and for it, until it has become, as it were, flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone; and then he has waked up some morning to find it gone, clean vanished away like the beautiful Melusina of the fable, and the essence of his life gone with it. I have myself known such a man.

Charles S. Peirce, 'How to Make our Ideas Clear' (1878)

Right at the heart of his search for a deeper understanding of Gatsby, while Gatsby and Daisy are getting reunited in his bungalow, Nick steps outside and for half an hour stares at Gatsby's mansion "like Kant at his church steeple" (Fitzgerald 1992: 93).<sup>1</sup> With this reference, Fitzgerald figures Nick as a contemplating consciousness and situates his deepening search for an understanding of Gatsby's personality in a philosophical context. This context happens to be the same one that inspired Mikhail Bakhtin in 'Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity', which combines a phenomenology of the relationship between the self and the other with a study of the creative process. With a theoretical framework drawn from Bakhtin and focusing mainly on one strand of the narrative in *The Great Gatsby*, this essay aims to elucidate the *process* by which Nick achieves and gives form to his understanding of Gatsby's inner self.

Bakhtin's ideas derive from Kant's model of how the mind understands the world, especially his claim that the mind of the knower plays an active role in constituting the features of the objects before it. As Clark and Holquist explain, he also follows Kant in insisting on "the necessary interaction – the dialogue . . . between mind and world" and in arguing that "thought is a synthesis of two sources of knowledge, sensibility and understanding" (Clark and Holquist 1984: 58). Bakhtin makes clear that the author in question is not the author-as-person but the author/creator (a role assumed during aesthetic activity) or a character upon whom that authorial role has been self-reflexively

<sup>1</sup> Fitzgerald is referring to the anecdote about Kant's habit of meditating while gazing at the steeple of the Löbenicht Parish Church, first reported by Ehregott Andreas Christoph Wasianski in 1804. Besides clarifying the source of this anecdote, Horst Kruse proposes that Nick's thoughts about Gatsby's mansion in the scene where Kant is mentioned constitute "a deliberate discourse on Time and the inability of Man to escape its inexorable rule" (2003: 76) thus forming part of the novel's series of reflections on time.

conferred and that the hero is not simply the protagonist but an image of a personality seen as a totality.

In order to create this whole, the author must assume a standpoint that enables him to see what is inaccessible to the perception and consciousness of the hero from his standpoint within his own life. Both perspectives must be present, for together they form the architectonic structure of the text. Bakhtin's point of departure for his analysis is the fact that each of us occupies a unique place in being: an *I* cannot be where an *other* is or see itself as the other sees it. For a self, the space around it is a horizon seen from its personal point of observation and every element in these surroundings assumes a specific meaning determined by its own ends. From the perspective of the other, that self exists in an environment where it figures as one given element among others and can be seen as part of the whole. In terms of its existence in time, a self feels that it is constantly evolving as a result of new events, experiences or knowledge; it sees itself as always striving after an ideal which may someday be actualized in a particular object or situation. The other, instead, can see that self as limited in time, bound by a beginning and an end, whole and complete. Similarly, from the point of view of meaning, a self cannot perceive its own axiological boundaries precisely because it is so immersed in the flow of life with its objectives, imperatives and possibilities. Yet those boundaries can be traced by a special other who deliberately tries to discern and interpret the self's repeating rhythms of behavior. Therefore, from the position of outsideness, and relying on the spatial, temporal and semantic surplus of vision this position permits, the special other (other as author) can fashion various aspects of the self (self as hero) into a conceptual whole with a coherent meaning termed *finalization* or *consummation*. Subsequently, during the process of reading, as Brandist says in his remarks on authoring, "it is this aesthetic judgement that the reader as external spectator co-creates. The author and reader thereby adopt a position akin to Kant's theoretical reason, sitting in judgement" (2001: 216).

In *The Great Gatsby*, Nick responds valuationally to each of the other characters but, save for Gatsby, his responses are concerned with a few aspects of their personalities of particular interest to him. He ponders on Tom's reactionary ideas and infidelity, on Jordan's androgyny and presumed dishonesty, on Myrtle's vitality and doomed aspirations, on Wolfshiem's lawlessness and lack of loyalty to Gatsby. He would like to go beyond his contradictory impressions of Daisy as either unfortunately limited by her milieu or insincere and self-serving, yet he never quite resolves his ambivalence, so the initial reason for his impasse – "I had no sight into Daisy's heart" (1992: 10) – remains true at the end of the story. His reactions to Gatsby, instead, are intense and profound and he eventually seems to recognize that he possesses a many-chambered inner realm and that the core characteristic of his selfhood metamorphoses according to the room it inhabits. As a matter of fact, Nick devises at least three conceptualizations of Gatsby, each of which is developed in a different set of scenes characterized by a different relationship between author and hero.

In the section of 'Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity' devoted to 'The Whole of the Hero as a Whole of Meaning', Bakhtin describes the possible interrelationships of author and hero as they are manifested in confession, autobiography, biography, lyric,

as classical or romantic ‘character’, as type and in hagiography. He concludes his discussion by specifying that:

These forms do not coincide, of course, with the concrete forms of particular works; we have formulated them here as abstract-ideal forms or utmost limits toward which the concrete moments of a work tend. For it is difficult to find pure biography, pure lyric, pure character, and pure type. What we usually have is the union of several ideal forms, the action of several ultimate limits, with the predominance now of one, now of another. (Bakhtin 1990: 186)

Two of Bakhtin’s ideal forms coexist in Fitzgerald’s representation of the different ways Nick relates to Gatsby as author relates to hero. These are the biographical form and that of the romantic character. The biographical hero’s “value”, or life-organizing force, “is grounded in the will or drive to be a hero – to have significance in the world of others; in the will to be loved; and, finally, in the will to live life’s ‘fabular’ possibilities” (Bakhtin 1990: 155). What this hero strives for originates outside himself; he chooses it, assimilates it into his consciousness and attempts to mold his life in accordance with it. The author’s understanding of this hero is an extrapolation of what is inherent in his behavior and his externalized thoughts while his value-defining position is alongside the hero, either in conflict or in agreement.

This form is present in two versions. The variant Bakhtin terms *adventure/heroic* focuses on what Gatsby has lived through and what he has done, how he has attempted to become the hero of his own life by achieving fame and glory. This Gatsby is conceptualized as a “young man from the provinces” who loses sight of his ideals as he fights for a share in the privileges and power of a capitalist social world which refuses him (Trilling 1950; Chanda 1981). Nick traces his transformation from a provincial idealist into an egotistical predator in scenes which show him as a youngster planning to attain wealth and social status while adhering to small town notions of virtue and chivalry, as an ambitious youth under the tutelage of Dan Cody, who educates him in ruthlessness, and as an associate of Meyer Wolfsheimer, whose underworld activities help him amass the fortune needed to purchase his fabulous mansion. Clearly, his values are chosen from those proffered by his culture, namely the self-made man and the frontier hero as they exist on both sides of the moral-ethical divide, and he strives, to borrow Bakhtin’s phrase, “to grow in and for others, and not in and for [himself] . . . to assume a place in the proximate world of [his] . . . contemporaries” (Bakhtin 1990: 156).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This conceptualization of Gatsby, which I associate with the biographical hero, assumes centrality in Michael Holquist’s analysis of *The Great Gatsby* in the final chapter of his volume *Dialogism: Bakhtin and his World*. Grounding his discussion in Bakhtin’s views about how perception and language work, Holquist argues that Gatsby’s story “dramatizes the central role of stereotyping in formation of the individual subject on the one hand, and on the other, the role of stereotyping as a dynamic in social and historical formation. Gatsby is the story of his career; in it we can see how history uses stereotypes, the formulaic categories of what might be called a poetics of the social, to form the subject as a link in the discursive chain” (1990:175). He stresses how James Gatz consciously chooses to forge his new social identity as Jay Gatsby according to the American stereotype of the self-made man and he proposes that what Gatsby “seeks in particular is a biography that will be free of changes” (1990: 177-178).

In another set of scenes, Gatsby is conceptualized as the kind of hero in biography who engages in "playing with life as a 'fabular' value, freed of any answerability within the unique and unitary event of being" (Bakhtin 1990: 158). This value pervades the scenes in which Nick envisions him as a Trimalchio in West Egg who, like his predecessor in Petronius' *Satyricon*, is a *nouveau riche*, eager to emulate his social superiors and given to a conspicuous display of wealth (MacKendrick 1950). Seen in this guise, Gatsby carnivalizes reality in his magnificent parties, assumes masks which blur his identity, ardently desires and almost achieves a carnivalistic shift of position and destiny from lowly farm boy to a prince worthy of marrying "the king's daughter, the golden girl" (1992: 127). Here too, his desire to attain an absolute reversal of his fortunes is not determined by his innermost *I-for-myself* but by something in the world which he has allowed to possess him and which he pursues with amoral intelligence (Farrant Bevilacqua 2003/2004).

The other ideal form arising from Nick and Gatsby's author-hero relation is that of 'Romantic character'. In contrast to the biographical hero, this hero's life-organizing force is an intensely personal, interior truth which arises from his *I-for-myself* and is kept hidden from the world of others:

Acting from within himself in accordance with various purposes, the hero actualizes that which has validity from the standpoint of meaning and objects, and, in doing so, he actualizes, in reality, a certain idea, a certain necessary truth of his life, a certain archetype of himself, the design God has conceived for him. The result is that the course of his life, its various events and constituents, and often its objective surroundings as well are somewhat *symbolized*. . . and all of the moments that constitute his quest for meaning and value (he wants, he loves, he considers something to be true, etc.) find their transgredient determination as the symbolic stages of a single artistic course, the course of actualizing a certain idea. It is inevitable that lyrical moments occupy a prominent place in the Romantic hero . . . The attitude or position with respect to meaning that is deposited in the Romantic character has ceased to be authoritative and is only re-experienced, lyrically re-experienced. (Bakhtin 1990: 180)

The scenes relating this visualization are referred to in the prologue when Nick announces that one essential part of the story he is about to tell will trace the evolution of his stance toward Gatsby through various moments of authoring when he interpreted his "series of successful gestures" (1992: 6) and that he is now in a position to offer his finalized image. To accomplish the task of creating such an image an author must be animated by "aesthetic love" for, Bakhtin cautions, "[l]ovelessness, indifference will never be able to generate sufficient power to slow down and *linger intently* over an object, to hold and sculpt every detail and particular in it, however minute. Only love is capable of being aesthetically productive" (Bakhtin 1993: 64). As if presenting his credentials, Nick draws attention to his reflective nature and his tendency to reserve judgements which, he says, is a matter of infinite hope in the essential value of people and their experiences. He likewise anticipates that he will present himself as intensely engaged in aesthetic activity even though those moments, he subsequently explains, "were merely casual events in a crowded summer and, until much later, they absorbed me infinitely less than my personal affairs" (1992: 60-61). Also in the prologue, Nick's emphasis on qualities such as Gatsby's "heightened

sensitivity to the promises of life . . . extraordinary gift for hope . . . romantic readiness” (1992: 6) indicates that, in this conceptualization, his hero’s core characteristic is his sense of unlimited possibilities and that this self-conception functions independent of the finite reality of concrete experience. Finally, Nick is careful to differentiate his aesthetic understanding of Gatsby as having “turned out all right at the end” from his ethical evaluation of him as having “represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn” (1992:6), the evaluation that permeates his portraits of him as a predator and as a clown.

During Nick’s aesthetic activity, Gatsby is invariably figured as standing at a real or metaphorical threshold which marks his separation from a world beyond his immediate possession and simultaneously promises him a point of access to it so that he always seems suspended between an unsatisfactory past and the illusion of a desirable future and in communion with a secret longing for something that can never be achieved. This figuration combines the intense interiority Bakhtin and Fitzgerald emphasize in the Romantic hero with the threshold viewed as “a ‘point’ where crisis, radical change, an unexpected turn of fate takes place, where decisions are made, where the forbidden line is overstepped, where one is renewed or perishes” (Bakhtin 1984: 169).

In the course of his narration, Nick generally signals the start of his aesthetic reactions, opens a space in his narrative for his speculations and alerts the reader that he does not assume there is an absolute correspondence between his and Gatsby’s views with phrases like “I suppose he smiled” (106), “I gathered that he wanted” (117), “he had probably discovered” (106), “possibly it had occurred to him”(98) and “I have an idea that Gatsby himself didn’t believe” (1992: 169). His aesthetic reactions to his hero evolve in precisely the three phases of authoring. After mentally projecting himself into Gatsby in an attempt to see the world as he perceives it, he returns into himself and, resuming his authorial surplus of vision *vis-à-vis* his hero without forgetting his hero’s worldview, he ponders on some newly-discovered or newly-intuited feature of Gatsby’s inward realm of experience. Thanks to the process of identification and separation, he achieves the outsideness necessary to see and know “more not just in the same direction as the hero looks and sees, but also in a different direction which is in principle inaccessible to the hero” (Bakhtin 1990: 12). Next, he extracts what he imagines to be Gatsby’s abstract ideals from their material embodiment and interprets them by means of judgement and commentary that textually manifest his surplus of vision. These meditations are often cast in the form of a segmented sentence or paragraph in which what is expressed simply or objectively in the first instance is then reformulated lyrically.

From Bakhtin’s point of view, it is not usually easy for an author to initiate a productive aesthetic relationship with a hero because “[b]efore the countenance of the hero finally takes shape as a stable and necessary whole, the hero is going to exhibit a great many grimaces, random masks, wrong gestures, and unexpected actions, . . . through the chaos of which [the author] . . . is compelled to work his way in order to reach an authentic valuational attitude” (Bakhtin 1990: 6). When Nick first glimpses Gatsby, he is standing alone in the moonlight in front of the bay behind his mansion with his arms stretched out towards a distant green light. Gatsby seems so absorbed in

what he is doing that Nick turns away without disturbing him and when he looks back again, his mysterious neighbor has vanished. During their initial encounter at one of Gatsby's parties, Gatsby seems to actively elicit his interest with "one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it, that you may come across four or five times in life. It faced – or seemed to face – the whole external world for an instant, and then concentrated on *you* with an irresistible prejudice in your favor" (1992: 52). However, this flash of intimacy, which Nick experiences as a moment of communion with Gatsby above and beyond their present spatial and temporal situation, comes to an abrupt halt as the smile vanishes and Nick finds himself looking at a young rough-neck whose elaborate formality of speech was almost absurd.

His confusion is increased by the rumors about Gatsby whispered by the party guests, and by Jordan's lack of belief in Gatsby's self-description as an Oxford man. Nick is also perplexed by Gatsby's air of detachment from his immediate environment: he takes no active part in the merriment and at the end, oblivious to the cacophony of the departing guests, he stands in "complete isolation, . . . his hand up in a formal gesture of farewell" (1992: 60). Their first extended conversation, during their ride to New York City, opens with Gatsby blurting out "Look here, old sport . . . What's your opinion of me anyhow?" (1992: 69) – a question which seems to express a desire, perhaps a need, for Nick's active contemplation of his inner self. Without waiting for an answer, Gatsby launches into a fantastic personal history which he says is intended to counteract the rumors Nick has certainly been hearing but which actually constitutes a self-parody of his attempt to invent himself as a person of consequence. Obviously, as long as Nick's knowledge of Gatsby remains so partial and his ideas are in such a state of flux, he cannot begin to relate to him as author/creator developing a stable evaluative position, nor can Gatsby be more than a potential hero.

Only when Jordan reveals Gatsby's youthful romance with Daisy and his longing for a reunion, which he wishes to take place in Nick's bungalow, does Nick get beyond his impasse and find a tentative key into his enigmatic friend: "Then it had not been merely the stars to which he had aspired on that June night. He came alive to me, delivered suddenly from the womb of his purposeless splendor" (1992: 83). His field of vision expands, bringing into focus things that were not heretofore perceptible, enriching his view of Gatsby's environment, opening an avenue of approach to his consciousness, suggesting aspects to be considered in formulating ideas about his life-organizing force. Eventually, Gatsby begins to trust Nick and makes a few intimate disclosures which further facilitate his aesthetic activity.

To designate how a particular lived experience can be ordered in time through the gaze of an other, Bakhtin uses the term *rhythm*. Rhythm overcomes the boundaries between past, present and future, changing the future into the present or the past into the future. Most crucially, an inner situation that is rhythmicized is removed from the epistemologically and axiologically unbounded region of life as experienced by the hero and is consolidated aesthetically by the author with elements that are outside the range of the hero's consciousness. It retains a "gleam" of the meaning it had for the hero but becomes part of a whole which exists independently of that meaning (Bakhtin 1990: 116-18).

Observing Gatsby responding to Daisy's presence in his bungalow on the day of their reunion, Nick remarks on how he "literally glowed; without a word or gesture of exultation a new well-being radiated from him and filled the small room" (1992: 94). Watching him in his mansion re-evaluating his possessions and himself through her reactions, he notes how he "passed visibly through . . . embarrassment . . . unreasoning joy . . . wonder" until the climactic moment when, standing beside Daisy watching the evening sky from his bedroom window, he experienced the thrill of having his dream come true (1992: 94, 97). After vicariously participating in his hero's fluctuating emotions, Nick steps back and, while Gatsby is still immersed in this particular moment of the ongoing event of his being, he tries to perceive it as part of a whole which unites past, present and future in some pattern of overall development. As a future-oriented hero whose lived experience is an attitude assumed in relation to some object or goal, Gatsby merely tells Daisy that, except for the rain and mist, they would be able to see the green light that burns at the end of her dock; as an author viewing his hero as bound and determined, and organizing his experiences *rhythmically*, Nick adds: "possibly it had occurred to him that the colossal significance of that light had vanished forever" (1992: 98). Nick's conviction that Gatsby, after five years of never having had to measure his vision against reality, will inevitably feel a sense of loss as well as fulfillment, leads to his first portrait of his hero's inner countenance:

Almost five years! There must have been moments even that afternoon when Daisy tumbled short of his dreams—not through her own fault, but because of the colossal vitality of his illusion. It had gone beyond her, beyond everything. He had thrown himself into it with a creative passion, adding to it all the time, decking it out with every bright feather that drifted his way. No amount of fire and freshness can challenge what a man can store up in his ghostly heart. (1992: 101)

During his meditations on Gatsby's adolescence, Nick's relationship to his hero deepens into "sympathetic understanding" which "is not a mirroring, but a fundamentally and essentially new valuation, a utilization of my own architectonic position in being outside another's inner life. Sympathetic understanding recreates the whole inner person in aesthetically loving categories for a new existence in a new dimension of the world" (Bakhtin 1990: 103). As far as the reader can understand from Nick's summary of Gatsby's recollections, as a farm boy from South Dakota, he refused to settle for his obvious and immediate horizons and after a few weeks of college became a drifter along the shores of Lake Superior. Supplementing and interpreting these facts, Nick arrives at an idea of Gatsby's inner life at that time as so intense and self-absorbed, making the world pivot on his ego, that only verbs of passionate action and nouns denoting a fervid imagination can effectively depict it:

. . . his heart was in a constant, turbulent riot. The most grotesque and fantastic conceits haunted him in his bed at night. A universe of ineffable gaudiness spun itself out in his brain while the clock ticked on the wash-stand and the moon soaked with wet light his tangled clothes on the floor. Each night he added to the pattern of his fancies until drowsiness closed down upon some vivid scene with an oblivious embrace. (1992: 105)

Nick imagines Gatsby’s encounter with Cody as taking place on a borderline where space is bifurcated into here and there and time stands still: “To young Gatz resting his oars and looking up at the railed deck, that yacht represented all the beauty and glamour in the world”, the materialization of his universe of ineffable gaudiness (1992: 106). Then he elevates the change of name with which Jimmy Gatz celebrates his good fortune in meeting Cody to the status of a ritual of self-definition – “his Platonic conception of himself” (1992: 104) – and transforms his aspirations into pursuit of an ideal which transcends ordinary reality. Nick articulates this quest, as he sees it animating Gatsby’s soul, in his own elevated style and with allusions to myth and religion that are congenial to him.

Within himself, the hero lives in the open present, looking for meaning from an anticipated future and sometimes using the past to look forward. After the party Daisy attended but did not enjoy, Gatsby, looking around “as if the past were lurking here in the shadow of his house, just out of the reach of his hand”, discloses that his intentions regarding Daisy hinge on his determination to “repeat the past . . . to fix everything just the way it was before”. Intrigued by his desire to enter a realm where he can defy time, deny mutability, transform regret for what never could have been into determination to reinstate an idealized version of his past, Nick ceases to report his words and switches into a doubly-marked speculation – “I gathered that he wanted to recover something, some idea of himself perhaps, that had gone into loving Daisy” – then trails off in an ellipsis (1992: 116-17). Unwilling to accept either the finality of Daisy’s marriage or how the events of her life over the past five years have affected his fate, Gatsby expresses the self’s “insanity of faith and hope” that the meaning of his life has not yet been realized: “In the deepest part of myself, I live by eternal faith and hope in the constant possibility of the inner miracle of a new birth” (Bakhtin 1990: 128, 127).

At this point, their author-hero relationship changes into one in which Gatsby’s words, his feelings and desires, his very sense of himself as yet-to-be are encircled and enclosed by Nick’s consciousness. Nick’s authorial stance now involves not only spatial, temporal and axiological separateness but also the act of aesthetic consolidation whereby he encapsulates the quintessence of Gatsby’s existential experience. Hence the richness of his meditation on the kiss that sealed Gatsby’s relationship to Daisy. Building less on his few bits of information about the courtship than on his previous ideas about his hero, Nick envisions this as a moment of romantic ecstasy during which Gatsby projects on Daisy qualities more appropriate to his dream of transcendence than to her actuality. Nick sees this moment as Gatsby’s major crisis, the turning point which will determine his fate. Situated on the boundary between the ideal – “his unutterable visions” – and the material – “her perishable breath” – Gatsby hesitates for an instant and listens to “the tuning fork that had been struck upon a star”. Then he makes his choice and “at his lips’ touch she blossomed for him like a flower and the incarnation was complete” (1992: 117). In this act of consummation, Nick simultaneously anticipates “the inevitable nonrealization or failure of his [hero’s] entire life in respect to meaning” as he hoped to achieve it and seeks to vindicate his life with “forms of justification that he is in principle incapable of finding from his own place”. Gatsby’s “miracle” thus occurs, but beyond the bounds of his own world, in Nick’s outsidedness,

where Nick “gives birth to [his] soul on a new axiological plane of being” (Bakhtin 1990: 130, 129).

On the morning after Myrtle’s brutal death, Gatsby spoke at length about his feelings for Daisy during his courtship and after. From Nick’s report, it seems that Gatsby saw himself as an outsider longing to cross the material and social gulf – the “indiscernible barbed wire” – that divided him from Daisy’s world; determined to step over the forbidden line, he “took what he could get, ravenously and unscrupulously” (1992: 156). Unexpectedly, he found himself intensely in love and although the war separated them and she eventually married Tom, he never gave up on reclaiming her. For Nick, this backward glance balances not only the story told by Jordan which had led to his breakthrough regarding Gatsby but also his memory of Gatsby outside Daisy’s home the evening before “standing in the moonlight – watching over nothing” (1992: 153). Gatsby’s defeat prompts Nick to console him as an individual and to assert the value of his emotions and desires without endorsing all aspects of his vision and actions. Empathy followed by an act of authoring thus characterizes what turns out to be their last exchange of words, gestures and attitudes:

We shook hands and I started away. Just before I reached the hedge I remembered something and turned around.

“They’re a rotten crowd”, I shouted, across the lawn. “You’re worth the whole damn bunch put together”.

I’ve always been glad I said that. It was the only compliment I ever gave him, 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. (1992: 161, emphasis added)

Nick and Gatsby have had an extraordinary relationship going far beyond a simple encounter of two selves and reaching the sphere of aesthetic intersubjectivity. Nick has attempted to formulate a sense of Gatsby’s inner world while he, as indicated by his understanding smile, has welcomed Nick’s gaze, has assumed an unfinalized subject position with regards to his authorial consciousness and has seemingly accepted elements of his artistic completion.

Nick’s final act of authoring is an imagined reconstruction of the thoughts in Gatsby’s mind just moments before he is murdered. Relying wholly on his surplus of vision and on his memory of his previous interactions with his hero, he focuses on the disintegration of the idea which, he has come to believe, constituted the essence of Gatsby’s inner life. The sky toward which Gatsby had thought he could climb to “suck on the pap of life” (1992: 117) is now seen as distant and frightening. Daisy’s blossoming at his kiss has metamorphosed into a grotesque rose with meaningless beauty destined to wither. The moonlight so congenial to his fertile imagination has been overwhelmed by the pitiless glare of raw sunlight. His illusions about the unreality of reality, which had authorized him to clothe the world in his own ideas, have collapsed, leaving him with “a new world, material without being real” (1992: 169).

Having completed his aesthetic activity, an author relinquishes his creative role and his work becomes the object of his contemplation. When he speaks about the heroes he has endowed with the gift of aesthetic form,

he voices his present relationship to them as already created and determined: he conveys the impression they produce on him now as artistic images and gives utterance to the attitude he now maintains toward them as living, determinate persons from a social, moral, or other point of view; they have already become independent of him, and he himself has become independent of himself as their active creator, that is, has become a particular individual, critic, psychologist, or moralist. (Bakhtin 1990: 7)

On the evening before he returns to the Midwest, Nick meditates on some possible larger meanings of his finalized image of Gatsby. Thoughts of Gatsby and his dreams, as Nick has fashioned them into an image of his soul, get linked with thoughts about the dream that animated the imaginations of the first Dutch sailors on reaching America when, in Nick's speculation, "for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder" (1992: 189). Dreams, enchantment, wonder experienced for the last time – elements integral to his image of Gatsby – are extended to the sailors who, suspended between their aspirations and reality, imagined that the New World 'flowered' for them and held out the promise of regeneration. Considering Gatsby in connection with the fate of the American Dream, Nick next conflates his hero's disorientation and failure with the betrayal of the ideals that were to have shaped the Republic and to have accompanied the pioneers of the westward movement. Then, in his mind, Gatsby's pursuit of infinite possibilities and his desire to rescue something he deemed precious from the flow of time become emblems of universal longings, illusions and disappointments.

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Winifred Farrant Bevilacqua, who holds a Ph.D. from the University of Iowa and a D.Litt. from the Università degli Studi di Milano, is Associate Professor of American Literature at the Università degli Studi di Torino. She is the author of *Josephine Herbst* and of *Images of the Past: Essays on the American Novel* and the editor of *Fiction by American Women: Recent Views*. Her essays have appeared in *American Literature*, *Centennial Review*, *Revue Française d'Études Américaines*, *Journal of the Short Story in English*, *American Studies in Scandinavia*, *Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate*, *Op. Cit.: Uma Revista de Estudos Anglo-Americanos*, *RSA: Rivista di Studi Anglo-Americani* and *Books at Iowa*.

Address: Winifred Farrant Bevilacqua, Professore Associato di Lingua e Letteratura Anglo-Americana, Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia, Università degli Studi di Torino, Via Sant'Ottavio 20, 10124 Torino, Italia.  
Tel.: + 39 011 670 3704. Fax: + 39 011 670 3495.