

T. S. Eliot and F. Scott Fitzgerald: Some Affinities

Gregory Hutchinson

In his excellent introduction to the Everyman edition of *The Great Gatsby*, Jeffrey Meyers mentions F. Scott Fitzgerald's admiration for T. S. Eliot. Without the help of a British critic, it might not occur to us that Fitzgerald cared about the self-elected Englishman.

Eliot was born and educated (up to graduate-school level) in the United States, but he moved to England, acquired a perfect English accent, and became a conservative British subject. Furthermore, he is the exemplar of twentieth-century British poetry. No other British poet (Yeats being Irish) is seriously compared with him, either for quality or influence.

Fitzgerald, by contrast, is best known as the chronicler of the jazz age. He is even more obviously American than Hemingway. Although for a while in his private life Fitzgerald assumed the role of that nostalgic Gershwin type the "American in Paris," we do not associate him with Europe. Even his style exemplifies what his friend H. L. Mencken called "the American Language." It is Hemingway's style that one thinks of as typically American, but if we were asked for an example of this style, we could, in good conscience, select one of his brilliantly Anglicized renditions of Latin conversation. Aside from his short stories, Hemingway's best fiction is set in Europe, and its famous spareness of diction owes much to

the pretense of rendering Spanish and Italian.

And yet, pristine American though he was, Fitzgerald praised *The Waste Land* — Eliot's most radical experiment of the twenties, at least — within two years of its publication, and he was a great admirer of Eliot's poetry. This is all clear from the external testimony of letters and anecdotes.

The question that this fact raises, however, is whether Fitzgerald's admiration points to a similarity in their actual writing. I believe it does. I see affinities in mood, image, sensibility, and, more generally, in their reaction to the modern world. In this paper I would like to use Eliot's poetry and Fitzgerald's best novel, *The Great Gatsby*, to discuss these affinities. While Fitzgerald will be represented exclusively by *Gatsby*, examples from Eliot will come from various poems, written before 1925.

Perhaps the first similarity we notice between the two writers is their reaction to the dead landscape. Eliot often strikes one as prophetic in his choice of images. Portraying the scene around him, he seems to sum up not so much the squalor of his own day as the disaster that is only now (as the millennium approaches) revealing itself. Take, for example, his image of the "tumid river":

The river's tent is broken; the last fingers of leaf
Clutch and sink into the wet bank. The wind
Crosses the brown land, unheard. The nymphs are departed.
Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.
The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,
Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends
Or other testimony of summer nights (Eliot, *The Waste Land*,

The Complete Poems and Plays, p. 67).

The fourth line above (beginning "Sweet Thames,") is from a simple celebration of the river, written in the sixteenth century by Edmund Spenser. Its absurdity in the present context is the point. Empty bottles, cigarette ends, and the rest of the rubbish may not be seen, but they are the usual "testimony of summer nights" — which, in the larger strategy of *The Waste Land*, suggests why the fishing is unpromising. The romantic associations of "summer nights" are as absurd in this setting as Spenser's line, with which the phrase resonates. Similar images of filth characterize the poems from Eliot's *Prufrock* volume:

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes,
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys...
("The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," Ibid, p. 13).

Half-past two,
The street-lamp said,
"Remark the cat which flattens itself in the gutter,
Slips out its tongue
And devours a morsel of rancid butter" (Eliot, "Rhapsody on
a Windy Night," Ibid., p. 25).

Since Eliot wrote the charming book of light verse that inspired

the Broadway musical *Cats*, it is interesting to note that each of these depressing observations turns positively unhealthy through the introduction of a cat image. In the first scene, the fog is personified as a cat licking up stagnant water; in the second, a real cat licks up a "morsel" (an awful culinary word in this context) of "rancid butter." A visual blight is thus associated with disease and possible death.

In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald achieves a very similar significance describing the valley of ashes:

About half way between West Egg and New York the motor road hastily joins the railroad and runs beside it for a quarter of a mile, so as to shrink away from a certain desolate area of land. This is a valley of ashes — a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air. Occasionally a line of gray cars crawls along an invisible track, gives out a ghastly creak, and comes to rest, and immediately the ash-gray men swarm up with leaden spades and stir up an impenetrable cloud, which screens their obscure operations from your sight (Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, p. 26).

Here the scene is New York City's borough of Queens during the early twenties, when the land was being reclaimed. The view from the train is dreary, and the men whose job it is to shovel the heaps

of dusty refuse over previous layers are indistinguishable from the dust itself until one's train passes close to them.

In fact, the people are the hardest to make out. First, supposed hills reveal themselves as houses, and chimneys. Next, the smoke emitted by the chimneys can be distinguished from the dust, and even then it takes a "transcendent effort" to identify the moving forms as human. The image (especially conspiring with the thought of what this ashen dust must be doing to the lungs of the workers) is of a land that robs its dwellers of their humanity. It is overseen by the now-famous Dr. T. J. Eckleburg sign: eyes perhaps two meters wide, judging by the size of the retinas, in a pair of fading yellow glasses. They are attached to no face and refer to no existing eye clinic. Dr. Eckleburg may have died ("[sunk] down himself into eternal blindness") or abandoned the place. In the narrator's fancy, they both typify and judge this barren landscape:

But above the gray land and the spasms of bleak dust which drift endlessly over it, you perceive, after a moment, the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg. 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. Evidently some wild wag of an oculist set them there to fatten his practice in the borough of Queens, and then sank down himself into eternal blindness, or forgot them and moved away. But his eyes, dimmed a little by many paintless days under sun and rain, brood on over the solemn dumping ground (Ibid.).

It comes as no surprise that when a resident of this valley appears, he seems distinctly unhealthy. This is George Wilson, garage owner and deceived husband of Myrtle Wilson (Tom Buchanan's mistress). He emerges from his dusty garage, "wiping his hands on a piece of waste" and generally looking as colorless as everything else:

He was a blond, spiritless man, anemic, and faintly handsome. When he saw us a damp gleam of hope sprang into his light blue eyes (Ibid., pp. 27-28).

Wilson blends in with his garage, too:

Get some chairs, why don't you, so somebody can sit down." [This is Mrs Wilson.]

"Oh, sure," agreed Wilson hurriedly, and went toward the little office, mingling immediately with the cement color of the walls. A white ashen dust veiled his dark suit and his pale hair as it veiled everything in the vicinity — except his wife, who moved close to Tom (Ibid., p. 28).

This is a morally blighted landscape as well. The way Wilson fades into the gray is reflected in his tendency to sullenness, which is stifled in this scene by Tom Buchanan's arrogance. Tom has been promising to sell Wilson his luxurious car as an excuse to visit the garage and set up trysts with Myrtle:

"Hello, Wilson, old man...How's business?"

"I can't complain," answered Wilson unconvincingly.

"When are you going to sell me that car?"

"Next week; I've got my man working on it now."

"Works pretty slow, don't he?"

"No, he doesn't," said Tom coldly. "And if you feel that way about it, maybe I'd better sell it somewhere else after all."

"I didn't mean that," explained Wilson quickly. "I just meant—" (Ibid., p. 28).

When Wilson eventually learns that Myrtle is cheating on him, he tries to lock her in. Reacting hysterically, she runs out in the street in front of the speeding car driven by Daisy Buchanan, Tom's wife. Soon afterwards, Wilson guns down Gatsby, who, according to the shameless Tom, was both Myrtle's lover and the driver of the car that killed her (Tom's coveted car). Of course Gatsby was neither. But Wilson's final act of pent-up sullenness is to kill himself, so he never learns the truth. Tom's sarcastic dismissal of Wilson, "He's so dumb he doesn't know he's alive" (p. 29), has a cruel aptness. Wilson is more dead than alive from the beginning.

Leaving aside the melodrama, the whole Valley of Ashes episode is strikingly anticipated by *The Waste Land*. There is even a passage describing Wilson's state: "I was neither/Living nor dead, and I knew nothing" (Eliot, *The Waste Land*, Ibid., p. 62), though this phrase is uttered by a figure with more sensitivity and from a higher social sphere. The closest parallel is in the parched mountain scene of Part V, where the dead landscape and the sullen people blend into each other:

If there were only water we should stop and drink
Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think
Sweat is dry and feet are in the sand
If there were only water amongst the rock
Dead mountain mouth of carious teeth that cannot spit
Here one can neither stand nor lie nor sit
There is not even silence in the mountains
But dry sterile thunder without rain
There is not even solitude in the mountains
But red sullen faces sneer and snarl
From doors of mudcracked houses (Ibid., p. 72).

In Eliot's mountains, Wilson's sullenness — later revealed to be repressed violence — has a counterpart in the frenetic movement of the lines (enhanced by the lack of punctuation) as well as in the repetitions and the sullenness of the inhabitants. Their parched red faces blend into their mud-red huts — and their angry facial creases complement the cracks in their huts — in the same way that the anemic Wilson and his dusty suit fade into his gray environs.

A second point of affinity between *Gatsby* and Eliot's poetry can be seen in the portrait of Wilson's wife. Myrtle is not anemic or sullen. In the passage quoted above, the "ashen dust" veils everything in the garage "except Mrs Wilson" (Fitzgerald, p. 28). In fact she exudes what the narrator, Nick Carraway, calls "vitality" (Ibid., p. 28). But she is deliciously vulgar. Myrtle has a serious purpose in the story as an instrumental cause of Gatsby's death. But she is portrayed with a kind of surreal humor.

When Tom's car happens to pass a vendor hawking a cartful

of mongrels, she insists on stopping the car and buying one. She wants "one of those police dogs" (Ibid., p. 30), presumably meaning a German shepherd. Ironically, Tom, the Yale graduate, doesn't know the right term either: "That's no police dog," he says (Ibid.), blending accurate observation with his native stupidity. Then, at the party in the tasteless little flat Tom has given her, Myrtle gradually flowers into a monster of lower-class affectation. Addressing her sister as "My dear" — a form that her nemesis, Daisy (Tom's upper-class wife) wouldn't be caught dead using — she drops a haughty reference to her imperial habits:

"My dear," she told her sister in a high, mincing shout, "most of these fellas will cheat you every time. All they think of is money. I had a woman up here last week to look at my feet, and when she gave me the bill you'd of thought she had my appendicitis out" (Ibid., p. 33).

Of course, she means "appendix," the organ, not "appendicitis," which is an acute inflammation thereof. Whether this "feet" business is astrological or merely a manicure isn't clear; Myrtle's unmistakable point is her power to have a "woman" attend on her, as if she were rich.

Furthermore, Myrtle is full of unconscious insult. When Mrs McKee (whom even the tolerant Nick calls "horrible" [Ibid., p. 32]) pays her a compliment, Myrtle rejects it in terms that either express contempt for Mrs McKee and the other plebeians or mean nothing at all; we never learn which:

"I like your dress," remarked Mrs McKee, "I think it's adorable.

Mrs Wilson rejected the compliment by raising her eyebrows in disdain.

"It's just some crazy old thing," she said. "I just slip it on sometimes when I don't care what I look like."

All of this is observed by Nick, who happens to be a gentleman in every sense. Though not one of the filthy old rich, like Tom, he is from a good family, Yale-educated, mild, and principled. Like almost everyone in the story, Myrtle senses Nick's quality and confides in him. This story of how she first met Tom is her greatest moment:

Myrtle pulled her chair close to mine, and suddenly her warm breath poured over me the story of her first meeting with Tom.

".... When we came into the station he was next to me, and his white shirt-front pressed against my arm, and so I told him I'd have to call a policeman, but he knew I lied. I was so excited that when I got into a taxi with him I didn't hardly know I wasn't getting into a subway train. All I kept thinking about, over and over, was 'You can't live forever; you can't live forever.'"

This is only part of Myrtle's wonderful speech. The panting quality at the end ("You can't live forever; you can't live forever") is especially fine. My own response, admittedly subjective and un-

transferable, is sympathy. Despite her crudity and double negatives, the unaffected Myrtle is endearing. She wants to live, and this is her chance. Though it is worse than vulgar to ridicule her husband in public, she can hardly be blamed for wanting something better than the sterile "life" at the garage. Then too, as we note the second time through the novel, Myrtle *doesn't* live forever.

Actually, Eliot's portraits of unsavory love affairs are so numerous and similar in spirit to the above suggestions, they might have been the conscious inspiration for Fitzgerald's portrait of Myrtle. The incantatory quality of Myrtle's breathless story is in the tradition of poetry more than prose, and Eliot was Fitzgerald's poet of choice in the nineteen-twenties.

Since this is unprovable, though, what we can observe are the parallels. The central Tiresias passage in *The Waste Land*, describing the typist's rendezvous with her pimply young "house agent's clerk," could be telling an alternate story: not Myrtle's affair with Tom or even her affair with Wilson, but a hypothetical affair between Myrtle and Mr McKee, the over-solicitous little photographer (husband of the horrible Mrs McKee). Lacking pride and pining for some kind of commission from Tom, McKee ignores Tom's scorn throughout the evening. He even fails to challenge Tom's sneering dismissal of his arty "studies" (the joke involves a snicker at Myrtle's husband as well): "You'll give McKee a letter of introduction to your husband, so he can do some studies of him," Tom says to Myrtle: "'George B. Wilson at the Gasoline Pump' or something like that" (Ibid., p. 35). Later, on his return from the party, McKee is shouted at by the elevator boy, who knows whom to bully:

“Keep your hands off the lever,” snapped the elevator boy.

“I beg your pardon,” Mr McKee said with dignity, “I didn’t know I was touching it” (Ibid., p. 39).

This portrait exactly captures the tone in which Eliot, via Tiresias, describes the young clerk:

He, the young man carbuncular, arrives,
A small house agent’s clerk, with one bold stare,
One of the low on whom assurance sits
As a silk hat on a Bradford millionaire.

“A Bradford millionaire” is a nouveau riche, like Gatsby and the rest of the West Egg residents. But of course this clerk is one of the truly “low,” and only resembles this type in his insecurity. His real American counterpart is McKee. Even the bold stare reminds us of McKee, earnestly and absurdly framing Myrtle Wilson for a picture — a fatuous ploy to ingratiate himself with Tom. If we can imagine McKee *in flagrante delicto* with someone like Myrtle, the rest of the description is almost perfectly apt:

Flushed and decided, he assaults at once;
Exploring hands encounter no defense;
His vanity requires no response,
And makes a welcome of indifference....
Bestows one final patronizing kiss,
And gropes his way, finding the stairs unlit....

Poetry readers will note that except for the last line, with its intentionally groping, uncertain rhythm, this is written in the heroic couplets and strict iambic pentameter of Alexander Pope. Also notable is the reaction of the typist when her "lover" has "departed." If we can imagine Myrtle after this scene, she might have thought exactly the same thing, and, by a dialectal coincidence, in the same words:

She turns and looks a moment in the glass,
Hardly aware of her departed lover;
Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass:
"Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over" (Eliot,
The Waste Land, *Ibid.*, p. 69).

But this would have been the more resigned Myrtle of her early years with George. While the clerk could be McKee's twin (but for his age), the typist is a bit too passive for the Myrtle in her avatar as Tom Buchanan's mistress. More evocative of Myrtle in her present state is the Cockney barmaid of Part II of this poem:

When Lil's husband got demobbed, I said—
I didn't mince words, I said to her myself,
HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME
Now Albert's coming back, make yourself a bit smart,
He'll want to know what you done with that money he
gave you
To get yourself some teeth. He did, I was there.
You have them all out, Lil, and get a nice set,

He said, I swear, I can't bear to look at you.
He's been in the army four years, he wants a good time,
And if you don't give it him, there's others will, I said,
Oh is there, she said. Something o' that, I said.
Then I'll know who to thank, she said, and give me a
straight look (Ibid., p. 66).

The barmaid ends her monologue with a stream of "Goonights" ("Goonight Bill, Goonight Lou. Goonight May. Goonight. / Ta ta. Goonight. Goonight" [Ibid.]), which Eliot sets off ironically against Ophelia's beautiful line (in *Hamlet*): "Good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good night, good night" (Ibid.). Fitzgerald may well have been thinking of this scene in another context. At the end of a wild party Nick stops to thank Gatsby (the host):

"Philadelphia wants you on the phone, sir" [the butler tells Gatsby].

"All right, in a minute. Tell them I'll be right there... Goodnight."

"Good night" [Nick answers].

"Good night." He smiled — and suddenly there seemed to be a pleasant significance in having been among the last to go, as if he had desired it all the time. "Good night, old sport...Good night" (Fitzgerald, p. 54).

This could be a coincidence, or Fitzgerald might have been thinking only of Shakespeare. But it is just as likely that he was thinking of both writers. If so, by his pronunciation at least, Gatsby is on

the aristocratic side: at least he can say, "Good night" distinctly. And Myrtle, clearly, is on the barmaid's side. The vulgarity and disgusting details — especially the straight talk about how Lil needs dentures, presumably said in a loud voice for all to hear — are exactly the tone of Myrtle's loudly expressed opinions. First is the contempt for George alluded to earlier:

"Crazy about him!" cried Myrtle incredulously.

"Who said I was crazy about him? I never was any more crazy about him than I was about that man there."

She suddenly pointed at me [Nick], and every one looked at me accusingly. I tried to show by my expression I had played no part in her past (Fitzgerald, p. 37).

And finally, there is the scene with Tom, over her right to mention Daisy:

Some time toward midnight Tom Buchanan and Mrs Wilson stood face to face, discussing in impassioned voices whether Mrs Wilson had any right to mention Daisy's 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 (Ibid., p. 39).

This scene is especially useful because it brings us, finally, to Tom's case. We have already observed his tendency to sneer and lie. In this scene with Myrtle, he shows himself to be a brute and

a bully. The first time we read this novel, we may assume that this is Tom at his worst, but it really isn't. In Tom's case one is tempted to say, with Hopkins, "No worst — there is none." Actually, Tom is always throwing his weight around. The size and muscles that made him an All American end at Yale is still in evidence:

Not even the effeminate swank of his riding clothes could hide the enormous power of that body — he seemed to fill those glistening boots until he strained the top lacing, and you could see a great pack of muscle shifting when his shoulder moved under his thin coat. It was a body capable of enormous leverage — a cruel body (Ibid., p. 12).

Stated precisely, Tom's problem isn't power, but the cruel use of power that Nick senses in his irksome habit of moving him from place to place. This habit is noted in the first scene of the novel, at Tom's house:

Before I could reply that he was my neighbor dinner was announced; wedging his tense arm imperatively under mine, Tom Buchanan compelled me from the room as though he were moving a checker to another square (Ibid., p. 16).

Ironically, the "he" referred to is Gatsby, whose name has just been mentioned by Jordan Baker. Nick has not even met Gatsby yet and has no way of knowing that his "neighbor" bought the house in West Egg with one obsessive idea in mind: he hoped Daisy Buchanan would eventually come to one of his parties and they could pick up

their romance where, for Gatsby, it had left off. Jordan has just mentioned Gatsby's name because he's the only person she knows by name in West Egg, where Nick lives, and Daisy perks up her ears momentarily at the name. But Daisy doesn't hear any more because Tom interrupts by "wedging" his muscular arm "imperatively" under Nick's and conveying him to another room, thus ending the conversation.

The same brute force accounts for Nick's presence at the party with Tom's mistress. On an idle Sunday afternoon, changing trains, he happens to meet Tom on the platform of a station located in the valley of the ashes | , and Tom simply forces Nick to join him:

I went up to New York on the train on afternoon, and when we stopped by the ashheaps he jumped to his feet and, taking hold of my elbow, literally forced me from the car

"We're getting off," he insisted. "I want you to meet mygirl."

I think he'd tanked up a good deal at luncheon, and his determination to have my company bordered on violence. The supercilious assumption was that on Sunday afternoon I had nothing better to do (Ibid., p. 27).

Beneath the obvious bullying, and the soon-to-be obvious cruelty, is the root cause of both: Tom's egoism. It is observed here in the "supercilious assumption" that Nick can give up his own plans on a moment's notice to gratify his whim. And ultimately Tom's most destructive "act" — worse than breaking Myrtle's nose — is nothing physical at all. It is lying about Gatsby to Wilson. The lie results

in Gatsby's death. but, being a true egoist, Tom feels no remorse. He even expects Nick to shake hands with him after the shooting. And Nick, being a sort of latter-day Henry James hero, does shake hands:

I couldn't forgive him or like him, but I saw that what he had done was, to him, entirely justified. It was all very careless and confused. They were careless people, Tom and Daisy — they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money....I shook hands with him; it would be silly not to, for I felt suddenly as though I were talking to a child (Ibid., p. 170).

The Tom Buchanan figure in Eliot is Sweeney, the eponymous hero of an interesting but uncompleted drama, *Sweeney Agonistes*, and of two poems ("Sweeney Erect" and "Sweeney Among the Nightingales") from Eliot's volume entitled, simply, *Poems*. He also appears in a third poem entitled "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Service." Eliot has a more historical, less novelistic sense of brutishness than we see in *Gatsby*. The poems are all satirical, and it is often impossible to be sure what is happening. Nevertheless, the function of Sweeney in the poems is clear enough. In "Mr Eliot's Sunday Service," for instance, a very subtle internal monologue seems to be generated by a divine named Mr Eliot. It involves the deliberate use of words we never encounter in everyday life: "Polyphiloprogenitive," (a word comprising the entire first line), "Superfetation," "pustular" (Eliot, the poet, seems to like elegant synonyms for "pimply"), "piaculative," and several more. This is good satire and daring verse, but what

throws it into relief is the last stanza:

Sweeney shifts from ham to ham
Stirring the water in his bath.
The masters of the subtle schools
Are controversial, polymath (Eliot, *Poema*, p. 54).

Those subtle masters may be “polymath” (versed in many fields and languages), but Sweeney isn’t: he wouldn’t even know the word. So the last two lines can hardly be his reflection. I believe they are a demonstration that after contemplating Sweeney, the nebulous narrator cannot resume in the original tone. The resulting effect is a humorous non sequitur.

What Sweeney does think like is suggested in “Sweeney Erect.” First, the present scene, with a woman undergoing apparent convulsions on a bed (convulsions that disgustingly parallel sexual acrobatics), is set against a really beautiful classical evocation, the second stanza of which runs:

Display me Aeolus above
Reviewing the insurgent gales
Which tangle Ariadne’s hair
And swell with haste the perjured sails. (Ibit., p.42)

The classical tale of Aeolus and Ariadne involves betrayal and death, yet it is beautiful and inspiring. Against this, we have the modern, sordid scene in the flat, with women outside fretting about the reputation of “the house.” And in the middle of all this stands

Sweeney:

Sweeney addressed full length to shave
Broadbottomed, pink from nape to base,
Knows the female temperament
And wipes the suds about his face (Ibid., p. 42).

Again, we get a view of Sweeney's backside and his complacency about the entire scene. We also know from "Sweeney Among the Nightingales" that he is "Apenecked" (p.56) In that poem Eliot contrasts his danger (the nature of which is almost comically opaque) with the classical tragedy of Agamemnon. Sweeney represents the same cheapening of life that in *The Waste Land* is suggested by the contrast of the twentieth-century Thames with Spencer's "sweet" river. Real tragedy, like the murder of Agamemnon, is impossible with a creature who can't, in Emerson's sense, be called "a man":

(The lengthened shadow of a man
Is history, said Emerson
Who had not seen the silhouette
Of Sweeney straddled in the sun.) (Ibid., p. 43)

Sweeney and Tom Buchanan are not exactly the same kind of characters, of course, but they share three concentric features. First, both are physical brutes. Tom is as apenecked as Sweeney. Secondly, each character's brutishness indirectly threatens us all: each of them, in his own way, exhibits what Eliot once described as "The conscience of a blackened street/Impatient to assume the world" ("Preludes,"

Ibid., p. 23).

The specifically modern threat is obvious in Sweeney's case, as he is constantly set against characters from myth. Sweeney represents the modern absence of myth, which is a malady from which we all suffer.

Tom's historical significance is less obvious, but is thematically registered in his financial influence. It is even suggested that he is a budding fascist. The one book he seems to have read is a local version of *Mein Kampf* entitled *The Rise of the Colored Empires*, which he defends in such illiterate terms that we wonder how he was ever admitted into Yale:

"Well, it's a fine book, and everybody ought to read it. The idea is if we don't look out the white race will be — will be utterly submerged. It's all scientific stuff; it's been proved... It's up to us, who are the dominant race to watch out or these other races will have control of things" (Fitzgerald, p 18).

Probably, we muse, he got in Yale by belonging to a fabulously rich and powerful family and class — exactly the class that flirted with fascism in the decade and a half between wars. Like Sweeney, though in a more literal way, Tom is a menacing historical phenomenon.

Finally, both Tom and Sweeney are egoists, with a yen for violence and death to animate their brutishness. As suggested, the ultimate expression of Tom's egoism is the murder of Gatsby at the hands of the doubly deceived George Wilson. One might add that Myrtle's death was part of the same causal chain. Tom's menace

consorts with real financial power. Even abetting a murder carries no consequences for him. And this is obviously the significance of Sweeney. Thus it is not too fanciful to say that Sweeney's menacing repetition in *Sweeney Agonistes*, "I know a man once did a girl in," anticipates Tom's relationship with Myrtle. Sweeney may be referring to something he did himself, but whether he is or not, he approves. After the last insinuating repetition of this line, he says as much:

I knew a man once did a girl in.
Any man might do a girl in
Any man has to, needs to, wants to
Once in a lifetime, do a girl in (Ibid., *Unfinished Poems*, p. 43)

Sweeney is gleeful in the contemplation of this act. There is no concern for law, decency, or kindness; self-gratification is all that concerns a "man." Hence the child-like excitement as the verbs ascend from the possible ("might") to the inevitable ("has to"); and from the predestined ("has to, needs to") to the personally pleasing ("wants to"). Just as talking to Tom about Gatsby's or Myrtle's death was "like talking to a child," this creed of Sweeney's is basically childish. And no one who has contemplated the impersonal violence of the last few decades will think it fantastic.

Differences between Tom and Sweeney are obvious enough. One is an excessively rich American, developed along realistic lines, while the other is a Cockney Irish portrayed through strictly poetic devices, including myth. But in their significance the two characters are alike in resembling the "rough beast" of Yeats's "The Second

Coming”:

...somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs....
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?
(Yeats, p. 235.)

Tom's brutal egoism resembles Sweeney's in evoking this half-human monster. Like the beast, they are thoughtless, pitiless, and menacing. Above all, they are creatures of the twentieth century.

Texts Employed

- Eliot, T. S. *The Complete Poems and Plays*. Faber and Faber Limited, London, 1969.
- Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. Penguin Books, London, 1926, 1950. (This was used as the text. Occasionally, spellings have been Americanized.)
- Myers, Jeffrey (ed.), Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. Everyman, London, 1993. (The excellent essay by Myers, pointing out that Fitzgerald had read *The Waste Land*, inspired this paper.)
- Albright, Daniel (ed.), *W. B. Yeats: The Poems*. Everyman, London, 1994, 1995.