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From the Dream to the Womb: Visionary Impulse and Political Ambivalence in *The Great Gatsby*

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It seems hard to believe in our period, when a three-decade lurch to the political Right has anathematized the word, but F. Scott Fitzgerald once, rather fashionably, believed himself to be a *socialist*. Some years before, he had also, less fashionably, tried hard to think himself a Catholic. While one hardly associates the characteristic setting of Fitzgerald's novels, his chosen kingdom of the sybaritic fabulous, with either proletarian solidarity or priestly devotions, it will be the argument of this essay that a tension between Left and religious perspectives structures the very heart of the vision of *The Great Gatsby*. For while *Gatsby* offers a detailed social picture of the stresses of an advanced capitalist culture in the early 1920s, it simultaneously encodes its American experience, at key structural moments, within the mitigating precepts of a mystic Western dualism.

Attempting both a sustained close reading of the novel, and the relocation of that reading within wider philosophic and political contexts, this essay will therefore consider the impact of a broad mystical strain of Western thought upon Fitzgerald's *political* analysis. For while it is a commonplace that Fitzgerald was fascinated, throughout his life, with what is variously conceived as the "ideal," "the Dream," "inspiration," the "visionary," or "Desire," a tradition with which this essay opens, the political *uses* of the ideal have largely escaped notice. Fitzgerald's excitable visionary sensibility, nourished in high school years by Catholic mysticism, fashioned him into a superbly perceptive critic of the appropriation of human need of the ideal by developments in

American capitalism in the 1920s. In response to economic crisis in the early years of this decade, the national advertising media developed and promoted a new cult of glamour, seeking through its allure to create a mass consumer market and revivify the foundering work ethic. Fitzgerald's entrancement by the suggestive power of beauty sensitized him both to the spell and the mendacity of that mass promise: to the cruel contradiction between the fostered impulse of ecstatic outreach and the terminal drudgery in which the many were entrapped, a drudgery ideologically occluded by the national imagery of a "vast, vulgar and meretricious beauty" allotted the glamorous few. It sensitized him, too, to the crunch choice, in a polarized yet paralyzed legitimate economy, between poverty and crime.

But if at one level the novel works to demystify North American society in the Roaring Twenties, at another it redeploys the ideal to absolve the system from its inequities, aligning the failure of economic and cultural aspiration with a tradition of high metaphysical defeatism. The ancient creed of the unattainability of the Dream thus functions in theological exculpation of a social formation in crisis, conferring apotheosis on pessimistic quietism. Fitzgerald's remystification of social values, and the ambivalent, uneasy conservatism that asserts itself as the novel's ultimate position, are confirmed, finally, in *Gatsby's* construction of gender relations and of the lower classes. Woman, in *Gatsby*, is the exquisite vehicle of solipsistic disengagement from a social order in crisis: not only at the obvious level of Romantic transcendentalism but as offering, on a subliminal plane, through a submerged and recurrent maternal imagery of sanctuarizing womb and suckling breast, a yearning for regressive, infantilizing retreat from the relentless pressures of competition. Conversely, the spectral underclass, simultaneously invisible and obtrusive, marginalized and central, wreaks the novel's horrific climax, emerging as the apocalyptic assassin of that ideologically saturated "ideal" order. In summary, we shall find that, in a sterile dialectic of demystification and prompt remystifying, the "Marxian" critical perception so powerful in *The Great Gatsby*, rather than generating progressive impulse, becomes, by anxious turns, metaphysically annulled, sexually eschewed in regressive libido, and climactically demonized in proletarian displacement.

It is commonly acknowledged that at the heart of the novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald there runs a poetry of desire, an unshakable process of quest set in motion by beauty. The youthful reveries of *Gatsby*, for instance, effect perhaps what Greek philosophy called a *metanoia* or conversion of vision to a further dimension of truth or destiny: "a satisfactory hint of the unreality of reality, a promise that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy's wing" (100). Ineluctably compelled by visitations of a transfiguring beauty, oriented round a field of transcendence, the novelist who in the 1920s styled himself the trumpeter of the Jazz Age would in an earlier age have articulated his ravishing disturbances in the discourse and dyad of a mystic. Listening to the "tuning fork struck upon a star," Fitzgerald stands squarely in an ancient and Western tradition of inescapably frustrate enchantment. "Only I discern / Infinite passion, and the pain of finite hearts that yearn," wrote Browning; and these lucid terms of Romantic formulation recapitulate a metaphysical tradition common to two

millennia of idealist aesthetics. In this tradition, the cravings set in motion by inspiration reach upward towards an ideality ontologically far removed in splendor from the quotidian material realm, which the ideal haunts nonetheless with a kind of incalculable and aesthetic gravitational pull. The ecstatic outreach this inspires may be interpreted as towards the immaterial world of First Forms (Plato) or an Aristotelian Unmoved Mover that “calls like a lover” (*kinei hos eromenon*); it may be towards a transcendent Christian Creator, upon whose natural forms play, in the discourse of Christian Platonism, dazzling beams or *enargeiai* that draw back the contemplative observer into their divine source; or it may be that the *raptus* draws poets into a pantheistic Romantic world-spirit, into “a sense sublime / Of something far more deeply interfused.” However construed, structural to the entire tradition is a shining higher order by which mortals mired in a corrupt, contingent realm become, in Fitzgerald’s language, “for a transitory enchanted moment compelled into an aesthetic contemplation” (*Gatsby* 182), and “gulp down the incomparable milk of wonder” (112). Fitzgerald, then, and his *Gatsby* experience intimations of what was once conceived as the “beatific.” Daisy, as the inexpressible exquisite disclosing the radiant higher kingdom (here, indefeasible wealth), necessarily remains descriptively *discarnate*, in contrast to the sexually profiled Jordan and Myrtle (11, 25). Daisy “gleams like silver,” like “the silver pepper of the stars,” exists as a voice, “a singing compulsion,” “an incarnation,” educing the marriage of “unutterable visions to her perishable breath” (150, 21, 9, 112).

But Daisy is, precisely, perishable: tragically inadequate to the inspiration she kindles. For Fitzgerald, the terms the world affords for the instantiation of ideality are inadequate; yet the ideal remains indefinable in terms of any other order, any specifiable transcendent origin. Fitzgerald thus diverges from the classic Western dualism that offers a transcendent situating of inspiration: for him, it has neither “ground” nor viable instantiation. Displaced and demystified by contemporary secular cynicism, Fitzgerald’s relation to the ideal is precisely Nick’s:

Through all he said, even through his appalling sentimentality, I was reminded of something — an elusive rhythm, a fragment of lost words, that I had heard somewhere a long time ago. For a moment a phrase tried to take shape in my mouth and my lips parted like a dumb man’s, as though there was more struggling upon them than a wisp of startled air. But they made no sound, and what I had almost remembered was uncommunicable forever. (112)

The traditional sacramental instinct endures, internalized yet alien, an elevated profundity fast fading into unintelligibility. As a liminal reflex persisting within modern America’s metaphysical amnesia, its wording proves illegible to a society whose telos is the vulgarity of private profit.

If beauty lacks a transcendent “ground,” personality’s springs become problematic, impossible of final judgment: there may, reflects Nick, or there may not be more to the lifestyle of romantic grace and aspiration than “an unbroken series of successful gestures”; and conduct may ultimately be “founded on the

hard rock or wet marshes" (2). Given the disappearance of an Absolute, the emotional triad on which *Gatsby* is built is decisively distinct from that of Christianity and Platonism. In the latter, awakened desire, colliding with a resistant phenomenal world, can yet remain assured of some ultimate translation to immutable and perfect transcendence. But in Fitzgerald's secular narratives of desire, the impetus of lyric promise is decisively disintegrated by the world's crude bathos and despoliation; and the Dream lacks sanctuary beyond the sphere that resists it. Lyricism, proceeding thus to frustration, must always revert to nostalgia, to elegy: "Can't repeat the past? . . . Why of course you can!" (111). In the tragic chiming of these three tones — lyric promise, its failure, elegy — is composed all Fitzgerald's work. In *Gatsby* they are found from the outset in the opening meditation, where "romantic readiness" issues only in a "foul dust [that] floated in the wake of his dreams," but where, in retrospect, "[o]nly [dead] Gatsby was exempt from my reaction"; and they form a pattern pursued to the final page, where the "green light" and "orgiastic future" turn out "year by year [to] recede before us," our boats being "borne back ceaselessly into the past," yet where the mind consolingly retrieves from a half-enchanted past the Dutch sailors and their magnitude of wonder. The triad structures, too, the essential outline of the narrative and the mood-modulation of the parties. Those parties which open with blue gardens, where "men and girls came and went like moths among the whisperings and the champagne and the stars" (39), but falter into violence, drunken stupor, screaming wives, and cars in the ditch, close upon the glance backward to Gatsby alone on his lighted porch bidding courteous farewell. Missing its final triumphant harmonic, the beat of a sacramental rhythm becomes the pulsing headache of private tragedy; Fitzgerald the mystic turns nostalgic drunk.

As this brutally condensed outline suggests, *Gatsby*, on one crucial plane, is a religious, almost a crypto-theological narrative, displaced thoroughly and with explicit, ironic inadequacy into the secular discourse of a sharply portrayed social formation. And within this particular society, "the unutterable visions" of this "son of God" (112, 99) may no longer figure and excite an assimilation to the universal, a passage from epiphany to serene *contemptus mundi*. They are socially conditioned, on the contrary, to kindle a strife for merely personal and financial achievement, to seek a "vast, vulgar and meretricious beauty" (99).

I have emphasized this "religious" dimension at length because I think it vitally important to appreciate the power, centrality, and dignity of this rapturous pull toward the ideal — its "colossal vitality," as Fitzgerald puts it: "no amount of fire or freshness can challenge what a man will store up in his ghostly heart" (97) — in order to understand both Fitzgerald and ourselves. The Platonic and medieval worlds — though doubtless deluded in their metaphysics, which they moreover betrayed in their social practice — could affirm that, in some bedrock ontological sense, the real was the radiant and the radiant was the real. The substance of joyous and visionary beauty was not the delusion of a youthful libido or abnormal temperament but rather possessed the stature of *noesis*: it was, that is to say, the momentary experience of authentic insight into the ultimate nature of reality as ineffably glorious. Against this, we have the society of Daisy and Tom, whose crabbed credo is "I've been everywhere and seen everything and done everything. . . . Sophisticated — God, I'm

sophisticated!" (18). Fitzgerald's novel thus stands as a *locus classicus* of the affective impoverishment, the crippled cynical sensibility, of the twentieth-century West, which has shriveled and discredited the ideal, peripheralizing the human faculty of wonder to the misfit status of the merely "aesthetic."

At the age of twenty-three, however, Fitzgerald had written to a Catholic friend: "I can quite sympathize with your desire to be a Carthusian. . . . [I am] nearly sure that I will become a priest" (quoted in Bruccoli 109-10). The Catholicism of his upbringing, in which Monsignor Fay had confirmed him as a teenager, was subjected to gnawing doubt in his Princeton years and finally rejected the year after leaving: the sublime cravings of Catholic mysticism had been routed by one for the freshly encountered Zelda; but a form of religious sensibility never left him. Indeed three stories ("The Ordeal," "Benediction," and that section on the early life of Gatsby which was to become excised from the novel and form an independent story, "Absolution") center on the pain, fervor and self-consecration of visionary religious experience. Fitzgerald had been attracted to Catholicism in the first place by the way that Fay had revealed in the "church a dazzling, golden thing," and by the fact that Fay "loved the idea of God enough to be a celibate." He was drawn in Fay, as in Gatsby, to "the faith shining through all the versatility and intellect" (Bruccoli 40-41). "There's that gift of faith that we have, you and I," Fay had told him, "that carries us past the hard spots" (quoted in Allen 44). Like the young Gatsby in "Absolution," Fitzgerald outgrew Catholicism but not his sense of the ideal, which he relocated in the City of the World: in a mysterious "something inef- fably gorgeous somewhere that had nothing to do with God" (Fitzgerald, "Absolution" 150). It was, one might comment, a worthy translation, for the great city, at least in one of its aspects, summons the immense poetry of the possibilities of the future, imaging transformation, joy, prosperity and beauty. Musing on the great towering cities, Raymond Williams reflects, "This is what men have built, so often magnificently, and is not everything then possible?" (6).

It is precisely as a kind of dislocated mystic, surveying North America with the paradoxical eyes of an atheist thirsty for a *visio dei*, that Fitzgerald becomes, as it were, *sub specie aeternitatis*, acutely sensitized to what, in his period and ours, replaces the traditional teleological sublime: the allure but also the fraud- ulence, the "spectroscopic gaiety" and "foul dust" (*Gatsby* 45, 2), of capitalism's transaction with the ideal. Transposed into more sociological terms, I hope to demonstrate that Fitzgerald's deracinated, incorrigible, vocational aestheticism positioned him, in a secular age, as a superlative critic of capitalism's appropri- ation and concentration of beauty in a new and historically unique institution: *glamour*, which Fitzgerald knows as thoroughly as a martyr his Bible. Fitzger- ald's more-than-aestheticism makes possible, in a dialectic of addiction and contempt, a searching demystification of capitalist society and its debased tele- ology of glamour — which, by the same token, he can never quite renounce. Anti-capitalistic, yet ultimately reactionary, throwing upon the commodity the devotional light of a vanished absolute, *The Great Gatsby* recalls Lukács' dictum that the characteristic form of the bourgeois novel is that of "the epic of a world abandoned by God" (88).

Although *Gatsby* has often been explicated in terms of its tragic paradox of corrupt hero and “incorruptible dream” (154-5), nearly all such readings have been conceived in the very general, sometimes even universalizing, “cultural” terms of an erosion of the “American Dream” by “materialism.”¹ We need, however, to impart economic and class specificity to such hazy generalities — for so Fitzgerald’s novel did — and one such welcome case is the work of Michael Spindler. My own essay, while it agrees with Spindler’s that *Gatsby* is “particularly expressive of that ideological conflict which the rise of the leisure class and the growth of consumption-oriented hedonism was generating in American society in the 1920s” (167), will attempt a textually and psychologically fuller reading than Spindler’s shrewd, cogent but very brief study allows. Further, I do not agree that Fitzgerald repudiates and distances himself from Nick’s constant romanticizing of Gatsby’s love of Daisy and of wealth: Nick’s ambivalence is precisely Fitzgerald’s, as his essays, “My Lost City,” “Echoes of the Jazz Age,” and “Early Success” make clear. Such ambivalence can rather be traced, I feel, to the coexistence in Fitzgerald of the cool “Marxian” eye with the fervent “dislocated mysticism” of his Catholic inheritance, though I must also disagree sharply with the *sancta simplicitas* of Joan Allen’s conclusion in her pious study of “the Catholic Sensibility of F. Scott Fitzgerald” that the novels project an Augustinian antithesis of matter and spirit by which the fate of the world and its revelers is one simply of damnation for sin (44, 103). A properly historicist reading of *Gatsby* is one true, perhaps, not only to the tension we shall see between the work ethic and the ethos of consumption but to the fullness of bathos between the meretricious ideal hymned by capital and the ideal of a joyous, stable and beautiful integrity of being, adumbrated in older traditions: an ideal whose very violation suggests so hauntingly that infinitely richer structures of human social life and feeling are both necessary and possible.

That “heightened sensitivity to the promises of life” (Fitzgerald, *Gatsby* 2) which drives *Gatsby* and its hero is pervasively conditioned by the economic structure of the Roaring Twenties themselves. The “riotous excursions,” the buoyant energy and hope, were the product not only of a pleasure-seeking post-war reaction but of a rapacious and excitative hedonism assiduously fostered by contemporary capitalism. The “American Dream” had become the capitalist imperative of upward social mobility, a giddy dynamic of apparently infinite possibility, massively stimulated by the images of glamour in the mass media and objectified in the new skyscrapers of New York and elsewhere (400 were built in the 1920s): “The city seen from the Queensboro Bridge is always the city seen for the first time, in its first wild promise of all the mystery and the beauty in the world” (69). The institution of glamour — the mass marketing of images of entrancing wealth and style — is historically unique to capitalism, as an economic formation whose enticing pinnacle is theoretically open to individual achievement; and glamour becomes in the 1920s the engine of popular capitalism, a structurally indispensable economic motivator, vital supplement to a work ethic whose traditional nineteenth-century values of industry, abstinence, thrift, and impulse-renunciation are dramatically eroded. (“Most of my friends drank too much — the more they were in tune to the times the more

they drank. And so effort *per se* had no dignity against the mere bounty of New York in those days" [Fitzgerald, "My Lost City" 28].) Generating this situation was a new imperative originating in the infrastructure of American capitalism. For by 1920, as Spindler documents in his brilliant essay, mass production techniques had developed to so high a level that a new mass market had to be created to accommodate excess capacity and forestall stagnation. The effect was a new phase of capitalism, marked by intensive advertising strategies and the introduction of consumer credit to stimulate sales, and ensuring the replacement of heavy industrial manufacture by consumer goods as the leading characteristic of the economy. In this new era of "high mass consumption," the total volume of expenditure on advertising rose from nearly 1.5 billion dollars in 1918 to nearly 3.5 billion by 1929 (Spindler 101).

Further, a qualitative change in the character of advertising ensued, with advertisers drawing on J. B. Watson's behavioral psychology to manipulate the consumer subconsciously, using lavishly pictorial and irrational, rather than informative, advertising display. Companies began hiring "image" consultants; "style-features" in new consumer commodities promoted rapid turnover for fashion reasons; and a new "ideology of consumption," exhibited above all by an emerging national leisure class of millionaires who flaunted pleasure, idleness and gratification as the highest lifestyle and were accorded high media prominence, clashed with the "stern" older values of the Protestant ethic (Spindler 101-2, 108-11). To this novel climate of intensive consumer tantalization, seeking purposefully (or "meretriciously") to enchant the public by a kind of lyric engineering, *The Great Gatsby* is unforgettable testimonial.

The superb recurrent synesthesia of the novel, deployed to evoke lyric promise — "the yellow cocktail music," "the blue honey of the Mediterranean," "the sparkling odor of jonquils and the frothy odor of hawthorn" (*Gatsby* 40, 34, 92) — is surely correlative, as a counter-natural heightening of sensory gratification, to a new, technologically accomplished mood of delectable control over nature: one conveyed in the magical production of blue gardens with their constantly changing light, the nightingale that has arrived on the Cunard Line, the human dispensation of starlight to casual moths, and "the premature moon, produced like the supper, no doubt, out of a caterer's basket" (39, 40, 16, 80, 43). The mood of advanced, magical affluence, of clever luxury, seems mediated from the euphoria over new gadgetry — autos, telephones, radios, alarm clocks, refrigerators — transforming the lives of those who can afford them. "Anything can happen now that we've slid over this bridge," thinks Nick, "anything at all" (69). True to this tone of the dreamy fabulous, of omnipotent artifice, Daisy wishes to put Gatsby in a pink cloud she spies above the sea and push him about in it (95).

The tone of the fabulous and the energizing of aspiration are promoted above all in advertising. Although in the 1920s, according to historian Merle Curti, "only the upper ten per cent of the population enjoyed a marked increase in real income," this reality was kept muted by "the fact that almost all the chief avenues to mass opinion were now controlled by large-scale publishing industries" (quoted in Zinn 374). "Not for nothing," remarks Eric Hobsbawm, "were the 1920s the decade of psychologist Emile Coué, who popularized optimistic

autosuggestion by means of the slogan, constantly to be repeated: ‘Every day in every way I am getting better and better’” (100).² Fitzgerald himself worked for an advertising agency, in New York City in 1919 (“We keep you clean in Muscatine”) and wrote hopefully for fashionable magazines. A check from *The Smart Set* allowed him to send silk pajamas south to Zelda, which made her, she said, “feel like a *Vogue* cover” (quoted in Bruccoli 6, 110-11). Casually, ironically, *Gatsby* acknowledges the ubiquity of the medium as a vital aesthetic ground of cosmopolitan imagination. At Myrtle’s party, Tom sends out “for some celebrated sandwiches, which were a complete supper in themselves” (36). Gatsby’s dissembling tale of his past drops into a discourse whose “very phrases were worn so threadbare” that they evoked a “‘character’ leaking sawdust at every pore. . . . [I]t was like skimming hastily through a dozen magazines” (66-7). Myrtle’s first action in escaping the garage with Tom is to buy “a copy of *Town Tattle* and a moving-picture magazine” (27). “You always look so cool,” Daisy tells Gatsby. “You resemble the advertisement of the man. . . . You know the advertisement of the man —” (119). Supremely conspicuous are the eyes of Doctor Eckleburg, “their retinas . . . one yard high,” set up to “fatten the practice” of “some wild wag of an oculist” (23).

At the summit, of course, of capitalist glamour, along with the movie star — “‘Perhaps you know that lady,’ Gatsby indicated a gorgeous, scarcely human orchid of a woman who sat in state under a white plum tree” (106) — is the millionaire. Nick’s house, though “an eyesore,” enjoys “the consoling proximity of millionaires” (5), a frank reaction reminiscent of Schwartz in *The Last Tycoon*, “who stare[s] with shameless economic lechery” as super-rich Stahr walks by (Fitzgerald, *Tycoon* 8). To aspiring beginners in the bond business, Nick’s volumes “promise to unfold the shining secrets that only Midas and Morgan and Maecenas knew” — a gaily sardonic hubris whose unconscious nemesis, perhaps, we find in the three “Mr. Mumbles” whom Nick meets at his first Gatsby party (*Gatsby* 4, 43). Daisy, of course, compels by a voice “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 . . .” (120). Gatsby himself embodies the full-dazzle glamour of the ultimate capitalist success story: the ever “restless” self-made man, soaring into a plutocratic stratosphere sufficient to buy his waterfront palace in just three years, he woos Daisy through epiphanies of conspicuous consumption in his home, hydroplane and Rolls Royce, through a shared commodity fetish pitched to the level of sublimity: “‘They’re such beautiful shirts,’ she sobbed, her voice muffled in the thick folds” (92).³

Fitzgerald’s genius for evoking this fierce magnitude of glamour, this national hunger for a scenery of leisured opulence transfigured by champagne and by advertising “into something significant, elemental and profound” (47), is often celebrated. Less celebrated, however, is his acute and clear-sighted demystification of all that mass-marketed hope: *Gatsby* offers almost a diagram of the fraudulence of specifically capitalist promise. Fitzgerald not only knows, he very clearly presents the injustice and the failure of capitalism. The poet of doomed enchantment proves intensely sensitized to the world of doomed competitiveness.

The competition is desperate. The hungry-seeming Englishmen, talking in earnest voices to prosperous Americans at Gatsby's party, are "agonizingly aware of the easy money in the vicinity" (42). Chester Mckee turns on Tom a throbbing yet modest economic longing that is significantly reminiscent of Wilson: "I'd like to do more work on Long Island," he says, "if I could get the entry. *All I ask is that they should give me a start*"; whereafter he falls "asleep on a chair with his fists clenched in his lap" (33, 37; emphasis added). In a poignant counterpoint to Daisy's tears of joyous possession, triggered by Gatsby's shirts, Myrtle weeps the more familiar tears of the heartbreak of *dispossession*. Discovering that her husband had borrowed the very suit in which he married her, she weeps as its owner carries it away (35), to find herself mired still in a poverty she thought to have escaped. Huddled thereafter above a dusty garage for eleven years, the first, and perhaps the only, significant things she ever takes in about Tom are "his dress suit and patent leather shoes" (36). In a deft symbolic touch, Fitzgerald has her avoid Tom's gaze on the train by pretending to stare at an "advertisement over his head"; but the strong allure of that institution has already effected his persuasion for him. "You can't live forever; you can't live forever" beats in her surrendering materialist mind, just as Nick pulls up Jordan to his face to the beating phrase, "There are only the pursued, the pursuing, the busy, and the tired" (81). Restlessness, in this frenetically competitive success society, is indeed a key term, recurring throughout the novel and applied successively to Tom and Daisy (6, 7, 179), Jordan (18), Nick (3, 59) and Gatsby (64).

But excited monetary pursuit, Fitzgerald shows, goes hand in hand with personal anxiety: under the strain of competition, social life has become a medium of unease. The correlative of incessant tantalization by glamour is a corrosive sense of personal inadequacy. Back home, Nick recalls, social events were "hurried from phase to phase . . . in sheer dread of the moment itself" (13). "Almost any exhibition of complete self-sufficiency draws a stunned tribute from me," he remarks (9), and he is on his way to getting "roaring drunk from sheer embarrassment" at Gatsby's party when Jordan rescues his equanimity (42). "You make me feel uncivilized, Daisy," he confesses (13), but this is precisely the function of the new national leisure class, whose *vocation* is to display a condition beyond such anxiety and gaucherie, to conduct lives of literally inimitable elegance levels: "gleaming like silver, safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor" (150). Daisy and Jordan are persistently figured in an imagery of ease and stasis, immobile in floating dresses (8, 115), cool in white or silver, at home in a "bantering inconsequence" (12) whose point is the superior grace of a languid *sufficiency*. Symptomatically, the most magical quality in the smiles of both Gatsby and Daisy is the imparting of unconditional *reassurance* (9, 48). Yet even the super-rich, in this political economy of competition for poise, secretly lack self-confidence. Tom is stung to envy by Gatsby's wealth and glamorous guests, and "no longer nourished" by "sturdy physical egotism" (21), while Jordan lies and fears clever men, being unable "to endure being at a disadvantage" (58).

In the struggle for fashionable acquisition and emulation, the collective existence of other people is apprehended, counter-democratically, as a fatigu-

ing, even repellent plurality. *Gatsby* frequently associates cheap public transport, and thus the masses, with oppressiveness and the thwarting of personal purpose. The nadir of Gatsby's early fortune in the loss of Daisy is presented as an almost martyring passivity aboard a hot day-coach that pulls him penniless from Louisville, raced by a yellow trolley lined with unfamiliar faces (153). The "harrowing scene" between Gatsby and Tom anticipated nervously by Nick begins with a train ride to Long Island, again in the heat, in which the passengers are irrationally suspicious of honestly extended courtesy (114). Myrtle's tedious party culminates in drunken gloom in "the cold lower levels of the Pennsylvania Station" (38). And uneasy undertones of the precariousness of Gatsby's dream are struck in the eerie sketch of elements and commuters interposed in Klipspringer's song: "Outside the wind was loud and there was a faint flow of thunder along the Sound. All the lights were going on in West Egg now; the electric trains, men-carrying, were plunging home in the rain from New York" (96). Not only the presence of the mass public but the very existence of perspectives alternative to one's own forms a kind of threat, demystifying the primary narcissism of self: "Life is much more successfully looked at from a single window," insists Nick (4); and "it is invariably saddening to look through new eyes at things upon which you have expended your own powers of adjustment" (105), a passage that recalls Gatsby's loss of "the old warm world," displaced from the illusion of special cosmic favor (162). Where young and romantic male hopefuls like himself are concerned, however, Fitzgerald can extend sympathy, and the novel crafts tenderly that sad knowledge of lonely outsiderhood inescapable in a society magnetized by glamorous *insiders*. "High over the city our line of yellow windows must have contributed their share of human secrecy to the casual watcher in the darkening streets, and I was him too, looking up and wondering. I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life" (36). Nick defensively eschews the pathos of "young clerks in the dusk" at Gatsby's party by positioning himself at the cocktail table, the only place where a single man can linger without looking "purposeless and alone" (57, 42).

As familiar as the desperate competitiveness, fear of personal inadequacy, and pathos of outsiderhood that float in the wake of capitalism's dream, is the casually coarse greed and hypocrisy it spawns. "He's a bootlegger," said the young ladies, moving somewhere between his cocktails and his flowers. . . . 'Reach me a rose, honey, and pour me a last drop into that there crystal glass'" (61). Nick, with his traditional middle-class values, seeks fastidiously to avoid such complicity in tainted money, insisting on paying for the lunch with Wolfshiem; yet he knows that New York's very skyscrapers are founded upon it, and he can only fantasize ruefully of "the city rising up across the river in white heaps and sugar lumps all built with a wish out of non-olfactory money" (69). Behind millionaires lies an implacable possessive drive, he knows, and in his first glimpse of Gatsby he imagines his opulent neighbour "come out to determine what share was his of our local heavens" (21).

Yet the most striking element in Fitzgerald's demystification of the world of the capitalist ideal is not the human insecurity and moral ugliness bred by the fever of glamour but the absolute failure of the work ethic quite literally to

deliver the goods. Only the upper ten percent of the population enjoyed markedly increased income in the 1920s, for as Spindler notes, by 1929 perhaps 50,000 individuals received half of all national share income (166). In 1921, Zinn records, 4,270,000 Americans were unemployed, two million people in New York City lived in tenements condemned as firetraps, and six million families (42 per cent of the US total) made less than \$1,000 a year (373); *Gatsby* opens in the spring of 1922. "Shocking to tell," records Ann Douglas, "71 per cent of American families in the 1920s had annual incomes below \$2,500, the minimum needed for decent living; in New York in the years just after the war, the average worker earned only \$1,144 a year" (18). In addition to the dramatic new polarization of wealth, corporate mergers between 1919 and 1930 swallowed up some 8,000 businesses (there were 80 bank mergers in 1919 alone), in a momentum of monopolistic concentration of wealth and power at the very top that rendered the traditional entrepreneurial dream a hollow fiction for virtually all. By 1929, the 200 largest non-financial companies held nearly half of all corporate assets and over one-fifth of the entire wealth of the nation (Spindler 103). In view of such developments, it is no wonder that Nick finds Tom and Daisy "remotely rich" and feels "a little disgusted" (20), a resentment of privilege shared by the cottagers of the old West Egg fishing village who refuse the offer by the original owner of Gatsby's mansion to pay five years' taxation if they will thatch their roofs. ("Americans . . . have always been obstinate about being peasantry" [89].) Their pride does not save them, however: a few years later even Daisy will feel offended by the "too obtrusive fate that herded its inhabitants from nothing to nothing" (108). For the truth of this economy gives the lie, as Fitzgerald firmly shows, to glamour's promise. Wilson, worn away by a decade's straining at the gasoline pump, pitied even by Tom (138), knows better than Klipspringer that the economy's real law is unavailing drudgery: "one thing's sure and nothing's surer / The rich get richer while the poor get — children" (96). In this society, where the "stern" names of "the great American capitalists" find no contemporary exemplars save the "gray old man who bore an absurd resemblance to John D. Rockefeller" and sold mongrel pups on the sidewalk (63, 27), there is only one way from rags to riches, and that is crime. The choice is a simple one between drudgery and a "gonnegtion." The reach of official corruption suggested in the successful "fixing" of the 1919 World Series is re-echoed on a more mundane plane in the white card sent Gatsby annually by the Police Commissioner for doing him "a favor," a card that sends policemen accelerating apologetically away on their motorcycles. Lack of further options is again suggested in the fact that even Tom's friend, Walter Chase, turns to crime to repair his fortunes. As Gatsby explains, Walter "came to us dead broke. He was very glad to pick up some money, old sport" (135). There were, in the telling new binarism of the 1920s metropolitans, only "suckers" and "racketeers" (Douglas 20).

Gatsby turns to crime only when, though covered in war medals, he becomes literally half-starved in the search in New York for even a menial job. "He hadn't eat anything for a couple of days. . . . He ate more than four dollars' worth of food in half an hour" (172). For, very strikingly, we are nowhere shown in this novel of defeated aspiration — Nick, Myrtle and Gatsby are all

failed climbers — a sphere of legal and effective self-betterment. In this landscape of bleak class-entrapment and dead-end labor, wherein rich and poor are frozen in polar extremes (*Among the Ash-Heaps and Millionaires* had been Fitzgerald's first title for the book), Gatsby could never have even have met and wooed Daisy without the imposed, momentary egalitarianism of uniform. Tom's contemptuous slash lacerates because it is true: "I'll be damned if I see how you got within a mile of her unless you brought the groceries to the back door" (132). In circumstances of ineluctable paralysis for the masses, of blocked economic ascent, Nick realizes that he himself — "one of the few honest people that I have ever known" (60) — might also have surrendered to a "gonneg-tion" at Gatsby's offer, had it been only more diplomatically timed: "I realize now that under different circumstances that conversation might have been one of the crises of my life. But, because the offer was obviously and tactlessly for a service to be rendered, I had no choice except to cut him off there" (83-4).

The legitimate economy, where we glimpse it, conveys the very essence of alienated labor. There the senses become, in a condition directly opposed to that of the synesthesia of the parties, starved, dulled and oppressed. Wilson's garage is a dim and almost bare expanse of dust "approached by a trail of ashes," where work has left him "spiritless, anaemic" (25). Up in the city, Nick falls asleep at his swivel chair, attempting "to list the quotations on an interminable amount of stock" (155). The oppressiveness of broiling heat on the train to Long Island is subliminally clinched by association with industry: "As my train emerged from the tunnel into sunlight, only the hot whistles of the National Biscuit Company broke the simmering hush at noon" (114). (The association may remind us again of the rich, "safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor" [150].) The work ethic is in crisis, its cruel bluff exposed. Fitzgerald's demystification of capitalist promise could hardly be more thoroughgoing. Or so it might seem.

The failure of the novel's aspirers — Myrtle, Wilson, Nick, and Gatsby — to find the better life each seeks is, however, assimilated to a putative inner law of the human psyche, and even to a spent momentum within history itself. "There must have been moments even that afternoon when Daisy tumbled short of [Gatsby's] dreams," insists Fitzgerald. "No amount of fire or freshness can challenge what a man will store up in his ghostly heart" (97). This is apparently also our own condition, as, incorrigibly illusioned, we "beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past" (182). With the colonization of the US, "the last and greatest of all human dreams" is apparently also behind us; its revelation to the Europeans was "the last time in history" for "man" to experience "something commensurate to his capacity for wonder." The grandeur of the sweep universalizes defeat, generalizes failure to a sacred and eternal tristesse; it was Fitzgerald's achievement, testifies Zelda, that he "offered the reconciliation of the familiarities of tragedy" to his generation, "persuaded them . . . to attitudes of a better-mastered Olympian regret" (quoted in Brucoli 709, 711). This is not because, as Leslie Fiedler wrote, America is "a nation that dreams of failure as a fulfillment," so that Fitzgerald "hoarded his defeats like his truest treasures" (71, 72) — although he did.

Rather, the insistence upon defeatism as noesis, upon ideality as uninstantiable in the world of time, is one that, as I have argued above, is a primary and defining metaphysical tenet of the Western tradition from Plato through Christianity to Romanticism. Themself part of this tradition, critics write of “impossible idealism trying to realize itself, to its utter destruction in the gross materiality” (Raleigh 101), or of the “tragedy” that links *Gatsby* with “the general lot of mankind” as “a symbol of the disenchantment of mankind as a whole” (Dyson 119, 123).

The elision of socio-economic specificities with allegedly transcendent and ineluctable truths of the heart has been long familiar as the posture of the Arnoldian “sage,” dominating “aesthetic” assumptions well past the point of Fitzgerald’s death and into the latter half of this century (see Eagleton 39-43, 60-65). But it is not, as Marius Bewley noted, the only tradition. “I join you,” wrote Thomas Jefferson,

in branding as cowardly the idea that the human mind is incapable of further advances. This is precisely the doctrine which the present despots of the earth are inculcating, and their friends here reechoing; and applying especially to religion and politics; “that it is not probable that anything better will be discovered than what was known to our fathers.” . . . But thank heaven the American mind is already too much opened to listen to these impostures, and while the art of printing is left to us, science can never be retrograde. . . . To preserve the freedom of the human mind . . . every spirit should be ready to devote itself to martyrdom. (Quoted in Bewley 126)

Jefferson’s historical moment was the “heroic” phase of the bourgeoisie, denouncing with Enlightenment ire and vim the metaphysical toils of political paralysis with which the ideological overlords of feudalism had roped the limbs of their countrymen. The contrast could hardly be clearer with the later, industrial bourgeoisie, passed from progressive fire into reactionary dogma, fugitive from history and seeking to “transcend” threatful political motion. It is into precisely such conservative arms that Fitzgerald ultimately rushes, in just the embrace traditional critics celebrate. Yet there is nothing “natural” or even organic about *Gatsby*’s closing meditation and the critics’ sonorous confirmations that indeed disillusion and defeat compose the eternal human condition. On the contrary, such patterning, I would argue, exhibits an arbitrary foreclosure of the novel’s social consciousness that is one hallmark of ideology. When *Gatsby* extrapolates a full-blown metaphysical absolute from a contingent economic impasse, it can do so only through an ideological process of drastic reductivism, imposing on its model of social cause and effect a response of fatalistic acquiescence cloaked as sublime wisdom. For the novel, we have seen, establishes accurately enough the social and ideological realities of an economic system that parades glamorous promise, launches energy and appetite, then thwarts that promise and wrenches that ideal into pain. *Gatsby* recognizes that the stark choice between drudgery and crime, the dearth of legitimate self-betterment for the talented, and the dead end of the work ethic, are determinate economic circumstances. It shows clearly that both Wilson’s reckless exhaus-

tion and Gatsby's need to turn, in a success culture paradoxically predicated on unreachable monopolistic capital, to a criminal life that re-alienates his lover, are *circumstantial*. Yet Fitzgerald assimilates these particularities of structural frustration and class ambivalence to eternity, abandons his superb sociological instincts for a misty melancholia. Throughout most of the narrative, social observation and psychological comment proceed entwined, the latter manifestly developing from the former; but at an altar of venerable dogma, of political shibboleth, they fly wide apart. *Gatsby*, accordingly, stands revealed as a novel about capitalist mass society and its dynamic — one of the better novels on this subject ever written — which, horrified by its own revelations, seeks refugee status among the stars. Sketching clearly the hegemonic code of glamour that newly romanticizes capitalist mass production, the novel recoils from this cruel class bluff by dissolving into a religiose mystification. Spurious spiritual inevitability is thus accorded to a precise moment of failure in the capitalist system, *Gatsby* becoming thereby not only a supreme Romantic classic but also one of the most powerful writings of reactionary conservatism ever penned. The swing here, this extraordinary, architectonic double-action — demystifying the character of the capitalist dynamic only to remystify it, “misleading theory to mysticism” in essentializing a particular moment of crisis — shows luminously once more the crypto-theological status of the novel, assimilating despairing political quietism to high spiritual knowledge in an Augustinian and Christian tradition.

When *Gatsby* remystifies aspiration as inevitably tragic, retreating from injustice and frustrated promise to sprawl, like Nick, in moonlit sands and seek the “reconciliation” of tragic reverie, a pattern is established of something like political schizophrenia, one that seems to distinguish modern political consciousness in the US from that in the European democracies. An extreme of nationalist declamation, in which the American continent represents “the last and highest of all humans dreams” (apparently democratic triumphs in European capitals or across, say, the continents of Africa or Asia would axiomatically be less “great”), falls supine without struggle before a posture of cynicism proclaiming that tragic unachievement is inevitable. Such oscillation between poles of tearful patriotic *frisson* and unofficial gut cynicism is puzzling to a non-native: where, one asks, is the cautious objectivity of the middle ground, acknowledging modest progress to be feasible? Is there not rather more to political reality than these histrionic extremes of spellbound Dutch mariners and Gatsby's rotating corpse? History, of course, shows not only that there can be but that there has been: just three years before Fitzgerald sat down to compose *Gatsby*, women won, for the first time in history and against great opposition, the right to vote in political elections. This world-historical breakthrough of 1920, a boat long beating against the current and most manifestly *not* borne back ceaselessly into the past, shows up Fitzgerald's elegant remystification of America for the reactionary dogma that it is.

The deep-seated conservative *quietism* that circumscribed Fitzgerald's temperament, for all his vaunted brawls and flamboyant public misdemeanors, takes also one other and subtler form of nostalgia and retreat than those proclaimed

in his nostrums: one evident in his presentation of women. We have seen that Fitzgerald's metaphysics of defeat stipulates high political gloom; and, despite some sharp ambivalence toward the elite, we shall see that his perspective on the underclass is marked by a fearful alienation. In these tense conditions, Fitzgerald opts (one might say opts out) for the solace of a purely individualist gratification.

Although at one level the "fast" life of his heady, competitive success culture is elating (Nick enjoys "the racy, adventurous feel of [New York] at night, and the satisfaction that the constant flicker of men and women and machines gives to the restless eye" [57]), the cumulative strain is telling. "It was borrowed time," Fitzgerald later wrote, "the whole upper tenth of a nation living with the insouciance of grand dukes and the casualness of chorus girls. . . . A classmate killed his wife and himself on Long Island, another tumbled 'accidentally' from a skyscraper in Philadelphia, another purposefully from a skyscraper in New York. One was killed in a speak-easy in Chicago; another was beaten to death in a speak-easy in New York and crawled home to the Princeton Club to die. . . . [M]oreover these things happened not during the depression but during the boom" ("Echoes" 18, 16). Cold shadows of violence flicker over the names of the partygoers on the blue lawns: "Civet, who was drowned last summer[,] . . . Edgar Beaver, whose hair they say turned cotton-white one winter afternoon for no good reason at all[,] . . . Muldoon who afterward strangled his wife[,] . . . Palmetto, who killed himself by jumping in front of a subway train in Times Square," and so on (*Gatsby* 61-3). Following his education from the "pioneer debauchee" Cody, Gatsby feels instinctively that he can preserve his dreams only if he flees community, perserving his immaculate disengagement: "Gatsby saw that the blocks of the sidewalks really formed a ladder and mounted to a secret place above the trees — he could climb to it, if he climbed alone" (112).

When, however, he weds his visions to Daisy's perishable breath, his quest for a trophy-wife, a clinching credential of wealth and glamour attained, reveals a perspective on the feminine that pervades the novel. "It excited him . . . that many men had already loved Daisy — it increased her value in his eyes" (148). "It's a man's book," Fitzgerald later admitted (quoted in Bruccoli 250), and the construction of Daisy precisely as the glittering prize awarded the sharpest sword dominates her characterization: gleaming like silver, her voice full of money, excitingly redolent "of this year's shining motor-cars and of dances whose flowers were scarcely withered" (*Gatsby* 148).⁴

An exquisite object of male consumption, Daisy has internalized male values. Weeping that her baby is a girl, Daisy is dependent on men to make her key decisions for her (133, 151): secure in and yet remote from male ownership and ardor, "making only a polite, pleasant effort to entertain or to be entertained" (12-13), she radiates a carefully girlish charm of irrationality and whimsy: "Do you want to hear about the butler's nose?" (14). Woman, it appears, is presented only as romance, in the restless world of glamour where there are only the pursued and the pursuing. As the flip side to such narrow pedestalization, an implicit morosity appoints Daisy as the traitor to Gatsby's ideal and as the killer of Myrtle who won't even stop the car; but "dishonesty in a woman is something you never blame deeply" (59).

Gatsby's women are primarily young women, who, "slenderly, languidly, their hands set on their hips," precede us onto rosy-colored porches for candlelit dinners, and correlative with this perspective of pursuit goes a certain recurrent antipathy to domesticity and motherhood. The over-enlarged photo of "a hen sitting on a rock" in Myrtle's apartment turns out to be "a stout old lady beaming down": Myrtle's mother, who "hovered like an ectoplasm on the wall" (29). The glowing sunshine on Daisy's face "deserted her with lingering regret, like children leaving a pleasant street at dusk" (14). Long Island Sound, no sooner than described as "the most *domesticated* body of salt water in the Western hemisphere," becomes a "great wet barnyard" (5; emphasis added). The final curse on poverty is that "the poor get — children" (96). The perspective typifies, in fact, the revolt of the 1920s modernists against the Victorian matriarch and her moralistic middle-class values, positing Daisy's slenderness against Myrtle's plumpness: as Ann Douglas explains, "The 1920s put the body type of the stout and full-figured matron decisively out of fashion" (8).

Yet if domesticity is a joke and motherhood a curse, the immense pressures of a competitive, performance-oriented culture secretly reinstate the reverse valorization: driving the narrative of *Gatsby* is not only a rapacity that would part delectable young women from respectable mothers but a subconscious maternal yearning that would reinsert a mother within the mistress. On the dustjacket on which Fitzgerald had insisted for *Gatsby*, a pair of sorrowing beautiful eyes, presiding above orgiastic neon, bears a foetus. And in this novel, high above the urgent, suave contestings, like an adult far removed from the fevers of sibling rivalry, a craved symbolic *mother*, strikingly absent in a world only of belles, haunts the upreachings of the narrative: sanctuary of security as the bestower of an *unconditional* love. Truest intimacy with Daisy is evoked not through orchids, ballroom, or kiss but through a "maternal" relation, a binding, protective gentleness: "she used to sit on the sand with his head in her lap by the hour, rubbing her fingers over his eyes and looking at him with unfathomable delight. It was touching to see them together — it made you laugh in a hushed, fascinated way" (78). Of Daisy and Gatsby, Nick writes, "They had never been closer in their month of love, nor communicated more profoundly one with another, than when she brushed silent lips against his coat's shoulder, or when he touched the end of her fingers, gently, as though she were asleep" (150). *Gatsby*, we recall, has no mother.

In a defining gesture, echoed in the book's closing lines, Gatsby stretches out his arms, "in a curious way" (21), towards the symbol of Daisy, just as Daisy holds out her arms to her child ("Come to your own mother that loves you"), who rushes across the room to "root" into her dress (116). But Daisy, traitor to the Dream, proves a negligent mother; and Myrtle, whose cheapness can only parody the Dream and motherhood, dies with her breast torn loose and "swinging . . . like a flap" (138). The feeding breast surfaces and fails, like "the fresh, green breast of the new world" revealed to the Dutch seamen, and like that where Gatsby "could suck on the pap of life, gulp down the incomparable milk of wonder" (112).

Fitzgerald's girls offer, as their profoundest appeal, a sense less of glamour and conquest in the "restless" world of conditional status than of its veritable

cancellation: some dim, deep fullness of peace in release from competition, in transcendence of performance. Nick, fantasizing about romantic women on the streets of New York, longs not for reciprocated flirtation, elegant partying or boisterous carnality but rather to “fade” with them “into warm darkness” (57). His aspiration arcs backwards, yearns from the stresses of the *Dream* to the stasis of the *womb*. For that haunting womb is the safe antithesis of action: Gatsby’s pursuit of Daisy had “delivered [him] suddenly from the womb of his purposeless splendour” into a restlessness that would destroy him (79). And his loss of her is rearticulated in terms suggestive of an expulsion from the womb: “he must have felt he had lost the old warm world. . . . [H]e must have shivered as he found what a grotesque thing a rose is and how raw the sunlight was upon the scarcely created grass” (162).

The Fitzgerald belle thus appeals to the hero through containing in her slender person a significant optative contradiction, a structure of paradox that parallels the self-abrogating logic of the fast eroding work ethic. As potential grand-prizewinner’s trophy, she motivates intense competitive performance and pursuit, yet she parallels too the motivation of alienated labor whose hope is to work sufficiently hard to need never work again. As thus a kind of self-negating telos, female glamour, like the glamour of the leisure class that re-energizes the work-ethic, induces a self-activation whose end is the bliss of inaction. For when “won,” woman annuls that old agonistic order, displacing it in a maternal, “suckling” or womb-like condition of blissful inaction, self-loss in ease and union. In the last analysis, then, woman haunts the novel as the lost and craved womb: refuge from economic injustice and political tension, solace of quietistic individualism. Ascending from the seductive to the maternal, she confers sublimity upon opting out.

We have seen so far how a “progressive” Fitzgerald who unmasks the mendacity of an economy that seemed in crisis in the very early twenties, impeding the very aspirations it instilled, then apparently declares for conservative quietism. Climaxing his book in a classic declamation of anti-Jeffersonian paralysis and defeatism, he seeks antidote to competitive fevers in the purely personal sanctuary of maternal, unconditional love. But though Daisy may have *seemed* “safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor” (150), and the riotous super-rich invulnerable, as they “smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness” (180), the early postwar years were stamped by rebellions all over the world (Russia, Ireland, Egypt, India, Korea); and *The Nation* could comment in 1919, “The common man . . . losing faith in the old leadership, has experienced a new access of self-confidence, or at least a new recklessness” (quoted in Zinn 371). Wave after wave of mass strikes hit Washington, Seattle, Pennsylvania, Chicago, Boston, New Jersey, and New York (368-73), and in 1922 — the year that Nick comes East — a US Senator, visiting striking miners and railroad workers, reported: “All day long I have listened to heartrending stories of women evicted from their homes by the coal companies. I heard pitiful pleas of little children crying for bread. I stood aghast as I heard most amazing stories from men brutally beaten by private policemen. It has been a shocking and nerve-racking experience” (quoted in

Zinn 376). Eugene Debs, socialist candidate for President, had garnered almost a million votes in 1912, and only police beatings and jailings were now breaking up the “Wobblies” (see McClellan 316; and Zinn 370, 376-7). Fitzgerald felt some sympathy with the plight of the poor and called himself a socialist in the twenties. He intended to make Dick Diver a communist when he projected *Tender Is The Night* (Brucoli 407). When later he read Marx and annotated *The Communist Manifesto*, he noted of his novels, in contrast with those of D. H. Lawrence, “I am essentially Marxian,” since he felt himself to perceive and present society in substantially class terms (quoted in Sklar 325). Yet when he wrote, in 1934, “I’ve given up politics. For two years I’ve gone haywire in trying to reconcile my double-allegiance to the class I am part of, and the Great Change I believe in” (quoted in Brucoli 408), it is hard to believe that, caught between his conscience and his aestheticism, he could ever have chosen differently. Seduced by the intensity of leisure-class glamour from principled progressive alignment, Fitzgerald had always been committed to the priorities of individualist fulfillment; and his attitude toward the proletariat was mingled, I suggest, with definite fear of insurrection, as *Gatsby* makes clear. A pervasive unease toward the lower classes in the novel climaxes in a literally unthinkable scene of horror.

Servants, we note, while being deferential to the rich (the smooth butlers who draw Tom to the telephone and Jordan to *Gatsby* in his library), supplying them with humorous material (the butler’s/chauffeur’s nose), and proving a snobbish delight to derogate (“Myrtle raised her eyebrows in despair at the shiftlessness of the lower orders” [32]), are shown also to lack morality: one recalls the caddy who retracts his statement implicating Jordan (58), the butler complicit in Tom’s adultery (whispering in his ear [14]), and the waiter, “a funny look” on his face, who faithfully delivers Rosy Rosenthal the message that draws him to slaughter (71). When the novel’s priceless Golden Girl has become a murderer hiding behind a lie, Fitzgerald proletarianizes the setting of our last glimpse of her. As *Gatsby* holds his sacred “vigil” outside in the summer night, Nick peers through the window of the pantry, to find Daisy and Tom sitting at a kitchen table, “with a plate of cold fried chicken between them, and two bottles of ale” (146).

To the middle classes, the lower class is snappy (“Keep your hands off the lever!” [38]), alien (Nick’s domestic “made my bed and cooked breakfast and muttered Finnish wisdom to herself over the electric stove” [3]), and a source of intelligence: “My Finn informed me that *Gatsby* had dismissed every servant in his house and replaced them with . . . others, who never went into West Egg Village to be bribed by the tradesmen” (113). For in a key structural paradox, the working classes are simultaneously marginal and central — inescapably, unavoidably in our constant midst. Ever a kind of black hole for Fitzgerald, lightless and spectral, the lifestyle of the poor is an unreal world, aptly depicted in the Valley of the Ashes as a phantasmagoric wasteland, “contiguous to absolutely nothing” (24). The emphasis reminds us of the former West Egg inhabitants, led “along a short-cut from nothing to nothing” (108). Wilson, proletarian, veiled in white ash, characteristically “mingles immediately with the cement color of the walls” (26). It is his duty, as it were, to become

invisible, like the servants at Gatsby's parties where apparently "a tray of cocktails float[s] . . . through the twilight" (43), or a guest "seizes a cocktail out of the air" (41). In the same spirit of contemptuous eclipse, Jordan drives so close to "some workman" that her fender flicks a button on his coat, without apology or concern (59). Yet if discontinuous and insubstantial, the workers are also a vital ground even of the aesthetic: "On Mondays eight servants, including an extra gardener, toiled all day with mops and scrubbing brushes and hammers and garden shears, repairing the ravages of the night before. . . . At least once a fortnight a corps of caterers came down with several hundred feet of canvas" (39). In an appropriately industrial image, "There was a machine in the kitchen which could extract the juice of two hundred oranges in half an hour if a little button was pressed two hundred times by a butler's thumb" (39). From an underworld of concealed proletarian energy arises the caravansary of glamour — even "the premature moon" is "produced like the supper, no doubt, out of a caterer's basket" (43). Ideally invisible yet structurally indispensable, the very incarnation of demystification, the proletariat stirs fear and offense in the instance of a "too *obtrusive* fate" (108), as when its "world, material without being real, where poor ghosts, breathing dreams like air, drifted fortuitously about," comes calling at the mansion of the rich, "like that ashen, fantastic figure gliding toward him through the amorphous trees" (162). The ensuing climactic action — Gatsby's presumable alarm, the raised gun, the expression, the aim, the shot — is denied enactment in the narrative: perhaps it is literally unfocusable for Fitzgerald's mind, since the text does not even refer to that ashen figure's weapon. Like an eruption from the tormented political unconscious, the very embodiment of proletarian suffering has come for rough justice to the enchanted blue lawns, and from the "holocaust" (163) wrought by that "unreal" world, the novel averts its gaze.

Fatalistically presented hitherto as unbeatable, the status quo now plunges into a final tension, unassailable yet imperilled, absolute but eliminable ("He was crazy enough to kill me if I hadn't told him. . . . His hand was on a revolver in his pocket every minute he was in the house" [180]). The identification of the working class as kind of spectral enemy goes deep for Fitzgerald, for the identical conjunction recurs in *The Last Tycoon*, where once again the destructive alliance of a philistine millionaire with proletarian insurrection sends to his doom the Fitzgerald hero — a personification of a shining beauty distilled from personal riches. In this final reflex of conservative reaction, Fitzgerald's response to the poverty and frustration that his novel exposed so clearly has been to blame the victim. ("It's essentially cleaner to be corrupt and rich than it is to be innocent and poor," insists Amory Blaine in *This Side of Paradise* [230]). Temperamentally incapable of identification with the poor because of their unpoetical indigence, the surreal aesthetic destitution imposed by poverty, Fitzgerald sides, to the end, with the exploitative, privileged magic of a glamour whose conditions he had so lucidly demystified.

Notes

1. See Trilling; Piper; Bewley; and Raleigh.
2. Also quoted ironically by Fitzgerald, "Echoes" 19.
3. On commodity fetishism in *Gatsby*, whereby "[t]hings, not human beings, seem to possess a nearly magical power of legitimation" and dominate consciousness, see Posnock 205-9.
4. Judith Fetterley puts the point well: "Daisy is that which money exists to buy. . . . Thus, women, who have themselves no actual power, become symbolic of the power of moneyed men" (75, 83). Fetterley's is a fine interpretation of Fitzgerald's misogyny and the double standard scapegoating Daisy. But Fetterley ignores class relations (curiously able thus to see Myrtle as achieving "final transcendence" [91]) and conceives *Gatsby's*/Fitzgerald's "investment" in the Daisy figure almost timelessly, as self-regarding male "romanticism," rather than defining the broad philosophic and contemporary economic contexts by which Daisy is constructed to figure and to fail as the bearer of the ideal.

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