

A Green Mirror: The Fatal Lure of the Past in the *Odyssey* and *The Great Gatsby*

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Abstract

F. Scott Fitzgerald claimed that he “read only Homer” while writing *The Great Gatsby*, yet previous scholarship has found few echoes of Homer’s poetry in the book. Reopening the “Homeric Question” in *Gatsby* by comparing Homer’s and Fitzgerald’s representations of the past, this paper argues that *Gatsby* adapts the fatal historicity of Homer’s Sirens. Where the Sirens tempt Odysseus to death by immersion in the heroic past, Daisy Buchanan lures Jay Gatsby to death by nostalgia. In both texts, narrator-heroes encounter Siren-figures on flowering islands which are really wastelands of bones and ashes; in both, the Sirens sing a past that is compelling, enchanting, and insincere; and in both, the narrator-hero escapes the Siren-lure through a contrived immobility. Events in both texts are overdetermined by pasts that are close in time but distant in spirit: Like Odysseus’ generation of lost sailors after the fall of Troy, *Gatsby*’s Lost Generation can’t go home again after World War One. Both Bronze-Age Greeks and Jazz-Age Americans construct their pasts in boastful performances at gatherings mixing alcohol and music; they stage origin-stories and war-narratives as exempla of cosmic favor, betokened by wealth and fame but unleavened by love. These historicities are epic plupasts which incite striving for immortality through monumentalization: The individual can become immortal by becoming a sign or *sēma* of something. The past thereby becomes a distorting lens, representing not reality but the wish to remake it in the image of individual hope. In Robert Fitzgerald’s translation of the *Odyssey*, Homer’s Sirens sing of the past as “a green mirror,” while in Scott Fitzgerald’s novel, *Gatsby* sees the past as a reflected green light. These Edenic semiotics suggest that archaic and modern societies share a common cultural construction of the past. Historicity promises a godlike perspective that is, tragically, beyond human capacities to achieve, yet commensurate to our capacity for wonder.

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A Green Mirror: The Fatal Lure of the Past in the *Odyssey* and *The Great Gatsby*

Eden Riebling

I'm going to talk today about how 2 narratives – one ancient, and one modern – construct the past. The ancient one is the Homeric epic known as the *Odyssey*. The modern one is F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. The *Odyssey* presents the dangers of historicity in the famous episode of the Sirens. *The Great Gatsby* echoes those same dangers by presenting its lead female character, Daisy Buchanan, as a Homeric Siren herself.

My basic argument is this. These two works, three thousand years apart, share a common construction of the past – and, especially, of its destructive lure. In both texts, narrator-heroes must overcome the Siren-lure of the past to achieve a *nostos*, a return.

I'll speak first about the fatal past in the *Odyssey*. Then I'll discuss how *Gatsby* re-imagines that Odyssean theme. Finally, I'll consider what the Siren-motif can tell us about what it means to be human in the context of time.

Women in the Western literary tradition are often presented as temptress-monsters, and the Sirens are an enduring form of that archetype.² Half bird and half human, Sirens are enchanting songstresses who live on an island and lure sailors to their deaths. Their Siren Song, as Margaret Atwood says, is something “nobody knows but everyone wants to learn,”³ and the reason no one knows the song is that no one survives hearing it. Well, almost no one: Crafty Odysseus lives to tell the tale in Homer's *Odyssey*.

The Sirens episode can be summarized as follows. Odysseus and his crew arrive suddenly

²Atre, “The Feminine As Archetype,” 151–93; Jung, “Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious”; Higgins, “Myth of Eve,” 639–47; Neils, “Les Femmes Fatales, 75-84; Campbell, *Goddesses*, 169-171.

³Atwood, “Siren Song,” 263-264.

at the Sirens' island. A mysterious calm ensues. The crew plug their ears with wax, tie Odysseus to the mast, and row the ship close to shore. The Sirens sit in a meadow that hides the bones of their victims. They sing:

Come here, Odysseus, famed for your many riddling words, you great glory to the Achaean name, stop your ship so that you may hear our voices. No man has ever yet sailed past us with his dark ship without staying to hear the sweet sound of the voices that come from our mouths. And he who listens will not only experience great pleasure before he goes back home. but will also be far more knowledgeable than before. For we know everything that happened at Troy, that expansive place—all the sufferings caused by the gods for the Argives and Trojans. And know everything on earth, that nurturer of so many mortals—everything that happens.⁴

Unable to resist the Sirens' lure, Odysseus motions for his men to cut him free. But by prearrangement his crew only bind him tighter and they sail safely past the Sirens' isle.⁵

Scholars have wrestled for a long time with questions about the Sirens' allure. Is it their voices themselves which are enchanting, or does the enchantment come from *what* they sing about? Do they cater to each individual in what they promise to sing? How do sailors die on the Sirens' island? Do they starve to death while listening, so enthralled that they forget to eat? Or do the Sirens themselves perhaps eat their victims? Do the Sirens, like the Muses, really know everything – or is this a false promise, part of their deceptive lure?

An influential approach to these questions is the 1979 analysis of Pietro Pucci, which has informed more recent readings by Gregory Nagy and others. To Pucci, the Sirens are the evil twins of the Muses. They speak with the diction of the *Iliad*, and they appeal to Odysseus' nostalgia for his glorious past deeds at Troy. As Nagy says, that is why their song would bring

⁴*Odyssey* 12.184-191. All translations by Fagles unless otherwise indicated.

⁵*Odyssey* 12.39-54, 158-200.

Odysseus out of his own epic, the *Odyssey*, to rot on their island.⁶ To get home, he must get past his past. “The Sirens’ song is an invitation to live in the past,” suggests Bernard Knox, “and that is a kind of death.”⁷ Where the lotus makes the traveler forget everything, the Sirens promise to recall everything. In both cases, an unbalanced relationship to memory impedes return.⁸

The great danger is stasis. The stunting of movement and growth is represented by the dying winds near the Siren’s isle. Freud talks about neuroses as psychic troops we leave behind, to fight battles which ended long ago – and that condition aptly describes Odysseus’ compulsion to relive Troy. It’s a condition common to many latter-day warriors trying to find their way home.⁹ The danger is universal: All men in Homer’s glory-mad world, including Odysseus and his crew, are susceptible to false promises. The Sirens will spell-bind any man alive, whoever comes their way. Whoever draws too close.¹⁰

The Sirens tempt the Homeric hero because they tap into his psyche. Nostalgia compels Odysseus to relive his exploits in a drinking-party that spans four books of the *Odyssey*. When the Achaeans enter Achilles’ tent in *Iliad* 9, they find him singing “the tales of famous men.”¹¹

⁶Pucci, “Song of the Sirens,” 126. Reinhardt (“Adventures in the *Odyssey*,” 75) sees the Sirens as a folktale monsters repurposed to kill by promising self-celebration. Gresseth (“Homeric Sirens,” 217) thinks they “represent primarily Magic Song,” patterned closely on the Sphinxes, Harpies, Gorgons, and Dreams. Vidal-Naquet (“Land and Sacrifice,” 43) sees the Sirens as a fiercer version of the Lotus-Eaters. Nagler (“Dread Goddess,” 147) anticipates Pucci’s analysis of the *Iliad*’s retrograde lure, underscoring the dead calm as one approaches the isle. Vernant (“Refusal,” 186-87) emphasizes the Sirens’ erotic lure, noting that *leimōn*, used to describe their meadow, can refer to the female genitalia. Segal (“Kleos and Its Ironies,” 215) compares the Sirens’ seductive magic to the *thelxis* of Circe, noting that they promise the total recall of the Muses without mentioning memory. Nagy (“Epic Hero,” 79; *Ancient Greek Hero*, 240) deems the Sirens a barrier to *nostos* precisely because they sing the *Iliad*, a song about a hero who is not Odysseus and who does not return. Peponi (“Choreia and Aesthetics,” 71) takes up Segal’s focus on *thelxis* and conceives the Sirens’ allure as aesthetic, a form of (proto-Joycean?) “arrest.”

⁷“Introduction,” Homer, *Odyssey*, tr. Fagles, 34.

⁸Conversation with Karolina Sekita, Feb. 24, 2024.

⁹Shay, *Odysseus in America*, esp. 86-95.

¹⁰*Odyssey*, Fagles 12.46.

¹¹*Iliad* 9.189, tr. Macleod, who notes (*Iliad*, 1) that the same phrase (κλέα ἀνδρῶν) is used in *Odyssey* 8.73 of Demodocus’ themes.

Homer's heroes are lived by what Jonas Grethlein calls "epic plupasts."¹² They're striving for immortality by becoming a sign or *sema* of something.

Yet this quest for future glory based on past exploits can be a prison in the present. In the *Iliad*, King Priam cannot bury his beloved son Hector until he travels to the Achaean camp, passing the Tomb of his grandfather, Ilus.¹³ Likewise Achilles to resolve his wrath must stop what Gregory Nagy calls mourning for ancestors by way of Patroklos, whose name means "he who has the glory [*kleos*] of the ancestors."¹⁴ A defining danger of Homeric heroism is the difficulty of moving beyond time which has become a kind of place.

In this sense, the *Odyssey* implicitly criticizes the idea of caring so much about the last war. Perhaps the Sirens episode is even a critique of the whole tradition of singing about war. Perhaps the *Odyssey* is a commentary on the *Iliad*. Most scholars say that the *Iliad* came first, implying that if the same poet wrote both, he composed the *Iliad* when younger and the *Odyssey* when older.¹⁵ This opens the possibility of competition between the two poems. Maybe a matured and domesticated poet is revising the warlike worldview of his earlier work.¹⁶

But if the epic past is presented as a danger, what does this tell us about how Homeric epic constructed the past? How does this construction plug and play with the past few decades of scholarship on the archaic Greek sense of history?¹⁷ In brief, I believe the Sirens episode can

¹²"Homer and Heroic History," in John Marincola, ed., *Greek Notions of the Past in the Archaic and Classical Eras*, Edinburgh, 2012, 20.

¹³*Iliad* 24.349; cf. *Iliad* 10.415, 11.166, 11.372.

¹⁴Nagy, *Pindar's Homer*, 205.

¹⁵On the relative chronology of the two epics, see esp. Janko, *Homer, Hesiod and the Hymns*, 93.

¹⁶Conversation with Karolina Sekita, Feb. 24, 2024.

¹⁷Mueller (*Iliad*, 3) sees Homeric poetry as the nostalgic recension of a lost heroic age. Anderson ("Making of the Past," 42) argues that Homeric (and all oral) poetry creates an "instant past" for its own rhetorical purposes. Nagy (*Pindar's Homer*, 68-69) regards Greek epic as preoccupied exclusively with the past, lyric as preoccupied with the past in relation to the present. Ford (*Poetry of the Past*, 13) calls Homeric verse simply "the poetry of the past." Boardman (*Archaeology of Nostalgia*, 23) notes the role of ancestral tombs as literal and metaphorical navigation aids in the *Iliad*, the narrative present demarcated by the past. Bakker (*Pointing at the Past*, Preface)

enrich our understanding of these questions by drawing our focus to three ideas.

First, narcissism.¹⁸ The Sirens appeal to Odysseus' vanity. They flatter him as the "great glory of the Achaeans," and promise to sing of all he did at Troy.¹⁹ They don't promise to sing about someone else's past. We're interested in ourselves, and we love to relive our lives, especially our moments of glory. So we succumb to this temptation – either because we're entranced by our own literal reflection, or because we're reflecting on the past. It's a version of myth of Narcissus. It's death by self-absorption. Siegfried Rachewiltz calls the Sirens' appeal "the lure of lyric (self-) enchantment."²⁰

Second, nostalgia. The term derives from the Greek *nostos* (return) and *algos* (pain). Nostalgia is a melancholy caused by prolonged absence from one's home or country. A longing for the conditions of a past age. A wistful memory of an earlier time.²¹ It's the pain we receive not just from thinking about the past, but from being unable to relive it. Homeric heroes are nostalgic in this sense. To them, the past is always greener on the other side.

Third, Edenic semiotics. To the literary critic Roman Jakobson, esthetic language is marked by ambiguity and a self-focusing character; and to literary theorist Umberto Eco, these are qualities of "Edenic" language.²² Self-focusing and ambiguity are also qualities of the Sirens,

regards the Homeric past not something objectively external to us but as something that language creates and makes vividly visible to us in the present. Grethlein ("Beyond Intentional History") centers the "epic plupast," the history preceding the poem's man action, separated by a gap or break in space-time, yet present in moral exempla from a lost heroic age. Whitley ("Diversity in Dark Age Greece") finds that for Homer's heroes, the past is neither remote nor alien; their exemplary history is above all relevant to the present, as evident in the exchange between the Trojan Glaukos and the Greek Diomedes, where "the generation of men is just like leaves," and this empathic note of common mortality presages the discovery that the two men share guest-friendship ties from the past.

¹⁸Ahl and Roisman (*The Odyssey Re-formed*, 147) see the Sirens as "the musical reenactment of [Odysseus'] own past, his own self, his own reflection, his own narcissism."

¹⁹*Odyssey* 12.189.

²⁰Rachewiltz, *Sirenibus*, 5

²¹*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed, Vol. 10, 535, s.v. "nostalgia."

²²Eco, "Aesthetic Messages in an Edenic Language," 90, citing Jakobson. I thank Mark Riebling for this reference.

their song, and its effect.²³ Like the tempter in the Biblical Eden, the Sirens promise total, godlike knowledge; and their meadow, like the Garden of Eden, implies the color green. In Robert Fitzgerald's translation of the *Odyssey*, the Sirens sing of the past as a "green mirror."²⁴ Strikingly, in *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald renders the lure of the past in nearly identical terms, as a reflected green light.²⁵

Fitzgerald claimed that he "read only Homer" while writing *The Great Gatsby*,²⁶ but scholars have found few echoes of Homer's poetry in the book.²⁷ Glenn Settle sees Daisy as a Siren-figure, but does not link her lure to Gatsby's fixation on the past.²⁸ Other scholars see the novel as concerned with the past, but do not connect that theme to Daisy's siren-lure.²⁹ Yet in fact, Fitzgerald adapts both the promise and peril of the Sirens' song; specifically, through Jay Gatsby's fraught relationship to time.

²³Gresseth, "Homeric Sirens," 207 flags the Sirens' ambiguity, noting that Homer does not detail the danger (or describe the Sirens) but instead "leaves an ominous but unspecified aura about the scene."

²⁴*Odyssey* 12.227, tr. Fitzgerald, 215.

²⁵*Gatsby*, 21, 92, 93, 180 (all page numbers from 2018 Scribner edition).

²⁶In May 1924, as he buckled down to complete *Gatsby*, Fitzgerald wrote to a friend, "I'm going to read nothing but Homer... until I finish my novel" (Fitzgerald to Thomas Boyd, May 1924, *Life in Letters*, 68). He later described this all-Homer regimen as an attempt to "to keep his artistic conscience... pure" ("Introduction" to 1934 Modern Library reprint of *The Great Gatsby, F. Scott Fitzgerald in His Own Time*, 156). He had read the Samuel Butler and possibly also the Alexander Pope translations of *The Odyssey* (Fitzgerald to Robert Bennett, September 25, 1940, *Correspondence*, 607). Having read only Homer while writing *Gatsby*, he then complained about being "compared to Homer" (Fitzgerald to Mabel Dodge Luhan, May 10, 1934, *Life in Letters*).

²⁷*Gatsby*, 21, 92, 93, 180.

²⁸Settle, "Fitzgerald's Daisy."

²⁹Steinbrink ("Boats Against the Current," 157) sees the novel's governing statement as: "Such circumstances as give life meaning lie buried in an irrecoverable past." Bruffee (*Elegiac Romance*, 45-46) classifies *Gatsby* as an aesthetic research into the past "to discover the roots of the fundamental structure of meaning that each of us has grown up with." Rohrkemper ("Allusive Past", 153) calls *Gatsby* "the richest meditation on American history to appear in our fiction," while Magistrale and Dickerson ("Language of Time") see the novel as an interpenetration of past and present. Gandal (2008) sees Fitzgerald himself as hung upon the near-past, and trying to rewrite it in *Gatsby*; Buell (*Dream of the Great American Novel*, 149) understands *Gatsby* to be saying that the American dream itself is "already sealed and gone, locked somewhere in the remote inaccessible past." Salmose (*Reading Nostalgia*, 83) sees the novel as fundamentally nostalgic; Goldblatt ("Can't Repeat the Past?") sees *Gatsby*'s rise from near-obscurity to Great American Novel in the decades after 1945 as a function of national nostalgia, born of Cold War fears that the country's best days were in the past.

The Great Gatsby echoes the *Odyssey*'s Siren-episode in uncanny ways. Daisy lives on a deceptive flowering island that is also a Valley of Ashes.³⁰ She maneuvers men into her deadly proximity, sometimes with the aid of a wind that blows and dies.³¹ She tempts the unwary to dock on her shore through flattery and the promise of a wondrous moment. In the scene where we meet Daisy, we even get the wine-dark waters Odysseus sailed: A wind from the Wind "ripple[s] over a wine-colored rug, making a shadow on it as wind does on the sea."³² The narrator-hero, Nick, overcomes Daisy's enchanting vocalization in the same way that Odysseus defeats the Sirens, and with the same result: By a situational immobility, which allows him to complete his postwar *nostos*.

The deepest connection between Homer's Sirens and Gatsby, however, is the fatal lure of the past. Like Odysseus' generation of lost sailors after the fall of Troy, Gatsby's Lost Generation can't go home again after World War One. Where the Sirens tempt Odysseus by immersion in the heroic past, Daisy Buchanan lures Jay Gatsby to death by nostalgia. Yet she's not just a Greek monster in a flapper's dress. By creating his own Homeric narrative of Gatsby returning from war as a sailor stuck in the past, Fitzgerald reworks the Siren myth and makes it his own.

Where song defines the sirens, Daisy's voice defines her character and role. The word

³⁰ For the flower imagery see esp. *Gatsby* 7, 19, 61, 63, 76, 84, 91, 92, 109, 111, 149, 179, 180. When Nick first meets Daisy, they are amid a "half acre of deep, pungent roses" (7), and during the dinner that follows, she seems to him "a rose, an absolute rose" (14). After dinner, just as Nick is about to leave, Daisy surprises him "by opening up again in a flower-like way" (19), and later, Fitzgerald has Daisy "blossom... for [Gatsby] like a flower" (111). In a flashback to Daisy's premarital life, we see "dying orchids on the floor beside her bed" (151), and soon after, just before his death, Gatsby understands "what a grotesque thing a rose is" (161). Daisy is herself named for the "day's eye" which grows abundantly on meadows, opening in the day and closing at night: cf. Daisy's "winking ferociously toward the fervent sun" (13); yet "to push up the daisies" means one has died, and cf. the word's first known use in English, c. 1000, "...and fif-leafe, daisies, and sinful." (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd Ed, Vol. IV, 219-220, q.v. "daisy").

³¹ *Gatsby*, 8.

³² *Gatsby*, 8.

“voice” appears fifty-eight times in the text, more than almost any other noun, and Nick notes her sonic effect in almost every scene in which she appears.³³ He calls her voice compelling, airy, low, watery, murmuring, musical, attractive, singing, thrilling, throbbing, heart-tugging, enchanting, transfixing, promising, insincere, deathless, and full of money. In the opening scene, Daisy’s voice causes Nick to move toward her physically.³⁴ Her voice is so captivating that men only focus on its sound, not its sense.³⁵ On Gatsby especially, its sound has a physical effect: “As she said something low in his ear he turned toward her with a rush of emotion. Her voice held him with its fluctuating, feverish warmth.”³⁶ With her voice she even moves whole groups of men. When Gatsby and Daisy’s husband, Tom, are unsure what to do in a tense moment, only her voice gets them to their feet.³⁷ Daisy’s voice defines not only her but, in effect, the men around her.

Like the Siren’s song, Daisy’s voice is full of empty promises. She entices with the prospect of a bliss that never comes.³⁸ Nick attributes her charm to “an excitement in her voice, a singing compulsion, a whispered ‘Listen,’ a promise of exciting things hovering in the next

³³I quantified Fitzgerald’s noun-use by importing a Project Gutenberg edition of the 1925 text into the Scrivener application and running a Statistics check. The only nouns which appear more often than “voice” are “man,” “house,” “eyes,” “time,” “night,” “car,” “room,” and “hand.”

³⁴She “laughed, an absurd, charming little laugh, and I laughed too and came forward into the room” (8). Later in the scene, Nick says “her voice compelled me forward” (*Gatsby*, 14), and, again, it “compel[led] my attention” (17).

³⁵To comprehend her words, Nick must follow each word individually and trace its denotation. *Gatsby*, 85.

³⁶*Gatsby*, 96.

³⁷*Gatsby*, 119.

³⁸At first Nick agrees with all she says, but when she finishes, the spell is broken and he realizes the superficiality and even falseness of her words. “The instant her voice broke off, ceasing to compel my attention, my belief, I felt the basic insincerity of what she had said. It made me uneasy, as though the whole evening had been a trick of some sort. . . I waited, and sure enough, in a moment she looked at me with an absolute smirk” (*Gatsby*, 17). Later Gatsby explains that the allure in Daisy’s voice is the sound of money. Nick responds: “That was it. I’d never understood before. It was full of money . . . the jingle of it, the cymbals’ song of it,” like a cash register (*Gatsby*, 120). Yet money is only part of the deceitful lure, for Gatsby is already wealthy when he meets Daisy after the war. Not for love of money does he take the fall for her running over Tom’s mistress, Myrtle, whose husband avenges her by killing Gatsby.

hour.”³⁹ Gatsby succumbs to that promise because of his romantic nature. He is a hope addict. “There was something gorgeous about him,” Nick tells us, “an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness.”⁴⁰ Gatsby’s hope and Daisy’s promise are a perfect and finally a fatal match.

What Gatsby wants is a cosmic do-over, and Daisy ruins him by tempting him to live in a lost time. The word “time” appears 85 times in the text, even more than “voice,” and many of the characters stand in an uneasy relation to calendars and clocks. Gatsby first meets Daisy five years before the story starts; they fall in love, but he is sent overseas to fight in the war, and by the time he returns, she has married Tom Buchanan. When Gatsby pursues her anyway, Nick reminds him: “You can’t repeat the past.” “Can’t repeat the past?” he cried incredulously. “Why of course you can!” He looked around him wildly, as if the past were lurking there in the shadow of his house, just out of reach of his hand. “I’m going to fix everything just the way it was before.”⁴¹

That grasping back for the past, just out of reach, informs the series of failed gestures that is Gatsby’s personality. “He stretched out his hand desperately as if to snatch only a wisp of air, to save a fragment of the spot that she had made lovely for him. But, he knew that he had lost that part of it, the freshest and the best, forever.”⁴² When Gatsby first sees the green light at the end of Daisy’s dock, “his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him.”⁴³ As Nick says in the book’s last line, Gatsby is a boat against the current, beating the wrong way, back into the past. What Gatsby wants is beyond his reach, because it already happened.

³⁹*Gatsby*, 9.

⁴⁰*Gatsby*, 2.

⁴¹*Gatsby*, 110.

⁴²*Gatsby*, 153.

⁴³*Gatsby*, 180.

In the closing paragraphs, Fitzgerald extends the siren-motif to an entire culture and continent. Gatsby's unconquerable hope echoes the magical instant when Europeans first beheld North America. Nick describes the effect of that first Edenic vision as "enchanting" and "compelling," words he also uses repeatedly to describe Daisy's voice.⁴⁴ Long before Gatsby died on the "old island," its trees had "pandered" in siren-like whispers to the sailors who first saw the fresh, green breast of the New World.⁴⁵ Daisy is for Gatsby what America was to the sailors who first saw it, and what the Sirens were to Odysseus: The promise of an existence outside the normal rules of time.⁴⁶ But just like a Siren, Daisy leaves Gatsby a foolish, fallen sailor. The novel's marine imagery not only makes him a seafarer,⁴⁷ but hints that he is symbolically drowned.⁴⁸

America, too, ruins by inducing impossible hope. In America hope is a lifestyle, a culture, a national character, almost a religion. Daisy's "deathless song" possesses a power above

⁴⁴*Gatsby*, 96, 98.

⁴⁵*Gatsby*, 180.

⁴⁶Not only his concept of Daisy but his "Platonic conception of himself" is out of time. *Gatsby*, 98.

⁴⁷Gatsby is associated with marine images from his humble beginnings "along the south shore of Lake Superior as a clam-digger and a salmon-fisher" (*Gatsby*, 98). "It was James Gatz who had been loafing along the beach that afternoon in a torn jersey and a pair of canvas pants, but it was already Jay Gatsby who borrowed a rowboat" (98). Cody fishes him from the rowboat in Little Girl Bay, and within a week he owns the clothes of a yachtsman: "a blue coat, six pairs of white duck trousers, and a yachting cap" (100). Gatsby has chosen to live in what Nick describes as once a Long Island "fishing village" (107), but "there was one persistent story that he didn't live in a house at all, but in a boat that looked like a house and was moved secretly up and down the Long Island shore" (97). At Gatsby's first party Nick comments on the "sea-change of faces" (41) and the "swirls and eddies of people" (42). Gatsby has gone "three times around the Continent" on Cody's yacht (100), and the marine imagery includes, finally, use of the nautical term "beat" in Gatsby's leaving home (98) and in the last sentence (180).

⁴⁸There are images of Gatsby as a drowned man at Nick's tea party, and Gatsby floating dead in his own pool. His death is foreshadowed when he appears like a drowned man, before his first rendezvous with Daisy at Nick's tea party: "Gatsby, pale as death, with his hands plunged like weights in his coat pockets, was standing in a puddle of water glaring tragically into my eyes." (86) Then, in death: "There was a faint, barely perceptible movement of the water as the fresh flow from one end urged its way toward the drain at the other. With little ripples that were hardly the shadows of waves, the laden mattress moved irregularly down the pool. A small gust of wind that scarcely corrugated the surface was enough to disturb its accidental course with its accidental burden. The touch of a cluster of leaves revolved it slowly, tracing, like the leg of a transit, a thin red circle in the water" (162) At Gatsby's funeral, the few who come, standing in the rain, are "all wet to the skin" (174).

time,⁴⁹ and that is the fatal lure of America, too, for old-world Europeans like Gatsby's forebears. Gatsby uses his money to escape history, but other Americans escape history to make money. The "green" breast of the new world is also the color of cash, and so are the lawns that literally overcome time: "The lawn started at the beach and ran... jumping over sun-dials."⁵⁰ A determination to defeat time has lured many voluntary immigrants to die of misplaced hope in what Nick calls "the dark fields of the republic."⁵¹ The fields are dark not just because they are in the past, but because they have doomed so many who dreamed the American dream: To live on lawns of money beyond the bounds of time.

Nick survives to tell us this cautionary tale because he is immobilized like Odysseus. Since Daisy is his cousin, he cannot really pursue her in a man-woman way, because of the societal incest taboo.⁵² Besides, she's already taken, twice-over, by Gatsby and Tom. Those realities have the effect of binding Nick to the mast, allowing him to experience the siren song without "going overboard," and so he lives to tell us what she sang. Like Odysseus, Nick is a storyteller returning from a voyage of initiation. Wiser for his woe, he can "come back home."⁵³

I'd like to make two concluding points.

First, I don't want to suggest that I've exhausted all the analytical possibilities of the Sirens myth in either of these texts. Among other questions which I think remain open is this: If Fitzgerald borrowed the Sirens imagery from Homer, was he also inspired by a retelling of the

⁴⁹*Gatsby*, 96.

⁵⁰*Gatsby*, 6.

⁵¹*Gatsby*, 180.

⁵²Fitzgerald sometimes uses their cousinhood to suggest a lure of the forbidden: "I looked back at my cousin, who began to ask me questions in her low, thrilling voice" (*Gatsby*, 9). There *could* be a transgressive subtext in Daisy's sentence-fragment, "Even if we are cousins" (16).

⁵³*Gatsby*, 176.

Odyssey which we know he read before writing *Gatsby*? Namely, James Joyce's *Ulysses*?⁵⁴

Second, I'd like to reflect on what the Sirenic parallels between *Gatsby* and the *Odyssey* can tell us about the human condition. Tempted by Sirens to relive their own pasts, Odysseus and *Gatsby* each invite comparison to Narcissus, who starved through enchantment with his own reflection.⁵⁵ In both texts, the Sirens sing a past that is enchanting, but insincere. In both, the narrator-heroes encounter Siren-figures on flowering islands which are really wastelands of bones and ashes. Both Bronze-Age Greeks and Jazz-Age Americans construct their pasts in boastful performances at gatherings mixing alcohol and music. They stage origin-stories and war-narratives as exempla of cosmic favor, betokened by wealth and fame but unleavened by love. In both narratives, events are overdetermined by pasts that are close in time but distant in spirit. The past thereby becomes a distorting lens, representing not reality but the wish to remake it in the image of individual hope.

These parallels suggest to me that archaic and modern societies share a common construction of the past. The Edenic semiotics of the green mirror and the green light are telling.

⁵⁴The questions about the possible relation between *Gatsby* and *Ulysses* are many and, I think, intriguing, yet remain relatively unexplored. Since *Ulysses* appeared in 1922, is Fitzgerald's decision to set the events of *The Great Gatsby* in that year a playful clue to his own creative process? By publicly pointing us toward Homer, is Fitzgerald actually diverting us from the proximate influence of his near-contemporaries? The influence of Joyce may be suspected because most of the adjectives used to describe Daisy's voice appear also in the Sirens episode (Chapter 11) of Joyce's *Ulysses*, a copy of which Joyce had in fact inscribed to him in Paris ("Fitzgerald on Ulysses: A Previously Unpublished Letter to Bennett Cerf," *Fitzgerald/Hemingway Annual* 4, 1972, 3-4; Thomas, "F. Scott Fitzgerald," 80, n. 2). Fitzgerald confided to Edmund Wilson of *Ulysses*, "I wish it was layed [sic] in America" (Fitzgerald to Wilson, June 25, 1922, *Life in Letters*, 61), raising the interesting possibility that *The Great Gatsby* may have been an attempt at such a displacement. Robert Sklar sees the influence of *Ulysses* in Fitzgerald's early short story "Winter Dreams," positing that "Joyce had helped him shift his focus to a lower-class character whose yearning for beauty, though expressed in conventional terms was surrounded by a new sense of mystery" (*F. Scott Fitzgerald: The Last Laocoön*, 173). The up-from-nothing Gatz, or *Gatsby*, certainly fits Sklar's paradigm, right down to the conventionalism that reminds Nick of "skimming hastily through a dozen magazines" (*Gatsby*, 66). Perhaps Fitzgerald's decision to read "only Homer" while writing *Gatsby* was a kind of palate-cleanser, to wash out the influence of *Ulysses*? Fitzgerald does seem to have been at least half-jokingly concerned about Joyce's influence on his work, describing himself as a "hack writer and plagiarist" in a letter to Edmund Wilson about *Ulysses* on May 20, 1922 (*Life in Letters*, 58). In any case, Fitzgerald seems to have avoided any obvious cribbing, though both texts share a penchant for forms of the word "murmur" (which appears eight times in Joyce's Sirens chapter, and eighteen times in *Gatsby*).

⁵⁵Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 3.505.

The past-as-paradise is just as compelling as what Milton called “pastures new.”⁵⁶ Living in the past is a temptation we find impossible to realize, yet impossible to resist.

In that sense, nostalgia symbolizes the human condition itself. We have the bodies of beasts but the dreams of gods. Our reach will always exceed our grasp. The Siren song calls us to a godlike perspective that is, tragically, beyond our capacities to achieve, yet commensurate to our capacity for wonder.⁵⁷

⁵⁶Milton, *Lycidas*.

⁵⁷*Gatsby*, 180.

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