mined to act in a decently human way. ". . . it grew upon me that I was responsible, because no-one else was interested—interested, I mean, with that intense personal interest to which everyone has some vague right in the end."

Carraway is also, by now, converted to Gatsby: "I found myself on Gatsby's side, and alone." His final compliment to Gatsby, "They're a rotten crowd. . . . You're worth the whole damn bunch put together" may not add up to much, but it is at least true, and a statement to which everything has been moving. At the very least, it is a recognition that being right about the nature of things is no excuse for being inhuman. In its broader implications, it is part of the larger meaning of the novel: which is that in a tragic and imperfect world scorn and condemnation can often come too easily as attitudes. Human warmth and pity may not be able to set everything to rights: but they are costlier and more decent attitudes than mere judgment; and in the waste land, perhaps juster than judgment itself. . . .

He cannot make reality more acceptable than it is, or find a way out of the waste land, or suggest a cure for the cynicism which is eating out the heart of society. He can, however, prize the highest human values that he sees, and respond to the misfortunes of others with a pity which has in it a feeling for human suffering as a whole. It is characteristic that in the closing sentences he should find in Gatsby's tragic awakening a symbol of the disenchantment of mankind as a whole—and end on a note which, transcending both Gatsby's personal fate, and the *folie-de-grandeur* [folly of grandeur] of the America which he also represents, achieves a universal tragic vision as haunting as any I can think of in a novel.

Two American Dreams in Conflict

Brian M. Barbour

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Gatsby *is sometimes interpreted as a symbolic novel, sometimes as the epitome of realism. These two concepts in the novel are linked not to one single American Dream, but two incompatible dreams. First is the dream of Benjamin Franklin, whose practical philosophy is founded on the fear that tyranny takes away the freedom to control one's own life, and that the way to maintain one's liberty is through economics—money. This is the dream that dominates the class structure in* Gatsby. *The second, competing dream is Ralph Waldo Emerson's. It stresses inner, spiritual independence and values. Jay Gatsby has progressed to an Emersonian stage in a society that is still Franklinesque.*

What I am trying to establish is the kind of representative quality the Buchanans have. For they are not meant to be taken as adequate representatives of the American leisure class ("the rich"); rather they represent a deep and permanent tendency in American life, one that surfaces most spectacularly in the leisure class but which is by no means confined to it. The quality they represent, the tendency they embody, is a moral complacency that finds material wealth both self-validating and its own end. The truth about the Buchanans is that they are blind to any values or standards beyond the ones

Brian M. Barbour, "*The Great Gatsby* and the American Past," *The Southern Review*, vol. ix, January 1973, pp. 288–299. Reproduced by permission of the author.

they enact. It is not that they repudiate any deeper wisdom about life and its ends; it is that they are unaware of any such wisdom. "The curse of ignorance," according to Socrates in the *Symposium*, "is that a man without being good or wise is nevertheless satisfied with himself: he has no desire for that of which he feels no want." It is this curse of ignorance that they embody and moral complacency is the quality they represent. Their debased feelings—their infantilism—have the most serious consequences for human life; but the material wealth which validates the moral complacency also makes thinking about ends and consequences unnecessary. The novel lacks the necessary density and roundedness for the Buchanans to be accepted as anything like adequate representatives of the American leisure class. Read like that the novel is not just brittle but absurd. But they represent a quality, a permanent tendency that runs all through American life and which finds its source in Benjamin Franklin.

The Great Gatsby is about the American dream—so the truism goes. But the truism in this case is too clumsy, for there are actually two American dreams and *The Great Gatsby* is about them both and the way they interact. It is convenient to . . . identify these two dreams with the two figures who first articulated them and thereby brought them to consciousness: Franklin and Ralph Waldo Emerson. . . .

The Franklinian dream . . . is one of self-validating materialism that is ignorant about the inner, positive meaning of the freedom it posits as its end, and is in fact complacently blind with respect to any positive moral values or genuinely spiritual sense of human life. The Buchanans embody it in its least attractive form. . . .

Two Different Views of Self-Reliance

Self-reliance is the foremost Franklinian virtue; it is also the title of Emerson's most powerful essay, and the fundamental differences between the two American dreams can be seen by

comparing the inner meanings the concept had for the two men. For Franklin it is a reliance on one's self as an accumulator of wealth. . . .

For Emerson self-reliance was based on trust, but it was decidedly not a trust in the ordinary self of the marketplace. That self had to be redeemed. Self-reliance begins with a reliance on God and it moves through a purgation of the ordinary self. That movement is from the ordinary self existing at the level of Franklinian materialism to the new self that has left materialism behind in order to live in the spirit. . . .

A Means to Rank

Information about Gatsby is scattered piecemeal throughout the novel and accumulates slowly for the very good reason that Nick Carraway has to realize the significance of Gatsby's career and this realization does not come easily. The last piece of the puzzle is provided by the novel's oddest character, Gatsby's father, who does not enter until the last chapter. What he provides pushes the novel to the full limits of its depth and significance. He takes from his pocket a tattered copy of *Hopalong Cassidy* and shows Carraway Gatsby's boyhood schedule scribbled inside the back cover. This schedule associates quite explicitly Gatsby's youthful dreams with the Franklinian version of the American Dream. But Gatsby is not associated with that dream; his is of a different order altogether.

When Gatsby dismisses his servants at the start of Chapter VII he is registering his attitude toward wealth. He cares nothing for it in itself; its only value is as a means to something beyond itself, some fuller, more graceful sense of life of which Daisy is the symbol. Gatsby's is a version of the Emersonian dream: in a great imaginative act he has created himself and set out to explore the possibilities of life. The Franklinian dream was the dream of his youth, but he repudiated that youth and the dream associated with it. Part of his "greatness"

lies in his having transcended the limits of the Franklinian world, but it is his fate that this Emersonian greatness will go largely unnoticed in a world whose fundamental postulates are Franklinian. Gatsby's dream matured, but America's did not. . . .

The Franklinian dream leads only to the dead end of money, and the characteristic animus held against the leisure class throughout the novel is associated with their lack of any enlarging vision. The Buchanans possess wealth and its concomitant freedom but they have no idea of living. They just drift "here and there unrestfully wherever people played polo and were rich together". Their concept of life never extends beyond a game. What the novel dramatizes, then, is the conflict between the two American dreams, one whose idea is material wealth and leisure (a restless leisure), the other whose ideal is less restricted and finally spiritual. But the novel argues its point even more closely. The Emersonian dream of the self depends to a certain extent on wealth also, although on wealth as means not as end. The freedom this wealth produces is *freedom-to*, a positive value, one that looks forward to becoming. One way of seeing the conflict is to say that there has been a fundamental confusion of material and spiritual values and that the novel dramatizes this confusion which is deep in American life. The confusion can account for Gatsby's failure—i.e., his unwise location of the meaning of his dream in Daisy.

But Carraway offers another choice. In his final meditation he notes that Gatsby's dream of the future really lies in the past, "somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic [roll] on under the night". The transcendental vision collapsed under the weight of the Civil War: that is a primary datum of American intellectual history. Another is that in the vast accumulation of wealth that followed, few noticed that it was gone. Where it endured

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([American essayist] John Jay Chapman) or resurges (Martin Luther King) it is a quirk: the American dream is a Franklinian dream. The Emersonian dream is in the possession of the scholars. The older vision was temporarily challenged by Emerson but his dream, which in part was not of this world, ended and the older vision reemerged and changed with the new conditions. It was Horatio Alger, not Emerson, who articulated the sense of the postwar world. . . .

Gatsby embodies the Emersonian dream, perhaps the most attractive quality in American life, and its weakness is his failure. His dream is so beautiful that he assumes that whatever triggers it must also have its haloed quality. The dazzle of the dream leaves his eyes too weak to gaze on ordinary life. Daisy's value for him is purely symbolic; like his shirts or his servants she means nothing in herself. His vision implicitly evaluates American civilization even as it gives dignity and purpose to his life. But while the Franklinian dream is complacently ignorant about the ends of life, the Emersonian dream runs the danger that the dreamer may be transfixed by his end. He may lose his contact with ordinary living.

The Great Gatsby dramatizes the conflict between the two American dreams. It does this because its characters represent fundamental tendencies in American life, and the novel acts its meaning on this representative level. It reveals a profound insight into the American past and the meaning of that past in the present. Fitzgerald dramatizes with a sure touch the moral consequences of the conflict and the moral differences between the two dreams. Moreover, he lays his finger on what is tragically missing in American life: an articulated awareness of moral evil. Both the Franklinian and Emersonian dreams lean too heavily on the thin reed of optimism. What is wanted is the oaken staff of [eighteenth-century American preacher] Jonathan Edwards. The novel, on the literal level, like Gatsby's clothes, always just misses being absurd. But on a different

level it reveals, on the part of its author, a rare inwardness with something that one can only call the meaning of American history.