DUST AND DREAMS AND *THE GREAT GATSBY*

BY JOHN FRASER

> No—Gatsby turned out all right in 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.[1]

The concept of enjoyment is a notoriously slippery one and of virtually no use as an aesthetic term, but I take it that most of us, when speaking without philosophical pretensions, intend pretty much the same thing when we call a novel enjoyable. We mean that it is the kind of book one can welcome when tired or convalescent or on vacation, and we are not implying that it is necessarily either better or worse than other kinds. I suggest that in this sense the number of distinguished American novels that are really enjoyable is curiously small, at least when compared with British ones. One hears even today of men of affairs who refresh themselves in their off-duty hours with Dickens or Jane Austen, for instance; it is hard to imagine their doing so with Melville or Hawthorne or James, and I question whether many academics in fact do so. (To say which is to be reminded anew of the irrelevance of the notion of pleasure to most kinds of critical discussion.) I further suggest that the three distinguished American novels that have been the most unfeignedly enjoyed by intelligent readers in our time are almost certainly *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *The Catcher in the Rye*. And I suggest finally than an important reason for this is that all three, in a peculiarly seductive way, invite and encourage a relaxation of the will. Each of them subverts the claims of the ordinary social world on one's allegiance; each shows us insufficiencies in conventionally schematized and unreflective ethical judgment-making; each points to a seemingly respectable correlation between freer and non-systematized moral perceptiveness and social powerlessness; each im-

[1] F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1925), p. 2.

plies that a really firm personal commitment to a long-term course of purposeful action is possible only if one is more or less deluded or trapped in one way or another by an inadequate conception of the nature of things. In a period of such corrosive scepticism and relativism as ours it seems desirable to look particularly closely at works in which such suggestions are advanced.

Of the three works that I have mentioned, the one that I am concerned with here, *The Great Gatsby*, has the largest philosophical pretensions and is the most seductive. It is especially concerned with the relationship between ideals and conduct, and its thesis on this subject appears to be as follows: To have large romantic ideals is almost certainly to be mistaken, because of the nature of ideals, but to attempt to do without them is to live emptily and to thwart a permanent human craving; hence almost any large romantic ideals, however mistaken, deserve to be viewed respectfully. In *Heart of Darkness*, to which the novel is obviously indebted,[2] this notion is raised as a possibility, but it is confined to the status of a possibility only, since if Kurtz is manifestly superior to the " pilgrims " he is just as manifestly inferior to Marlow. He is evil, grotesque, and even in his own terms a failure; and in Marlow we are shown convincingly the consciousness of someone who, while aware of a good many of the things that Kurtz is aware of, can yet live admirably and up to a point satisfyingly in terms of a very different set of values. In *The Great Gatsby* this kind of balance is missing; as Arthur Mizener observes, the limitation of the novel " is the limitation of Fitzgerald's own nearly complete commitment to Gatsby's romantic attitude." [3] In the following pages I shall try both to account for the air of solidity given to what is, on the basis of the amount of human conduct displayed in the novel, an untenable thesis, and to point out certain artistic defects entailed in the attempt to substantiate it.

That the novel is at least as much about Nick Carraway as about Gatsby is rightly a commonplace, but there is an important aspect of Nick's consciousness that so far seems to have been

[2] For substantiation of this point see Robert Wooster Stallman, " Conrad and *The Great Gatsby*," *Twentieth Century Literature*, I (April, 1955), 5-12, and Jerome Thrale, " The Narrator as Hero," *Twentieth Century Literature*, III (July, 1957), 69-73. Like Mr. Stallman I will add that I arrived at my conclusions about the indebtedness independently.

[3] *F. Scott Fitzgerald* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1958), p. 177.

slighted. When one tries to account for the extraordinary period weightiness of so slim a book one is driven, I think, to consider the functioning in it of a particular set of ideals as apprehended by Nick, namely those promulgated through the entertainment media. " It was like skimming hastily through a dozen magazines," (p. 67) Nick comments justly on the Rich-Young-Suffering-Hero persona that Gatsby proffers for his inspection during their ride into Manhattan, and he could have said with equal truth that the whole Gatsby-Daisy relationship was like that, or like going to two dozen popular movies or listening to two score popular songs. The novel is one in which Fitzgerald can quite casually trap not only the fact that in 1922 movie stars are living in the West Fifties overlooking Central Park but also, in the same sentence, the fact of " the clear voices of little girls " out in the park singing of the Sheik of Araby (p. 79) and, by implication, of the galaxy of other heroes who are entering their consciousnesses by way of the kinds of movies in which those stars are acting and to whose splendid remembered images they will presumably be trying later to approximate the males with whom they have sentimental dealings. We are in a world—very much a twentieth-century, media-permeated urban world—where the boundaries between ' life ' and ' art,' stereotypes and private individualities, have lost their definiteness and in which the question of when some of the characters are being truly ' themselves ' becomes almost impossible to answer. And it is from Nick himself that we get these perceptions. If Gatsby is trying to adjust himself to a stereotype, Nick is as familiar with that stereotype as he; and if when Klipspringer plays the popular songs for Gatsby and Daisy one recognizes both their appropriateness to the evening mood and the roles that others like them have played in the evolving consciousnesses of the two lovers, it is Nick himself who has felt their appropriateness and mentally provided the lyrics. Nick's consciousness in these respects is one that most of us, I take it, have duplicated to varying degrees in our own growings-up; it is far closer to most of ours, certainly, than are those of Hemingway's rural-oriented Midwesterners, which is no doubt one reason why Hemingway's novels are coming to seem more and more ' period ' while *The Great Gatsby* remains, paradoxically, so glowingly modern. Accordingly, the more normal that Gatsby's consciousness and conduct appear in relation to Nick, the more

normal they are likely to appear to us; and the tendency of the whole novel is in fact to normalize them.

There is an anecdote, possibly apocryphal, of Proust's having been discovered one day sitting on the floor with the MSS of his masterpiece spread around him and exclaiming about his characters, with an air of dismayed discovery, "But they're *all* like that!"[4] In *The Great Gatsby*, similarly, examples of a single pattern of conduct proliferate: the pretensions of Gatsby are in varying degrees echoed throughout it by virtually all the characters, including the Buchanans, the former owner of Gatsby's house, the haughty negro trio in their chauffeur-driven limousine, the whole crew at the brilliantly rendered affair at Myrtle Wilson's apartment, and presumably most of the guests at Gatsby's parties. All are endeavoring, with an unsuccess apparent to Nick's ironic gaze, to conform to "platonic conceptions" of themselves for which they are obviously unfitted. And the effect of this is paradoxically the reverse of what it is apparently intended to be. True, we are left in no doubt about the discrepancies between Gatsby's conceptions of himself, of Daisy, and of their future, and the actualities; and the incongruities here are plainly intended to be underlined by those observable in the other characters, just as the pretensions of Pip are underlined by the pretensions of most of the other characters in *Great Expectations*, a work with which *The Great Gatsby* has marked affinities.[5] But in Fitzgerald's novel, at least, such underlinings serve in a deeper way to excuse or at least to invite a softening of judgment on the conduct of the protagonist, since they suggest that it arises out of proclivities deeply rooted in human nature. And there is a further and more important way in which such a softening is invited. Nick himself, I suggest, is presented throughout as being fully alive only to the extent that his own way of looking at things resembles Gatsby's.

Nick's constant romantic self-projection, his own large sense of glamorous possibilities, his ability, even while noting the tawdriness of an actuality, to understand the glamour that it could still legitimately possess for an outsider—these, of course, are so obvious and so spelled out as to need no commenting on here.

[4] I am unfortunately unable to recall where I heard this.

[5] A number of the affinities are pointed out from a neo-Aristotelian viewpoint in Norman Friedman's "Versions of Form in Fiction—'Great Expectations' and 'The Great Gatsby'," *Accent*, XIV (Autumn, 1954), 246-264.

What I wish to emphasize instead is the way in which when Nick strikes out for himself in an opposite direction from Gatsby's, especially in the crucial matter of sex, he seems positively to be leaving the 'natural' behind. Nick responds to things in general in a variety of ways, of course; it is a single consciousness in which Manhattan reiterates its "first wild promise of all the mystery and the beauty in the world," (p. 69) and the Buchanans' lawn runs and jumps for a quarter of a mile from the beach up to their house (pp. 6-7), and moonlight solidifies and floats on the Sound while the notes of a banjo liquify and drip nearby in Gatsby's garden (p. 47), and, at the Buchanans' again, "our eyes lifted over the rose-beds and the hot lawn and the weedy refuse of the dog-days alongshore" to the clean simplicity of a boat's sails against "the blue cool limit of the sky." (p. 118) But in those responses as I have arranged them a spectrum is discernible nevertheless, one ranging from energies and 'dialogue' to an imagistic and non-metamorphosing relationship with discrete objects; and Nick's relationship with the "clean, hard, limited" boylike figure (p. 81) of Jordan Baker can be placed toward the latter end of the spectrum while that between Gatsby and Daisy belongs near the former. Putting it another way, it is plain that in the deliberately simple, largely unillusioned and passion-free relationship that Nick has chosen one can see, in part, another manifestation of that yearning for a clean and changeless simplicity, a nonhuman aesthetic purity, that shows itself in his grateful view of the ocean's cleanness and in the general gratefulness with which he responds to phenomena having those qualities. But to seek for changelessness of this sort is of course, it is demonstrated, to expose oneself to disappointment when dealing with most things and with all people; sweat breaks out repulsively on the upper lip of the girl back home, Jordan Baker turns away disgruntled in the end, "foul dust" follows in Gatsby's wake, and, having no special dream that he is trying to realize himself, Nick becomes increasingly conscious of time not as the bringer of fruitions but only as the destroyer of beauties and securities. It is hardly too much to say, indeed, that in this one novel Fitzgerald's vision has encompassed Hemingway's and 'placed' it more firmly than Hemingway himself was ever able to do.

Moreover, the limitations of Nick's consciousness are rather more serious than even Fitzgerald himself appears to have been

aware of. In spite of what I have just been saying, a highly important component of the pervasive relaxing charm of the novel, of course, is the general pleasantness of engaging oneself with most of the presented experiences in Nick's fashion, both as they occur and in the act of recollecting them. How far the Herr Issyvoo of Christopher Isherwood's Berlin fictions is indebted as a conception to Nick Carraway can presumably only be a matter of speculation, and if there is indeed indebtedness there has clearly also been a vulgarization. But it is easy to see how vulgarization is invited, just as it is easy to see how Fitzgerald himself has vulgarized certain of the consciousnesses in James and Conrad: it is always very flattering, after all, to be everyone's friend and confidante, to make amidst the multiplying errors of others virtually no false step oneself that exposes one to irony, and to be conscious always that at least one is being alert—alert photographically or poetically or morally, and frequently all three at once. For that matter, there is certainly something to be said for maintaining an unillusioned detachment in a period in which to go around acting with moralistic vigor may very well be to act wrongly. But obviously detachment is only meritorious up to a point, and it seems to me that that point is very decidedly passed in *The Great Gatsby*. For all his agreeableness, Nick is someone in whom the moralizing process has become largely a matter of observation unrelated to intervention, and the neo-Conradian coolness of his opening reference to " the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men " (p. 2) appears to have been arrived at far too lightly. The distinctive poise revealed in his narration of the events is one, to borrow a phrase from W. M. Frohock's admirable discussion of Fitzgerald himself, that " has to do less with morals than with manners." [6]

But the basic question, after all, is not how Gatsby's consciousness and conduct are helped to appear normative through their relationship to Nick Carraway's, but how far they ought in fact to seem so to us; and this brings me at last to Gatsby himself. Arthur Mizener's reaction is representative enough for my purposes. " In contrast to the corruption which underlies Daisy's world," he claims, " Gatsby's essential incorruptibility is heroic. Because of the skilful construction of *The Great Gatsby* the

[6] " Morals, Manners, and Scott Fitzgerald," *Southwest Review*, XL (Summer, 1955), 227.

eloquence and invention with which Fitzgerald gradually reveals this heroism are given a concentration and therefore a power he was never able to achieve again. The art of the book is nearly perfect." [7] It seems to me that, on the contrary, the rhetoric of the book may be nearly perfect but the art most certainly isn't, and this because Gatsby's " essential incorruptibility " is not heroic but unbelievable.

To point out that Gatsby is, after all, a professional criminal on a large scale is not, I think, to be naive or coarse; and one of the more interesting aspects of the book is the extraordinarily skillful sleight-of-hand with which Fitzgerald has avoided coming to terms with the fact of this criminality in the interest of sustaining his opening disjunction between the ' pure ' figure of the dreaming Gatsby and the " foul dust " that stirred in his wake. To pick up a term that I used above, a good deal of metamorphosing goes on in the novel, with lawns leaping, and gasoline pumps glowing in the summer darkness like exotic flora, and the boundaries between the human and non-human, the natural and man-made, becoming strangely indeterminate in Nick's heightened apprehension of things. It is a world of surprises, of things escaping from pigeonholes, so that at the start even " that slender and riotous island which extends itself due east of New York " (p. 4) eludes momentarily its customary label; and from one point of view there is perfect consistency in the extension of this kind of metamorphosing so that Gatsby's professional milieu becomes converted into an oddly harmless—almost an innocent—kind of fantasy world. The superb telephone conversation between Gatsby and one of his lieutenants is an obvious example of this. (" Well, he's no use to us if Detroit is his idea of a small town.") (p. 95) But it is Wolfsheim, of course, who is the prime representative " denizen " of the underworld in a novel that relies so heavily on representative scenes and figures; and from one point of view, again, the discrepancy between Wolfsheim's comic, sentimental, little-Jewish-businessman appearance and the abstract idea of The Man Who Fixed The World's Series is masterly. So too is Wolfsheim's anecdote of the shooting of Rosy Rosenthal, in which the murdered man's almost dream-like dissociation from his body's vulnerability—his transporting of himself to the door as a

[7] *F. Scott Fitzgerald*, p. 177.

kind of object, as it were, that can subsequently be transported back to resume contact with the waiting coffee-cup—is another example of the dissociating and the conversion of bodies into *things* (by heat or fatigue or alcohol) that goes on throughout the novel. The transmogrification of the underworld by such means is a significant element in that slightly nightmarish dissolution of certainties and values that is so important a part of Nick's experience of the East. Yet sleight-of-hand still seems the appropriate term where its function in the larger argument of the novel is concerned.

In terms of plotting, of course, there is no necessity for Gatsby's being a criminal at all, but it is obvious enough why Fitzgerald made him one. Hovering behind the novel, as I said above, is *Heart of Darkness*, with Gatsby standing in relation to Nick and the 'society' characters as Kurtz stands to Marlow and the "pilgrims." Given a marked emptiness, unawareness, or positive corruptness in the *soi-disant* respectable, the claims to respect of the single-minded and extravagant risk-taker dominated by ideals increases considerably in force for the judicious onlooker. The crucial difference between the two works, however, is that Conrad has permitted all the elements in the problem to emerge fully, whereas Fitzgerald has not. Kurtz's power to make not only the young Russian but Marlow "see things—things" [8] is not allowed to be dissociated from the severed heads on the posts and the general horrors of King Leopold's *domaine privé*. Gatsby, on the other hand, lives for us in the novel almost wholly as simply one of Fitzgerald's yearningly aspiring and self-improving Minnesota boys grown up into financial success. As a criminal he is as little present and convincing as Dick Diver in *Tender is the Night* is present and convincing on the Riviera as a psychiatrist; qua Good-Bad-Guy, indeed, he is almost as stock and sentimentalized a creation as the Lone Wolf.[9] And by dodging or metamorphosing the muck and violence of large-scale criminality in the interest of preserving Gatsby's 'image' from contamination, Fitzgerald has also dodged a crucial fact about Gatsby's fantasyings about money and the charms of Daisy, namely their fairly direct causal relationship to the obscured unpleasantnesses in his get-rich-quick

[8] *Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness*, ed. Leonard F. Dean (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1960), p. 46.

[9] See especially Louis Joseph Vance, *The Lone Wolf* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1914).

career. The wholehearted sympathy extended by some critics to Gatsby and his ambitions seems to me possible only if one is, in George Orwell's words, " the kind of person who is always somewhere else when the trigger is pulled." [10] " Mr. Heathcliff and I are such a suitable pair to divide the desolation between us. A capital fellow! " [11]—the initial enthusings of Lockwood in *Wuthering Heights* come irresistibly to mind when one is informed, for instance, of " Gatsby's goodness and faith in life, his compelling desire to realize all the possibilities of existence, his belief that we can have an Earthly Paradise populated by Buchanans." [12]

That Gatsby should have evoked the kind of sentimentality that he has is in part, however, a tribute to a further aspect of the illusion of largeness that the novel so brilliantly and charmingly generates. In his essay on Fitzgerald Lionel Trilling remarks with his customary suavity that " Gatsby is said by some to be not quite credible, but the question of any literal credibility he may or may not have becomes trivial before the large significance he implies. For Gatsby, divided between power and dream, comes inevitably to stand for America itself." [13] As a piece of arguing, of course, this seems surprisingly bad. I am reminded, indeed, of F. R. Leavis's characterization of another distinguished *littérateur's* manoeuvrings as " slipping into the empyrean by something very like the Indian rope-trick," [14] since it is hard to see how anything can have a very meaningful " large significance " of this order unless it has a firmly credible smaller one first; whatever Moby Dick, for instance, epitomizes for his pursuers and for us, he couldn't do it if he were not in the first place a very convincingly formidable old albino sperm whale. But one can see all the same a sense in which Gatsby—or more precisely Fitzgerald's creation of him—is very American in the reconciliations that are attempted by means of him. Paradoxically, it is Nick Carraway's conscious-

[10] *A Collection of Essays*, Doubleday Anchor Books (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1954), p. 243.

[11] *Wuthering Heights*, ed. V. S. Pritchett, Riverside Editions (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1956), p. 1.

[12] Marius Bewley, *The Eccentric Design* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1959), p. 287.

[13] " F. Scott Fitzgerald," *The Liberal Imagination*, Doubleday Anchor Books (Garden City, N. Y.: 1953), p. 242.

[14] " Dr. Richards, Bentham and Coleridge," *Scrutiny*, III (March, 1935), 393.

ness that, for all the moralizing notes that are sounded in it, invites a neo-Puritan uneasiness and condemnation; it is the consciousness of someone who has been defeated and has withdrawn, and whose detachment, in the light of traditional American patterns and values, is markedly un-American. "A new world, material without being real"—the analysis of Gatsby's impoverished consciousness after the destruction of his illusions (p. 162) is disturbingly relevant to Nick's consciousness too; disturbingly, I mean, in view of the lurking implication in the novel that the latter is the psychological end to which all the idealistic energies of the American experiment have been leading. But by dividing Gatsby's "power" from the evil concomitants of that power and thereby emphasizing the heroism of his "dreams," Fitzgerald has been able to provide a figure counterpoising Nick's in which a more traditional American pattern of consciousness can once again be affirmed, with its "heightened sensitivity to the promises of life," its "extraordinary gift for hope," and its "romantic readiness" (p. 2); and in Nick's sympathetic contemplation of those qualities the actual desolation of his own position and its implications can escape being brought into disconcerting focus. The reaffirmation is not quite as traditional as it looks, however, and I will conclude by suggesting that in fact the novel culminates in a misreading of the American past in the interest of showing, reassuringly, that the discrepancies between it and the revealed present are not in fact as accusingly great as they might seem.

The four last paragraphs of the novel pluck at the heartstrings, and they are no doubt prominent items in the mental scrapbooks of a lot of us. To animadvert on them is rather like animadverting on Dietrich or Garbo; they are among the 'beauties' of American prose. But surely they are largely incantation, and surely it is not obtuse to insist on that ultimate inseparability of Beauty from Truth that was affirmed by the poet to whom Fitzgerald himself was so indebted? Surely one is not waking from a dream in those paragraphs but going yet deeper into one; and surely, too, it is not 'the' American dream but a peculiarly twentieth-century, urban, sentimentalizing one? Presumably none of us knows what Dutch sailors in the early seventeenth century were thinking while they eyed the approaching shores of Long Island, but it seems highly improbable that they lapsed into a picturesque

trance of " aesthetic contemplation "; and the gazelle-like leap by which Fitzgerald in the next sentence makes them the representatives of man in general reminds one of how much tougher the early American settlers as a whole were, with their gallimaufry of private and communal ambitions, than Fitzgerald's evocation of that " old, unknown world " in terms of siren-like whisperings and a soothing feminine breast suggests. So too, for that matter, were those pioneers who were still heroically pursuing their " dreams " across the Great Plains more than two centuries after this " last time in history " when " man " was faced with " something commensurate to his capacity for wonder." (p. 182). In other words, far from exalting the quality of all the ambitions and virtues that have manifested themselves in the making of America, Fitzgerald has diminished them to something almost Hollywood in the attempt to raise Gatsby to heroic stature and imply that the errors in his idealizings are historically inevitable. Furthermore, in ignoring the role of clearly articulated and admirable ideals in the collective American experience he has further diminished their role in individual lives. " So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past." (p. 182) Tell that, one is tempted to retort, to William Bradford or Thomas Jefferson. Tell it for that matter (to invoke a novel that demonstrates what the effective use of the aspiring intelligence feels like) to Tolstoy's Levin. Admittedly American fiction after Cooper's has been strikingly destitute of figures of this sort, but that would seem to point not to the nature of ' man ' but to an insufficiency in the way in which ideals have often operated in the American consciousness.

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