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NOSTALGIA

Coda

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In one of the most famous moments of literary nostalgia, Nick Carraway takes his last look at Jay Gatsby's house. Here is the entire last page of *The Great Gatsby*:

Most of the big shore places were closed now and there were hardly any lights except the shadowy, moving glow of a ferryboat across the Sound. And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; 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.

And as I sat there brooding on the old, unknown world, I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night.

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter—to-morrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther And one fine morning—

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.
(189)

I have to admit that I get a thrill from this, every time. It is nostalgic, we can all agree, and I don't think it is possible to get the aesthetic charge of these paragraphs without experiencing something very like nostalgia, without there being, for the reader, as there is for Carraway, a relation between being "borne . . . into the past" and being "compelled into an aesthetic contemplation." That combination produces the complex feeling we call nostalgia, even if what that feeling is, exactly, even after all these essays, is hard to say: to add another perspective, we might suggest that some kind of hormonal release is involved, something happening beneath the solar plexus, a catch in the breath, maybe. In the peculiarly stilted and yet evocative language of the social sciences, nostalgia has been called "depression-happiness," and at least one researcher claims it requires the release of acetylcholine, the neurotransmitter of the parasympathetic nervous system (Kemper). Whatever else nostalgia is, in other words, it is, like any affect, a bodily phenomenon that we are trained, culturally, to recognize when we feel it.

However, if anyone would ask, I would say that I, personally, am not nostalgic. I don't go to reunions, I don't listen to oldies stations, I don't pine in any way, shape, or form for yesteryear. Sure, once in a while a snatch of song can surprise me into a nostalgic sentiment, and, as I suggested with *Gatsby*, I appreciate it when someone constructs one for me. But when I read a novel the nostalgia is not mine—I prefer, to paraphrase Jesus and Karl Marx, to let my dead bury their own dead. In feeling what the text prompts me to feel I'm simply doing my job as a reader—in the case of Fitzgerald's ending, nostalgia. In doing so, I conclude the novel and finish putting together my sense of the narrator and the implied author I have been constructing. I have that final, retrospective moment of novel reading, that sense of an ending, without which a novel is at best dissatisfying. We might even say that the literary novel is, in fact, a nostalgic form, each novel creating a world that we live in and contemplate aesthetically, knowing that in the end it will be irrevocably past and gone. "Can't repeat the past?" *Gatsby* says to Carraway incredulously. "Why of course you can!" The novel, as its favorite tense, the preterite, suggests, enacts precisely such a repetition.

What these essays propose is that nostalgia is as central to other cultural forms as it is to the novel, and that to understand how and why nostalgia works requires attention to these forms and their contexts. The essays chart a variety of new ways to approach this corner of the "intimate public sphere," and they do so informed by the theories of nostalgia produced in the late 1980s and 1990s, but wary of them. As Sean Scanlan notes in his introduction, despite their heterogeneity of approaches, these essayists all seem to agree that the postmodern theories of nostalgia (Scanlan's instructive cartoon of them: "nostalgia was bad, bad, bad") unduly simplify its effects and claims on our attention. Instead, as in Marcos Piason Natali's essay, they turn the critique of nostalgia on itself, suggesting that nostalgia as critique necessarily depends on the very progressive beliefs such arguments identify as nostalgia's unconscious. Nostalgia is better considered, Amelia DeFalco writes, as a perceptual and representational strategy with variant cultural politics, one that can only be understood in relation to a text's other goals. As Jennifer Ladino announces, the time when nostalgia had the "dubious distinc

tion” of being one of theory’s most “pigeonholed concepts” is over. Like Ladino’s the essays by David Sigler, Maureen McKnight, and Natalie Friedman all show that nostalgia need not signify real longing for a real state of affairs, whether the days of 1970s fashion, American Slavery, or the Soviet Police. Nostalgia for pre-perestroika Russia can signal not a reactionary desire for the past but a coherent critique of the present and a call for a different future, for a future other than Americanization.

This, perhaps, explains part of the power of Fitzgerald’s complex image. In the middle of his evocation of a golden past is the “fresh, green breast of the new world,” as if the very desire nostalgia encodes is not one for the past at all, but for another beginning, a new world. The “capacity for wonder,” whatever else it is, insists on a future that neither the present nor the past can dictate. Nostalgia, we might even say, enables the future.

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