F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *Gatsby* and the Imagination of Wonder

**Giles Gunn**

**T**HERE are certain occasions, I believe, when it is useful, even necessary, to formulate an interpretation of a book which attempts to explain why we keep coming back to it, to suspend the usual critical apparatus and simply try to concentrate on those details, selective as they may sometimes be, which shape or determine the way a particular book reads us as well as we read it. I regard this, in fact, as an indispensable part of the critic’s total job of work. For criticism does not end with explication, it only begins there. It ends, if at all, only with an account of how specific books, writers or traditions somehow reorder the mental, emotional and spiritual furniture of our lives, somehow move us, if ever so slightly, to accept new ideas of order, fresh reconceptions of what will suffice. In this, one of its furthest reaches, the act of criticism is very like the act of love: The critic finds himself in the paradoxical situation of seeking to preserve and enhance the memory of something he cherishes only to discover in the process that this response has been compelled almost from the very beginning by an odd sense that he is merely reciprocating in kind. Hence, as much as the critic should strive, in Matthew Arnold’s words, “to see the object as in itself it really is,” there comes a point in his negotiations with certain literary texts when his comprehension inevitably will, and necessarily should, be determined as well by how the object sees him.¹ Though few may wish to go quite as far as Leslie Fiedler, there is still a certain warrant to his confession that "the truth one tries to tell about literature is finally [no] different from the truth one tries to tell about the indignities and rewards of being the kind of man one is—an American, let’s say, in the second half of the twentieth century, learning to read his country’s books."² What Fiedler is suggesting has been beauti-

¹Certain passages in this and the following paragraph are drawn from my "Reflections on My Ideal Critic," *Criterion*, II (Spring, 1972), pp. 18-22, which I here use with the permission of the editors.


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fully expressed by Erich Heller where he claims that the ultimate business of
the student, teacher and critic of literature is "not the avoidance of subjectivity,
but its purification; not the shunning of what is disputable, but the cleansing and
deepening of the dispute." To this degree, Heller maintains, there are no meth-
ods which completely and satisfactorily comprehend the critic's subject matter—
"only methods, perhaps, that produce the intellectual pressure and temperature
in which perception crystallizes into conviction and learning into a sense of
value."3

This, I would argue, is how the critic tries, if he ever really can, to improve
the quality of life. By assessing the actual in light of its own potential, that is,
by seeking to comprehend a work not only for what it is in and of itself but
also in terms of what it merely suggests but still elicits, he struggles not only to
preserve a sense of value but also to increase it. Yet in a culture characterized
chiefly by what Richard Gilman has described—and far too sanguinely, I be-
lieve—as a confusion of realms, he can afford no illusions about the heavy odds
stacked against him. His position, like that of the writer's for whom he serves
as an advocate, is always an embattled one; for he knows, or should know, that
in the realm of cultural and spiritual values, as T. S. Eliot once remarked, "we
fight rather to keep something alive than in the expectation that anything will
triumph."4

It is no accident that F. Scott Fitzgerald could have said very nearly the same
thing. For The Great Gatsby is nothing if not an attempt to keep something
alive in the face of a certain conviction that it has no possibility of ultimate tri-
umph. What is at issue, of course, is not the survival of Gatsby himself nor
even the substance of his vision; the one is fatally vulnerable, the other hopelessly
naive and corruptible. The novel is rather about the energy and quality of the
imagination which propels both Gatsby and his vision, and which endures, if at
all, only in the narrative strategies of Fitzgerald's art. Viewed as a story about
Gatsby and his dream, the novel is merely an elegy, or, more specifically, a
threnody sung over the death of one of our culture's most affecting but flawed
innocents. Viewed instead as a story about Gatsby's poetry of desire, his im-
agination of wonder, the novel is an act of historical repossession, an attempt to
release and preserve some of the unspent potential of our spiritual heritage as
Americans.

Nonetheless, there is no blinking the distance which separates most of us
from F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby and what I would call "the Imagina-
tion of Wonder." For in a world bounded on the one side by the agonies and

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3Erich Heller, The Disinherited Mind; Essays in Modern German Literature and
4T. S. Eliot as quoted by F. O. Matthiessen, The Achievement of T. S. Eliot; An Essay
atrocities of Vietnam or the American urban ghetto and on the other by televised moon landings, I would suggest that we wonder, if at all, only about what is left to wonder at or wonder about. The imaginative capacity for wonder—whether it takes the primitive form of awed and passive astonishment before the unexpected, or the more sophisticated form of active, imaginative penetration into modes of being other than our own—requires a special openness to the unanticipated, a certain susceptibility to surprise, and most of us can no longer allow ourselves to be so vulnerable. Instead of remaining receptive to novelty, we have become rotten-ripe with knowingsness as the imagination's last defense in a world which, if experienced directly, might stun us back into the Stone Age. Having innured ourselves to strangeness with a surfeit of information, we are all but dead to those startling confrontations with otherness which have traditionally given shape and substance to the literature which has created as well as reflected our national experience.

The reason is not hard to find. In the shadows of a possible nuclear holocaust where we have now lived for more than a quarter of a century, reality takes on proportions of enormity simply too vast, too horrific, for the imagination to grasp. What we have made, what in fact we have it in our power to do, is now beyond our capacity to dream. Suddenly there seem to be no "others" more monstrous than the ones which, if Marshall Luhan is to be believed, are mere extensions of ourselves, and this is something beyond the compass of even our darkest, our most diabolic, night thoughts.

Yet when morning finally comes and the shadows of disaster lift at least high enough for us to see the landscape about us, all we are still likely to perceive is what we have put there ourselves, something which in the daylight looks more like a metropolis than a mushroom cloud, but which, as Thomas Pynchon has suggested in *The Crying of Lot 49*, is less identifiable as a city "than a grouping of concepts—census tracts, special purpose bond-issue districts, shopping nuclei, all overlaid with access roads to its own freeway."

To be sure, even in a world whose most discernible and meaningful patterns suggest nothing so much as the printed circuitry of a transistor radio, one may still, like Oedipa Maas, discover what appears to be "a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning...an intent to communicate." The problem is that when the environment has become but an extension of man himself, there is no way of telling the difference between what Robert Frost calls "counter-love, original response" and "our own voice back in copy speech." Thus one is left yearning, as Americans have always been, for "a world elsewhere" beyond the self, yet suspicious that whatever traces of it are left constitute evidence of nothing but our own paranoia. In such circumstances as these, wonder gives way all too easily to cynicism, yearning to submission, and hope to the madness of boredom.

This is a prospect of which F. Scott Fitzgerald was acutely conscious. Had

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6 The Phrase is Emerson's, which Richard Porier uses as the title of his fine study, *A World Elsewhere; The Place of Style in American Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966).
he foreseen it with any less clarity in his evocation of the world of Tom and Daisy Buchanan, he could not have written so compellingly of the marked contrast which Gatsby himself presents to it. For Gatsby's illusions have nothing whatsoever to do with the modern, secularized world of Tom and Daisy. As Fitzgerald makes clear on the last page of the novel, Gatsby's dream belongs to a historical order which has long since ceased to exist, to a vision of possibility which had almost died on the eyes of those first Dutch sailors to these shores who, paradoxically, were the last to look out upon the American landscape in innocence: "for a transitory enchanted moment," Fitzgerald writes, "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 with his 'capacity for wonder'." Fitzgerald describes this "capacity for wonder" as an "aesthetic contemplation," but for Jay Gatsby, in whom Fitzgerald invests it to such an extraordinary degree, it is clearly something more. "Out of the corner of his eye," Fitzgerald tells us at one point in the novel, "Gatsby saw that the blocks of the sidewalk really formed a ladder and mounted to a secret place above the trees—he could climb to it, if he climbed alone, and once there he could suck the pap of life, gulp down the incomparable milk of wonder."

There is, of course, an incredible garishness involved in Gatsby's capacity for wonder precisely because he attempts to make so transparent and gouche a religion out of it. What with all his gorgeous sacramental shirts, his splendid gestures of supplication, and his ornate West Egg mansion which functions throughout the novel as a kind of sacred shrine, Gatsby seems a grotesque parody of some high priest or shaman who is continually dispensing holy waters, consecrated food, and other elements of the sanctified life to whatever aspirants he can gather around him. And the fact that Gatsby's friends inevitably turn out to be "faithless" in the end only heightens the parody: it was never intended that he serve their illusions but rather that they serve his. Thus Gatsby remains ridiculously sentimental to the very end, a fool for, and ultimately a victim of, the faith he made out of his own unquenchable thirst for wonder.6

Part of the triumph of the novel is that Fitzgerald refuses to discount the vulgarity of it all and instead confronts it directly by employing as his narrator and chief spokesman a character who, like one side of Fitzgerald himself possesses an "unaffected scorn" for everything that Gatsby represents. During the course of the novel, however, Nick Carraway undergoes what Melville would

6 In this there is, to be sure, a marked parallel between Gatsby and all those other devotees and avatars of something like an American religion of wonder—Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Twain, a certain side of James, Gertrude Stein, Sherwood Anderson, Hemingway, Salinger, and Walker Percy—whose idealization of an unencumbered simplicity of response Tony Tanner discusses in his The Reign of Wonder: Naivete and Reality in American Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965). But where Tanner is interested in wonder chiefly as a way of seeing, as "the cultivation of a naïve eye," I am more interested, as I think Fitzgerald was as well, in wonder as a mode of being, as something intrinsic to the very nature of life itself.
have called a "sea-change" as he is himself brought slowly face to face with something at once intrinsigently American and also universal which by the end of the novel somehow transcends and, to a point, even redeems the crude and sordid materials in terms of which it is expressed. I refer to Gatsby's marvelous capacity for wonder when viewed not as an inborn trait of character so much as a reflex response to life, and which issues in what Nick describes as his "extraordinary gift for hope," his "romantic readiness." If Gatsby's personality is no more than "an unbroken series of successful gestures," as Nick muses at the beginning, still there is what can only be described as "something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life, as if he were related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away."

By the end of the novel, Nick is able to identify this responsive capacity with something the American continent once might have elicited in all men, but neither he nor Fitzgerald is under any illusions about what America offers now. Contemporary American society presents itself in The Great Gatsby as utterly devoid of any of those fresh and unexpected images which once astonished man into a new and original relation with the universe and which thus gave rise, whether in Jonathan Edwards or Ralph Waldo Emerson, in Walt Whitman or Hart Crane, to a new American imagination of wonder. The "fresh, green breast of the new world," which first presented itself to those unsuspecting Dutch sailors, has now diminished to the tiny, green light which burns all night on Daisy Buchanan's pier and which illumines little more than the desolate Valley of Ashes, that wasteland of frustrated desire and shattered hopes existing, so Fitzgerald would have us believe, at the end of every contemporary American rainbow.

Thus Jay Gatsby, "born of his Platonic conception of himself," as Nick tells us, and "elected to be about his Father's business" is left from the beginning without anything in twentieth-century America but "a vast, vulgar and meretricious beauty for him to serve." The tragedy, however, is not his alone but also his society's, for both seemed doomed by what they lack—Gatsby by his lack of any critical ability to distinguish his spiritual ideals from the material conditions in and through which he must realize them; American society by its lack of either substance or form commensurate with Gatsby's belief in them. Yet if Gatsby's destruction by "the foul dust" which "floats in the wake of his illusions" is thus inevitable, his inexhaustible store of wonder and good will still confer upon the very actuality which eventually extinguish them whatever truth, beauty or goodness that American actuality ever fully attains. Fitzgerald is thus able to celebrate Gatsby's veritable religion of wonder, while at the same time exposing its pathetic vulnerability and ultimate defilement. His tribute

7 For this and several other insights in this paper, I am indebted to Marius Bewley's excellent chapter on the novel entitled "Scott Fitzgerald and the Collapse of the American Dream" in his The Eccentric Design; Form in the Classic American Novel (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), pp. 159-87.
is part of his critique, a single act of judgment and love which proves that Fitzgerald knew what he was talking about when he remarked that “the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind, at the same time, and still retain the ability to function.”

II

Nick Carraway's first glimpse of Gatsby outlined in all his elemental loneliness against the sky as he makes his trembling gesture of acknowledgement and supplication to the green light which beckons to him from across the bay contains nearly the entire meaning of Gatsby's story. For, like Melville's Captain Ahab before him and Faulkner's Thomas Sutpen after him, Gatsby has committed his life to a pursuit in the future of what has already become a symbol of his own reinterpreted and idealized past. As a symbol, the green light is most clearly associated in Gatsby's mind with Daisy, but it represents much more than Daisy herself. As Gatsby's appropriately sexual substitute for “the fresh, green breast of the new world,” the green light symbolizes to Gatsby all that Daisy once meant to him during their very brief but poignant love affair five years before, some idea of himself which went into his loving of her but which he irretrievably lost the moment he “forever wed his unutterable visions to her perishable breath.” Once the incarnation was complete the vision began to wither, and Gatsby would henceforth be condemned to living in that country of American fantasy which is always located in the spiritual as well as historical wilderness between the "no longer" and the “not yet,” or, to recall Klipspringer's song, "In the meantime," in between time where all one asks is "Ain't we got fun?"

From the very beginning Gatsby's "unutterable visions" had served to convince him “that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy's wing,” but they had not received human shaping until the day Dan Cody's yacht dropped anchor in the shallows of Lake Superior and the young Jimmie Gatz rowed out to have a look. To young James Gatz—soon to become Jay Gatsby, but now only a recent drop-out from St. Olaf's College—the appearance of Cody's yacht seemed as momentous as the arrival of the Nina, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria, and so he signed on to serve Cody in some vague personal capacity for what eventually turned out to be five years. When Cody died at the end of that time, Jimmie Gatz was cheated out of the $25,000 his mentor had left him, but Jay Gatsby had acquired something much more valuable—what Nick describes, with not a little irony, as an "appropriate education" from a man who was the "product of the Nevada silver fields, of the Yukon," and "of every rush for the metal since seventy-five." The historical allusion is perfect. At Gatsby's point of time in history, who but one of the fallen Sons of Leatherstocking could have transmitted to him what was left of that earlier American vision which now lives on only in the body of his corruption? Yet it was not until the now hardened but still adolescent Jay Gatsby of Minnesota met the beautiful but unstable Daisy Fay of Louisville during the Great War that his education was filled out. The
myth of the Northern Yankee forever seeking the paradise of his dreams in the ever-vanishing world of the West had to be joined with what was left of the legend of the Southern Cavalier discovering a salvation of refinement in the gossamer world of midnight balls and late afternoon teas before Gatsby's vividly American identity could be firmly fixed.

If Cody's world, as Nick speculates, is the world of "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" Daisy's is the artificial, vapid and completely brittle world of the teenage socialite whose only real aim in life is to remain "gleaming, like silver, safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor." Like so many before him, Gatsby was compelled into an attitude of absolute enchantment by the sense of "ripened mystery," of throbbing expectation, which seemed so much a part of Daisy's person, her house, her culture, and, particularly, her voice. There was "a singing compulsion" to it, "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." It was a voice which held out to him the possibility of every promise's fulfillment, a future of unlimited beatitude and sexual felicity which was, to quote Howard Mumford Jones, "if not the kingdom of Prester John, the empire of the Great Kahn, or Asia heavy with the wealth of Ormuz and of Ind, then next door to it, or a passage toward it. . ." Only years later, in telling Nick of his poignant affair with Daisy five years before, would Gatsby be able to perceive that "the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the cymbals' song of it" was simply the sound of money. Gatsby and Daisy had, of course, fully intended to marry after the war, but before Gatsby could cut through the red tape delaying his return, Daisy's febrile will had collapsed and her letter arrived announcing her marriage to a midwesterner named Tom Buchanan.

As so many critics have noted, Tom exists in the novel as a kind of double to Gatsby, thus permitting Fitzgerald to point up by contrast Gatsby's incomparably greater stature. Tom strikes Nick from the moment he meets him as "one of those men who reach such an acute limited excellence at twenty-one that everything afterward savors of anti-climax." A Chicago boy from an enormously wealthy family, Tom had played end at Yale and ever after gave the impression that he "would drift on forever seeking, a little wistfully, for the dramatic turbulence of some irrecoverable football game." If Daisy's most striking attribute is the sound of her tinkling voice, Tom's is his "cruel body," "a body," Nick surmises, "capable of enormous leverage." Gatsby, by contrast, is all spirit. Far from creating the impression of power, Gatsby conveys the impression of desire. Nick acquires this impression the first time he meets Gatsby when he catches a glimpse of it in Gatsby's most characteristic attribute, his smile:

*See, in particular, Bewley, pp. 283-85.*
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 instant, and then concentrated on you with an irresistible prejudice in your favour. It understood you just as far as you wanted to be understood, believed in you just as you would like to believe in yourself, and assured you that it had precisely the impression of you that, at your best, you hoped to convey. Precisely at that point it vanished—and I was looking at an elegant young rough-neck, a year or two over thirty, whose elaborate formality of speech just missed being absurd.

This passage is brilliantly executed because, as Marius Bewley has suggested, "it presents Gatsby to us less as an individual than as a projection, or mirror of our ideal selves." Gatsby's youthful impression, in fact, has nothing to do with youth at all: It is a quality of good will, of total willingness, which neither time can stale nor age wither—a prejudice, to paraphrase part of Alfred North Whitehead's definition of religion, that the facts of existence shall find their justification in the nature of existence. As a prejudice which has no concern for the facts as they are, it can, of course, become absurdly sentimental; but even here Gatsby is to be contrasted with Tom. For whereas Tom's sentimentality is decadent and wholly self-serving, Gatsby's is ebullient and wholly self-effacing. Tom is never more revealing than when he is brought to tears over the sight of a box of half-finished dog biscuits which constitute the final remains of a day of drunken philandering with his now dead mistress, a day which was finally brought to a close only after Tom, in a fit of adolescent pique, had broken her nose with his open hand in one "short, deft movement." Gatsby's sentimentality, on the other hand, is revealed in his constant temptation to confer his essentially heroic capacity for faith and wonder upon objects which are decidedly unworthy of them, objects ultimately as dangerous as style, money, and class. The latter points only to a deficiency of mind, the former to a deficiency of heart. What Gatsby lacks is the critical ability to temper his generous, if also innocent, feelings, which are in turn responsible for the splendor and naivete of his illusions. What Tom lacks, by contrast, is the affective power to feel truly anything but pity for himself, which renders him depraved and inhuman.

In this, as in other ways, Tom and Gatsby reflect related but different strains in the development of American history and culture. Tom is a scion of the great robber barons of the Gilded Age who "seized the land, gutted the forests, laid the railroads," and turned the cities into vast urban fortresses for the purpose of protecting their own moneyed interests. Descendants of those early pioneers, frontiersman and later settlers who attempted to transform the Virgin Land into a New World Garden, these later empire-builders of the post-Civil War period who wanted to replace crops with machines set aside morality as easily and quickly as they attempted to buy up civilization. Men of single-

10 Ibid., p. 284.
minded purpose who were at once daring and perseverent, they, like Captain Ahab, allowed nothing to stand in their "iron way," and they assured themselves of Heaven's blessing—as Tom would if he could but remember the right words—by convincing themselves that they were doing Heaven’s will.

Gatsby, by contrast, recalls an earlier generation of American worthies who originally journeyed to these shores in the hopes of establishing a kingdom on earth which might more nearly conform to the Kingdom of Heaven. But in the century and a half intervening between the first settlement and the establishment of the Republic, the dreams of the one had become intertangled with the success of the other. The original theocratic impulse to found a City upon a Hill to the greater glory of God had been displaced by the more secular desire to build a nation in the wilderness which testified instead to the inalienable rights of man. The seventeenth-century propulsion to know why had been reduced to the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century preoccupation with know how. The Calvinist belief in God as the maker of man’s destiny has been supplanted by Benjamin Franklin's doctrine of self-help. To be sure, there were still traces of that earlier Puritan dream in its later, more pragmatic expression. As Perry Miller has noted, Benjamin Franklin pursued worldly success every bit as disinterestedly as Jonathan Edwards pursued the nature of true virtue, and both shared a similar conviction "that the universe is its own excuse for being." 12

But by the time Gatsby had got hold of it, American society, but for an hour on Sunday mornings, had long since abandoned the view Franklin strangely shared with Edwards, the view that life on earth could and should be, as it were, lifted up to Heaven. Instead, for a century or more, America had been telling the Jimmie Gatz’s of this world that the Kingdom of God could be established right here in America, perhaps even on somebody’s rented estate, and that, further, one could get away with populating this New World paradise with Daisy Fays, Tom Buchanans, and Meyer Wolfsheims, the latter being reputed to have fixed the World Series in 1919.

This is absurd, and Fitzgerald knew it was. Thus he shows that the plan Gatsby concocted to express it was doomed from the beginning, and he does not mince words as to the reason why. Gatsby’s proposal to rectify what he considers the mistake of Daisy’s marriage to Tom, by asking her to request a divorce so that she can marry him instead, is based upon his incredible belief that history doesn’t matter, that the past can be repeated. This is the ultimate flaw at the heart of Gatsby’s dream, and, with the dream itself, it shatters like glass against Tom and Daisy’s brutal indifference.

That indifference is nowhere more apparent than when Daisy accidentally kills Myrtle Wilson, Tom’s mistress, with Gatsby’s car. The accident merely fulfills and completes that earlier act of violence which Tom committed against Myrtle himself and thus serves as a perfect expression of that reliance upon brute force, at once, physical and material, which holds Tom and Daisy and their kind

together. Hence when Gatsby magnanimously offers to protect Daisy from any possible recriminations from Tom, Tom and Daisy repay his generosity by insinuating to Myrtle's grief-crazed husband, George Wilson, that Gatsby was responsible instead. In deflecting Wilson's certain vengeance away from themselves out of a habit of self-protection it took their forbears several generations to perfect, Tom and Daisy make Gatsby the scapegoat of their own irresponsible pasts. Yet this is in character, Nick later surmises, for in spite of their wealth and glamor, perhaps even because of it, Tom and Daisy were simply "careless people" who "smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they made."

Thus when George Wilson kills Gatsby and then himself, a strange circle of significance is completed. If Gatsby represents that irrepressible reaction of wonder and hope which once gave motive force to the vision of what the American reality might one day be, Wilson represents that spiritless desperation and hopelessness at the center of what the American reality, in this novel at least, has actually become. The only people who escape are ironically those who have done most to create the one out of the other, people like Tom and Daisy who have acquired enough money and shrewdness in the process to buy their way out of trouble.

III

But Gatsby's destruction at the end in no sense indicates a complete triumph of the forces, both from within and without, which have conspired against him. For Fitzgerald has so constructed his novel that Gatsby's true stature and significance can only be finally measured by his impact upon the narrator, and to Nick Carraway Gatsby's ultimate victory is absolutely assured.

As narrator Nick seems perfectly suited to his task. He describes himself on the very first page of the novel as one of those people who is "inclined to reserve all judgements, a habit that has opened up many curious natures to me and also made me the victim of not a few veteran bores...." But Nick's tolerance is not without its limits; for he is concerned to live as he has been raised, according to "a sense of the fundamental decencies." And having returned from the East to tell his story, he confesses, "I felt that I wanted the world to be in uniform and at a moral attention forever; I wanted no more riotous excursions with privileged glimpses into the human heart."

Yet much as Nick tries to remain ambivalent and uninvolved throughout the book, "simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the variety of life," he cannot maintain the distance of a neutral observer as he becomes progressively more involved in Gatsby's incredible scheme to recapture Daisy. For if Nick is contemptuous of everything Gatsby represents, he still cannot resist admiring the intensity with which Gatsby represents it. And the more Nick uncovers the cynicism and corruption beneath Tom and Daisy's glamor, the more he grows to respect Gatsby's optimism and the essential incorruptibility not of his vision
but of the desire it incarnates. Hence by the time Gatsby is murdered by the demented Wilson, Nick has come to think that Gatsby was "worth the whole damn bunch put together." But he also finds that, like Gatsby before him, he must pay the price of loneliness for his conviction. For it readily becomes apparent at the time of Gatsby's death that Gatsby's friends no longer have any use for him. And then it is that Nick realizes the nature of his own relationship to Gatsby: "it grew upon me that I was responsible, because no-one else was interested—interested, I mean, with that intense personal interest to which every-one has a vague right in the end."

This feeling of genuine concern and sympathy for another human being emerges as one of the most important positive values of Gatsby's tragedy. If it does not seem capable of mitigating the pathos of Gatsby's destruction, much less preventing it, Nick's capacity for concern and love nonetheless enables him to see in the tragedy of Gatsby's own idealism a symbol for the tragedy of all human aspiration. Before Nick leaves the East permanently after Gatsby's death, he crosses his front yard to take one last look at Gatsby's house:

... as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here, that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, ... face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.

Nick is able to give his words such a beautiful, haunting, evocative quality because he had himself been partially seduced by Gatsby's dream. Not only had he once felt the mysterious attraction in Daisy's voice; he had also fallen half in love with someone who suggested its rich ring of promise. But Nick had been able to discern the note of cynicism and emptiness behind the magic suggestiveness of Daisy's voice, just as he had also been able to perceive that Jordan Baker, his temporary lover, was basically a liar and a cheat.

At the end Nick can only surmise as to whether Gatsby was ever able to acknowledge the terrible disparity between his magnificent illusions and the coarse actuality which finally betrayed them. Nick can scarcely believe that Gatsby remained ignorant to the very end of "what a grotesque thing a rose is," but as for himself there is no question. The culture of the East, which once held out to him, as it always did to Gatsby, the promise of beginning all over again in a New World in the very next hour—the culture of the East now appears to Nick as a night scene from El Greco:

In the foreground four solemn men in dress suits are walking along the sidewalk with a stretcher on which lies a drunken woman in a white evening dress. Her hand, which dangles over the side, sparkles cold with jewels. Gravely the men turn in at the house—the wrong house. But no one knows the woman's name, and no one cares.
The only illumination which relieves Nick's otherwise dark and ferral tableau is the absurd, little green light at the end of Daisy's pier which Gatsby so fervently believed in, "the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us..." "... but that's no matter," Nick assures us—"tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther. ... And one fine morning—"

"So we beat on," Nick concludes, "boats against the current, borne ceaselessly back into the past."

This image, with its perfect union of sexual and spiritual promise, arrests us with its terrible poignancy. Gatsby's capacity for wonder was doomed from the beginning. "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 muses. "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." Yearning always forward to secure a future that was already lost to the past, Gatsby is borne ceaselessly backward in time until he becomes a sacrificial victim of the pasts of others, indeed, of the American Dream itself.

The pathos of the final image thus seems definitive: Gatsby's beautiful circuit of belief and desire is broken on the rack of America's cruel indifference; his generous "willingness of heart" is simply no match for Tom and Daisy's "hard malice." Committed to pure spirit in a world almost exclusively composed of mere matter, Gatsby is defeated by his inability to understand that the things of the spirit can exist only amidst the unavoidable conditions which the actual and the material make for them.13

Yet this is not the whole truth, either for Nick as narrator or for us as readers. Because if the coarse materials of Gatsby's world have refused to yield to the impulses of his spirit, if, indeed, Gatsby himself at the end "must have felt that he had lost the old warm world, paid a high price for living too long with a single dream," still the very intensity of his commitment to spirit has nonetheless transfigured, for however brief a time, the otherwise drab materials of existence. That Gatsby's imagination of wonder can never overcome the current, cannot even resist the current, is nothing to the point: It is the poetry of beating on that counts! As a reflex response to that most elemental, though not most profound, intimation of the sacred both within and beyond us, Gatsby's spontaneous act of resistance constitutes here, as in life generally, what might be described, in R. W. B. Lewis's fine phrase, as "the tug of the Transcendent."14 Without it, life loses all of its energy and interest, all of its color and originality. With it, we recover a sense of that radiance which temporarily redeems life even as the flow of life itself bears it away.


But we do not have to settle for Fitzgerald's word alone on this subject. Robert Frost once used an image almost identical to Fitzgerald's boats beating on against the current and gave that image of primitive spiritual resistance one of its definitive religious expressions. Frost's image occurs in the poem "West-Running Brook." Fred and his wife have been speaking of the meaning of contraries when suddenly an illuminating example presents itself to him: "... see how the brook," he remarks to his wife,

In that white wave runs counter to itself.
It is from that in water we were from
Long, long before we were from any creature.
Here we, in our impatience of the steps,
Get back to the beginning of beginnings,
The stream of everything that runs away.

The universal cataract of death
That spends to nothingness—and unresisted,
Save by some strange resistance in itself,
Not just a swerving, but a throwing back,
As if regret were in it and were sacred.
It has this throwing backward on itself
So that the fall of most of it is always
Raising a little, sending up a little.
It is this backward motion toward the source.
Against the stream, that most we see ourselves in,
The tribute of the current to the source.
It is from this in nature we are from.
It is most us.

Gatsby's abundant store of wonder, with its reflexive capacity to generate and sustain such marvelously radiant, if also deeply flawed, visions is "a throwing back," As if regret were in it and were sacred." So too, I would have to say, is Nick's whole narrative attempt to understand its meaning. Taken together, then, Nick's and Gatsby's "backward motion toward the source," Against the stream" constitute Fitzgerald's "tribute of the current to the source." And thus we say at the close of the novel, when we finally put the book down and begin to let it have its way with us:

It is from this in nature we are from.
It is most us.