

“... and the long secret extravaganza was played out”:
The Great Gatsby and Carnival
in a Bakhtinian Perspective

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The supreme ruse of power is to allow itself to be contested ritually in order to consolidate itself more effectively. Georges Balandier¹

From antiquity, Mikhail Bakhtin argues, literary history has been shaped both by “serious” genres such as tragedy and epic and by serio-comic genres like Menippean satire which constitute the carnivalistic line in Western literature. Petronius’ *Satyricon* is a foundational text in the carnival tradition of the novel for its disenchanted portrayal of a changing contemporary society, its use of laughter to defamiliarize approved ideologies and ideas, and its roots in folklore and festive rituals. Behind its scenes and events, “there glimmers more or less distinctly the carnival square with its specific carnivalistic logic of familiar contacts, *mésalliances*, disguises and mystifications, contrasting paired images, scandals, crownings/decrownings, and so forth. [...] in fact the very plot of the *Satyricon* is thoroughly carnivalized” (*PDP* 133-34).²

Fitzgerald entitled a late version of his novel *Trimalchio* and in the published work he retained Nick’s observation that after Gatsby realized Daisy did not enjoy his parties, “his career as Trimalchio was over.” Various elements link these two works.³ Both *Trimalchio* and *Gatsby* are *nouveaux riches* and invent elements of their own biographies. Each has a luxurious home, owns an impressive library, gives lavish parties attended by socially heterogeneous groups. Their festivities, where food is a form of play and often disguised so that its original nature is unrecognizable, unfold against a musical background and are so well-staged that *Trimalchio* is described as the “director, producer, main actor”⁴ of his party while *Gatsby* is termed

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“a regular Belasco.” Both are obsessed by the passage of time. An astrologist has revealed to Trimalchio the exact length of his life so he installs a big clepsydra in his dining room and has a uniformed bugler blow a horn every hour to remind him of how long he has left to live. Gatsby’s story contains a myriad of references to time, and details such as the broken clock that almost falls off the mantelpiece during his reunion with Daisy symbolize his desire to stop or even reverse the flow of time. Crucially, each work reproduces versions of the primary carnivalistic act at the very core of the carnival sense of the world—the mock crowning and subsequent decrowning of the carnival king.⁵

Petronius was innovative in using a first-person narrator, Encolpius, who is also a character in the story, something not done in any example of epic or fiction known to him.⁶ This narrator’s education and prior experiences have not prepared him for a world dominated by arrogant social climbing, unscrupulous business dealing, the trading of sexual favors for power, extreme materialism—a mysterious social universe which both attracts and disconcerts him.⁷ Fitzgerald’s narrator/protagonist Nick likewise finds himself in a social world he does not fully understand, where he feels “within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life” (TGG 30).⁸ Another link between the narrators regards their connection to the carnivalistic “notion of bisexuality [...] as a release from the burden of socially imposed sexual roles.”⁹ Encolpius’ bisexuality is presented openly and exuberantly while Nick’s possible erotic attraction to men is treated in a veiled manner.¹⁰

Most fundamentally, there are affinities between the implied ethical stances of the authors. The *Satyricon* has been read “as a depiction of a degenerate society, whose individuals are haunted by anguish” and where there is “economical, sexual and culinary [...] satiety without spiritual fulfillment.”¹¹ Petronius has been seen as a moralist “preoccupied to the point of nausea and despair by the hopelessness of a culture corrupted by *luxuria*, a culture which turns men into the living dead, which degrades, desecrates and finally annuls, a culture with-

out joy, without hope, [...]."¹² Although they ultimately evaluate their heroes in different ways, with Petronius offering a blanket condemnation and Fitzgerald insisting on Gatsby's essential "greatness," Fitzgerald describes the decadence, amorality, violence, and confusion of the Jazz Age, as he sees it, in terms which Petronius would understand.¹³

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Even if *The Great Gatsby* is not thoroughly carnivalized, the influence of a carnivalistic masterpiece on it is evidence of its deep kinship with carnival as a sense of the world and as a form of artistic visualization. In point of fact, in Fitzgerald's literary practice, carnival forms become

a powerful means for comprehending life in art, [...] a special language whose words and forms possess an extraordinary capacity for *symbolic* generalization, that is, for *generalization in depth*. Many essential sides of life, or more precisely its *layers* (and often the most profound), can be located, comprehended, and expressed only with the help of this language. (*PDP* 157)

Specifically, in representing Gatsby's parties and in certain other episodes, Fitzgerald conceives of time, space and value in terms of the carnival chronotope, fuses carnivalesque elements from folkloric and literary traditions such as the feast and the grotesque body with the specific features of his own time and place, and makes profoundly significant use of symbolic inversions as the defining image of climactic moments in his narrative.¹⁴

Chronotopically speaking, the essential characteristic of carnival is "carnival time," a temporary, atypical removal from the normal progression of biographical or historical time which flows according to its own laws and during which life is shaped according to a certain pattern of play. The natural setting is the public square and the streets adjoining it, an area where people with a range of social identities can come together and intermingle. But, "to be sure, carnival also invaded the home; in essence it was limited in time only and not in space" (*PDP* 128).

Gatsby's residence, compared to a Hôtel de Ville, an elaborate roadhouse, and a World's Fair, with its enormous gardens lit up like a Christmas tree, where his guests are free to conduct themselves "according to the rules of behavior associated with amusement parks," fully qualifies as carnival space (*TGG* 34). This public arena attracts people who do not know each other or even the host: "People were not invited—they went there. They got into automobiles which bore them out to Long Island and somehow they ended up at Gatsby's door" where they hoped to find all sorts of people mixed together in a communal performance (*TGG* 34). Carnival is not set in motion by an order given by a directive figure but opens simply with some kind of signal to mark the beginning of merriment and foolery. Fitzgerald signals the start of Gatsby's parties with a stunning periphrasis for nightfall and a hint that this "time outside time" will open up a new dimension of experience where, for example, music is visually perceived and laughter is a material substance: "The lights grow brighter as the earth lurches away from the sun and now the orchestra is playing yellow cocktail music and the opera of voices pitches a key higher. Laughter is easier, minute by minute, spilled with prodigality, tipped out at a cheerful word" (*TGG* 34).

The dominant motif of carnival is transgression of conventions and prohibitions, of hierarchical boundaries and of all the rules which determine the structure and order of ordinary, that is noncarnival, life. Everyone abandons daily routines to dance and sing in the streets, consume large quantities of food and drink, enjoy a world where disorder prevails and ordinarily inappropriate behavior is not only permitted but encouraged and expected. In this new realm of existence, the participants are released from their usual alienation from each other, enter into new forms of interrelationships, and enjoy freedom "not only from external censorship but first of all from the great interior censor" (*RW* 94).¹⁵

At Gatsby's, up-and-coming Irish, German, Italian, Jewish, and East European immigrants rub shoulders with guests who belong to New York's social register as well as with new-money people from silent

films, theater and business and there is even a yoking together of the upstanding and the disreputable. This heterogeneous crowd offers an image of some of the centrifugal forces which, during the 1920s, were transforming American society by developing new cultural forms, introducing new ethnic groups, upsetting the existing hierarchy, and shortening the distance between legal and illicit activities.

The forms of liberation offered by carnival do not remain abstract concepts but are concretely acted out in the physical experience of the festivities. The closeness of the revellers as they move through the carnival spaces has the power to make each one feel that he or she is “an indissoluble part of the collectivity, a member of the people’s mass body” (RW 255). These spaces thus become the locus for oceanic feelings of unity with one another. Fitzgerald acutely exemplifies the visceral sense of community and the crowd’s multiform nature through his sea imagery:

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 sea-change of faces and voices and color under the constantly changing light. (TGG 34)

Seemingly, the fragmented nature of society has been temporarily overcome, a sense of the primordial mass of pre-class society has been reestablished, and individuals have the illusion of being able to transcend their habitual roles.

Entering into a larger fellowship is also expressed by playful actions that disrupt the traditional distinction between those who produce a spectacle and those who watch it. Urged on by a sense of *communitas* as well as by the music, the alcohol, and the sheer magic of the time and place, the guests turn into performers who engage in “stunts” all over the garden, dance out alone on the canvas platform, momentarily relieve the musicians “of the burden of the banjo or the traps” or offer their heads for the formation of a singing quartet (TGG 39). Playacting like this permits an escape from delimiting expectations of behavior—

another form of crossing a borderline—and further allows for transcendence of one's own identity and the assumption, perhaps the embodiment, of another.

In keeping with such ambivalence, costumes and masks destabilize fixed identities and help produce an atmosphere of relativity. Masked revellers either give free reign to their imagination or pretend to be what they are not by donning costumes that hide the truth about their social standing, profession, gender, and so on. Although few of Gatsby's guests "dress up,"¹⁶ the idea of a masquerade is introduced in the list of names Nick jots down on his railroad timetable, many of which recall Bakhtin's association of the mask with "transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries, mockery and familiar nicknames" (RW 40). Some guests bear the names of animals, flowers, vegetables, trees, and minerals, such as Cecil Roebuck, Clarence Endive, Henry Palmetto and the Chromes or of heroes from the past like Stonewall Jackson Abrams, Mrs. Claud Roosevelt, and Willie Voltaire. Other names allude to the principle of grotesque degradation, that is, "the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract [...] to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity" as is the case with Claudia Hip and with Belcher, Swett and the Smirkes (RW 19-20). Yet other names associate the bearer with negative character traits like an excess of predatory instincts, as in the Leeches, or duplicity, as in the man reputed to be a chauffeur and a prince of something but "whom we called Duke" (TGG 51).

In the temporary transfer to a world of pleasure and abundance permitted by carnival, the topos of the banquet is an important element since it brings people together and opens their spirits to play and merriment. Eating and drinking are among the most significant manifestations of the grotesque body because during these actions we experience an interaction with the world that gives us an illusory triumph over our usual sense of alienation from it: "man tastes the world, introduces it into his body, [...] devours it without being devoured himself. The limits between man and the world are erased, to man's advantage" (RW 281). Moreover, the joyful consumption of

food in collective feasts has the connotation of accessible happiness for all. The suppers offered by Gatsby at nightfall and at midnight contribute significantly to the lavishness and conviviality of his parties. Fitzgerald depicts them in imagery suggesting masks, jokes, illusionist transformations. Salads of “harlequin design,” turkeys “bewitched to a dark gold,” and, in honor of the carnival animal *par excellence*, some “pastry pigs” magically take on a life of their own so that the edibles crowd together on the buffet tables while “floating rounds of cocktails permeate the garden outside” and provoke a spontaneous surge of “chatter and laughter” (TGG 33, 34).

Bakhtin sees an organic bond between feasting and discourse—“bread and wine [...] disperse fear and liberate the word”—pointing to the symposium, ancient “table talks,” the gay speech of medieval banquets, and even the old adage *in vino veritas* (RW 284-86). As drink releases Gatsby’s guests from the restraints of etiquette, their language is altered to allow a familiarity not permissible at other times, and some of them even appear to adopt marketplace speech in which “there are no neutral epithets and forms; there are either polite, laudatory, flattering, cordial words, or contemptuous, debasing, abusive ones [...] the more unofficial and familiar the speech, the more often and substantially are those tones combined, the less distinct is the line dividing praise and abuse” (RW 420). Gatsby is invariably the subject of “romantic speculation” (TGG 37) and “bizarre accusations” (TGG 52) presented with the ironic ambivalence which turns praise into an insult and abuse into a gesture of admiration. Nick conveys these remarks in a crescendo of overheard fragments of conversation culminating in a delightfully surreal bit of dialogue about Gatsby’s background, activities and even his ontological status in which mockery and exaltation are simultaneously expressed.

“He’s a bootlegger,” said the young ladies, moving somewhere between his cocktails and his flowers. “One time he killed a man who had found out that he was a nephew to von Hindenburg and second cousin to the devil. Reach me a rose, honey, and pour me a last drop into that there crystal glass.”
(TGG 49)

Through contradictory definitions like this, carnival speech calls into question the values through which praise and blame are assigned and confounds the notion of truth on which their assignment is based.

Most importantly, Fitzgerald's narrative can be illuminated by the social and economic observations underlying Bakhtin's theories, especially his conviction that in the modern novel carnival "proved remarkably productive as a means for capturing in art the developing relationships under capitalism, at a time when previous forms of life, moral principles and beliefs were being turned into 'rotten cords'" (*PDP* 166). Nick comments on how lust for money permeates the atmosphere at Gatsby's parties:

I was immediately struck by the number of young Englishmen dotted about; all well dressed, all looking a little hungry and all talking in low earnest voices to solid and prosperous Americans. I was sure that they were all selling something: bonds or insurance or automobiles. They were, at least, agonizingly aware of the easy money in the vicinity and convinced that it was theirs for a few words in the right key. (*TGG* 35)

At the time, bond-selling was becoming a common profession yet it still retained an aura of suspicion because of a perceived difficulty in distinguishing the line separating legitimate from illicit sales. Also, in that period, in order to possess an automobile, many people willingly went into debt or, as one commentator harshly put it, got involved in "the crime of installment selling [...] that is causing manufacturers, advertisers, merchants and consumers to go more madly after material things to the neglect of the things of the spirit."¹⁷ Laws were passed to regulate consumer credit, converting "loan sharks [...] into respectable businessmen" as another commentator quipped, but this did not placate worries that purchasing without first having accumulated the necessary funds was a dangerous practice.¹⁸

A related indictment regards gambling which is "by nature carnivalistic" and "always a part of the image system of carnival symbols" because it brings together people from various positions in life (*mésalliances*) in an activity that in no way corresponds to the roles they ordinarily play (*à l'envers*) and because its atmosphere is one of sud-

den and quick changes of fate in which the lowly can reach new economic heights and the wealthy can take a step down (the turnabout).¹⁹ Fitzgerald uses this symbol to highlight similarities between gambling and stockbroking, both aimed at getting the greatest possible return on an investment, to the extent that they become parodic images of each other:

Da Fontano the promoter came there and Ed Legros and James B. ('Rot-gut') Ferret and the de Jongs and Ernest Lilly—they came to gamble and when Ferret wandered into the garden it meant he was cleaned out and Associated Traction would have to fluctuate profitably next day. (TGG 50)

Although Bakhtin makes it clear that carnival's mirthful inversions offer only a temporary alternative to official culture, he ascribes to them a deep philosophical significance. He speaks of carnival as constituting a "second life of the people" where humanity for a moment can fully realize its potential and experiment with the utopian realm of abundance, freedom, and equality (RW 255). In this context, "utopian" refers not to some future state of perfection but to an ideal world achieved in the here and now. The laughter that is an integral part of this utopia has emotional and cognitive value in that it "demolishes fear and piety [...] thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation."²⁰ It is liberating also because it grasps phenomena not as immutably fixed but in the process of change and transition. Carnival is ephemeral but the 'unofficial truths' regarding the "gay relativity" (RW 11) of all things that it reveals remain in the participants' minds and hearts and, Bakhtin believes, have the potential to transform their inner relationship to the conditions of everyday life.

Aside from a common interest in flirting, gossiping, and enjoying the commodities that fill his playground, Gatsby's guests have no ties, no shared beliefs, nothing that draws them together in a meaningful community. Out of touch with the primitive magic of carnival which transforms a crowd into "the people as a whole [...] organized *in their own way*," (RW 255) these guests' external gestures express only the desperate hilarity of alienated individuals. Their absence of hope in the possibility of redefining their lives is revealed by how, even dur-

ing their most festive moments, they never forget the “too obtrusive fate” which “herded [them] along a short cut from nothing to nothing” (TGG 84). Instead of an affirmative celebration of “the feast of becoming, change, and renewal,” (RW 10) they are imitating models whose naïve confidence they can never replicate. Most pointedly, the last minutes of the parties link back to noncarnival life to highlight its aimlessness, violence, and lack of stable relationships. If, at the start, there was music in the “blue gardens” and “men and girls came and went like moths among the whisperings and the champagne and the stars” (TGG 33), at the end, the gaiety degenerates into chaos as women have arguments with “men said to be their husbands” (TGG 42), the playfulness disappears as the departing guests create a traffic jam in the driveway, and the laughter dissipates into “the harsh, discordant din” (TGG 44) of a car crash.

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Myrtle Wilson’s party occurs in an ambience that seems to point us toward Bakhtin’s description of “rococo carnivalesque” where

the gay positive tone of laughter is preserved. But everything is reduced to “chamber” lightness and intimacy. The frankness of the marketplace is turned into privacy, the indecency of the lower stratum is transformed into erotic frivolity, and gay relativity becomes skepticism and wantonness. And yet, in the hedonistic “boudoir” atmosphere a few sparks of the carnival fires which burn up “hell” have been preserved. (RW 119)²¹

Seen in this light, the party is a miniature, mock version of an eighteenth-century French *salon* culture gathering during which elegantly dressed aristocratic ladies and men would meet in a richly furnished rococo style salon to discuss an artwork or literature as well as to express their wit through storytelling and where the hostess’ learning and ability to stimulate conversation were critical to the success of the event. An emblematic *maîtresse de salon* and icon of the Rococo period was Madame Pompadour. This beautiful, refined and elegant woman, trained from girlhood to believe in her superiority, rose beyond her

class status and entered the ranks of the aristocracy, being pronounced the Marquise de Pompadour, the official mistress of Louis XV. She became the patroness of eminent painters, writers, philosophers and architects like Boucher, Voltaire, Montesquieu, and Lassurance. Her proud, regal figure was immortalized in many splendid portraits by painters of the stature of Boucher, La Tour, and Drouais.

For Myrtle, represented as a parodic double of Madame Pompadour, her apartment is a lavishly-appointed estate where she can assume the identity of a woman of the leisure class, high above the life she leads at the garage in the Valley of Ashes. She has decorated it in a *nouveau riche* attempt at elegance, filling it with oversized furniture upholstered in fabric depicting "scenes of ladies swinging in the gardens of Versailles," a typical subject for Rococo painters who specialized in scenes of aristocratic leisure and of love and seduction in a natural setting (TGG 25). Myrtle, whose face "contain[s] no facet or gleam of beauty," whose dresses "stretch[...] tight over her rather wide hips," and who "carr[y] her surplus flesh sensuously," gets her ideas about gentility from gossip magazines and has no special talents or artistic interests (TGG 23). Her group of guests includes Nick who "was rather literary in college" (TGG 7), Chester McKee who says he is in the "artistic game" (TGG 26) and would like to become a sort of official photographer of Long Island if only he could "get the entry" (TGG 28), Mrs. McKee, a "shrill, languid, handsome and horrible" (TGG 26) woman with strong opinions on everything, and Myrtle's sister Catherine whose sticky bob of red hair, complexion powdered milky-white and innumerable pottery bracelets jangling up and down her arms give her a distinctly clownish appearance. The only 'conversation pieces' available are McKee's overenlarged photograph of Myrtle's mother that "hover[s] like an ectoplasm on the wall" and an ignored copy of the 1921 bestselling novel *Simon Called Peter* (TGG 26). Myrtle leads her guests in banal chatter about topics like getting more ice and problems with feet or in pretentious talk of unfortunate experiences at the gaming tables in Monte Carlo. Far from being refined and polite, her speech is sprinkled with mispronunciations and mis-

usage of words and sometimes descends into the “violent and obscene” (TGG 29). Considering her efforts at self-fashioning, it is curious that she fails to pick up on Mrs. McKee’s hint that her husband be given a commission to do her portrait—“If Chester could only get you in that pose [...]” (TGG 27).

Amorous intrigues in the apartment replicate, at a lower level, the action represented in Jean-Honoré Fragonard’s quintessentially Rococo masterpiece, “The Swing” (1767). This painting depicts, in a lush pastoral setting with statues of cupids, a flirtatious young woman in a frilly pink dress being pulled on a swing by an older man in cleric’s clothes (her husband, a servant, a bishop?) while her lover, strategically positioned on a bed of roses, looks up her skirt and she teases him by kicking off her shoe in his direction. Myrtle, whose eroticism is overt rather than playful, exchanges sexual favors with Tom and he evokes the figure of her cuckolded and perhaps impotent husband by suggesting that Chester do a photographic study of “George B. Wilson at the Gasoline Pump” (TGG 28). Another episode of seduction and dalliance involves the triangle made up of Nick, Mrs. McKee, and Chester whom Nick describes as “a pale feminine man” (TGG 26). She lets Nick accompany Chester back to their apartment and the men have a sexually-charged exchange of words in the elevator. After an ellipsis, the narration finds the two of them in the McKees’ bedroom where Chester, clad in his underwear, is showing Nick his portfolio of photographs.

Myrtle intends her party as her apotheosis as royal mistress. Her path from low to high began when she encountered Tom in a “railway car [which in literature] [...] is a substitute for the *public square*, where people from various positions find themselves in familiar contact with one another. Thus there is the coming together of the *beggar prince* and the *merchant millionaire*. The carnivalistic contrast is emphasized even in their clothing” (PDP 174). The sight of Tom in his dress suit, patent leather shoes, and starched white shirt took her breath away, so, repeating to herself “You can’t live forever, you can’t live forever,” she headed off with him to become his mistress (TGG 31).

On the day of her party, Myrtle carefully selects a new lavender-colored taxi cab with grey upholstery for her triumphant drive across New York—somewhat like the coronation parade along the city streets of a *roi-pour-rire* on the “hell.” Along the way, there is the farcical scene of the acquisition of a royal gift in the form of a puppy of uncertain breed. Myrtle makes a ceremonial entrance into the apartment building “[t]hrowing a regal homecoming glance around the neighborhood” (TGG 25) and then sweeps into the kitchen as if “a dozen chefs awaited her orders there” (TGG 27). At the height of the festivities, she disappears into the bedroom to array herself in an elaborate afternoon dress of cream colored chiffon which gives out a continual rustle. How such a masquerade can confer an identity at odds with the wearer’s stable sense of self and express the joy of change and reincarnation, is highlighted by Nick: “With the influence of the dress her personality had also undergone a change. The intense vitality that had been so remarkable in the garage was converted into impressive hauteur” (TGG 26). With carnivalesque ambivalence, her regal air mingles with grotesque exaggeration until

[h]er laughter, her gestures, her assertions became more violently affected moment by moment and as she expanded the room grew smaller around her until she seemed to be revolving on a noisy, creaking pivot through the smoky air. (TGG 26-27)

Myrtle does not realize that her period of false privilege as a travesty queen is limited to the temporary and atypical moment of carnival, and that she can be punished if she steps out of line or in any other way displeases the king. Her pose is tolerated until she attempts to extend her sway beyond the permitted limits at which point she is forced into “the ceremonial of the ritual of decrowning [which] is counterposed to the ritual of crowning: regal vestments are stripped off the decrowned king, his crown is removed, the other symbols of authority are taken away, he is ridiculed and beaten” (PDP 125). As the evening draws to a close, Myrtle attempts to violate the sacredness of her rival by chanting her name:

"Daisy! Daisy! Daisy!" shouted Mrs. Wilson. "I'll say it whenever I want to! Daisy! Dai—"

Making a short deft movement Tom Buchanan broke her nose with his open hand.

Then there were bloody towels upon the bathroom floor and women's voices scolding, and high over the confusion a long broken wail of pain.
(TGG 41)

The party ends with the despairing figure of Myrtle on the couch, stripped of her illusions, bleeding profusely, and trying to spread a copy of *Town Tattle* over the tapestried scenes of Versailles.

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As with Myrtle, in those parts of Gatsby's story governed by the carnival chronotope, "the carnivalistic act of crowning/decrowning is, of course, permeated with carnivalistic categories (with the logic of the carnival world): free and familiar contact (this is clearly manifest in decrowning), carnivalistic *mésalliances* (slave-king), profanation (playing with the symbols of higher authority)" (PDP 125). An indispensable element in Fitzgerald's representation of Gatsby is the carnival topos of the renewal of clothes and the social image. Gatsby is almost always in disguise not only for the joy of changing identities but also to hide something, to keep a secret, to deceive. After disassociating himself from his family origins and the provincial territory of his birth, he begins to fashion a new self-image modelled on the nature of the world he wishes to enter not as Jimmie Gatz but as Jay Gatsby. At eighteen, he eagerly exchanges his torn green jersey and pair of canvas pants for the blue jacket and white duck trousers given him by Dan Cody in which he looks like a millionaire's dashing son. While he courts Daisy in Louisville, he conceals his status as "a penniless young man without a past" under "the invisible cloak of his uniform" as an army officer (TGG 116). Only through this disguise can he overcome the socioeconomic barrier separating him from Daisy, and gain access to her world. When not actually in masquerade, he paints exaggerated verbal self-portraits. For instance, he tells Nick he

is the last surviving member of a wealthy Midwestern family and that he once lived “like a young rajah in all the capitals of Europe” (TGG 52).

Gatsby, however, wants more than to play at what he is not. His deepest desire is a shift of position and destiny from a poor farm boy to a prince worthy of marrying “the king’s daughter” (TGG 94). He feels this metamorphosis is at hand when he is finally reunited with Daisy. Wrapped in his golden aura, assuming the air of a monarch showing his realm to his beloved, and arrayed in his white suit, silver shirt and gold colored tie—the apparel he has chosen for his period of misrule—he escorts her through his shining, palatial home and re-values everything “according to the measure of response it drew from her well-loved eyes” (TGG 72). Their tour reaches its climax in his bedroom where, as surrogate emblems of a high familial lineage, he keeps photographs of Cody and of himself in a yachting outfit. Here, he opens his wardrobe and ritualistically displays his piles of custom-made imported shirts as a sign of his rank and as a tribute to her. In this emotional moment, she symbolically accepts him as her royal suitor. Having successfully drawn Daisy into his masquerade, he enjoys a taste of intense life set, as Klipspringer’s song reminds us, in a very carnivalesque “*In between time*” (TGG 75). But already, at the height of his glory, Gatsby seems to have forebodings of his downfall and of Daisy’s change of heart as if he somehow sensed that crowning and decrowning are inseparably dualistic, one invariably passing into the other. As Nick takes leave of the lovers he notices that “the expression of bewilderment had come back into Gatsby’s face, as though a faint doubt had occurred to him as to the quality of his present happiness” (TGG 75).

Gatsby feels he is on the verge of crowning his dream on the day he encounters Daisy and Tom and they transfer from the Buchanans’ mansion to the Plaza Hotel, a public setting implicitly associated with the carnival square by its very name and rendered even more appropriate by the sounds of merrymaking at a large wedding downstairs which filter into the suite where the confrontation between Tom and

Gatsby takes place. Gatsby believes he has reached the moment of absolute reversal when Daisy will leave Tom and marry him. Tom, who has wearily tolerated Gatsby because he has seen him only as a clownish parvenu, finally realizes that he has become a true threat to his marriage and determines to put an end to his attempt at profanation, namely, "his presumptuous little flirtation" (TGG 105). What ensues is a "scene of the scandal and decrowning of the prince—the carnival king, or more accurately of the carnival bridegroom" when "the 'rotten cords' of the official and personal lie are snapped [...] and human souls are laid bare" (PDP 161, 145). Launching into verbal violence aimed at stripping away Gatsby's public image, Tom makes fun of his pink suit, ridicules his "circus wagon" (TGG 94) of a car, renames him "Mr. Nobody from Nowhere" (TGG 101), and reveals the illegitimacy of his fortune, thereby unveiling his total lack of social respectability.

For an instant during this scene of scandal, when Tom recalls tender intimacies with Daisy and she confesses that she loved him while loving Gatsby too, and Gatsby struggles to "touch what was no longer tangible [...] that lost voice across the room," the three of them let their masks drop and show their emotional vulnerability (TGG 105). The pathos of the moment is compounded by Gatsby's blindness to the truth, so evident to Nick, that Daisy "never intended doing anything at all" (TGG 108). The relative ease of Tom's victory reveals the fragility of the identity Gatsby has fashioned out of illusions and built on insubstantial hopes. Indeed, his painstakingly constructed persona "'Jay Gatsby' had broken up like glass against Tom's hard malice and the long secret extravaganza was played out" (TGG 115-16).

It is quite telling that both decrownings are followed by the ritual of dismemberment for, in carnival, the king "is abused and beaten when the time of his reign is over, just as the carnival dummy of winter or of the dying year is mocked, beaten, torn to pieces, burned, or drowned even in our time" (RW 197). Myrtle, "her life violently extinguished" by the car Daisy was driving, lies dead and mutilated in the road "her left breast [...] swinging loose like a flap," her "mouth wide open and

ripped at the corners," her blood mingling with the dust (*TGG* 107). Tom escapes Wilson's wrath by directing him toward Gatsby. The next day, when Nick finds Gatsby's body floating in the pool, "his blood tracing [...] a thin red circle in the water," and sees Wilson's corpse lying in the grass, he realizes "the holocaust was complete" (*TGG* 128). With this burning of the "hell," the carnival truly comes to an end and the ruling authorities reascend the throne. The customary order has been restored and further consolidated through the kind of social control by which members of the upper classes eliminate opponents of the lower classes.

In Bakhtin's theory, the brief reign of a travesty king or queen symbolizes the relativity of human structure and order as well as a temporary victory "over supernatural awe, over the sacred, over death" (*RW* 92). The carnival monarch's divestment of power while being ridiculed, beaten, or even killed is indissolubly linked to rebirth and the possibility of renewal. The concluding episodes of Fitzgerald's novel work in ways antithetical to these premises. Myrtle's and Gatsby's carnivalesque adventures are crushed from without rather than ceding of their own accord to an appointed limit. Their tragic destinies are not charged with any kind of dialogical significance vis-à-vis Tom and Daisy, who do not allow their lives to be affected by the deaths they cause but go on living as if nothing had happened.

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NOTES

¹Georges Balandier, *Political Anthropology*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970) 41.

²Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984). Cited in the text as *PDP*. It is worth reiterating Bakhtin's emphasis on how, during carnival, the festive crowd assigns powerful officials inferior positions while simultaneously conferring high status on individuals heretofore on the margins of society. The lowly subject who is elected to office enjoys, in an outrageous manner, the prerogatives of sovereignty

for the duration of carnival, at the end of which he or she is ignominiously or savagely deposed. Nonetheless, the crowning of the mock king or queen is a potentially subversive attack on authority since it allows for "a concretely sensuous, half-real, half-play-acted form, a new mode of interrelationship between individuals, counterposed to the all-powerful socio-hierarchical relationships of noncarnival life" (PDP 123).

³Without reference to carnival, Paul L. MacKendrick, a classicist, pointed out a number of important links in "The Great Gatsby and Trimalchio," *The Classical Journal* 45.7 (April 1950): 307-14.

⁴Costas Panayotakis, *Theatrum arbitri: Theatrical Elements in the Satyricon of Petronius* (New York: E. J. Brill, 1995) 63.

⁵An important analysis from a Bakhtinian perspective of carnival in the *Satyricon* is R. Bracht Branham, "A Truer Story of the Novel?" *Bakhtin and the Classics*, ed. Branham (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2002) 175-80.

⁶"Introduction" to Petronius' *Satyricon*, ed. and trans. R. Bracht Branham and Daniel Kinney (Berkeley: U of California P, 1996) xxi-xxii.

⁷Mariangela Scarsi, "Il maestro 'dai piedi di vento,'" Gaio Petronio, *Satyricon*, ed. and trans. Scarsi (Florence: Giunti Gruppo Editoriale, 1996) xxxii-xxxiv.

⁸F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925). All quotations come from the Cambridge Edition of the Works of F. Scott Fitzgerald, ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli, 1991. Cited in the text as TGG.

⁹Robert Stam, *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1989) 93.

¹⁰For this aspect of Fitzgerald's characterization of Nick and its relationship to the characterization of Encolpius, see Keath Fraser, "Another Reading of *The Great Gatsby*," *Critical Essays on F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby*, ed. Scott Donaldson (Boston: G. K. Hall & Company, 1984) 140-53.

¹¹Maria Plaza, *Laughter and Derision in Petronius' Satyricon: A Literary Study*, (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2000) 46.

¹²William Arrowsmith, "Luxury and Death in the *Satyricon*," *Arion* 5.3 (1966): 304-31; 324.

¹³MacKendrick 308. In contrast, William Frohock, in *Strangers to This Ground: Cultural Diversity in Contemporary American Writing* (Dallas: Dallas Southern Methodist UP, 1961) 60, asserts that "Scott Fitzgerald was no Petronius."

¹⁴Much valid criticism has centered on parties in *The Great Gatsby* and a few critics have examined this fundamental aspect from a perspective that includes the idea of carnival. For example, in *Candles and Carnival Lights: The Catholic Sensibility of F. Scott Fitzgerald* (New York: New York UP, 1978) 111-16, written before Bakhtin's theories were available in English, Joan M. Allen discusses carnival imagery in the context of her specific interest in Fitzgerald's "Catholic

sensibility"; although Christopher Ames uses Bakhtin's ideas as part of his theoretical approach in *The Life of the Party: Festive Vision in Modern Fiction* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1991) 139-50, his reading differs from mine because it is based on the conviction that "parties, though structurally and stylistically important in *The Great Gatsby* are, finally, thematically insignificant" (41); Philip McGowan's interest in *American Carnival: Seeing and Reading American Culture* (London: Greenwood P, 2001) 68-78, is in contrasting the colorful gaudiness of Gatsby's parties with the concept of "whiteness" represented by the Buchanans.

¹⁵Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984). Cited in the text as RW.

¹⁶The gathering at Gatsby's in Chapter Six was originally conceived of as a costume party with the theme of the harvest dance; guests who did not arrive in costume were given bonnets or straw hats. See Trimalchio: *An Early Version of The Great Gatsby*, ed. James L. W. West (Cambridge: CUP, 2000) 80-81.

¹⁷Roger W. Babson, *The Folly of Installment Buying* (New York: Ayer Co. Reprint ed., 1976), quoted in Michael Tratner, *Deficits and Desires: Economics and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Literature* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2001) 73.

¹⁸Walter S. Hilborn, *Philosophy of the Uniform Small Loan Law* (New York: Division of Remedial Loans, Russell Sage Foundation, 1923), quoted in Tratner 73.

¹⁹See PDP 171 for Bakhtin's brief remarks on gambling.

²⁰Mikhail Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel," *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: U of Texas P, 1981) 23.

²¹Bakhtin notes that "in European carnivals there was almost always a special structure (usually a vehicle adorned with all possible sorts of gaudy carnival trash) called 'hell' and at the close of carnival this 'hell' was triumphantly set on fire" (PDP 126).