Title: A Gatsby for today: an enduringly relevant novel of acrid disillusion and resurgent hope
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SINCE IT WAS first published, in 1925, **The Great Gatsby** has established itself as an American classic--more tellingly, as a classic that people actually read, and love. There are some good reasons for this. Fitzgerald's novel is at once formally elegant and piercingly romantic in its expression--a compelling story, but one imbued with the features of legend. It goes off like a flashbulb, freezing a bold array of images on the retina; the fade is delicious, stirring. And then there is the beauty of the writing, the lyric thrill of the sentences. Here is Nick Carraway arriving for his first visit at the home of Daisy and Tom Buchanan:

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Their house was even more elaborate
than I expected, a cheerful red-and-white
Georgian Colonial mansion,
overlooking the bay. The lawn
started at the beach and ran toward
the front door for a quarter of a mile,
jumping over sun-dials and brick
walls and burning gardens--finally
when it reached the house drifting
up the side in bright vines as though
from the momentum of its run. The
front was broken by a line of French
windows, glowing now with reflected
gold and wide open to the warm
windy evening, and Tom Buchanan
in riding clothes was standing with
his legs apart on the front porch.
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Kinetic and sportive at first, the description comes to rest in a stationary-heraldic--image of power. This is a prose that has learned a few tricks from the movie camera.

But economy and stylistic grace, even when coupled with a good page-turning story, are not enough to ensure that a work will rise above seasonal excellence to become a classic. To attain that status a novel--or a work in any genre--must

perpetually renew its relevance for audiences. Some books must wait for changing cultural circumstances to give them point; they go in and out of print as the incalculable mood of the general readership dictates. Others, the true classics, survive the vagaries of the marketplace by tapping the stratum of the universal, embodying our essential dreams and conflicts.

Gatsby succeeds on these latter terms. If the novel is not universal in the Shakespearean or Dantean sense, it is nevertheless thoroughly and perfectly American, a pure distillation of our collective experience. But even as it endures as a classic, Gatsby is also able to manifest a particular immediacy at certain times. Just now, I would say, it has a special resonance. Indeed, it might well be a kind of breviary for the nineties, not only because it gives us portraits of our recent and current psychological climates, but also because it tells us something about who we are at a point when we very badly need to know.

There is, of course, the obvious relevance--Gatsby as a cautionary tale. The Jazz Age of Fitzgerald's 1920s corresponds in so many ways to our recent 1980s: the glitter and public strut of money, and the fiscal and moral leveraging that made it possible; the reckless rush away from the centers of gravity, and the sudden, terrible realization that gravity writes no exceptions--all this is in the book. The wild party and the hangover. We know it well: morning after in America. Like Nick at the outset of the story, we are waking up, slightly stunned, wondering what happened and what it means. Nick says, "When I came back from the East last autumn I felt that I wanted the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever; I wanted no more riotous excursions with privileged glimpses into the human heart."

Gatsby unfolds over the course of a long summer and follows the logic of a dream. One of the marvels of the book is the way in which the narration changes. Though Nick has alerted us in the first few pages to the crashing outcome, we forget. We forget because Nick forgets. His narration becomes fresh and expectant, untainted by hindsight. He is a young man gone east to make his way; he has rented a bungalow next to a fabulous manor house tenanted by a singularly mysterious character.

We first catch sight of our eponymous "hero" when Nick returns home from his dinner with the Buchanans. Nick is out breathing the night air when he realizes that he is not alone: "fifty feet away a figure had emerged from the shadow of my neighbor's mansion and was standing with his hands in his pockets regarding the silver pepper of the stars." He is about to call to the stranger, but when he observes that the man is fixated by a faraway gleam of green light, he desists. And then the man who will be Gatsby is gone.

The first encounter, then, is with the fundamental mystery of Jay Gatsby. And for a time the mystery only grows. Nick starts seeing more of the Buchanans, and begins to date Daisy's friend, the cool but companionable Jordan Baker. Then he goes to one of Gatsby's legendary parties, which are, he eventually learns, nothing more than shimmering nets thrown out in the hopes of snaring Gatsby's long-lost love, Daisy. We see Gatsby as Nick sees him, magnified and dazzling in the strobe lights of rumor. They say he is a German spy, a nephew of Kaiser Wilhelm, a killer. A killer ... against such opulence, the speculation about dark deeds is but a further exaltation of the image. The collective instinct is unerring: such a magnificent flower can only be sprung from an evil soil.

Gatsby is never more thrilling, more fantastic, than in those early, champagne-lit conjectures. Soon enough Nick will meet his neighbor and be drawn into his machinations. And though he will remain to the last an unknown quantity, Gatsby will slowly wither from episode to episode. After the mist of legend blows off, he becomes merely mysterious--a financier with peculiar connections, none more peculiar than his "gonnegtion" to Meyer Wolfsheim, the man who allegedly fixed the 1919 World Series. Then, when his quixotic obsession with Daisy is revealed, his mysteriousness is replaced by an aura of tragic pathos--Gatsby in love is as foolishly human as any of us.

Yet it is this love, the scale of it, that confers upon Gatsby whatever grandeur he finally possesses. Without it he is the Wizard of Oz--a behind-the-scenes operator with extensive ties to bootleggers and dubious financiers. When his dream of love is destroyed, he is nothing but his extravagant props--he is ready for George Wilson's bullet. In the end only his old father, Nick, and a few stragglers attend the funeral. And it is one of these stragglers, "the owl-eyed man," who gets the last word that day: "The poor son-of-a-bitch."

ON THE SURFACE, then, Fitzgerald has written a parable on the perennial American theme of outsized dreams and their bitter ruin. "I coulda been a contender," Brando says in On the Waterfront. In the last scene of Death of a Salesman, Charley sums things up for Biff: "Nobody dast blame this man. A salesman is got to dream, boy. It comes with the

territory." And on and on. We do not have to work very hard to connect Fitzgerald's vision with the narrative of public life in our era--our Wall Street pirates, our stumping politicians looking for the light in the distance as they kick up the dust around their own suspect doings. Self-making is a bloody business. And Nick's awakening--"I wanted the world to be ... at a sort of moral attention forever" --is ours.

But this parable of rise and fall, of magnificent mansions bought by dirty dealings, is not what determines Gatsby's greatness or its ultimate relevance. That is only part of the picture. Indeed, running behind or beneath the obvious legend is a secondary narrative, a narrative that is less about paying the piper than it is about dreaming. About the power of our expectations and our longings. And it is the vibration that is set up when this presses against the ostensible plot that makes Gatsby so galvanizing-and so American. To put it simply, the novel argues with itself, and does so just as we do in our own souls. It purports to speak of incidents and moral consequences, but underneath it is communicating something much more ambiguous and suggestive.

First the sober opening:

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In my younger and more vulnerable
years my father gave me some
advice that I've been turning over in
my mind ever since.

"Whenever you feel like criticizing
any one," he told me, "just remember
that all the people in this
world haven't had the advantages
you've had."
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Our narrator is going to give us a lesson, tell us a story about wising up--about coming to mature terms with human frailty. He is back from the East and Gatsby has fallen. But already by the fourth paragraph we sense that Nick is at odds with himself. Directly after his claim that he wants "no more riotous excursions with privileged glimpses into the human heart," he introduces the name of Gatsby--Gatsby, who "represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn,' but in whom Nick had found "an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which it is not likely I shall ever find again."

This ambivalence is never really resolved. There is the tale, and there is the teller. And time and again we are given clues that the teller, our collective mouthpiece, that stand-up decent fellow from the Midwest, does not quite believe the tale---certainly not the lesson it would impart. The language repeatedly gives him away. Shrewd and cynical as he can be when characterizing the Buchanans or Jordan, he cannot get the note of reverence out of his voice when he writes of Gatsby and his gaudy displays. Here he notes the preparations for another of Gatsby's parties: "On buffet tables, garnished with glistening hors-d'oeuvre, spiced baked hams crowded against salads of harlequin designs and pastry pigs and turkeys bewitched to a dark gold." The prose--glistening, harlequin, bewitched, dark gold is enraptured.

And the bacchanal itself? Again the tone and the rhythm inform on the observer:

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Laughter is easier minute by minute,
spilled with prodigality, tipped
out at a cheerful word. The groups
change more swiftly, swell with new
arrivals, dissolve and form in the
same breath; already there are wanderers,
confident girls who weave
here and there among the stouter
and more stable, become for a sharp,
joyous moment the center of a
group, and then, excited with triumph,
glide on through the seachange
of faces and voices and color
under the constantly changing light.

Suddenly one of these gypsies, in
trembling opal, seizes a cocktail out
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> of the air, dumps it down for courage
> and, moving her hands like Frisco,
> dances out alone on the canvas platform.

If Nick is a man remembering scenes of past extravagance--the fireworks before the fall--then he has clearly been seduced by the promise all over again; against this indrawn breath of excitement any sober rectitude must feel willed.

Even after Gatsby has fallen to earth, after the dark secrets have come out, the lessons been grudgingly learned, Nick sustains a wistful yearning that the sad facts cannot destroy. Back in the Midwest, having survived to tell the tale, he reflects:

> West Egg, especially, still figures in
> my more fantastic dreams. I see it as
> a night scene by El Greco: a hundred
> houses, at once conventional
> and grotesque, crouching under a
> sullen, overhanging sky and a lustre-less
> moon. In the foreground four
> solemn men in dress suits are walking
> along the sidewalk with a
> stretcher on which lies a drunken
> woman in a white evening dress.
> Her hand, which dangles over the
> side, sparkles cold with jewels.
> Gravely the men turn in at a house
> --the wrong house. But no one
> knows the woman's name, and no
> one cares.

It would be a despairing image, ought to be, except for the fascinated absorption of the narrating voice. Nick can't resist making his dream a tour de force, imparting to its staging a strange beauty.

None of this is incidental. Every cadenza, every perfectly orchestrated description, is part of the design, guiding the reader to the romantic surge of the book's final passages. These passages would surely strike us as excessive and overblown were they not most patiently prepared for. Step by step, mostly by way of the tone and the subliminal suggestiveness of the language, we have been made to recognize the true unconscious disposition of Nick's American soul. The man who began with both feet on the ground and his head screwed back on has unveiled the contrary side of his character. And it is the progress of this unveiling, its sudden final momentum, that imparts to Gatsby the magic of renewability.

The final passage is one of the best known in our literature, but I cite from it again.

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

    to his capacity for wonder.

And

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

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

This might well be the most lyrical patch of prose in our literature. Taken by itself it sounds florid, overwrought. There is only the last sentence, implacable beneath the lulling sway of its syllables, to mitigate the visionary excess. But encountering it as we do on the far side of Gatsby's exploded paradise, we are stirred at the deepest level. In a stroke Fitzgerald has forged the link between Gatsby's belief in love-the fabulous self-making enterprise it fostered--and the originating dream of the first European settlers. The mystery of this corrupt but also pathetic and forgivable man is seen as an attribute of something larger. As Nick says of Gatsby,

    He had come a long way to this blue
    lawn, and his dream must have
    seemed so close that he could hardly
    fail to grasp it. He did not know that
    it was already behind him, somewhere
    back in that vast obscurity beyond
    the city, where the dark fields
    of the republic rolled on under the
    night.

Nick has here restored to him the greatness of his desire. It is a desire that partakes of everything we feel when we consider our own fate, private and collective, under the larger dispensation, what the philosophers once called "the aspect of eternity." Insofar as we feel the inchoate promise of ourselves and our historical presence, we are joined to him.

"So we beat on ..." The boats are not defeated by the current--nothing so simple. They are "borne back ceaselessly into the past." And what is that past but the vision of those Dutch sailors, the imagining of a new history before which all other initiatives pale? If **The Great Gatsby** is indeed a cautionary tale, then it is really cautioning us against selling ourselves short, against turning in fear or disappointment from the lyrical call of our nature. Gatsby was not a fool for dreaming, only for not knowing how dreams intersect with realities.

Similarly, if Gatsby is a book for us today, it is not so in the obvious moralizing way. We are not asked to repudiate our more excessive selves. Rather, we are to recover in altered form something of the power of that intoxication, that amorous bent toward greater possibilities of feeling and action. Our basic excessiveness is not about greed or display, nor is it a frantic escape from the roll-call confinements of dailiness. It is a surviving trace of the awe that set everything into motion. And wounded and compromised as we may feel, there is a clue about renewal in that essential American image of dark fields rolling on under the night.

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