

Bakhtin and History: A Response to Winifred Bevilacqua*

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Winifred Bevilacqua provides a superb analysis of the overall plot of *Gatsby* as a Bakhtinian Carnival: the temporary enthroning of a carnival king and queen (Gatsby and Myrtle) replacing the authoritative king and queen of the noncarnival world, Tom and Daisy. This approach sheds considerable light on the peculiar ambivalence which has troubled critics of the novel: Gatsby is praised as embodying all the dreams that made and could still make America a great nation and yet he seems something of a buffoon. If Gatsby is a carnival king, he is of course a figure full of absurdity and even silliness, and yet he serves to remind us of the possibility of something greater than the mainstream structures of authority surrounding him. The chill that descends over the novel when Gatsby shuts down his parties to be alone with Daisy is not simply evidence that he has been pursuing impossible dreams: it is part of the inevitable slide of any carnival king into the orgy of destruction and dismemberment which ends a festival. The popular flavor of the novel also gains new dimensions: its role as a literary work is something of a carnival moment in the rise of Modernism, and as such may have much to reveal as a parody of other more canonically "authoritative" artworks.

Bevilacqua uses Bakhtin as a tool to uncover subtle formal structures in Fitzgerald's novel, but her analysis has larger implications if we add to it what Bakhtin describes as the basic function of a carnival: "Carnival is the place for working out, in a concretely sensuous, half-

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real and half-play-acted form, a *new mode of interrelationship between individuals*, counterposed to the all-powerful social-hierarchical relationships of noncarnival life" (*Problems* 123). The word "new" is important in this phrase: the carnival is not merely an occasion for fantasizing an imaginary alternative to current social-hierarchical relationships; rather it is part of a process of actually developing something new, something that will eventually become a part of the social order. Bakhtin argues that the substitution of carnival figures for social authorities within a novel reveals that the discursive structures which support those authorities "are (in real life) doomed to death and displacement" (*Discourse* 312). In Bakhtin's Marxist framework, the crucial realm in which social structures die and new ones emerge is economics. We can then use Bevilacqua's analysis to see how *The Great Gatsby* rehearses the emergence of new modes of economic interrelationship in the early twentieth century.

Bevilacqua touches briefly on economic issues, noting that "Fitzgerald's narrative can be illuminated by the social and economic theories underlying Bakhtin's theories, especially his conviction that 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»'" (118). Bevilacqua interprets the passage from Bakhtin which she quotes as saying that modern novels capture critiques of capitalism, and so she goes on to illustrate such critiques by citing comments contemporary with *The Great Gatsby* that decry the immorality which surrounds bond selling and the buying of automobiles on "installment" plans, practices which appear repeatedly in the novel—Nick and Gatsby sell bonds, while George Wilson tries to get Tom to let him buy and resell his car, presumably on credit. Bevilacqua describes the contemporary sense of immorality surrounding bond selling and buying on credit as evidence that the novel is revealing the "rotten cords" of capitalism, the corrupting effect of what is described in the novel as "easy money" (*TGG* 46).

I wish to suggest a different interpretation of these same economic elements in the novel, based on looking a bit more closely at what Bakhtin says in the quote Bevilacqua includes in her article. In that quote, Bakhtin says that the “developing relationships under capitalism” are turning “*previous* forms of life, moral principles and beliefs [...] into ‘rotten cords’”—in other words: what is being exposed as rotten is not capitalism but rather pre-capitalist forms of life. So what Bakhtin would point to as the “rotten cords” in *The Great Gatsby* are those elements which resonate with a pre-capitalist worldview. It is not hard to see Tom and Daisy as vestiges of an aristocratic style, a pre-capitalist style that somehow is continuing on within capitalism. They have money but they have no awareness of where that money comes from or what would make it grow; they just spend their money and presume that there will always be more. The economic practices of bond selling and buying on credit which Bevilacqua points to as emblematic of capitalism are not at all associated with Tom and Daisy or with any sense of an older, decaying order, but rather with Gatsby, George Wilson and Nick Carraway; those practices, I suggest, are images of the new “developing relationships under capitalism” being initiated by the carnival itself. The fact that contemporary social commentary found a kind of “immorality” in bond selling and buying automobiles on “installment” is not so much evidence that those activities are in general worthy of condemnation in a rejection of capitalism; rather the contemporary critiques of such practices as immoral is evidence that they embodied a challenge to older forms of morality which were dying out. And certainly in the decades after this novel, buying automobiles on installments lost all tinge of immorality, and bonds became if anything emblems of stolid, conservative financial dealings. Fitzgerald is thus capturing in his art a moment of transition, when a new economic morality within capitalism, a “new mode of interrelationship of individuals,” is replacing an older one.

Before we examine in more detail what new form of capitalism this novel might be signaling, we might consider a reason why this novel would appear a bit different from the works Bakhtin generally dis-

cusses: because it is written rather later, after the Russian Revolution; it could then be interpreted as representing the era in which, in a Marxist view, capitalism is dying out entirely. Bevilacqua gets close to suggesting something like this, describing Gatsby's death as "the kind of social control by which members of the upper class eliminate opponents of the lower classes" (127). In Bakhtin's theory, the destruction of the carnival king and queen as opponents of the old form of authority is only a temporary act: the "new modes" embodied in the carnival figures will later come into reality. In Bevilacqua's description, then, the novel foreshadows the triumph of the lower classes over the upper.

That of course did not happen in the U.S., and Bevilacqua provides some justification for not seeing this carnival as foreshadowing the end of upper-class rule in America: because the ending does not seem satisfying as a carnival ending at all. She finds in the novel little of "rebirth" or "renewal" because "Myrtle's and Gatsby's carnivalesque adventures are crushed from without rather than ceding of their own accord to an appointed limit." As a result, their deaths have no "dialogical significance vis-à-vis Tom and Daisy, who do not allow their lives to be affected by the deaths" (127). According to Bevilacqua, then, this carnival does not make any difference, does not bring about any "new modes of interrelationship": it is a failed carnival.

However, there is another way to account for the sense we have that the ending is not quite a satisfying return or renewal: the failure of "rebirth" or "renewal" can be seen as indicating that what is being played out in this novel is one of those moments when a carnival does not quite work because it occurs right at the very end of the historical tenure of a social structure. At such a moment, the restoration of the non-carnival king and queen could seem quite dissatisfying, more as an act of violence holding back the future than a renewal. And that is what the end of this novel seems. The non-carnival king and queen—Tom and Daisy—regain power, but their return does not seem a triumph: it is, as Nick puts it, a "retreat" which reveals that they are immoral, "careless people—they smashed up things and creatures

and then retreated back into their money" (*TGG* 187-88). In that summary judgment, Tom's and Daisy's "form of life, moral principles and beliefs" are revealed as thoroughly "rotten cords."

Furthermore, there has been within the carnival itself an element that suggests that the play here is much less fantasy and much closer to reality than in most carnivals: during the carnival, Tom and Daisy do not simply disappear to be replaced by the carnival king and queen; rather Tom and Daisy themselves take part in the revelry and in a sense merge with the carnival figures. Instead of a substitute royal couple, we get two substitute semi-royal couplings: Tom joins with Myrtle while Gatsby joins with Daisy; all four then participate in that fundamental activity of all carnivals: sex outside of the moral strictures of marriage. Moreover, the book makes it clear that Tom and Daisy are not just casually having fun as a supplement to their real lives: they need the excitement and energy of the carnival and of their non-marital sexuality because in their non-carnival lives, they are enervated, weak, impotent. Tom, though he has one of the "most powerful" bodies, has no motivation, no goals, so he just "drift[s] on, forever seeking for the dramatic turbulence of some irrecoverable football game" (*TGG* 10). He reads old books and passes through a series of mistresses, searching for something he lacks, "as if his sturdy physical egotism no longer nourished his peremptory heart" (*TGG* 25). Daisy does not provide the nourishment he seeks, because she, too, is in some sense empty. Her body is so light and delicate that she seems "buoyed up as through upon an awkward balloon"; when she first appears in her living room, she seems to have been "blown back in after a short flight around the house" (*TGG* 12). Daisy is passive and hollow. What Tom and Daisy both need and what they gain, temporarily, from Myrtle and Gatsby, is that core of self-directed energy which Fitzgerald calls "vitality." When Myrtle appears, she has an "immediate perceptible vitality about her as if the nerves of her body were continually smoldering" (*TGG* 30). She brings fire and nerve to get Tom's "hulking" body moving again. Similarly, Gatsby brings to

Daisy “the colossal vitality of his illusion,” which is so overwhelming that at times she “tumbled short of his dreams” (*TGG* 101).

In this novel, the rich have the means to do anything, but they just drift about, while the lower classes have colossal vitality but lack the means to make use of their vitality. Marx of course predicted that such a moment would arise and would foment the revolution, but instead this book presents in its carnival the emergence of “new modes of interrelationship” within capitalism, new forms of interaction between the upper and lower classes which merge the desires of the lower classes with the wealth of the upper. Such a transformation of capitalism is precisely what emerged in the early twentieth century: a new economic orthodoxy, replete with a new morality and new modes of relationships among individuals and among classes: the “Keynesian Revolution.”

Keynes’s theory focuses on a crisis in capitalism which is very much what afflicts Tom and Daisy: the problem that great stockpiles of wealth seem to be just sitting there, drifting along, no longer driving the engines of economic growth. And Keynes’s analysis of what is missing is very much what *Gatsby* and Myrtle bring: desire, or, in economic terms, “demand” (Keynes 23-25), the willingness to consume. Keynes predicts that capitalism is threatened by a lack of desire or demand because too much money has been stored up in the bank accounts of the rich: saved money goes to finance increases in capital and increases in production but it does not go into purchasing power, and so a clog appears in the economic cycles, the clog Keynes attributed to ‘oversaving’ and others called “underconsumption” (324). It might seem strange to see Daisy and Tom as exemplars of “underconsumption” but in contrast to *Gatsby* and Myrtle such a label becomes clear: what *Gatsby* and Myrtle bring into the world of Daisy and Tom is colossal consumption. Tom and Daisy have as much money as *Gatsby*, but, as Keynes says about the rich, they have a low “propensity to consume” (90-91)—they don’t want anything much as they drift about—and that gets in the way of the growth of capital. Keynes’s solution when capital is stalled because of a lack of con-

sumption, a lack of desire, in the economic system, is deficit spending, designed to put money in the hands of the lower classes, who have a much higher “propensity to consume” and thus increase “demand” for goods: given access to money, the lower classes bring the missing desires back into the economic system. We can see Keynes’s logic in this novel: when Myrtle and Gatsby have access to money, they are able to act on their large desires, which has the effect of providing energy or vitality to the rich.

Of course the Keynesian transformation of capitalism really occurred in the 1930s, due to the crisis that was the Depression. But the core values of a new system of economics were in place by the 1920s, and it is those new values which made Keynesian ideas acceptable in the 1930s. The historian of economics Lawrence Birken traces a shift from 1870 to 1914 that he characterizes as a move from the “values of production” to the “values of desire” (37). The novel rather precisely traces this shift in values, as Gatsby’s dreams—his strong desires, his demands—emerge at the end of the book as of much greater value than Tom’s vast accumulation of riches.

Furthermore, one of the key economic changes of the twenties—the explosion of consumer credit—also prepared the way for acceptance of Keynesian ideas. The reason consumer credit grew so rapidly was that automobiles were invented and presented a new economic problem which was very much the kind of problem Keynes analyzed: automobiles contained great value and were highly desired by nearly everyone but could not be sold to most people because of a lack of cash. Cars would have just decayed in sales lots without a new method of providing people purchasing power—and that new method was consumer credit, which prepared the country to accept Keynesian deficit financing.

Gatsby’s excessive consumption in the novel and his fabulous car are thus images of the economic future, not merely reflections of the wild, free spending of the twenties which was about to disappear in the Depression. The twenties revealed a new way for economics to run: driven by consumption, not by production. Without the power of

consumption, without demand, capital just sits there and has no energy to generate anything. Tom and Daisy are images of this kind of stalled capital, wealth unable to circulate.

During the “carnival” Tom and Daisy feed like vampires on the “demand,” the colossal build-up of desire, within the lower classes, and in doing so regain for a time the “vitality” which makes all their stored-up power able to act. The end of the carnival could have marked the end of this process, but the book hardly returns the reader to the world of Tom and Daisy or to the virtues of their ways of using wealth: rather we are left with a deep desire for more glorious dreams like Gatsby’s. The end of novel thus propels us into the new Keynesian economic system, in which those who are not rich (i.e., most of the readers of the novel) will be provided with numerous ways (such as reading and buying on credit) to satisfy our desires through consumerist sharing in the “goods” of the wealthy—the parties, the elegant clothes, the automobiles. In the new modes of capitalism which emerge after this novel, the lower and upper classes are locked together in a tight economic embrace. The lower classes are allowed to satisfy their immense desires by “consuming” the lifestyles of the rich and the powerful, and these lower-class acts of consumption provide the energy to propel into circulation the stockpiles of wealth of the upper classes which would otherwise drift about carelessly.

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