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The Gospel of Gatsby

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"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."

THUS NICK CARRAWAY speaks about Gatsby in F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel, *The Great Gatsby*, and thus Fitzgerald gives us his most outspoken allusion to the jazz-like parody of the life of Christ which he plays in a minor, sardonic key throughout the novel.

The novel has long been noted for its threads of imagery: Fitzgerald's obsession with East and West (both as his own Midwestern background opposed to the Princetonian East, and as the materialistic West as opposed to the spiritually exotic Middle East); the color scheme — green, white (silver), and rose; the nature imagery involving water. But the main tapestry into which these threads smoothly weave has been overlooked. It is an extensive parody, sardonic in tone, involving the Christian story and the idea of rebirth, with Gatsby ironically likened to Christ, and Nick Carraway, the story-teller, likened to Nicodemus, who appears in the Gospel According to St. John. Viewed in this way, all of the imagery of the novel falls into a well-constructed and coherent pattern. Furthermore, when the novel is read with this awareness, what had earlier seemed at worst an indecisive or ambiguous novel and at best an evocative but depressing novel may be exceedingly

judgmental — a novel which may have as its subliminal message the quite simple question, "Have you tried Christ?" For the inverted Christ figure, Gatsby, offends our sense of decency overall, and yet his one redeeming act — the protection of Daisy to whom he continued faithful — bears the superficial character of Christian love, however distorted, romantic, and displaced it may have been in fact. And it is this final act which causes Nick to say that Gatsby came out "all right in the end."

The parody has its most clearly sustained development at the beginning of Chapter VI, just after Daisy meets Gatsby at Nick's house. At that point Nick tells us Jay Gatsby's true story, or at least the truth insofar as Gatsby was capable of truth. In this story Fitzgerald delights in a *tour de force* as cleverly designed as any of the classical parodies in Joyce's *Ulysses*.¹ Fitzgerald improvises on the story of Christ (as nearly as one can tell, almost exclusively the Gospel According to St. John) in a modern jazz spirit which twists, disguises, and embellishes a melody line, allowing only fragments to slip through, while still seeking a fresh unity of interpretation that can make the performance the property of the musician and not that of the composer.

Nick tells us that a young reporter

¹Fitzgerald was greatly impressed by his reading of *Ulysses* in 1922. *The Great Gatsby* appeared in 1925.

had approached Gatsby for a statement, but that Gatsby had either fended him off or had given him a confusing answer. Nick commends the reporter's "instinct" for a story, for Gatsby's "notoriety" had been spreading, giving rise to rumors about him. Among the "legends" that had grown was word about his "underground pipe-line to Canada" — his bootlegging activities — and the rumor that he did not live in a house, but "in a boat that looked like a house and was moved secretly up and down the Long Island shore." We are reminded of the many people who approached Jesus early in his ministry and who left pondering a riddle-like parable or a non-committal response. We remember Christ's first miracle in *John* when, at the wedding party in Cana, he turned six pots of water into wine. The "ruler of the feast" did not know "whence it was," but the source was fully understood by the "servants which drew the water" (*John* 2:9); clearly Gatsby was not drawing his booze through a pipe-line, but his men were drawing much from bathtubs. And we recall that shortly thereafter Christ taught the multitude from the boat on the Sea of Galilee and was mysteriously seen along the shores in places which amazed the people (*John* 6:22).

The story continues that at seventeen Gatsby (*ne* James Gatz) had been a young ruffian, bumming about the south shore of Lake Superior, where by chance he had met Dan Cody, a millionaire yacht-owner from the wilds of Nevada, Montana, and the Yukon. The two had met on the water, Gatsby rowing out to meet Cody, who had been "coasting along all too hospitable shores" on his mission of riotous living. They had met on "Little Girl Bay" — a delightful invention and improvisation on the slang of the day (Galilee). After a few questions from Cody, James Gatz had announced his name as "Jay Gatsby" — which bothered him little because in "his

imagination . . . [he] . . . had never really accepted . . . his parents at all," the "shiftless and unsuccessful farm people." At this point Fitzgerald gives his reader the sentence quoted at the beginning of this article, which announces that Gatsby was "a son of God." The entire scene, of course, describes the baptism of James Gatz and the rebirth of Jay G. at the hands of Dan the baptist — the "pioneer debauchee" from the wilds of the West, raising his voice from the wilderness to announce the beatitude of a life of wine, women, and money. His name — Dan Cody — has the true American tone, as native as jazz — proclaiming both staunch pioneering (Daniel Boone) and wild-west splendor (Wild Bill Cody). Like Christ, Jay Gatsby felt no compunction about renouncing his earthly parents, for he was off on his service to "His Father's business, the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty" — something more significant than the lowly life of common drudgery on a simple farm in North Dakota.

Prior to meeting Cody, Gatsby had been making a living "as a clam-digger and a salmon-fisher." In the same paragraph Nick mentions that young Gatsby had known women early and was most contemptuous of them — of virgins for their ignorance and others for their "hysteria . . . about things which in his overwhelming self-absorption he took for granted." His dreams are filled with "fantastic conceits" which he accepts as a "promise that the rock of the world . . . [is] . . . founded securely on a fairy's wing."

The relationship of Christ to the fishing is obvious. Gatsby's "fantastic conceits" (and whose more fantastic than these of Fitzgerald?), like the puzzling parables of Christ, became Gatsby's spiritual food. And the reference to the "hysteria" of practiced women at Gatsby's "self-absorption" and to Gatsby's satisfaction with "a promise that the rock of

the world . . . [is] . . . founded securely on a fairy's wing" adds to other evidence which suggests a latent homosexual problem in Gatsby, as well as echoing Gatsby's search for a Simon Peter (the rock) who would recognize his divinity.

There follows a passage about young Gatsby's short-lived and disillusioning stay at "the small Lutheran college of St. Olaf's in southern Minnesota," where he found himself despairing the "janitor's work," thereupon quitting and returning to Lake Superior. These passages parallel Christ's visit to the tabernacle, his overturning the tables and cleansing the temple by chasing out the moneylenders, and his subsequent return to Galilee (John 2:14).

A few more points deserve noting for their especially delightful inventiveness. Gatsby serves Dan Cody in rather vague capacities (as Christ did John the Baptist for a time), among others as his "jailor" to protect him from his own excesses of debauchery; and, as a result of watching the debauchery, Gatsby abstains from drink except when women "rub champagne into his hair" at parties. We recall that the growing circle about John the Baptist led to his arrest and imprisonment, that Christ himself would not administer baptism (John 4:2), and that Mary anointed Christ with expensive oils (John 12:3).

Fitzgerald's Salome for Dan Cody is a newswoman who "played Madame de Maintenon" to Cody's weakness, and thus drove him to take his debauchery to sea in his yacht. When she caught up with him in Boston, he died in two weeks from (apparently) sexual starvation. And although Gatsby had been expecting some money from Cody's will, the woman managed to make off with all the legacy.

The entire passage — some dozen or more paragraphs — constitutes a jazz-like commentary on both the '20's and the birth of our era — a "jazz history of the

world," similar to the intent of the music played at one of Gatsby's parties (a composition called "Jazz History of the World" by a composer who is perhaps too cutely named Tostoff). We can imagine Fitzgerald's delight in his own ingenuity as he presents his flippantly tossed-off parody of the story of Christ.

Although no comparable passage of consecutive paragraphs can be found elsewhere in *The Great Gatsby* — no other passage so rich in Joycean parody and punning — Fitzgerald sustains his direction throughout. The characters and actions of the novel frequently mirror, in topsy-turvy ways, figures and incidents in the Gospel According to St. John.

Nick Carraway, the story-teller, is central to the novel. He comes East from the Midwest to seek his fortune as a bond salesman in 1922. He tells us that his family, which prides itself on a probably spurious background in Scottish nobility, had its actual beginnings in the wholesale hardware business. Being a person of some "advantages" — an Eastern education and a "sense of the fundamental decencies" which so often accompany money and solid, middle-class standards — Nick figuratively belongs to the class of Pharisees, like Nicodemus.

Like Nicodemus as well, he finds himself beset with intimations of the possibility of rebirth (John 3). Immediately upon his arrival in the East, Nick has the "familiar conviction that life . . . [is] . . . beginning over again." He settles in West Egg (Little Nick, Long Island), where live the Jews, Hollywood people, and *nouveau riche* who find themselves excluded from East Egg (Great Neck Estates), where live the ironically exotic, long-established families of Nordic purity, who live aloof. Fitzgerald's choice of names, aside from being geographically justified (Little Nick and Great Neck Estates both have the rotund shape of an egg), gives us imagery involving rebirth;

and Nick's comment that "like the egg in the Columbus story, they are both crushed flat on the contact end" suggests Columbus' search for the Far East — its riches and promise — only to have to settle for a newer, more primitive and demanding West.

Nick's cottage, incongruously nestled next to Gatsby's resplendent mansion, gives Nick the occasion to attend one of Gatsby's notorious parties. Nick approaches Gatsby for the first time at night, just as Nicodemus approached Christ. At their first meeting, Gatsby invites Nick to take a flight in his "hydroplane" — an invitation to go out upon the water and rise with him. Later Nick is asked to go swimming with Gatsby at Coney Island. These invitations parallel Christ's invitation to Nicodemus to seek rebirth in baptism. Throughout their ensuing relationship, Nick succumbs to a fascination for this strange, haunted man, but resists Gatsby's "orgiastic dream." Acting on the long-standing advice of his father, Nick refuses to pass final judgment on Gatsby, despite his rejection of Gatsby's extravagant fictions about himself, despite the rumors of and evidence of Gatsby's underworld connections, and despite Gatsby's puerile romanticism. In a similar fashion, Nicodemus steps forward as one of the only disbelieving supporters of Christ, one who says to the officers of the Pharisees, "Doth our law judge any man, before it hear him, and know what he doeth?" (John 7:50). Ultimately, like Nicodemus, Nick takes it as his duty to attend the funeral of the rejected "messiah," a task eschewed even by Christ's closest disciples.

And like Nicodemus, Nick remains unfulfilled himself — contented only in that he has not denied his human and tribal relationship to the jazz-age Christ, but aware that he has himself avoided any real contact with the experience of rebirth (Nick has somewhat inexplicably rejected Jordan Baker, his own particular

hope for the promise of love). Nick keeps rejecting women in his own life: the broken "engagement" back home, the terminated "affair" with the girl in Jersey City, the rejection of Jordan Baker. Something seems to force him to repeat certain patterns of relationship with women. Repeatedly also, we find Nick critical of Gatsby's passionate evaluations of his relationship with Daisy and her world. Nick is unwilling either to assent to the superiority of that Eastern world or to accept the almost divine construction Gatsby puts on his past relationship with Daisy, or on the possibility of his having a future with her. When Nick one night insists with Gatsby that you "can't repeat the past" (Cf. Nicodemus' insistence with Christ that no man born of woman can re-enter the womb and be born again [John 3]), Gatsby answers "incredulously . . . 'Why of course you can!'" And later when Gatsby, even after having been rejected by Daisy, insists that everything is all right because her momentary love for her husband, Tom Buchanan, has been "just personal", Nick writes: "What could you make of that, except to suspect some intensity in his conception of the affair that couldn't be measured?"

Nick's rejection of love — of discipleship with Gatsby — is emphasized strongly by Fitzgerald. At the apartment on 158th Street, where Nick goes with Tom Buchanan for an impromptu party one afternoon, Nick idly picks up the book *Simon Called Peter*, while Tom and Myrtle have retired to the adjoining bedroom, for obvious purposes. Nick finds that the book is "either terrible stuff or the whiskey distorted things, because it didn't make any sense to me," and he puts it aside. Figuratively Nick rejects the role of Peter, who was first to proclaim the divinity of Christ and the mission of love. Early in the novel Nick takes his place squarely among the Pharisees with the view that "Conduct may

be founded on hard rock or the wet marshes, but after a certain point I don't care what it is founded on." He does not accept the foundation of conduct on stone (Peter and the divine recognition) or on the water of baptism and rebirth, but like the Pharisees he insists upon a uniform moral stance, nonetheless.

And yet Nick's rejection of discipleship becomes a rejection of life, somehow. Before the return to Long Island, after the dreadful confrontation between Tom Buchanan, Daisy, and Gatsby, Tom Buchanan offers some whisky to Jordan and Nick: "Want any of this stuff? Jordan? . . . Nick?" We never hear Jordan's answer, but Nick rejects the "spirits" and is immediately thereafter haunted by his own age — thirty — at which point he finds himself facing "a portentous, menacing road of a new decade" with the "promise of a decade of loneliness, a thinning list of single men to know, a thinning briefcase of enthusiasm . . ." Nick finds himself at the age of Christ on the Cross, with neither mission nor promise. Even the honesty on which he had prided himself has fallen away with his silence to Tom (later) about Daisy's guilt in the accident and his somewhat inexplicable falling out with Jordan Baker, who accuses him of an essential dishonesty with her. (The possibility that Nick's dishonesty with Jordan has to do with some sexual insufficiency cannot be avoided, although it is equally reasonable to suspect he had begun a sexual relationship and had, without explanation, broken it off.)

The pitiful irony is that in Fitzgerald's Roaring Twenties it had to be the Nicodemus figure who was forced to become the witness to truth; and in the end, Nick is found wanting in spirit, confirmed in his Pharisaical tendencies. At the beginning of the novel, Nick announces that the entire experience with Gatsby and Daisy had left him wanting "the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever." His stance is,

in the last analysis, hardly pleasing. It seems to be the stance of a man who rejects the possibility that sexual power can have not only a legitimate place in marriage, but also a role as a kind of spiritual communion. It is the stance of a man who, faced by unwholesome decadence at every turn, will be ripe, if not for the judgment leading to a new Golgotha, at least for a renewed Armageddon — a man who, having denied the possibility of rebirth, seeks its attractive counterfeit — general destruction — to wipe the slate clean for an enforced renewal². Nick admits having "enjoyed" the First World War as a "counter-raid" as part of the "delayed Teutonic migration," and by the end of the novel, he is psychologically ripe for World War II — a new destruction which might complete the job.

But if Nick lacks the promise and spirit, he at least escapes the trap that springs on Gatsby: he has sense enough to escape betrayal at the lips of Daisy. Shortly after the communion of Gatsby and Daisy over tea cakes and tea at Nick's cottage, Daisy and Tom accept an invitation to one of Gatsby's parties. Titillated by the surrounding males — her husband, would-be paramour, and Nick — Daisy seeks even more domination, whispering to Nick: "These things excite me so . . . If you want to kiss me any time during the evening, Nick, just let me know and I'll be glad to arrange it for you. Just mention my name. Or present a green card. I'm giving out green—." Like the green light on the Buchanan dock, which so mesmerizes Gatsby's evening vigils, or like the green of young Gatz's shirt and the green of the upholstery in Gatsby's shiny car, Daisy's "green" holds out extraordinary but deceitful promise — a hint of seduction toward some unattainable "orgias-

²In a letter in 1940, Fitzgerald himself admitted to being strangely excited and inspired by promise in the face of the "new Armageddon" which had just begun.

tic future." A few pages later we are taken back into Gatsby's past when, as a young officer, he had courted Daisy. On an autumn night, surrounded by falling leaves on a tree-lined street (the Garden of Gethsemane),

. . . Gatsby saw that the blocks of the sidewalks really formed a ladder and mounted to a secret place above the trees—he would climb to it, if he climbed alone

His heart beat faster and faster as Daisy's white face came up to his own. He knew 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.

At the point of the kiss, Gatsby met his betrayal, which waited five years for its denouement in the aftermath of the auto accident, a betrayal not unlike Christ's own, willingly sought and accepted (John 13:26). Christ had the choice of entering the Garden alone to commune with his God, but by taking his disciples with him, he set the stage for the Judas kiss of betrayal (John 18:4); Gatsby, too, saw that he could "climb to it" alone, but kissed Daisy, knowing that "his mind would never romp again like the mind of God." Nick continues, commenting that the story of "appalling sentimentality" reminded him of something, but he could not grasp what. He had forgotten Daisy's invitation to him and the historical meaning of a kiss. What more appropriate for the age of the flapper and the liberated woman (from Fitzgerald's point of view) than seeing man's betrayer as a confused doubling of responsibility — man's initial romantically unjustified response to woman and the promise of sex, followed by some deceit by the woman, who is inherently frail, untrustworthy, and incapable of giving permanent satisfaction; for Fitzgerald, the Frankie and Johnnie of the Midwestern ballad can only point

back to John the Baptist and Salome or forward to Gatsby and his Daisy.

After the party attended by Tom and Daisy, Gatsby goes into mysterious retreat, dismissing his servants and bringing into his home some apparently "hot" friends of Wolfsheim, the gambler. The kitchen is reported to look "like a pigsty." At this juncture, Daisy invites Nick and Gatsby to lunch, and Nick comments that he hoped they would not choose that moment for a scene, remembering as he did the "harrowing scene . . . in the garden" at the last of Gatsby's big parties. The day for the lunch is "broiling," and as Nick and Gatsby's train "emerged from the tunnel into the sunlight, only the hot whistle of the National Biscuit Company broke the simmering hush at noon."

A contemporary gag during the '20's was to say to someone who showed spiritual depression, "Uneda Biscuit," a play on the advertisement of the National Biscuit Company and upon the idea of communion. The entire scene here reminds us of the harrowing of Hell, Gatsby among the underworld figures living in filth, the excessive heat, the tunnel out into the sunlight. A few lines later on, Gatsby and Nick arrive at the Buchanan home, and in the muggy heat, which distorts sound, overhear the butler answer the telephone:

"The master's body!" roared the butler into the mouthpiece. "I'm sorry, madam, but we can't furnish it—it's far too hot to touch this noon!"

Nick goes on to say: "What he really said was: 'Yes . . . Yes . . . I'll see.'" Clearly Fitzgerald seeks to jar us into awareness of the relationship between seeking communion (Gatsby's purpose in visiting Daisy) and the "master's body," which has been in "hell."

Daisy herself appears time and again in association with white and with silver (Judas), ironic commentary on the

myth of Southern womanhood, for despite her having been seduced by Gatsby prior to her marriage to Tom (hence "wronged"), Fitzgerald insists that "When they met again . . . [after the kiss] . . . it was Gatsby who was breathless, who was, somehow betrayed." The sense of betrayal is complete when we learn about Daisy's direct conspiracy with her husband, or indirect guilt by silence or a lie, in precipitating Gatsby's death at the hand of Myrtle's deranged husband, George Wilson. It was Gatsby who sustained the hurt, even while intending Daisy no harm.

Gatsby himself appears time and again in association with rose colors, with pink colors, with roses, or with "rose" as a verb. The Christian symbolism of the rose becomes insistent. The sustained imagery reaches its most painful effect in the picture of Gatsby's death. Gatsby returns to the water (he had not used his swimming pool previously that season) with an inflated rubber raft, which he shoulders: "Once he stopped and shifted it a little, and the chauffeur asked him if he needed help, but he shook his head. . . ." Gatsby was shouldering not the heavy cross of Calvary, but the insubstantial, air-filled trapping of an affluent society. Myrtle's husband, George Wilson, ascends "Gad's Hill" (*gad* as an irreverent form of God), gun in hand, to kill Gatsby. And when Gatsby is found, shot to death, the wind has moved the burdened raft so that "The touch of a cluster of leaves revolved it slowly, tracing . . . a thin, red circle in the water." In effect, the stream of Gatsby's blood surrounds the leaves, tracing a perfect rose in the pool, the symbol of Christ.

The aftermath of the murder and Nick's experiences as attendant to Gatsby's body reveal the conclusion of Fitzgerald's plan. After finding the body, Nick and the servants return to the house "with Gatsby" — a phrase which suggests that Gatsby is somehow still

alive. In Nick's search to find someone to attend the funeral, we discover that Gatsby had his Simon Peter in the gambler Meyer Wolfsheim,³ manager of the "Swastika Holding Company," who will thereafter hold faith to the criminal's special double-cross. Wolfsheim admits to having been influenced by his first sight of Gatsby, as Peter was with his first view of Christ: "I saw right away he was a fine-appearing, gentlemanly young man, and when he told me he was an Oggsford I knew I could use him good. . . . We were so thick like that in everything . . . always together." Like Peter as well, Wolfsheim "denies" his "kingly" companion three times — first in a letter to Nick, next by refusing to see Nick at first at his office, and then to his face (Wolfsheim's office girl plays the role of the damsel at the door in John 18: 16-17). We see that Nick has at least used prudence, even if he has not passed judgement on Gatsby. Had Nick not resisted the temptation to be Gatsby's disciple by joining him in his shady, money-making enterprises, Nick too would have been denying Gatsby at the end in order to avoid notice by the police.

At the funeral, the owl-eyed man with thick glasses — whom Nick had first met at a party at Gatsby's, and who, though drunk at the time, had showed a judicious evaluation of Gatsby's "front" of culture — is the only one of Gatsby's acquaintances other than Nick to show up. His owl-like lenses tie him to the theme of honest witnessing to the light (John 3), which is so prominent in the novel (Doctor T. J. Eckleburg's⁴ oft-mentioned glasses). Like Joseph of Ari-

³Even a Lazarus-figure appears: Mr. Klipspringer (*clip*—an enclosure, plus *springer*), whom Gatsby wakes to make him entertain Daisy at the piano. Klipspringer, somewhat confused, says, "I was asleep That is, I'd *been* asleep. Then I got up . . ." We first see him in pajamas down on the floor doing "liver exercises" (a pun on the word *live*).

mathea, Mr. Owl-eyes seems to be a man of good sense and substance who has no fear of admitting his relationship to the dead messiah, whose former hospitality he had enjoyed. He and Nick, like Joseph and Nicodemus (John 19:38-40), attend the body while all others, those truly closer to Gatsby, remain away. It is Mr. Owl-eyes who has the last word for Gatsby's epitaph: "The poor son-of-a-bitch" — which carries its sardonic meaning in relation to Christ.

Nick attends during the dividing up of the clothes (John 19:23), for a friend of Gatsby claims to have left his tennis shoes at Gatsby's house and wants them returned; and in a scene with Gatsby's father, who has come East from Dakota, Nick is shown an old list of "resolutions" that Gatsby as a boy had determined upon as a plan for "getting ahead." Nick comments that Mr. Gatz seemed "reluctant to close the book, reading each item

⁴A possible pun or *eccl-*(church) plus *burg* (city), hence "city of God." Throughout, the eyeglass sign becomes the watching eyes of God (which are, ironically, inert and empty in fact).

aloud and then looking eagerly at me . . . [as if he] . . . rather expected me to copy down the list for my own use." Nick rejects the childish commandments of Gatsby's infantile "sermon on the mount." Amusingly, the resolves had been put down in a copy of *Hopalong Cassidy*, young Gatsby's "good book," a novel which has for its hero a man who lives without women, his one love having died, leaving him bereft. In the end, Nick bears witness to the final, vain, and painfully faithful gesture that made Gatsby turn out "all right in the end," his protection of Daisy, who needed none.

The evidence of Fitzgerald's extensive parody in the novel — the details of which have long been overlooked — overwhelms. Many more bits remain for speculation than have been included in this paper. The artistic device so suits Fitzgerald's tone and intent that only when one recognizes what he has done can one fully appreciate the unusual depth of *The Great Gatsby* — a novel which Fitzgerald himself emphasized was "constructed" rather than "lived."