

***The Great Gatsby* by F.S.Fitzgerald**

**Articles**

From: Aufrecht - Boveré et al.  
 Figures Libres, Figures imposées  
 L'explication de texte en anglais (fiction)

Gatsby's house was still empty when I left – the grass on his lawn had grown as long as mine. One of the taxi drivers in the village never took a fare past the entrance gate without stopping for a minute and pointing inside; perhaps it was he who drove Daisy and Gatsby over to  
 5 East Egg the night of the accident and perhaps he had made a story about it all his own. I didn't want to hear it and I avoided him when I got off the train.

I spent my Saturday nights in New York because those gleaming, dazzling parties of his were with me so vividly that I could still hear the  
 10 music and the laughter faint and incessant from his garden and the cars going up and down his drive. One night I did hear a material car there and saw its lights stop at his front steps. But I didn't investigate. Probably it was some final guest who had been away at the ends of the earth and didn't know that the party was over.

15 On the last night, with my trunk packed and my car sold to the grocer, I went over and looked at that huge incoherent failure of a house once more. On the white steps an obscene word, scrawled by some boy with a piece of brick, stood out clearly in the moonlight and I erased it, drawing my shoe raspily along the stone. Then I wandered down to  
 20 the beach and sprawled out on the sand.

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  
 25 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 æsthetic  
 30 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  
 35 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.

40 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 – tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms further... And one fine morning –

45 So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.

## HÉLÈNE AUFFRET-BOUCÉ

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The final lines of *The Great Gatsby* open out on a deserted fictional universe. The chips are down, and the game is up. Nick Carraway, the narrator, is taking his leave of the reader: there is nothing more to be told. The eponymous hero, Jay Gatsby, who in death has turned into Jimmy Gatz again, has been buried in almost total dereliction. The minor characters in the drama have all vanished away. Nick Carraway himself, whose dream of social conquest was but a flimsy copy of the Great Gatsby's, forsakes the mythical East Egg, and retraces his steps to his origins.

Death and flight have emptied the fiction of its characters.<sup>1</sup> Only the stark fiction appears in these ultimate lines:

- its space: an empty setting;
- its temporality: quasi excessive time-markers;
- its voice: a vulnerable one, whose over-modalization betrays the narrators's disarray,

all elements constituting a romantic identity. Once the story is over, it bears but the hallmarks of a fiction reduced to its barest essentials. This complete starkness, which endows Nick Carraway's last words with their elegiac grandeur, is evidenced by the fugal structure of the final page. The set melodic progression superimposes itself on its own time-warped image. Everything here, as in a fugue, may be termed "in imitation." The theme, Jay Gatsby's epitome, and the counter-theme the narrator's adventure, make a muted return, suffering the adjunction of a coda, i.e., the final sentence opening out on another story, that of mankind's dream.

What do this fugal structure and the inception of the coda signify, marked in the text by the subtle interplay of first person pronouns, except that the shift from I to We spells the silencing of the narrative voice and the effacement of a defunct fiction, which the narrator will not sustain any longer?

1. "The holocaust was complete," p. 154.

# 1 A FAREWELL TO PLACES

As the novel closes, the tragedy is over. The textual locus bears the stigmata of the past so deeply that it becomes legendary: "one of the taxi drivers in the village never took a fare past the entrance gate without stopping for a minute and pointing inside..." and induces repetitive deportments. In this haunted setting Nick's ultimate gestures reproduce the late Gatsby's favourite attitudes. Like Gatsby, Nick stands under the porch, "on the white steps" and lies down on the beach: "I... sprawled out on the sand." The same gestures to find one's way back to faith, and imbue with meaning again what is meaningless.

For all the rest is but a chilly solitude. A nocturnal lighting is chosen, as though, ever since the evening of the accident – recalled by the mention of the last trip taken by Daisy and Gatsby – an eternal night brooded over the setting: "one night," "on the last night," "that vast obscurity," and made it unreal: "As the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away..." This "space-quake" has brought about, in the preceding pages, the comparison with an El Greco night scene: "West Egg, especially still figures in my more fantastic dreams. I see it as a night scene by El Greco." (p. 167)

A locus of illusions, and an illusory one, Gatsby's house seems to slip back into nothingness. The opulent building, in the "nouveau riche" style, and a masterpiece of bad taste, described in the first chapter as "a colossal affair by any standard: it was a factual imitation of some Hôtel de Ville in Normandy" (p. 11) has turned, by means of the hypallage, into "that huge failure of a house." As soon as its master has disappeared, the house becomes derelict. When the first owner died, the house was sold by the heirs, even before the funeral wreath could be taken down from its door. When Gatsby dies, the house falls a victim to abusive graffiti: "On the white steps an obscene word, scrawled by some boy with a piece of brick, stood out clearly in the moonlight."

Nick's gesture, erasing the obscene word, and conveying back its virginity to the house, also turns the setting into a locus where signs are effaced. As such, the house may be dubbed "inessential" in the Platonic meaning of the epithet, since it is no longer an "Idea" – Gatsby's notion of luxury and success, the casket offered to Daisy, the pearl – but a mere empty shell.

No wonder then that, for Nick, it should be haunted. It is peopled with the noises and the lights of yore, "those gleaming, dazzling parties of his were with me so vividly that I could still hear the music and the laughter," a muted echo of those festive nights when "the whole corner of the peninsula was blazing with light." (p. 79) A convivial venue, quintessentially, the house is designed for crowds and tumult: "I keep it always full of interesting people, night and day..." (p. 87) But it has become the house of the dead, whom Nick refuses to wake up. Out of Gatsby's presence – called "a Trimalchio" by Nick Carraway – these ghosts are completely meaningless and salvationless: they too are "inessential." Should this distancing, this flight of the narrator, be read as an echo of Fitzgerald's confidence: "Parties are a form of suicide. I love them but the old Catholic in me secretly disapproves"?"

Thus, in the empty setting, endowed again with its initial virginity by dreams, the desire founding the adventure and the whole work, makes its subtle and surreptitious comeback.

## 2 TIME REGAINED AND LOST

The final page of *The Great Gatsby* affords a constant setting into perspective of time. It is the ultimate fragment of a portrait "in absentia," which opposes kaleidoscopic images of Gatsby: fleeting images which compose and discompose, say and unsay. The prism of Nick's memory rejects confrontation with any other memorization. The taxi-driver's tale is unworthy of any transcription: "perhaps he had made a story about it all his own. I didn't want to hear it..." just as the hypothesis of the stray guest is unworthy of any verification: "Probably it was some final guest who ... didn't know that the party was over."

The lived and mythical pasts criss-cross and interweave, spurning "historical" truth. How reliable may the testimony be? What guarantee is the reader vouchsafed when the past may be reconstructed or destroyed at will? The rejection of the multiple viewpoint, the deliberate choice of partiality are, all the same, choice clues. Nick has privileged a reading, and one only, of Gatsby's life – "the poor son-of-a-bitch" (p. 166) –, a reading blazoned forth from the very first page of the novel: "Gatsby turned out all right at the end." (p. 8) The ouroboros-text unites together the beginning and ending of the novel into a vision of the past.

Likewise, the ultimate page of *The Great Gatsby* brings the distant and the recent pasts to confront each other in an ever-renewed pattern, founded on the permanent interplay of repetitions. The grass has grown in Gatsby's garden, as it did in Nick's; the taxi-driver takes about his fares as he did Daisy and Gatsby; the lonely car stops at the frontsteps of the house as the former guests' did. Hence, the importance of the temporal markers used in the text: *now vs once, first vs last, then vs now*, which denote the interplay of such oppositions, and what should be called the "double vision." Those proliferating markers offer a clue: Gatsby's enemy, five years late, is none but Time. By wrenching Gatsby out of linear time, and making him slip back into the eternal cycle of sense, Nick Carraway gives him back the control of his destiny. Gatsby's dream then is no failure as it is eminently reproducible, and especially stands for the very motion of human thought, from the origins to the present times. Such perennality is symbolized by the light shining at the end of the East Egg dock: "You always have a green light that burns all night at the end of your dock" (p. 90), an ever-returning light. The emblem of Gatsby's desire, it is at times inaccessible, at times close: "it had seemed as close as a star to the moon. Now it was again a green light on a dock" (p. 90) throughout the adventure: "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."

By setting Gatsby's time into the history of mankind, Nick Carraway gives it back its legitimacy. An incarnation of the American dream, Gatsby becomes a mythical figure: "Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us..." Fitzgerald's text, according to the various editions, proposes two different readings, either "orgastic" or "orgiastic." The difference is negligible and does not deserve further comments. What the text displays, anyhow, is an extraordinary flow of imagery uniting past and future into a hymn to the ideal, even though it means a celebration of lost innocence. In consequence, the mythical ending *a posteriori* justifies the title of the book, *The Great Gatsby*.

### 3 THE VOICE THAT FAILED

Thus, this admirable novel draws to a lyrical and elegiac close. At last appeased and reconciled with himself, the narrator may sort out the fascination from the repulsion with which the Great Gatsby inspired him. By the end of his meditation, he puts into practice his father's initial advice: "Whenever you feel like criticizing anyone... just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you have had" (p. 7), and its corollary: "Reserving judgements is a matter of infinite hope." (p. 7) Such hope thus alluded to here is that of redemption. The story of Gatsby, a victim of his dream, is exemplary. The utopian illusion of the garden of Eden regained, and effaced time, is a shared one. The experience lived by Gatsby becomes common to all, as it expresses a universal truth: "You can't repeat the past." (p. 106)

Gatsby's naïveté is none other but that of the first ages of the conquest, the pioneers' ("Dutch sailors' eyes), whose image superimposes and overprints itself, as in Galton's photographs, on Gatsby's vanished face. A prelapsarian vision of innocence, before corruption sets in, like the view of New York from Queensboro Bridge: "the city seen from the Queensboro Bridge is always the city seen for the first time, in its wild promise of all the mystery and beauty in the world." (p. 67) The American continent, offering its virginity to the gazers, is a Garden of Eden – "the island flowered" – whose flowering recalls all the flowers blooming in the novel, daisies, roses, myrtles. A generous land, and a potent maternal image, "a fresh, green breast of the new world." The polysemy of the adjective "green," which also characterizes the dock-light, acts as a sign and a signature of Gatsby's dream: it establishes the link between wonder and innocence. The brief ecstatic epiphany, springing from illusion, is held off in suspense by the long sentence, with its unexpected and unusual rhythm: "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..." its breaks, returns, and duplications, as though the confidence were held back, whispered rather than uttered, and the narrator reluctantly gave himself up to lyricism: "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." For this illusory happiness, located at the origins by the lyrical sentence, is eventually the only one accessible to human nature. An irony and a grandeur connoted by the dangling sentence, for ever broken off by death, "And one fine morning..." and taken up by the final sequence, "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past." There, the anaphoric segments and the alliterations reproduce the drifting away of drunken ships down the flow of time. Finally, Gatsby's only legacy to the narrator, and through him, to the reader, is that extraordinarily lively vision in a lethal and lethiferous universe. That unexpected gift, that lyricism bursting out where it was no longer expected, also stems, as the fiction closes, from the narrator's effacement. The reticences in his voice have already been noted, as well as the use of such modalizations as "perhaps," "as if," "seem," "must have held," "must have seen," which turn this ultimate page, with its restraint, into a magnificent paraleipsis. To which should be added the final metalepsis: the boundaries of the diegesis, of the fictive representation of the universe, are transgressed. Thus, Nick sets Gatsby's adventure

into a legendary chronotopos. But, chiefly, by shifting from the pronoun "We" to "I," he sets the reader into a novelistic universe, compelling him to participate and acknowledge his part in the tragedy he has just been told, and effect a narcissistic return to a novelistic image. In a word, Nick Carraway thus compels his reader to acknowledge that nothing but his own story has been told. The shift from "I" to "We," the waning out of the narrative voice, grounds the narrator's claim for identity in a more or less mythical community, which is both the reader's and the author's, a fusion marking the ending of fiction.

*Such is the masterly poetic closure (in every sense of the word) of The Great Gatsby. There could be no better illustration to define it than the following sentence of Conrad – Fitzgerald's acknowledged model –: "I had to deal with a being to whom I could not appeal in the name of anything high or low."<sup>2</sup>*

*As such, the poesy pervading the final lines has left its imprint on the contemporary poet's imaginativeness. For instance, in order to express the emotions felt by his character gazing over the bay of San Francisco at dawn, David Lodge in Changing Places (1975) writes: "This was a good hour to arrive in Euphoria. It was almost possible to imagine what it must have been like for the first mariners who sailed, probably quite by chance, through the narrow strait now bridged by the Silver Span, and found this stupendous bay in the state God left it at the creation. What was that passage in The Great Gatsby? 'A fresh, green breast of the new world... for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent...'"<sup>3</sup>*

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2. J. Conrad. *Heart of Darkness* (Portable Conrad, 1947), p. 586.

3. D. Lodge. *Changing Places*. (Penguin, 1981), pp. 170-171.

## YVES CARLET

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*Under the crystal-like surface of Gatsby lie several gulfs into which the reader is only allowed a few brief, tantalizing glimpses. The most obvious of the book's half-solved enigmas concerns Gatsby's origins, his metamorphosis from "a penniless young man without a past" into an endlessly hospitable tycoon, and the alchemical transformation of his dubious, "ravenously and unscrupulously" acquired wealth (p. 141) into the pure gold of his "incorruptible dream" (p. 147).*

*The story of Jay Gatsby, properly speaking, is completed by the middle of Chapter 8, when Nick's last meeting with him yields a wealth of hitherto undisclosed information about his past. At this point, Gatsby's dream has already been destroyed by Daisy's accidental killing of Tom's mistress. This twofold closure should conclude the novel; but Fitzgerald has chosen to devote one chapter and a half (one sixth of the whole) to subsequent events.*

*Nick's reconstruction of the facts fails to account for Gatsby's death, until a chance conversation with Tom Buchanan (which is situated just before our passage) clearly designates the latter as the virtual murderer. This last-minute disclosure throws some light into the second dark pit of the novel : the Buchanans' hidden "intimacy" (which was already half-revealed by the couple's "conspiring" on the evening of the accident (p. 138), not to speak of their absence at the funeral), the "vast carelessness" of their shared betrayal, and the way in which they have "smashed things and creatures and then retreated back into their money" (p. 70).*

*The Buchanans, at least, have a very clear, if sordid, motive for staying away from it all; Gatsby's former guests (Klipspringer), partners (Wolfshiem), and friends do not. Yet "nobody came" (p. 165). This sickening retreat, which looks like some kind of posthumous ostracism, suddenly turns Nick Carraway into an unlikely but devoted white knight, throwing him "on Gatsby's side, and alone" (p. 156), overwhelming him with "a feeling of defiance, of scornful solidarity [...] against them all" (p. 157). Mr Gatz's (Gatsby's father's) arrival even makes him into some kind of adopted brother of the victim.*

*The last chapter of the novel, therefore, is less an account of facts than a half-outraged, half-mournful testimony, a painful quest for an elusive phantom, a strident post-mortem plea in favor of Gatsby's greatness, and an attempt at recovering "the colossal vitality of his illusion" (p. 92).*

*Nick's last encounter with Tom Buchanan apparently shatters any hopes of achieving these goals.*



*Gatsby's lonely champion ends up condoning Tom's self-pity and lies, shaking hands with an implicit murderer who, as Marius Bewley has pointed out, is guilty of much more than the taking of a man's life: "The crime that he commits by proxy is only a symbol of his deeper spiritual crime against Gatsby's inner vision."<sup>1</sup> How could Nick hitherto pretend to defend this vision against the forces that threaten it? This, however, is what he does in a page which constitutes one of the most unexpected finales in American literature.*

## 1 FROM MOURNING TO DESPAIR

Part of the charm of this passage is due to the unusual tone created by its half-elegiac, half-eery wistfulness. From the start, Gatsby's house has sheltered a gallery of phantoms, from the "indefinite procession of shadows" that kept flitting up and down its front-steps (p. 104) to the "new world" of his lonely despair, "where poor ghosts, breathing dreams like air, drifted fortuitously about" (pp. 153-54). The emptiness of his moonlit house had been prophetically hinted at by Nick, during the very first party to which he had been invited, when "a wafer of a moon was shining over Gatsby's house," and "a sudden emptiness seemed to flow from the windows and the great doors, endowing with complete isolation the figure of the host [...]" (p. 56). What had then been a transitory feeling became an obsessive awareness when he paid Gatsby his last visit: the "enormous" house was already a haunted mansion, with its "ghostly piano," its "musty rooms," and the "inexplicable amount of dust everywhere." (p. 140) Strangely enough, such explicit references to a Sleeping Beauty atmosphere are lacking here. The lingering presence of the past is conjured up through subtler means: the repetition of "still" ("still empty;" "I could still hear"), the discreet, but effective use of the past perfect ("he had made;" "who had been away"), the long silence implied by the taxi-driver's frozen gesture ("stopping for a minute and pointing inside"), and the echo of former parties ringing in Nick's mind.

This last element deserves some attention. The beginning of the text is based on a double antiphrasis: it creates a sense of death through the re-creation of departed life ("I could still hear"), and it suggests Gatsby's haunting presence through Nick's denegations ("I avoided him"; "I didn't investigate") and escape ("I spent my Saturday nights in New York"). Nick is thus reluctantly self-promoted from the role of simple witness to that of focalizer. Because "after Gatsby's death the East was haunted for [him]" (p. 167), he is able to use his haunted mind to build the archetypal image of the haunted house. The substitution of preterite for past perfect turns a memory into a hallucination; and the repetition / variation device ("I could still hear" / "I did hear"; "the cars going up and down" / "a material car") make real sense impressions into echoes of visual or auditory delusions.

Even more striking is the "obscene word" that is scrawled "on the white steps." Superficially, it can be read as a last mark of the vulgarity which, from the start, "preyed on Gatsby," the "foul dust" that "floated in the wake of his dreams." (p. 8) More deeply, however, it may appear as a sacrilegious echo of the dream itself, as it came to life in a previous night scene, when the moonlit sidewalks became a ladder that "mounted to a secret place above the

1. in Arthur Mizener, ed., *F. Scott Fitzgerald: a Collection of Critical Essays* (Prentice Hall, 1963), p. 138.

trees." (p. 106) Daisy herself, for a brief moment, seemed to share Gatsby's vision, when "her glance [...] sought the lighted top of the steps." (p. 105) Now the whiteness of the steps merely sets off the red obscenity, and the moonlight derisively brings it out.

At an even deeper level, this degraded word may have a self-reflexive meaning. In the first two paragraphs, Nick's hypnotic receptivity already led him to project his own voyeurism on to two anonymous characters: a taxi-driver who became a narrator of sorts ("he had made a story about it,") and an improbable guest to whom he lent his credulous disbelief ("and didn't know that the party was over"). The vision of the "obscene word" may be a final, damning comment on his previous attempts at creative empathy, e.g., the end of the passage alluded to above, in which Gatsby's inexpressible dream clearly became his:

[...] I was reminded of something – an elusive rhythm, a fragment of lost words, that I had heard somewhere a long time ago. For a moment a phrase tried to take shape in my mouth and my lips parted like a dumb man's, as though there was more struggling upon them than a wisp of startled air. But they made no sound, and what I had almost remembered was incommunicable forever. (p. 107)

The "elusive rhythm" has now been degraded into the derisive echo of "the music and the laughter" created by Gatsby's parties, and the "lost words" of ecstasy have evaporated, leaving nothing for the moonlight to focus on, except the ugly sediment of the "obscene word." The would-be narrator can only – supreme irony – erase the graffiti: untelling has become his sole function, now that Gatsby's death and his own apostasy have sealed the triumph of the barbarians.

This sense of loss and decay reverberates throughout the text, in a succession of mournful, sometimes dirge-like echoes. From "the ends of the world" to "the end of Daisy's dock," from "the night of the accident" to "the Saturday nights" to "the last night," from the empty house to the "inessential houses," from the erased word to the vanished trees, from the "old island" to the "old unknown world," from "over" to "down" to "behind" to "back," from "once more" to "once," the whole passage vibrates with what Frank Kermode has called a "sense of an ending." This haunting finality seems to grow and swell, as the "final guest" makes way for "the last of [...] human dreams," as if this final page of Nick's story prefigured an apocalyptic "last time in history."

The structure of the text confirms what the ripple of metaphors already suggested: the agony of personal loss which is conveyed in the first two paragraphs is then immeasurably (improbably?) amplified into cosmic despair. This expansion of grief was already present in the incongruous reference to the guest who had been "away at the ends of the earth." Soon, Gatsby becomes "man," and his dream a type "of all human dreams." His deluded sense of imminent fulfillment becomes representative of human *hubris* and confusion. His "extraordinary gift for hope" and "romantic readiness" (p. 8) suddenly lose their specificity to mirror "our" faith in "the orgasmic future." This final irruption of "we" can be read as a blown-up image of the posthumous "solidarity" which has developed between Nick and Gatsby, and which has now come to include the whole of mankind.

## 2 THE UNDISCOVERY OF AMERICA

The unusual force of this ending lies in Fitzgerald's ability to impose this zoom-like effect, to blow up a starry-eyed bootlegger into an archetypal follower of the "grail" (p. 142). Although this legerdemain is partly effected by the virtuosity of his style, it would be a mistake to see the passage as a mere exemplar of verbal pyrotechnics. Note for instance how firmly the seemingly ectoplasmic vision is grounded in a specific geographic space. The middle link through which Nick turns into Gatsby, and both into Everyman, is clearly the East coast of the American continent, more specifically the several landmarks that prepare the reader for the imaginative jump of the fourth paragraph: East Egg (paragraph 1), New York (paragraph 2), the Sound (paragraph 4).

The narrator plays an unobtrusive, but essential part in this process. The novel began with the account of his move to the East, of his "haunting loneliness" in Manhattan, of his craving to "enter into [the] lives" of New York's "romantic women" (p. 56), and of his self-delusions about becoming "a guide, a path-finder, an original settler" (p. 9). What the passage describes is a double transference; Nick first "enters into" Gatsby's romantic dreams, then, through this medium, reconstructs the vision of the "original settlers" of New Amsterdam.

Nick and Gatsby are both displaced westerners. In fact, Nick's fascinated interest in Gatsby is linked with his fellow-westerner's apparent conquest of the East, triumphantly proclaimed to the world by the openness of his house. Throughout the novel, the house seems to fulfill a need for catering and hospitality which owes much to the myth of America, then of the West, as the land of milk and honey. This myth, however, is here subverted and made to serve an ironical strategy. For one thing – as Nick realizes very early –, Gatsby has only conquered West Egg – this outpost of the West whose "raw vigour" "appals" (p. 103) the "staid nobility" of East Egg (p. 46). His parties are offered in a spirit of munificent regality and received in a spirit of sordid greediness. Then it becomes increasingly clear, to Nick, and to the reader, that fertility to Gatsby is a substitute for his "unutterable visions," as they have been "forever wed to [Daisy's] perishable breath." (p. 107) To the young James Gatz, already, Daisy's house was a "ripe mystery." (p. 141) The sight of "the quiet lights in the houses" inspired him with an irresistible (compensatory?) desire to "suck on the pap of life, gulp down the incomparable milk of wonder." (pp. 106-107) Losing her led him to look for a substitute Eden; he found it – ironically – in that "slender riotous island which extends itself due east of New York." (p. 10) The word "riotous" aptly describes Gatsby's failure to recreate Daisy's world – or his own vision of it –, and his inability to control his self-made Canaan. Jordan's remark to Nick about New York's summer afternoons makes a similar point: "There's something very sensuous about it – over-ripe, as if all sorts of funny fruits were going to fall into your hands." (p. 119) Gatsby's fall is a shift from Daisy's "ripe mystery" to New York's over-ripe fruits. His dazzling parties, which, as Nick reminds him, makes his place "look like the World's Fair," are a frantic attempt at recovering the "quiet lights" of Daisy's home town.

Nick's last glance at "that huge incoherent failure of a house" (third paragraph) is his final assessment of Gatsby's awesome disaster. It will be followed by a glimpse of the closed "big

shore places" and of the dark shore ("and there were hardly any lights"): the fading of vision significantly becomes the dominant trope for the final dirge: Gatsby becomes a kind of blind Tantalus, vainly clutching at a dream which he mistakenly believes to be "so close," but which is "behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic [roll] on under the night." (fifth paragraph) This final fade-out has been preceded by an explicit reference to "Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock." The incongruous, but deliberate allusion to America as a nation – and no longer as a continent or a country – clearly suggests that this last page should be read, at least partly, as a jeremiad – a bitter glance at the betrayal of American promise. Even more striking – and ominous – is the position of the narrator, who sits "brooding on the old, unknown world." "Unknown" suggests a deficiency of vision, "old" definitively deprives America of its spurious innocence.

The two passages that I have just linked are in fact divided by a paragraph which is – spatially, thematically, metaphorically – the centre of the text: the famous vision of the new world by the first Dutch sailors. The fact that this vision is hemmed in by obscurity gives it a sinister gleam; and the reference to the "vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house" seems to rule out any possibility of coexistence between the two great symbols of the book: the recurring image of the moon-lit white steps has been, as it were, blotted out by the return of America's legitimate landscape. This ghost-like apparition of Nature's Nation is of course remindful of the "haunted mansion" motif, in the first two paragraphs, but the second vision obliterates the first – and accounts for the erasure of the "obscene word." Not only does the moon cease to light the steps: it allows "the inessential houses" to "melt away," while the "green breast of the new world" slowly comes to shadowy life. One is of course tempted to remember Daisy's moon-like whiteness, and the promise of "the incomparable milk of wonder" that it offers; and of course the "green breast" echoes the "green light at the end of [her] dock." Two young, maidenly promises violated by the golden lure of greed.

### 3 A WORLD ELSEWHERE

The difficulty of *The Great Gatsby* is linked with the richness of its frequently reversible metaphors. Thus, when Nick Carraway tries to reconstruct Gatsby's last moments, he writes: "He must have felt that he had lost the old warm world..." And he conjures the "new world, material without being real..." where Wilson, and death, await him (pp. 153-54). The problem with such a passage is that it inverts the oppositions of the final page. But are these oppositions themselves as biblically simple as they appear? If the vanished trees "once pandered in whispers" to man's hopes, did not the "fresh, green breast of the new world" conspire with the sordid hunger of old Europe, thus inviting its own violation? Did not the American continent create, by its very lushness, the incontinence that was to destroy it, just as the "green light" at the end of Daisy's dock was as much a mirage as a beacon – just as Daisy herself was from the start an "orchid" that embodied the hot-house atmosphere of "her artificial world" (p. 143), and the "riotous excursions" that she prompted (p. 8)?

Gatsby, in Nick's memorable phrase, "sprang from his Platonic conception of himself" (p. 95). If we take this as more than a nice formula, it means that any form of "incarnation" will take him away from his "father's business," and entail some degradation, some fall into matter. The moment of his first kiss with Daisy was described as such an incarnation: "He knew that when he kissed this girl, and forever wed his unutterable visions to her perishable breath, his mind would never romp again like the mind of God." (p. 107) The discovery of the American continent by the Dutch sailors is another such moment, when the godlike dreams of man are both exalted and degraded by their encounter "with something commensurate to [their] capacity for wonder." The implicit equation suggested by such homologies somehow identifies a private dream and a public one, or – to put it differently – a literary construct and an historical myth. This, as Richard Poirier has noted, is what makes American literature into an unlikely heir of European romanticism: "The most interesting American books are an image of the creation of America itself, of the effort, in the words of Emerson's Orphic Poet, to 'Build therefore your own world' [...] It is as if the conventions of English romantic poetry could in America take on the life of prose, take on a reality that even history might recognize and that novels could report as news."<sup>2</sup> Poirier here gives new life to the old cliché of Fitzgerald's romanticism: Fitzgerald is an American romantic, not because he delights in sunsets and romance, but because, like Emerson and Thoreau, he helps Americans to realize that they have sprung from the Platonic idea of themselves, by creating what Poirier calls "the environment of inner space."<sup>3</sup>

The American "incarnation" of romantic visions does raise insoluble problems. It creates, shall we say, both a rivalry and a complicity between "inner" and "outer" space: a rivalry, because, to quote Poirier again, "to take possession of America in the eye, as an Artist, is a way of preserving imaginatively those dreams about the continent that were systematically betrayed by the possession of it for economic and political aggrandizement;"<sup>4</sup> but a complicity too, because the eye's dominion, like all forms of power, violates the object that it controls, and thus dooms the beholder to some form of degradation. Tony Tanner has echoed Poirier's suggestion, when he wrote that the problem of American writers was "the need to recognize and contain a new continent. The wondering vision was adopted as a prime method of inclusion and assimilation."<sup>5</sup> The last page of *Gatsby* bears out both critics' reading: the "transitory enchanted moment" of "aesthetic contemplation" represents both the fulfillment of man's "capacity for wonder," and an awed, almost painful sense of abandonment to an urge "he neither understood nor desired" – both an instant of total control and of the loss of this control.

Like Poirier, Tanner focuses on Emerson as a romantic and neo-Platonist who tried to "enjoy an original relation to the universe," but who was painfully divided between the benign despotism of distant contemplation and the craving for a recovery of the lost "cradle," "womb," or "bosom" of nature.<sup>6</sup> The same point could be made about Fitzgerald. The metaphors of our text convey, at the same time, a sense of control through frontal

2. Richard Poirier, *A World Elsewhere: The Place of Style in American Literature* (New York University Press, 1966), p. 3.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

5. Tony Tanner, *The Reign of Wonder: Naivety and Reality in American Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 1965), p. 10.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

distance ("in the presence of this continent," "face to face"), and a need for almost foetal closeness to a protective "breast." Such contradictions show the complexity of Fitzgerald's imagination, which is mobile and stable, precarious and balanced, like Gatsby's belief "that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy's wing." (pp. 95-96) As Tanner points out, Fitzgerald "celebrated that capacity [for wonder] at the same time as he traced it to its doom," tried "to explore the *limits* of wonder, to celebrate the poetry of its willingness *and* draw the perspective of its fate."<sup>7</sup> Nick's ability – not to create or imagine, but to "become aware" of "the old island" that has been facing him suggests that American wonder, unlike that of Europe, is indissociable from the beholder's belonging to "the continent," and that its very momentariness amounts to a collective doom.

*The passage – and the book – ends on a new glimpse of the "green light," which is associated with that of the boat "beat[ing] on [...] against the current." This double metaphor echoes a passage which described Gatsby and Daisy looking out of the window, from the stuffy room of a New York apartment: "On the green Sound, stagnant in the heat, one small sail crawled slowly toward the fresher sea [...] Slowly the white wings of the boat moved against the blue cool limit of the sky. Ahead lay the scalloped ocean and the abounding blessed isles." (p. 113) The last paragraph of the book reads like a terribly ironical inversion of this image: the "old island" is now only the focus of a long since vanished dream, of an "orgastic future" which is as dead as the new world. The obstinate boat may also bring us back to the origin of James Gatz's metamorphosis into Jay Gatsby: the few months spent on the yacht of Dan Cody, "the pioneer debauchee, who during one phase of American life brought back to the Eastern seaboard the savage violence of the frontier brothel and saloon." (p. 97)*

7. *Ibid.*, p. 360.

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## 1 PROEM

Epilogues are, by nature, retrospective. With Fitzgerald, they not only provide a nostalgic return into the past, they also set the stage for the realization of some irremediable loss. And the moral lesson they teach betrays the writer's – or the narrator's – adherence to the Puritan / Calvinist vision of a lost Eden. Closure and dispossession come together to Anthony Patch in *The Beautiful and the Damned*, to Dick Diver in *Tender is the Night*, to Amory Blaine in *This Side of Paradise*. Yet Patch is seen, in the final scene, his eyes lost on the horizon, pondering over the hardships he went through and stubbornly and stoically reaffirming his philosophy of life. *This Side of Paradise* closes on a sentimental "reverie" about lost youth and past illusions, yet recalls also Blaine's instinctive determination to run the gauntlet of life, whatever the costs. In such instances, meditation and dream balance the sense of closure, and soften its disheartening impact. It looks as if the novel's final words somehow resisted their teleological status.

Words, at the end of *The Great Gatsby*, display a similar resistance to narrative closure. These concluding paragraphs, here, are the novel's true epilogue: they are definitely retrospective, they mourn the passing of an era and its illusions, they give Gatsby's friend and erstwhile confidant, Nick Carraway, an opportunity for moralizing. Yet, at the same time, they open timeless perspectives that partly deny their conclusive function. I will remind you here that in an early draft of the novel, these lines served as a conclusion to Chapter One and, by virtue of their position, acquired much of their transitional and open-ended character.

Let me expand a little more on this epilogue business. There are two stories, maybe three, coming to an unmistakable end in these pages. One is Jay Gatsby's story, as told by Nick, his self-proclaimed chronicler – should I say hagiographer? The other is Nick's own narrative, told in the confessional mode, which turns increasingly elegiac as the surviving friend feels compelled to celebrate Gatsby's truly heroic stature while mourning his loss. In addition, it seems that one chapter in human history has also been closed for good: the concomitance of

this closure with Gatsby's death and Nick's return to his native Midwest clearly signals the passing of an era. And yet another cycle is about to begin. For Gatsby's dreams were pregnant with possibilities of renewal, which only the moralist in Nick could detect. As witness to and actor in Gatsby's story, Nick feels committed to introducing some didactic moralism into his final observations; having managed to preserve ironic distance with his favorite subject, Gatsby, he turns the saddest acknowledgement of failure into a startlingly hopeful encomium. Nick, the somewhat insipid thurifer, is briefly transfigured into an inspired visionary. As the ontological despair fed by Gatsby's ill-fated dreams of grandeur fades, history acquires mythical overtones and his story becomes emblematic of the perennality of man's ambitions and hopes. Fitzgerald's prose, divested of all inessential accretions, becomes tense, increasingly elliptical, dense, tropic, polysemic and rhythmical like poetry. It is as though aesthetic form provided an ultimate rampart against the dissolution of story and history. What we get with *The Great Gatsby* is probably Fitzgerald's most elaborate and most militantly Modernist attempt to impose the reconstructed order of art against the chaos of a crumbling postwar world. And I fancy I can hear Fitzgerald intoning the last stanza of "The Waste Land," quiveringly asking the anguished "Shall I at least set my lands in order?" and assuaging his doubts with the promising "These fragments I have shored against my ruins."<sup>1</sup>

## 2 LOCALE

Scenery, though never neglected, is treated in a rather impressionistic manner throughout the novel. Clearly, places, landscapes, settings are valued for their evocative, symbolic power. Locale, for Fitzgerald, is fundamentally connotative and entirely subservient to the narrative; it works as the "where" of the story's so many incidents and dramas. Here, though, the house, the lawn, the road, the stairs, the shore, assume a definite – albeit belated – causal importance. "Where" becomes "why" or "because" as the sense of place is enhanced by the perception of absence (Gatsby's) and the prospect of departure (Nick's).

Houses have a particular oneiric quality in this last scene: they vanish in the moonlight, "melt away" into the gossamer fabric of Nick's meditation. Gatsby's mansion itself had been conceived, from the start, as the tentative materialization of a dream, as "colossal" as its owner's vital illusions. With Gatsby gone, his house is just an empty shell, doomed to fossilization, restored to the flux of History whence it had emerged only as a sophisticated anachronism and an architectural fantasy. That Gatsby's house should be a "failure" can be taken metaphorically, as reference to the incongruity of this Châteauesque mansion in an American environment – Nick's satiric view of contemporary local architectural tastes further reveals his midwestern democratic bias. The phrase "that huge incoherent failure of a house" can also be taken, metonymically, as evidence of Gatsby's own fate; the building, like Poe's "House of Usher," is the tangible representation of some mental construct. With Gatsby dead and the dream shattered it stands there like a broken icon, a shadow of the past under the moon. The sense of an irretrievable past is heightened by the shift of focus away from the house. Once a fashionable rendez-vous where crowds converged, it has become an

1. T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems* (Faber, 1963), p. 79.



object of distant or peripheral curiosity. The place has no future – as its prolonged emptiness (“still empty”) confirms – but memories of its former splendor endure. Fitzgerald’s typically elegiac treatment of locale works on two different levels: personal elegy primarily involves Nick’s reminiscences and his knowledge that “the party [is] over.” Historical elegy mourns the loss of some pristine state of nature, eradicated by private dreams like Gatsby’s; and the backward-moving narrative seeks those “pre-mansion” days before settlement, and fancifully restores the primeval forest (those “trees that had made way for Gatsby’s house”) to try and recover some lost, prelapsarian, dream. Gone is Whitman’s optimistic vision of a grand nation built over felled trees – “the axe leaps... the shapes arise,” as he wrote in “Song of the Broad-Axe.” *The Great Gatsby* is an anti-celebration of material progress, an indictment of those values which spoiled the romantic dream of harmony between man and Nature. Gatsby’s house is evidence that they finally proved mutually exclusive.

### 3 SHADOWS

The unreality of this last scene is striking. Nick’s parsimonious narration greatly contributes to a general feeling of immateriality: sounds fade away into memory (e.g. the “music and laughter” of Gatsby’s parties) or ironically dissolve into silent words. I find particularly suggestive of this flight from reality the image of a ferryboat noiselessly moving “across the *Sound*” (italics mine), into a world of contemplative silence. The polysemy of the word “sound” could not have escaped the master craftsman that Fitzgerald was. Besides, Nick also rejects the taxi-driver’s version of the accident as polluting agent; silence is for him narrative purification and integrity. His story of Gatsby’s life is the only one acceptable and suffers no postscript except his – Nick’s – own. He is thus doubly and immanently present here: as narrator and as caretaker of his own narration.

In contrast with the glitter of Gatsby’s parties and the harsh sunlight of summer days, this night-scene laments the vanishment of an era. Literally we are invited into a thickening darkness: few tangible light-sources remain, the ephemeral headlights of an anachronistic guest’s car, the “glow” of the ferryboat and the dim moonlight that sets Nick on his meditative course. The moon actually carries us away from the factual into an abstract world of moral values and historical symbols. By shedding enough light on the “obscene” graffiti spoiling Gatsby’s stairs it awakens the moralist in Nick; by blurring the outlines of the landscape, it forces him into a vision that recapitulates the first settlers’ “aesthetic contemplation” of the American continent.

These original visitors are but shadowy presences, like Gatsby himself, invisible yet obsessively present on the scene of his past glory. There are in fact three Gatsby shadows that you can meet here: one is the upstart that Daisy knew, who bought and inhabited a house that came true only through her eyes. The other is the jet-set favorite whom Nick knew, the nightly silhouette on the lawn of Chapter 1, with his arms outstretched towards a meaningful Sound, the host-with-a-thousand-guests who threw “dazzling parties” for a vain crowd. The third is the impassioned lover, eternally pining for Daisy, who tried to reach out to the “green light” of his dreams and finally outreached himself. I would suggest that these three shadows blend into one single figure, Fitzgerald’s version of the modern “homo

americanus," a doomed character that failed to learn the lessons of history, failed to measure the impact of progress on his environment and to perceive how he had perverted the democratic ideal; a character who believed in the virtues of material wealth as foundations of happiness and was cruelly reminded of the transitory nature of his bliss.

## 4 AWARENESS

These pages are epiphanic: they tend chiefly towards the resolution of Nick's private puzzles and dilemmas, towards significance. All the major themes of the novel, ambition, power, the Past, love, death, have been gathered into this last narrative roundup, standing at attention for some ultimate inspection. Nick is obviously anxious to invest his story with final meanings, to provide indisputable explanations for Gatsby's fate. His return to the house thus assumes the character of a pilgrimage to his hero's shrine, where Gatsby's ghostly presence might prove inspirational: the sanctity of the place is, to him, undeniable and he feels compelled to ritual gestures, like the cleansing of the front steps, sullied by a mysterious obscene word, scribbled in red, the color of impurity and death. I cannot help being reminded here of Holden Caulfield's similarly compulsive gesture at the end of J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*: as he visits the Egyptian wing of the local museum, with its pharaoh's tombs, he spots a "- you" inscription on the wall, "written with a red crayon or something," that he frantically tries to rub off. He goes on:

"That's the whole trouble. You can't never find a place that's nice and peaceful, because there isn't any. You may think there is, but once you get there, when you're not looking, somebody'll sneak up and write '- you' right under your nose. Try it sometime. I think, even, if I die, and they stick me in a cemetery, and I have a tombstone and all, it'll say 'Holden Caulfield' on it, and then what year I was born and what year I died, and then right under that it'll say '- you'. I'm positive, in fact."<sup>2</sup>

In both novels the symbol is more important than the word: what is obscene is life itself and man's incapacity to master his own destiny. Though less explicit about the inscription, Nick is quite positive about its obscenity. That this word should be so disturbing is a sure indication of Nick's feeling of frustration and of existential revolt against Gatsby's death and the failure of his hopes. By rubbing off the inscription Nick on one hand appoints himself guardian of conventional morals and decency, thereby justifying his flight from perverted West Egg and return to his Middle West home. On the other hand, he also reaffirms his loyalty to Gatsby, to what Gloria Gilbert, in *The Beautiful and the Damned*, calls "some profound and fundamental concept of honour."<sup>3</sup>

"Loyalty" may sound too much like a litotes when one considers Nick's unconditional commitment to Gatsby's memory; "veneration" seems more appropriate, judging from his next move. Elated, glad to have paid a last homage to his friend's merits, Nick spreads out on the beach in an attitude remindful of Gatsby facing the waters with arms outstretched towards Daisy's house on the opposite shore. Aping the hero, though in an earthbound manner (Nick is lying on the sand), is part of the pilgrimage. But it also points to Nick's last

2. J. D. Salinger, *The Catcher In The Rye* (Penguin Books, 1958), pp. 220-221.

3. F. S. Fitzgerald, *The Beautiful and The Damned* (Penguin Books, 1966), p. 318.

visit as heuristic quest: maybe the answer to the enigma posed by Gatsby's failure will be found in the original rite of going to the shore and looking at Daisy's "green light." Revelation might come from this kind of liturgy of hope.

This naive, almost fetishist quest for meanings does turn into a vision, yet an alarmingly sterile one. Teleologically, Gatsby's story makes sense: his life was shaped by a single purpose that produced an expected end. Gatsby's death, we may realize, was immanent in his pursuit. Yet why he could not "grasp" his dream, why that pursuit proved impossible remains in the limbo of failed explanations.

You will notice how highly speculative Nick's observations appear, in this last scene, and how anxious he is, all along, to keep narrative control over a story whose ultimate meanings he feels are escaping him. Nothing is more revealing of his apprehension than his imperious rejection of the taxi-driver's own version of events. Nick censures the story as though it were fiction and only his own account was truth. There is a clear warning, here, about the dangers of narrative authority. We will never know whether the taxi-driver had a first-hand knowledge of the accident and its aftermaths. But we know that Nick, since he "didn't want to hear" the man's story, can lay claim to no particular authenticity or power except those he has arbitrarily arrogated. The reader, really, has no other alternative but to follow that self-appointed guide. This scene, which Fitzgerald wrote as a Conradian modified first-person narration (i.e. a narrative mode which combines subjective and objective points of view), is meant to be a test of our capacity to adhere to Nick's vision, despite the limited nature of his knowledge.

And if Nick Carraway seems to us sympathetic or trustworthy we might wonder for what specific reasons, given the fact that so much of his account is based on speculations. Indeed, on closer scrutiny, one finds Nick's reports strangely uncertain. He seems satisfied with probabilities as he desperately tries to fit uncontrollable data into his narrative construct: the taxi-driver "*perhaps... drove Daisy and Gatsby over to East Egg the night of the accident and perhaps... made a story about it all his own.*" (italics added); and the invisible car once heard on Gatsby's drive was "probably" some guest's. As Nick's historical vision expands, so do his conjectures (man "*must have held his breath*" before the grandiose scenery of the continent, he suspects; Gatsby's dream "*must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it*" – italics added). And one is astonished to realize how much of the fiction one reads is actually the product of accumulated ignorance: not only the information deliberately withheld from us by the narrator, like the taxi-driver's identity (which Nick evidently knew since he "avoided him" on his return to West Egg), or the word scribbled on Gatsby's front steps; not even the ignorance due to lack of interest (like who was Gatsby's "final guest"); but also what could aptly be called ontological nescience, the mystery of the irrecoverable past and of the unpredictable future. Nick, indeed, has an intimation of "this continent" as it was offered to the explorer's eyes, but it remains, fundamentally, an "unknown world." Similarly, the "orgastic future" "eluded" Gatsby when he tried to grasp it, and, by Nick's own admission, eludes all of "us" as well.

As regards the future, we must admit that Nick has a tremendous advantage over Gatsby, which is that of the historian, i.e. the privilege of retrospection. He has that much more knowledge than Gatsby which derives from his living in Gatsby's future, so to speak. Being able to recapitulate Gatsby's life *and* death, he knows what Gatsby obviously ignored while alive: that his future "was already behind him." Nick's conviction is warranted by the fact

that Gatsby's unlived future is precisely Nick's lived past – the whole story he has been telling us retrospectively. By virtue of his friendship and of this – to him – exceptional understanding, Nick feels qualified to extend Gatsby's quest first to himself, then to all men. Gatsby's dramatic pursuit of love and happiness becomes emblematic, universal. In a final dissolution of ironic distance, Nick identifies with Gatsby and we are invited to identify with him as well. The individual chronicle expands into myth and Gatsby's tragic fate suddenly looks terribly human.

This ecstatic quest ("orgastic future") is a motor for mankind and for history, keeps the machine going, yet, inevitably, all futures stumble on the closure of mortality, accordingly bearing us "back ceaselessly into the past" in a perpetual Sisyphean motion. It seems that the only glimmer of hope may be found in the stubborn refusal of evidence, the repeated challenge of art forms against mortality; fiction vs. death, the ideal love against the erosion of time. This is not only the purpose behind Gatsby's tremendous spilling of energies, and behind Nick's impassioned account of it; it is the purpose of all writings. Provided one finds the right words, a prospect subtly implied by the aposiopetic phrase: "And one fine morning –"

That the narration should end in silence comes as no surprise. Nick has now renounced all claims to omniscience and Fitzgerald all pretension to the creator's omnipotence. The message contained in this conclusion is that each piece of writing is a momentary stay against the inexorable drift of time, a foredoomed attempt to impose words in the vacuum that stands between any past and any future. Yet, inexorable, like life itself, the mortal story is, in the end, restored to the silence it came from.

But, as with Gatsby and with Nick, the most important feature in any fictional construct is that we believe in it, the way Nick believed in Gatsby's tales and Gatsby believed in his own illusions. The ultimate hope, as Wallace Stevens said, "the final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly."<sup>4</sup>

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4. "Adagia" in *Opus Posthumous*, ed. Samuel French Morse (Knopf, 1957), p. 163.

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*By the close of Chapter 8, with the discovery of Gatsby's and Wilson's corpses, the novel's story has been fully told to its tragic end, and were the novel to stop there, it would still be a consistent, completed narrative sequence. Even as the first chapter serves as a meditative prologue, the ninth and last, written, as Nick Carraway the narrator indicates, two years after the events, turns out to be a brooding epilogue. It is still very much about Gatsby, and by no means lacks narrative content. Gaps in our information are eventually filled in: Meyer Wolfshiem tells Nick about his first meeting with Gatsby, "a major just out of the army" (p. 162), and how he put him on the road to success; Gatsby's rustic father shows Nick the "schedule," the earliest record of his son's lofty aspirations; Nick's last conversation with Tom Buchanan sheds light on the latter's complicity in Gatsby's murder. Furthermore, the chapter pursues the primary narrative in recounting Gatsby's desolate funeral, pointing up the final irrelevance of his wasted life to the society in which he lived, and hence the pathetic futility and foolishness of his solitary dream which has "broken up like glass against Tom's hard malice." (p. 141)*

## 1 REMEMBERING

Like the first, the final chapter is about Nick as much as about Gatsby. Significantly, its first sentence places him in the foreground as narrator by calling attention to his present remembering: "After two years I remember the rest of that day, and that night and the next day..." (p. 155) Nick's feelings, judgments, and responses are as much in evidence here as they were in the first chapter: his keen feeling of solidarity with and responsibility toward Gatsby ("I found myself on Gatsby's side, and alone," p. 156), his growing awareness of the callous indifference of Gatsby's former friends and partners, his own final emotional numbness. Past events are retold and reassessed from a greater distance, and in a mood of utter disillusionment.

Gatsby has vanished forever from the scene, and with him the gaudy, glittering world of enchantment he had miraculously managed to create at West Egg. Nick's final meditation

begins with a seemingly trivial observation: "Gatsby's house was still empty when I left – the grass on his lawn had grown as long as mine." In early June 1922, shortly before he actually made his acquaintance, Nick had seen – and been intrigued by – his neighbor's spurious mansion, "a factual imitation of some Hôtel de Ville in Normandy, with a tower on one side, spanking new under a thin beard of raw ivy, and a marble swimming pool, and more than forty acres of lawn and garden." (p. 11) So it is somehow fitting that he should observe it again one last time after Gatsby's death. Empty now, like a cenotaph, it has become for the musing survivor the last visible monument to Gatsby's life and pride, and the last reminder of his untimely death. Its present emptiness stands in sharp contrast to its former animation and crowdedness, and yet after his first attendance at one of Gatsby's parties, Nick, watching again the house from his shabby bungalow, was already struck by the "sudden emptiness" that "seemed to flow now from the windows and the great doors, endowing with complete isolation the figure of the host, who stood on the porch, his hand up in formal gesture of farewell." (p. 56)

Nick's final references to Gatsby's house thus build upon all his earlier ones, and their function, of course, by far exceeds the purely referential. The reader, at this point, is bound to read any descriptive detail pertaining to Gatsby's possessions rhetorically, as a metonymic allusion to his character and his dream. That "the grass on his lawn had grown as long as mine" would be of little import, had Nick not previously emphasized the difference between his own lawn and Gatsby's: "We both looked down at the grass – there was a sharp line where my ragged lawn ended and the dark, well-kept expanse of his began." (p. 80) Now the difference has vanished: the well-tended, well-trimmed pastoral garden, through which Gatsby asserted his shaping power and exercised his capacity to order and control, is about to be reabsorbed into nature and to return to the immutable seasonal cycles of growth and decay.

Coming as they do at the novel's ending, Nick's speculations about the historical significance of Gatsby's exceptional fate carry the full weight of the whole text. There is hardly a word in them that has not been used and re-used before in different contexts, and has not acquired a symbolic weight through its very repetition. Hence every word reverberates with its earlier occurrences, and re-activates the reader's memory of earlier scenes. Nick's incidental remarks about one of the local taxi drivers is another case in point. The taxi driver is one of the novel's many anonymous contributors to the insistent buzz of extravagant public rumor about Gatsby, of which we had already been given a rich sampling in Chapter 3. Nick suspects him of having made "a story about it all his own," a story he does not want to hear.

## 2 ERASURES

"I spent my Saturday nights in New York because those gleaming, dazzling parties of his were with me so vividly that I could still hear the music and the laughter..." The second paragraph summarizes Nick's last weeks in New York. Still under the shock of the events of that fatal summer and about to flee to the safe, orderly world of the Midwest, he now clearly wants to distance himself as much as he can from his recent involvement with Gatsby. Just as he refuses to hear the taxi driver's version of Gatsby's story, he refuses to investigate

when, one night, he hears a car stop at the front steps of Gatsby's house. Yet, on the last night, Nick pays a last visit to "that huge incoherent failure of a house." The failure he contemplates is of course that of Gatsby himself, the miscarriage of his design, the destruction of his dream. That much Nick is willing to acknowledge, but not the defilement of the dream. Hence his prompt erasure of the "obscene word, scrawled by some boy with a piece of brick" on the white marble steps of the house. The graffiti is like a profane inscription on a tombstone, as intolerable to Nick as the sordid gossip about Gatsby in his lifetime. His erasing gesture is an apt metaphor of his whole endeavor as Gatsby's biographer: in writing his own romanced version of Gatsby's story, Nick attempts not only to rescue his dead friend from oblivion but to preserve his remembered image – the glamorous image of Nick's own ideal self – from distortion and diminishment, to dissociate Gatsby's "unutterable visions" from his "perishable breath" (p. 107), to purge his dreams from the "foul dust" (p. 8) that floated in their wake. *The Great Gatsby*, the text of Nick's requiem for Gatsby, is meant to efface the ignoble text of a racketeer's career.

The erasure of the "obscene word" is the cleansing rite preceding Nick's final vigil on the deserted beach. The night has come and the shoreline of Long Island is dark now, the summer residences having been closed for the winter: "there [are] hardly any lights except the shadowy, moving glow of a ferry-boat across the Sound." No green light any more to focus the gaze of desire; just a distant "glow" out on the water. But the moon is shining once again, bringing to mind three earlier scenes in which Nick saw Gatsby under the same moonlight: his first glimpse of him, reported at the end of the first chapter – a lonely figure "regarding the silver pepper of the stars" (p. 25); his later appearance after one of his wild parties, standing on the porch, "a wafer of a moon" shining over his house (p. 56), and again, after the car accident, "standing there in the moonlight – watching over nothing." (p. 139)

### 3 TRANSFIGURATIONS

As Hawthorne suggested in "The Custom-House," his preface to *The Scarlet Letter*, the moonlight may be seen as an analogon of the imaginative act in that it transfigures and sublimates the material world and allows another, rarer kind of visibility to emerge.<sup>1</sup> Such a transfiguration is precisely what occurs during Nick's final meditation on Gatsby's beach:<sup>2</sup> "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." The higher the moon, the more the earth is imbued with its other-worldly radiance. All houses, including Gatsby's baronial mansion, now appear "inessential," that is, in accordance with the idealistic assumptions underlying the entire novel, the timebound inessentiality of the material gives way at last to the timeless essentiality of the ideal. While Gatsby, after the shattering of his illusions, the defeat of his belief in "the unreality of reality" (p. 95), awoke to the nightmare of a "new world, material

1. See N. Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (Norton & Company, 1961), pp. 30-31.

2. Nick's meditation about American history and the sense of possibility originally appeared in the manuscript not as the conclusion of the whole novel, but as the end of Chapter I, where Nick returns to West Egg from visiting Tom and Daisy, and sees Gatsby attempting to "determine what share was his of our local heavens."

without being real, where poor ghosts, breathing dreams like air, drifted fortuitously about..." (pp. 153-154), Nick discovers a world which is real without being material, and essential without being present.

But real and essential only to the mind, a past world conjured up by the imagination – revisited without being repossessed. The virgin island that "flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes" will not flower again; the "fresh, green breast" of the brave new world has turned into the grey Valley of Ashes. Nick no doubt considerably enlarges the significance of Gatsby's private dream by relating it to the shared dream of those who discovered and settled the American continent. Yet "the last and greatest of all human dreams" was already, like Gatsby's, the regressive dream of an impossible rebirth: the naive hope, denying history and yet caught in a historical process already begun, already underway, of a new guiltless beginning in a regained paradise, the belated dream of a recovered earliness. And as Nick intimates, the (re)beginning was in fact an ending, the beginning of an ending, for this was "the last time in history" that man was face to face "with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder."

Gatsby exemplifies this "capacity for wonder" in modern times, a capacity now out of proportion with what reality can offer. While "for a transitory enchanted moment" the stolid Dutch sailors were "compelled into an aesthetic contemplation" they "neither understood nor desired," Gatsby attempted to impose his own aesthetic vision upon a world whose beauty had been cheapened and corrupted, and so he could only become the mystified servant of the "vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty" (p. 95) of twentieth-century America. Yet the contrast should not be overemphasized, the ambiguities and dissonances in Fitzgerald's carefully chosen wording not be overlooked. Again and again, from the "obscene word" to the "orgastic future," the text intimates an undercurrent of equivocal sexuality, and the verb "pandered," with its unmistakable erotic and venal overtones,<sup>3</sup> seems to suggest that, far from being innocent wonder, the dream of the first settlers was already a greedy dream of lawless possession.

## 4 FROM WONDER TO NOSTALGIA

It is noteworthy too that Nick's visionary moment, his imaginative re-enactment of the "enchanted moment" experienced by the Dutch sailors is anticipated in the novel by the ecstatic moment, recorded in Chapter 6, when Gatsby kisses Daisy: "At his lips' touch she blossomed for him like a flower and the incarnation was complete." (p. 107) Daisy's miraculous blossoming for Gatsby both foreshadows (in the textual sequence) and recalls (in historical time) the magic flowering of the island for the sailors' eyes; the "green breast of the new world" shares its alluring greenness with the light at the end of Daisy's dock, "the green light" already mentioned at the close of Chapter 1 in connection with Gatsby (p. 25), and which had come to be the haunting signal and symbol of the remote, unattainable object of his desire.

3. Pander : a go-between or liaison in sexual intrigues, pimp, procurer; one who caters to the lower tastes and desires of others or exploits their weakness (*Random House Dictionary*).



The green light is referred to again in the next paragraph: "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." From Gatsby, Nick's musings have moved in ever-widening circles to the "Dutch sailors," then to universal "man." Now they revert to Gatsby. Remembering the moment when he first saw him stretching out his arms toward the light beyond the dark waters, Nick speculates once again about his moods and thoughts: "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." Nick, the narrator and self-appointed interpreter, conjectures how Gatsby felt, but he knows more than Gatsby ever did; he has come to realize that both Gatsby's dream and the American dream have been engulfed by History and so are the besetting phantoms of a dead past: "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."

For all his blindness, for all his misspent energy and ultimate failure, however, Gatsby remains for Nick (and probably remained for Fitzgerald) the "great Gatsby," an exemplary and representative American, and a heroic figure to be both admired and pitied. In the short paragraph that follows, his faith is at once reasserted and reexamined: "Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us." Within a single sentence the narrative shifts from the third person singular to the first person plural and from past to present tense. The novel's hero, the narrator and the narratees are eventually conflated in an all-inclusive "us," and Gatsby's quixotic quest becomes paradigmatically ours. The present empties itself under the spell of an elusive past future and an equally elusive future future: "It eluded us then, but that's no matter – tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms further..." The final irony is that the lessons of the past are never learnt, that no amount of disillusion can ever cure man of hope.

*"And one fine morning –": here, as it is about to summon us for another start, the sentence suddenly breaks off, Nick breaks off; his rhetoric vanishes into silence, his vision dissolves into a vacuum, leaving us suspended between mute despair and the thin but irrepressible hope of another rebeginning. "And one fine morning –": the future is an enigmatic blank, eluding Nick's words, as it eluded Gatsby's dreams and is eluding ours. The future only lives in myths and memories, its bright promise lies forever buried in the murky recesses of our individual and collective past. All dreams are regressive; they pull us backward, and we keep looking wistfully back to what might have been and never was and never will be. In writing, however, through the mirages of fiction, time is reversible, lost opportunities become possibilities again, and the darkest moods can be translated into the bittersweet music of nostalgia – the music we hear in the novel's alliterative final chord: "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."*

## MARIE-CHRISTINE PAUWELS

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*This famous passage which concludes The Great Gatsby, certainly the most moving and suggestive pages in the book, is Nick's last visit to the enchanted house of his former neighbor before his return to the Midwest, away from the destructiveness of the East.*

*It is the end of the summer, a time of regret and nostalgia. A feeling of emptiness and desolation pervades the first half of the passage, with the echo of Gatsby's sumptuous parties lingering in Nick's ears. The big house is now empty and the season is definitely over: "most of the big shore places were closed now," "there were hardly any lights." (l. 21-22)*

*Built upon the opposition between past/present and reality / illusion, the last page encompasses two distinct moments. Standing on Gatsby's doorstep, Nick expresses longing for his friend and disgust for the world at large before moving down to the beach where his meditation expands and becomes a lyrical reverie on Gatsby's dream, giving it a wider significance, that both of the American and human experience.*

## 1 SHADOWS OF THINGS PAST

The passage opens with a series of reminiscences which show the past as sublimated in Nick's memory, and the present as squalid and humiliating. The performance is finished, "the party was over" (l. 14) – an echo of "the party had begun" (Chapter 3) – the flashy decorum and "gleaming, dazzling parties" (l. 8-9) have vanished for ever, leaving only a theater of shadows peopled by ghostly figures. Nick is haunted, and suffers from hallucinations: "...I could still hear the music and the laughter, faint and incessant, from his garden and the cars going up and down his drive" (l. 9-11) and spends his Saturday nights in New York to shun painful memories. Nature has taken its revenge over artifice and the grass on Gatsby's lawn has grown as long as Nick's. The real world, with its squalidness and its vulgar taste for the sensational is claiming its rights over the illusion and Gatsby's tragedy is brought down to the level of a mere *fait divers* by the taxi driver who, when driving customers past the house, always stops to tell a tale of his own. Likewise, the

obscene word that Nick finds scribbled on Gatsby's steps stands as a symbol of the corruption and jealousy that killed him and sullied his memory. The sharpness of the brick-red scrawl contrasts violently with the lily-white of the marbled steps, two colours which are brought in constant opposition throughout the novel and which carry very strong undertones in Francis Scott Fitzgerald's (henceforth FSF) symbolic world: in his brilliant study on *The Great Gatsby*, A. Le Vot (see bibliography) shows the colour red as being permanently associated with danger for Gatsby, while it is the dominant tone chosen to describe the world of the Buchanans. At the beginning of the novel, Nick insists on the red of Tom's house: "brick walks and burning gardens," "bright vines," "a bright rosy-colored space," "a wine-colored rug" (pp. 12-14), a world of arrogance and ostentatious riches in which Gatsby has no right to be. In contrast, red stands as a symbol of inadequacy and awkwardness when related to Gatsby. His pink suit is all wrong and the window that he scrutinizes after the accident, "the pink glow of Daisy's room" (p. 151), bears the mark of treachery. Gatsby stands "in the center of the crimson carpet" (p. 121), isolated in an alien environment. The carpet image and the danger it conveys foreshadow the puddle of blood in the pool at the end of Chapter 6, making "a thin red circle" in the water where Gatsby lies dead.

Just as Nick refuses to listen to the taxi driver whose storytelling insults Gatsby's memory, he likewise erases the epitaph-like inscription, thereby showing his disagreement with the contemporary assessment of his friend.

Gatsby's life was one of illusion, an illusion clad in splendor and extravagance now shattered and destroyed, leaving only a "huge incoherent failure of a house" (l. 16) which has now lost all meaning as its only reason to exist was to attract Daisy back, one day. But like the pink suit, a colour that a genuine Oxford man, as Gatsby pretends to be, would never wear, Gatsby's crazy mansion, "a factual imitation of some *Hôtel de Ville* in Normandy" (p. 11) is also ill-suited and in bad taste, "incoherent," a mere fake. It has never achieved the authenticity of Daisy's house, an elegant and elaborate Georgian colonial mansion. The mystery that enveloped Gatsby during most of the novel is still present at this point, albeit with a strong ironical overtone with such words as "probably" and "perhaps," used several times. This feeling of hesitancy and confusion pervades the first three paragraphs of the last page, written in a voluntarily constrained and syncopated rhythm which emphasizes action over emotion: "Probably it was some final guest who had been away at the ends of the earth and didn't know that the party was over." (l. 13-14) This very powerful sentence is built around short, mostly monosyllabic words which perfectly convey the cynical mood of the narrator. Numerous negatives, "I didn't want to hear it," (l. 6) "I avoided him," (l. 6) "I didn't investigate," (l. 12) "(he) didn't know" (l. 14) further express the narrator's uneasiness. The verb "to hear" which expresses perception is constantly used in the negative form, once referring to the taxi driver's story that Nick refuses to listen to, then to Gatsby's former parties which are still so painfully vivid in Nick's mind, and finally to the final guest, driving up the alley, a ghostly figure whom Nick decides not to investigate. At the same time, the choice of verbs expressing movement (to leave, to grow, to point, to get off, to go up and down, to draw) express the transient quality of this passage, a mere moment in the life of a narrator reluctant both to remember the past and face the present, eager to leave and forget.

After having erased the obscene scrawl on Gatsby's steps, Nick walks down to the beach and sprawls down on the sand. From this position – appropriate to dreaming – his mind starts to wander and the tribute paid to his friend enlarges into something more intense, a

cosmic meditation on the origins of the American experience as well as on the meaning of the human condition.

## 2 AN AMERICAN REVERIE

Imperceptibly, the mood which permeated the first three paragraphs of the passage changes. The moon which shone vividly upon the obscene scrawl on the steps "rose higher" (l. 23) and the "inessential houses" are said to "melt away," (l. 23-24) revealing, in the photographic sense of the term, the superior reality of Gatsby's dream. The fact that the scene is moonlit is of great significance, for not only does it convey an impression of serenity, but it also makes the novel come full circle by echoing the first time Gatsby appeared to Nick at the end of Chapter 1, standing on his moonstruck lawn with his arms outstretched, lost in the contemplation of a tiny green light at the end of a dock across the bay. Gatsby is a moon child in the sense that the moonlit scenes give him another meaning, reveal his real self, normally hidden behind a dazzling radiance which reverberates nothing but emptiness, very much like his glitzy car: "terraced with a labyrinth of wind-shields that mirrored a dozen suns." (p. 70) Facing the moon and the starlit sky, Nick experiences a vision which comes to him not at once but step by step, as in the revelation of a photograph: "the inessential houses began to melt away," "gradually I became aware." (l. 23-24) In a very fluent movement, almost in slow motion – the dimly lit ferry is a mere shadow gliding over the bay, the moon slowly rises higher – we pass from the temporal to the timeless and from the inessential to the essential.

As the focus changes, so does the tone. Unlike the constrained and syncopated rhythm of the earlier passage, Nick's vision here possesses a lyrical and melodic quality which is also found in the novel every time he identifies with Gatsby's own vision. In Fitzgerald's first draft, this passage was put at the end of Chapter 1. But the author realized that it was too moving and lyrical a page to be presented at the beginning and that its deeper meaning became lost in the course of the book. Placed at the end, it echoes and enlarges the entire novel.

Long Island and its palaces are replaced by a forest, and the scene is transposed three centuries back, to the origins of the American experience and of the American dream, when the awestruck Dutch sailors first set their eyes on the "fresh, green breast of the new world." (l. 25-26) During a short moment of perfect harmony between aspirations and reality, man then thought that his relentless quest for Paradise Lost had come to an end. A return to Nature, or rather to Nature as mother / lover ("breast") fed the hopes of these pioneers who first set eyes on the American shores. By his artful choice of words, "dreams," "enchanted moment," "contemplation," "wonder" which all belong to the irrational plane, as well as the epic rhythm of the sentences, FSF appeals rather to our senses and emotions than to our intellect and builds a very intensely evocative passage.

Meanwhile a subtle network of associations constantly brings us back to Gatsby's particular case and links it imperceptibly to the larger vision: the old island which had "flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes" (l. 25) is the enlarged metaphor of Daisy's transformation at the end

Free Sophomore  
Foundation

of Chapter 6 as she “blossomed for him like a flower” when Gatsby kissed her for the first time. (p. 118) Likewise, the “fresh, green breast” with its maternal connotations echoes another vision, that of Gatsby climbing his imaginary ladder to “suck on the pap of life, gulp down the incomparable milk of wonder.” (p. 118) Further down in the passage, the American dream becomes “his dream” (l. 35) and “man’s capacity for wonder” (l. 31-32) is echoed in “Gatsby’s wonder.” (l. 34) Finally, the word “pandered” which suggests the corruptive action of the pioneers upon the new continent also evokes the deceitful attraction of Daisy upon Gatsby.

Gatsby’s dream becomes a metaphor for the American dream itself, a dream which, as the first settlers engaged in the pursuit of an ever receding frontier, became corrupted and sullied by the love of Mammon. In Lionel Trilling’s own words (1968), “Gatsby, divided between power and dream, comes to stand for America itself, for ‘the American dream.’” As the hope and idealism of the frontier and of democracy soon conflicted with a destructive and acquisitive materialism, so was Gatsby to discover the intense corruptive forces at work to destroy him. The Dutch sailors and their ideal vision were to be replaced by the “pioneer debauchees” embodied by Dan Cody, Gatsby’s spiritual father. Thus, FSF sees American history as a destructive journey from the “fresh, green breast” evocative of a verdant world, of generosity and new beginnings, to the sterile “valley of ashes” in which men have become mere shadows of themselves, a valley in which the colour grey replaces the hopeful green. That civilization spells corruption is suggested by the choice of words, “the last and greatest of all human dreams,” (l. 27-28) “the last time in history,” (l. 30-31) which convey a sense of finality and doom, for the fleeting moment will never come again, and the vision, in its ephemeral quality – “a transitory enchanted moment,” (l. 28) “man must have held his breath” (l. 28-29) – carries in its very perfection the seeds of its own destruction.

Like the first settlers, Gatsby yielded to corruption to win back Daisy, committing himself to serving a beauty that is “vast, vulgar and meretricious” (p. 105), pursuing an incorruptible dream with corrupt means. In following his grail (Daisy), Gatsby mistakenly believed that innocence and the Edenic past could be recaptured: “Can’t repeat the past?” “Why of course you can!” (p. 117) The future became for him a mere avenue leading back to the past, but a past which doesn’t even exist as it is born of his imagination.

This sense of failure is also suggested by the victory of darkness over light: “He did not know that it (his dream) 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*.” (l. 36-39) (our italics)

The constant interplay between past, present and future tenses further stresses the connexion between the two dreams. It carries the reader into wider realms, that of human destiny, and that of timelessness, in a fluid manner which is typically Fitzgeraldian: The Dutch sailors’ “new world” becomes, in Nick’s words, “the old unknown world,” (l. 33) i.e. their future has now become our past. Likewise, Gatsby’s dream which he believed to be still ahead “was already behind him.” (l. 37) We are made to travel back and forth between present, past and future and in the last few lines, the novel even encompasses the three tenses at once, this time inside the same sentence: “It eluded us then, but that’s no matter – to-morrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms further...” (l. 41-42). According to Christiane Johnson (see bibliography), “this page is more than timeless: it partakes of past, present and future at once, and shows how it is their interplay that causes timelessness.”

Now we are made to feel that Gatsby's quest is not only timeless, but that it is universal; it is humanity's entire quest that we are made aware of, through a process of assimilation: "Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us." (l. 40-41) In this reciprocal construction, Gatsby becomes "us," he becomes every man. And the "green light" becomes the "orgastic future," an expression which carries very strong undertones, suggesting both the absolute ecstasy of Gatsby's dream and the corruption inherent in the exuberant parties he gave. What is also meant here is that no human quest is devoid of this ambivalence.<sup>1</sup> The choice of words in the next sentence further emphasizes the parallel between Gatsby's hopes and the hopes of every man, "...tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms further... And one fine morning --" (l. 42-43). With this image, a subtle reminder of our first meeting with Gatsby, stretching his arms towards a green light across the bay, it is the unfailing hope of mankind that is laid out before us, an unfailing hope to which is added, in the last sentence, an equally strong determination to struggle: "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past." (l. 44-45) Men are only helpless boats in the flow of time, both active, "we beat on," and passive, "borne (born?) back" in relation to their destiny. In this very moving sentence in which the "b" alliterations stress the dogged effort to go on, FSF celebrates the infinitude of human desire and man's capacity for dreams and visions faced with the inevitability of failure, since our dreams, grounded in an irrecoverable past, forever remain ungraspable. At the same time, this realization does not lead to despair, for in FSF's own words: "It is sadder to find the past again and find it inadequate to the present than it is to have it elude you and remain forever a harmonious conception of memory." (1935)

*In this sense, Gatsby is "great" as he transcends human limitations and stresses the power of imagination over reality. Time destroys illusion, the "magical glory" as FSF himself called it when writing Gatsby,<sup>2</sup> but the illusion, nonetheless, forever lives in memory and if the dream is betrayed in fact, it is yet redeemed in man's mind.*

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1. There is confusion as to whether Fitzgerald intended the word to be "orgastic" or "orgiastic": in 1925, in a letter to Maxwell Perkins, he says the following: "orgastic is the adjective for 'orgasm' and it expresses exactly the intended ecstasy. It's not a bit dirty." Yet on Fitzgerald's personal copy, one can see a faint "i" pencilled in the margin, although nobody knows for sure who added it.

2. "That's the whole burden of this novel – the loss of these illusions that give such color to the world that you don't care whether things are true or false as long as they partake of the magical glory." Quoted from FSF to Ludlow FOWLER, *Correspondence of FSF*, ed. M.J. Brucoli & M. Duggan (Random House, 1980), p. 145.