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SCOTT FITZGERALD AS SOCIAL NOVELIST: STATEMENT AND TECHNIQUE IN 'THE GREAT GATSBY'

Lionel Trilling, in his study of Mr E. M. Forster, develops at some length a comparison between Forster and the American novelist Sherwood Anderson.[1] Even more revealing in certain ways is the comparison to be made between Forster and F. Scott Fitzgerald, and we may usefully set side by side a famous passage from each—the description in *Howards End* of the tide coming into Poole Harbour and the concluding paragraphs of *The Great Gatsby*. Here is Forster:

There was a long silence, during which the tide returned into Poole Harbour. 'One would lose something,' murmured Helen, apparently to herself. The water crept over the mudflats towards the gorse and the blackened heather. Branksea Island lost its immense foreshores, and became a sombre episode of trees. Frome was forced inward towards Dorchester, Stour against Wimborne, Avon towards Salisbury, and over the immense displacement the sun presided, leading it to triumph ere he sank to rest. England was alive, throbbing through all her estuaries, crying for joy through the mouths of all her gulls, and the north wind, with contrary motion, blew stronger against her rising seas. What did it mean? For what end are her fair complexities, her changes of soil, her sinuous coast? Does she belong to those who have moulded her and made her feared by other lands, or to those who have added nothing to her power, but have somehow seen her, seen the whole island at once, lying as a jewel in a silver sea, sailing as a ship of souls, with all the brave world's fleet accompanying her towards eternity?

And here is the conclusion of *The Great Gatsby*:

Most of the big shore places were closed now and there were hardly any lights except the shadowy, moving glow of a ferryboat across the Sound. And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.

And as I sat there brooding on the old, unknown world, I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night.

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther....And one fine morning—

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

What is immediately striking is how alike Forster and Fitzgerald are in their imagery, in their use of symbols, in their gift of rhetoric, in their feeling for the native land that lies beneath and beyond the human dramas enacted upon it. In *Howards End* and *The Great Gatsby* they are dealing with the same basic theme,

[1] Lionel Trilling, *E. M. Forster* (Norfolk, Connecticut, 1943), pp. 20–2.

which each sees as a national theme: the conflict between the outer life and the inner life, between, to put it crudely, those who do and those who feel. Forster conducts an intensive exploration of this conflict, which is not for him a clash of black and white, and the movement of the novel is towards resolution and reconciliation. It is difficult for him to make us accept the Wilcox-Schlegel marriage—we never do accept it entirely—but at least the difficulty has been directly faced.

If the conclusion of *The Great Gatsby* leaves us with no such feeling of dissatisfaction, that is largely because the movement of the book is circular: the action and the symbolism are designed to illustrate, emphasize and justify Nick Carraway's opening distinction between Gatsby, with his 'heightened sensitivity to the promises of life', and, on the other hand, the 'foul dust [which] floated in the wake of his dreams'. When in the course of Nick's funeral oration—for that is what it amounts to—Gatsby's story is suddenly expanded into a parable of man's fate, the splendour of the rhetoric blinds us to the fact that this is a development for which the action of the novel has not completely prepared us. This may give rise, in retrospect, to certain intellectual doubts about the book. The mode of *The Great Gatsby*, however, is essentially poetic, and on this level the resolution achieved is wholly satisfying.

It is often noted that in *The Great Gatsby* Jay Gatsby's business affairs are revealed only in brief and ambiguous glimpses. We learn little more of his background, indeed, than we do of Christopher Newman's. If this is less disturbing in *The Great Gatsby* than in *The American*, that is because Fitzgerald, without necessarily being more informative than James, at least supplies more food for the imagination: 'Well, he's no use to us if Detroit is his idea of a small town', says Gatsby into the telephone. Allusions of this kind comprise one important aspect of the 'confidence trick' which Fitzgerald performs so successfully throughout the novel: although we have no idea what the conversation is about we are completely convinced that Gatsby is mixed up in something, and that it is all more or less illegal. And this is sufficient for Fitzgerald's purposes: indeed the very vagueness of Gatsby's background actually enhances his almost mythic stature.

The precise methods by which Gatsby makes his money are irrelevant. What is not irrelevant, however, is the element of illegality involved: this is why Fitzgerald makes such use of an otherwise peripheral character, Meyer Wolfsheim, with his talk of 'business gonnegtions' and his distinction of being, as Gatsby explains, 'the man who fixed the World Series back in 1919'. In stressing the corruption at the heart of Gatsby's dream, as well as exposing, in the revelation of Daisy's character, the tawdriness of what the dream aspires to, Fitzgerald clearly intended a fundamental criticism of the 'American Dream' itself and of the business society to which, in the twentieth century, it had become indissolubly wedded. So, in *Tender is the Night* (1934), Gatsby's crooked business has its symbolic counterpart in Nicole's violation by her businessman father, and Fitzgerald's view of American society finds its most explicit expression in the comment on Nicole's shopping orgy in Paris:

> Nicole was the product of much ingenuity and toil. For her sake trains began their run at Chicago and traversed the round belly of the continent to California; chicle factories fumed and link belts grew link by link in factories; men mixed toothpaste in vats and drew mouthwash out of copper hogsheads; girls canned tomatoes quickly in August or worked rudely at the Five-and-Tens on Christmas Eve; halfbreed Indians toiled on Brazilian coffee plantations and dreamers were muscled out of patent rights in new

tractors—these were some of the people who gave a tithe to Nicole and, as the whole system swayed and thundered onward, it lent a feverish bloom to such processes of hers as wholesale buying, like the flush of a fireman's face holding his post before a spreading blaze. She illustrated very simple principles, containing in herself her own doom, but illustrated them so accurately that there was grace in the procedure, and presently Rosemary would try to imitate it.

It should now be clear that to speak of Fitzgerald's 'confidence trick' in *The Great Gatsby* is to describe his technique, not to decry it. Angus Wilson, after all, has recently said that all fiction is a confidence trick,[1] and Coleridge spoke long ago of 'the willing suspension of disbelief that constitutes poetic faith'. The method, as has been suggested, is akin to that of poetry and works primarily through the imagery. Alternatively we might say that it is a cinematic technique, achieving economy, speed and tautness by building up the narrative through the scene rather than the chapter unit, cutting abruptly from one scene to another, using the flash-back, creating a total pattern through recurrent phrases, scenes, situations, images. The symbolism of the 'green light' is obvious enough, but scarcely less insistent are such images as Gatsby's yellow car, Daisy's white roadster, the blue lawns of Gatsby's house. We might examine, for the sake of example, the way in which Daisy's representativeness is defined by the images which cluster round her. After the famous moment when Gatsby says that Daisy's voice is 'full of money' Nick, as narrator, goes on:

That was it. I'd never understood before. It was full of money—that was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the cymbals' song of it.... High in a white palace the king's daughter, the golden girl....

This paragraph is the climax of two strands of imagery which also come together in Daisy's name: the daisy flower is white with a golden centre ('in a white palace... the golden girl'). Daisy herself is always associated with whiteness: in chapter I and again in chapter VII Daisy and Jordan Baker sit together on the couch 'like silver idols weighing down their own white dresses', Daisy speaks of their 'white girlhood' together, and Jordan tells Nick that Daisy is a girl 'dressed in white, and had a little white roadster'. This whiteness obviously carries suggestions of innocence, remoteness and inaccessibility ('the white palace'), but in the first chapter it is already made clear that something more is involved:

Sometimes she and Miss Baker talked at once, unobtrusively and with a bantering inconsequence that was never quite chatter, that was as cool as their white dresses and their impersonal eyes in the absence of all desire. They were here, and they accepted Tom and me, making only a polite pleasant effort to entertain or to be entertained. They knew that presently dinner would be over and a little later the evening, too, would be over and casually put away.

The whiteness, that is to say, goes with the life-denying 'absence of all desire' and links up with Nick's final dismissal of Tom and Daisy as 'careless people' who 'smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness'. The 'innocence' is destructive, like that of Graham Greene's 'quiet American'; the inaccessibility is a withdrawal from those 'promises of life' to which Gatsby himself is so sensitive.

The other strand of imagery, culminating in 'the golden girl', is, of course, associated with ideas of wealth. At the very beginning of the novel Nick speaks of

[1] *Writers at Work*, ed. Malcolm Cowley (New York, 1958), p. 257.

his first actions on coming East to live: 'I bought a dozen volumes on banking and credit and investment securities, and they stood on my shelf in red and gold like new money from the mint, promising to unfold the shining secrets that only Midas and Morgan and Maecenas knew.' It is to this sentence that we must refer back the description of the Buchanans' house: outside it is 'red-and-white' and surrounded by roses; inside Daisy and Jordan wait in a room that is 'crimson', 'rosy-colored' and has a 'wine-colored rug' below 'the frosted wedding-cake of the ceiling'. Daisy herself is associated again and again with gold: she has a gold pencil; in Gatsby's bedroom she sees his 'toilet set of pure dull gold' and 'took up the brush with delight, and smoothed her hair'; her youth, like that of Judy Jones in 'Winter Dreams', is recalled in terms of 'golden and silver slippers' and faces 'like rose petals'.

Many other examples could be quoted—Gatsby, for instance, dresses for his first reunion with Daisy in 'a white flannel suit, silver shirt, and gold-colored tie'—but enough has probably been said to indicate the characteristic features of the technique. As so often with Fitzgerald it isn't easy to say just how far he was himself aware of what he was doing: on the other hand it seems likely that it was to this quality of the book above all that Mr T. S. Eliot responded so generously. It has obvious affinities with his own method in *The Waste Land*. His letter to Fitzgerald about *The Great Gatsby* speaks of its being 'the first step that American fiction has taken since Henry James...'.[1] This linking of Fitzgerald with James has worried critics ever since. Certain features of *The Great Gatsby* seem reminiscent of James, yet it seems unlikely that Fitzgerald had read much, if any, of James's work at this time. James E. Miller, Jr., in his recent study of Fitzgerald's early novels, concludes: 'Although Fitzgerald, at the time of writing *The Great Gatsby*, was apparently not under the direct influence of James, he could have felt an immense indirect attraction through any number of writers who themselves had gone to school to the master.'[2]

It is difficult to understand why Miller does not go on to mention Edith Wharton, whose name nowhere appears in his study. Gilbert Seldes, who, as Mizener notes,[3] had talked with Fitzgerald about the book, said when reviewing *The Great Gatsby* for *The Dial* that Fitzgerald had derived the scenic method 'from Henry James through Edith Wharton'.[4] She was, in any case, by far the most important, and the best known, of James's followers, and Fitzgerald certainly knew and admired her work. Fitzgerald, indeed, sent her a copy of *The Great Gatsby* when it first appeared; her letter of thanks, though warm and appreciative, contains one rather curious criticism:

> My present quarrel with you is only this: that to make Gatsby really Great, you ought to have given us his early career (not from the cradle—but from his visit to the yacht, if not before) instead of a short résumé of it. That would have situated him, & made his final tragedy a tragedy instead of a 'fait divers' for the morning papers.[5]

It is a little surprising that Edith Wharton should criticize Fitzgerald for something which he might well have derived from her own method in, say, the presenta-

[1] *The Crack-Up*, ed. Edmund Wilson (New York, 1956), p. 310.
[2] James E. Miller, Jr., *The Fictional Technique of Scott Fitzgerald* (The Hague, 1957), p. 72.
[3] Arthur Mizener, *The Far Side of Paradise* (1951), p. 170.
[4] Gilbert Seldes, 'Spring Flight', *The Dial*, LXXIX (1925), 163.
[5] *The Crack-Up*, p. 309.

tion of Elmer Moffatt in *The Custom of the Country*. Moffatt's background is very lightly sketched in, but he is seen in action, or on the brink of action, sufficiently often to convice us, as Christopher Newman probably does not, that he is capable of the achievements attributed to him. This, as we have seen, is exactly Fitzgerald's method in presenting Gatsby, whose history, situation and aspirations are similar to Moffatt's in several important respects. Indeed, it is possible to think of *The Great Gatsby* as representing, in certain ways, a bringing up to date of the American sections of *The Custom of the Country*. Certain important themes occur in both novels: the conflict between West and East within America itself; the relationship between the possession of wealth, social success and 'getting the best girl'; and, above all, the presentation of the money-society of New York, both at its amusements and in its domestic settings, and of the corruption at the heart of that society. Daisy, with her voice 'full of money', bears an obvious resemblance to Undine Spragg; Tom Buchanan recalls Peter Van Degen. Gatsby himself, as has been noted, is like Moffatt in many ways, but in others he is like Ralph Marvell: he imagines his 'golden girl' to be much finer than she really is, and he ends by dying on her account.

This is not to argue that Fitzgerald, in writing *The Great Gatsby*, was directly indebted to *The Custom of the Country*. The point is rather that Fitzgerald, as a social novelist, is much closer to Edith Wharton than to any of his predecessors or contemporaries: he works in the same social area, uses similar characters, and views society from much the same standpoint. Both Fitzgerald and Edith Wharton, that is to say, clearly perceive the existence of an American class-system dominated by the money-power, and when Fitzgerald speaks of Nicole as the product of capitalistic exploitation we are put in mind of Edith Wharton's description of Mrs Westmore in *The Fruit of the Tree*:

> Her dress could not have hung in such subtle folds, her white chin have nestled in such rich depths of fur, the pearls in her ears have given back the light from such pure curves, if thin shoulders in shapeless gingham had not bent, day in, day out, above the bobbins and carders, and weary ears throbbed even at night with the tumult of the looms.

The central idea here is, of course, something of a cliché of nineteenth-century romanticism, going back at least as far as Keats's *Isabella*. At the same time, the two passages are remarkably similar in content, in tone and even in cadence, and, what is more important, in both passages the author appears in what we think of as an uncharacteristic mood—for although both Fitzgerald and Edith Wharton adopt a critical attitude towards their society it is not normally their primary object to satirize it. They recognize the corruption, but they are drawn irresistibly as novelists to the fascinating coruscation of the social surface.

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