The Eyes of Dr. Eckleburg: A Re-examination of “The Great Gatsby”

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F. SCOTT FITZGERALD’s The Great Gatsby seems, deceptively, to be a simple work, and the plot can be summarized in a paragraph or two. In the spring of 1922, Nick Carraway rents a house on Long Island Sound. Near by live Nick’s cousin Daisy Buchanan and her rich, burly, racist, congenitally unfaithful husband Tom, whose current mistress is Myrtle Wilson. Next door to Nick in an enormous mansion is Jay Gatsby, rich too but rootless as air, mysterious as his rare smile “with a quality of eternal reassurance in it.” While visiting the Buchanans, Nick meets Jordan Baker, a petulant charming girl flawed by an incurable dishonesty; from her he learns (truthfully) that Gatsby, as a young officer about to go overseas, had been in love with Daisy in 1917 before her marriage to Buchanan. Next to Nick in an enormous mansion is Jay Gatsby, rich too but rootless as air, mysterious as his rare smile “with a quality of eternal reassurance in it.” While visiting the Buchanans, Nick meets Jordan Baker, a petulant charming girl flawed by an incurable dishonesty; from her he learns (truthfully) that Gatsby, as a young officer about to go overseas, had been in love with Daisy in 1917 before her marriage to Buchanan.

At Gatsby’s request, Nick arranges a meeting between Gatsby and Daisy, the first of several. But Daisy cannot break away from Tom, particularly after she learns that Gatsby’s wealth comes from racketeering. As Daisy and Gatsby are driving back to Long Island from a party in New York, they run down Myrtle Wilson and do not stop. Though Gatsby unintentionally reveals to Nick that it was Daisy at the wheel, Daisy allows Tom to tell Myrtle Wilson’s husband George (who already thinks that Gatsby was his wife’s lover) that Gatsby is responsible for Myrtle’s death. George Wilson shoots Gatsby and then himself, and that is that.

It is even possible to read The Great Gatsby and remain content with a single symbol: the green light (which, as a student once informed me, ought legally to be red) at the end of Daisy’s dock. To those who do not feel a need to inquire further, the light obviously stands for what Nick Carraway says it stands for: “the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us.” True, even the most pragmatic reader may wish to add that the green light might also represent to Gatsby a projection of his wishes: a signal to go ahead, to “beat on . . . against the current,” to attempt so desperately with his “unbroken series of successful gestures” the recapturing of that past which he can never attain.

But there is still more in The Great Gatsby than a protagonist, a plot, and a green light. Many elements in the story, perhaps, will puzzle the practical-minded, for on the level of simple narrative they cannot be accounted for. What does one make, for example, of the faded blue eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg, those staring, vacant, yet somewhat terrible eyes so much more than an abandoned signboard; of the ash heap and its “ash-grey men, who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air” over which the eyes brood changelessly; of George Wilson’s despairing mutter as he...
gazes at the eyes, "You may fool me, but
you can't fool God!'?2

And there is the matter, too, of the odd
scene in which Nick and Jordan Baker
discuss Jordan's carelessness with au-
tomobiles. One could easily find structural
reasons for such a conversation between
Nick and Daisy, or Gatsby and Daisy,
for it is Daisy who runs down Myrtle
Wilson. But why emphasize Jordan's in-
ability to handle an automobile safely?3
I believe the answers to this question and
the others I have posed are concerned
with a more complex organization than is
commonly assumed, an organization of
symbols the whole meaning of which was
not entirely clear to Fitzgerald himself.
For Fitzgerald-as-Fitzgerald and Fitz-
gerald-as-Carraway, the gleeman of the
Gatsby saga, are not the same, though
both appear alternately throughout the
novel, intertwining like the threads in a
fabric whose sheen depends not only on
the materials out of which it is made but
on the light in which it is viewed.

It seems to me a very interesting fact
that the overt theme of The Great Gatsby
has little to do, actually, with the novel's
use of symbol. It is indeed likely, as a
matter of fact, that the subdominant
motif—which I hope soon to expose—
very often overshadows what Fitzgerald
apparently intended to be his principal
theme. Of course, it is true that in mak-
ing its point about the paradoxical futil-
ity of an attempt to recapture the past,
The Great Gatsby obviously also says
much more; one measure of its greatness
is the complex and ironic quality of
Gatsby's attempt to beat against the
current. For he—and he alone, barring
Carraway—survives sound and whole in
character, uncorrupted by the corruption
which surrounded him, which was indeed
responsible for him; from his attempt at
the childishly impossible he emerges with
dignity and maturity. Yet no major work
of fiction with which I am acquainted re-
serves its symbols for the subtheme; the
more one thinks about The Great Gatsby,
the more one comes to believe that F.
Scott Fitzgerald may not have entirely
realized what he was doing.

I think it is evident that not even the
most skilful novelist could make us quite
accept a young bond salesman of Nick
Carraway's background and experience
(even one who was "rather literary in col-
lege") as capable of composing the won-
derful description in chapter iii of Gats-
by's parties, or the passage later on in the
same chapter beginning "I began to like
New York," or managing to contrive
that unique and poignant apostrophe to
the "hundred pairs of golden and silver
slippers" which "shuffled the shining
dust . . . while fresh faces drifted here
and there like rose petals blown by the
sad horns around the floor." In other
words, Nick as Nick is one thing and
Fitzgerald as himself is another—some-
thing, incidentally, which Fitzgerald tac-
titly admits in a letter presently to be
quoted. Thus the novel may very well
involve not merely the theme which Nick
presents in his own character, but also
another which may be called, for lack of a
better name, the "Fitzgerald theme." And
it is toward the latter, I believe, that
almost all the symbolism in The Great
Gatsby is directed.

Nick Carraway, as Nick, could very
well point everything he said toward the

2 It is interesting, though not so relevant as
might at first glance be supposed, that the eyes
were written into the book after Fitzgerald saw
what Arthur Mizener accurately calls a "very bad
picture" on the dust jacket, a picture originally in-
tended to represent Daisy's face.

3 The scene does serve partly to foreshadow
Nick's final breaking-off with Jordan; but only
partly.
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magnificent and at the same time sordid spectacle, Gatsby; could praise in Gatsby “something gorgeous...some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life” and rub out the obscene word some prowling urchin has scrawled on the white steps of the dead Gatsby’s deserted mansion. But F. Scott Fitzgerald is the one who introduces, I think unconsciously, a fascinating examination of certain values only peripherally related to Gatsby’s rise, his dream, and his physical downfall. And, if we turn to this other area, this non-Carraway thematic possibility, we see at once that The Great Gatsby is not, like Lord Jim, a study of illusion and integrity, but of carelessness. Our “second” theme—perhaps the more important regardless of Fitzgerald’s original intention—becomes a commentary on the nature and values, or lack of them, of the reckless ones.

We know that the critics were not alone in sensing a certain lack in The Great Gatsby. Fitzgerald himself felt it, was uncomfortable about it, tried to explain it away even though there is evidence that he always regarded Gatsby as his greatest piece of work. No one agreed, however, about what the lack was. Fitzgerald could not define it consistently; in a letter to John Peale Bishop postmarked August 9, 1925, he calls The Great Gatsby “blurred and patchy” and adds: “I never at any one time saw him clear myself—for he started out as one man I knew and then changed into myself [n.b.]—the amalgam was never complete in my mind.”

In a letter written the same year to Edmund Wilson, however, he shifts his ground: “The worst fault in [The Great Gatsby] I think is a big fault: I gave no account (and had no feeling about or knowledge of) the emotional relations between Gatsby and Daisy from the time of their reunion to the catastrophe.” And then he goes on to make a particularly significant remark if we keep in mind the distinction between Nick Carraway and Scott Fitzgerald: “However the lack is so astutely concealed by the retrospect of Gatsby’s past and by blankets of excellent prose [my italics] that no one has noticed it—though everyone has felt the lack and called it by another name.” Later in the same letter Fitzgerald calls this “big fault” by still a different, though cognate, term: “...the lack of any emotional backbone at the very height of it [i.e., the Gatsby story].”

Now, all of this self-analysis, it seems to me, misses the point. The “lack” is there, all right, and Fitzgerald strikes at least a glancing blow when he speaks of the “blankets of excellent prose”—Fitzgerald prose, please note, not Nick Carraway prose; for in the letter to Wilson, Fitzgerald is clearly speaking as author and craftsman. But, still, he misses; for it is doubtful that the “emotional relations” between Gatsby and Daisy need any more explaining than they get in the novel. In spite of Peter Quennel’s description of Daisy as “delightful,” one feels that neither her character nor the quality of her emotional resources justifies any very exhaustive analysis. Certainly one must assume that, if the novel means anything, it cannot concern itself

4 See, for example, the letter to his daughter dated June 12, 1940, in which he says: “...I wish now I’d never relaxed or looked back—but said at the end of The Great Gatsby, ‘I’ve found my line—from now on this comes first. This is my immediate duty—without this I am nothing’” (The Crack-Up, p. 294).

5 Ibid., p. 271.

6 Ibid., p. 270.

7 New Statesman and Nation, XXI, No. 519 (February 1, 1941), 112. Apparently no irony is intended. It might be added that Quennel transforms Gatsby into “the son of a poverty-stricken Long Island farmer.”
with the love of Jay Gatsby, boy financier, for the pretty wife of Tom Buchanan, football hero. In other words, the point of the Carraway theme, at least, has everything to do with precisely the emptiness of the Gatsby-Daisy "emotional relations"—those same emotional relations which Fitzgerald seemed to feel, I think quite wrongly, it was a "big fault" not to elaborate upon. That Daisy exists both in, and as, an emotional vacuum into which Gatsby, being Gatsby, could attempt to pour only the most obvious and contrived cheap-novel sentimentalism has everything to do with the ironic quality of his final defeat at her hands. And the novel would be the worse, I believe, for the very thing the author says it needs: an exegesis of this vacuum and Gatsby's response to it. Fitzgerald's instinct for craftsmanship, we may be thankful, operated before his analysis as critic.

No, it is not the details of Gatsby's later love for Daisy; nor is it that Gatsby turns into Fitzgerald, though this is closer; nor yet is it (as, says Fitzgerald, \(^8\) Mencken thought) that the central story is "a sort of anecdote"—none of these things is responsible for that feeling of something missing which many readers have experienced but that none seems able to account for. As a matter of fact, what is really "missing" in The Great Gatsby is not so much a specific element in plot or even theme; the sense of something missing comes, rather, from the inherent confusion of themes, the duality of symbol-structure of which Fitzgerald seems to have been unaware. The book, great as it is, still falls short of its possibilities because its energies are spent in two directions. If The Great Gatsby revealed to us only its protagonist, it would be incomparable. Revealing, as it does, perhaps a little too much of the person who created it, it becomes somewhat less sharp, less pointed, more diffused in its effect.

In the last chapter of the novel, you may recall, Carraway describes the "schedule" which Gatsby, as a boy, had written in the flyleaf of a cheap western novel.\(^9\) The "schedule" starts, "Rise from bed . . . 6:00 A.M.," and ends, "Study needed inventions . . . 7:00-9:00 P.M.," with all the hours and half-hours between thoroughly accounted for. Carraway finds the reaction of Gatsby's father to the schedule somewhat amusing: "He was reluctant to close the book, reading each item aloud and then looking eagerly at me. I think he rather expected me to copy down the list for my own use." It is, however, important to recognize that not the dream of progress, but rather the fact of such scheduling of one's resources to the quarter of an hour, is exactly the sort of thing by which F. Scott Fitzgerald was both repelled and fascinated. As Arthur Mizener makes plain in his excellent biography,\(^10\) Fitzgerald was always haunted by the theory that one's physical and emotional "capital" was a fixed and ordered quantity, to be carefully parceled out along the years of one's life and overdrawn only at one's peril. The Nick Carraway who earlier in the novel had wanted the world to be "at a sort of moral attention forever" is closer to Fitzgerald's heart, we may be sure, than the Nick Carraway who, back in his own fictional character, stands ironically detached from a young boy's

\(^8\) In the letter to Edmund Wilson (The Crack-Up, p. 270).

\(^9\) Hopalong Cassidy, for the benefit of those who might wish to speculate on the coincidence of a revival of literary interest in more than one direction.

\(^10\) The Far Side of Paradise (Boston, 1951).
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The answer, I believe, is that he wanted order. Fitzgerald, like Mark Twain, saw around him only chaos. And, again like Mark Twain, he tried to find an ordered cosmos in his own terms. Twain plunged himself into a machine-world where $B$ always follows $A$, as a lever on a typesetter always responds to the cam which actuates it. Fitzgerald seemed to think he could discover in that magic world of the rich “safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor” the sanctuary he seems always to have sought. Like “Manley Halliday” in Budd Schulberg’s The Disenchanted, Fitzgerald had “a strong sense of pattern.” The list which Gatsby’s father shows to Nick Carraway is not so important for what the old man thinks it represents, that his son “was bound to get ahead,” though this is a part of the Carraway theme. Rather, in its boyish effort to reduce the world to terms in the Chaucerian sense of “boundaries,” the “schedule” imposes on the haphazard circumstances of life a purpose and a discipline, just as Fitzgerald the man attempts in his novel the same sort of thing.

Many elements now seem to fall into place. The conversation about carelessness between Jordan Baker and Nick assumes a different stature, and in the thin red circle which Gatsby’s blood traces in his swimming pool “like the leg of trans-it” we can see a meaning: the end-and-beginning within which lies, at least, something else than khaos, the mother of all disaster. “It is not what Gatsby was,” a student of mine once wrote, “but what had hold of him that was his downfall.” “What had hold of him”—and of F. Scott Fitzgerald himself—was the dream that all share who seek to impose some kind of order on a cluttered universe. The meaning Gatsby sought—the “order,” if you will—was Daisy; when

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the betrayal came, his dream disintegrated, and Fitzgerald interposes the most remarkable and terrible "blanket of prose" of all:

... 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... like that ash, fantastic figure gliding toward him through the amorphous trees.

That "old, warm world," we feel, was not Gatsby's vision alone. Certainly by 1925, when The Great Gatsby appeared, Fitzgerald must have long since begun to suspect that not even the wealth of Croesus could really keep one "safe," though that might be a dream as hard of dying as Gatsby's.

Lionel Trilling thinks that Jay Gatsby "is to be thought of as standing for America itself."14 Perhaps; everyone is Everyman, in a sense, and Gatsby can stand for America as conveniently as he can stand for himself. But it seems to me that the true significance of The Great Gatsby is both more personal and more specific. The "spiritual horror" which Mr. Trilling finds in the novel he ascribes to "the evocation of New York in the heat of summer, the party in the Washington Heights flat, the terrible 'valley of ashes' seen like a corner of the Inferno from the Long Island Railroad... Gatsby's tremendous, incoherent parties... the huge, sordid and ever-observant eyes of the oculist's advertising sign."15 This we may accept; but summer heat and ashes and oculists' signs are horrible not per se but per causam. The cause of the horror is, in The Great Gatsby, the terrifying contrast between the Buchanans, Jordan Baker, the obscene barflies who descend in formless swarms on Gatsby's house, all symbolized by the gritty disorganized ash heaps with their crumbling men, and the solid ordered structure so paradoxically built on sand (or ashes) which Gatsby's great dream lends to his life. And over it all brood the eyes of Dr. Eckleburg, symbols—of what? Of the eyes of God, as Wilson, whose own world disintegrates with the death of Myrtle, calls them? As a symbol of Gatsby's dream, which like the eyes is pretty shabby after all and scarcely founded on the "hard rocks" Carraway admires? Or—and I think this most likely—do not the eyes in spite of everything they survey, perhaps even because of it, serve both as a focus and an undeviating base, a single point of reference in the midst of monstrous disorder?

It was all very careless and confused [says Nick]. They were careless people, Tom and Daisy—they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made.

Here Fitzgerald nearly calls his turn—yet he misses again. For Tom and Daisy retreat "back into their money or their vast carelessness." And in the implication of the phrase we see that Fitzgerald was himself unready to give up his old, warm world; that Jay Gatsby was not the only one to pay a high price for living too long with a single dream.

15 Ibid., p. xii.