BOATS AGAINST THE CURRENT

Nostalgia in Three Twentieth Century American Novels

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1. "Borne Back Ceaselessly into the Past," Introduction

Before embarking on this critical study, I'll confess that I wasn't aware of the more negative connotations of the word 'nostalgia' until I arrived at college and heard a professor say, in a critique of a student's writing, "You don't want it to be merely nostalgic." *Merely?* I was horrified. Since I was young, much of my aesthetic sensibility has been built upon a near-reverent belief in the power of nostalgia. I often listened with rapt attention to the longing in my father's voice as he talked about the Navy life he shared with my mother and their friends in the early 1970s. He told me about the excursions outside of their base in Pensacola, Florida—a town he always described to me as "a pit," yet with fondness in his voice—to concerts in Atlanta or New Orleans, carousing in the French Quarter, my mom's failed first garden, the pig she raised and had to have butchered because their friends kept greasing him up and chasing him.

Despite my pacifism, part of me longed to join up when I got old enough, though I knew that most of the time it had to be miserable. He would admit that boot camp was the worst experience of his life. New Orleans, most of all, became a Shangri La for me, a rumor-steeped place that was surely teeming with exotic and beautiful things.

I first traveled there at nineteen, and still remember the landscape in a way I'm sure is not quite accurate. I circumscribed the French Quarter for days. While I wandered, I fell in love with wrought-iron balconies and street corner jazz, and I avoided the places that were x-ed out on the map by the family friend with whom I stayed. And in the month after Katrina, I saw New Orleans again, inexorably altered. I was part of the first flush of Red Cross workers, power linemen and carpenters to re-open Bourbon Street. There were careening groups of us, near-strangers linking arms and swaying between bars, lamenting

the vacant and trash-strewn side streets. It was catharsis and homesickness, a strange debauchery in the disaster's aftermath that I still long for from this distance.

Instead of the Navy, I joined AmeriCorps, and found myself traveling in a van for ten months with ten other eighteen to twenty-four year olds, doing service projects around the Southeastern United States. Together we laid stone patios in the tradition of Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps, built houses with Habitat for Humanity in Alabama, and sang around the campfire as counselors at a camp for disabled children and adults in Tennessee. There are many wistful inaccuracies in my memory of that time as well, I am sure.

My nostalgia is even branded. My father's talk about the year he spent as an adolescent in Yonkers, New York, living on fried Cheerios and Coke, conjures up oversimplified images of better times on dusty stoops, Beatles haircuts and school dances.

I understand, from looking to nostalgia's synonyms—wistfulness, sentimentality, and (my favorite) homesickness—that it is dangerous literary territory. Sentimentality can certainly be an enemy to genuineness in storytelling. But when nostalgia is revealed or evident in a character, it can offer us something magical: a glimpse into that character's deepest wishes, hopes, and needs, into the limits of his own longing, and an understanding of the lens through which he sees his past.

Retrospective first-person storytelling is nostalgia's primary way into a story. The narrator can tell the story from a fixed point after its completion, reveal little about the present moment, and still satisfy the reader that the story's significance is linked to its being recalled from a distance. We, as readers, don't necessarily need (and sometimes

don't want) a summary of all the in-between time, or a direct link to be drawn between the "now," and the "then" of the story. For instance, we would never want *The Great Gatsby* to end with Nick proclaiming that he has become a writer, or perhaps a psychiatrist, because of his ordeal with Gatsby. That would put undue limits on everything we've just been told. It would cheapen the entire story. Additionally, the narrator need not be clear on the exact significance of the past events he's telling, but he does need to understand that they *are* significant, and that he is looking back, with some kind of longing, whether or not he knows what he longs for.

The intersection of a retrospective first-person telling and a nostalgic voice can have powerful results. Marilynne Robinson's narrator in *Housekeeping* may not have a "rose-colored" notion of the past, but she is certainly homesick. She longs for a home that she never fully possessed, not with her mother, her grandmother, or her aunt Sylvie. She longs for a home that was approximated most closely with her sister Lucille, before their paths diverged forever. The longing that Ruthie feels is at the very core of the novel's retrospective telling, and her memory of events is colored deeply by her longing.

In the closing lines of Michael Chabon's *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh,* the narrator, Art, states that nostalgia is ruinous, that it obliterates the past (297). This bold statement suggests that the entirety of the novel is somehow untrue, or remembered incorrectly. The statement is followed by the wonderful closing line, "and no doubt, as usual, I have exaggerated everything" (297). This further instructs the reader not to trust anything he has just absorbed. Yet, within that statement is the nonchalant confidence of someone who understands that you *did* and *do* believe him, and that the nostalgic tone to the story did not merely enhance the interest, but *was* the interest. There is an

expansiveness that prevails throughout Art's telling. Without Art's exaggerated longing, without his belief in the cinematic quality of his memory, there would be events, but no story.

F. Scott Fitzgerald's pivotal novel, *The Great Gatsby*, from which Chabon draws a great deal in *Pittsburgh*, has the strongest case for "ruinous nostalgia," that I've yet read. *Gatsby's* Nick Carraway looks back both fondly and darkly at his former self, revealing, in this retrospective telling, the way he despises the longing that still resides within him. In the famous last line of the novel, "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past" (Fitzgerald 115), the narrator conjures up a longing that causes him to look backward not often but *ceaselessly*. The reader understands that the events of the story still consume Nick. The power of the concluding sentence is compounded by the word "we," which draws the reader intimately in, forcing *us* to understand that we are all caught up in the past.

The power of the retrospective narrator is significant in all these works not because of any hard and fast truths the narrator has learned and is now imparting to the reader. That would feel like moralizing. In fact, the narrator is telling us the opposite in all of these examples; longing has marred Art's ability to look back through his grandiose visions and see anything clearly; Ruthie is forever linked to the bitter beauty of the place she left behind; and Nick is bound to look back and believe in that beautiful, glittering past, despite all the evidence that it was merely a mirage. The siren call to look backward, full of nostalgia and its bittersweet longing, has all these narrators in its grip, and has given them their stories.

2. "A Word is Elegy," Definitions

When I say nostalgia, specifically as it relates to twentieth century American novels, I think of longing, but not just longing: backward-looking longing that lacks an appropriate outlet or object. One synonymous phrase is "obliterative longing," for what we lack is lacked so utterly when it was never really there. Impoverished, wistful, complicated and simple at once, each character's nostalgia is unique. But it comes from a common desire for the past to have been just a little bit different, just a little better. There's a certain obliterative longing to the limits of the word "nostalgia" itself, as it seems to circumscribe but never quite get at the feeling it is intended to describe. Robert Hass's poem *Meditation at Lagunitas* comes to mind, where he writes, "a word is elegy to what it signifies" (4). Nostalgia's ability to limit a character's understanding of his past is not an act of negation. The concept's real power rests in what arises within the scope of limited memory, false memory, or failed memory. Nostalgia is a form of misdirection that creates compelling tension because it is always revealing something *other than* what it is pointing to. For one character I investigate, what arises is a cinematic and borrowed history. For another, what's revealed it is a lack so powerful that her invented memories become palpable and real. For the final character there emerges a sense of both the personal necessity and futility of looking backward at all.

Throughout this paper I will investigate these concepts, not to get at the root of what the word *nostalgia* means, but what the particular *longing* behind it means for literature. My intent is not to defend nostalgia through a semantic argument, or to suggest that nostalgia in literature can be "good." I simply wish to show that wistfulness, longing for a simplified version of past events, or romanticism in a character or in the tone of a

novel, does not necessarily create a limited, simplified or overly-romantic novel. In fact, the opposite can happen. A whole world can open up and begin to resonate, an expanse of desire, loss, and small disappointments rendered large. When a character's emotional limits are revealed through nostalgia, we, the readers, are offered a glimpse into that resonant expanse.

3. "The Huge Dirigible of August," Nostalgia as Expansiveness

In Michael Chabon's debut novel, the protagonist, Art Bechstein, is wracked with a nostalgia that resonates because of its particularity, because the beautiful fallacies of his misguided, misdirected longings are so aptly rendered. *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh* opens in a Pittsburgh hotel with Art Bechstein, the protagonist, having an obligatory lunch with his father, a modern day gangster who deals in vague business transactions.

> I was nervous and drank more than I ate; my father carefully dispatched his steak. Then he asked me what my plans were for the summer, and in the flush of some strong emotion or other I said, more or less: It's the beginning of the summer and I'm standing in the lobby of a thousand-story grand hotel, where a bank of elevators a mile long and an endless red row of monkey attendants in gold braid wait to carry me up, up, up through the suites of moguls, of spies, and of starlets, to rush me straight to the zeppelin mooring at the art deco summit, where they keep the huge dirigible of August tied up and bobbing in the high winds. On the way to the shining needle at the top I will wear a lot of neckties, I will buy five or six works of genius on 45 rpm, and perhaps too many times I will find myself looking at the snapped spine of a lemon wedge at the bottom of a drink. I said, "I anticipate a coming season of dilated time and of women all in disarray." (10)

There's a sense of a swell around the character, dream-objects swirling around him toward a fantastic crescendo. You know what he wants, and what he wants is a romantic fantasy he can't possibly have. This reminds me of something Rebecca McClanahan, author of *Word Painting, a Guide to Writing More Descriptively*, said in a lecture on the

same topic. She said that if a story or a novel is "in-scene" all the time, the reader will become claustrophobic. I took this to mean that the reader cannot exist in a story that hinges completely on the physical world of the character, experiencing reality right along with the character. A different kind of psychic space is required, a space for the character's longings and fears, his particular aesthetic. This can come in different ways, through straight description, or in paraphrased dialogue, as is the case in the passage above. The scene has expanded in both physical space and in imaginative possibility. The rising motion of the elevator and the fantastic notions of spies, starlets, and dressed-up monkey attendants all facilitate this expansiveness. Beyond giving the reader more room to breathe in the story of the novel, it offers the novel a greater scope. The range of possibilities in this passage opens up, rather than becoming limited by the particular details. Art mashes together "suits of moguls," "monkey attendants," an "art deco summit" and "works of genius on 45 rpm." This amalgamation of images creates a particularity, a unique aesthetic, while at the same time expanding the scope of possible worlds within the novel.

The fantastical summer that Art longs for is something he makes manifest through his perception of the somewhat ordinary events that soon engulf him. Art works at a drab discount bookstore, but he spends his nights and days off in bars or wandering Pittsburgh's streets with a crowd of new friends whom he finds captivating:

> The evening began, once again, with a vision through the big front windows of Boardwalk Books. About fifteen minutes before I expected Phlox, Arthur, Cleveland and Jane to come collect me, they went down the sidewalk past the shop, and there was one long moment in which I noted but did not recognize

> them. They were two and two. The pair of women came first, one strangely dressed, in pied clothes of three or four eras, talking and examining the wrist and bracelet of the other, who wore a candy-striped skirt and bright yellow sweater. In the wind, their hair trailed from their heads like short scarves, and their faces looked cynical and gay. The two men followed behind, one with a great black lion head and black boots, and the other in white Stan Smiths, looking flushed and wealthy and bathed in sunlight, and each holding his cigarette in a different fashion, the heavy man with negligent looseness, the thin man pointedly, wildly, as though the cigarette were a tool of speech. My God! I thought, in that spinning instant before they turned and waved to me. Who are those beautiful people? (Chabon 147-148)

In this passage, the store window serves as a movie screen projecting the expansive, fabulous image of everything Art longs for. The details serve to broaden the scope, the amalgamation of longings that become one thing through the sheer force of Art's will. He describes his friends not by name but by their dress, their gestures, the ways in which they differ but still somehow make one perfect whole. In this passage, his distance from them, his longing for them, and the actual connection he possesses to them but does not quite believe is his, are a microcosm of the whole narrative.

By making Art's longing, and the sentimental limitations underneath his longing overt, Chabon has not overplayed his hand. Chabon has created a character who is wracked with nostalgia for a reason. Only such a character could tell a story that hinges on the disappointments of his outsized dreams. Yet Art is also a character who doesn't understand his *actual* dreams, or their power to effect change in his life. That is the crux

of why nostalgia, as Art decides in the end, is so ruinous. It has no capacity to comprehend scale. The "greatness" Art seeks overshadows his actual experiences to the point that he is no longer able to detect the danger that his gangster father poses for his new friends.

Arthur Lecomte, one of the friends Art spies in the bookstore window, is the crisp, white-suited gentleman Art longs to be. He has impeccable manners and aspirations to work in international business. Cleveland Arning is Arthur's childhood best friend, a reckless alcoholic whose appeal comes mostly from the legends of his often-wild behavior that Art hears before ever meeting him. Cleveland ultimately destroys the careful separation Art has created from the shady life his father leads, and is the character who helps Art put a name to his longing for the grandiose. He does this in a drunken conversation the two characters have at the beachfront cabin of Cleveland's father. Cleveland begins,

> "Bigness is the goal of life, of evolution, of men and women. Look at the dinosaurs. They started out as newts, little newts. Everything's been getting bigger. Cultures, buildings, science…We used to have this thing, this image of ourselves—not ourselves, but, well, it was exactly like your thing with the hotel. …We had this vision—imagine your skyscraper hotel, only think of the whole city around it, think of a whole skyline like that, big and art deco, with searchlights, the beams of searchlights, cutting across the sky, all crazily, frantically. And then you see them. In the sweeping beams of the searchlights."
>
> "See what?"

> "Giant women! Gorgeous women, like Sophia Loren, Anita Ekberg, but the size of mountains, kicking over buildings, crushing cars under their manicured tremendous toes, with airplanes caught in their hair."
>
> "I see it," I said.
>
> "That was the manifestation of our will-to-bigness." There was a long silence. I heard the toilet flush inside the house. "You know, ah, Bechstein…"
>
> "Hmm?"
>
> "When do I get to meet your father?" (Chabon 130)

The clumsy syntax of "will-to-bigness" further underscores the impoverished nature of the characters' longing, their lack of scope or even proper terminology to name their deep desires. The desires themselves are impossible fantasies, but no less significant to the characters for being such.

The nature of Cleveland and Arthur's fantasy (Arthur being the other half of the 'we' implicated in Cleveland's story), adds another sort of expansiveness to the nostalgia inherent in the narration. It is cinematic, like Art's vision in the bookstore window, and it's large and impossible, like Art's grand hotel, but it's Cleveland and Arthur's bizarre vision, and therefore it is confirmation that this is a world in which the different characters possess a multitude of outsized longings. The fact that these images are borrowed further enhances the lack inherent in their longings. Fantasy is revered.

This passage ultimately makes the connection between the characters' fantasy worlds and the reality that Art is trying assiduously to hide from his friends. Cleveland sees an opportunity to advance himself in the racketeering business by meeting Art's legendary father. The irony, of course, is that Art's fantasy world, the grandiosity of it,

doesn't square with having a real-life gangster for a father. Art feels only shame for his father's business, while still wanting to preserve the relationship he has with him. The irony is deliberate. Chabon recognizes the nostalgia that many of us have for gangsters of another era, and the tradition of American cinema that has bred and reinforced the wistful inaccuracy in gangster portraits. Yet Art is sincere in his rejection of the actual world of gangsters that his father inhabits. Instead he longs for limitless summertime, for the fantastic evenings of too much to drink, for figures in window glass and late night conversations. Again, there's a different sense of scale. Giant women in searchlights roam in these young men's fancy, and yet, the real life gangsters hover at the edges of the story.

Though the circumstances of the "present" from which Art narrates his story are never made clear, the narration reveals the ongoing nature of Art's multitude of longings and disappointments. That this interplay between past and present—without any overt mention of the narrator's current circumstances—is possible provides further proof of the transformative power of nostalgia.

4. "Everything That Falls Upon the Eye is Apparition," Nostalgia as a Sorrowful Lens

It is impossible for me to revisit Marilynne Robinson's novel, *Housekeeping*, without getting lost in the language almost immediately. Robinson has the ability to meld the inner and outer world of her narrator, Ruth, in such a way that language becomes more than a vehicle for expression of action or even thought. Language seems to create the narrator's reality rather than describe it. And the language Ruth employs is a language of departure, of longing filled with regret.

In one powerful scene, Ruth and her sister Lucille go into the woods and inadvertently spend the night there:

> As we sometimes realized, we were now in Sylvie's dream with her. In all our truancies, perhaps we never came to a place where she had not been before us. So she needed no explanation for the things we could not explain. For example, once we spent the night in the woods. It was a Saturday, so we had worn our dungarees, and had carried our fishing poles and a creel that contained cookies and sandwiches as well as jackknives and worms. But we had not planned to stay the night, so we had no blankets. (Robinson 110-111)

Robinson could have created a scene in which the girls go into the woods, and the tension centers around the question of whether or not they will be forced to spend the night there. If she had made that choice, you could argue that the scene would have a stronger thread of tension. You would be pulled along by concern over Ruth and Lucille's welfare. In order to understand Robinson's choice to instead reveal everything that seems significant in the opening passage of the scene, I have to understand the scene's intent. The line

"perhaps we never came to a place where she had not been before us" suggests that what Ruth is describing is already an echo of experience, rather than experience itself. All retrospective first person narratives look backward, but Robinson's does so with a certain force. Robinson intends for the reader to understand that Ruth's experience of the night in the woods is ongoing. The sensory details are immediate, pulling us right back there with the child-Ruth while letting us also feel the narrator-Ruth's loss of childhood. Ruth continues,

> Lucille would tell this story differently. She would say I fell asleep, but I did not. I simply let the darkness in the sky become coextensive with the darkness in my skull and bowels and bones. Everything that falls upon the eye is apparition, a sheet dropped over the world's true workings. The nerves and the brain are tricked, and one is left with dreams that these specters loose their hands from ours and walk away, the curve of the back and the swing of the coat so familiar as to imply that they should be permanent fixtures in the world, when in fact nothing is more perishable. Say that my mother was as tall as a man, and that she sometimes set me on her shoulders, so that I could splash my hands in the cold leaves above our heads. (Robinson 116)

The idea that a dream or an experience is perishable further underscores the deep need inherent in Ruth's narrative. It is, at its heart, a need for truth that transcends a factual account of experience. This is the pulling back from a life of ordinary things, family dinners, dates, and school dances. As narrator, Ruth can only convey the memories she holds, altered and dream-like as they are.

This unspooling is nostalgic in the sense that it is memory warped by longings that are specific and necessary. Just as Art Bechstein needs his cinemascope version of events in order to counter his shame about his gangster father and his ambiguous ambitions for post-graduate life, this narrator needs not a wistful recreation of her youth, but a story that explains her gradual retraction from the typical life that her sister Lucille ultimately embraces.

In the girls' walk into the woods—which, as it comes to pass, is the last true moment of sisterhood between them—Robinson uses descriptive language to further emphasize the long and sorrowful separation that is Ruth's story:

> The sky was whited by a high, even, luminous film, and the trees had an evening darkness. The shore drifted in a long, slow curve, outward to a point, beyond which three steep islands of diminishing size continued the sweep of the land toward the depths of the lake, tentatively, like an ellipsis. (Robinson 113)

This description is striking not just in its beauty, but in the remarkable way that the language mirrors the subject. The ellipsis of the islands is felt throughout the girls' journey. There is a sense here of memory both clouded and pristine taking the place of a factual account of Ruth's childhood. Robinson is able to create a deeply sad sense of nostalgia through the limits of language and memory. In fact, the ellipsis—that simultaneous extension and diminishment of some muted reality beyond words—is felt throughout the childhood described in the novel and on into Sylvie and Ruth's final journey across the railroad bridge, their bodies hunched against the wind, forced to escape danger and face danger with deliberate slowness:

> Something happened, something so memorable that when I think back to the crossing of the bridge, one moment bulges like the belly of a lens and all the others are at the peripheries and diminished. Was it only that the wind rose suddenly, so that we had to cower and lean against it like blind women groping their way along a wall? or did we really hear some sound too loud to be heard, some word so true we did not understand it, but merely felt it pour through our nerves like darkness or water? (215)

Ruth's strongest memory of the night she departed the town in which she grew up is of something that may have been a sound, a word, or the wind. Yet, the circumambulation of this event doesn't make it vague to the reader. It becomes mysterious as well as palpable. There is a physicality to what might have been that is every bit as visceral and real as the "actual truth" of what happened. The strength of Ruth's longing creates the world of the novel, and nowhere is that more evident than in the passage above. Her nostalgia is not created through a *lack* of ability to conjure specific images of her childhood. Rather, she is flooded with images and sensations, none quite true or quite false. All that is available to make sense, to create a narrative, is Ruth's backward-looking longing, her homesickness, the inventive power of her own nostalgia.

Language, as Robinson shows, has the distinct and remarkable ability to reach toward the sorrow of its own limitations. I am reminded again of Robert Hass's phrasing, "a word is elegy to what it signifies" (4). This taps into something essential in Robinson's work, the idea of what Ruth is unable to say. The longing that Ruth experiences often has the feeling of a lament. There is so much she is unable to say about the losses of her mother, her sister, and the loss of self that comes from being a drifter. But what she

expresses about what she is unable to express carries the reader forward, stretches that ellipsis of experience onward, until what is left is something that is palpable but in some ways indescribable.

5. "I See Now That This Has Been a Story of the West, After All, " Nostalgia and Retrospect

One of the most powerful things about a retrospective telling is the simple authority that comes from being able to say "this is my story and here is how it happened." The narrator, trustworthy or not, is the sole authority on the events he tells. In F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Nick Carraway's retrospective first-person narration, from the beginning of the novel, establishes both a present, from which the story is being told, and a past, which is the bulk of the book:

> When I came back from the East last autumn I felt that I wanted the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention for ever; I wanted no more riotous excursions with privileged glimpses into the human heart. Only Gatsby, the man who gives his name to this book, was exempt from my reaction—Gatsby, who represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn. (3)

Fitzgerald has demonstrated to the reader, early in the text, that Nick will be telling this story from sometime after its conclusion. "Last autumn" is a pointed clue that it happened not long ago. The reader is aware from the very beginning that Nick is about to tell him a story. This may seem obvious, but there's a distinction to be made between novels that begin with a story being told, and novels that begin with a narrator claiming that a story is about to be told. Nick's introduction allows the reader to immediately have a sense of faith and security that something significant is about to be imparted. The novel's beginning also makes it clear that the story is being written down.

Nick is clearly still grappling with the events of the particular story he is about to tell. Despite his proclamation that he *ought* to dislike Gatsby, it is clear that he does not,

or cannot. This unrest in the narrator's mind offers opportunities to enrich the story. If Nick was completely satisfied that he understood all the events he was about to tell, the narration might take on a moralistic quality, it might become preachy, or perhaps ironic.

Nick tells the tale of Jay Gatsby and the summer that Nick lived in West Egg, Long Island, as Gatsby's neighbor. He steps out of the past tense occasionally, in order to illuminate some aspect of his telling:

> 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…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…At the enchanted metropolitan twilight I felt a haunting loneliness sometimes, and felt it in others—poor young clerks who loitered in front of windows waiting until it was time for a solitary restaurant dinner—young clerks in the dusk, wasting the most poignant moments of night and life. (Fitzgerald 37)

In this break from the past of the story, Nick reveals that this is a book he is *still* writing. This enhances the idea that Nick is dealing with the events of the summer as he writes. By "correcting" the impression of the text as it stands, Nick is offering a glimpse into the days and nights that did consume him at the time, and he is also reinforcing the story by allowing that it was, at the time, not a story but a series of isolated events that took on storyhood later. This pulls the reader in further, as he believes that there is something to be gleaned by these "three nights several weeks apart." It also reinforces the casual

demeanor with which Nick carries himself at the dinner of Tom and Daisy, the day he spends in New York with Tom and his mistress Myrtle, and the first party that Nick attends at Gatsby's mansion.

In the second half of the passage, as Nick reflects on his time in between these three events, working as a clerk in New York and having lonely dinners in the city, the narration takes on a nostalgic tone. Despite the fact that Nick is describing the loneliness of those nights, there is a clear fondness as well, for the "racy, adventurous feel of the night." The fact that the wonder is tinged with regret only enhances the power of retrospect in this scene and in the novel as a whole. Nick is offering a look at what he has left behind, and there is a sense that, despite the loneliness, this was a whole world, something singular that Nick will never again attain.

Late in the novel, referring to the day that Nick discovers Gatsby's body in the pool, he states, "After two years I remember the rest of that day, and that night and the next day…" (Fitzgerald 103) Near the beginning he referenced "last autumn", and now it has been two years. The clues indicate that it's taken him over a year to write the story down. The reader now has another arc, the time in which Nick has spent writing down the story of the summer he knew Gatsby. This not only cements the feeling of a real, living world, from which Nick is reflecting on these events, but it gives the novel an echoing feeling of distance, of returning again and again to the remnants of the past which haunt the narrator.

Near the close of the novel, Nick's nostalgia swells to a crescendo, as he writes about the way he remembers the Midwest of his youth, through the bustle of train stations as he returned from prep school and college:

> That's my Middle West – not the wheat or the prairies or the lost Swede towns, but the thrilling returning trains of my youth, and the street lamps and sleigh bells in the frosty dark and the shadows of holly wreaths thrown by lighted windows on the snow. I am part of that, a little solemn with the feel of those long winters, a little complacent from growing up in the Carraway house in a city where dwellings are still called through decades by a family's name. I see now that this has been a story of the West, after all – Tom and Gatsby, Daisy and Jordan and I were all Westerners, and perhaps we possessed some deficiency in common which made us subtly unadaptable to Eastern life. (Fitzgerald 112)

Again Nick is attempting to sort out the events of the summer, of Gatsby's demise and Daisy and Tom's flight from New York, and though he is coming closer to an understanding of what happened, it is clear that he needed to write this book to come to this understanding. From early on, we the readers are aware that Nick is documenting in writing the story of his summer in West Egg, and that what we read is the document itself. Yet Nick's character is never established as a writer. That, I believe, adds validity to the story. In fact, the details of Nick's life when he returns to the West are quite vague. Nick writes down Gatsby's story, not because of any artistic aspirations or to create an historical document, but because he *has to*, because it is simply the story that he needs to tell.

6. "The Ruinous Work of Nostalgia," Conclusion

Each of the novels I've explored finally looks to the present, and in so doing, declares the limitations of the narrator's memory, actions, and ability to describe what's transpired.

Nick Carraway's nostalgia is wrapped up with a longing that is genuine and ongoing, both expansive and impoverished in its impossibility to quell. *The Great Gatsby*'s last lines are evidence of that point:

> Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter – tomorrow we will run faster, stretch our arms farther… And one fine morning –
>
> So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past. (115)

Fitzgerald works these lines into a near crescendo of romantic longing until he comes to a full stop and illustrates the futility of the whole thing. Despite rowing against the current, Nick is unable to shake the pangs of past longing, past friendship, and past loss.

In *Housekeeping,* Robinson's narrator draws on the specter of the living, Ruth's lost sister Lucille, to show the limits of a narrator's retrospect:

> We are nowhere in Boston. However Lucille may look, she will not find us there, or any trace or sign. We pause nowhere in Boston, even to admire a store window, and the perimeters of our wandering are nowhere. No one watching this woman smear her initials in the steam on her water glass with her first finger, or slip cellophane packets of oyster crackers into her handbag for the seagulls, could know her thoughts are thronged by our absence, or know how she does not watch,

> does not listen, does not wait, does not hope, and always for me and Sylvie. (219)

These vivid, remarkable concluding lines become an incantatory negation. They are about—as nostalgia is—what is not. Not only do these lines describe what is no longer—the relationship between Ruth and Lucille—but also what never was. Despite all these attempts at negation, the narrator is ultimately making herself more substantial and real, as she imagines her sister tracing her finger down a perspiring water glass, as she hears the cellophane of an oyster cracker packet crinkle. What we do not and cannot have or see, we are forced to imagine. This is what Ruth is showing us, and that imagination, despite its negation of what is true or fact, has the power to amplify and expand backward-looking longing—which is ultimately nostalgia—exponentially outward. As Ruth says earlier in the novel, "when do our senses know a thing so utterly as when we lack it?" (152).

The concluding lines of Michael Chabon's *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh* allude quite pointedly to the closing lines of *The Great Gatsby*:

> When I remember that dizzy summer, that dull, stupid, lovely, dire summer, it seems that in those days I ate my lunches, smelled another's skin, noticed a shade of yellow, even simply sat, with greater lust and hopefulness—and that I lusted with greater faith, hoped with greater abandon. The people I loved were celebrities, surrounded by rumor and fanfare; the places I sat with them, movie lots and monuments. No doubt all of this is not true remembrance but the ruinous work of nostalgia, which obliterates the past, and no doubt, as usual, I have exaggerated everything. (297)

As Fitzgerald did with Nick's conclusion, Chabon's Art Bechstein creates the effect of a swell, a grandiose vision of the summer, before quashing it completely by simply calling it "the ruinous work of nostalgia" (297). Art argues that nostalgia really ought to negate what we've just read. Yet, it does the opposite. Without his nostalgia, his grand vision of celebrities and movie sets, there is no story.

I don't wish to merely point out the irony of a character suggesting that we should probably ignore everything he's told us through the entire novel. There's a deeper meaning to this negation. With our imaginations as our only tools, we often look back through rose-colored glasses, longing to see the beauty and completeness, the storyhood of the past. As writers, this is especially true. We are forced to fall back on our imperfect memories as imperfect people in imperfect situations.

I'm not suggesting that we use nostalgia because we don't have clearer memories. The present, more than "ruinous nostalgia," obliterates the past in every moment of our lives. The beauty and tragedy is that we cannot ever go backward. This is refuted by Gatsby himself, when speaking to Nick. "'Can't repeat the past?' he cried incredulously. 'Why of course you can!'" (70). Fitzgerald, in this way, puts the question at the forefront. Are we attempting to repeat or recreate the past, by remembering? Is anyone who tries to repeat the past a fool, or worse, doomed, as Gatsby was? Regardless of a lack of answers, we continually delve backward into our lives and the lives of our characters, heedless of the danger.

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