

A Modest Letter in Response to *The Great Gatsby*, Bakhtin's Carnival, and Professor Bevilacqua*

Dear Editors:

Many thanks for forwarding me this article and providing me with an opportunity to respond to it. I not only appreciate the print forum you have offered in *Connotations*, but also found myself highly engaged with the author's argument and my own response to it. Although I may appear highly critical of Prof. Winifred Farrant Bevilacqua's handling of this subject, she nevertheless managed to reawaken my own thinking about this subject. And when you consider that Mary Jane Dickerson and I first published our own Bakhtinian reading of *The Great Gatsby* no less than eighteen years ago,¹ Bevilacqua has accomplished some feat.

Bevilacqua in her essay demonstrates, I think, a solid understanding of Bakhtin's notion of carnival as a festival of misrule. She does so by examining the bond that exists in *The Great Gatsby* between images of subversion, masquerade, and illusion that are appropriate to Bakhtinian elements of carnival. Particularly insightful is Prof. Bevilacqua's attention to eating and drinking in *Gatsby* as "a form of play" (111) that also coincides with manifestations of the grotesque body described by Bakhtin. However, for Bakhtin, these aspects of eating and drinking—along with other manifestations of carnival—signal liberation, the moment when humanity is placed in the position to realize its potential in the act of freeing itself from the social and moral restraints that characterize the non-carnavalesque. *Gatsby*'s revelers, and Bevilacqua acknowledges this, descend into mere grotesques when

*Reference: Winifred Farrant Bevilacqua, "'... and the long secret extravaganza was played out': *The Great Gatsby* and Carnival in a Bakhtinian Perspective," *Connotations* 13.1-2 (2003/2004): 111-29.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the Connotations website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debbevilacqua01312.htm>>.

alcohol unleashes their inhibitions. Certainly they exist in the comedy of misrule, but their behavior appears more objectionable than liberating, as drunks stare blankly into space or, worse, take the opportunity to fight, sing, and engage behavior, as Fitzgerald notes, more appropriate for an amusement park. I guess I would say the same thing about Bevilacqua's treatment of Gatsby himself as a figure from carnival; he appears less as a liberated figure of subversion than pathetic and desperate.

Prof. Bevilacqua acknowledges that "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" (112). All of this is true enough, of course, but the author fails to explore to any real degree precise illustrations of where and why this occurs in the novel. There are, after all, a variety of *different kinds of time* at work in the novel—historical and mythological time, for instance, interfacing with narratological time to create heterogeneous histories, both personal and national.

Prof. Bevilacqua notes correctly that "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" (113), but she does little to demonstrate exactly how this distortion of temporal reality affects the novel itself, or to supply specific evidence of its occurrence. The fact that Gatsby's parties create a world where "disorder prevails and ordinarily inappropriate behavior is not only permitted but encouraged and expected" (114), is not the same thing at all; while true enough, this observation does not explore Bakhtinian conceptions of biographical or historical time.

While the author cites several interesting publications that deal with Bakhtin's use of carnival under the Notes section of her essay, precious little of this scholarship is used to support and advance Bevilacqua's insights into *Gatsby* per se. In our article, Mary Jane Dickerson and I have shown that the mantelpiece clock is not only an operative

symbol for time throughout the novel, but also a means for examining Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope in specific operation. Chapter 5, where the mantelpiece clock appears, and the point in the narrative cited by Fitzgerald himself as the most significant in the novel, is set in Nick's living room and contains, in Bakhtin's words, "the place where the major spatial and temporal sequences of the novel intersect [...] the place where encounters occur [...] where dialogues happen, something that acquires extraordinary importance in the novel, revealing the character, 'ideas' and 'passions' of the heroes."² At the moment when Gatsby's head makes contact with the broken clock, he has just been reunited with Daisy, giving substance to his belief that the advance of time can be altered or even halted. And this thesis is symbolically portrayed as Gatsby's head—the place where his memories of the past originate—is juxtaposed with the defunct clock. The scene thus becomes an illustration of Bakhtin's time-space relationship: Gatsby exists *physically* in one temporal arena, but he *mentally* inhabits another. However, just as Gatsby appears to have the past within his grasp, reunited with Daisy, Fitzgerald reminds us of the Bakhtinian awareness of just how ephemeral and tenuous our understanding of time really is. The very realization of Gatsby's dream, like the "trembling fingers" that catch the clock as it falls from the mantelpiece, highlights the ephemeral relationship that he maintains with time, "the dangerous [...] pressure of his head" literally juxtaposed against a broken clock falling through space. This is the sort of detailing that the reader often yearns for in Bevilacqua's analysis.

The one place where Prof. Bevilacqua does pause sufficiently within the text is in her discussion of Myrtle Wilson's identity and party pretensions. Discussing Wilson as a parody of eighteenth-century French salon culture is a masterful stroke of insight, especially when the writer interprets her affectation as an attempt to emulate "a woman of the leisure class, high above the life she leads in the Valley of Ashes" (121). This insight would seem to reflect the kind of social inversion Bakhtin celebrated in the various mock rituals associated with carnival. Surprisingly, however, Prof. Bevilacqua fails to capital-

ize on or complicate this connection; although it is appropriate to view Myrtle as a grotesque figure of parody and exaggeration, her link to Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque remains somewhat unclear, since she is only white trash *pretending* to assume the role of royalty. In this context, how can we then see her as representative authority figure whose power is undermined by the action of carnival?

Discussing Prof. Bevilacqua's interpretation made me realize how much more still remains to be said about *The Great Gatsby* and the meaning that Bakhtin imparts to it.

Tony Magistrale
University of Vermont

NOTES

¹Mary Jane Dickerson and Tony Magistrale, "The Language of Time in *The Great Gatsby*," *College Literature* 16.2 (1989): 117-28.

²Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: U of Texas P, 1981) 246.