

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

The first two novels that we have been discussing were comparatively traditional, or else transitional, in that they look from the twenties in retrospect, as contrasted with the immediacy of the present, the modern, the contemporary, the youthful. With Willa Cather we had a change of direction, from the East toward the Midwest; and with Scott Fitzgerald we have another such change, but proceeding in the opposite direction.

Fitzgerald did rename his period "The Jazz Age" from the new popular music that was emerging, and its echoes run through *The Great Gatsby*. "In the morning, in the evening, ain't we got fun?" asks one lyric, and "One thing's sure and one thing's surer. The rich get rich and the poor get—" We expect to hear "poorer", but we don't: "The rich get rich and the poor get children." Then the chorus, "In the evening, in the morning, ain't we got fun?" But when we hear "It's three o'clock in the morning; we've danced the whole night through; and daylight soon will be dawning—Just one more dance with you," we could contrast it with a later and more rueful remark of Fitzgerald, entered into his notebook: "In the dark night of the soul, it is always three o'clock."

In my introductory remarks I quoted from his first novel, *This Side of Paradise*, an expression of aftermath, the post-war feeling of a new generation that "all gods were dead, all faiths lost." Somewhat anticlimactically, they were now ready to dedicate themselves to the worship of success. They would become what Gertrude Stein would call a "lost generation." I mentioned also the influence of what at the time was called "the noble experiment" in the United States after the first World War, Prohibition, which helped to set up an underground network of bootleggers and gangsters. This does not come out into the open, but figures in the murky distance of the novel. You can observe here an example of how Prohibition could release inhibition, and how it could create an alcoholic *modus vivendi*. In Hemingway's *In Our Time*, the first three words are, "Everybody was drunk." And in *This*

Side of Paradise, when one character asks another, "You drink all the time, don't you?" and the answer is: "Well, I suppose so. Don't you?"

Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald -I like to begin with his full name because it has its implications. A very distant relative, Francis Scott Key had composed the national anthem, the "Star Spangled Banner" in Maryland during the War of 1812. His collateral descendant, the Scott Fitzgerald of the 1920's, gloried in the association, partly because most of his family was of Irish Catholic origin and felt a nuance of class consciousness in their relationship to the older Yankee Protestant families of the time.

There are various interesting later novels dealing with Irish-American life: notably those of James T. Farrell about Chicago and those of Edwin O'Connor mainly about Boston, as in *The Last Hurrah*. Quite recently I have been reading *The Other Side*, by a very promising young new novelist, Mary Gordon, which deals with four generations of an Irish-American family. Now, given these class distinctions, there was an interval division between what were called the "Shanty Irish", who were looked down upon, and the "Lace Curtain Irish", as they were called: those who had taken a few steps up the social ladder, but were not fully accepted by many of the Yankees. If they thought they might be, they were extremely self-conscious about it, as Scott Fitzgerald always was. He was born and grew up in Saint Paul, Minnesota -not very far from the small native town of Sinclair Lewis, Sauk Center,- "on a street above the average in a house below the average." One could feel a precarious sense of social position even there, on Summer Avenue. That was the quiet residential street of James J. Hill, who dominated the community, one of the empire builders, the so-called "robber barons," who made great fortunes and developed the country in the latter part of the nineteenth century. He had been responsible for the Northern Pacific Railroad and had become a patriarchal figure in Saint Paul. His house was at one end of Summit Avenue, looking down on the metropolitan area, from which this long boulevard of mansions extended westward to the Mississippi River at the other end.

The Fitzgerald family was substantial enough for a while to have a modest house on this fashionable street and to send their son to

Princeton, one of the well established Eastern universities. It could mean a good deal more than that; but for such people it was mainly a social cachet; and it wasn't much of an intellectual experience for Fitzgerald. He did very badly in his studies, and had to drop out at one time; but he wanted to shine in athletics. Although he was a very handsome young man, he was rather slight, and could not qualify for the football team. That was a blow to his strong sense of hero-worship, not to say his hopes of becoming a hero himself. The second blow came with the advent of the war, when he went into training camp but was never sent overseas. That he did not star in college, alas, and was never a wartime hero, seems to have exacerbated his sense of the heroic.

However, he underwent his military training in the South, and that was where he met Zelda Sayre, a Southern belle. The greatest beauty, it was said, in Georgia or Alabama –two whole states– she was wayward as well as beautiful, with many beaux and many engagements. One of them, with Fitzgerald, did not last long because he was not a very eligible suitor at that time. He retreated homeward to Saint Paul, where in the early Twenties he wrote his first novel, *This Side of Paradise*. On publication it was immediately hailed as the voice of a new generation and became a best-seller, so that he now was in a position to marry. But when he did, he said, "It wasn't the same," not the same as it might have been, if they hadn't broken up and then come together again. He tells about this, with some fictional disguise, in a story called "The Ice Palace".

The playboy married the playgirl, then, and they danced and drank their way through the Twenties, living on Long Island, the scene of *The Great Gatsby*, where they had a number of neighbors more interesting than some in the story. (Among others Ring Lardner, one of the writers who really created a style out of the American vernacular, but who never realized his literary potentiality.) The Fitzgeralds moved on to the Riviera, and the literary consequence of that was his most substantial novel, *Tender Is the Night*. Dealing with American writers abroad, like Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, it shows the characteristic Fitzgerald theme of a golden boy who is destined not to realize his potentialities.

Zelda, breaking down, spent most of the Thirties in mental institutions, while Scott Fitzgerald spent them in Hollywood. He died very prematurely in 1940, at the age of forty-four, living up to his dictum that "the life of the American writer has few second acts." Yet he had enjoyed a brilliantly promising first act. He explored this theme during his Hollywood years, in a volume collected by his closest college friend and "literary conscience", the critic Edmond Wilson. This volume, entitled *The Crack-Up*, also contains some interesting material from his notebooks for stories he never got to write. He did leave, almost completed, the manuscript for a novel about Hollywood that has been published posthumously, *The Last Tycoon*.

The comedy of manners had changed a good deal, just as manners had changed from the age of Edith Wharton, looking back toward New York in the Seventies, to the Twenties, when Scott Fitzgerald was still producing what you could call a comedy of manners with a difference. The nuances can be noted, because that special consciousness had made him well aware of the social code, the class distinctions. A disciple of his, John O'Hara, who came from a somewhat similar background, (and wasted a great deal of his later talent in slick magazines, but wrote one early novel that is well worth reading, *Appointment in Samara*) greatly admired Fitzgerald and tried to emulate him. O'Hara paid his tribute succinctly by saying, "He knew the forks." Yes, Fitzgerald knew the forks; he knew just where you sit down to the table as a guest in great establishments; he knew how people behave socially.

In that worldly wisdom there was a kind of guilty knowledge, to be sure. A snobbish sense of distinction between the nobs, those who were more highly placed in society, and the snobs, those who looked up to them and were social climbers. But there could also be –and there was in Fitzgerald– what Proust had called "la poésie du snobisme". I quoted –one is bound to quote more than once– that notorious interchange between Fitzgerald and Hemingway: "The rich are different." "Yes, they have more money." Fitzgerald was very disturbed that Hemingway had made it a dialogue, because actually they never said it in a conversation. The phrase appropriated by

Hemingway appears in a novella, one of Fitzgerald's best, *The Rich Boy*, characterizing a member of this class. His retort, the obvious wisecrack, of common sense, had been an afterthought. When he reprinted the story, Hemingway dropped the name at Fitzgerald's request; but in retrospect, when Hemingway recounted his memoirs in *A Moveable Feast*, he was vindictively unfair to Fitzgerald.

Yet knowing the forks, or recognizing the differences when confronted with members of a richer or higher social class, that is an accomplishment in itself, it makes for the kind of observation you find in Thackeray, who brought the word "snob" into the English language. Such differences continue, though they vary from generation to generation; the British were still speaking, not very long ago of the difference between U (upper class) and non-U speech. If I speak of my eye-glasses, that is non-U; if I wanted to speak U, I would call them spectacles. Thus Fitzgerald, with his eye for such distinctions, could call his heroine Daisy, -very U, a nickname for Margaret, of course- and could call the other woman Myrtle, which is very non-U.

Seeking romance as Fitzgerald did is not easy in the modern world. The question of how to distinguish oneself in an undistinguished role was most pointedly addressed in an important essay by Baudelaire called "Le romance dans le monde modern:" facing that question, Baudelaire came out with the conclusion that the only part for the would-be hero to play was the role of the dandy. The dandy was, as Baudelaire described him, an unemployed hero. It is significant, I think, in this connection, that the year in which *The Great Gatsby* appeared was the first year in which the *New Yorker* magazine appeared; on its cover that anniversary is celebrated every year with the exaggerated portrait of Eustace Tillen, an archetypal New York dandy. Fitzgerald must have had something like this in mind when he composed a little doggerel poem to be the epigraph of the book about the gold-hatted lover. At one point he even wanted to call the book *Gold-Hatted Gatsby*. Gatsby was not so overt a dandy; it was not really a matter of dress with him. Another alternative title that he considered was *Ash-heaps and Millionaires*. That would have underlined the ultimate class distinction, while emphasizing the

symbolic significance of the ash-heap where the book's climax occurred. Another title, which seems to cast a good deal of light on his intention and on the situation of the dandy, and which brings us back again to Latin precedent, was *Trimalchio at West Egg*. In *The Satyricon* of Petronius Arbiter, Trimalchio is the ultimate *nouveau riche*, who gives those overelaborate entertainments which finally leave one disgusted. This is, on the other hand, the classical precedent for Gatsby's hospitality, when he settled down at Great Neck and is playing the lavish host to his vulgar neighbors in the hope that Daisy may turn up.

Now Great Neck is where the Fitzgeralds had stayed on Long Island, with Ring Lardner and a number of other literary people. It wasn't considered as socially distinguished as Little Neck, where dwelt more millionaires, who commuted on the Long Island Railway to Wall Street in the mornings. Both looked out on Long Island Sound, which is part of the backdrop for the story; Great Neck and Little Neck figure as East Egg and West Egg in *The Great Gatsby*. This arrangement is not peculiar for Long Island or for North Americans. After all, the highly dramatic plan of Proust's great novel involves a comparable distinction between *le côté de chez Swann* and *le côté de Guerny*. First in the country and then again in the city, these directions mark the difference between the arriving bourgeoisie and the declining aristocracy.

The narrator, Nick Carraway, will be thirty on the fatal day of the story that will celebrate his birthday. He will have spent the summer in the East, away from his native Middlewest, and it will be a maturing experience for him. The novel would almost be a *Bildungsroman*, if it were his story and not Gatsby's. But he is in a good position to observe on first hand, and the others fill him in on some of the background details. He is even allotted a feminine partner, whom he admires but does not trust, in Jordan Baker.

Gatsby, meanwhile, has been trying to settle down in this large, improbable house on Long Island Sound. A somewhat romantic figure in himself, he seems larger than life. He is surrounded by a buzz of rumors, an aura of enthralling surmises. He seems to have been a war hero; indeed he was. He claims to have gone to Oxford; it

sounds doubtful; but we learn that, under certain special circumstances, he did spend a term there as a veteran. No one knows where he comes from; he doesn't seem to know where San Francisco is located, when someone asks him a question about it. But what looms large for Nick Carraway is Gatsby's titanic conception of himself. This is Nick when he is beginning to tell the story, relieved at being back home from his entanglements in the East:

I wanted no more riotous excursions with privileged glimpses into the human heart. Only Gatsby, the man who gives his name to this book, was exempt from my reaction—Gatsby, who represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn. If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures, then there was 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. [That, of course, would be a seismograph.] This responsiveness,...was an extraordinary gift of hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which it is not likely I shall ever find again. No —Gatsby turned out all right at the end; it is what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams that temporarily closed out my interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men.

Gradually, through flashbacks and hints and revelations, we piece out some awareness of Gatsby's prior career, the career of James Gatz from a commonplace background. He has certainly been brought up on the work ethic, the resolve to make the most of what comes his way. By accident, he was flung into the service of a mentor who accustomed him to a taste for better things, and he has had to take illicit steps to gain them in a hurry. The quickest way involved bootlegging. We get hints of this through those curious telephone calls, but the underground connection is kept at that subterranean level. Our suspicions are gradually aroused after these rumbles and rumors, personified for a moment or two in the person of Meyer Wolfsheim. Wolfsheim is modelled upon a professional gambler with underworld connections named Arnold Rothstein. He was a man who won great notoriety by trying to "fix" the World Series in 1919. I

am not a baseball fan myself, but I suppose most North Americans would regard that as the ultimate profanation. They idealized the game, and here was this gambler who was trying to go into this final, world-shattering match and secure his bets by bribing the local team to throw away their expected victory.

Like Fitzgerald himself, Gatsby, when in military training for the war, had met his golden girl, and they had been mutually smitten. But she is a debutante enshrined in her family's elitist pretensions. In fact, when Daisy is mentioned at one point, it is said: "There's something in her voice." What is that something in her voice? "It's money." Daisy, having grown tired of waiting, has married Tom, the brash, overbearing Chicago millionaire. They were both from the Midwest like Fitzgerald. Tom had been a football player at college, and had gone on in life being a polo player. He has never grown up, but is used to getting his own way. Now, of course, it is five years after the abortive romance between Daisy and Jay.

The Gatsby plan is to bring West Egg to East Egg by a continuous open house, and a series of wilder and jazzier parties than any of the neighbors, which attract a motley crew. In the book you will note two full pages that name and describe these guests somewhat like a gossip column in a newspaper; or perhaps it resembles, with due allowances for the difference between Long Island society and the Italian scene, something out of *La Dolce Vita*. Eventually, Daisy and her husband do turn up, and she has changed. Her new cynicism is mirrored in her conversational style. "God, I'm sophisticated," she says. "Sophistication," of course, is a key-word. It has had a rather interesting history too, because it used to be rather deprecatory, meaning something chemically adulterated; apparently, whatever element was put into the combination of liquids made it fizz.

Like an Elizabethan drama, the plot has a subplot which runs parallel to it. The renewal of the romance between Daisy and Gatsby, which is kept pretty well in the background, is paralleled in the foreground by the rather sordid affair between Tom and Myrtle Wilson. The dénouement of the story brings the two affairs together. The novel is neatly constructed, with an almost Dantesque inclination toward multiples of three. There are nine chapters which might be

subdivided into three groups: three triads, each containing a party as its most animated feature. The first is the West Egg cocktail party that brings the lovers together again; and then we see what is described as a seedy orgy in the New York apartment that Tom has hired for Myrtle Wilson, which culminates when he slaps her in the face. She has mentioned Daisy, and he does not want his two lives brought together. Then there is the confrontation scene between Gatsby and Tom, which takes place in a fashionable locale, the Plaza Hotel in New York, leading to the climactic episode. The pace quickens as the episodes move on toward the final section, so that Chapter Seven recounts the accident, Chapter Eight the murder, and Chapter Nine the aftermath.

The setting for the climax is almost apocalyptic: the Valley of Ashes, a kind of village wasteland, rendering a dark view of modern life. For that matter, you find a counterpart, if you are looking for the theme in other novels, in Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend*, where the dustheap seems to symbolize the debris of civilization. This Valley of Ashes confronts a railroad junction, which is strategically important. Its sordid scene is where the commuting millionaires drive in their motorcars to board the suburban train, and it is also where Myrtle's husband, George Wilson, has his garage. Looming over it all is a billboard, an advertisement for a Long Island oculist. That enormous sign becomes an expressionistic symbol: you aren't getting away with this or with anything else, God is looking at you through the eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg.

Daisy is driving when Myrtle, imprisoned by her jealous husband, manages to break out and run out onto the road into a fatal accident. Gatsby, motivated by pure chivalry, pretends to have been driving and takes the blame. That is what leads to his death by the avenging Wilson, who had been tipped off by Tom. There is an interesting comment. Daisy and Tom are sitting opposite each other at the kitchen table, with a plate of cold fried chicken between them, and two bottles of ale. It is now late at night and, passing by, Nick happens to look in the window:

He [Tom] was talking intently across the table at her, and in his earnestness his hand had fallen upon and covered her own. Once in a while she looked up at him and nodded in agreement.

They weren't happy, and neither of them had touched the chicken or the ale-and yet they weren't unhappy either. There was an unmistakable air of natural intimacy about the picture, and anyone would have said that they were conspiring together.

They were rich, and they could afford to be what Jordan Baker called "careless people".

The funeral is dreary. Almost no one comes; and, of all those freeloaders who came and ate and drank at the parties, only one is there, the cynical, owl-eyed man. His remark is Gatsby's epitaph, far from heroic: "The poor son of a bitch." Incidentally, when Fitzgerald died and the sophisticated New York poet of the 1920's, Dorothy Parker, paid her respects at the funeral parlor, she looked down at the remains, and the words she echoed were: "the poor son of a bitch."

What was so great about Gatsby, after all? The adjective is ironic, of course. "Great" is used with ironic effect by Fielding in his story of an English jailor and crook, *Jonathan Wild the Great*. The concept of greatness is brought back and forth in the context of that book. As for Gatsby, he aspired to greatness in his romantic way. His father appears at the end and thinks about him as wanting to be another James Hill, wanting to emulate the prominent figure in the region from which Fitzgerald came, to be an empire-builder, not a bootlegger. In the end we take a receding view again, as in *My Ántonia*. I cited this passage the other day, and I shall not quote it all, but let me remind you:

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

He looks at the large houses, mostly closed now for the winter season. No lights, except from the ferryboat across the Sound; and it is

then that he has that vision of the Dutch sailors who discovered New York, the first to have seen Long Island. The expectation trails off into an epigraph:

...the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment, man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.

That is—rather, was—the American Dream. And then Nick thinks of Gatsby's wonderment in the presence of Daisy.

...I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. 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.

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther.... And one fine morning—

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

And that is the closure, the final sentence. You will recall that in the closure of *My Ántonia*, the last word also was "past". "You can't repeat the past," says Nick at one point. "Why, of course you can," says Gatsby. But of course he couldn't.