Fitzgerald and Cather: The Great Gatsby

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I

Shortly after The Great Gatsby was published in 1925, F. Scott Fitzgerald received a letter from Willa Cather complimenting him on his achievement. Fitzgerald was understandably excited about the letter, so much so that he woke up Christian Gause and his wife at one o'clock in the morning to celebrate. His behavior was extravagant, for Gause was a Dean at Princeton and much Fitzgerald's senior, but extravagant behavior was not unusual for Fitzgerald. Nevertheless, there is reason to suppose that the excitement Cather's letter generated in the young author was authentic and that it somehow verified his own ambitions for his new novel. For he had consciously striven to emulate Cather's literary technique; but, more importantly, she had exerted a greater influence upon him than even he seems to have realized, in matters of incident and story as well as style and technique.

Maxwell Geismar, in his book The Last of the provincials, was the first to suggest the influence of Cather upon The Great Gatsby. He perceived a similarity of theme and tone in the concluding passages

1 This letter is in "Scrapbook IV (The Great Gatsby)," p. 21, in the Firestone Library, Princeton University, and is dated 28 April 1925. Cather's letter was actually written in response to a letter from Fitzgerald in which he confessed to writing a passage in Gatsby that he thought reminiscent of a passage from A Lost Lady. Fitzgerald's letter is reprinted in Matthew Brucoli's "'An Instance of Apparent Plagiarism': F. Scott Fitzgerald, Willa Cather, and the First Gatsby Manuscript," Princeton University Library Chronicle 39 (1978), 171-78; stipulations in Cather's will prohibit quotation from her letter.


of *My Ántonia* and *Gatsby*. The novels bear a special similarity as well, he argued, in their first person narrators, Jim Burden and Nick Carraway, both of whom possess a remembered association with someone unique and unexampled yet who embodied something precious, if lost, “like the founders of the early races,” as Cather had phrased it.³

James E. Miller augmented and fortified the Cather/Fitzgerald connection considerably in his *The Fictional Technique of F. Scott Fitzgerald*. He suggested the possibility that Fitzgerald might have been acquainted with Cather’s essay “The Novel Démeublé,” in which Cather urged novelists to throw all of the furniture of fiction out the window; and, in contrast to Geismar, Miller speculated that Fitzgerald might have learned more about literary form from reading *A Lost Lady* (another first person narrative) than from *My Ántonia* because the first is more compact, less “furnished.” At any rate, Miller is surely correct in arguing that *Gatsby* represents Fitzgerald’s movement away from the heavily furnished novel of “saturation,” which swarms with detail, and toward the unfurnished, refined novel of “selection.” And *A Lost Lady* does display greater artistic restraint than *My Ántonia*. Miller further identified the nature of Cather’s influence on Fitzgerald as essentially one of technique, and especially that Fitzgerald learned from her a great deal about “point of view and about form and unity.”⁴

Henry Dan Piper went even further in arguing Cather’s influence on Fitzgerald when he contended that she was “almost as important as” Conrad in contributing inspiration to Fitzgerald’s developing literary craftsmanship. And he additionally speculated that the young author may have responded to Edmund Wilson’s review of *A Lost Lady* in January, 1924, in the *Dial*. There, Wilson had argued that that novel achieved its dramatic intensity through the skillful management of its first-person point of view. This review, Piper suggested, “may even have had something to do with Fitzgerald’s decision three months later to abandon the third-person approach to


his story.” But I would argue that Cather’s influence upon Fitzgerald was not restricted to matters of technique alone and that his affinity with her was even more extensive than Geismar, Miller, and Piper have suggested.

There is no doubt that Fitzgerald thought highly of Cather’s achievements (he identified himself in a letter to her as one of her “greatest admirers”), and her work was in his mind during and after the composition of *The Great Gatsby*. He was familiar enough with *A Lost Lady* (though he consistently misremembered the title as “*The Lost Lady*”) to recognize that he had written a paragraph in *Gatsby* that “strangely paralleled” a paragraph in that book and conscientious enough to write Cather directly before the publication of his novel and inform her of this accidental plagiarism. Additionally, in a letter to Charles C. Baldwin, again before the completion of *Gatsby*, he proudly announced that his book would be an “attempt at form,” an attempt “to convey the feel of scenes, places and people directly—as Conrad does, as few Americans (notably Willa Cather) are already trying to do.” After the publication of his novel, however, despite his conscious ambitions to write a novel of form rather than a rambling chronicle of the jazz age, Fitzgerald confessed to H. L. Mencken that his book was a “failure” compared to *My Ántonia* and *A Lost Lady*. This may or may not have been false modesty on Fitzgerald’s part; he had often bragged about his accomplishment in *Gatsby* and felt this book made him a novelist to be reckoned with. In fact, simply in terms of what he had attempted, a novel of form, he was probably correct in the comparison. Artistically, *A Lost Lady* is no doubt the better book—it is quiet and sure; its tone is steadier; its narrative persona more consistently drawn; it seldom yields to excitable variations of mood and tempo.

But, be that as it may, we know as well that Fitzgerald, while he recognized Cather as a fellow artist, equally recognized her as a fellow mid-Westerner. Somewhat mistakenly, however, he thought of her as a mid-Westerner whose pioneers were exclusively

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7 Quoted in Miller, pp. 73–74.
"Swedes." He may have had Cather in mind, in fact, and was distinguishing his experience from hers, when he had Nick recall his return trips with fellow students from Eastern schools at Christmas. When they saw and breathed once again the snow in the air, Nick recalls, we became "utterably aware of our identity with this country for one strange hour, before we melted indistinguishably into it again." "That's my Middle West—," says Nick, "not the wheat or the prairies or the lost Swede towns, but the thrilling returning trains of my youth, and the street lamps and sleigh bells in the frosty dark and the shadows of holly wreaths thrown by lighted windows on the snow. I am part of that." It is this reverie in the final chapter which triggers the recognition that his story has been a mid-Western one: "I see now that this has been a story of the West, after all—Tom and Gatsby, Daisy, Jordan and I were all Westerners, and perhaps we possessed some deficiency in common which made us subtly un-adaptable to Eastern life." And it is the "El Greco-like" "distortions" (pp. 177–78) he perceives in Eastern life which justify his return home after Gatsby's death.

Although My Ántonia and A Lost Lady are the only Cather novels Fitzgerald mentions in his letters, he showed a special respect for one of her short stories, "Paul's Case," when he wrote that that story alone was worth more than anything Dorothy Canfield had to say in her fiction and had claimed in his letter to Cather herself that it was one of his favorites. His mention of this story is suggestive because of certain similarities it has to Gatsby and its thematic similarity to one of Fitzgerald's own stories, "Absolution," which had been originally intended as a prologue to The Great Gatsby and which would fill in details about Gatsby's early life. Cather's story, as its subtitle, "A Study in Temperament," suggests, is clearly a case study.

It is the story of a young man living in Pittsburgh who leads two lives—a cramped, conventional one symbolized by the pictures of

9 Letter to Perkins, c. 1 June 1925. Letters, pp. 183–88. Fitzgerald provided Perkins with a "History of the Simple Inarticulate Farmer and His Hired Man Christy" in this letter. In his entry for 1918, he wrote: "Willa Cather turns him [the simple farmer] Swede." 1918 is the year of publication of My Ántonia, which does not deal with Swedes but Bohemians. Fitzgerald was probably thinking of O Pioneers! (1913), which does deal with Swedish farmers.


George Washington and John Calvin and the motto "Feed the Lambs" which hang above his bed, and the life of his romantic imagination which thrives when he is at work as an usher at Carnegie Hall. Paul takes his courage to deal with the first from his romantic convictions about the second. He dresses flamboyantly and is disdainful of the conventional expectations placed upon him by his father and his school. In one episode, Paul follows the theater performers to their hotel after the performance and allows his imagination to play upon the exotic possibilities that lay within. As he stood in the gravel drive in the rain, he looked up at "the orange glow of the windows above him. There it was, what he wanted—tangibly before him, like a fairy world of a Christmas pantomime"; but mocking spirits stood guard at the doors, and, as the rain beat in his face, "Paul wondered whether he were destined always to shiver in the black night outside, looking up at it."12

In a bold gesture, he steals three thousand dollars and travels to New York and lives in romantic splendor for a fortnight. His resources depleted and aware that his father is in New York looking for him, he opts to end his life rather than return to his home on Cordelia Street. Paul commits suicide by throwing himself in front of an onrushing train, and he drops back into the "immense design of things." Reminiscent as "Paul's Case" is of certain elements in Gatsby—Gatsby’s flamboyant dress, his romantic imagination, and his sacred, late night vigil in Chapter VII standing in a gravel drive in a pink rag of a suit, looking up at lighted windows—the emotional complex of boyhood, the imagined life which gives Paul courage, is closer to Fitzgerald’s story of Rudolph Miller, which he called "Absolution."13

"Absolution," too, deals with a young man caught between the conventional expectations of him and his own romantic imagination, represented by his undaunted double, who neither observes conven-

12 "Paul’s Case," in Youth and the Bright Medusa (New York: Random House, 1975), p. 189. "Paul’s Case" was first published in McClure’s and later collected in The Troll Garden (1905) and Youth and the Bright Medusa (1920). Since Fitzgerald mentions "Paul’s Case" and "Seduction," both of which are included in Youth and the Bright Medusa, in his letter to Cather as being his favorite stories by her, it is likely that he read the story in this last collection.

13 "Absolution" was first published in the American Mercury in June, 1924, pp. 136–51; it is reprinted in Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby: The Novel, the Critic, the Background, Henry Dan Piper, ed. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970), pp. 83–92.
tion nor is fearful of the consequences of his disregard. For Rudolph Miller, the imagined double has a name, Blatchford Sarnemington. Blatchford lives in "great, sweeping triumphs," but Rudolph is gnawed by conscience. And when he goes to his priest to admit that he had lied in confession, he is taken aback by Father Schwartz's rhapsodic speech about the seductive attractions of a gay world. The priest advises Rudolph to go to an amusement park, where "everything will twinkle." For Father Schwartz, like Rudolph, is attracted to the romantic world where "things go glimmering."

He eventually removed this episode from his novel and sold it separately as a short story, and in the novel he changed Rudolph's name to Jimmie Gatz and his alter ego's to Jay Gatsby, but the double life of his newly named character persisted. More than "Paul's Case," however, Cather's first novel, Alexander's Bridge, seems to have exerted the most suggestive influence upon Fitzgerald. The novel was serialized in McClure's under the title Alexander's Masquerade in 1912 and published as a book by Houghton Mifflin later the same year. It was well received and was reissued with an author's preface in 1922, at a time when Fitzgerald was contemplating the novel which would become The Great Gatsby.

As a first novel, Alexander's Bridge is understandably an apprentice piece in many ways—Cather herself was to claim her second novel, O Pioneers! (1913), her first spiritually and to confess that at the time of writing Alexander's Bridge she was too fascinated by the unfamiliar and unmindful of the richness of the subject matter closest to her—her native Nebraska.¹⁴

In any event, Alexander's Bridge is the story of a middle-aged engineer named Bartley Alexander whose worldly success and marital happiness are vaguely insufficient for him. Living in Boston, his supervision of the construction of a cantilever bridge in Canada requires him to travel to London periodically to reacquaint himself with British building codes. It is in London that he attends a play in which Hilda Burgoyne, his first love of several years before, stars. He re-kindles the flame against his better judgment, all the while recognizing that his marriage is the more valuable and durable rela-

tionship. But Bartley is not actually in love with Hilda so much as he is in love with a more youthful and vital image of himself which he perceives to be slipping away from him and which he seeks to recapture through her. Repeatedly he resolves to put an end to the affair, but he is so obsessed with this idea of himself that his resolution weakens and he travels to London to be with her.

Toward the end of the novel, Hilda's troupe travels to New York and they meet in an apartment which he keeps for business purposes. It is the distraction of Hilda which prevents Alexander from attending to a telegram from Canada concerning a structural problem with the bridge. A second telegram reaches him and he rushes to the construction site. The lower beams are showing strain, and Bartley immediately orders the workers off the bridge. But his commands come too late; the bridge collapses and Alexander drowns along with dozens of workers.

The novel is principally interesting in that it reveals Cather's persistent concern with the doubleness of personality, though with the Catherian technique as yet unrefined. In particular, her symbolism is too obvious and heavy-handed. The cantilever bridge is a conspicuous analogue for Bartley's mental state—just as Bartley's personality is described as possessing a "weak spot" where some day strain would tell,"¹⁵ so is there a structural defect in the bridge he is building. The strain is tested, of course, in his maintenance of two lives, the secure domestic one with his wife and the youthful, romantic one with Hilda. Bartley longs for the days when he had a "single purpose and a single heart" (p. 101), but in pursuing that dream in middle age he develops a "another nature," as if "a second man has been grafted into me," and "he is fighting for his life at the cost of mine" (p. 102). The cantilever bridge, stretched half-way across the river, is explicitly identified as symbolic of Alexander's passion, and the river beneath as "death, the only other thing as strong as love. Under the moon, under the cold, splendid stars, there were only those two things awake and sleepless; death and love, the rushing river and his burning heart" (p. 118).

The angles of this love triangle are roughly congruent with those in *Gatsby*, but the most suggestive similarities exist in a single passage

which identifies Alexander’s background and his developing desire to retrieve himself from the past through his passion for Hilda. He recognizes that he is afraid of the “dead calm of middle life which confronted him” (p. 38) and longs for the days when he felt his own “wild light-heartedness”:

Such hours were the only ones in which he could feel his own continuous identity—feel the boy he had been in the rough days of the old West, feel the youth who had worked his way across the ocean on a cattle-ship and gone to study in Paris without a dollar in his pocket. The man who sat in his offices in Boston was only a powerful machine. Under the activities of that machine the person who, in such moments as this, he felt to be himself, was fading and dying. He remembered how, when he was a little boy and his father called him in the morning, he used to leap from his bed into the full consciousness of himself. That consciousness was Life itself. Whatever took its place, action, reflection, the power of concentrated thought, were only functions of a mechanism useful to society; things that could be bought in the market. There was only one thing that had an absolute value for each individual, and it was just that original impulse, that internal heat, that feeling of one’s self in one’s own breast.

When Alexander walked back to his hotel, the red and green lights were blinking along the docks on the farther shore, and the soft white stars were shining in the wide sky above the river. (pp. 39–40)

The parallels between the lives of Gatsby and Alexander as they are revealed in this passage are rather obvious. Both characters come from provincial Western or mid-Western homes and had worked aboard ships. Both studied abroad—Alexander in Paris, Gatsby for a few months at Oxford. And both observe green lights across the water, which serve as emblems of that image of themselves which they attempt to retrieve through reviving a lost love. This last parallel is the most significant because it is the green light at the end of Daisy’s dock in East Egg which becomes the dominant symbol of Gatsby’s emotional complex. At the conclusion of Chapter I, Nick returns home in the evening and observes his mysterious neighbor “regarding the silver pepper of the stars.” He decides to call to him, but checks himself when he realizes Gatsby is content to be alone—“he stretched out his arms toward the dark water in a curious way, and, far as I was from him, I could have sworn he was trembling. Involuntarily I glanced seaward—and distinguished nothing except
a single green light” (pp. 21–22). And Fitzgerald returns to this image in the lyrical conclusion of the book when he has Nick sum up Gatsby’s motivation: “Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us” (p. 182).

The green light did not always occupy so central a position in the novel. Originally there were two lights at the end of Daisy’s dock and were meant simply to convey a certain romantic intimacy, for they were introduced in Chapter V when Daisy and Gatsby were reunited.16 Through revision, Fitzgerald made the image central to his novel. He made it the dominant image of the concluding paragraphs and introduced it into the final paragraph of Chapter I. It became a symbol to which Gatsby devoted the last ounce of his “romantic readiness,” “his extraordinary gift for hope.” Fitzgerald’s appropriation of this image and his transformation of it into a forceful symbol invites further speculation about how extensive the influence of Alexander’s Bridge was upon the author.

Gatsby enacts his own masquerade and, like Alexander, at odd moments the strain of his dual-life tells. Despite his “resourcefulness of movement,” Nick notices that Gatsby was “never quite still; there was always a tapping foot somewhere or the impatient opening and closing of a hand” (p. 64). There is also a fascinating division between Gatsby’s public personality and his private, sinister business dealings which Fitzgerald wisely decided to keep mysterious. Jay Gatsby, as opposed to Jimmie Gatz, is an invention which Nick says, “sprang from his Platonic conception of himself” (p. 99), and to this immutable conception, we are told, Gatsby was faithful to the end. His extravagant and obsessive designs to recapture Daisy’s love are vain attempts to “repeat the past,” an ambition to which Gatsby devotes all his energies.

Like Bartley Alexander, Gatsby pursues his own lost vitality and youth; Alexander is in his mid-forties, but Gatsby is much younger. He is, according to Nick, an “elegant young roughneck, a year or two over thirty” (p. 48). Yet when Maxwell Perkins, Fitzgerald’s editor, wrote the author after reading the manuscript, that Gatsby

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seemed to be a much "older man," Fitzgerald replied: "It seems of almost mystical significance to me that you thought he was older—the man I had in mind, half-unconsciously, was older." This discrepancy is not one of detail—what we know of Gatsby's background numerically tallies with his actual age—; it is rather a matter of the emotional quality of Gatsby's character. He is not so old as to possess Meyer Wolfheim's tired sentimentality, who excuses himself at the restaurant because he belongs to "another generation" (p. 73). But Gatsby is well into that "menacing" decade which Nick imagines for himself on his thirtieth birthday: "Thirty—the promise of a decade of loneliness, a thinning list of single men to know, a thinning briefcase of enthusiasm, thinning hair" (p. 136). Gatsby's enthusiasms already have thinned to one, his enthusiasm for Daisy.

Gatsby's obsessions are, as Nick speculates, with "some idea of himself": "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 all slowly, he could find out what that thing was" (pp. 111–12). That "thing," in fact, probably never existed for Gatsby (or for Jimmie Gatz for that matter). For Nick renders Gatsby's recollections of his love for Daisy five years before in such romantic and distorted detail that we immediately recognize the futility of his dreams. The moonlit "blocks of the sidewalk" in Daisy's hometown really formed a ladder to a "secret place above the trees" where, once climbed, Gatsby could "gulp down the incomparable milk of wonder" (p. 112). As he kissed Daisy that autumn evening in Louisville, he listened "for a moment longer to the tuning-fork that had been struck upon a star. Then he kissed her. At his lips' touch she blossomed for him like a flower and the incarnation was complete" (p. 112).

The "incarnation" of which Nick speaks, and which is unbelievable precisely to the degree that it is poetic, is that particularized moment, as it is sustained by memory, when Gatsby believed his own Platonic self had for an instant touched the earth; and it is that identity, which never actually existed, that he seeks and which is symbolized by the green light across the water. It is Gatsby's futile

dream which Fitzgerald explicitly identifies with the American Dream in the conclusion of the novel and which thus makes a mythical figure of his character:

I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors’ eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby’s house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder. (p. 182)

This is the age-old dream Gatsby seeks, but it is a vain striving: “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 the vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night” (p. 182).

These famous concluding passages of The Great Gatsby not only bear the weight of the novel and, in fact, transport Gatsby’s story into the realm of myth, but they had informed it as well. The final paragraphs grew out of a single lyrical sentence which Fitzgerald had originally used to conclude the first chapter. He crossed that sentence out, worked up the paragraphs, and placed them at the conclusion. In doing so, he introduced the green light which had before been confined to Chapter V, and then worked it into the concluding paragraph of Chapter I as well. Thus, he gave Gatsby’s yearnings a single and dramatic focus, for this green light, as symbol, is inextricably wed to Gatsby’s consciousness of it. Through revision, he made his small town boy from North Dakota a jaded and mysteriously sinister figure, for whom the world at large does not go “glimmering,” as it had in “Absolution,” but for whom a single and resolute purpose, existing in the free solution of his own imagined memory, of a possession five years past, is palpably located and symbolized in the green light at the end of Daisy’s dock.

Fitzgerald’s creative imagination, as Arthur Mizener has pointed out, was an instinctive rather than a calculating one. Despite his claims that he was attempting to write a novel of form, the author’s relation to his material in Gatsby was probably felt rather than dis-
cerned. Surely Maxwell Perkins must have been dismayed by the reply he received after he had written Fitzgerald commending him on his achievement with this novel and making a few suggestions: "You once told me you were not a natural writer," he wrote, "—my God! You have plainly mastered the craft, of course; but you needed far more than craftsmanship for this." Fitzgerald's response included a curious remark: "My first instinct after your letter was to let [Gatsby] go and have Tom Buchanan dominate the book . . . but Gatsby sticks in my heart." If we imagine what a small and trivial book his novel might have been with Tom Buchanan as the dominant character, we must realize how much we have to thank for Fitzgerald's "heart." But more than that, we can understand how, in his meticulous attention to individual sentences, his "craftsmanship," he was somehow blind to the larger successes of his novel except in the most instinctive way. This may help to explain why he might recognize a paragraph that "strangely paralleled" one of Cather's in A Lost Lady and, at the same time, to have failed to remember the title of that novel or to recognize the ultimately larger influences which "Paul's Case" and Alexander's Bridge had exerted upon him.

II

Willa Cather had written Fitzgerald of her admiration of Gatsby in the spring of 1925; the next fall she would begin to write what she ultimately considered her finest novel, Death Comes for the Archbishop (1927). It would be written, she would recall a few years later, in "the style of legend," the essence of which is to lightly "touch and pass on." Such a creative method would be a "kind of discipline," she wrote, "in these days when the 'situation' is made to count for so much in writing." It was this sort of artistic detachment which Cather had cultivated since the beginning of her career and which gave rise to some of her finest work. In part, her disparagement of Alexander's Bridge in the preface to the 1922 edition of the novel pro-

20 "On Death Comes for the Archbishop," an open letter to the editor of The Commonweal, 23 Nov. 1927; rpt. in Willa Cather on Writing, pp. 3-13.
ceeded from her belated recognition that she had relied too much upon "interesting" material and had tried to capitalize upon a situation. But, unlike Cather, the imaginative coherence Fitzgerald achieved in *The Great Gatsby* appears to have derived not from his detachment from but his involvement with his material. However much Fitzgerald may have learned from Cather about the writer's craft, however much *Alexander's Bridge* may or may not have contributed to his plot, one suspects that the real achievement of *Gatsby* had its sources in an intense emotional identification with both his main character and his narrator in a way that was but half-conscious. If Fitzgerald responded to *My Ántonia* and *A Lost Lady* professionally, he probably responded to *Alexander's Bridge* personally, for it identified an emotional complex he found sympathetic, one indeed that may have tallied with his own.

In the opening chapter of *The Great Gatsby*, Nick Carraway confesses to his burgeoning expectations for his new career in the East: I was going to "become again that most limited of all specialists, the 'well-rounded man.' This isn't just an epigram—life is much more successfully looked at from a single window, after all" (p. 4). His single window ambitions prove untenable, however; soon after his arrival in New York his life becomes entangled with the careless, careening lives of others. Dragged to a New York City apartment by Tom Buchanan, Nick, Tom, Myrtle Wilson, and the rest drink, argue, and lament through the afternoon and into twilight, and Nick reflects upon his unwilling association with this crowd: "Yet 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" (p. 36).

Casual observer and reluctant participant, Nick brings a double vision to the story he tells, at once diffuse and exact. It is a simultaneous vision which, much like a stereopticon, lifts its figures from the page precisely because the images don't quite jibe, but are, instead, flat and lifeless without this discrepancy. How close this sort of double consciousness is to Fitzgerald's very sane assessment of his own "crack up" in an essay by the same name. "The test of a first-rate intelligence," he wrote a decade after the publication of *Gatsby*, "is
the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function." Fitzgerald's quiet and lucid self-diagnosis is a complaint not of the loss of his intelligence but of his ability to function, his artistic edge.

While he was writing *The Great Gatsby*, however, he retained the ability to function though he divided himself by identifying with both the jaded and obsessive Gatsby and the dazzled Nick, full of "interior rules" yet awestruck by the variety of life. Thus divided, he would divide his sympathies. Fitzgerald had of course identified with Gatsby; he wrote John Peale Bishop that that character "started out as one man I knew and then changed into myself—the amalgam was never complete in my mind." But he was Nick Carraway, too. For he could well remember his own first reactions to New York as being one "up from the country gaping at the trained bears . . . I had come only to stare at the show . . . I took the style and glitter of New York even above its own valuation."

In nearly every line of the book there is a certain divided quality, not yet a "crack up" but a slight fissure that yields a pervasive emotional tension, a tension where someday strain would tell. "I had no girl whose disembodied face floated along the dark cornices and blinding signs" (p. 81), says Nick; and lacking Gatsby's obsession, he is left simply with dark cornices and blinding signs for which his "interior rules" are sorry equipment. The world goes "glimmering" for Nick, but it lacks focus. This paragraph is representative of such a tension, I think: "Again at eight o'clock, when the dark lanes of the Forties were five deep with throbbing taxicabs bound for the theater district, I felt a sinking in my heart. Forms leaned together in the taxis as they waited, and voices sang, and there was laughter from unheard jokes, and lighted cigarettes outlined unintelligible gestures inside. Imagining that I, too, was hurrying toward gayety and sharing their intimate excitement, I wished them well" (p. 57–58). Nick's despair and provincial magnanimity punctuate his description of this haunted scene of faceless forms—irregularly lighted

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and half heard—throbbed with excitement but stalled in traffic.

This is typical of the El Greco-like distortion that permeates the novel, "at once conventional and grotesque" (p. 178). And we find it everywhere in the book. In the photograph of Myrtle Wilson's mother that "hovered like an ectoplasm on the wall" (p. 30); in the invisible object Jordan Baker balances upon her chin; in Nick's simultaneous fascination and repulsion by the idea that one man could fix the World Series; in the tramp who sells dogs on the street and yet looks all the world like John D. Rockefeller; in the tragic eyes and short upper lips of eastern European faces in a funeral train; in the city itself, "rising up across the river in white heaps and sugar lumps all built with a wish" (p. 69). And we find it in Nick's reaction to Gatsby himself, at once "gorgeous" and representative of "everything for which I have an unaffected scorn" (p. 2).

How much of this was the result of sheer "craftsmanship" and how much represented a heavy investment of the author himself in his material is unknown. But we do know that Fitzgerald continued his inventory of losses in a sequel to "The Crack-Up" which looks back to that time: "For a check-up of my spiritual liabilities indicated that I had no particular head to be bowed or unbowed. Once I had had a heart but that was all I was sure of."24 His perception of the grotesqueries of life had once been tempered by sympathy and sustained by an enormous vitality. But these qualities had played out; he had developed a "sad attitude toward sadness, a melancholy attitude toward melancholy and a tragic attitude toward tragedy."25 He had become identified with the objects of his "horror and compassion," and he was paralyzed by his own perceptions. "Life, ten years ago," he wrote, "was largely a personal matter. I must hold in balance the sense of the futility of effort and the sense of the necessity to struggle. . . If I could do this through the common ills—domestic, professional and personal—then the ego would continue as an arrow shot from nothingness to nothingness with such force that only gravity would bring it to earth at last."26 This passage has the ring of truth, but it stands as a statement of philosophical conviction rather than a felt reaction to life. But there seems to have been a time when life,

24 "Pasting It Together," in The Crack-Up, p. 80; this article originally appeared in Esquire April, 1936.
indeed, was a "personal matter" for Fitzgerald, when Gatsby, when all vain human striving, "stuck in his heart."

The search for a lost vitality and a lost self which characterized the strivings of Bartley Alexander and Jay Gatsby was too familiar to Fitzgerald by the time he came to write "The Crack-Up." If at one time he had sympathized with their middle-aged dream of youth, now he shared it. In the end, Fitzgerald suffered from that very condition he had himself once so compassionately dramatized:

It was back into the mind of the young man with cardboard soles who had walked the streets of New York. I was him again—for an instant I had the good fortune to share his dreams, I who had no more dreams of my own. And there are still times I creep up on him, surprise him on an autumn morning in New York or a spring night in Carolina when it is so quiet that you can hear a dog barking in the next county. But never again as during that all too short period when he and I were one person, when the fulfilled future and the wistful past were mingled in a single gorgeous moment—when life was literally a dream.27
