THE GREAT GATSBY

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There is every reason to believe that for many undergraduates in American colleges and universities *The Great Gatsby* is the great American novel. There are few introductory literature classes that do not include it, and if a student misses it there, he or she is likely to encounter it somewhere later on. F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald still seem to fascinate the reading public,[1] and *The Great Gatsby* continues to be F. Scott Fitzgerald's most widely read work.

However, the continuing popularity of *Gatsby,* even its high reputation among academic literary critics, is no certain measure of its greatness. For one thing, the revival of interest in Fitzgerald coincided with the great expansion of higher education. Students in lit classes had to have something to read, and *Gatsby* was American, reasonably recent, and short. For another, Scribner's has kept the novel and other Fitzgerald works available in a variety of attractive forms. For another, Fitzgerald's aura carried over to the novel; his legend seemed to be more alive during the fifties and sixties than it had been at any time since the twenties. Related to that fact is the welling up of nostalgia and the rise of opportunities to bring back reminders of the Twenties. And finally, *Gatsby* had literary qualities hospitable to exegesis; its structure and theme and style were well suited to the passion for analysis which has dominated literary study since World War II.

These contentions help explain the continuing popularity of *Gatsby,* but they do little to make a strong case for *Gatsby* as a great book. It is of some moment that so many professional and amateur critics have wrestled with its symbolism, allusion, indirection, irony, ambiguity, and mythical dimensions. For that seems to indicate that *Gatsby* is by no means as slight as its length, its setting, and its bare plot might suggest. Forty to fifty critical articles have been wholly or partially focused upon *Gatsby,* about a third of the total number of critical articles on the work of F. Scott Fitzgerald in the past fifty years. When one looks back at 1925, the year *Gatsby* was published, and considers other novels which came out that year—*Manhattan Transfer, An American Tragedy, Barren Ground, The Professor's House, Arrowsmith*—he may reasonably conclude that none has held up as well.

But my point is not to establish *Gatsby* as *the* great American novel, although I think it is great enough to justify the kind of enthusiasm which brings forth such claims. My purpose is to consider what there is that argues for the novel's greatness, to note what has drawn the critics' attention to the novel, and to add some matters that seem to have escaped critical attention.

I'll begin by claiming for *Gatsby* a greatness of theme, one which illuminates the American past and present but which also has the power of myth to convey meaning independent of time, place, and the particulars of the narrative. If I were to pick a central article which sets forth this claim, I would pick Robert Ornstein's "Scott Fitzgerald's Fable of East and West." Ornstein was not the first to call attention to the mythical import of the novel, but his emphasis differs significantly from the earlier views of Edwin Fussel, Marius Bewley, and John Bicknell. These critics, he claims, emphasized the novel's dramatization "of the betrayal of the naíve American dream in a corrupt society." Ornstein writes:

> I would agree that in *Gatsby* Fitzgerald did create a myth with the imaginative sweep of America's historical adventure across an untamed continent. But his fable of East and West is little concerned with twentieth-century materialism and moral anarchy, for its theme is the unending quest of the romantic dream, which is forever betrayed in fact and yet redeemed in men's minds . . . . Yet once, Fitzgerald suggests, there had been opportunity commensurate with aspiration, an unexplored and unexploited frontier where great fortunes had been made or at least romantically stolen. And out of the shifting of opportunities from the West to Wall Street, he creates an American fable which redeems as well as explains romantic failure.[2]

If there is one single perception that has done more to raise the novel's reputation than any other it is the recognition that the novel is not primarily concerned with the details of the Jazz Age but with a central American experience which has not yet played out its effects upon American life. It is to Ornstein's credit, that he sees this theme not only in terms of American experience but in its embodiment of the romantic response to life. "Gatsby *is* great," Ornstein writes, "because his dream, however naive, gaudy, and unattainable is one of the grand illusions of the race, which keep men from becoming too old or too wise or too cynical of their human limitations."[3]

It took critics a long time to recognize that a writer like Fitzgerald could be more than superficially romantic, an even longer time to realize that he was, as a novelist, intuitively historical. The handwritten title, "thoughtbook of Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald of St. Paul, Minn., U.S.A.," is a juvenile commonplace, and yet it prefigures the grown-up novelist who was seeking to find his man's place in the universe. All of this is recognized by those who have reached some genuine acquaintance with Fitzgerald and his work; it is still obscure to those who come on to Fitzgerald through the legends he and we have made of his life. "Then I was drunk for many years," he wrote in his notebooks, "and then I died."

I will not make an extended argument for the depth and precision of Fitzgerald's romantic vision. He was not a Goethe, though the tightness of *Gatsby* does not suffer by comparison with the sprawl of *Faust*.[4] He was not a Keats, though few writers have been more responsive to Keats, or more precise in describing the effect of Keats' poetry: "For a while

after you quit Keats all other poetry seems to be only whistling or humming."[5] He comprehended the romantic vision, not in the describing of it, but in creating characters who lived by it, and he preserved it by the characteristic act of the romantic—sweating over the written word as if to preserve something of the flux of life.

There is a wholeness and focus in Ornstein's view that makes me prefer it to more extended discussions of Fitsgerald's romanticism and his treatment of the American dream. But the entire body of criticism which deals with these closely related subjects contributes much to an understanding of *Gatsby*. John W. Bicknell[6] begins with a hint dropped by Lionell Trilling[7] that Fitzgerald's novel is a prose version of Eliot's "Waste Land," a poem Fitzgerald knew almost by heart. Like Conrad, Fitzgerald sees "the modern corruption in contrast to a lost rather than to an emergent ideal." Bicknell's overall critical intent is to explore whether *Gatsby* is tragic or merely pessimistic. He ends by accepting Alfred Kazin's view that "in a land of promise 'failure' will always be a classic theme."[8] Thus, he is willing to call the novel classic, while still arguing that its pessimistic conclusions about contemporary society fall short of embracing tragedy.

Marius Bewley's essay "Scott Fitzgerald's Criticism of America"[9] finds more to praise in *Gatsby,* perhaps because he does not assume that tragedy is the definitive measure of a novel's worth. He writes:

> Fitzgerald—at least in this one book—is in a line with the greatest masters of American prose. *The Great Gatsby* embodies a criticism of American experience—not of manners, but of a basic historic attitude to life—more radical than anything in James's own assessment of the deficiences of his country. The theme of Gatsby is the withering of the American dream.[10]

Bewley's essay also brings out what Malcolm Cowley[11] has called Fitzgerald's "double vision":

> We recognize that the great achievement of this novel is that it manages, while poetically evoking a sense of the goodness of that early dream, to offer the most damaging criticism of it in American literature. The astonishing thing is that the criticism—if indictment wouldn't be the better word—manages to be part of the tribute. Gatsby, the "mythic" embodiment of the American dream, is shown to us in all his immature romanticism. His insecure grasp of social and human values, his lack of critical intelligence and self-knowledge, his blindness to the pitfalls that surround him in American society, his compulsive optimism, are realized in the text with rare assurance and understanding. And yet the very grounding of these deficiencies is Gatsby's goodness and faith in life, his compelling desire to realize all the possibilities of existence . . . .[12]

Edwin Fussell's "Fitzgerald's Brave New World"[13] is more labored than either of the other articles, but it does mention the universality as well as uniqueness of the American experience: "After exploring his materials to their limits, Fitzgerald knew, at his greatest moments, that he had discovered a universal pattern of desire and belief and behavior, and that

in it was compounded the imaginative history of modern, especially American, civilization."

It is not incidental that Fussell comes to this conclusion through following out *Tender Is the Night* and *The Crack-Up,* books in which the American-ness of Fitzgerald's experience is less prominent than in *Gatsby.*

Since the Fitzgerald revival of the early fifties, almost all critics have praised *Gatsby* for the seriousness of its theme and the way that theme is carried out. Response to the novel at the time it first appeared was much more mixed. T. S. Eliot's letter to Fitzgerald thanking him for sending a copy of the novel, called it "the first step American fiction has taken since Henry James."[14] But the general response of reviewers caused Fitzgerald to say, "Not one had the slightest idea of what the book was about."[15]

Even today, readers may have difficulty in reconciling the achievement of *Gatsby* with Fitzgerald's popular fiction and other novels. There is still a mystery about how everything seemed to come together for Fitzgerald in that novel, how it seems to be such a great advance over *This Side of Paradise* and *The Beautiful and Damned.* The mystery may be partially explained by recognizing the magnitude of Fitzgerald's ambitions and the channeling of these ambitions into learning the craft of writing. Even the informed reader may not realize how early in life Fitzgerald began to write.[16] By the time he arrived at Princton and had the chance to widen his acquaintance with writing and to associate with other would-be writers, his ambition had crystallized into the remark reported by Edmund Wilson, "I want to be one of the greatest writers who have ever lived, don't you?"[17] One cannot understand Fitzgerald's work, certainly can't come to terms with the accomplishment of *Gatsby,* without recognizing what that remark, naive, presumptuous, grandiose as it is, suggests about Fitzgerald's ambitions and his development as a writer.[18]

"I shall not write another novel for a year but when I do it will not be a realistic one," Fitzgerald wrote in 1922 to Maxwell Perkins.[19] Two years later, he is apologizing to Perkins for not having the new novel (*Gatsby*) quite in hand: ". . . you know how those things often come out, and even if it takes me ten times that long I cannot let it go out unless it has the very best I'm capable of in it, or even, as I feel sometimes, something better than I'm capable of."[20] He goes on to say that he has had to discard much of the previous summer's work, intended to be the beginning of the novel. The material ended up as "Absolution," a story whose intensity and quality give another indication of the creative energy going into *Gatsby. In closing the letter he sayss "I feel I have an* enormous power in me now. This book will be a consciously artistic achievement and must depend on that as the first books did not."[21]

As the novel came closer to completion, Fitzgerald's hopes for it, the mention of hard work going into it, were expressed more often. We know that from at least June until October 27, 1925, Fitzgerald worked on *Gatsby* with an intensity that he was not able to bring to any other novel. His high hopes for the novel are stated in a letter sent to Perkins after he had completed the manuscript: "I can now make it perfect," and repeated in the next paragraph, "With the aid you've given me I can make *Gatsby* perfect." [22]

Granted, Fitzgerald placed high value on other books he had written. As recently as August, 1922, he had told Perkins that his play *Gabriel's Trombone* (later changed to *The Vegetable*) was "the best American comedy to date." The play sank out of sight in Atlantic City in December after one performance, and no one has since tried to reclaim it. Nevertheless, we must pay heed to Fitzgerald's ambitions for *Gatsby,* because it is in the breadth of these ambitions that a comparatively slight novel with a melodramatic plot and a hazily distinguishable central character emerges into a novel of such remarkable amplitude.

Through the crucial years in which *Gatsby* found its form, Fitzgerald was adding greatly to his literary experience. Frank Norris's *McTeague* and *Vandover* came to mention in 1920 along with Charles Norris's *Salt.* That same year he says "this fellow Conrad seems to be pretty good after all."[23] His response to other writers shows an increasing sophistication.[24] Charles Norris's *Brass* of 1920 is set aside as fundamentally undistinguished, and Dos Passos's *Three Soldiers* is picked out as the book of the autumn. Mark Twain's *Autobiography, The Mysterious Stranger,* and Van Wyck Brooks' *The Ordeal of Mark Twain* were apparently closely read in 1921. Anatole France, Samuel Butler, and George Bernard Shaw are brought forth as justifying some of his intentions in *The Beautiful and Damned.* James Harvey Robinson's *Mind in the Making,* Upton Sinclair's *The Brass Check,* and Hardy are mentioned in connection with his socialist leanings in 1922. Aldous Huxley's *Chrome Yellow* and Joyce's *Ulysses* were part of his reading in 1924-1925, as was *War and Peace,* which he began reading in July 1924. Raymond Radiguet had come to his attention by August; he recommended Gertrude Stein's novel in the *Transatlantic Review* to Perkins and asked him to send a copy of Havelock Ellis's *Dance of Life.* Finally, by 1925, he was personally acquainted with serious writers both in America and abroad. Edmund Wilson and John Peale Bishop were among his friends at Princeton. He and Ring Lardner tried to pay their boozey respects to Joseph Conrad when Conrad visited America in 1923. He met both Galsworthy and James Joyce in 1922, brought Ernest Hemingway to Maxwell Perkin's attention that same year, and became a close friend of Hemingway's during his second trip abroad. All in all, Fitzgerald was keeping impressive literary and intellectual company in the years preceding *Gatsby.*

Fitzgerald's Introduction to the 1934 Modern Library edition of *Gatsby* stresses the intensity with which he worked on the novel. "Never before," he wrote, "did one try to keep his artistic science as pure as during the ten months put into doing it."[25] The essay also acknowledges his having just re-read Conrad's preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus,* and the attempts he made to carry out Conrad's injunctions. Critics are in agreement that Conrad was a major influence upon the structure, style, and theme of the novel.[26]

What I have been citing is designed to counter the notion that an essentially popular writer like F. Scott Fitzgerald could not possibly have aspired to write a masterpiece. A novelist's ambitions will not necessarily produce a great novel, but no great novel was ever written, I think, by a writer lacking such ambitions. To many readers, recognizing Fitzgerald's seriousness of intent may be necessary to recognizing the novel's specific excellences. I began by calling attention to the magnitude of conception of the novel and to the mythical element which brings out the nature of romanticism and American romantic experience. Let me go on to examine Fitzgerald's mastery of technique and excellence of style which have been praised by almost every critic of the novel.[27]

James E. Miller's *The Fictional Technique of F. Scott Fitzgerald* (revised and enlarged as *F. Scott Fitzgerald: His Art and His Technique*)[28] is the best close study of this subject. *Gatsby* receives a major share of the author's attention. Miller accurately summarizes the novel's specific debts to Conrad: "for the use of style or language to reflect theme; for the use of the modified first person narrative; and for the use of deliberate 'confusion' by the re-ordering of the chronology of events." He also calls attention to Fitzgerald's use of "series of scenes dramatizing the important events of the story and connected by brief passages of interpretation and summary," a practice not unlike Henry James's use of the scenic method. All of these are matters of technique and style, and reinforce the view that *Gatsby* impresses not only by what it is as a novel but by how it achieves its effects.

With the recent publishing of the handwritten manuscript of *The Great Gatsby* (Microcard Editions Books, 1973) even the casual reader now has a chance to see just how the novel emerged as a triumph of craft. The first thing to be said is that neither technique nor style is a matter of accident, lucky guesses, or chance outpourings from a gifted pen. All of Fitzgerald's manuscripts reveal the evidence of careful work. In *Gatsby,* the most conspicuous success in technique was the adoption of Nick Carraway as the point-of-view character. Both Conrad and James preceded Fitzgerald as masters in the use of such a fictional narrator. Conrad's Marlow surely provided the model for Carraway, and I would argue that Carraway is as important in his characterization and in relation to the rest of the novel as Marlow is in Conrad's works. Carraway not only serves a

technical function of telling the story and of providing a point-of-view; he is very much in the story—and who he is and where he stands and where he ends up is as important to the story's import as Gatsby is.[29] Like Marlow, Carraway provides a moral center. But perhaps because Marlow comes to the reader in a number of stories, he may lose his individuality, be accepted merely as the storyteller with each successive tale. With Carraway's single appearance, in *Gatsby,* the reader is forced to take him into account. In "The Theme and Narrator of 'The Great Gatsby' "[30] Thomas Hanzo has grappled more successfully with the use and complexity of Nick Carraway than any other critic. Early, Mencken tried to dismiss him as a bond salesman, "a sort of chorus to the tragic force," and Robert W. Stallman, deeply involved in examining the use of the narrator, still seems to read Carraway's presence in peculiar ways. To me, Hanzo properly locates Nick Carraway in seeing that Fitzgerald's exploration of American morality is amplified "through the personal history of a young American provincial whose moral intelligence is the proper source of our understanding and whose career, in the passage from innocence to revaluation, dramatizes the possibility and mode of a moral sanction in contemporary America."[31]

The use of Nick Carraway as narrator is only one aspect of the technical problem of presenting the story. Following the lead of other modern novelists, Fitzgerald chose to abandon straightforward chronology (though if we accept *Absolution* as the original version of the opening of the novel, we perceive that the breaking up of the chronology must have been a second thought). The creation of Nick Carraway as narrator must have also come some time after Fitzgerald's initial attempts at the novel. The manuscripts do not reveal how Fitzgerald arrived at either choice, but they do give clear indications of how Fitzgerald manipulated scenes and sections of the novel to get the effects he wanted.

Even in the final pencil draft, the structure was somewhat simpler than it became in the final version of the novel. Readers may still be puzzled over the way in which Fitzgerald withholds information about Gatsby. They may not on first reading even grasp how the details of the plot fit together. Fitzgerald was willing to risk confusion in order to accomplish the very difficult task of making a deliberately shadowy figure the central character of the novel. How well he succeeded can be argued from the fact that Gatsby is one of those few characters in American fiction, like Huck Finn and Hester Prynne, whose name immediately brings forth a type representative of a vital aspect of the American character and experience. It was obviously Fitzgerald's intent to make Gatsby both shadowy and clear, to emphasize the myth of Gatsby at the risk of slighting his reality. The reader first learns about Gatsby indirectly through Nick Carraway, and Nick, in turn, is the outsider who picks up hints about Gatsby through Tom, Daisy, and Jordan Baker. Originally, the party at Gatsby's house followed Chapter One, but in the galleys, Fitzgerald

shifted the whole of what was then Chapter Three to Chapter Two. This contains the valley of the ashes scene in which the eyes of T. J. Eckleburg become an arresting symbol, and then the subsequent unfolding of Tom's affair. A number of objectives are accomplished in the shift. Gatsby is kept off-stage that much longer and Carraway's ambiguous feelings about the East are darkened by the physical setting and actions Fitzgerald chooses to bring forward. The explicit tawdriness and violence of Tom's and Myrtle Wilson's affair and Nick's detached yet forced presence in it emphasize an ugly reality impinging upon Nick's past experience and present hopes. Gatsby's party in Chapter Three amplifies the contrast between an ugly real world and the fantasy world Gatsby creates. This fantasy world reaches us through the soft night and music and glitter, but through it run reminders of the real world, specifically in the person of Jordan Baker, who provides Nick with further second hand information about Gatsby. Nick's first meeting with Gatsby mixes reality with fantasy—for Nick as well as for the reader.

This section ends with the foreshadowing of the fatal auto accident in the mock accident in front of Gatsby's house. The wafer moon, the laughter and sound from the still glowing garden give way to the sudden emptiness flowing from the windows and doors and the complete isolation of Gatsby the host. Fitzgerald lets Carroway intrude at this point, one of a number of instances where there is a self-conscious yet necessary clarification of where we are in a story which will not tell itself at once. The gist of this intrusion is to explain that the events just described are merely "casual events in a crowded summer." A re-encounter with Jordan leads to Carraway's assertion that ends Chapter Three, "I am one of the few honest people that I have ever known."

The chapter which follows offers the bravura piece on Gatsby's guests, a list inevitably suggestive both of Homer's catalogue of ships and of New York social lists. I will not argue that structurally it is in just the right place, but every reader should be grateful that Fitzgerald didn't take it out. The Carraway-Gatsby conversation which occupies most of Chapter Four is vital for filling out the image, if not the actuality, of Gatsby. Parts of this chapter were carefully rewritten to sharpen the characterization of Gatsby. Chapter Five, the meeting between Daisy and Gatsby, is the central scene of the novel, even more carefully reworked than the preceding chapter. It stands as time captured in the life of Gatsby, a static moment, placed appropriately at the center of a novel whose action has, up to this moment, refused to present itself straightforwardly, insisted on unfolding through a succession of scenes, some deliberately enforcing sharp contrasts, others connected loosely.

The last half of the novel has a swifter movement than the first, and moves in a somewhat opposite way. Though Gatsby is able to fuse reality and illusion as he and Daisy for a moment recapture the past, the reader must still try to separate fact from fantasy. The most abrupt shift in

the novel is from this moment of realized fantasy to the mundane factuality of the reporter's knocking on Gatsby's door. Within the next few pages we get Gatsby's actual historical past with all its enlargement of the American romantic Western experience. Here again an important structural change was made, for this aspect of Gatsby's past was moved forward in the novel and separated from its original context. There is a good deal of reworking in the short scenes which follow the exposition of Gatsby's past. The scene between Tom Buchanan and the Sloanes gives way to the second of Gatsby's parties, in which Fitzgerald, in revising, takes key images from the earlier party and places them more effectively here. The chapter ends with a scene between Gatsby and Nick through which the reader finds out about Gatsby's early love for Daisy.

Chapter Six and Seven are both a carrying out of the plot and an exposing of Gatsby to the cold hard malice of Tom. The trip into New York, which comprised the second chapter, is repeated with a different group of characters here. The ugliness of the first scene is paralleled by a heightened ugliness in the physical presence of Tom, his rising jealousy, his accusations against Gatsby, his transition from "libertine to prig." It marks one point in the rising action. The other is Gatsby's insistence that Daisy say she never loved Tom. Gatsby loses the conflict, loses it again in the actuality of Tom's physical presence for Daisy at Kapiolani, in the facts of Wolfsheim revealed by Tom's informant, and most of all in Daisy's inability to meet Gatsby's demands. The fatal accident concludes this section of the novel.

Chapter Seven closes with Gatsby keeping "the sacredness of his vigil," the outsider watching Tom and Daisy together after the accident. Chapter Eight still contains the material in which Gatsby attempts to explain the actuality of his passion for Daisy. A crucial part of this—Gatsby's Western background—was, as I have mentioned, moved forward. The movement not only gives prominence to that aspect of the story; it also focuses attention here on Gatsby's compulsive need to explain his love. In revising, Fitzgerald made additional cuts in the section, and put part of it into present tense dialogue: "I can't describe to you how surprised I was to find out I loved her, old sport." Nick's farewell to Gatsby removes his living presence from the novel and the reader follows the details of plot to Gatsby's murder and Wilson's suicide.

The last chapter, from beginning to end, emphasizes the crucial importance of Nick Carraway. His father's appearance from somewhere out West, the West Nick had come from; the filling in of other portions of that mixture of the real and mythic Gatsby and Owl-Eyes' requiem, "The poor son of a bitch"—these are the first part of an immensely rich final chapter which seems to come out effortlessly. The very last part moves to Nick's thinking back on his own Western trips, his leaving of Jordan and Tom, and his going back to the Middle-west. "I thought you were rather an

honest, straightforward person," Jordan says. "You're crazy, Nick, crazy as hell," says Tom Buchanan a scene later. Both of those brief final conversations have nuances easy to pass over. Both raise fundamental questions of moral perception. Both underscore one of Fitzgerald's finest technical achievements in making Carraway a central moral vision in the novel, a uniting vehicle, and a means by which the story gets told. The last image of the book, "the fresh, green breast of the new world," was originally written as the conclusion of the first chapter. Now placed at the end of the novel, it enlarges even as it closes out the narrative.

I do not argue that structure is always a major strength of Fitzgerald's fiction. He could and did, in dozens of stories which kept the pot boiling, manage plot convincingly, but in his other novels, structure is more a weakness than a strength. The structure of *Gatsby,* may be due to a fortunate combination of circumstances (for the direction Fitzgerald was going in *The Beautiful and Damned* was not toward the tightly constructed, spare but resonant, form of *Gatsby*). Perhaps it resulted in part from the threadbareness of the material with which he worked. He was, after all, telling the F. Scott Fitzgerald story over one more time, both the actual story of Zelda Sayre's capture and the mythic story of poor boys from obscure places who dream of glory, both the near-at-hand glory of country-club success and the more distant glory that only some poetic sense of larger time and place can fix in the imagination. Having that one story on his mind, having already told it a number of times, he did not have the materials for a sprawling social novel. Fitzgerald must have been like Gatsby, obsessed all the while with unattainable dreams amidst a life even more ruled over by actualities than Gatsby's. And like Gatsby, at one point, in the crafting and polishing and fixing of the novel, he got everything to unite and stand still. The details outside that central story serve to set it off, to express honestly Fitzgerald's deepest social feelings, and to vent some of the violence which is surprisingly close to the surface in most of Fitzgerald's work. "I want Myrtle Wilson's breast ripped off," he wrote to Perkins, "It's exactly the thing, I think, and I don't want to chop up good scenes by too much reworking."[32]

I will say little here in the way of eulogizing Fitzgerald's style. Few critics who have written about his style seem to have much heart in the task. If they are sensitive to it, it seems waste labor to try to explain it. And if explanation is offered, it proceeds in the face of recognizing that every word the critic writes seems to plod along the page. There have been some few attempts to come to grips with the details of his style, but they have not been very successful. In the end, a reader comprehends Fitzgerald's style through the ear and inner eye. His sentences have movement, grace, clarity, directness when necessary, force when desired, and cadences appropriate to the mood or emotion or scene. Matched with the visual images, simile and metaphor, sentences like this emerge in profusion: "In his blue gardens men and girls came and went like moths among the

whispering and the champagne and the stars" (p.39); "We drove over to Fifth Avenue, so warm and soft, almost pastoral, on the summer Sunday afternoon that I wouldn't have been surprised to see a great flock of white sheep turn the corner" (p. 28); "The lawn started at the beach and ran toward the front door for a quarter of a mile, jumping over sun-dials and brick walks and burning gardens—finally when it reached the house drifting up the side in bright vines as though from the momentum of its run" (pp.6-7). Fitzgerald's style is remarkably precise and apt, even when it is dealing with nearly ineffable matters: "He was a Son of God— a phrase which, if it means anything, means just that—and he must be about His Father's business, the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty" (p. 99). Part of that aptness is the quality of Fitzgerald's wit, apparent in lines like "the Airdale—oudoubtedly there was an Airedale concerned in it somewhere" (p. 28), or "Americans while occasionally willing to be serfs, have always been obstinate about being peasants" (p. 89).

In *Gatsby,* stylistic effects are seldom used for mere display. One of the observations he made about the writing of *Gatsby* was his determination to use none of his virtuosity to get an effect.[33] The only showing off I can think of is in the catalogue of guests, and surely his management of the Homeric cadence, the aptness of the names and the characteristics which distinguish the guests, justifies its inclusion. Like almost everything else in the novel, the passage is not intrusive but integral with the social and moral dimensions of the novel. In dozens of other respects the book is tightly knit together, as much by repetition of images and symbols as by exposition and narrative structure. Hence, though a first reading might be confusing, subsequent readings seem to reinforce the feeling of unity and completeness. Thus, critics will continue to explore color symbolism, repetition of images, and symbolic motifs as they are carried out in the novel. Details like Gatsby's phrase "Old Sport," Gatsby's pink rag of a suit and piles of shirts, and such variations as, for example, Gatsby's picture of Oxford, Wolfsheim's "Oggsford," and Tom Buchanan's "Oxford, New Mexico" are small but vital touches. The dialogue also has a way of amplifying meaning and of expressing exact tone and nuance. Examples are Gatsby's central speech, "Can't repeat the past? Why of course you can!" (p. 111), and later in the novel when he has failed to get Daisy to say she had never loved Tom, "In any case, it was just personal" (p. 152).

Clearly, there has been no lack of appreciation of Fitzgerald's style. Edmund Wilson's early criticism that Fitzgerald was "left with a jewel which he doesn't quite know what to do with" also acknowledges that "He has an instinct for graceful and vivid prose which some of his more pretentious fellows might envy."[34] Paul Rosenfeld is even more explicit and accurate about Fitzgerald's style:

> He is a born writer, amusing himself with tales and pictures; and eventually nothing is interesting except the natural bent. Salty and insipid, exaggerated poetical and bitterly parodistic, his writing pours exuberantly out of him. Flat paragraphs are redeemed by brilliant metaphors, and conventional descriptions by witty, penetrating turns. Ideas of diamond are somewhat indiscriminately mixed with ideas of rhinestone and ideas of window glass; yet purest rays serene are present in veritable abundance.[35]

Rosenfeld was writing before the appearance of *The Great Gatsby,* and he observed that Fitzgerald had not yet crossed the line that he felt bound the field of art. "He has seen his material from its own point of view, and he has seen it completely from without. But he has never done what the artist does: seen it simultaneously from within and without; and loved it and judged it, too."[36] Looking back, one is amazed at how closely *Gatsby* answered Rosenfield's specific demands. His style and structure were never so closely attuned to substance and theme. And never again until *The Crack-Up* essays was Fitzgerald's double vision so skillfully employed.

Conrad's famous Preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus,'* which Fitzgerald re-read while completing *Gatsby,* set before him the writer's task: "By the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you see. That and no more, and it is everything."[37] Reading *Gatsby* in light of that Preface, we can fairly say that Fitzgerald adhered to that task, that he aspired to a work which "should carry its justification in every line,"[38] and which "through an unremitting never-discouraged care for the shape and ring of sentences" aspired to the "plasticity of sculpture, to the colour of painting, and to the magic suggestiveness of music—which is the art of arts."[39]

If *Gatsby* is not the great American novel, it will do until something better offers itself. The remarks about its brevity were not entirely facetious, for the great American novel may have to be short. Americans will not give to a novel the kind of leisurely contemplation required by those novels of Henry James or Melville. And yet, the short novel cannot stand on *that* claim alone. *Gatsby,* however, can stand on the most American of grounds: it is a truly *efficient* novel. For the time the reader puts into it, a great deal comes out, both in the suggestions it plants in a responsive reader's mind and in the amplifications which have become part of the critics' ruminations. Its nuances of style are not likely to be lost on American readers, either, for they have the laconic power of sarcasm, the brevity of the pun, and the directness of American speech. Its moral dimensions still touch the American sense of decency and fair play, just as its topicality is grounded in the Twenties but not confined to that decade. It has plenty enough of pathos, and more of tragedy than American readers may want to recognize. It has that basic irony which Americans have had to wrestle with from the beginning: How can you tell greatness without an established rank order? And how do you measure a man? By his power, his wealth, his accomplishments, his

dreams? Good American questions, as applicable to a nation as to a man. Finally, there is in *Gatsby* the depiction of the ideal and the real which are any culture's preoccupations. In America, they seem always to be in our literature, perhaps what has made the romance more the prevailing form than the novel, what makes *Gatsby* a romance rather than a novel, except that it is riveted to the earth as well as heightened into myth. Fitzgerald, too, lived between the real and the ideal, fully aware that all is not gold that glitters but aware, too, that still it glitters.

ENDNOTES

1 In the past three years, eight hard-covered books by or about F. Scott Fitzgerald have appeared. Nancy Milford's *Zelda* (Harper & Row, 1970) was a best seller; and Sara Mayfield's *Exiles from Paradise* (Delacorte, 1971), Bruccoli's editing of correspondence with Harold Ober *As Ever, Scott Fitsgerald* (Lippincott, 1972), Kuehl & Bryer's *Dear Scott/Dear Max; The Fitzgerald-Perkins Correspondence* (Scribner's, 1971), and Aaron Latham's *Crazy Sundays: F. Scott Fitzgerald in Hollywood* (Viking, 1970) all came out as trade books. Bryer and Kuehl's *The Basil and Josephine Stories* (Scribner's, 1973) in an alternate selection of the Readers' Subscription book club. Only two of these books were published by university presses, Bruccoli's *F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Bibliography* (Pittsburgh, 1972), and Bruccoli and Bryer's *Fitzgerald in His Own Time/A Miscellany* (Kent State, 1971.)

2 Robert Ornstein, "Scott Fitzgerald's Fable of East and West," in K. Eble, ed., *F. Scott Fitzgerald* (McGraw-Hill Paperbacks, 1973), pp. 60 and 62-63.

3 *Ibid,* p. 66.

4 See Lionel Trilling, "F. Scott Fitzgerald," in A. Kazin ed., *F. Scott Fitzgerald/The Man and His Work* (World Publishing Co., 1951), pp. 200-202 for a comparison of Fitzgerald and other writers.

5 Edmund Wilson, ed., *The Crack-Up* (New York, 1945), p. 232.

6 "The Waste Land of F. Scott Fitzgerald," in Eble, ed., *op. cit.,* pp. 67-80.

7 Kazin, *op. cit.* p. 204.

8 *Ibid.,* p. 204.

9 *The Sewanee Review,* LXII (Spring, 1954), 223-46.

10 *Ibid.,* p. 223.

11 "Third Act and Epilogue," Kazin, ed. *op. cit.,* pp. 149-50.

12 Bewley, *op cit.,* p. 246.

13 "English Literary History," XIX (Dec. 1952), 291-306.

14 Letter to F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Ibid.,* p. 310.

15 Letter to Edmund Wilson, *The Crack-Up* (New York, 1945), p. 270.

16 See John Kuehl, *The Apprentice Fiction of F. Scott Fitzgerald* (Rutgers Univ. Press, 1965); Donald Yates, "The Road to 'Paradise': Fitzgerald's Literary Apprenticeship" in Eble, *op. cit.,* pp. 19-33.

17 Edmund Wilson, "Thoughts on Being Bibliographed," *The Princeton University Library Chronicle,* (February, 1944), 54.

18 See Trilling, *op. cit.,* pp. 201-202. "For all the engaging self-depreciation which was part of his peculiary American charm, he put himself, in all modesty, in the line of greatness; he judged himself in a large way."

19 A. Turnbull, ed., *The Letters of F. Scott Fitzgerald* (Scribner's, 1963), p. 154.

20 *Ibid.,* p. 162.

21 *Ibid.,* p. 163.

22 *Ibid.,* p. 172.

23 *Ibid.,* p. 144.

24 Early in his career, Fitzgerald admired many writers not to be compared with the writers whose influence can be discerned in *Gatsby*. In 1922, he tried to interest Charles Scribner in bringing out a "library" of distinguished Scribner's authors including John Fox, Jr., Richard Harding Davis, Thomas Nelson Page, Henry Van Dyke, Jackson Gregory, and Stephen Whitman. Frederick Hoffman, ed., *The Great Gatsby* (Scribner's 1962), p. 7 cites the possible influence of Willa Cather, Henry James, Ford Madox Ford, and Conrad on *Gatsby*. He points out that Ford's *Personal Remembrance of Conrad* was first published in 1924 in the *transatlantic review* and contained a full discussion of the problems of scenic representation and point of view. By that date, Fitzgerald was reading such magazines and it is quite possible that he had read Ford's piece.

25 Hoffman, *op cit.*, p. 167.

26 See Robert Long, *"The Great Gatsby* and the Tradition of Joseph Conrad," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language,* 8 (*Summer and Fall,* 1966), pp. 257-76, 407-22; R. W. Stallman, "Gatsby and the Hole in Time," and "Conrad and *The Great Gatsby,"* in *The Houses that James Built and Other Literary Studies* (Michigan State University Press, 1961); E. Fred Carlisle, "The Triple Vision of Nick Carraway, *Modern Fiction Studies,* 11 (Winter 1965-66), pp. 351-60; Peter Lisca, "Nick Carraway and the Imagery of Disorder," *Twentieth Century Literature,* 13 (April, 1967), pp. 18-28; Joseph Riddel, "F. Scott Fitzgerald, the Jamesian Inheritance, and the Morality of Fiction," *Modern Fiction Studies,* 11, (Winter 1965-66), pp. 331-50.

27 Gary Scrimgeour, "Against 'The Great Gatsby,'" *Criticism,* 8 (Winter, 1966), 75-86, is the only extended critical essay to stand against the prevailing chorus of high praise. His argument is almost entirely focussed upon Fitzgerald's handling of Nick Carraway, and is both obtuse and contradictory in making unfavorable comparisons between Carraway and Marlow. "The character of Carraway . . . appeals to our liking for sentimental pessimism; critics and teachers can overvalue romanticism as much as authors, and thus damage our literary tradition by mistaking delicate perceptions for sound thinking."

28 (Nijhoff, the Hague, 1957): enlarged edition (New York University Press, 1964).

29 One of the evidences of growth in Fitzgerald's handling of technical details is revealed in a passage Fitzgerald cut from the novel in which Carraway says, "I told myself that I was studying it all like a philosopher, a sociologist, that there was a unity here that I could grasp after or would be able to grasp in a minute, a new facet, elemental and profound." In realizing fully the character of Nick along with his technical use, Fitzgerald had no need for such underlining passages. Those that remain (like the whole first page, focused on the "Fundamental decencies of life," and Nick's final pronouncement on Gatsby's character—"You're worth the whole damn bunch put together") are vital to the larger meaning of the novel as well as to Nick's and Gatsby's character.

30 *Modern Fiction Studies,* 2 (Winter, 1956-57) 183-90.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 190.

32 Turnbull, *op cit.*, p. 175.

33 Introduction to *The Great Gatsby,* Hoffman, *op cit.*, p. 167

34 "Fitzgerald Before *The Great Gatsby," in Kazin, op. cit.*, pp. 78-80.

35 *Ibid.*, pp. 72.

36 *Ibid.*, pp. 77.

37 Joseph Conrad, *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus,'* (Harper & Brothers, 1951), p. xi.

38 *Ibid.*, p. xxxvii.

39 *Ibid.*, p. xxxix.