Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich XXVIII 2
PL ISSN 0084—4446

ROBERT ELBAZ
Montréal

OF ABSENCE AND EXCESS IN THE DISCOURSE OF SCOTT FITZGERALD

Critics[1] of Fitzgerald tend to see in his work a well-rounded and meaningful discourse, though suffering sometimes from minor structural or thematic faults. They approach his fiction as a mimetic or representational statement on his times. *The Great Gatsby*,[2] in particular, is understood to present the American dream, with the tragedy of non-fulfillment it involves; Gatsby is taken as a well-defined entity in whom the tragedy of the American dream unfolds. The available criticism of *The Great Gatsby* focuses on a variety of themes: fame and money, the romanticism of the hero losing his girl, the moral and religious values, the dream of youth, East versus West, the meaningless ash-heaps of life, and mauvaise-foi. All these readings share one basic view: they see the novel as a centralized discourse revolving around a tangible Gatsbian presence.

In contradiction with these readings, the purpose of this paper is to investigate a discursive surplus in the discourse of Scott Fitzgerald. It seeks to argue for non-presence and non-representation in *The Great Gatsby*. I conceive of Fitzgerald's discourse as a cracked discourse suffering from inner deficiencies which, however, make for its sense.

---

[1] Mizener, Turnbull, Piper, Cowley, Kazin, and others have criticized Fitzgerald's work in relation to his biography. The tendency in the available heavily positivistic criticism of Fitzgerald's work has been and still is to find some kind of relotionship between his life and work. Although one cannot deny the dialectic between the two, it is far from being an external cause and effect relationship which is what most of this criticism posits. If Fitzgerald's life has some bearing on his work, it is not representatively, but mostly on the blood and flesh of the words themselves, on the nature of his discourse. The question is not what the author is saying but from what position he is saying what he is saying, and Fitzgerald speaks from a position of excess.

[2] *The Great Gatsby*, New York 1953.

I conceive of it as decentralized and dispersed; the cracks therein being conditional to his sense-making process. It will be shown that Fitzgerald's discourse experiences a mediating excess conditioning his construction of meaning.[3]

The first question a careful reader of *The Great Gatsby* must face is: who is Gatsby? What is his identity? This question is asked throughout the novel by Fitzgerald, or his spokesman, Nick Carraway. What does Fitzgerald mean by the "great Gatsby"? In what sense is Gatsby "great"? The multiplicity of answers we are given throughout the text puts this question into question. Catherine, Mrs Wilson's sister, says: "Well, they say he's a nephew or a cousin of Kaiser Wilhelm's." (33) A guest at one of the parties claims: "somebody told me he killed a man once"; however, another guest interjects: "it's more that he was a German spy during the war." (44) The moment we close in on this culprit he seems to escape, and every new definition makes the previous one obsolete. So Gatsby turns out to be, following the novel's chronology: "an Oxford man", "a bootlegger", "a nephew to Von Hindenburg and second cousin to the devil", "the son of some wealthy people with a family tradition", "a young rajah in all the capitals of Europe", "a decorated major of the allied armies", "one of Wolfsheim's protégés, connected in some way to the underground pipeline to Canada". Then, we are told that he does not live in a house but in a boat that looks like a house, that he is James Gatz—at least legally, that he is the son of God, that he owned some drugstores, that he is the supposed son of the man who comes to his funeral. The one prevalent obsession in the novel is an attempt at a clear grasp of what we would call a subjectivity—a central core around which we can organize this fictional space. However, Fitzgerald seems to be saying that there is no truth, that the antecedents of this absent character cannot be clarified. We remain therefore in the domain of gossip and rumors. We are left with a multiplicity of definitions, masks which do not refer to any one reality but which mediate one another ad infinitum, which in our case is Gatsby's death. His death confirms a discursive purpose: because 'Gatsby' is a non-existent entity which it is futile to try to englobe, the game must end somewhere and therefore Gatsby must die. That is we have reached the point of no return (an indefinite process of circular referentiality). In this sense *The Great Gatsby* is a meta-novel in which fiction becomes an independent and self-sufficient game setting its own rules.

It is of particular interest to note in this connection that fathers—

[3] For a brilliant elucidation of the relationships among madness (the ultimate excess), philosophy and literature, see S. Felman, *Madness and Philosophy or Literature's Reason*, Yale French Studies, n. 52.

the model—hardly ever appear in Fitzgerald's fiction, and when they do it is in order to challenge the values they stand for. In "*Absolution*" (one of Fitzgerald's classic short stories which was meant to open *The Great Gatsby)* Rudolph, the young hero, is punished by his father for challenging established moral and religious values. However, we learn that Father Shwartz, the priest giving Rudolph absolution, talks and dreams about the "glitter" of parties, thus espousing, in a way, Rudolph's new values. By the end of the story Father Shwartz starts "muttering inarticulate and heartbroken words". This scene, interestingly enough, points to a very crucial relationship in Fitzgerald's world: that between the glimmer of parties and the process of seeing and talking clearly. A difficulty is expressed here: uttering meaningful statements while one is blinded by glitter. Father Shawrtz's talk turns into delirium—an excess. In *Tender is the Night*, the father is in an incestuous relationship with the daughter, a relationship which shakes the pillars of culture and puts all established values into question. This incestuous relationship causes schizophrenia in Nicole, the heroine: schizophrenia which is the ultimate excess.

Let me now develop the concept of absence which I find basic to the novel. A vast number of elements in the novel and in Fitzgerald's fictional world as a whole support the predominance of absence over presence. "A figure had emerged from the shadow... When I looked once more for Gatsby he had vanished", (22) says Nick Carraway of his first encounter with Gatsby. This experience is repeated whenever Nick attempts to close in on Gatsby (he uses the phrase: "I hunted for him"), but the latter seems to escape like sand between the fingers. "I made an attempt to find my host... two people denied vehemently any knowledge of his movements." (42) "The bar where we glanced first, was crowded, but Gatsby was not there. She could not find him from the top of the stairs, and he was not on the veranda". (45) "I turned toward Mr. Gatsby but he was no longer there." (75) This non-presence is not surprising to the reader for in order to hunt someone down we must close in on him in a limited space, we must corner him. But how can we corner Gatsby in his mansion or among the vast number of guests at his parties?

The house is not exactly a house: "it was a factual imitation of some Hotel de ville in Normandy", but interestingly enough, "it was a mansion, inhabited by a gentleman of that name." (5) Gatsby does not live there; he is not the subject. Rather, the house is "inhabited" by someone answering to the name Gatsby or maybe Gatz. The house is "inhabited" by a ghost responding to many names (or to no name). This mansion is filled with "Marie-Antoinette music rooms and Restauration salons" where guests were "concealed behind every couch and table, period bedrooms... dressing rooms, and poolrooms and bathrooms." (92)

It is clearly impossible to encompass the limits of this mansion; where does it start? and where does it end? We are not told how many dressing rooms, poolrooms, or bathrooms there are. Just undefined quantities of each. And this undefined number of rooms is inhabited by an undefined number of ghosts.

> "Sometimes a shadow moved against a dressing room blind above, gave way to another shadow, an indefinite procession of shadows, that rouged and powdered in an invisible glass." (109)

In what window amongst this infinity of windows and ghosts is Gatsby's ghost going to appear? It is of interest to note that Nick helps close this unreal mansion at the end, thus coming to terms with this endless number of windows—this horizontal chasm—swallowing the parameters of the house with its ghostly inhabitants.

As to the rouged and powdered ghosts roaming carnivalesque around this space, they have no reason for being there.

> People were not invited—they went there... somehow they ended up at Gatsby's door. (41)
> Most people were brought. (46)
> The groups change more swiftly, swell with new arrivals, dissolve and form in the same breath... the sea-change of faces and voices and color under the constantly changing light. (40)

Being at those parties, or rather, that party, for it is one endless party, is gratuitous; there is no necessity for whatever is happening there. People just float there aimlessly like masked ghosts. Their ethereal quality is further emphasized by the decor of this glittering scene. The orchestra is "no thin five piece affair, but a whole pitful of oboes and trombones and saxophones and viols and cornets and picolos, and low and high drums." (40) Quantity dominates in this world; the plural is prevalent over the singular throughout Fitzgerald's text. The modesty, temperance, and restraint of the singular are alien to this discourse; everything comes by the crate:

> crates of oranges and lemons... glistening hors-d'oeuvres, spiced baked hams crowded against salads of harlequin desings and pasiry pigs and turkeys... gins and liquors, floating rounds of cocktails. (39—40)

This euphoria or "world's fair" pushes to the point where "women never knew each other's names." (40) Names—the epitome of identity—the basic stamps of all unities disappear to make room for faked presences. The extravagant-artificial euphoria of this theatre is achieved by numbers—a situation where the chances of one unit recognizing another are practically nil, a space where anonymity reigns. Jordan

Baker, the queen of all fakers, prefers large parties because "they're so intimate. At small parties there isn't any privacy." (50) However, at the big party there is no identity and therefore no privacy.

This gratuitous overcrowdedness is not pertinent to Gatsby's party only; it is present in the first, small yet very similar party that Tom and Mrs Wilson organize in their little apartment. This apartment is literally jammed with furniture; its occupants, lacking any breathing space, "disappeared, reappeared, made plans to go somewhere, and then lost each other, searched for each other..." (37)

This euphoria extends outward to New York, a New York which is not much different from the French Riviera (one of Fitzgerald's cherished locations), or for that matter, the Hollywood of Monroe Stahr. "I began to like New York, the racy, adventurous feel of it at night, and the satisfaction that the constant flicker of men and women and machines gives to the restless eye." (57) The words "flicker" and "restless eye" summarize the ethereality and absence in Fitzgerald's discourse. I have so far pointed to a phenomenon which seems to be prevalent throughout this discourse: namely, that 'quantity' blurs the limits of unity, that differentiation is very hard to achieve when it comes under the banner of excess. It was indicated that the unity of the house disappears behind the multiplicity of rooms and windows.

Similarly, Gatsby's car provides us with a further extension of this phenomenon. It seems as though Fitzgerald is on the border between the description of an object and its obliteration. The description of Gatsby's car opens on a realist note about color and trim, in short, a conventional portrayal: "It was a rich, cream color, bright with nickel". But then "swollen here and there in its monstrous length with triumphant hat-boxes, supper-boxes and tool-boxes." The attempt to elaborate on the shape, size, and appandages is aborted since the car, to all intents and purposes, has no shape, an unreal size, and irrelevant appandages. Finally, it is "terraced with a labyrinth of windshields that mirrored a dozen suns." (64) The car, then, loses all identity and becomes a landscape connoting loss since it multiplies reality through the endless circular referentiality or mirrored suns.

The car disappears behind an indefinite quantity of boxes, and this description illustrates the problematic of Fitzgerald's fiction: that between setting the limits of discourse and the impotence involved in the blurring of these limits. Between seeing clearly, being able to make judgments, being able to speak, to make a statement, and total confusion. The attempt, in this case, is to describe one car, Gatsby's car and to differetiate it from other cars. However, the identity of this car vanishes behind the vast quantities of its components, and behind the mirrored labyrinthian glare shining forth from it. The dozen suns seem

to swallow the car, just as the noise and the blinding light swallow Gatsby and his guests.

Absence is expressed as well through the excess of lights and colors: everything is shining in this world. And I am not referring only to the house which when lit "illuminates the whole corner of the peninsula... with light which fell unreal on the shrubbery." (82) The house of course epitomizes this mountain of light. But the glitter is everywhere; words like 'sunshine, gold, shining, white, glitter, burning, bright, glow, glisten, gleaming, silver, light, flicker, nickel, rubies, flaming, blazing, radiate, fire, sparkling, broiling, metallic, glare, luminosity, moon, radiant' recur throughout Fitzgerald's discourse, mostly as qualifiers. Again, this is an extravagant series of qualifiers pointing to the same absent reality. In other words, the quantification I suggested above reappears at the level of discourse. The excess is an excess of things and words. And the title of the book itself is very revealing in this context. Gatsby is "great", why not famous or just rich? He is great precisely because "great" accomodates quantification and accumulation.

I have spoken so far of the ghostliness and ethereality of Gatsby's house and guests emphasizing quantity; I would like to consider the discourse now in terms of quality, and see how this excessive list of qualifiers reinforces the concept of absence I have been developing.

Descriptions of characters in *The Great Gatsby* never deal with the immediate contours or shape of any physicality; we are never given any feature characterizing a physionomy: we are always meant to feel a certain overall abstract aura surrounding the characters. Faces, shapes, and bodies are engulfed by this aura. Of Tom, we are told that he is "a national figure in a way, one of those men who reach...an acute limited excellence at twenty-one"—vague terms; for what is a national figure? and what is this limited excellence? However, Tom has "glistening boots" and "two shining arrogant eyes". The aggressivity and "enormous power of that body", presumably Tom's only defining feature, is described in abstract and quantitative terms: "the great, big, hulking physical specimen." (12) Again, the word "specimen" opposes uniqueness. Daisy has everything glowing about her. "Her face was sad and lovely with bright things in it, bright eyes and bright passionate mouth." (9) She has a "glowing face" and her voice "glowing and singing". (15) Jordan Baker has golden arms and shoulders. Both Daisy and Jordan are dressed in white, and their dresses "were rippling and fluttering as if they had just been blown back in after a short flight around the house." (8) They both lack weight and thickness. The house they fly in "a cheerful red and white...burning gardens...bright vines...French windows, glowing now with reflected gold." (6) Their "chatter (was) as cool as their white dresses and their impersonal eyes in the absence of all desire." (12) They wear hats "of metallic cloth". Only now can

we understand the statement "her voice is full of money". What do Gatsby and Fitzgerald mean? How can a voice be filled with money? Money to Fitzgerald is color; it partakes in the glimmer of his world. The silver-golden property of money means coins first and banknotes after: "the jingle of it, the cymbal's song of it." (120)

Gatsby is rich in coins, not bills. Because coins fit in his shining world; they sparkle like his dress. If, on the one hand, we are showered with piles of shirts behind which Gatsby vanishes (quantity), on the other hand, Gatsby shows preference for silvery (coin-y) clothing. He prefers a "white flanel suit, silver shirt, and gold colored tie." (84) "The luminosity of his pink suit under the moon" remains with the reader. A ghost is by definition an absence filled with whiteness.

A blinding light must generate a certain amount of heat, but not any heat. The kind of heat it takes to see mirages in the hot desert: the aforementioned series of qualifiers connotes heat as well. However, the heat connoted never ignites for if it did this whole universe would go up in flames. It is only the uncomfortable heat of a hot summer afternoon. Similar to the one in the novel, on the day of the accident—the beginning of the dénouement. It is not by chance that the novel takes place in summer, for the coldness of winter would not permit extravaganza. Winter is cold lucidity keeping a clear-cut perception of things; haziness and lack of perceptual control come with the hot summer. "And so with the sunshine and the great bursts of leaves growing on the trees, just as things grow in fast movies, I had that familiar conviction that life was beginning again with the summer." (4) People can "drift, play polo and be rich together" only where it is warm. Only on the sunny, hot French Riviera could things come back to life—and as was suggested, Gatsby's perpetual party, the French Riviera and Hollywood are one and the same—for life means the adequate lack of perceptual control over reality. A certain confusion of the senses. Or, in other words, the ability not to set clear-cut limits to discourse. "The next day was broiling, almost the last, certainly the warmest, of the summer." (114) "«But it is so hot, insisted Daisy, and everything's so confused.»" (118) Heat, then, means confusion.

Overcoming a discursive confusion, attempting to set things straight is probably the main theme of the book; it is certainly Nick Carraway's main preoccupation, if not the exclusive one. And the hypostasis of this problematic is the ash-heaps. The vast majority of critics put the emphasis on the hollowness and meaninglessness of life as symbolized by the ash-heaps, and in this connection Eliot's influence on Fitzgerald is mentioned time and again. But these critics have tended to neglect one basic relationship existing in this nameless dramatic location. One must read carefully and ask the question: what function does the poster of

Doctor T. J. Eckleburg fulfil? Why is his face facing, or rather, looking over the ash-heaps, as God would?

One basic property of ashes is to raise dust, and generate a heavy smoke screen. Anyone placed behind such a screen would have difficulties seeing through it. Fitzgerald, in effect, emphasizes the density of this space the characteristic feature of which is "rising smoke... powdery air... impenetrable cloud." (23) Fitzgerald could not be clearer about the function of the ash-heaps: "the ash gray men swarm up with leaden spades and stir up an impenetrable cloud, which screens their obscure operations from your sight." (23) If Daisy, Jordan, Tom, and all the guests disappear behind the shine and glitter encompassing them, Mr and Mrs Wilson together with all the inhabitants of the ash-heaps disappear inside the dust engulfing them. Interestingly enough, this dust is white. Hence why we are told of Mr Wilson that "a white ashen dust veiled his dark suit and his pale hair as it veiled everything in the vicinity." (26) There is no more presence to the inhabitants of the ash-heaps than to those in Gatsby's palace.

However, someone is trying to see through; Dr. Eckleburg aspires to apprehend what is there just as Fitzgerald attempts "to see through" his discourse, not to see through it but to see it through.

> The eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg are blue and gigantic—their retinas are one yard high. They look out of no face, but, instead, from a pair of enormous yellow spectacles which pass over a non-existent nose. (23)

A very interesting face! No face, however. Just eyes. (Incidentally, the nose is non-existent on the face of Dr. Eckleburg, but it is in the book. It was given to the Buchanan's butler who lost the sensitivity of his nose from polishing silver for a long period. A non-discerning nose.) Again, size here is important. The eyes are gigantic, gaping, like Gatsby's windows. Big as they are, they need correcting lenses. These eyes are empty, their expression, that of an owl. So Dr. Eckleburg cannot see because he has no eyes, in effect, and because of the dense screen facing them. Finally, and this is Fitzgerald's self-reflexive statement, Dr. Eckleburg does not see because there is nothing to see; the blue eyes are covered with white dust, and that is all there is to see.

Gatsby's house partakes in this excess as well. Besides the quantitative excess of its rooms and the excess of lights, when not lit from top to cellar, it shares some of the properties of the ash-heaps. "There was an inexplicable amount of dust everywhere, and the rooms were musty, as though they had not been aired for many days." (147) But opening the windows would not help; the inside and the facade look the same: they both confuse. By night you are literally blinded, and by day a screen of dust blurs your view. Gatsby cannot set the record

straight, nor can Fitzgerald simply because there is no record to straighten.

Thus far, I spoke of quantification and its relation to absence; I have referred to qualification with its division into light and heat. Heat, in turn, involves two elements: haziness with which I have just dealt, and alcohol. The attempt here is to create a language inherent in Fitzgerald's text, and to see how the components of this language contribute to generate his discourse, or how number, glare, hazines, and alcohol cohere in his discursive reality. Excess in number and excess in quality in all its varieties, relate to form the overall excess of his discourse—those forgotten pieces, the necessary surplus that litters this discursive formation.

Alcohol is one of the key biographical facts in all major studies of Fitzgerald. What critics have missed is that alcohol is not an external literal fact relating to his work. Alcohol is the permeating spirit of his text; it is the necessary drug that keeps his text in warmth. The heat generated by alcohol coincides with the excess of his discourse; that is, Fitzgerald's discourse is an "alcoholic discourse" rather than the discourse of an alcoholic. Everybody drinks in *The Great Gatsby* except Gatsby and Nick, who claims to have been drunk only twice in his life. The flowing champagne is one more ingredient in this atmosphere of unreality. Under its influence haziness becomes a real possibility, but, of course, the glare and glitter help make it more effective.

In *The Lost Decade,* we are given the story of a man who has been absent for a decade because he was drunk all along. He is taken around by a guide to see the long forgotten places, and while visiting (or revisiting) a famous location he exclaims: "I've been in it—lots of times. But I've never seen it. And now it is not what I want to see. I would not ever be able to see it now." [4] He certainly has seen the building many times during those drunken years; but once alcohol sets in, once fiction sets in, one looks at the world with different eyes. The illusion this protagonist entertains is that maybe he could look at the world with those old eyes. However, he realizes that that old familiar building is not what he wants to see now because he will never be able to see it again. But the lost decade is not lost since it is recaptured in the story, and the story is always the story of someone trying to recapture the story: the story of a pre-alcoholic age.

Alcohol conditions the cacophonic noise of the orchestra as well as the various colors that form the spectrum of Gatsby's world. Alcohol blurs the limits of the present, the past, and the future, and blurring these three categories of time means not being in any one of them but being in all of them in confusion. When the boundaries of time

[4] *The Bodley Head Fitzgerald,* vol. VI, London 1958, p. 381.

disappear, one is merely floating in an unmarked, unidentifiable universe. Consequently, the grip over self and world is lost. At this point, centralization vanishes and dispersion takes place. Bits and pieces of the present, the past, and the future coexist in simultaneity: present, past and future dilute to form a new, swollen present. With time and space logic disappears and delirium rises to existence. Alcohol, then, is the ultimate excess, for it allows those bits and pieces, the surplus, to come to the fore—the pure delirium. Fiction, the locus of deliric madness, takes form when the grip over the world weakens. Absence in Fitzgerald suggests not being able to be here, being here and there, hovering between sense and non-sense. The "alcoholicity" of Fitzgerald's discourse cannot be overemphasized. A key document on alcohol is found in *In His Own Time*, which constitutes a collection of left-overs, that are literally forced into groups. The fragment is entitled, *A Short Autobiography*. This intriguing piece is a collection of fragments ordered chronologically starting in 1913 and ending in 1929. Each paragraph recounts in the manner of a telegram the name of an alcoholic beverage and its unclear relationship to a space. The title says it is an autobiography, but in what way? What importance attaches to the events described? Around each of the paragraphs a story must be told; that is, we are missing seventeen stories. The reader is faced with a series of gaps impossible to overcome; the information remains incomplete. Whose autobiography is it? Fitzgerald's? How can one reduce a lifetime to an unconnected series of stray events? Moreover, this is not even a series of events, and subjectivity seems absent. What comes first is the name of the beverage which is the primordial entity. But we are never told what happens to the beverages on this list; the only thing we can conclude is that they exist in this fictional-autobiographical space occupying the center of the stage.

1913

The four defiant Canadian Club whiskeys at the Susquehanna in Hackensack.

1914

The Great Western Champagne at the Trent House in Trenton and the groggy ride back to Princeton.

1915

The Sparkling Burgundy at Bustanoby's. The raw whiskey in White Sulphur Springs, Montana, when I got on a table and sang, "Won't you come up", to the cowmen. The Stingers at Tate's in Seattle listening to Ed Muldoon, "that clever chap." [5]

This list (which goes on for two and a half short pages) constitues a discontinued accumulation—since the dates, or rather, the years come

[5] *In His Own Time: A Miscellany*, ed. by M. J. Bruccoli and J. R. Bryer, Toronto 1971, p. 223.

in between—of alcoholic presences. A series of dissociated pictures of bottles—an impression of nature morte which can only exist in a fictional universe. For bottles in the real world have subjects to consume them, to act upon them. These seem to exist in a vacuum. And the final meaning of the piece is that alcohol sets the limits of autobiography or fiction. Autobiography and fiction coincide with alcoholic excess. In short, I am suggesting that this piece in itself means nothing whatsoever, that its own reality is the language of discourse and not the world. This, because it falls within the limits of Fitzgerald's discursive-deliric non-sense.

What about Gatsby, the abstainer? and Nick Carraway, the moderate drinker? There is a homology relating the two, for the novel is Nick Carraway's setting the limits of his story—that is, Gatsby, who, in turn, is setting the limits of his own discourse. Actually, Fitzgerald is setting the limits of the totality of his discourse through Nick's limit setting through Gatsby's setting of limits. This process of furthering away makes for the resistance of this text to theories of representation. For the question remains: why such a narration? Why not have Gatsby tell his story directly or a straight, third person, indirect narrative? Because that would have brought the text closer to the world which does not suit the nature of an excessive discourse. This process of furthering away is necessary because it accomodates absence. (Realist texts cannot speak absence; I am not saying that Realist texts cannot involve a process of furthering away, I am merely saying that the presence of absence in a text necessitates a more complex process of distanciation.)

The homology between Gatsby and Nick is in the definition of the boundaries of their respective discourse. To define these boundaries one must be able to see clearly and therefore refrain from drink. Nick's preoccupation with the ability to make judgments is quite apparent in his selfintroduction. It comes at the opening of his discourse because it conditions it. And Nick's difficulty is in his being in and out of it, in synchrony: "I was within and without". (36) For clarifying Gatsby's antecedents, making sense of his own speech, entails seeing clearly within himself. If Gatsby is "just a man named Gatsby" (49) and nothing else, then one must pack his bags; there is no more to be said. Nick's main concern is whether Gatsby's statements "fall to pieces" or can hold together and make sense. The doubt (as to this sense-making process) from beginning to end draws the parameters of his speech. Through Gatsby's speech Nick is reminded of something; however, this something cannot be uttered.

> ...an elusive rythm, a fragment of lost words, that I had heard somewhere a long time ago. For a moment a phrase tried to make 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 for ever. (112)

It is clear then that the inability to go back to what one thinks is the truth—hindered by numbers, glare, haziness, and alcohol—coincides with the inability to speak. And this inability can take two forms of expression, either silence or excess. When one cannot make sense one multiplies the non-sense. It is only when one cannot make sense that one falls within the realm of non-sense.

Gatsby refrains from drink because he wants to see "the green light", a differetiated light hiding behind the glare of his parties. But can he see it?

"Can't repeat the past?" he cried incredulously, "Why of course you can!" He talked a lot about the past and I gather that he wanted to recover something, some idea of himself perhaps... 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. (111)

Recovering something, seeing clearly, or returning to a starting place: but one cannot cross the same river twice, and consequently each return is a false start. (And recapturing something lost is a recurrent theme in Fitzgerald's discourse.) Extending the past to include the present can only be achieved with the help of alcohol. Gatsby could see the green light with a bottle of champagne; the lost decade can be recaptured as well through the mediation of alcohol.

Before dealing with the notion of the "false start", I would like to retrieve a minor character who seems to be lost in this fictional universe. He is the only character who appears at Gatsby's first party as well as at his funeral. He seems to have come from nowhere, but he is there for a purpose: to sober up in Gatsby's library, apparently the only real space to which he can escape. This character has the wise, all-knowing eyes of an owl (he is also obsessed with the cleanliness of his glasses which he wipes ceaselessly). But seeing clearly means being in the library, but this library presents us with a problem.

"The books" ...Absolutely real—have pages and everything. I thought they'd be a nice durable cardboard. Matter of fact, they're absolutely real. Pages and—See! He cried triumphantly. "It's a bona-fide of printed matter. It fooled me. This fella is a regular Belasco. It's a triumph. What thoroughness! What realism! Knew when to stop too—didn't cut the pages. (46)

One, then, sobers up in a library which is a perfect copy of a real library, down to the last detail. (Belasco was a director known for his achievements in lighting effects.) The question raised here is what is real, the world or the library. And since this fake library is almost more real than a real library, then the borders between the real and

the non-real disappear. In effect, the fake replaces the real and hence the necessity for an attempt to see clearly (and why one must clean one's glasses). In other words, discourse (fiction) replaces reality. For if the 'real' library presumably represents the world, the fake one represents but itself; it is self-referential—the realm of discourse, of the production of meaning. This forsaken character hypostasizes both the "alcoholic" and the "clear" discourses. He drinks and sobers up, but both activities amount to the same thing, for each of these two activities—each of the two discourses—is defined as the negation of the other.

Let us return now to the notion of "the false start". Recapturing the antecedents, reality, life; returning to a starting point, is what *One Hundred False Starts* is all about. Bits and pieces of stories are strewn along this short story, the bits and pieces that constitute the surplus, but this surplus—this excess—is "wasted material" since these stories (as in the short autobiography mentioned above) are never spoken in full, these fragments never materialize.

> These little flurries caused me no travail—they were opium eater's illusions, vanishing with the smoke of the pipe, or you know what I mean. The pleasure of thinking about them was the exact equivalent of having accomplished them. It is the six page, ten page, thirty page globs of paper that grieve me professionally, like unsuccessful oil shafts; they represent my false starts.[6]

The false start must replace of necessity the real start because one has already covered the circuit and "reaches the finish to find he has no following". So "the race must be run all over again" and the only alternative left is to multiply the false starts, to run the race all over again although one is eliminated from it. This process of elimination is the excess that fills the absence, the delirium that covers the crack.

Though absence is present in Fitzgerald's fiction, he does not seem to have rejected the notion of authority altogether, or rather, he does not seem to have overcome this problem. Some pieces of his fiction defy authority (e.g. *Afternoon of an Author* which is spoken by an anonymous voice.) This is, no doubt, the beginning of a process of rejection of the concept of authority. There certainly is a difference between *Afternoon of an Author* and his earlier fiction. In the early fiction authority hesitates between presence and absence, between controlled speech and deliric excess, whereas in *Afternoon of an Author* excess takes over and speech is anonymous. It is likely, given his short life, that he did not have enough time to solve this problem.

Fitzgerald's *Note Books* gives us a clue as to the capital importance of excess in his discourse; very little has been said about this text, which, I believe, conditions his discourse as a whole. *Note Books* is an

[6] *The Bodley Head Fitzgerald*, vol. VI, p. 164.

amalgam of bits and pieces, the daily 'verbiage', arranged in alphabetical order. "A" stands for Anecdotes, "B" for Bright Clippings, "C" for Conversations and Things Overheard, and so on. However, this order in no way adds to the meaning of these fragments. *Note Books* is filled with a multiplicity of lists which in themselves mean nothing. *List of Troubles* for example:

Heart Burn
Eczema
Piles
Flu
Night Sweats
Alcoholism
Infected Nose
Insomnia
Ruined Nerves
Chronic Cough
Aching Teeth
Shortness of Breath
Falling Hair
Cramps in Feet
Tingling Feet
Constipation
Cirrhosis of the Liver
Stomach Ulcers
Depression and Melancholia [7]

Then we have other lists like: *Backwoods Names*, *The Baynyard Boys or Fun on the Soil*, *Economy Statements*, "Turkey Remains and How to Inter Them", "Most Pleasant Trips", "Most Unpleasant Trips", "Nostalgia or the Flight of the Heart", "Journal of a Pointless Life", "Songs of 1906", "Modern Slang 1932", "Notes of Childhood"—all these lists as totalities do not seem to mean anything.

Actually, *Note Books* as a whole constitutes one vast list: an unnecessary succession of bits and fragments that do not belong anywhere—the surplus of Fitzgerald's discourse. Quite a few of these lists appear in the novels themselves; some fragments are transcribed verbatim into the fiction. Fitzgerald no doubt meant this collection to be the starting point of his fiction—a reservoir. And these lists constitute the innumerable false starts and eliminations that Fitzgerald had to go through in order to see his discourse through, to bring it to its optimum, to write it.

One list, found in the middle of *The Great Gatsby*, is the famous list of guest which seems to be stuck in the novel for no reason. Why do Gatsby's quests appear in a cumulative list? Why are not we introduced to them gradually throughout the novel? As was suggested above,

[7] *The Crack Up*, New York 1956, p. 168.

the guests are non-present, and the names are the guests. That is, this adds nothing to the meaning of the novel: it does not mean but it conditions meaning. It is the necessary mediating surplus of Fitzgerald's discourse, the overflow and the dribble of it.

It is known that these lists were composed in special moments, when the sense-making process breaks down, when non-sense fills the gaps. In *The Crack Up*, which is in many ways, the story of writing as a story, Fitzgerald tells us:

> I could lie around and was glad to, sleeping or dozing sometimes twenty hours a day and in the intervals trying resolutely not to think—instead I made lists—made lists and tore them up, hundreds of lists: of cavalry leaders and football players and cities, and popular tunes and pitchers, and happy times, and hobbies and houses lived in and how many suits since I left the army and how many pairs of shoes... And lists of women I'd liked, and of the times I had let myself be snubbed by people who had not been my betters in character or ability.[8]

This incomplete meta-list (all that enters into writing), this list of lists, which is incomplete because it does not and could not, cover the hundreds of lists Fitzgerald wrote, and those he did not write, introduces us to his obsession with fictional material. A list is, in essence, an attempt to exhaust reality. In cramming as many elements as you can into as many lists as you want, you aspire to encompass reality into a minimal space. And fiction is such a space. For behind each item on every list there is a story to be told; a story not told but there as a possibility. Excess, then, is the potential of fiction or fiction as potential. Fitzgerald's aspiration to cover all of reality with fiction, to try to exhaust every bit of virtual fiction, must come at the expense of a process of selection. Although each list has—at least in appearance—some common denominator, its basic function is to pile up material for fear of losing it. In order not to "waste material" one must indulge in excess, one must fall into non-sense. Writing for Fitzgerald, the good start, the selected story, the told story is conditioned by the potential of fiction, by the untold story, by the wasted material, the lists, the excess. Excess is the condition to economy; with Fitzgerald we remain within the domain of discourse. That is, the main problematic is that of moving fiction from the virtual into the realm of writing: to set the limits of discourse.

---

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 71—72

BRAK I NADMIAR W DYSKURSIE SCOTTA FITZGERALDA

STRESZCZENIE

Tekstowa dynamika charakterystyczna dla prozy Scotta Fitzgeralda zdaje się potwierdzać nieskuteczność, daremność dyskursu realistycznego w literaturze amerykańskiego dwudziestolecia, w twórczości „pokolenia rozczarowanych". Istotnie, *Wielki Gatsby* wyraźnie potwierdza ów brak koherencji okresów wypowiedzi w językowej osnowie tego dzieła. Co więcej, odzwierciedla wyraźnie wielki wewnętrzny niepokój drogi twórczej tego dwudziestolecia, co znalazło swój dobitny wyraz w słowach samego bohatera powieści. Jest w nich obsesyjna wprost próba zawarcia w tekście ucieczki od realności ku brakowi, nieobecności i ku nadmiarowi, przekroczeniu granic — a kategorie te są podstawowymi wyznacznikami literackiej przestrzeni semiotycznej S. Fitzgeralda.

Wszakże w przeciwieństwie do wielu ujęć interpretacyjnych autor rozprawy chciałby się przeciwstawić poglądowi na niereprezentatywność i zdecentralizowaną strukturę „szalonego" dyskursu Scotta Fitzgeralda, wyrażając twierdzenie, że sensy zawarte w jego powieści mieszczą się niejako pośrodku między możliwością uchwycenia sensu rzeczywistości a jej dezintegracją.

Przełożył *Jan Trzynadlowski*