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Author(s): John Rohrkemper

Source: *College Literature*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (Spring, 1985), pp. 153-162

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25111658>

Accessed: 30-05-2016 22:26 UTC

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# THE ALLUSIVE PAST: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE IN *THE GREAT GATSBY*

by John Rohrkemper

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He talked a lot about the past, and I gathered that he wanted to recover something, some idea of himself, perhaps, that had gone into loving Daisy. His life had been confused and disordered since then, but if he could once return to a certain starting place and go over it slowly, he could find out what that thing was . . . .<sup>1</sup>

This epigraph from *The Great Gatsby* not only suggests a Gatsby who is an idealistic dreamer, who, like the country he represents within the novel, is a boat “against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past” (180), but it also suggests Fitzgerald’s aim in writing the novel: to explore America’s past, to recover some idea of ourselves as a people, to look to a starting place and “find out what that thing was” that was America. The result is perhaps the richest meditation on American history to appear in our fiction, a “history of the human imagination in the New World,” according to Edwin Fussell.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, Fitzgerald does not cast his meditation in the form of a traditional historical novel—a possibility which he had considered;<sup>3</sup> rather, he achieves a more powerful effect by rooting the novel solidly in the immediate present and juxtaposing that corrupted present with the luminous possibilities of a rapidly receding past by means of a number of evocative allusions to those earlier times.

Partially because of this method, and the subtlety with which Fitzgerald employed it, many early readers of the novel missed completely its historical significance. The novel had lackluster sales and reviews were mixed. While

it received some of the most favorable reviews Fitzgerald was ever to receive, many reviewers were less than convinced of its merits. The reviewer for the *New York World* called *The Great Gatsby* "another one of a thousand modern novels which must be approached with the point of view of the average tired person toward the movie around the corner."<sup>4</sup> This dismissal of the novel as so much popular ephemera suggests the tone of many of the reviews. Mary Orvis, in the *Indianapolis News*, called it "a jazz novel in every sense of the word: confusion, harsh screaming sounds jumbled together."<sup>5</sup> Another reviewer branded *Gatsby* as "decidedly contemporary. Today it is here, tomorrow—well, there will be no tomorrow. It is only as permanent as a newspaper story."<sup>6</sup> All such views were succinctly summarized by H. L. Mencken writing in the *Baltimore Evening Sun*. While he thought the writing in general fine, he found the novel to be "basic triviality . . . Does not go below the surface."<sup>7</sup>

It hardly seems possible that these reviewers are speaking of the same book which we read, teach, reread, and speak and write of endlessly. But, if they are at fault for underestimating the novel, perhaps Fitzgerald must shoulder some of the blame. His three previous books—particularly the novel *This Side of Paradise*, but to a lesser extent *Flappers and Philosophers* and *The Beautiful and Damned* as well—were in many ways decidedly contemporary. Early in his career Fitzgerald did not decline the mantle of Spokesman of the Jazz Age. It is understandable how, on first reading, the reviewers could see in the "yellow cocktail music," the "confident girls who weave here and there among the stouter and more stable," the quart bottles wrapped in towels, the shiny coupes and ostentatious mansions of the tennis and polo set—could see in them nothing more than the shimmering surface of the Jazz Age. Fitzgerald, however, thought that he had done something more in this novel and continued to believe till his death that it was his most important and substantial work.

He also felt that the novel revealed something of particular importance about the American character and the American predicament. It is telling that Fitzgerald, who had great difficulty in deciding on a title for the work and had a number of working titles, finally and enthusiastically chose *Under the Red, White, and Blue*. Much to his dismay, however, production of the book had already begun and he was obliged to stay with *The Great Gatsby*, a title with which he never was satisfied.<sup>8</sup> The novel did not satiate his appetite for exploring the American character. His later work often returns to the theme, especially *Tender Is the Night* in which Dick Diver's distinctive Americanness is repeatedly remarked upon and on several occasions

analyzed. Nowhere is Fitzgerald more concerned with the mythic dimensions of America's past, however, than he is in *The Great Gatsby*.

More than anything else, it is Fitzgerald's use of historical allusion which gives *The Great Gatsby* its delicate weight, its buoyant profundity, and this seems to be precisely what many of the first readers of the novel missed. It is also what elevates the novel above a story such as "Winter Dreams" which Fitzgerald called "a sort of first draft of the *Gatsby* idea." "Winter Dreams" is the story of the idealized love of a young man for a dazzling and coquettish young woman, a love inextricably tied to a class difference which the young man perceives as a boy and which, it is suggested, is a driving force in his rise to wealth. In this story we hear clear echoes of the Gatsby-Daisy relationship, but it never goes beyond the relatively simple symbiosis of love and wealth. It is clearly only the "rough draft" of the idea which was to be more fully and complexly explored in *The Great Gatsby*, for in that novel he was to fuse one man's longings with the aspirations of a people, to tie one man's personal history to the history of his culture.

Historical references abound in the novel, from the famous conclusion in which Nick imagines the Dutch sailors who, upon first catching sight of "the fresh green breast of the new world," are "face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate with [man's] sense of wonder" (182), to the more recent Black Sox scandal in which the 1919 World Series was fixed—in *Gatsby* by Meyer Wolfsheim. The East-West, West-East movements of the novel remind one, perhaps, of Horace Greeley's advice and possibly also Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Thesis." There are references to actual heroes of America (Columbus) and dubious ones (John D. Rockefeller) and mythical ones (Hopalong Cassidy) as well. All such allusions resonate through the narrative, but there are others which more than merely resonate; they are central to helping us solve the riddle of the book—the riddle of Gatsby's identity.

About half-way through the novel, pieces of the Gatsby puzzle begin to fall into place for the narrator (Nick Carraway) and the reader. We learn that this mysterious man, variously rumored to be the nephew or cousin of Kaiser Wilhelm (33), a murderer (44), a German spy (44), an Oxford man (49), and the nephew of Baron von Hindenburg (61), is at the same time both less and more romantic than all the speculation about him. He is his own creation, the Platonic conception of himself, the romantic notion of who he should be. We are told that the moment of self-creation coincides with his meeting of and apprenticeship to the millionaire adventurer Dan Cody, whose name is a fusion of two more American heroes, Daniel Boone

and Buffalo Bill Cody. The linking of these two figures in the name of Gatsby's mentor suggests the thematic technique of *The Great Gatsby*.

Both Boone and Cody are westerners, icons of the American pioneer experience, of rugged individualism, of faith in manifest destiny. One, however, is the authentic hero, the explorer opening the wilderness, the founder establishing the communities in which the American dream might be realized. The other is the exploiter of the dream, who, whatever his accomplishments, capitalized on the western myth and created a parody of it, one who became, himself, a parody of the heroic pathfinder. Boone and Cody also play out the East-West, West-East pattern of the novel, one pushing Euro-American civilization west, the other doubling back, bringing the west—or at least a theatrical version of it—to the East. It comes back badly tarnished. Nick, seeing a portrait of Dan Cody in Gatsby's bedroom, describes him as “a gray, florid man with a hard, empty face—the pioneer debauchee, who during one phase of American life brought back to the Eastern seaboard the savage violence of the frontier brothel and saloon” (101). Thus, Dan Cody, in some ways like Buffalo Bill Cody, brings back not the essential courage and decency of the westward pioneers, but the superficial, or, in the case of Gatsby's mentor, the corrupted elements of westward expansion. The figure of Daniel Boone de-evolved to Buffalo Bill Cody as embodied in Dan Cody suggests the pattern Fitzgerald employs in his examination of America past and present: first, it will be based in allusion; second, the allusions will suggest a diminishment, a loss of the idealism, courage, and valor of an earlier America, which are exchanged for the pursuit of material wealth.

One of the most important historical allusions in the novel is to Benjamin Franklin.<sup>10</sup> When Mr. Gatz arrives for his son's funeral he shows Nick the battered copy of *Hopalong Cassidy* which he takes as prophetic of young James Gatz's inevitable success. On the back cover the boy had written:

Rise from bed . . . . .	6:00 A.M.
Dumbbell exercises and wall-scaling . . . . .	6:15-6:30 A.M.
Study electricity, etc. . . . .	7:15-8:15 A.M.
Work . . . . .	8:30-4:30 P.M.
Baseball and sports . . . . .	4:30-5:00 P.M.
Practice elocution, poise, and how to attain it . . . . .	5:00-6:00 P.M.
Study needed inventions . . . . .	7:00-9:00 P.M.

#### GENERAL RESOLVES

No wasting time at Shafters or [a name indecipherable]  
 No more smoking or chewing.  
 Bath every other day

Read one improving book or magazine per week  
Save \$5.00 [crossed out] \$3.00 per week  
Be better to parents (174)

Mr. Gatz, repeating "It just shows you," takes the plan as evidence that his son's success was assured, that from the beginning his boy was destined for great things.

Both the schedule and the list of resolves call to mind, of course, the plan for moral perfection which Franklin had practiced as a young man and which he included at the heart of his *Autobiography*. Fitzgerald obviously wishes to make the comparison between Franklin and Gatsby and their "plans." This is particularly suggested by the inclusion of a number of points from young Gatz's list: the emphasis on studying electricity and inventions, for instance, and the resolves to practice frugality, industry, and even cleanliness which are taken almost directly from Franklin's plan. But, if Franklin can be faulted, as he often has, for a simplistic and mechanical concept of the elements of moral perfection, his plan seems complex and sophisticated in comparison with the literal-minded plan of the young Gatz who apparently cannot make the leap from the specific to the general, who lacks the cognitive or philosophical sophistication of the young Franklin. Thus Franklin's efforts to practice cleanliness ("Tolerate no uncleanness in body, clothes, or habitation.") becomes "Bath every other day"; Franklin's resolve to practice industry ("Lose no time. Be always employed in something useful. Cut off all unnecessary actions.") becomes "No wasting time at Shafter's or [a name indecipherable]"; his injunction to himself to be just ("Wrong none by doing injuries or omitting the benefits that are your duty.") is reduced to simply "Be better to parents."<sup>11</sup>

Most significantly, Gatsby's plan, unlike Franklin's, makes no mention of moral improvement; his goal appears never to be more than success—material success. Fitzgerald seems to suggest throughout the novel that, in pursuit of our dreams, we have abandoned that element which connects them with the larger dream, that identifies them with the strivings of mankind, that gives them a grandeur larger than personal success or glory. Gatsby is as much the progeny of Franklin as he is of his biological father, but his inheritance has been impoverished over the generations. The twentieth-century Franklin is but the husk of the original. Gatsby dreams as does Franklin, and he achieves a kind of success, but he ultimately lacks an overreaching vision, lacks a sense of his moral responsibility to the world, lacks a moral base. He is like Buffalo Bill, a modern incarnation of an earlier hero, but one with only a superficial resemblance, one without a stable

moral core, one who suggests just how far we have been borne back against the current.

The spirit of Franklin informs the novel in another important way as well. While a number of critics have noted the importance of Franklin's and Gatsby's plans to achieve the elusive American Dream, none has adequately examined the role of the city in each man's dream. For Franklin might be considered our first important urbanist. As a merchant he of course valued and used the urban economy, but he also was our first important urban planner, founder of Philadelphia's first lending library, fire department, and university; designer of city streets and plans for cleaning and lighting them. If Franklin's prescription for success was shrewdness, hard work, and luck, the locus of success was, for him, distinctly urban.

And it is of course to the city, *the* city that Gatsby comes, but his New York is not like Franklin's Philadelphia. This is not the city which gave voice to American dreams of freedom and independence. This is, instead, the city in which Tom Buchanan can, almost nonchalantly, smash the nose of his mistress. This is the city which Nick would like to believe holds all the promise of the dream. As he enters the city with Gatsby one day, he marvels at the vision before him:

The city seen from the Queensboro Bridge is the city seen for the first time, in its first wild promise of all the mystery and all the beauty in the world . . . . Anything can happen . . . anything at all. (69)

But immediately after crossing that bridge Nick encounters Gatsby's New York, the haunt of Meyer Wolfsheim, whose cuff links made of human teeth mark him as a predator in an urban jungle. When Nick learns that this is the man who fixed the World Series he remarks: "It never occurred to me that one man could start to play with the faith of fifty million people—with the single-mindedness of a burglar blowing a safe" (74). New York is not the city of dreams which Nick at first imagined it to be. The city does not fulfill dreams; the city subverts dreams; and its inhabitants—Gatsby no less than Wolfsheim—are agents of that subversion. We see in Gatsby a perversion of the hardheaded but fair-minded pragmatism of Franklin; we see in Gatsby's city a corruption of Franklin's vision of the city of opportunity. Indeed, it is more like the city envisioned by another founding father and mythic American, Thomas Jefferson.

In fact, if we are to measure Jay Gatsby against the ideal of Benjamin Franklin, we also are invited to compare him with Jefferson as well. Fitzgerald considered Jefferson essential to what he called "the great American line: Washington-Jefferson-Jackson-Lincoln."<sup>12</sup> Certainly he shared Jef-

erson's idealism, his sense of the wonder of the world, his belief in the nobility of the word. Thus, it is understandable that he would allude to Jefferson in his meditation on the American experience. At the beginning of the second chapter we are introduced to "a certain desolate area of land . . . a valley of ashes" (22). Presiding over this wasteland, in fading paint on a weathered billboard, are the eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg which "dimmed a little by many countless days under sun and rain, brood on over the solemn dumping ground" (23). Lottie Crim and Neal B. Houston have pointed out the doctor's name might be taken from two German words: *ekel*, meaning loathsome, and *burg*, meaning town.<sup>13</sup> John H. Kuhnle has taken this a step further to suggest that the doctor's initials are meant to evoke Thomas Jefferson. Thus, Dr. T. J. Eckleburg becomes an anagram for "Dr. Thomas Jefferson's Disgusting City."<sup>14</sup> Such speculation might not be as far-fetched as it at first seems, if we consider how much of Jeffersonian thought, how much of his understanding of the American dream, is implicit in Fitzgerald's narrative.

Jefferson, of course, saw the locus of the dream very differently from Franklin; his was an agrarian dream, precisely the dream on which James Gatz turns his back. And the valley of ashes, itself, obviously inspired in part at least by Eliot's *Waste Land*, is not a corrupted Eden as in much of the wasteland imagery of Fitzgerald's contemporaries. It is clearly a farm, a "fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills" (23). For Jefferson, the farm and the farming life were the ideals upon which a great republic would be founded, and the husbandman, Jefferson's yeoman farmer, was the ideal man, for

those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue. It is the focus on which he keeps alive the sacred fire, which otherwise might escape from the face of the earth. Corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a phaenomenon of which no age nor nation has furnished an example.

Conversely, Jefferson felt that abandonment of the agrarian ideal inevitably led to corruption:

Dependence begets subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition. This, the natural process and consequence of the arts, has sometimes perhaps been retarded by accidental circumstances: but, generally speaking, the proportion which the aggregate of the other classes of citizen bears in any state to that of its husbandmen, is the proportion of its unsound to its healthy parts, and is a good enough barometer whereby to measure its degree of corruption.<sup>15</sup>



All the major characters of *The Great Gatsby* are dependent in the Jeffersonian sense. Nick has left the fertile plains to become a bond salesman, an occupation which produces no tangible goods, which usually does not even allow the salesman to see the pieces of paper symbolic of transferred wealth. Tom and Daisy are financially independent, but, in fact, are totally dependent on the labor of others. Perhaps only Gatsby himself among the major characters produces anything tangible, but, again, his is a corrupt and illegal harvest. The one true husbandman in the novel is Gatsby's father, whom we meet at his son's funeral, but he too is a victim of the "subservience and venality" which has come to infest even Jefferson's favored class. Fitzgerald seems to suggest that in twentieth-century America Jefferson finally would be able to find an example of "corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators."

Such a corruption of his ideal man leads to other fissures in Jefferson's America. He saw his version of the American Dream as the best way to achieve and preserve the democratic ideal, but in *The Great Gatsby* that ideal is nearly impossible to find realized. Gatsby, himself, is driven to rise above and even (through the name change) deny his connection with the common man; Tom Buchanan piously spews forth his racist drivel; Gatsby chooses as his closest associate Meyer Wolfsheim, who shatters the faith of fifty million Americans who would be believers. Finally, tied both to his belief in agrariansim and the democratic ideal is Jefferson's deep-seated anti-materialism which is routed by Gatsby and the times in which he lives, by a culture which has chosen material wealth as a means to achieve its dream. Significantly, Fitzgerald had planned the novel—before he abandoned the structure of a more conventional historical narrative—to be set in the Gilded Age of post-Civil War America, the very period in which, as Henry Adams and lesser historians have noted, America embraced mammon, relinquishing its earlier idealism.<sup>16</sup> In the imagery of the valley of ashes, itself, and in Gatsby's fervent flight from the seminal concepts of Jeffersonian America, Fitzgerald seems to suggest that America has indeed become Thomas Jefferson's Disgusting City, and that the presiding spirit of Jefferson, no less than Franklin, has been corrupted in modern America.

While a number of readers of the novel have explored the significance of *either* the allusion to Franklin or to Jefferson, Fitzgerald's use of *both* is what gives *The Great Gatsby* its special historical resonance. By invoking Franklin, the pragmatic urbanist, and at the same time Jefferson, the agrarian idealist, Fitzgerald could revive a debate at the center of the American self-concept, a debate which is a central concern of the narrator, so re-

cently arrived from the midwestern plains to find work and adventure in America's city. Pragmatism and idealism; the city and the country: the poles between which America has had to set its point of balance, from the time of the Dutch sailors, to Gatsby's time, and even to this day. In Franklin and Jefferson we have men who represent the best of each position, who suggest that toward whichever pole we lean we can do so with confidence. In Gatsby, the novel's representative man, we see the impoverishment of both men's visions. As James Gatz he rejected Jefferson's vision; as Jay Gatsby he has played his part in the subversion of Franklin's vision. By linking Jefferson and Franklin with Gatsby, Fitzgerald suggests the tragedy of American history in the debasement of a wondrous dream, a dream vast enough to encompass the vision of both a Jefferson and a Franklin, but, unfortunately, not durable enough to withstand the Meyer Wolfsheims, the Tom Buchanans, the Dan Codys, even the Jay Gatsbys who would subvert it.

At their last meeting, Nick says to Gatsby, " 'They're a rotten crowd . . . You're worth the whole damn bunch put together.' " It was the only compliment Nick ever gave him, he tells us, because " 'I disapproved of him from beginning to end' " (154). These enigmatic and seemingly contradictory statements have caused much speculation and conjecture among readers of the novel. Certainly Nick, schooled by his father in moderation, would disapprove of Gatsby's excesses: his gaudy clothes, his flamboyant gestures; and he certainly would disapprove of the way Gatsby's monomania blinds him to the moral consequences of his illegal business affairs. Yet Nick, himself apparently unaware of the reason for his confused feelings toward Gatsby, seems to sense something in him of the "old unknown world," something from back "where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night" (182). What he probably senses is the presence of the very best of what America could offer to the restless dreamer: the shades of the Franklin and Jefferson to whom he has alluded—probably unknowingly—in his narrative. And it is this sense which creates in Nick an elegaic tone, which evokes for the reader a sense of tragedy. Without the Dutch sailors to whom Nick alludes at the end of the novel, without Daniel Boone, especially without Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, without all these shades hovering about Gatsby, the novel might be only "another one of a thousand modern novels," "confusing, harsh, screaming sounds jumbled together," "only as permanent as a newspaper story," or "basic triviality" as those early reviewers considered it. But with these informing motifs, *The Great Gatsby* takes its rightful place among a handful of works that might well be considered a Great American Novel,

since Fitzgerald's skillful use of historical allusion makes the novel both great and a remarkably penetrating portrait of America.

## NOTES

- 1 F. Scott Fitzgerald. *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Scribner's, 1925: 111-112.
- 2 Edwin Fussell. "Fitzgerald's Brave New World." *F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Arthur Mizener. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1963: 48.
- 3 Henry Dan Piper. *F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Critical Portrait*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965: 101.
- 4 Anon. "F. Scott Fitzgerald's Latest a Dud." *New York World* 12 April 1925: sec. 3, 7m.
- 5 Mary B. Orvis. "Much-Talked-of Novels." *Indianapolis News* 1 July 1925: 24.
- 6 Anon. "The Greatness of Gatsby." *Milwaukee Journal* 1 May 1925: 12.
- 7 H. L. Mencken. "As H. L. M. Sees It." *Baltimore Evening Sun* 2 May 1925: 9.
- 8 Matthew J. Brucolli. *Apparatus for F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby"*. Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 1974: 31-32.
- 9 Andrew Turnbull, ed. *The Letters of F. Scott Fitzgerald*. New York: Scribner's, 1963: 192.
- 10 Of particular interest to the exploration of the Gatsby-Franklin connection is Floyd C. Watkin's brief early piece, "Fitzgerald's Jay Gatz [sic] and Young Benjamin Franklin." *The New England Quarterly* 27 (1954): 249-252.
- 11 Russel B. Nye, ed. *Autobiography and Other Writings*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin/Riverside Press, 1958: 76-77.
- 12 Shiela Graham. *College of One*. New York: Viking, 1967: 106.
- 13 Lottie B. Crim and Neal B. Houston. "The Catalogue of Names in *The Great Gatsby*." *Research Studies* 36 (1968): 117.
- 14 John H. Kuhnle. "The Great Gatsby as Pastoral Elegy." *The Fitzgerald/Hemingway Annual, 1978*. Washington: NRC Microcard: 153.
- 15 Thomas Jefferson. *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Ed. William Peden. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1955: 164.
- 16 Piper, 101.