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The Power of Romance and the Gatsby-Wolfshiem "Gonnegtion"[1]

Michael Beatty

Summary

This article explores the careful ways in which F. Scott Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby* avoids a full confrontation with Gatsby as a character, or with the implications of Gatsby's source of wealth: his criminality and his underground "gonnegtions". As a consequence, we are encouraged, through Nick Carraway's idealising and fantasising vision, to be caught up in Gatsby's romantic self-construction. On the other hand, the tension between the narrator's irony and his romanticism enables us to discover a moral vision that endorses Nick's ability to endure beyond the disillusionment that destroys Gatsby.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel word gewy aan die omsigtige wyses waarop F. Scott Fitzgerald daarin slaag om 'n algehele konfrontasie met Gatsby as karakter, of met die implikasies van die oorsprong van Gatsby se bron van rykdom, naamlik sy kriminaliteit en sy ondergrondse "gonnegtions", te vermy. Die leser word gevolglik aangemoedig om deur middel van Nick Carraway se idealiserende en fantaserende visie in Gatsby se romantiese selfkonstruksie verwikkeld te raak. Aan die ander kant stel die spanning tussen die verteller se ironie en sy romantiek ons in staat om 'n morele siening te ontdek wat Nick se vermoë staaf om bo die ontnugtering wat tot Gatsby se ondergang lei, uit te styg.

> [The] whole burden of this novel is the loss of those illusions that give such colour to the w orld so that you don't care whether things are true or false so long as they partake of the magical glory.
>
> F. Scott Fitzgerald

> In every great novel, who is the hero all the time? Not any of the characters, but some unnamed and nameless flame behind them all.
>
> D.H. Lawrence

1

The Great Gatsby is probably the most widely read of F. Scott Fitzgerald's fictional works, both inside and outside high school and the university. Indeed, this short novel, which first appeared when Fitzgerald was only twenty-eight years old (cf. Bruccoli 1981), has gained the reputation of a twentieth-century American masterpiece. Fitzgerald of course was not always attended to as a living presence. In this paper I will not attempt to recount the fortunes of *The Great Gatsby* from its mixed reception and disappointing sales on publication in 1925, through its increasing popularity in the 1940s, to its critical and popular elevation from the standing of an important "period piece" to that of an established classic of American literature (cf. Fitzgerald 1991: 5). I want rather to begin by considering two instances of the approbation in which the novel has come to be held, particularly in America.

The first is found in George Garrett's 1985 essay in a respected collection of Fitzgerald criticism, *New Essays on The Great Gatsby*: "I have never yet known an American writer of my generation or of the older and younger generations, who has not placed *Gatsby* among the rare unarguable masterpieces of our times" (1985: 101). He found it unique that "in an age when we have become so politicized that even the toothpaste one uses becomes, like it or not, a political statement, writers of all political stripes and persuasions seem to admire *Gatsby*, even as, inevitably, they describe the characters and the story in somewhat different terms" (1985: 101).

The second instance is found in the Preface to the Scribner Classics edition of the novel, by Matthew J. Bruccoli, the Fitzgerald authority. His words echo Garrett's: "*The Great Gatsby* does not proclaim the nobility of the human spirit; it is not politically correct; it does not reveal how to solve the problems of life; it delivers no fashionable or comforting messages. It is just a masterpiece" (1996: 5).

Garrett and Bruccoli are persuasive in their contention that *The Great Gatsby* transcends both the conventional moral expectations of readers of fiction and fashionable political preconceptions and persuasions in America and elsewhere. But I must put an objection to their wording above. For their invocation of the term "masterpiece" explicitly repudiates anybody who might want to inquire responsibly and critically into the reputation of the novel that has become current. It is as if *The Great Gatsby* has been disconnected from all questions of human value and enshrined for our pleasure and adulation in a kind of Hall of Fame of American Fiction.

The novel is indeed a skilfully crafted, complex work of art; it is a beautifully written and sophisticated work displaying great brio, humour, sadness and

charm. Fitzgerald is a poet in prose. Tony Tanner, in his excellent introduction to the Penguin Twentieth-Century Classics edition of the book, goes so far as to pronounce it "word-perfect and inexhaustible. *The Great Gatsby* is ... the most perfectly crafted work of fiction to have come out of America" (1990: lv). Nevertheless, the novel seems to me problematic in certain important ways. And I want now to try and make clear a fundamental reservation about Fitzgerald's conceptions of Nick Carraway and Jay Gatsby, the main outsiders who, during the aftermath of the 1914-1918 War, venture into the irresponsible New York milieu of American wealth.

2

That Nick Carraway's voice is that of the novel is rightly a commonplace. As Fitzgerald's first-person narrator, Nick, recollects and retells almost all the incidents and events in which he has been involved during the late spring and summer of 1922, in the order in which he experienced them. Fitzgerald's vivid representation of Nick as both a novelistic consciousness and character allows him to control the novel's point of view and construction. Moreover, Fitzgerald's use of Nick as a representative modern American enables him to bring into his book some experiences which he knew from his own life to be crucial. F. Scott Fitzgerald of course is not Nick Carraway. But there is a great deal of Fitzgerald in him, and Nick can be said to stand for the author.

Nick is from a prosperous Middle-Western background. He is a graduate of Yale University, where he was "rather literary" (Fitzgerald 1990: 10) and has fought in the First World War. Now, a bit of an outsider and almost thirty years old, he has relocated to the East "to learn the bond business". At the beginning of Chapter 1, Fitzgerald creates Nick's point of view as that of someone who, because he is a third-generation member of a decent, prominent family, is "inclined to reserve all judgements" (p. 7). He also establishes Nick's amused self-awareness of this inclination, for which "tolerance" is another name. Nick's "tolerance" attracts others to confide in him. In short, he comes across as a basically decent, mature, sophisticated and likeable young man who is able to view both his experience of "many curious natures" (p. 7) and himself with ironic disinterest.

But Nick's point of view is complicated by the way in which Fitzgerald goes on to build into it the history of Nick's disenchantment with the East. Nick first expresses his moral disgust at the conduct of the people he has encountered there. Then he waxes lyrical about Gatsby as follows:

> Only Gatsby ... 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 .... This responsiveness ... was an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person .... 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.
> (Fitzgerald 1990: 8)

Here Nick's paradoxical statements about Gatsby are charged with romantic feeling. The impetus of his rhetoric describing Gatsby's special romantic quality goes beyond his inclination to ironic disinterest. Nick's knowledge of Gatsby arises from the profound admiration with which he has come to view him and his actions. Furthermore Nick implies that Gatsby has also helped to create in him a large sense of the "promises of life", a power of romantic responsiveness.

Ironic disinterestedness combined with a supremely romantic attitude towards life is the informing spirit of *The Great Gatsby*, and it yields the pervasive charm of the novel. For the reader it is pleasurable to share Nick's mode of imaginative attention to most of the presented experiences both as they occur and as he recollects them. Isn't this true, for example, of Nick's account of his visit to his second cousin Daisy Buchanan and her extremely wealthy husband Tom at their East Egg home? Here it is pleasant to share Nick's ironic engagement with Tom's powerful physique, his arrogance and his pathetic postwar theorising about "[c]ivilization's going to pieces" (p. 18).

It is also pleasant to share Nick's sympathetic attention towards Daisy. He responds generously to her humour, beauty, and marital unhappiness; yet while he admires her, he is aware of her cynicism, insincerity and corruption. Nick, moreover, is almost everyone's friend and confidant. Fitzgerald's privileging of Nick allows us to engage with a character who makes amidst the errors of others virtually none himself that exposes him to irony. And it is pleasurable for the reader to feel with Nick that he or she is always alert; alert as an observer, or morally, or poetically, and frequently all three at once.

Nick himself, as the opening paragraphs of the novel have implied, will be presented throughout as a normative consciousness only to the extent that his power of romantic responsiveness resembles Gatsby's. Moreover Gatsby's consciousness and conduct will appear heroic through their relationship to Nick's. But before I pursue this line of thought, I want to consider how we come to learn about Gatsby as we read the novel.

Fitzgerald's disclosure of Gatsby to the reader, through Nick, is both artful and gradual; he keeps us in suspense as to who he is and as to what his

background really is. Shortly before the novel appeared, Fitzgerald wrote to his publisher, Maxwell Perkins, asking him not to tell the story in the blurb: "Don't give away that Gatsby *dies* or is a *parvenu* or *crook* or anything. It's a part of the suspense of the book that all these things are in doubt until the end" (Fitzgerald quoted in Turnbull 1963: 176). Gatsby is created largely in terms of gossip from sources of varying reliability. The gossip is sometimes false, sometimes half-true, sometimes true. He is also presented in fragments which are carefully placed for maximum effectiveness. It is interesting to follow Gatsby's life chronologically through the novel. The only glimpse of his boyhood comes in Chapter 9, the last chapter. The important account of him as a youth - at the age of seventeen joining Dan Cody's yacht and in the process transforming himself from James Gatz to Jay Gatsby - is given in Chapter 6. The crucial love affair between Gatsby and Daisy when Gatsby, then in the army, first met Daisy, and which took place five years before the action of the summer of 1922, is related three different times - in Chapters 4, 6 and 8. Each time the point of view is different and so is the degree of fullness of the telling. The account of Gatsby's war experiences and his trip, after his discharge from the army, back to Louisville, Daisy's home, is given in Chapter 8. And Gatsby's entry into his present mysterious occupation by way of his "gonnegtion" with Wolfshiem is presented, briefly, in Chapter 9.

Gatsby's whole background informs his pattern of conduct during the crucial summer of 1922. Of particular importance to his transformation of himself into Jay Gatsby has been his acquisition of a great deal of money. His pretentiousness based on money forms a central motif of the work as a whole. It is in varying ways echoed through the novel by virtually all the characters, including the Buchanans, Tom's mistress, Myrtle Wilson, the previous owner of Gatsby's vulgarly opulent West Egg house, the strange crowd at the superbly presented party in Tom's and Myrtle's New York apartment, and most of the guests at Gatsby's fabulous parties. Through Nick's ironic engagement, the reader learns of the incongruities between the characters' conceptions of themselves and the realities. But when it comes to Gatsby's conduct, Nick continually romanticises him, inviting us to excuse him. Nick, endorsed by Fitzgerald, invites us to judge Gatsby's conduct as morally different from that of the "foul dust [that] floated in the wake of his dreams" (Fitzgerald 1990: 8).

The issue of our judgement of Gatsby is intimately related to the issue of the success, or lack of success, of Fitzgerald's conception of his hero. How firm is Fitzgerald's apprehension of Gatsby? How credible is he? This question was discussed by Fitzgerald and his publisher, Maxwell Perkins, while Fitzgerald was writing his novel (cf. Turnbull 1963: 170-177), and has often been raised since then. Since the 1950s, critics as different as Lionel Trilling, Arthur

Mizener, Marius Bewley, and Tony Tanner have all argued in favour of Gatsby's success.[2] Trilling's dealing with the question will help me clarify my reservation.

In his excellent essay, "F. Scott Fitzgerald", Trilling contends: "Gatsby is said by some to be not credible, but the question of any literal credibility he may or may not have becomes trivial before the large significance he implies [that is, he stands for America itself]" (1950: 244). The question of Gatsby's "literal credibility" does not seem "trivial" to me, despite his symbolic significance. But for the moment, I would like to point out that Trilling goes along with Nick Carraway's interpretation of Gatsby in the following passage:

> The truth was that Jay Gatsby of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself. 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. So he invented just the sort of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen-year-old boy would be likely to invent, and to this conception he was faithful to the end.
>
> (Fitzgerald 1990: 95)

This passage, despite the ambivalent last sentence, can be seen as the statement of a main theme of the novel. Nick's assessment of Gatsby, we judge, is endorsed by Fitzgerald. And Trilling, like many other critics, both approves of it and takes it over in his account of the book's large significance, its truth about America: "To the world it is anomalous in Gatsby, that so much raw power should be haunted by envisioned romance" (1950: 244).

Thus Gatsby's large romantic ideals which he invented as a seventeen-year-old youth, and which were unavoidably made out of the materials that his society provided him, are mistaken, but, or so the novel appears to assume, to attempt to do without them is to live emptily and to thwart a permanent human need. I have already suggested that Gatsby's consciousness and conduct are helped to appear normative through their relationship to Nick Carraway's. Moreover, the novel conveys Fitzgerald's own nearly complete commitment to Gatsby's romantic idealism. But despite the book's poetic prose and masterly construction - the eloquence and invention with which Fitzgerald gradually reveals Gatsby to us - it seems to me that Gatsby's "essential incorruptibility" is not heroic but unbelievable. And this brings me to the matter of the Gatsby-Wolfshiem "gonnegtion".

To point out that the felicitously named Gatsby has, after all, resorted to crime in his pursuit of his "Platonic conception" of himself and his subsequent dream of romantic love that he focused on Daisy, is not, I think, a trivial matter. Gatsby is an extremely wealthy professional criminal with a network of

underworld associations. But Fitzgerald, it seems to me, does not come to terms with the fact of this criminality. The reason he does not, I suggest, is because he wants to sustain Nick's moral separation between the "gorgeous" Gatsby who "turned out all right at the end" and the "foul dust" that "floated in the wake of his dreams" (Fitzgerald 1990: 8).

Fitzgerald, it seems to me, plays down Gatsby's criminality. He allows himself to be deceived and is willing to deceive the reader. We become aware of this mainly through his representation of Nick's mode of imaginative attention to Gatsby. Nick's power of romantic responsiveness is a main way in which his mind is made to work; but he shows a tendency to fantasise his experience. An early instance of this is seen when Nick is describing the Buchanan's house: "The lawn started at the beach and ran towards the front door for a quarter of a mile, jumping over sundials 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" (p. 12). Here the lawn as athlete is witty and poetic. But my main point is that a great deal of fantasising goes on in the novel, with young women seated on a couch "buoyed up as though upon an anchored balloon" (p. 13) and cars scampering like brisk yellow bugs "to meet all trains" (p. 41) and so on. And the trouble is that, in Nick's romantic responsiveness to his experience, the boundaries between the imaginary and the real, the illusory and the true, become strangely indeterminate.

Nick's inclination towards fantasy becomes important where his engagement with Gatsby as a criminal is concerned. As a result Gatsby's illegal activities and associates become almost harmless, even comic. The masterly telephone conversation between Gatsby and one of his colleagues is an example of this: "Well, he's no use to us if Detroit is his idea of a small town" (p. 91). A more important representation of the underworld, however, is Meyer Wolfshiem. From one point of view, the discrepancy between Wolfshiem's nostalgic reminiscence of the gang slaying of his friend Rosy Rosenthal and his simultaneous interest in Nick as a potential "business gonnegtion" (p. 69) is brilliant. So too is the discrepancy between Nick's apprehension of him as a crass, even comic New York Jewish actor or dentist, with his cuff links made of human teeth and his sentimental avuncular manner, and the abstract idea of "the man who fixed the World's Series back in 1919" (p. 71). For Nick, the criminality of Gatsby and his associates seems not quite believable. Certainly neither Nick nor Fitzgerald concerns himself with any criminal career that is real and serious.

Gatsby, I suggest, lives for the reader mainly as an aspiring and self-improving Minnesota boy grown up into financial success and as the hopeful dreamer about Daisy. As a criminal he is neither realised nor convincing. And by evading the dirt and violence of Gatsby's get-rich-quick career in the interest

of preserving his image from contamination, Fitzgerald has also evaded the basis of his dreams of wealth and of the charms of Daisy.

It is interesting to note that Fitzgerald himself, as certain letters written by him during 1924 and 1925 show, was aware of, in his words, "Gatsby's vagueness". On 9 August 1925, about four months after the appearance of his novel, he wrote to John Peale Bishop: "You are right about Gatsby being blurred and patchy. I never at any one time saw him clearly myself - for he started as one man I knew and then changed into myself - the amalgam was never complete in my mind" (Fitzgerald quoted in Turnbull 1963: 358). Fitzgerald's admission here that he did not grasp Gatsby clearly or firmly seems to me believable. Some critics, however, have seen Gatsby's vagueness as deliberately intended by the author. Tony Tanner, for example, in his introduction to the Penguin edition of the novel contends:

> This wonderfully maintained "vagueness" is better than "O.K.": it is an essential part of the magic of the book. For, after even the harshest scrutiny of Gatsby - which might reduce him to a sentimental roughneck, a criminal with a soppy dream, a ruthless social climber determined to buy himself a very classy piece of female goods - Gatsby does, somehow, stick in the heart.[3]
>
> (Tanner in Fitzgerald 1990: xivi)

The statement "Gatsby does, somehow, stick in the heart", seems to me an instance of sentimentality. That Gatsby should have evoked, and continues to evoke, such a response from many readers is, I think, a tribute to the illusion of his largeness that the novel so brilliantly and seductively generates. Indeed, despite Gatsby's problematic credibility, we can see a sense in which, as Trilling has argued, Fitzgerald's creation is very American - American in the reconciliations that are attempted by means of him. By dividing Gatsby's "power" from the "foul" concomitants of that power and thereby emphasising the heroism of his "dreams", Fitzgerald has been able to provide a figure complementing that of Nick. It is as if, through Gatsby, Fitzgerald is trying to reaffirm a more traditional American mode of consciousness, with its "heightened sensitivity to the promises of life", its "extraordinary gift for hope" and its "romantic readiness" (Fitzgerald 1990: 8).

However, the reaffirmation of America that is actually presented to us is not as traditional as it may first appear. Consider, for example, the famous four paragraphs that end the novel:

> [M]ost of the big shore places were closed now and there were hardly any lights except the shadowy, moving glow of a ferryboat across the Sound. And as the moon rose higher the unessential 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, 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.

And as I sat there brooding on the old, unknown world, I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. 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 orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that is no matter - tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms further ... And one fine morning -

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

(Fitzgerald 1990: 171-172)

Here Nick exercises his imagination in such a way that he attends to Gatsby with faith and love. For many readers, these poetic paragraphs "stick in the heart"; moreover, they are wholly endorsed by Fitzgerald. But Nick's words seem to me largely rhetoric. As we reach the end of the novel, is Nick, or the reader, waking up from a dream? Or are we being drawn to live in a dream? And is it a truly American Dream, or an imaginary one, an illusion? The passage shows the characteristic workings of Nick's fantasy: "And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes - a fresh, green breast of the new world". Does Nick, does Fitzgerald, do we, know what Dutch sailors in the early-seventeenth century were thinking while they eyed the approaching shores of Long Island? Doesn't it seem improbable that they were "compelled into an aesthetic contemplation?" And by what logic do the Dutch sailors become representative of man in general? Even if we start thinking of the early American settlers as a whole, don't we think of them in terms of commitment, endurance and luck? The evocation above of that "old unknown world" in terms of siren-like whisperings and "a fresh, green breast" reads as a piece of myth-making. The later pioneer movement too was much tougher - those three hundred thousand Americans who were still pursuing their "dreams" from the Atlantic shores across the Great Plains to the Pacific Ocean about two centuries after, in Nick's words, "this last time in history" when "man was faced with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder". In sum, I do not think that Fitzgerald has succeeded in conveying in any fullness the quality of

the ambitions and virtues that have manifested themselves in the making of America. He has rather sentimentalised them in the attempt to raise Gatsby to heroic stature and imply that his romantic illusions are historically inevitable.

At the end of the novel Nick attends to Gatsby with faith and love. But at the end of Chapter 8, after Daisy has finally left Gatsby in the lurch, following the car accident which killed Myrtle, Nick anxiously imagines Gatsby waking up from the dream about Daisy in which he has been living:

> ... he must have felt that he had lost the old warm world, paid a high price for living too long with a single dream. He must have looked up at an unfamiliar sky through frightening leaves and shivered as he found what a grotesque thing a rose is and how raw the sunlight was upon the scarcely created grass. A new world, material without being real ....
>
> (Fitzgerald 1990: 153)

Here, Nick's imaginative responsiveness to Gatsby's impoverished consciousness after the loss of his illusions shows him depicting the reality awaiting him: "A new world, material without being real ...." An implication in the novel is that this is the psychological and ontological end to which the heroic energies of Americans have been leading.

What is important, however, is the fact that Nick does not undermine Gatsby's romantic illusions with his ironic gaze. Nor does Nick himself embrace the "new world, material without being real". Despite the limitations of Nick's consciousness - his excessive responsiveness to Gatsby, and his tendency to fantasise his experience - and despite the fact that he is someone who has been defeated and has withdrawn from the East to the Middle West, Nick is able to carry on in a constructive way. Nick's values of honour, truth-telling, loyalty and personal integrity are values rooted in his growing up a Carraway, and make possible his endurance. Even though the East has defeated him, Nick does not pass from the illusionment of Gatsby to Gatsby's kind of disillusionment. Instead, he is able to make sense of his experience during the summer of 1922. Finally, Fitzgerald's creation of Nick portends the courage that he himself exhibited after the "crack-up" of his own Gatsby-like illusions (cf. Fitzgerald 1945).

Notes

1. This essay is a revised version of a paper delivered to the Cape American Studies Association's Colloquium on American Modernisms, held on 28 September 1996, to mark the centenary of F.Scott Fitzgerald's birthday on 24 September.

2. I am indebted to the work of all these critics. See Mizener's (1963) useful collection of essays. I have also drawn on Berryman's (1976) brilliant piece on Fitzgerald. I am also indebted to Fraser (1984).

3. Tanner's use of the statement "Gatsby does, somehow, stick in the heart" (cf. Turnbull 1963: 173) alludes to Fitzgerald's letter (circa 20 December 1924) to Maxwell Perkins, in which he says "Gatsby sticks in my heart" (cf. Turnbull 1963: 173).

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