The Girls and the Money: Reflections on *The Great Gatsby*

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My Grey Walls Press edition of *The Great Gatsby*, published in 1948 and bought about the same time, came in a dust jacket I never liked. But it's more dust than jacket now, and all I can remember of its design is that it had crude skyscrapers, not the least sharp-edged, on it somewhere, and something red and something green. Or at least I think it did. Yesterday what I picked up was green cloth bound, slim, subdued, plain, not the least bit awkward and garish, hurried and home-made. Those last are qualities I've always associated not only with Gatsby but also with *Gatsby,* and if being reduced to that plain green is one of the signs that some of the life you held in your hand when you held it new—and it still felt new, in 1948 (to a young man, anyway)—has now been rubbed off, has crumbled away and left bare the permanent rock, then it's a change I suppose we can do nothing but try to get used to. In its plain monotone, perhaps we can think of the book as more like the jewel Edmund Wilson compared it with and less like the local newspaper. Plain cloth is in any case an improvement over ruffled Robert Redford on glossy paper cover.

But as soon as I opened it I thought the dust jacket had told a truth, at least about the beginning. It's a book permeated with crude youthful uncertainties, surely. Novels are about young people, of course, because they (novels and young people) are about growth and change, about love and hunger, and novelists wish to tell us that while the best thing you can be is young, there's also a lot wrong with being young; it's what most older people seem to believe. But *Gatsby* is not only about young people, and the love they need and the money they need; it's also *by* a young person, and a fairly awkward one seems to speak to me out of those early pages.

What I think I see through is a youthful effort to impress. If I were more subtle than I am perhaps I would make great play about the difference, the great gap, between author and narrator, and be confident about reading in the opening sentence,

> In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I've been turning over in my mind ever since. (p. 5)

a smile at the baby narrator's claim to maturity, a smile from a knowing author who is not taken in the least little bit by this slightly pompous young man, an author who conspicuously pares his fingernails in a superior sort of way, secure on his pedestal in the background. It's a view many authors would like us to have of them. "You didn't think I meant that!" they might choose to cry. "That's rubbish? I was being ironic!" Yet the truth of the matter (or at least *a* truth of it), surely, is that—for all the undoubted ironies, all the opportunities we are given to judge—Conrad (whom Fitzgerald admired), say, has a good deal invested in Marlow, Melville in Ishmael, Hemingway in Lieutenant Frederick Henry, Dickens in David Copperfield, Twain in Huck, Joyce in Stephen, and Fitzgerald in Nick Carraway. It is safer, it seems to me, to assume that the author "means" what his narrator says than to assume he doesn't. Better still, not to assume anything at all, but take note only of ironies quite demonstrated, quite created.

Apart from anything else, the Nick Carraway who speaks in these opening pages doesn't seem to me very like the one I listen to in the rest of the book, who does not "reserve all judgements", does not avoid "the intimate revelations of young men", and does not seem particularly a snob. Through him here I feel the presence of a young author yearning to perform dazzlingly for us, opening his book with worked up bon mots about "the abnormal mind" and those "intimate revelations", wanting to command our respect (as well as our affection and our trust) for his insouciant dry sharp wit, wanting to introduce his subject with grace and verve. Is the book about class differences, though? Yes. Is it about "fundamental decencies"? Not really. Is it about "personality"? Not really. Is it about "infinite hope"? Certainly. So has it found its subject in these opening paragraphs? More or less. But if it's not quite like that first cut at the rough diamond, the cut that clears a perfect little area of order out of natural disorder, then no matter; for myself, I like that young author. He's not paring his fingernails; he's struggling, like a real young man, to get his book started without letting us see too much behind the scenes. There is no deceit or malice or sneer that I can see in him, but only clear young ambition, which is fine.

I suppose I'm more interested in Fitzgerald than I am in Nick Carraway. It's fashionable to claim about first-person narratives that what they are largely about is that first person; most often, it seems to me, that is only a minor interest, so very often do

authors choose narrators in whom their deepest feelings find a life, and so much more interesting are authors than their narrators. But it's a free country. I'm free to find the hatred Mark Twain tries to hide into Huck more interesting than Huck, and Fitzgerald's reaching out in the figure of Nick for an idea of what being beyond the strife might be like more interesting than Nick the shadowy recorder. Nick is Fitzgerald trying to stand back from the completed jewel, all passion spent. But at the end of the book the jewel is still waiting to be cut, America has still to be discovered.

And no matter what Nick says, introducing his story, Gatsby does *not* represent "everything for which (he has) an unaffected scorn". If anyone does represent that, it is Tom Buchanan. In a way, of course, he's like Gatsby; he drifts on, "for ever seeking, a little wistfully, for the dramatic turbulence of some irrecoverable football game" (and only someone who knew the feeling could have dressed it up so wordily), just as Gatsby ploughs on seeking irrecoverable Daisy. But does Tom ever seem wistful, as claimed? I can't think of an occasion. He's wistful here, I feel fairly sure, because Fitzgerald enjoys wistfulness (or the idea of it) and could not resist draping its cloak over Tom, either not noticing or not caring that it did not fit him. No, what's interesting about Tom is not his wistfulness; it's that "great pack of muscle shifting when his shoulder moved under his thin coat". Tom is brutal, brutal physically, morally and politically. He is the Caliban of the novel, the representative of ugliness who has trapped his Miranda in a golden cage. The ugliness is power, first muscle power and then bulk in general (even Myrtle's), things, what can be possessed and established, displayed, consumed, bought: at the end we always find money, which Tom and Gatsby have in common. It's one of the axes on which *Gatsby* turns.

Jane Austen knew that it was a good fortune that made a single man attractive, but only Fitzgerald knew what beautiful shirts it could buy; in a culture that knew money was dirty, Fitzgerald knew it shone. But it shines with not just its own light. Wealth makes things look like this:

> The only completely stationary object in the room was an enormous couch on which two young women were buoyed up as though upon an anchored balloon. They were both in white, and their dresses were rippling and fluttering as if they had just been blown back in after a short flight around the house. I must have stood for a few moments listening to the whip and snap of the curtains and the groan of a picture on the wall. Then there was a boom as Tom Buchanan shut the rear windows and the caught wind died out about the

> room, and the curtains and the rugs and the two young women ballooned slowly to the floor. (p. 11)

Money is transforming, can be exchanged into almost anything else, is Protean, can change many of the shapes life takes on. The most characteristic and the most possessing prose of this book transforms, makes things undergo a sea change, de-materializes them. Sometimes it catches an Ariel lightness, as I think it does in the passage above. But not always.

> I looked back at my cousin, who began to ask me questions in her low, thrilling voice. It was the kind of voice that the ear follows up and down, as if each speech is an arrangement of notes that will never be played again. Her face was sad and lovely with bright things in it, bright eyes and a bright passionate mouth, but there was an excitement in her voice that men who had cared for her found difficult to forget: a singing compulsion, a whispered 'Listen', a promise that she had done gay, exciting things just a while since and that there were gay, exciting things hovering in the next hour. (p. 12)

The excitement in that seems to me factitious, not conjured up by vision but rubbed up out of not much more than the need to be excited. The book is accused sometimes of being adolescent, sentimental; passages like that are evidence for the prosecution.

One could possibly argue, I suppose, that the bad writing is a sign that Fitzgerald's heart is in the right place: he couldn't give his best art to a bad feeling, in this case the feeling that what is needed for a rich life is "excitement". There's perhaps something in that argument; certainly it would be foolish to believe Fitzgerald couldn't tell the difference between being struck by the beauty of young women in light white dresses and being always on the itch to go to a party. When it counted, he could. From the beginning, indeed, he never quite trusts the Daisy who attracts him so much:

> The instant her voice broke off, ceasing to compel my attention, my belief, I felt the basic insincerity of what she had said. It made me uneasy, as though the whole evening had been a trick of some sort to exact a contributory emotion from me. I waited, and sure enough, in a moment she looked at me with an absolute smirk on her lovely face, as if she had asserted her membership in a rather distinguished secret society to which she and Tom belonged. (p. 20)

The Insincerity Society? Is this the Nick who is "inclined to reserve all judgements"?

At the end of the chapter, for contrast, we have a person, Gatsby, quite decidedly not on show, holding his arms out as if in beseeching prayer, in the dark, and seen by Nick only because

if the narrator doesn't see it it can't happen. Unlike Tom when we first see him, Gatsby when we first see him is as good as insubstantial. "When I looked once more for Gatsby," Nick writes, "he had vanished." It would be hard to imagine Tom vanishing.

What I take to be Fitzgerald's almost religious belief in the possibility of transformation—the belief that gives his most distinctive and poetic prose its character and power—has its obvious connections with Gatsby's idealism and with Nick's sympathy for that idealism; idealism is a hope that reality will transform itself. Its connection with Daisy can be seen, it seems to me, in the account of the "valley of ashes" and "the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleberg" that opens Chapter Two. Daisy's tone is one of cute imaginative fun, playful invention, and that's the tone here, surely; the Dickensian grotesquerie, so often the product of fastening one attribute on to multifarious connected appearances, accumulates no weight here, and the ash men arouse no feelings of wrath at injustice or degradation or exploitation. If this is Nick having a go at the Waste Land and the Death of God, then while we might respect him for his interest in the topics it would be hard to do more than award an A for Effort; Industry and God get off pretty well unscathed. But wherever in this book words like "fantastic" or "wild" turn up, there is at least the faint spoor of transformability, the strain and excitement and throb of that deep hope.

The bulk of this chapter tells us of the vulgarity of what Tom's instincts lead to. We have to go through the ashes to reach it, appropriately, through a world defaced and despiritualized by commerce, and it is perfectly appropriate that Tom's love-making leads to broken bone and spilt blood. It's a perceptive piece of writing, graced by the comic, parodic lightness that nevertheless shows rather more that Fitzgerald saw himself as superior to these people (and he was) than that Nick did. Bereft of vision though they are, Dreiser would not have found them so amusing.

But it is Gatsby's party, in Chapter Three that takes Nick's—and Fitzgerald's, and our—fancy and imagination. At Tom's party,

> Mrs Wilson had changed her costume some time before, and was now attired in an elaborate afternoon dress of cream-coloured chiffon, which gave out a continual rustle as she swept about the room. With the influence of the dress her personality had also undergone a change. The intense vitality that had been so remarkable in the garage was converted into impressive hauteur. Her laughter, her gestures, her assertions became more violently affected moment by moment, and as she expanded the room grew smaller around her,

> until she seemed to be revolving on a noisy, creaking pivot through the smoky air. (p. 31)

Good strong writing, judging clearly the aggressive egotism she shares with Tom.

At Gatsby's party,

> The lights grow brighter as the earth lurches away from the sun, and now the orchestra is playing yellow cocktail music, and the opera of voices pitches a key higher. Laughter is easier minute by minute, spilled with prodigality, tipped out at a cheerful word. The groups change more swiftly, swell with new arrivals, dissolve and form in the same breath; already there are wanderers, confident girls who weave here and there among the stouter and more stable, become for a sharp, joyous moment the centre of a group, and then, excited with triumph, glide on through the sea-change of faces and voices and colour under the constantly changing light.
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> Suddenly one of these gypsies, in trembling opal, seizes a cocktail out of the air, dumps it down for courage and, moving her hands like Frisco, dances out alone on the canvas platform. A momentary hush; the orchestra leader varies his rhythm obligingly for her, and there is a burst of chatter as the erroneous news goes round that she is Gilda Gray's understudy from the *Follies*. The party has begun. (pp. 40, 41)

The difference is a hundred and eighty degree one. Under Tom's influence the world is morally, and finally physically, subdued; under Gatsby's it is freed. And the freedom is characterized by the possibility of transformation. Transformations, indeed, of all kinds:

> Every Friday five crates of oranges and lemons arrived from a fruiterer in New York—every Monday these same oranges and lemons left his back door in a pyramid of pulpless halves. (p. 38)

But a butler's thumb has to press a button two hundred times in half an hour for that sort of result, and the news about the understudy is erroneous; Fitzgerald is not quite so intoxicated as the girl in "trembling opal" is with her egoistic freedom.

If there is an intoxicating opalescent chameleon in the novel, it is of course Gatsby himself. We have had charming and disreputable Mr Jingles in literature before this, we have had black and white Jekyll and Hyde, but so far as I can remember we have not had a man who changed his beings and his not beings every time we met him, or, more than that, a man who as good as invented himself. Jay Gatsby is the possibility of transformation incorporated, and as such the necessary hero of this novel.

But what he does with that smile of his is not subdue the world to his charm, not dance out to be seen.

> It was one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it, that you may come across four or five times in life. It faced—or seemed to face—the whole eternal world for an instance, and then concentrated on *you* with an irresistible prejudice in your favour. (p. 46)

With that benedictive smile he does not transform Nick but confers identity on him, enables him to be—or imagine he is—his best self. But just for a moment:

> Precisely at that point it vanished—and I was looking at an elegant young roughneck, a year or two over thirty, whose elaborate formality of speech just missed being absurd. (p. 46)

Well, which is he? Roughneck or Son of God?

I think Nick the know-all (who at thirty knows how many times in a lifetime you'll see a certain kind of smile) wants to show us that he maturely knows that all we have is the real world, which means if not quite ash heaps, then at least grime. He (and Fitzgerald in him, pretending to know what Conrad knew in *Heart of Darkness*: that Kurtz the idealist will end up killing) wants brusquely to assure us that Gatsby is busy in "the services of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty", that he was as much a crook as a dreamer, that his friends are not even Sloanes but Wolfsheims, the associates of gangsters, and so on. No sooner has he told us that "No amount of fire or freshness can challenge what a man can store up in his ghostly heart" than he has to qualify that with "The most grotesque and fantastic conceits haunted him in his bed at night. A universe of ineffable gaudiness spun itself out in his brain . . ."

Perhaps it's possible—perhaps it's necessary—to be both roughneck *and* Son of God? But so far as I am concerned anyway, the roughneck (whom we never hear talking or see behaving) is made up, and the Son of God is not. Which is another way of saying, I suppose, that what I carry away from this book under the name of Gatsby, what I think of when I think of Gatsby, has no roughneck in it; like Nick, I think "Gatsby turned out all right in the end". Which is another way of saying that it was Daisy who did one killing and Tom who connived at another, it was Daisy who did not tell the truth and Tom who ratted. Fitzgerald could not make Gatsby over into Kurtz. Gatsby only *looks* as if he had "killed a man".

Fitzgerald is often as unsure about Gatsby as Nick is, despite the final view they both come to. He is very afraid of the sentimentality that sometimes crowds in when he starts to think Gatsby, and he rushes to blame Gatsby for it. But I think he

should blame the times. Fitzgerald was of the first generation in our time to believe that in not believing anything it knew everything; he had difficulties to face that Jane Austen did not know about. Even so, he managed to write what might turn out to have been one of the last novels.

As a class, novels are the stories that begin by placing their faith in girls and money, and end with some loss of that faith. Nick loses Jordan, but wins back "the fur coats of the girls returning from Miss This-or-That's". Without that faith I rather suspect that novels have only their own clevernesses to fall back on, their art-egos. It is a large part of Fitzgerald's achievement in this novel that he managed to fight off, while still close-wrapped in its coils, the death stings of disbelief, and tell us, in the best of his art, truths: that Daisy is a continent of mystery and rich promise, an America, but America will go wrong, but Daisy is still an America, and America will still go wrong, and that the Gatsby who lives in that hope despite that knowledge will not be saved by either of them but might help save us if we are lucky.

Why does Nick rub out the "obscene word, scrawled by some boy with a piece of brick" on the steps of Gatsby's deserted house? Because though he tries to accept what he knows, he cannot get rid of hope. His being able to understand and express the Dutch sailor's coming "face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder" is nearly all the proof we need that it was *not* the last time; Gatsby's "wonder" in the very next sentence shows its continuing vitality. But if that is playing games with words, then let us listen to the throb and pulse of hopefulness in these last four paragraphs. In the very last lines, for example, we are not drifting, but beating on, not with the current but against it, not finally, but ceaselessly. And if it's into the past that we are "borne back", how do you get a past? By gobbling up the future. I'm inclined to think that even if Nick and Fitzgerald don't quite know it, even if the tellers are in the grip of fashionable self-pity, what the tale tells us at its end, as so often throughout, is to row like hell after the girls and the money.