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“Boats Against the Current”: Mortality and the Myth of Renewal in *THE GREAT GATSBY*

JEFFREY STEINBRINK

F. Scott Fitzgerald's recreations of the Jazz Age are convincing not only because they draw upon his experiences as a charter member of the Lost Generation but also because they convey so pervasively a sense of the fundamental paradox which gave the Age its poignancy. In a Fitzgerald novel one is drawn almost simultaneously in two directions: toward the naive hope that the best of life is yet to come, and toward the realization that such circumstances as give life meaning lie buried in an irrecoverable past. Characters in his best work are nowhere more representative of the Jazz Age than when they find themselves curiously suspended in time. The conventional wisdom of the nineteenth century, threadbare even before the Great War, was simply and undeniably inadequate to deal with the world which the War had left in its wake. To a person standing at the threshold of the 1920s the pre-war world and its traditions appeared not simply remote, but archaic, the repository of an innocence long since dead. Possessed of what seemed an irrelevant past, Americans faced an inaccessible future; for a moment in our history there was only the present.

The roar of the twenties was both a birth-cry and a death-rattle, for if it announced the arrival of the first generation of modern Americans it also declared an end to the Jeffersonian dream of simple agrarian virtue as the standard of national conduct and the epitome of national aspiration. The new generation forfeited its claim to the melioristic certainties of an earlier time as the price of its full participation in the twentieth century, and declared itself lost not in spite of its

history but because of it. Disenchanted observers remarked everywhere—as they had even before the turn of the century—that the perennial fruits of the American experience were frustration and disappointment. The New Jerusalem envisioned by our Puritan fathers was never to be realized; the possibilities of spiritual regeneration in a boundless New World were fatally diminished by the closing of the frontier; the dream that technology would provide the means to happiness and fulfillment proved a nightmare as the machine threatened to become man's master rather than his servant. The very impetus or direction of American history came repeatedly into question, and what once had appeared (to use Clifford Pyncheon's image) an ascending spiral curve now became a steady downward sweep toward the void of nonexistence.

The truth seemed to be that history itself subscribed to the theory of entropy which was rapidly gaining currency in the early twentieth century. Writers and philosophers joined men of science in the discovery that the operant energy within any closed system tends to diminish in the course of time. The universe, they declared, was in fact running downhill—like a clock with an ever-relaxing mainspring—its suns growing dimmer, its planets spinning and orbiting more slowly, its capacity to sustain life always dwindling. More disillusioned than bitter, members of the generation which came of age in the 1920s understood and accepted this grim cosmology even while they lamented the loss of innocence and confidence which isolated them from the optimism of their forefathers. The frantic vitality of the decade reflected their tacit accommodation of the pursuit of personal happiness to an entropic world view; they burned brightly while they were able and then sought repose in their exhaustion. In matters of deportment and style relating to that pursuit they took as a model and recording angel F. Scott Fitzgerald.

The impact of history in Fitzgerald's work is inevitably to remind us that the course of human experience, whether individual or societal, is best described as a long downward glide. Moments of happiness or triumph from the past can neither be recaptured nor repeated, and for that reason seldom can they be forgotten. Regeneration and renewal are myths, or at best metaphors, rather than real possibilities of actual life. Given these circumstances it is hardly surprising that Fitzgerald's characters are often cynical, nor is it unusual that their nearly obligatory hedonism is relieved only by moments of nostalgia or regret. A few members of his cast, among them the very young and the very foolish, either refuse to accept or are unable to understand the per-

sonal consequences of living in an entropic system and are crushed—some tragically, some only pitifully—by the burden of truth they are eventually made to bear. Fewer still are able to accommodate themselves to this truth and successfully to steer a course between hope and despair.

Fitzgerald had experienced the Great War and its aftermath, and had witnessed in his own life that the brightest lights were often the first to flicker. By the time he was twenty-five he had earned world renown as an author, had begun to amass a personal fortune, and had won the hand of Zelda Sayre. He was exhilarated by his achievements and by the spirit of the 1920s which in fact he helped to create, but his satisfaction was bittersweet. His instincts and his view of history told him that early, soaring successes were likely to produce intense, lingering disappointment in the course of time. He sensed, too, as David W. Noble has put it, “that the myth of the American Adam and the American Eden was bankrupt, had indeed always been morally indefensible, even though he was unable to find another faith to live by.”¹ Innocence and youth having been spent or sacrificed, in other words, he knew that the curve of human experience tended inexorably toward atrophy, dissipation, and ruin.

Fitzgerald wrote the bulk of *The Great Gatsby* in 1924, when he was twenty-eight. It might be described as an attempt to explore the relationship between the past and the present in the hope of discovering a sense of balance between giddiness and despair capable of sustaining a man without delusion as he enters life’s long decline. It is many other things as well, of course, but among its main concerns is how to face “the promise of . . . loneliness . . . , a thinning briefcase of enthusiasm, thinning hair” as we drive “on toward death through the cooling twilight.”² *The Great Gatsby* exhorts those of us who would be reconciled with the future to see the past truly, to acknowledge its irrecoverability, and to chasten our expectations in view of our slight stature in the world of time and our ever-diminishing store of vitality.

We are brought to this understanding, however, only when we realize and accept the unlikelihood of regeneration or renewal in an entropic universe. Repeatedly in *The Great Gatsby* Fitzgerald allows us (and perhaps himself as well) to entertain the hope that it is possible to make a “fresh start”—to undo the calamities of the past or to relive its quintessential moments. The geographic dislocation of all the important characters in the novel is in itself suggestive of this hope; each, like Fitzgerald himself, is a midwesterner gone east, a descendant of the pioneers trying to reverse the flow of history. Of this counter-migration

Robert Ornstein has remarked that "To Fitzgerald . . . the lure of the East represents a profound displacement of the American dream, a turning back upon itself of the historic pilgrimage towards the frontier which had, in fact, created and sustained that dream."³ The journey from West to East, that is, symbolically suggests an attempt to recapture the dream by drawing nearer its sources, to make a new start by getting back to what Robert Frost calls "the beginning of beginnings" in "West-running Brook." Having undertaken that journey, each of the book's main characters is made to deal with a reality which never quite meets his expectations.⁴

The notion that the flow of history can be arrested, perhaps even reversed, recurs in *The Great Gatsby* as a consequence of the universal human capacity for regret and the concomitant tendency to wish for something better. Nick Carraway has come East not simply to learn the bond business, but because his wartime experiences have left him restless in his midwestern hometown and because he wishes to make a clean break in his relationship with a woman whom he likes but has no intention of marrying. The predominant traits of Nick's character—patience, honesty, and levelheadedness—derive from his sure senses of history and social position, and yet in the chronology of the story he is first to succumb to the idea that life is subject to continual renewal. Of his roots in time and place he tells us,

My family have been prominent, well-to-do people in this Middle Western city for three generations. The Carraways are something of a clan, and we have a tradition that we're descended from the Dukes of Buccleuch, but the actual founder of my line was my grandfather's brother, who came here in fifty-one, sent a substitute to the Civil War, and started the wholesale hardware business that my father carries on to-day (pp. 2–3).

The fresh start Nick seeks in the East represents not so much a rejection of his heritage as a declaration of its inadequacy to satisfy the rather ambiguous yearnings of the post-war generation. Stimulated by his contact with the teeming city and the novelty of his circumstances of West Egg, Nick gives in to a most compelling illusion. "I had that familiar conviction," he says, "that life was beginning over again with the summer" (p. 4).

Tom and Daisy Buchanan, their marriage in pieces, have similarly come East, determined to settle after several years of "drift[ing] here and there unrestfully wherever people played polo and were rich together" (p. 6). "'I'd be a God damned fool to live anywhere else,'" says Tom, whose foolishness is hardly a consequence of geography.

Tom is a classic manifestation of entropic theory in human form. Nick describe him as “one of those men who reach such an acute limited excellence at twenty-one that everything afterward savors of anticlimax” (p. 6). Tom’s single consolation may well be his muddled perception that he is not alone in his fall. “‘Civilization,’” he says, “‘[is] going to pieces’” (p. 10). Daisy lives with a perpetual illusion of recreation, transparent even to herself; she supposes that the meaning of life can be restored or revived by proper superficial ministrations, as rhinestones are added to an old gown. Thus she instigates senseless and enervating trips to the city, speaks thrillingly of dismal and mundane topics, and is charmed by Jay Gatsby’s devotion without fully comprehending its meaning.

Even Jordan Baker, hard, cool, and perhaps the most resolutely cynical of Fitzgerald’s characters, gives lip service to the regeneration myth. To Daisy’s theatrical but heartfelt question, “‘What’ll we do with ourselves this afternoon . . . , and the day after that, and the next thirty years?’” Jordan responds, “‘Don’t be morbid. . . . Life starts all over again when it gets crisp in the fall’” (p. 118). Her remark neatly complements Nick’s earlier acknowledgement of a sense of rebirth with the coming of summer, but Nick discovers (as Jordan apparently does not) that while these illusions may give momentary comfort, to surrender to the myth of rejuvenation is to deny both the nature of reality and the chance for a modicum of contentment. Jordan, of course, surrenders to nothing and so is unlikely to be much affected by her misconceptions.

The same cannot be said of the Great Gatsby himself. Like Nick, Daisy, Tom, and Jordan, Gatsby has emigrated from the heart of the continent to establish himself in the East, and like them he is anxious to believe that the possibilities of life do not diminish with time; unlike them, however, he adopts the myth of regeneration as the single sustaining principle of his existence. Gatsby’s past is punctuated by a series of seeming fresh starts: As a young boy he jotted Franklinesque resolutions in his copy of *Hopalong Cassidy*, proving to his father’s satisfaction that he “‘was bound to get ahead.’” As a seventeen-year-old combing the beaches of Lake Superior he readied himself for the future by fashioning a wholly new identity. As a protégé of Dan Cody he acquired the experience which began turning his romantic musings into hard realities. As an army officer he assumed a manner in keeping with the deference paid him by society and took Daisy Fay as a kind of emotional hostage. After the war he did what he thought necessary to become what he had let Daisy believe he was, and to ransom her back.

Gatsby's accomplishments are a credit to his energy, enthusiasm, and singlemindedness, his sheer determination at all costs to stem the flow of history's current. "There was something gorgeous about him," Nick says, "some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life . . . —it was an extraordinary gift for 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" (p. 2). His gift for hope, as it turns out, is Gatsby's curse as well as his blessing, since it insulates him from the rational and experiential restraints which might otherwise temper the intensity of his ambition. Having managed so well at apparent self-creation and recreation, he allows his sensitivity to life's promises to blur into a belief in its limitless possibilities; ultimately he longs to conquer the passage of time itself. History is a very real force to Gatsby—in fact, almost a tangible commodity—and his patient, arduous assault upon it sometimes seems likely to succeed.

The extraordinary odyssey of Jay Gatsby began in the Minnesota back-country, where a restlessness to become something other than a dirt farmer drove a rather callow James Gatz to the shores of the Great Lakes and eventually into the company of Dan Cody. Serving in the entourage of millionaire Cody, whom Nick describes as "the pioneer debauchee" (p. 101), was instrumental not so much in molding the young adventurer's character as in lending tangibility to his materialistic fantasies and in indoctrinating him to the ruthlessness which easy money generates. "The truth," says Nick, "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" (p. 99).

The act of self-generation, a marvelous exercise of will in the face of the force of history, established the terms of Gatsby's life and set the tone of his subsequent behavior. He learned early that detachment, disingenuousness, chicanery, and nerve often rendered even the most imposing circumstances malleable; especially under the protective mantle of his army lieutenantcy he found himself capable of taking from the world almost anything he wanted, virtually without penalty. In taking Daisy, however, he allowed his detachment to slip, and once more he entered the world of time—of human ties, memories, and decay. Gatsby had sidestepped temporality momentarily by shedding his humanity and becoming a manipulator of rather than a participator

in events. The cost—and the recompense—of his loving Daisy was to surrender his Platonic dreams to a tangible, corruptible reality and to reenter the stream of history. “He knew,” says Nick of Gatsby at the moment of that surrender, “that when he kissed this girl, and forever wed his unutterable visions to her perishable breath, his mind would never romp again like the mind of God” (p. 112).

His affair with Daisy becomes the definitive circumstance of Gatsby’s past. In a sense it is the *only* circumstance, all others—his experiences in the war, his five-months’ study at Oxford, his “gonneg-tion” with Meyer Wolfsheim, his lavish Long Island parties—seeming to him significant or relevant only insofar as they related to his regaining her love. Gatsby realizes the intensity of his commitment to this past only when he returns from the war to visit Louisville, Daisy’s hometown, after she has wed Tom Buchanan. He finds amid the familiar walks and houses no vestige of the happiness he had known there and he understands that his memories lie buried in time as well as space. On the train which carries him away to the East Gatsby’s longing to relive a moment of that time becomes almost palpable:

The track curved and now it was going away from the sun, which, as it sank lower, seemed to spread itself in benediction over the vanishing city where she had drawn her breath. He stretched out his hand desperately as if to snatch only a wisp of air, to save a fragment of the spot she had made lovely for him. But it was all going by too fast now for his blurred eyes and he knew that he had lost that part of it, the freshest and best, forever (p. 153).

That this longing persists, undiminished, is suggested by Gatsby’s striking a similar attitude when Nick first sees him, peering across the bay toward Daisy’s green light, five years later. “He stretched out his arms toward the dark water in a curious way,” Nick says, “and, far as I was from him, I could have sworn he was trembling” (p. 21).

Because he believes in the myth of regeneration and misapprehends the nature of history in an entropic cosmos, Gatsby becomes a victim of his past. He tells Nick that he has drifted about since the war “‘trying to forget something very sad that happened to me long ago’” (p. 66), but in truth he has not only kept alive his memory of losing Daisy but devoted all his energies to getting her back. As his sympathy for his extraordinary neighbor grows Nick comes gradually to appreciate the scope and sincerity of Gatsby’s single passion. “He talked a lot about the past,” Nick says, “and I gathered that he wanted to recover something, some idea of himself perhaps, that had gone into loving

Daisy. His life had been confused and disordered since then, but if he could once return to a certain starting place and go over it all slowly, he could find out what that thing was . . ." (pp. 111–12). To "return to a certain starting place" is precisely Gatsby's ambition—to fight back through time and make a fresh start in order to "correct" history and suspend the steady dissipation of the universe. In a passage from an early version of Chapter VIII which was eventually deleted Gatsby exclaims to Nick, "'Why I'm only thirty-two. I might be a great man if I could forget that once I lost Daisy. But my career has got to be like this—.' He drew a slanting line from the lawn to the stars. 'It's got to keep going up.'"⁵

Gatsby's declaration explicitly demonstrates his fundamental misunderstanding of the entropic world which Fitzgerald's characters inhabit. The line he draws toward the stars for Nick perpendicularly intersects the entropic curve and indicates Gatsby's determination to bend history to his will. "'That's what I've got to do,' " he says in the same deleted passage, "'—live the past all over again. And I don't want to start by running away . . . I want to turn the whole world upside down and give people something to think about.'"⁶ The statement is remarkable because in Gatsby's case turning the world upside down has the ring of literal truth; his intention is to alter reality in order to bring it in line with his dream. "What more colossal *hubris* can 'a son of God' commit," asks R. W. Stallman, "than to tinker with the temporal order of the universe! To fix time and reinstate thus the past in the present (as though the interim were unreckoned and life has passed unlocked) to wipe the slate clean and begin anew—that is Gatsby's illusion."⁷ While each of the book's major characters betrays some small faith in the myth of regeneration or renewal, Gatsby believes in it ultimately, absolutely.

Although this truth comes to Nick slowly as the threads of the story gradually unravel in his hands he is nevertheless awestruck by the proportions of Gatsby's ambition, the quality of his hope, and the degree of his confusion. "He wanted nothing less of Daisy," Nick marvels, "than that she should go to Tom and say: 'I never loved you.' After she had obliterated four years with that sentence they could decide upon the more practical measures to be taken. One of them was that, after she was free, they were to go back to Louisville and be married from her house—just as if it were five years ago" (p. 111). The custodian of common sense and of historical consciousness, Nick urges moderation. "'I wouldn't ask too much of her,' " he says. "'You can't repeat the past.' " "'Can't repeat the past?' " Gatsby cries incredulously.

“‘Why of course you can . . . ! I’m going to fix everything just the way it was before. . . . She’ll see’” (p. 111). Here, then, is an open acknowledgement of Gatsby’s presumption—of his “greatness” and his error. He will “fix” the past just as Wolfsheim fixed the 1919 World Series, by manipulating people and circumstances to suit his necessities. Gatsby, says Noble, “would bring Daisy back to 1917. He would obliterate her marriage and her motherhood. He would restore her virginity.”⁸ It is the supreme test of his Platonic will and of his faith in the human capacity for renewal, a test which he can only fail.

The scene of that failure is the confrontation between Gatsby and Tom Buchanan which takes place in a Plaza Hotel suite on a hot August afternoon. There Gatsby, who assures Daisy that her unhappy relationship with Tom is “‘all over now,’” insists that “‘It doesn’t matter any more. Tell him the truth,’” he urges, “‘—that you never loved him—and it’s all wiped out forever’” (p. 132). Here, however, the irreversibility of human experience asserts itself as Tom—brutish and self-indulgent and sure of his instincts—breaks Daisy’s spirit of rebellion by showing that it rests on a lie. “‘Oh, you want too much!’” she cries to Gatsby. “‘I love you now— isn’t that enough? I can’t help what’s past . . . I did love him once but I loved you too’” (p. 133).

That Daisy “can’t help what’s past” marks the end of Gatsby’s hopes for the future, since it is precisely that help which he had expected of her. Nick, who is as prepared to accept Daisy’s limitations as Gatsby is determined to deny them, observes that after her admission “. . . only the dead dream fought on as the afternoon slipped away, trying to touch what was no longer tangible . . .” (p. 135). During the confrontation, he says, “‘Jay Gatsby’ had broken up like glass against Tom’s hard malice, and the long secret extravaganza was played out” (p. 148). The truth is that the gorgeous illusion fashioned by James Gatz on the shores of Lake Superior and enhanced by his vision of Daisy was destined almost from its inception to break up against the hard realities of human experience. Forced by Tom’s very density, his “bulking” obtuseness, to see that the past, too, is solid, fixed, and irrefutable, Gatsby senses that the certainties around which his life has been so patiently organized have deserted him altogether. As Nick puts it,

. . . 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, where poor ghosts, breathing dreams like air, drifted fortuitously about . . . (p. 162).

His extravaganza played out, Gatsby's death follows quickly, almost mercifully. Even before the shooting Nick finds it virtually impossible to think of his neighbor and "close friend" dispossessed of his dream (and in the passage quoted above imagines that Gatsby himself shares this attitude). Gatsby goes to his grave a "poor son of a bitch," the victim and martyr of his romantic obsession to interrupt for a moment the course of universal decline in order that it might accommodate his splendid illusion. He is not given time to contemplate his fall or to learn very much from it; no new faith, not even despair, establishes itself before he is murdered. It remains rather for Nick Carraway, in many senses Gatsby's complement as well as his chronicler, to interpret their mutual experiences over the summer and to apply the lesson of Gatsby's life to his own.⁹

That he does so is only implicitly evident at the story's end. Having determined to return to his native Minnesota, Nick wanders onto Gatsby's deserted beach during his last night in the East, perhaps—as he had said earlier of Gatsby himself—to determine what share is to remain his of the local heavens. "Gradually," he says,

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 (p. 182).

In having Nick establish these parallels between Gatsby and the Dutch sailors Fitzgerald makes several points concerning the outcome and significance of his story with great economy.¹⁰ First, Gatsby is to be admired for the scope of his vision and the sincerity with which he devotes himself to its realization. His greatness is earned, the appella-

tion hardly ironic. Second, like the Dutch sailors, Gatsby fails to comprehend fully the enormity of the task which his wonder inspires. To fulfill the promise inherent in the virgin land is—like Gatsby's ambition to relive the past—necessarily an impossibility, given the boundlessness of human hopes and the strictures of an entropic universe. Third, any attempt to realize the dream is destined not only to fail but to sully the dream itself. The actual settlement of this country, by the Dutch and others, gave rise not to edenic bliss but to mercantile avarice, divisiveness, and war. Gatsby's dream of Daisy is perfect only until the tangible Daisy reappears; then he begins to sense disappointment, even before his ultimate disillusionment.

Gatsby's dream, the exercise of his Platonic will, obscures his vision of the world as it is and clouds his understanding of the historical process. It becomes Nick's responsibility, in telling Gatsby's story, to see that process truly and to reconcile to it the events of the summer of 1922. He is, in fact, driven toward this integrative view of past and present both by his penchant for honesty and by a sense of the connectedness of time which is part of his inheritance as a Carraway. Unlike Gatsby, Nick accepts the circumstance of being rooted in space and time, acknowledging both the limitations and the reassurances which those roots provide.¹¹ Speaking of his home at the end of the book—no longer “the ragged edge of the universe” but “my Middle West”—Nick says, “I am part of that, a little solemn with the feel of those long winters, a little complacent from growing up in the Carraway house in a city where dwellings are still called through decades by a family's name” (p. 177).

Nick returns to that home after Gatsby's death, reversing the tendency toward eastern migration with which the story began and indicating an intention to take up life where he had left it—to reenter the flow of his own personal history rather than resist it. In doing so he seems to many to be admitting defeat and withdrawing from the uncertainties of the present into the security of the past. Having had his glimpse of life's futility, proponents of this reading assert, Nick shrinks from further involvement and seeks a kind of non-life near the ancestral hearth.¹² Finally to regard Nick in this way, however, seems to place him ultimately in the camp of the Buchanans, whose relationship with the world at large has deteriorated to a series of retreats, escapes, and evasions. Nick has neither the callousness nor the moral opacity to behave with the vast carelessness of Tom and Daisy, and to reduce him to their stature is to deny the genuine sympathy, even love, with which he tells Gatsby's story.

The telling of that story itself is perhaps the best evidence that Nick refuses simply to withdraw from the experiences of the summer but seeks rather to learn from them. Certainly his capacity for optimism—together with his adolescent restlessness—has been greatly diminished by his having been so privileged a witness of Gatsby's fall. He returns to Minnesota a somber, sadder, and more modest man than he left. And yet for him to retire from life altogether would amount to an ultimate repudiation of Gatsby and his fragile, fated dream. Nick is determined, rather, to demonstrate Gatsby's greatness as well as his monumental foolishness, and in telling the story to examine the interplay of vision and restraint, of timeless imagination and historical reality, in the hope of striking a proper balance between the two. He sees that it is the tension between the incessant diminution of energy in an entropic universe and the perennial thrust of human expectations which gives life meaning.

It is on this note of accommodation, of very modest dreams in light of the sobering realities of history, that *The Great Gatsby* ends. Looking simultaneously back over the story he has told and forward to the future, Nick acknowledges with gratitude man's gift for hope while he accepts with equanimity the disillusionment which that gift often precipitates:

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 our arms farther. . . . And one fine morning—

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past (p. 182).

And so we must, apparently, for according to Fitzgerald man lives successfully only in a state of equilibrium between resistance to the current and surrender to its flow. He must accommodate the lessons of his past to his visions of the future, giving it to neither, in order to stand poised for happiness or disappointment in the present.

¹ David W. Noble, *The Eternal Adam and the New World Garden: The Central Myth in the American Novel Since 1830* (New York: George Braziller, 1968), p. 152. For a valuable discussion of the dissipation of energy in Fitzgerald's works—a discussion in many ways complementary to that presented here—see Robert Ian Scott, "Entropy vs. Ecology in *The Great Gatsby*," *Queen's Quarterly*, 82 (Winter 1975), 559–71.

² F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953; first published 1925), pp. 136–37. Future page references to this text will appear parenthetically in the body of the essay.

³ Robert Ornstein, "Scott Fitzgerald's Fable of East and West," *College English*, 18 (1956-57), 141.

⁴ Milton R. Stern makes a similar observation somewhat more demonstratively. "In *The Great Gatsby*," he says, "Fitzgerald made out of his life with Zelda and his dream a moral history of the gnawing and murderous disappointment attendant upon discovering that the gorgeousness of America exists not in her glittering actualities, past or present, East or West, but in the fantastic sense of possibilities that drives the imagination of the archetypal American, the eternal pioneer in search of the golden moment dreamed in the past and to be recaptured in the imagined future." *The Golden Moment: The Novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1970), p. 165.

⁵ Quoted in Henry Dan Piper, *F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Critical Portrait* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1968), p. 149.

⁶ Quoted in Piper, p. 149.

⁷ R. W. Stallman, "Gatsby and the Hole in Time," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 1 (Nov. 1955), 4.

⁸ Noble, p. 158.

⁹ Of this complementary relationship between Gatsby and Nick, John Henry Raleigh has said, "Taken together they contain most of the essential polarities that go to make up the human mind and its existence. Allegorically considered, Nick is reason, experience, waking, reality, and history, while Gatsby is imagination, innocence, sleeping, dream, and eternity . . . Nick's mind is conservative and historical, as is his lineage; Gatsby's is radical and apocalyptic—as rootless as his heritage. Nick is too much immersed in time and in reality; Gatsby is hopelessly out of it . . . They are generically two of the best types of humanity: the moralist and the radical," "F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*: Legendary Bases and Allegorical Significances," *University of Kansas City Review*, 24 (Oct. 1957), 57.

¹⁰ The identification of Gatsby with Nick's imaginary mariners has generated much discussion. "Gatsby is the spiritual descendant of these Dutch sailors," claims Ornstein. "Like them, he set out for gold and stumbled on a dream. But he journeys in the wrong direction in time as well as space. The transitory enchanted moment has come and gone for him and for the others, making the romantic promise of the future an illusory reflection of the past," (p. 141).

"Like the sailors," observes Charles Thomas Samuels, "Gatsby tried to return to the source of life, to imbibe wonder at its breast. But man ages, time goes on, and life is a slow dying . . . When Gatsby loved Daisy he lost his dream; when the sailors took the new world they began the degradation of America's promise; when God saw what he had incarnated he went back to Heaven leaving only a blind sign of the business he would not now open. The past is our future. We have come to the end of possibility." "The Greatness of 'Gatsby,'" *The Massachusetts Review*, 7 (Autumn 1966), 793.

¹¹ Maintaining that "Fitzgerald represents the past both as a loss and as a source of strength," Thomas A. Hanzo asserts that ". . . in the Carraway family tradition, it confers a discipline and standards which, even as survivals of an old morality, may still produce better conduct than Nick witnesses on Long Island." "The Theme and the Narrator of 'The Great Gatsby,'" *Modern Fiction Studies*, 2 (Winter 1956-57), 189.

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¹² This argument is often made with considerable enthusiasm: “[Nick’s] return [to the Middle West] is not a positive rediscovery of the well-springs of American life,” insists Ornstein. “Instead it seems a melancholy retreat from the ruined promise of the East, from the empty present to the childhood memory of the past,” pp. 142–143.

Similarly, Gary J. Scrimgeour maintains that “. . . Carraway’s distinctiveness as a character is that he fails to learn anything from his story, that he can continue to blind himself even after his privileged overview of Gatsby’s fate. The defeat evident in his disillusionment is followed not by progress but by retreat. He returns not only to his safe environment in the Mid-West but also to the same attitudes from which he started He has learned nothing.” “Against ‘The Great Gatsby,’” *Criticism*, 8 (Winter 1966), 83–84.