Fitzgerald’s “Babylon Revisited”

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Thus, though we cannot make our sun
Stand still, yet we will make him run. —Marvell

In the little hours of the night every
move from place to place was an enormous human
jump, an increase of paying for the privilege
of slower and slower motion.

—“Babylon Revisited”

I

The two epigraphs which introduce
this essay define, in one sense, the polar
limits of Fitzgerald’s life. His frenetic,
_attempts, almost heroic in their intensity
and pathetic in their ultimate ineffectiveness, to stay ahead of “Time’s
winged chariot” (though he was afraid
the race was lost at thirty) are too well
known, have been too fully documented,
to need much elaboration here. “I wanted
to enjoy, to be prodigal and open-hearted, to miss nothing.” What Fitz-
gerald wanted, finally, was to fill each
moment of life so full of living that
time would stand still for him. This was
the way to “beat” time—to run a dead
heat with the galloping stallions of mor-
tality. It is one of Fitzgerald’s accomplish-
ments that he can still make us
respond to the purity of this desire even
as we recognize, as we are so often
meant to, the spurious materials and
self-defeating methods by which his
characters strive to make life go glim-
mering. Those of us for whom the
Twenties as Fitzgerald’s metaphor of
what life may offer by way of glamour
has not yet become a whipping boy of
middle-age can still acknowledge, as he
wrote in his notebook, how “any given
moment has its value; it can be ques-
tioned in the light of after-events, but
the moment remains. The young prince
in velvet gathered in lovely domesticity
around the queen amid the hush of rich
draperies may presently grow up to be
Pedro the Cruel or Charles the Mad,
but the moment of beauty was there.”

But at the polar opposite of Fitzger-
ald’s presentations of “the romantic en-
largement of the possibilities of life”
to use Professor Bewley’s phrase) emerge the results of the toughened vi-
ion of the “spoiled priest”—as Fitzger-
ald once called himself—who watches
with horror as the “filled moment” col-
lapses of its own weight. In this region
of Fitzgerald’s moral geography—whose
supreme history and topography have
been written into “Babylon Revisited”
(1931)—there is nothing of the confu-
sion of attitude to be found in such essays
as “Echoes of the Jazz Age” (1931) or
“My Lost City” (1932), in which the
seemingly firm-eyed recapitulation of
catastrophe and self-delusion finally
counts for less than the nostalgic yearn-
ings with which they end.¹ Nor is there

¹“... and it all seems rosy and romantic to
us who were young then, because we will
never feel quite so intensely about our sur-
roundings any more” (“Echoes of the Jazz
Age”). “For the moment I can only cry out
that I have lost my splendid mirage. Come
back, come back, O glittering and white!”
(“My Lost City”).
anything here of that troubled ambivalence which characterizes our response to that fantastic ambiguity, Jay Gatsby, whose exquisite dream moves us even as we acknowledge the cloud of foul dust which trails in its wake. In the world of “Babylon Revisited” winter dreams do not drift sweetly into sad memories, but erupt into nightmares of irrevocable loss, leaving only the waste and horror of the twisted shapes that lie on the decimated plains of the Babylonian Captivity.

II

The action of “Babylon Revisited” begins and ends in the Ritz bar. This structural maneuver is absolutely right, for the bar is one of the story’s chief symbols of the relentless impingement of the past on the present, though it is not until the end of the story after Charlie’s defeat, that it clearly takes on this signification. Indeed, ironically enough, Charlie’s initial appearance at the Ritz seems to imply precisely the opposite: the apparent separation of the past from the concerns, needs, and desires of the present. The very fact that Charlie can return to the hub of a life which had cost him his wife and his child does not at all indicate, as the story’s most recent commentator has it, that the old way of life “still appeals to him,” but rather demonstrates the extent and depth of his self-mastery and the confidence he feels in his belief that his wildly squandered yesterdays are over and done with, that there is no tab left for him to have to pick up.

The opening scene’s primary function is to show how divorced Charlie feels from the blurred life of several years ago. His questions to the bartender about cronies from the past are mechanically curious but fundamentally uninterested.

The news that “Mr. Campbell [is] a pretty sick man” and that Claude Fes- senden cheated the bar of thirty thousand francs and is now “all bloated up” evokes no comment. The pricks to memory of “familiar names from the long list of a year and a half ago” strike no responsive chord. Charlie feels out of place and “polite” in the bar that, in the time of wine and roses, he had felt he had “owned.” “It had gone back into France,” he thinks. When he goes through the remembered ritual of placing his foot firmly on the bar rail and turning to survey the room, only a single pair of indifferent eyes “fluttered up from a newspaper in the corner.” Charlie’s dissociation from his past is capped by the brief bit of dialogue with which the scene ends:

“Here for long, Mr. Wales?”
“I’m here for four or five days to see my little girl.”
“Oh-h! You have a little girl?”

In the Babylon who “saith in her heart [I] shall see no sorrow,” there can be neither children nor the risk of their loss. The figures there float rootlessly free of human ties and responsibilities, having sprung full-born from their skyrocketing blue chips and capacity for dissipation. The adults are the only children. “We did have such good times that crazy spring [Lorraine wistfully recalls in the letter to Charlie], like the night you and I stole the butcher’s tricycle, and the time we tried to call on the president and you had the old derby rim and the wire cane.” But Charlie Wales’s return to Paris is an attempted return to fatherhood, an attempt to lay the ghost of his past childishness through the recovery of his lost child, Honoria. “Oh-h! You have a little girl?” is a bitterly reasonable question for one whose life had been nothing more than a “catering to vice and waste . . . on an utterly childish scale.” After all, children have no children.

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The tragedy is that Charlie no longer deserves such a question. There is in us a desire to find the present Charlie somehow deserving of his wretched fate—which is what perhaps accounts for Professor Harrison's reading—for it is easier to live with a belief in reasonable justice. But Fitzgerald does not allow us this luxury. Throughout the story he ironically stresses the splendid achievement of Charlie's reform. His sensitivity, poised intelligence, and quiet power over himself should be enough to get his daughter back. That moral renovation may not be enough is the injustice that lies at the center of the story.

Charlie's recovery of "character"—"the eternally valuable element"—which was implied in the opening scene in his being unafraid to confront the old life, is made explicit as he leaves the bar. Walking the street, he feels, all at once, "the sudden provincial quality of the left bank." But Charlie is not a prig: his self-mastery is too final to need the subtly corrupt support of the moral outrage of a libertine turned puritan. He can still be moved by the "pink majesty" of the Place de la Concord and "the blue hour spread over the magnificent façade" of the Avenue de l'Opéra; he can even afford to indulge in the fantasy of imagining that "the cab horns, playing endlessly the first few bars of Le Plus que Lent, were the trumpets of the Second Empire." Paris is not, after all, Babylon. Only the Left Bank, which in the "crazy years" had seemed the epitome of romantic possibility, strikes him with "its sudden provincialism." Brennito's, cheap restaurants (in which he had never eaten), such as Duval's, with its "trim little bourgeois hedge," had never been "spoiled," because they had never been touched, by the crowd of three years ago who had made "months into days." Babylon, Charlie thinks sadly, had been an American creation.

The following scene with Marion and Lincoln Peters, Charlie's sister-in-law and her husband, who had been given custody of Honoria when Charlie's wife, Helen, was dying and he himself was broke and in a sanitarium for alcoholism, is the symbolic obverse of the opening scene at the Ritz bar, which had depicted the repudiated past. Here the "warm and comfortably American room," the intimate movements of children, "the cheer of six o'clock" as dinner is being prepared, and Honoria (in Charlie's mind) at the center of the bustle, represent the future which Charlie anticipates with excruciating need. The contrasts between the two scenes are extensive. The mechanical exchange in the bar has become the sincerely interested conversation between Charlie and Lincoln Peters; the "single bored voice in the once-clamorous women's room" has changed into "the eager smacks of the fire and sounds of French activity in the kitchen"; the shrill group of homosexuals ("strident queens") has been replaced by a family. Honoria's ecstatic shriek of welcome—"oh, daddy, daddy, daddy, daddy, dads, dads!"—is the answer to the barman's surprised question.

Yet for all the obvious contrasts between the two scenes, there is also present an ominous similarity—a similarity which functions as the first of many symbolic foreshowings of Charlie's failure to redeem his daughter (and thus himself) from the carnival years. In both scenes Charlie is fundamentally isolated from the radical quality of the life going on around him: in the bar because of his maturity, in the home because of his position as a suppliant. Despite Honoria's presence (with its infinite promise), it is Marion Peters' hostility which dominates the scene, making Charlie's heart sit "up rigidly in his body." Although it is not until Part III that we come fully to understand why Marion has set herself against Charlie's future, her animosity, interposing itself as it does between father and
daughter, so serves to consign Charlie's presence to the periphery of the room that the final effect of the scene is the disturbing implication that Charlie's proximity to the symbols of the life he hopes for is as deceptive as was his proximity in the opening scene to the symbols of the life he left behind him. It is significant that Honoria never speaks again in the scene after her cry of joy and that the last bit of dialogue is Marion's frigid reply to Charlie's statement that he takes but one drink a day—"I hope you keep to it."

The parallelism between the two scenes is reinforced by the similarity of Charlie's response to both the bar and the Peters' home: relief at being able to get away and a desire to roam the streets alone to see Paris "with clearer and more judicious eyes than those of other days." His second view is more severely contemptuous, the result, no doubt, of his recent contact with Honoria. Montmartre, "where he had parted with so many hours and so much money," stripped of its alcoholic haze, reveals itself as cheap, meretriciously exuberant, and corrupt. As he watches the prowling prostitutes, devouring cafes, and "bleak and sinister cheap hotels," he "suddenly realized the meaning of the word 'dissipate'—to dissipate into thin air; to make nothing out of something." Then follows what is perhaps Fitzgerald's most profound insight into the nature of Babylon, Jazz Age style: "In the little hours of the night every move from place to place was an enormous human jump, an increase of paying for the privilege of slower and slower motion."

On the literal level, the sentence describes early morning bar-hopping: greater and greater expenditures of cash for the "privilege" of more and more uncertain physical movement. But the passage reaches out to larger significances. The impulse towards the enlargement of experience which lies behind the spree manifests itself in the little hours of the night (which Fitzgerald elsewhere described as "the dark night of the soul")—"little" not only in the sense of early, but also in the ironic sense of compressed and constricted. The "enormous human jump" required of the drunk in moving from place to place, for whom physical space is constantly hostile, enlarges to an understanding of the expense of spirit which the movement entails. Not only is money being spent ("an increase of paying"), but the human quality is being spent, used up, too. The desire to make the sun run by filling each moment so full of gaiety and abandon that time will seem to stand still succeeds only in so weighting down the figures that they can manage only the contrived movements of an artificially slowed-down motion picture. Life, not time, has stopped.

Part II opens deceptively. The "fine fall day," Charlie's euphoria, and lunch with Honoria at the only restaurant Charlie can think of "not reminiscent of... long luncheons that began at two and ended in a blurred and vague twilight," seem to promise, structurally, that the happier of the alternatives symbolically offered in Part I will occur. This scene—the only extended contact between father and daughter—is particularly poignant because in dramatizing a glimpse of the future Charlie yearns for, Fitzgerald makes us feel (and not merely abstractly acknowledge) the absolute rightness of Charlie's desire to be reunited with his daughter. Though Charlie knows that he needs his daughter back in order to give shape and direction to his renascence, to redeem his lost honor, and, in a sense, to recover something of his wife "escaped to a grave in Vermont," he is aware of the danger in the very intensity of his need. He knows how perilously easy it would be to make Honoria into a smothered surrogate for all that he has irretrievably
lost. For example, when Honoria "tranqulily" agrees that she won't always love her daddy best, but will someday "grow up and meet somebody her own age and go marry him and forget [she] ever had a daddy," Charlie is not upset. The conversation between father and daughter is tender and loving and wholly free of sinister psychiatric pressures, dramatic proof of Charlie's ability to act in terms of his understanding as it is articulated in Part IV:

The present was the thing—work to do and someone to love. But not to love too much, for he knew the injury that a father can do to a daughter... by attaching [her] too closely: afterward, out in the world, the child would seek in the marriage partner the same blind tenderness and, failing probably to find it, turn against love and life.

Hawthorne once observed that every crime we commit destroys more Edens than our own. In focusing on Charlie's need it is easy to miss Honoria's. Though Fitzgerald does not cheapen the scene by sentimentalizing the unsatisfactoriness of Honoria's present life, it is clear that Honoria likes neither Marion nor Marion's daughter, though she is too well-bred and sensitive to engage in spiteful recriminations that could only serve to deepen her father's unhappiness. Her sudden "Daddy, I want to come and live with you," though unaccompanied by Dickensian emotional fanfare, is an eloquent plea that broadens the base of the tragedy, much as does the silent presence of the children at the end of the Oedipus. This encounter will painfully remind us, when Charlie's undeserved defeat is at the center of our response, of Honoria's loss as well.

The past and future, which were structurally separated in Part I (though the past was made to impinge symbolically upon the future) are narratively intersected in Part II. Duncan Schaeffer and Lorraine Quarles—"Sudden ghosts out of the past"—intrude themselves upon the promise of tomorrow. They are ghosts not only because they will eventually haunt Charlie to defeat, but also because they are disembodied, dislocated spirits inhabiting a world which exists only in their self-conscious stirrings. Lorraine's "This your little girl?" (which echoes the bartender's question) announces her exclusion from reality; similarly, when Charlie tries to stop the banal bantering about his being sober by indicating Honoria with his head, both Lorraine and Duncan can only laugh. The innocent pleasure of father and daughter attending the vaudeville at the Empire becomes, in Lorraine's "There! That's what I want to do... I want to see some clowns and acrobats and jugglers," an obscene activity, a Babylonian revel of ruinous irresponsibility and desperate hilarity. But they are ghosts in yet another sense, for Lorraine and Duncan are the anonymous figures in slow motion in the passage already quoted. Doomed as they are to being out of time, where gestures pass through all the essential realities, they can only drift, "trite, blurred, worn away," in search of some vampiristic contact with those who inhabit the real world. "They liked him," Charlie thinks, "because he was serious... because he was stronger than they were, because they wanted to draw a certain sustenance from his strength." He has located their essential weakness; but he has miscalculated their power to destroy. Human blood cannot make vampires normally human; but vampires destroy what is human in achieving temporary sustenance.

The intrusion of the ghosts from Charlie's past accounts, symbolically, for the tableau with which Part II ends. Charlie does not accompany his daughter into the Peters's house. He waits, instead, "in the dark street until she appeared all warm and glowing, in the window above, and kissed her fingers
out into the night.” The distance between the shadowed father and radiant daughter, which the kiss can only symbolically but not actually traverse, is the measure of their inevitable separation. Honoria, framed in the window, has become, the passage seems to imply, a portrait—something that was once livingly available but is now only accessible as a memory in a gallery of remembrances of things past. The tableau, moreover, looks back to the terminal passage of Part I, in which Charlie eludes the “encouraging stare” of a street-walker, though he buys her supper and gives her a twenty-franc note (as he is later to buy Honoria lunch and give her a doll), and forward to the terminal passage of Part III, when Charlie in a half-dream tries to talk to his dead wife, who “was in a swing in a white dress, and swinging faster and faster all the time, so that at the end he could not hear clearly all that she said.” These structural juxtapositions indicate that although Charlie has wilfully removed himself from the sterility of his past, as represented by the prostitute, he is nevertheless actually closer to her than he is to the distanced Honoria or receding Helen. He is offered the physical presence of a non-wife, non-mother, but only the “portrait” of his child and the “ghost” of his wife.

In Part III Marion becomes a significant actor in the drama. Having dressed herself in a black dress “that just faintly suggested mourning,” as if already prepared to preside over the death of Charlie’s hopes, Marion sets herself squarely against her brother-in-law’s dream of the future. Although she has obviously convinced herself that she is motivated solely by a concern for Honoria’s welfare and duty to her dead sister, it soon becomes apparent that her hard stance is not morally unequivocal. In Marion we see a subtly corrupt desire for self-justification masking itself in the virtues of duty and responsibility. Marion, because she had never really loved her sister, jealousely represented her sister’s materially superior marriage. Lincoln, though a wholly decent person, has never been capable of making much money; even in the boom time he “never got ahead enough to carry anything but [his] insurance.” Indeed, although Charlie has recently to start over again from scratch, he is already making twice as much money as Lincoln. Marion’s response to this “injustice” has been to take psychological refuge in the cliché that the rich are never happy; she has submerged her envy in “a curious disbelief in her sister’s happiness.” Marion’s hostility did not originate, as Lincoln believes, in the Babylonian days—“Marion felt there was some kind of injustice in . . . you not even working toward the end, and getting richer and richer”—but long before that. The party years merely aggravated—and seemed to give justification for—an already existing mean condition of mind. Marion’s vindication came in “the shock of one terrible night” when Helen was locked out in a snowstorm and barely escaped pneumonia. Convinced, because she wanted to be, that this was “one of many scenes from her sister’s martyrdom,” Marion’s repressed envy was able to flower forth as self-righteous “hatred” for Charlie. The death of Helen (which Marion falsely insists on blaming Charlie for) and Charlie’s own crack-up affirmed once and for all the superiority of her own married life. Her “investment” has paid off in the legal guardianship of Honoria; and the power to beat Charlie with this moral triumph is what she has instead of a materially lavish life.

3When Marion intimates a tremendous love for her sister, Charlie thinks that “he had never been certain how fond of each other the sisters were in life.” The contrast between the two sisters is symbolically emphasized by Marion’s black dress, which opens the section, and Helen’s white one, with which the section closes.
Marion, however, is not merely an interesting piece of psychological portraiture, for she complicates what might otherwise have been an unqualified commitment to the life of the "solid citizen." Though "Babylon Revisited" is centrally an exploration of the waste inherent in the quest for the gorgeous life, it is not thereby a paean to Main Street. It is clear that Charlie's "plans, vistas, futures for Honoria and himself" are organized around what we have come to call middle-class values and virtues—home, responsible job, hard work, the respect of the community. But it is also clear—as Marion's presence in the story indicates—that the achievement of worth is not to be found in the middle class automatically. Every mode of life is shadowed by its own kind of treachery and means of self-aggrandizement. Marion, no less than Lorraine and Duncan, "needs" Charlie, in her case as a "tangible villain." It is therefore both ironic and apt that although Marion is revolted by people like Lorraine and Duncan—they "make her really physically sick"—she will, in Part IV, unwittingly ally herself with them to destroy Charlie. She too has set herself against Charlie's attempt to extricate himself from his past: "from the night you did that terrible thing [Charlie's accidental locking out of his wife in the snow] you haven't really existed for me." Indeed, without Marion, Lorraine and Duncan are without effect. How fully she has committed herself to keeping Charlie from escaping into the future is revealed when, after being forced to acknowledge that Charlie "had somehow arrived at control over the situation" and that Lincoln will not help her keep Honoria from her father, she responds with hysterical viciousness, "I think if she were my child I'd rather see her—" and retreads to her bed with a neurasthenic headache.

In Part IV, which ironically opens with Charlie's ecstatic feeling that the "door of the world was open again," Charlie is to feel the full weight of his history. As if duplicating the ultimate movement of the entire section, Charlie's happiness fades suddenly into the sad memory of all the plans he and Helen had made that would never materialize. Though he turns away from the past—"The present was the thing"—the arrival of a letter from Lorraine, nostalgically recalling the "good times that crazy spring," reinforces the mounting sense of an unreasonably vengeful past. It will turn out to be of no avail that Charlie can dismiss the thought of a "trite, blurred, worn away" Lorraine to "think of Sundays spent with [Honoria]... and knowing she was there in his house at night, drawing her breath in the darkness."

For at the very threshold of Charlie's new life, the "ghosts from the past" drift up the corridors of time. Fitzgerald's paragraph describing their emergence is appropriately eerie. First, like an announcement of doom, the long peal of the bell; then the voices in the corridor coming closer, "which developed under the light into Duncan Schaeffer and Lorraine Quarles." Drunk, incoherent, irresponsible, the world of Babylon has shattered the world of "people together by a fire." In a brilliant symbolic gesture, Charlie, horrified, moves closer to them, "as if to force them backward down the corridor." That it is Charlie's own past that he is trying to force backward into time is amply demonstrated by the fact that Lorraine and Duncan are specifically identified with the figures in the "little hours of the night" passage: "Still in slow motion, with blurred, angry faces, with uncertain feet, they retired along the corridor."

But Charlie's power is finally useless: the door of the world opens to both the past and the future. Charlie is now more isolated than he had ever been before. Marion stands rigidly with an
arm encircling each of her children and Lincoln is “swinging Honoria back and forth like a pendulum from side to side.” The implications of this tableau are totally devastating. The past has set the pendulum of the future in motion; time will serve only to take Honoria further away from him; “the tangible, visible child” will swing away into dimmer and dimmer memory, like Helen in the dream in Part III, who was “swinging faster and faster all the time, so that in the end he could not hear clearly all that she said.” All that is left for Charlie to do is to return alone down the corridor, turning to say a final goodbye—“Good night, sweetheart. . . Good night, dear children.”

The story ends in the Ritz bar, where Charlie furiously goes to find Lorraine and Duncan. But he soon realizes that “there was nothing he could do.” The return to the bar, as well as the first appearance of Paul, the head barman, “who in the latter days of the bull market had come to work in his custom-built car,” symbolizes Charlie’s bondage to a world which he mistakenly supposed could be cast off completely. Charlie does not change in the course of “Babylon Revisited”; his undeserved defeat does not become an occasion for either self-pity or self-indulgence; in the bar he neither talks of his loss nor takes more than the one drink a day he has allowed himself.

But his substantial endowments have not been enough. Though he thinks that he will “come back someday; they couldn’t make him pay forever,” the whole movement of the story makes it bitterly clear that they can. When he asks the waiter “What do I owe you?” the answer the story supplies is “your hopes and dreams.”

A part of Charlie’s life had stopped in the little hours of some night when if you didn’t want something to be real, “you just paid some money.” Looking back, Charlie now realizes how utterly he “lost everything [he] wanted in the boom”; and Fitzgerald, in the final sentence of the story, crushes any lingering hopes by indicating that there is nothing left for Charlie to do but turn for comfort to the dead, for whom time has also stopped. “He was absolutely sure Helen wouldn’t have wanted him to be so alone.”

O’Hara’s Appointment in Samarra:
His First and Only Real Novel
Jesse Bier

It has been over a quarter of a century now since British reviewers like Peter Quennell enthusiastically received John O’Hara’s Appointment in Samarra. It has taken the full measure of these twenty-seven years for Americans to catch up with our own. For the novel was greeted in the United States with varying degrees of reservation and regret, accorded a range of distressed reviews that went the distance from denunciation in The Saturday Review of Literature to mere though forceful disapproval in The Nation. In that initial chorus of complaint, voices like Henry Seidel Canby’s, R. P. Blackmur’s and John Peale Bishop’s resonated about the

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