

The Restless Desert
A study of the theme of rootlessness
in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

Hilda Carey

聖心論文集 第九輯
1978年5月

The Restless Desert:
a study of the theme of rootlessness
in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

Hilda Carey

I. Introduction	II. The Major Symbols
III. Restlessness and Drift	IV. Machines and Motion
V. Nick	VI. Gatsby
	Bibliography

I: INTRODUCTION

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*¹⁾ long ago joined the ranks of literary works distinguished (or made notorious) by the fact that critical material on them takes up far more space than the books themselves. Yet it still elicits new insights and interpretations. It is the story of a Dakotan clam digger named James Gatz who dreamed himself into the glorious identity of Jay Gatsby, millionaire denizen of the sophisticated East Coast world whose capital was the wealthy resorts lining the Long Island shore. Although he loved, and thought he was loved by, Daisy Fay, who genuinely belonged to that world, his dream was shattered by the discovery that his dream world, represented by Tom Buchanan, Daisy's husband, would never extend him the privilege of membership. Shortly afterwards, his life was taken by a madman's bullet.

Richard Lehan claims that "the fiction of F. Scott Fitzgerald has received as much attention as that of any American novelist, with the exception perhaps of Melville, James, Hemingway and Faulkner,"²⁾ and *Gatsby* has received more of this attention than any

1) F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925, 1953. Later page references (given in parentheses after each quotation) will all be to this edition. Hereafter, the book will be referred to as *Gatsby*, the man as Gatsby.

2) Richard D. Lehan, *F. Scott Fitzgerald and the Craft of Fiction*, Southern Illinois University Press, 1966, p. xiii.

other of his works. In 1967, Jackson Bryer listed and annotated an impressive 87 book reviews, 117 articles, 63 books and book sections (English as well as American), 18 foreign books and articles and 30 additional contributions to the critical discussion of *Gatsby* alone.³⁾ This flood tide has not slackened in the ensuing nine years.

This orgy of analysis and criticism has spawned a bewildering number of interpretations. To mention only a few, *Gatsby* has been called a general critique of the American dream and the agrarian myth,⁴⁾ "a kind of tragic pastoral, with the East exemplifying urban sophistication and culture and corruption and the Middle West . . . the simple virtues,"⁵⁾ and "the archetypal representation of that conflict between illusion and reality that has tormented the American conscience since the early voyagers"⁶⁾; it dramatizes the continuing ambiguity between "the human faculty of wonder, on the one hand, and the power and beauty of things, on the other,"⁷⁾ and in it "the motive of an impossible dream of love, which riches cannot fulfill after the right moment has passed forever, finds its definitive conservation"⁸⁾; its theme is "the withering of the American dream"⁹⁾ to one writer and "atrophy; the wasting away of self as one grows into the world of sex and money and time"¹⁰⁾ to another. According to Fitzgerald, "the whole burden of this novel [is] the loss of those illusions that give such color to the world so that (sic) you don't care whether things are true or false so long as they partake of the magical glory."¹¹⁾

Amidst such a welter of authoritative—and conflicting—opinions, can there be anything else worth saying? Undoubtedly, because *Gatsby* is a symbol-laden work and symbols, like metaphors, can be extraordinarily prolific of meanings. "It is probably because [the novel's] symbols 'suggest' rather than mean," remarks James E. Miller, "that *The Great Gatsby* survives many readings and that with each reading it continues to 'sparkle with meaning.'"¹²⁾ Since it is the text that "sparkles," this study will concentrate primarily

- 3) Jackson R. Bryer, *The Critical Reputation of F. Scott Fitzgerald: a Bibliographical Study*, Archon Books, 1967.
- 4) David F. Trask, "A Note on Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*," *University of Kansas Review* XXXIII (Spring 1967), in Henry Dan Piper, *Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby: the Novel, the Critics, the Background*, New York, Charles Scribner's, 1970, p. 213.
- 5) Arthur Mizener, *The Far Side of Paradise: a Biography of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Riverside Press, 1951, p. 175.
- 6) K. G. W. Cross, *Scott Fitzgerald*, Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1964, p. 53.
- 7) John H. Raleigh, "F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*," *University of Kansas Review* 24 (Autumn 1957), in Arthur Mizener (ed.), *F. Scott Fitzgerald: a Collection of Critical Essays*, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1963, p. 99.
- 8) Sergio Perosa, *The Art of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1965, p. 60.
- 9) Marius Bewley, "Scott Fitzgerald's Criticism of America," *The Sewanee Review* LXII (Spring, 1954), p. 223.
- 10) Charles Thomas Samuels, "The Greatness of 'Gatsby,'" *The Massachusetts Review* VII (Autumn 1966), in Piper, p. 158.
- 11) From a letter to Ludlow Fowler, quoted in Mizener, *Far Side of Paradise*, p. 177.
- 12) James E. Miller, *F. Scott Fitzgerald: his Art and his Technique*, New York University Press, 1964, p. 125.

on the
of the

F. S.
Sure
seriou

In the
convinc
largely
metaph
of a dri
produce
deserted
in plott
at the cr
Ecklebur
trying to
tension b
and yet s
Nick Car
choice, ar
returning
by Lionel

The Grea

- 13) Adm
Gatsby
decran
Public
huma
It is v
after t
enthus
to Job
compl
has be
New Y
- 14) Jacks
York:
- 15) One no
sprang
(A. E.
pp. 40,

on the book itself, rather than on the voluminous criticism it has inspired.¹³ Bryer's study of that criticism concluded:

F. Scott Fitzgerald remains a writer who could benefit best right now from criticism *in vacuo*. Surely we know nearly enough about his life and times; we need now primarily to look long and seriously at his writings.¹⁴

In the course of a good deal of serious perusal of *Gatsby*, I have become increasingly convinced that a central implication of the work—perhaps a major theme—has been largely overlooked by critics, or, if noticed, dismissed as merely peripheral.¹⁵ This central metaphor is that of rootlessness, and the theme the aimlessness, frustration, and sterility of a drifting life. In criticizing the American dream, Fitzgerald focuses on the mobility-produced (and -producing) rootlessness of a society whose steadying traditions have been deserted. The book is full of motion and restlessness, of cars and trains and travelling, both in plotting and imagery. Two of its major symbols, the valley of ashes and the green light at the end of Daisy's dock, express the same mobility, while the third, the eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg, silently judge it. *Gatsby* himself, committed to an unsubstantial dream and trying to find a stable relationship with an essentially restless woman, is caught in the tension between restlessness and rootedness, becoming both pitiful and heroic, destroyed and yet somehow indestructible. The one stable and dynamic character is the narrator, Nick Carraway, a man rooted in tradition. He alone exercises responsibility and rational choice, and he alone is capable of breaking free from the clutch of the frenetic East and returning to his roots in the tradition-centered Middle West. This same rootedness is seen by Lionel Trilling as giving value, not to Nick alone, but to the novel as a whole.

The Great Gatsby . . . after a quarter-century is still as fresh as when it first appeared; it has even

13) Admittedly, much of the criticism is of dubious value, goading Kenneth Eble to grumble in defense of *Gatsby*, "No novel . . . can be held responsible for the speculations of graduate students mildly deranged during the writing of dissertations." (Kenneth Eble, *F. Scott Fitzgerald*, New York: Twayne Publishers, 1963, p. 88.) Does it really matter, for example, that the eyes of Dr. Eckleburg—like all human eyes—are shaped somewhat like East and West Egg—and all eggs—as one writer "discovered"? It is worth noting that Fitzgerald little respect for the critical opinions expressed in his day. Shortly after the publication of *Gatsby*, he complained to Edmund Wilson, "Of all the reviews, even the most enthusiastic, not one had the slightest idea what the book was about." A few months later, in a letter to John Peale Bishop, Fitzgerald paid him and the novelist Edith Wharton a less than enthusiastic compliment, asserting that their letters were "about the only criticism that the book has had which has been intelligible." (F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Letters of F. Scott Fitzgerald* (ed. J. Andrew Turnbull), New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963, pp. 342, 358.)

14) Jackson F. Bryer (ed.), *Sixteen Modern American Authors: a Survey of Research and Criticism*, rev. ed., New York: W. W. Norton, 1973, p. 304.

15) One notable exception is A. E. Dyson, who calls the characters "rootless," claims that their society sprang from the soil of "uprootedness," and considers *Gatsby* "the apotheosis of his rootless society." (A. E. Dyson, "The Great Gatsby: Thirty-Six Years After," *Modern Fiction Studies* VII (Spring 1961), pp. 40, 37, 42.)

gained in weight and relevance, which can be said of very few American books of its time. This, I think, is to be attributed to a courage which implies Fitzgerald's grasp—both in the sense of awareness and of appropriation—of the traditional resources available to him. Thus, *The Great Gatsby* has its interest as a record of contemporary manners, but this might have served only to date it, did not Fitzgerald take the given moment of history as something more than mere circumstance, did he not, in the manner of the great French novelists of the nineteenth century, seize the given moment as a moral fact.¹⁶⁾

Robert Sklar also sees Fitzgerald's rootedness in tradition as giving creativity and value to his fiction.

One of the major thrusts in the modern movement of the arts was the desire to regain a sense of connection with the past and the eternities; and Fitzgerald, whose religious and literary backgrounds particularly endowed him with a sense of time and the supernatural, whose intellectual energy was devoted to relating values and tradition in conflict, was as well prepared as any to participate creatively.

The past and the eternities, a sense of universal patterns in human behavior, appear from the start in Fitzgerald's fiction.¹⁷⁾

According to Sheilah Graham, who may have known him better than anyone else, Fitzgerald "liked to have . . . roots to offset the rootlessness he recognized as the affliction of post-World War I society."¹⁸⁾ *Gatsby*, set in the summer of 1922, less than four years after the close of that war, is a criticism of the same rootless society.

II: THE MAJOR SYMBOLS

The three major symbols of *Gatsby* are generally agreed to be the eyes of Dr. Eckleburg, the valley of ashes which those eyes watch balefully, and the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. The last stands for an instigator of motion, the signal that starts hundreds of wheels moving mechanically along a never-ending road; the second represents listless drifting; and the first, a judgment on that drifting. Thus, the major symbols express the theme of judgment upon a restless, unrooted generation. That generation lived in

16) Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*, Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1957, pp. 243-244.

17) Robert Sklar, *F. Scott Fitzgerald: the Last Lagoon*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1967, p. 169.

18) Sheilah Graham, *The Real F. Scott Fitzgerald: Thirty-Five Years Later*, New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1976, p. 36.

1) Another important symbol takes up the related themes of purposeless motion and the abdication of responsibility. It is a scene from Nick's "more fantastic dreams:"

I see it as a night scene from El Greco: a hundred houses, at once conventional and grotesque, crouching under a sullen, overhanging sky and a lustreless moon. In the foreground four solemn men in dress suits are walking along the sidewalk with a stretcher on which lies a drunken woman in a white evening dress. Her hand, which dangles over the side, sparkles cold with jewels. Gravely the men turn in at a house—the wrong house. But no one knows the woman's name, and no one cares. (178)

a valley of
gardens;
a transe
powdery
creak, an
stir up a

This infect
defaced th
gurative, T
and an un
York's Cit

It may be
memorabl
dump tha
become th
and the m
Gatsby.³⁾

Eliot's "W
spired a ger

Faulkner (
Rises) all c
influential

2) Edwin F
3) Roger Se
4) William
Among t
most use
gerald's
Gatsby. (5
Trimalchi
169, 177
the astron
saw the
the ma
Fitzgerald
to watch
Later, in

a valley of ashes—a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke, and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of ash-gray men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air. Occasionally a line of gray cars crawls along an invisible track, gives out a ghastly creak, and comes to rest, and immediately the ash-gray men swarm up with leaden spades and stir up an impenetrable cloud, which screens their obscure operations from your sight.²⁸⁾

This infertile landscape has two obvious sources: on the literal level, the cinder dump which defaced the bank of New York's Flushing River in the nineteen-twenties and, on the figurative, T.S. Eliot's poem "The Waste Land," published in 1922 and "both a conscious and an unconscious correlative for Fitzgerald."²⁹⁾ Roger Starr, executive director of New York's Citizens Housing and Planning Council, wrote in 1973:

It may be a source of melancholy pride—or of shame—to New Yorkers that one of the more memorable novelistic uses of scenery to elucidate the human condition involves the vast cinder dump that had accumulated along the west bank of the Flushing River, beneath what has now become the Mets' Shea Stadium and Flushing Meadow Park. The novelist was F. Scott Fitzgerald, and the metaphor he constructed on the cinder dump comprises a central element in *The Great Gatsby*.³⁰⁾

Eliot's "Waste Land," depicting an "Unreal City" on the other side of the Atlantic, inspired a generation of angry young writers, and

Faulkner (in *Soldier's Pay*), Fitzgerald (in *The Great Gatsby*), and Hemingway (in *The Sun Also Rises*) all owed a profound debt to the sterile landscape of Eliot's *Waste Land*, one of the most influential depictions of twentieth-century society.⁴⁾

2) Edwin F. Moseley, *F. Scott Fitzgerald*, William B. Eerdmans, 1967, p. 32.

3) Roger Starr, "The Catalytic Dump of F. Scott Fitzgerald," *Intellectual Digest* 1973, pp. 76

4) William Goldhurst, *F. Scott Fitzgerald and his Contemporaries*, Cleveland: World Publishing Co., p. 33. Among the interesting echoes of Eliot's poem to be found in a study of *Gatsby* are a title Fitzgerald almost used and the luncheon scene with Meyer Wolfsheim. The title, *Trimalchio in West Egg*, was Fitzgerald's favorite, but he finally discarded it on the advice of his wife, Zelda, who preferred *The Great Gatsby*. (See Nancy Mitford, *Zelda: a Biography*, Harper & Row 1970, p. 113.) But the longing to use *Trimalchio* died hard, as is evidenced in later letters to Maxwell Perkins and Ernest Boyd (*Letters*, pp. 169, 177, 478). The epigraph of the *Waste Land*, taken from Petronius' *Satyricon*, is spoken by Trimalchio, the ostentatious, vulgar, and fabulously rich self-made man, who

saw the Sibyl suspended in a glass bottle at Cumae, and when the boys said to her, "Sibyl, what is the matter?" she would answer, "I yearn to die."

Fitzgerald's Trimalchio, Jay Gatsby, another wealthy parvenu given to extravagant parties, also seemed to watch the dwellers in a waste land haplessly enduring a life to which death would be preferable. Later, in one of the "Unreal City" passages, Eliot tells how:

Mr. Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant
Unshaven, with a pocket full of currants
C.I.F. London: documents at sight,
Asked me in demotic French

Yet the two waste lands (lest his indebtedness to Eliot be lost on the reader, Fitzgerald calls his ash valley "the waste land" (24)) are not identical. Eliot mentions dust only once ("I will show you fear in a handful of dust", line 30) and his principal image is water, bringing life, fertility, and redemption to the parched desert. Fitzgerald's dried waste, on the other hand, feels no rain (with the exception of the afternoon when Daisy and Gatsby meet for the first time in five years, and the day of Gatsby's funeral, both potentially redemptive moments): the landscape is made of dry, choking, blinding dust. Eliot's dust, moreover, does not move; it lies menacingly in the prophet's hand. There are no prophets in Fitzgerald's desert (Eckleburg and Owl-Eyes, to be discussed later, might be failed or partial prophets) and the dust "floats," (2) rises in "a flurry," (124) and "scurries here and there in the faint dawn wind." (160) "Spasms of bleak dust . . . drift endlessly.. (23) and, at romantic moments, "shining dust" is shuffled by "a hundred pairs of golden and silver slippers." (151)

Although occasionally "shining," this dust has consistently negative connotations. It was dust, "what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams" that disillusioned Nick and "temporarily closed out [his] interest in the abortive sorrows and shortwinded elations of men." (2) The dust may represent, as William Goldhurst believes, "a variety of cheats, liars, amoral and immoral characters of all sorts, representatives of what Carraway alludes to as the 'rotten crowd around Gatsby'⁵⁾ but such an interpretation is already one step removed from the qualities implied by the image itself: infertility, restlessness, "sterility and hopelessness, . . . ashen limbo," Gatsby's mansion has "an inexplicable amount of dust everywhere," (147) but dust is most strongly associated with the hapless Wilsons: George, so ashen-gray that entering his office he "mingl [ed] immediately with the cement color of the walls, [as] a white ashen dust veiled his dark suit and his pale hair" (26) and Myrtle who, dying, "mingled her dark blood with the dust." (138) Both the quiescent George and the vital Myrtle were destroyed, for, in their different ways, both got caught up in the drift of a life they were too weak to oppose, a whirling world which (in an image they might have used had they lived forty-five years later) they were unable to stop and get off.

Fitzgerald's waste land, like Eliot's, constitutes a moral indictment of the early nine-

To luncheon at the Cannon Street Hotel

Followed by a weekend at the Metropole. (11. 209-214)

In an equally sleazy luncheon scene, Fitzgerald portrays another hairy Semite, Meyer Wolfsheim, bent on another mysterious business deal, reminiscing about "the old Metropole" as he dined with Nick and Gatsby. Other parallels with Eliot are suggested by John W. Bickell in his "The Waste Land of F. Scott Fitzgerald," *Virginia Quarterly Review* XXX (Autumn 1954), 556-572; rpt. Kenneth E. Eble, ed., *F. Scott Fitzgerald: a collection of Criticism*, McGraw-Hill, 1973, 67-80.

5) Goldhurst, p. 147.

6) Gross, p. 59.

teen-t

if th

mor

shou

And w

Ash R

respon

But a

conti

Eckle

instea

some

then

Unlike

blinded

roundir

ing aro

At Gat

shcim, C

a humb

to jerk a

walking

his restle

In she

heaps, "

who rac

(123); T

death, p

thing" (

still coul

they repr

sions of g

lieved); v

7) Starr

8) Mose

teen-twenties, for,

if the natural environment is thought to shape man, the urban environment should be all the more significant. The city should not only tell us about the personality of the inhabitant but should also give us a clue to his moral values. After all, man created it.⁷⁾

And while the real valley of ashes may be blamed on civic unconcern and the Brooklyn Ash Removal Company, the valley in *Gatsby* was created by a society as shiftless and irresponsible as the drifting dust.

But above the gray land and the spasms of bleak dust which drift endlessly over it, [Fitzgerald continues,] you perceive, after a moment, the eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg. The eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg are blue and gigantic—their retinas are one yard high. They look out of no face, but, instead, from a pair of enormous yellow spectacles which pass over a non-existent nose. Evidently some wild wag of an oculist set them there to fatten his practice in the brough of Queens, and then sank down himself into eternal blindness, or forgot them and moved away. (23)

Unlike any other eyes mentioned in the book (with the possible exception of the smoke blinded puppy, who will be discussed later), Dr. Eckleburg's are steady, fixing the surrounding restlessness with a "persistent stare." (24) Fitzgerald pictured Daisy's eyes "flashing around her in a defiant way" (18) and her husband's "flashing about restlessly." (7) At Gatsby's party, Tom's eyes "roamed the crowd" (106) much as the eyes of Meyer Wolfsheimer, Gatsby's shady business partner, had "roved very slowly around the room" during a humbler repast in New York. (71) So restless were Tom's eyes, in fact, that his body had to jerk about to keep up with them. The last time that Nick and Tom met, the latter was walking down Fifth Avenue, "his head moving sharply here and there, adapting itself to his restless eyes." (179)

In sharp contrast, the eyes of Dr. Eckleburg "kept vigil" (124) over the shifting ash heaps, "emerg[ing], pale and enormous" (160) to trouble the dulled consciousness of those who raced by. They reminded Nick that he and Tom were about to run out of gasoline (123); Tom frowned at them irritably (26); the distraught Wilson, grieving at his wife's death, perceived them as a divine judgment on the murderous world—"God sees everything" (160)—and his friend Michaelis, who claimed they were nothing but an advertisement still could not face them and turned from the window back into the room. (160) Whether they represent God (as Wilson and a number of critics have thought) or merely the delusions of grandeur of a "wild wag of an oculist" (as Michaelis and other critics have believed); whether they symbolize "a blind and neglected fate,"⁸⁾ "the non-existent God to

7) Starr, p. 76.

8) Moseley, p. 28.

whom the lost souls pray,"⁹) or "the spiritual bareness and blindness of the world,"¹⁰) the eyes of Dr. Eckleburg are steady and disturbing, a judgment on the dust that floats around them as they continue, "dimmed a little by many painless days under sun and rain, [to] brood on over the solemn dumping ground." (23) Their steadiness prompted Tom Burnham to ask,

do not the eyes in spite of everything they survey, perhaps even because of it, serve both as a focus and an undeviating base, a single point of reference in the midst of monstrous disorder?¹¹)

They may even be the eyes of Fitzgerald, for whom writing the novel was, in part, a quest for order. "It is in protest against my own formless novels," he wrote to H. L. Mencken, "and Lewis' and Dos Passos' that this [book] was written."¹²)

A third symbol associated with rootlessness is Daisy's green light. "Probably no better symbol than the green light," says James E. Miller, "could be used for Americans' restless, reckless pursuit of the American dream."¹³) A green light, summoning to motion, is the most welcome sight an impatient motorist can see. Yet it gives nothing but permission to join the ranks of "the pursued, the pursuing, the busy, and the tired," who, to Nick, were the "only" people in the world. (81) Like activity for its own sake, the green light kindles desire without providing satisfaction. Gatsby long yearned after the "single green light, minute and far away" (22) at the end of Daisy's dock, trembling as he stretched out his arms toward it; he "believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year re-

9) Milton R. Stern, *The Golden Moment: the Novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, University of Illinois Press, 1970, p. 215.

10) Perosa, p. 63.

11) Tom Burnham, "The Eyes of Dr. Eckleburg: a Re-examination of *The Great Gatsby*," *College English* October, 1952, p. 12.

There is one character who can almost be said to have steady eyes and who invites considerable speculation. He is "Owl Eyes," "the gentle, genial drunk whose integrity, in attending the funeral of the man whose liquor he has freely drunk, counterparts Nick Carraway's, and whose capacity for wonder . . . is second the Gatsby's." (Riley V. Hampton, "Owl Eyes in *The Great Gatsby*," *American Literature* XLVIII (May, 1976), p. 229.) Searching for his host at one of Gatsby's parties, Nick entered the library and came upon

a stout, middle-aged man, with enormous spectacles [who] was sitting somewhat drunk on the edge of a great table, staring with unsteady concentration at the shelves of books.

His great enthusiasm of the moment was his discovery that the books lining the walls were

"absolutely real—have pages and everything. I thought they'd be a nice, durable cardboard. Matter of fact, they're absolutely real." (45-46)

His desire to see beneath the surface appearances and his zest for the real (not to mention his interest in books) set him apart from the rest of the guests, as did his gaze, which, while still "unsteady," was at least a species of "concentration." Owl Eyes has been likened to Dr. Eckleburg, to some brooding divinity, even to Ring Lardner, novelist and friend of Fitzgerald. There is no doubt, however, that while Owl Eyes cannot claim to have Eckleburg's steady gaze, he approaches it, and is thus of special interest and value to Fitzgerald.

12) *Letters*, p. 480.

13) Miller, p. 124.

cedes be
"You
Daisy a
light the

Possibl
forever
near to
a green

What he
most of

There m
short of
It had g
sion, add
amount o

Whether
ment,¹⁴ Fi
with the lye

Gatsby be
cluded us
. . . And or
So we be

III: R

Gatsby's w
they are com

14) One into
light is gi
to Schne
mately de
for reality
dream. In
and the ch
"eyes of L
cles." (23)
J. Schneid
Piper, pp.

cedes before us." (182)

"You always have a green light that burns all night at the end of your dock," he told Daisy at their first meeting after her marriage to Tom, so absorbed in his thoughts of the light that he seemed unaware of her. Yet at that moment the light lost its significance.

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

What he had really lost, however, was the dream in whose feverish pursuit he had spent most of his life.

There must have been moments [Nick reflected later] 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 or freshness can challenge what a man will store up in his ghostly heart. (97)

Whether or not Gatsby ever realized that the green light beckoned only to disillusionment,¹⁴ Fitzgerald does not seem to feel that the rest of us have learned. The book ends with the lyrical passage:

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 out our arms farther . . . And one fine morning—
So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past. (182)

III: RESTLESSNESS AND DRIFT

Gatsby's world is characterized by restlessness. Like the moths, flies, and ghosts to which they are compared, its inhabitants drift and float about. Usually an ugly world, but oc-

14) One interesting explanation of the peculiarly frustrating quality of Gatsby's pursuit of the green light is given by Daniel J. Schneider in an exploration of the color-symbolism of the novel. According to Schneider, yellow symbolizes "the money, the crass materialism that corrupts the dream and ultimately destroys it," while blue is "associated with the promise, the dream, that Gatsby has mistaken for reality." Yellow and blue are frequently juxtaposed to symbolize the constant betrayal of the dream. In Gatsby's "blue gardens men and girls came and went like months among the whisperings and the champagne and the stars" (39) while the orchestra played "yellow cocktail music." (40) The "eyes of Dr. Eckleburg are blue and gigantic," and look out "from a pair of enormous yellow spectacles." (23) The color green is an even closer mingling of blue and yellow, dream and betrayal. (Daniel J. Schneider, "Color-Symbolism in *The Great Gatsby*," *University Review* XXXI (Autumn 1964); rpt. Piper, pp. 145, 147.)

asionally a beautiful one with cool autumn nights full of "stir and bustle among the stars" (112) and summer dawns busy with "gray-turning, gold-turning light," (152) it is always full of motion. It is also fragile and ephemeral. Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings felt this floating quality throughout the book and compared it to a drifting soap bubble:

The book resolves itself into the strangest feeling of a crystal globe, or one of those immense soap bubbles we achieved as children, if it could hold its shape and color without breaking.¹⁾

In Eliot's "Waste Land," roots are painful, disturbing influences through which vitality throbs up into lives of quiescent moral apathy. The poem begins with the complaint:

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.²⁾

Later, the protagonist cries out,

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish?³⁾

Fitzgerald's rootless waste land, however, is empty of such discomfiting assertions of life or purpose. All is drift and empty motion.

The Buchanans, lords of the waste land, seemed to have discovered the secret of perpetual motion. Their restlessness so impressed W. J. Hawey that he concluded, "If we follow up this tiny and apparently insignificant verbal clue [restlessness] we shall find that it will lead us swiftly to the heart of the book."⁴⁾ The scene when we first see Daisy is one of fitful motion: curtains whipping and snapping, twisting and rippling, dresses "rippling and fluttering as if they had just been blown back in after a short flight around the house." (8) Nick's opinion that Tom "would drift on forever, seeking, a little wistfully, for the dramatic turbulence of some irrecoverable football game" (6) was well substantiated by the facts. Throughout their married life, Tom and Daisy had "drifted here and there unrestfully, wherever people played polo and were rich together." (6) Married in Louisville, they had spent three months in the south seas, touched down briefly in Santa Barbara, hopped from place to place (Cannes, Deauville . . .) in France for a year and returned to Chicago before lighting in East Egg. Daisy could well remark scornfully, "I've been every-

1) Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, from a letter to Fitzgerald quoted in Goldhurst, p. 235.

2) Eliot, p. 63 (lines 1-4).

3) *Ibid.*, lines 19-20.

4) W. J. Hawey, "Theme and Texture in *The Great Gatsby*," *English Studies* XXXVIII (1957), in Ernest Lockridge (ed.), *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Great Gatsby: a Collection of Critical Essays*, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1968, p. 94.

where and seen everything." (18)

The restlessness of their eyes has already been mentioned; their bodies expressed a similar impatience. That same first evening, Tom, as host, was "hovering restlessly about the room," (10) and their house guest, the golf champion Jordan Baker, for all her athletic grace even stood restlessly, her body asserting itself "with a restless movement of her knee." (18) Nick, the fourth member of the party, was in the East because he "came back restless" from the war. (3)

The hundreds of "men and girls [who] came and went like moths" (39) drawn by the brilliance of Gatsby's parties were equally restless. In an unfocused rush, "they got into automobiles which bore them out to Long Island, and somehow they ended up at Gatsby's door." (41) This "indefinite procession of shadows," (109) "obscene barflies . . . descended in formless swarms on Gatsby's house." (110) Once there, the "swirls and eddies of people" (41) would wander among "floating rounds of cocktails" (40) while chattering groups would "change, . . . swell with new arrivals, dissolve and form in the same breath," (40) and "wanderers [would] weave here and there . . . and then . . . glide on through the sea-change of faces and voices and color under the constantly changing light." (40) They must have made Daisy recall the parties in her youth where "fresh faces drifted here and there like rose petals blown . . . around the floor." (151)

That this constant shifting around is symbolic of a deeper restlessness is indicated by a scene that marked the end of (at least) one party. A weeping singer had just sunk

into a deep, vinous sleep.

"She had a fight with a man who says he's her husband," explained the girl at [Nick's] elbow.

I looked around. Most of the remaining women were now having fights with men said to be their husbands. (51-52)

That, even in an atmosphere so clouded by a mist of alcohol, there should be such widespread confusion over who was supposed to be married to whom points, as Hawey remarks, "to the rootlessness and transience of these people, the lack of any stable relationship."⁶

The theme of relative truth and morality contributes strongly to our understanding of the world of experience . . . inhabited by Gatsby, the Buchanans, Myrtle and George Wilson, and—for a while—Nick Carraway. It is insubstantial, elusive as a dream, full of "somewhat truthful" assertions, fatal and near-fatal self-deceptions, and nebulous treacheries . . . characterized by an absence of fixed ethical standards, by a lack of any foundation in truth or morality.⁷

5) Schneider points out, in the essay mentioned earlier, that in this scene and a parallel one (115), Daisy and Jordan are dressed in white, which he considers "strongly associated with airiness, buoyancy, levitation." (Schneider, p. 146). The drunken woman in the "El Greco" scene is also dressed in white.

6) Hawey, p. 92.

7) Goldhurst, p. 152.

The city was no different from the suburbs. The party in Myrtle's flat was marked by an equal transience. Surrounded by groping, shifting people, the humblest member of the group, the recently purchased puppy, provided the only stability.

The little dog was sitting on the table, looking with blind eyes through the smoke, and from time to time groaning faintly. People disappeared, reappeared, made plans to go somewhere, and then lost each other, searched for each other, found each other a few feet away. (37)

In this frenetic scene, as Sidney Finkelstein says, as well as in others,

we see people vividly, but cannot feel them as people, with an inner life. It is as if they are from a world of strangers. And . . . in depicting the estrangement of the people from one another, or their alienation from their own humanity, Fitzgerald expresses also his detachment from them.⁸⁾

Even Nick, much as he disliked that sordid afternoon, was infected with their restlessness and

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. (57)

His "short affair" with the girl in Jersey City must have been as superficial as most of the relationships whose instability he deplored, for when "her brother began throwing mean looks in [his] direction," he "let it blow away quietly," (57) with all the restless detachment of a wandering breeze.

Gatsby's tragedy lay in the fact that he was both alien to and a citizen of this drifting world, dreaming of being rooted while living rootlessly. In his opening reflection on Gatsby, Nick compared him to a seismograph because of his "heightened sensitivity to life." However, the sensitivity of those "intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away" (2) is also a source of extreme restlessness. Of Gatsby's "resourcefulness of movement," Nick later commented:

This quality was continually breaking through his punctilious manner in the shape of restlessness. He was never quite still; there was always a tapping foot or the impatient opening and and closing of a hand. (64)

This view was corroborated and explained by Gatsby himself: "I usually find myself among strangers," he confided to Nick, "because I drift here and there trying to forget the sad thing that happened to me." (67) Yet he had been drifting long before the "sad thing"

8) Sidney Finkelstein, *Existentialism and Alienation in American Literature*, New York: International Publishers, 1968, p. 172.

(Daisy's
"beating
fisher or
merely ge
ineffable g
tory hunt c
securely on
in Minneso
millionaire
Barbary Co
secretary, a
"sad thing"

No wond
light, that t
of the world
about." (162

All this "in
activity"⁹⁾ se
less—"¹⁰⁾ the
reflection of

. . . desire [
It stops and
sunbeam mo
that made yo

So Tom and D
Myrtle and Mr
grasping only t

IV: MAC

Given the res
Egg, the valley c
are much in evic

9) Gale H. Carr
10) F. Scott Fitz
20.

11) *Ibid.*, p. 341.

(Daisy's marriage to Tom) occurred. When he was still James Gatz he spent over a year "beating his way along the south shore of Lake Superior as a clam-digger or a salmon-fisher or in any other capacity that brought him food and bed." (99) This drifting was not merely geographical: his heart "was in a constant, turbulent riot," and "a universe of ineffable gaudiness spun itself out of his brain These reveries . . . were a satisfactory hint of the unreality of reality, a promise that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy's wing." (99-100) He settled down for all of two weeks in a small college in Minnesota, and then "drifted back to Lake Superior," (100) where he stumbled upon millionaire yachtsman Dan Cody and promptly sailed off for the West Indies and the Barbary Coast. In the following five years, while serving Cody as "steward, mate, skipper, secretary, and even jailor," (101) he circled the Continent three times. All this, before the "sad thing" started his drifting.

No wonder that Nick felt, the first night that he saw Gatsby yearning after Daisy's green light, that the very darkness was "unquiet," (22) or that he imagined Gatsby's last vision of the world as one "where poor ghosts, breathing dreams like air, drifted fortuitously about." (162)

All this "imagery of drift, flutter, or rush, the figure of purposeless action, of meaningless activity"⁹⁾ seems to be explained by Anthony Patch, "nervous as a will-o'-the-wisp, restless—"¹⁰⁾ the hero of Fitzgerald's *The Beautiful and the Damned* and, like Gatsby, a fictional reflection of his creator:

. . . desire [he claims] just cheats you. It's like a sunbeam skipping here and there about a room. It stops and gilds some inconsequential object, and we fools try to grasp it—but when we do the sunbeam moves on to something else, and you've got the inconsequential part, but the glitter that made you want it is gone."¹¹⁾

So Tom and Daisy, Jordan and the three Mr. Mumbles, Morris A. Flink and Beluga's girls, Myrtle and Mr. McKee all drifted in pursuit of a restless sunbeam, reaching for the glitter, grasping only the inconsequential, and so drifting on once again.

IV: MACHINES AND MOTION

Given the restless drifting of the inhabitants of Fitzgerald's waste lands—East and West Egg, the valley of ashes, and New York City—it is not surprising that the car and the train are much in evidence, so much so, in fact, that they seem to symbolize the rootless people

9) Gale H. Carrithers, Jr., "Fitzgerald's Triumph," in Hoffman, p. 316.

10) F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Beautiful and the Damned*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922, 1950, p. 20.

11) *Ibid.*, p. 341.

and their shifting worlds. The principal characters are identified by their automobiles; the plot hinges on scenes which take place in wheeled vehicles; the twin worlds of pleasure and business are so filled with trains, taxis, and private cars as to be almost defined by them; and Gatsby is caught in the same bondage of moving metal.

The characters' personalities can be found in their cars. Daisy's "little white roadster" is almost synonymous with the "most popular of all the young girls in Louisville." Jordan mentions it twice in the first eleven lines with which she describes Daisy (75), and later identifies Gatsby, her lover, simply as "the officer in the white car." (79) It obviously had the same symbolism for Gatsby who, returning heartbroken from France after hearing of her wedding,

made a miserable but irresistible journey to Louisville on the last of his army pay. He stayed there a week, walking the streets where their footsteps had clicked together through the November night and revisiting the out-or-the-way places to which they had driven in her white car. (152-3)

Gatsby's cumbrously pretentious car, "gorgeous" and boasting a "three-noted horn," (63) was, like its owner, known to everyone.

Everybody had seen it. It was a rich cream color, bright with nickel, swollen here and there in its monstrous length with triumphant hat-boxes and supper-boxes and tool-boxes, and terraced with a labyrinth of wind-shields that mirrored a dozen suns. (64)

Tom, on the other hand, secure in his wealth and position (or trying to give the impression that he was), could express his roving pretensions more modestly: with a blue coupe. Nick, who dazzled no one, even in his own imagination, had a dependable "old Dodge" (3) which, significantly, he sold when he forsook the East for his home in the staid Middle West.¹⁾

So dominated was the East by the car that walking had become a lost art. All walks were specifically relegated to the past. Jordan recalled having taken a walk "one October day in nineteen-seventeen" (75) and walks taken by Daisy and Gatsby that same autumn are mentioned (112, 152-153). Five years later, Nick described meeting a stranger on a walk (he certainly would not have met the Buchanans or their coterie!) but insisted that his stroll had taken place before "the history of that summer really [began] on the evening I drove over . . . to have dinner with the Tom Buchanans." (5) Once he joined their society he drove or took the train. Once, not yet sufficiently converted to the new way of life, he felt the desire to walk: at the drunken party in Myrtle's flat.

1) Would it be unduly far-fetched to point out that Nick's family name can be read as Car-away—"Get away in a car" or "Away from cars"?

I wanted to get out [he recalled] and walk eastward toward the park through the soft twilight, but each time I tried I became entangled in some wild, strident argument which pulled me back, as if with ropes, to my chair. (36)

Automobiles and trains provided the setting for many key happenings. Tom and Myrtle met on a train and Myrtle, who was married to the proprietor of a gasoline station-garage, carried on her sordid romance with Tom by dint of furtive trips to New York by train and died in a car accident. An earlier infidelity of Tom's had been discovered because of another accident in another coupe. When Tom married Daisy, it was not enough that he "come down with a hundred people"; he must bring them in "four private cars." (77) The reader first sees Daisy and Gatsby together in her car and when, five years later, Gatsby began negotiating with Nick to make possible another meeting with her, he did so in his "circus wagon" (121) of an automobile.

So addicted were these people to mechanized motion that they seemed able to cope with life only by crying, "Let's go!"

"Let's go back, Tom. Tomorrow!" cried Daisy in response to Nick's teasing account of Chicago mourning her departure. (10)²⁾ After a hundred pages (but no perceptible growth in stability) she greeted the hottest day of the year with "Let's all go to town!" (110) but had not been there long before she wailed again: "Please let's all go home. Why don't we all go home?" (131) Gatsby found it perfectly natural to suggest to Nick at 2:00 in the morning, "Let's go to Coney Island, old sport. In my car." (82)

The landscape seemed to partake of its owners' frenetic mobility. The Buchanans' lawn (which one might reasonably expect to be a rather rooted, steady stretch of ground)

started at the beach and *ran* toward the front door for a quarter of a mile, *jumping* over sun-dials and brick walks and burning gardens—finally when it reached the house *drifting* up the side in bright vines as though from the *momentum* of its *run*. (6-7; italics are mine)

Nor was the situation across the courtesy bay very different. Gatsby's mansion was architecturally solid enough, but the "persistent story that he didn't live in a house at all, but in a boat that looked like a house and was moved secretly up and down the Long Island shore" (98) while factually incorrect was true in spirit. Gatsby had, moreover, gotten his "singularly appropriate education" (102) floating about on a yacht for five years and died floating on an air mattress in his pool.

Constant transportation symbolized not only the characters but their world as well. The "compact Main Street ministering" to the valley of ashes "and contiguous to absolutely nothing" (24) consisted of an all-night restaurant and Wilson's garage. The population

2) It is significant that Nick's mourners are not people, but cars with the "left rear wheel painted black."

needing ministrations was obviously transient.

Among those who patronized Wilson's garage Gatsby's guests must have figured largely. A list of their names, "a *tour de force* which tells us more about them and Gatsby than an elaborate description,"³⁾ was written on an old timetable "distintegrating in its folds, and headed 'This schedule is in effect July 5th, 1922.'" (61) The enshrining of these "gray names" on a timetable so dated suggests "impermanence combined with a hangover,"⁴⁾ the day "when the exhausted holiday crowds, as spent as firecrackers, return to their homes."⁵⁾ The parties these travellers attended were announced by "the cars going up and down [Gatsby's] drive," (181) made possible by his Rolls-Royce which "became an omnibus, bearing parties to and from the city between nine in the morning and long past midnight" and by his station wagon, which "scampered like a brisk yellow bug to meet all trains." (39) They were rendered enjoyable by his "two motorboats [which] slit the waters of the Sound, drawing aquaplanes over cataracts of foam." (39) Once the party concluded in a "caterwauling crescendo of horns" from cars blocking the driveway while a drunken driver, guilty of shearing the wheel from a coupe, stood "blinded by the glare of headlights and confused by the incessant groaning of the horns" wondering if he had run out of gas. (55-56) One gets the impression that Gatsby's parties are attended by machines, some made in Detroit and others supposedly human but in fact merely an agent of mechanized motion.

An equally giddy mobility characterizes the more respectable worlds of money-makers in the great city and their suburban homes, whose inhabitants were herded by fate "along a short cut from nothing to nothing." (108) Evening in the suburbs is the time, not of crickets or moon rise, but of "electric trains, man-carrying" (96); summer came, not to gardens and beaches but to "road house roofs and in front of wayside garages, where now red gas-pumps sat out in pools of light," (21) and no human being, but "the grocer's automobile" (89) supplied vacationers with food. In the city, evening saw "the deep lanes of the Fortics . . . lined five deep with throbbing taxicabs." (57) For the fatal, hottest day of the year, the mood is set by a scene on a train:

As my train emerged from the tunnel into the sunlight/recalled Nick/, only the hot whistles of the National Biscuit Company broke the simmering hush at noon. The straw seats of the car hovered on the edge of combustion. . . . "Hot!" said the conductor, to familiar faces. "Some weather! . . . Hot! . . . Hot! . . . Is it hot enough for you? Is it hot? Is it . . . ?"

My commutation ticket came back to me with a dark stain from his hand. (114-115)

The three closing paragraphs of the book comprise three more travel images. The first

3) Perosa, p. 23.

4) Cross, p. 61.

5) Bewley, pp. 230-231.

is a train. Nick remarks that during Gatsby's journey through life, his dream "was already behind him, somewhere in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night." In the next paragraph, the image is a race. We are all running, failing to catch our dream, but continuing in vain pursuit: "Tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther . . ." In the final paragraph, the journey continues on the water, where, as vainly as before, "we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past." (182) No longer purposeless and drifting, the pursuit has become laborious and steady. Yet it is still a homesick, rootless wandering.

V: NICK

Among all these rushing vehicles and people, Nick stands in steady contrast. As the summer of 1922 rolls by, this contrast becomes increasingly marked. At first, if not anxious to become like those around him, he is at least withholding judgment. As Mizener notes,

Nick has come east after the war to become a real Easterner, but his moral roots are in the Middle West. He is prepared, in the book's very first scene, to respond to the beauty and charm of Daisy, adrift like some informal goddess.¹⁾

Yet in the end, shocked by Daisy's callous "conspiring" (146), nourishing a "feeling of defiance, of scornful solidarity between Gatsby and me against them all," (166) he turns from the worship of such a drifting deity and returns home to the source of his roots. Nick alone shows moral stability or the ability to take responsibility. He alone seems able to grow. Finally, when the book closes with the destruction or continued drift of the other characters, he alone provides grounds for a fledgling hope.

His importance derives from more than his, admittedly important, role as narrator. To Sklar, he is "the narrator of the novel and also its secret,"²⁾ a role of which he must have been dimly aware, describing himself as "within [Myrtle's flat] and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled." (36) According to Mizener, he

is, for the book's structure, the most important character. . . . A great deal of the book's color

1) Mizener, *Far Side of Paradise*, p. 173.

2) Sklar, p. 175.

3) Cf. Moseley's comment:

Fitzgerald's Nick Carraway is a carefully handled narrator who, like Hemingway's central intelligence Nick Adams, gives the entire organization to the story. In a sense Gatsby is no more the dramatic center of *The Great Gatsby* than are the killers or Ole Anderson in "The Killers." Again, these characters, and we might add Conrad's Kurtz here, are all accomplished examples from which the innocent observer learns the way of the world. If we can reconstruct Kurtz's or Gatsby's development, or even conjecture about Ole Anderson's . . . , we hardly see anyone of them change dramatically. The action involving change from exposition through complication to climax and denouement all happens within or to

and subtlety comes from the constant play of Nick's judgment and feeling over events.⁴⁾

Cross puts it more strongly:

Nick's Carraway . . . adopts a moral stance which modifies our judgment of what he describes and whose sensibility and intelligence mediate between the action and the reader.⁵⁾

The book begins with repeated assertions of Nick's rootedness. Unlike the other characters, who acted as if they were totally devoid of antecedents, Nick referred, in the first sentence of the book, to some advice of his father's "that I've been turning over in my mind ever since." (1) On the next page, he boasted that his family had

been prominent, well-to-do people in this Middle Western city for three generations. The Carraways are something of a clan, and we have a tradition that we're descended from the Dukess of Buccleuch, but the actual founder of my line was my grandfather's brother, who came here in fifty-one, sent a substitute to the Civil War, and started the wholesale hardware business that my father carries on today. (2-3)

"Generation," "clan," "tradition," "descended," "founder," "line," "grandfather," "father"—this is the vocabulary of stability and rootedness. The same relish for stability showed itself in the loneliness Nick felt at West Egg before he could come to feel like "an original settler," (4) and in the lyrical passage (lyricism was rare with Nick, the apprentice bond seller) describing, in years gone by, the trip home from the East for the Christmas holidays.

When we pulled out into the winter night and the real snow, our snow, began to stretch out beside us and twinkle against the windows, and the dim lights of the small Wisconsin stations moved by, a sharp wild brace came suddenly into the air. We drew in deep breaths of it as we walked back from dinner through the cold vestibules unutterably aware of our identity with this country for one strange hour, before we melted indistinguishably into it again.

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. (177)

After Gatsby's death had destroyed any lingering dream he might still have cherished about

the focus of narration. Marlow learns, Nick[Adams]learns, and now in Fitzgerald another Nick learns: Kurtz, Ole and Gatsby are examples of whatever reality the innocent narrator must face. (Moseley, p. 23)

4) Moseley, *Far Side*, p. 172.

5) Cross, p. 53.

the go
smoke
[he] d
He
"in ur
of visio
a singl
tage of
Gatsby
that G
Tom p
in trad
One
He wor
Gatsby
fact, th
the fail
Nick
than an
discussio
am one
berated
was you
to mysel
Becaus
(59) he l
"Supp
never will
Nick's
They w
retreat
together
Nick, c
at the be
6) Henry
Critica

the golden East, the pull of his Midwestern roots reasserted itself, and "when the blue smoke of brittle leaves was in the air and the wind blew the wet laundry stiff on the line [he] decided to come back home." (178)

He was a remarkably conservative young man who wished to have the whole world "in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever," (2) and, far from longing for breadth of vision and variety of experience, felt that "life is much more successfully looked at from a single window." (4) Henry Dan Piper claims that Nick survives because of "that heritage of moral values that he has learned from his father,"⁶ a man markedly different from Gatsby's parents, of whom we know only that they "were shiftless and unsuccessful," and that Gatsby's "imagination had really accepted them as his parents at all." (99) What Tom probably considered Nick's "provincial squeamishness" (181) was a morality rooted in tradition.

One result of this traditional moral training was the high value Nick assigned to honesty. He worked, fittingly enough, at the Probity Trust Company. His shock on learning that Gatsby's "gonnegtion" Meyer Wolfsheim had fixed the 1919 World Series came from the fact, that in his honesty "it never occurred to [Nick] that one man could start to play with the faith of fifty million people with the single mindedness of a burglar blowing a safe." (74)

Nick was not always honest, but he tried to be so, and certainly came closer to success than anyone else. Moreover, he was honest enough to admit his dishonesty. In an early discussion of Jordan's lack of probity, Nick informed the reader rather smugly that "I am one of the few honest people I have ever known." (60) Later, however, when Jordan berated him, "I thought you were rather an honest, straightforward person. I thought it was your secret pride," Nick could only answer, "I'm thirty. I'm five years too old to lie to myself and call it honor." (179)

Because he was a careful man, "full of interior rules that act as brakes on my desires," (59) he hated all carelessness, particularly, it seems Jordan's thoughtless driving.

"Suppose you met somebody just as careless as yourself," he once chided her. "I hope I never will," she answered. "I hate careless people. That's why I like you." (59)

Nick's final indictment of Tom and Daisy was not for manslaughter but for carelessness:

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 had made. (181)

Nick, on the other hand, neither retreated nor left the clearing up to others. Content at the beginning of the summer to let an affair "blow away quietly," he was changed by

6) Henry Dan Piper, "The Untrimmed Christmas Tree," a condensed version of *F. Scott Fitzgerald: a Critical Portrait*, Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1962, Chap. VI, in Hoffman, p. 329.

the tragedy which marked the season's end. He took full charge of Gatsby's funeral and burial because after the accident

as he lay in his house and didn't move or breathe or speak, it grew upon me that I was responsible, because no one else was interested—interested, I mean with that intense personal interest to which everyone has some vague right at the end. (165)

So it was Nick who, accompanied only by Gatsby's father, the minister, and a handful of servants, attended Gatsby's funeral and splashed through the rain to watch his coffin being lowered into the grave. One other mourner managed to arrive for the close of the ceremony: the "owl-eyed" man, whose somewhat steady gaze had, perhaps, permitted him to share Nick's vision of the need for that "intense personal interest" which Gatsby must have felt. The hundreds who had drunk Gatsby's champagne and "twinkled hilariously on his lawn," paying him "the subtle tribute of knowing nothing whatever about him" (61) now seemed to have adopted Wolfsheim's policy of letting everything alone in case of trouble. (173) Even Daisy, the cause of Gatsby's death, remained miles away, wrapped in wealthy carelessness.

Nick's honesty and care, his responsibility and interest, his ability to learn and change are the source of whatever hope the reader can muster as the book closes. As William Troy commented,

insofar as the book is Gatsby's story it is the story of a failure—the prolonging of the adolescent incapacity to distinguish between dream and reality, between the terms demanded of life and the terms offered. But insofar as it is the narrator's story it is a successful transcendence of a particularly bitter and harrowing set of experiences, [and the return to], a world of restored sanity and calm.⁷⁾

VI: GATSBY

Nick's greatest importance lies, perhaps, in the contrast he provides with Gatsby. Gatsby the "gorgeous," (2) the "great," is the hero of the book and Nick "only" the narrator; yet, the more one studies the novel, the more Nick grows in importance. The contrast between the two men, although expressed in many ways, remains essentially the difference between a stable man and a floater. To John Raleigh,

Nick is reason, experience, waking, reality, history while Gatsby is imagination, innocence, sleeping, dream and eternity. . . . Nick's mind is conservative and historical, as is his lineage; Gatsby's is radical and apocalyptic—as rootless as his heritage. Generically two of the best types of humanity: . . . they are the moralist and the radical.⁴⁾

7) William Troy, "Scott Fitzgerald: the Authority of Failure," *Accent* VI (Autumn 1945), p. 57.

1) Raleigh, p. 103.

To Thom

Gatsby
easily, I
Daisy is
Gatsby
his New

Yet they

The som
terizatio
very sha

For Nick
ment upo

In so fa
West, he
of his ki
he lives
greatnes

Nick coul
unaffected
and most
fluttered i
ly, perhaps
young boy
from 6:00
vast, vulge
but not, as
star-shine.
dazzling n
played out
a high pri

2) Thoma
1956-1

3) Eble, p

4) Mizenc

To Thomas Hanzo,

Gatsby is rich, Nick relatively poor. Gatsby is alone, mysterious, obsessed; Nick makes friends easily, his life is ordinary, and he is quite sane. Gatsby is without conscience except perhaps where Daisy is concerned, and Nick subjects every act and motive to the scrutiny of a lively moral sense. Gatsby learns nothing in the course of the novel, . . . Nick . . . does come to understand what his New York interlude has meant.²⁾

Yet they are not simply unrelated opposites; Nick's stability steadies Gatsby.

The somewhat shifting character of Gatsby is kept stable by the firmness of Carraway's characterization. . . . Because of the stolidity of Nick's character, Gatsby is able to stand as a character very shadowily created and to gain from that very act of specification.³⁾

For Nick's real purpose, to Fitzgerald, is to clarify the "greatness" of Gatsby and to comment upon it. As Mizener noted,

In so far as Gatsby represents the simplicity of thought Fitzgerald associated with the Middle West, he is really a great man; in so far as he achieves the kind of notoriety the East accords success of his kind and imagines innocently that because his place is right across from the Buchanans' he lives in Daisy's world, he is great about as Barnum was. Out of Gatsby's ignorance of his real greatness and his misunderstanding of his notoriety, Fitzgerald gets most of the book's irony.⁴⁾

Nick could say in one sentence that "Gatsby represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn" and in the next that "there was something gorgeous about him" (2) and most readers feel the same ambiguity. It is easy to dismiss the "casual moths" (80) who fluttered in and out of Gatsby's mansion or to respect Nick—somewhat unenthusiastically, perhaps. One's feelings and judgments about Gatsby, however, are more complex. The young boy who, in his search for order and discipline, subjected himself to a rigid schedule from 6:00 A.M. until 9:00 P.M. (174) became the man consecrated to "the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty." (99) His life was committed to one steady love, but not, as he supposed, of Daisy, sitting on her porch "bright with the bought luxury of star-shine." (149) The porch meant more than Daisy, for his real love was given to the dazzling new "Jay Gatsby," to the dream of an omnipotent mobility, and for this dream he played out the "long secret extravaganza" (143) that carried him to his death. He "paid a high price for living too long with a single dream" (162) as Nick realized, but he was

2) Thomas Hanzo, "The Theme and Narrator of *The Great Gatsby*," *Modern Fiction Studies* II (Winter 1956-1957), pp. 183-184.

3) Eble, p. 98.

4) Mizener, *Far Side*, p. 176. P. T. Barnum was a famous showman.

faithful to it, even after it had "broken up like glass against Tom's hard malice." (148)

This faithfulness—even to an unreality, this steadiness—even in pursuit of a will-o'-the-wisp, was his true greatness. Gatsby's "hopeless task, his fidelity of purpose, even the shoddiness of the dream itself—all combine to make [his], attempt poignant and touching."

Gatsby was at his greatest the night after the automobile accident in which Myrtle was killed. Although Daisy had been driving at the time, he was determined to protect her by claiming that he had been, at whatever consequence to himself. He did not know that she and Tom had already finished "conspiring" to run from the scene of the crime, leaving Gatsby to take the blame for Myrtle's death. He spent the night watching over Daisy, hoping to shelter her from Tom's (nonexistent, had he but known it) wrath. Such faithfulness is undeniably great, even when "founded securely on [the] fairy's wing" of unreality. Gatsby kept his sacred vigil "standing there in the moonlight—watching over nothing." (146)

Yet, if the dream is

to be anything one dreams of being, to become a part of any milieu one chooses as desirable, . . . the reality, at least as Fitzgerald represents it in his serious fiction, is a disappointment.⁵⁾

James Gatz, clam digger, dreamed of becoming Jay Gatsby, millionaire citizen of the glittering world of the Buchanans. He pursued that illusion with the zeal of a worshipper who has "committed himself to the following of a grail." (149) He failed because reality reasserted itself. Yet his faithfulness to a "dead dream" (135) came from something deeper than the dream. Zelda Fitzgerald, in her reflective "Looking Back Eight Years," expressed his predicament well.

Success [she commented] was the goal for this generation . . . [but] nine in ten would confess that success is only a decoration that they wished to wear; what they really wanted is something deeper and richer than that.⁷⁾

Gatsby wanted something far better than the restless knocking of moths about a candle. And while others continued to flicker about the flame, he, by taking responsibility for Daisy's crime, flew straight into it. His life had been spent in the restless pursuit of a dream but "Gatsby turned out all right in the end" (2) because his dreams and his desires were rooted deeply in loyalty.

5) Lehan, p. 109.

6) Goldhurst, p. 141.

7) Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald, "Looking Back Eight Years," *College Humor* June, 1928, quoted in Milford, 132.

Mari
22
Jackso
Ne
Tom B
Oc
John F.
of
K. G. V
A. E. D
Kenneth
T. S. El
Sidney
Pub
Francis
1950
Sons
William C
Sheilah G
1976
Kenneth I
Riley V. I
Thomas H
1956-
Grederick
Alfred Kaz
Richard D
Ernest Loc
sayr, E
Nancy Mill
James E. M
Arthur Mize
Prentice
The Ri

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Marius Bewley, "Scott Fitzgerald's Criticism of America," *The Sewanee Review* LXII (Spring, 1954), 223-246
- Jackson R. Bryer (ed.), *Sixteen Modern American Authors: a Survey of Research and Criticism* rev. ed., New York: W. W. Norton, 1973
- _____, *The Critical Reputation of F. Scott Fitzgerald: a Bibliographical Study*, Archon Books, 1967
- Tom Burnham, "The Eyes of Dr. Eckleburg: a Re-examination of *The Great Gatsby*," *College English* October, 1952, 7-12
- John F. Callahan, *The Illusion of a Nation: myth and history in the novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, University of Illinois Press, 1972
- K. G. W. Cross, *Scott Fitzgerald*, Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1964
- A. E. Dyson, "The Great Gatsby: Thirty-Six Years After," *Modern Fiction Studies* VII (Spring, 1961)
- Kenneth Eble, *F. Scott Fitzgerald*, New York: Twayne Publishers, 1963
- T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems: 1909-1962*, London: Faber & Faber, 1974
- Sidney Finkelstein, *Existentialism and Alienation in American Literature*, New York: International Publishers, 1968
- Francis Scott Fitzgerald, *The Beautiful and the Damned*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922, 1950
- _____, *The Great Gatsby*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925, 1953
- _____, *The Letters of F. Scott Fitzgerald* (ed. J. Andrew Turnbull), New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963
- William Goldburst, *F. Scott Fitzgerald and his Contemporaries*, Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1963
- Sheilah Graham, *The Real F. Scott Fitzgerald: Thirty-Five Years Later*, New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1976
- Kenneth E. Eble, ed., *F. Scott Fitzgerald: a collection of criticism*, McGraw-Hill, 1973
- Riley V. Hampton, "Owl Eyes in *The Great Gatsby*," *American Literature* XLVIII (May 1976), 229
- Thomas Hanzo, "The Theme and Narrator of *The Great Gatsby*," *Modern Fiction Studies* II (Winter 1956-1957), 183-190
- Grederick Hoffman (ed.), *The Great Gatsby: a Study*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962
- Alfred Kazin (ed.), *F. Scott Fitzgerald: the Man and his Work*, New York: Collier Books, 1951
- Richard D. Lehan, *F. Scott Fitzgerald and the Craft of Fiction*, Southern Illinois University Press, 1966
- Ernest Lockridge (ed.), *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Great Gatsby: a Collection of Critical Essays*, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1968
- Nancy Millford, *Zelda: a Biography*, Harper & Row, 1970
- James E. Miller, *F. Scott Fitzgerald: his Art and his Technique*, New York University Press, 1964
- Arthur Mizener (ed.), *F. Scott Fitzgerald: a Collection of Critical Essays*, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1968
- _____, *The Far Side of Paradise: a Biography of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Riverside Press, 1951

- Edwin M. Mosley, *F. Scott Fitzgerald*, William B. Eerdmans, 1967
- Sergio Perosa, *The Art of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1965
- Henry Dan Piper, *Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby: the Novel, the Critics, the Background*, New York: Scribner's Sons, 1970
- Robert Sklar, *F. Scott Fitzgerald: the Last Laocoon*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1967
- Roger Starr, "The Catalytic Dump of F. Scott Fitzgerald," *Intellectual Digest* 1973, 76+
- Milton R. Stern, *The Golden Moment: the Novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, University of Illinois Press, 1970
- Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*, Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1957
- William Troy, "Scott Fitzgerald: the Authority of Failure," *Accent* VI (Autumn 1945) 56-60
- Andrew Turnbull, *Scott Fitzgerald*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962