Fiction as Greatness:
The Case of Gatsby

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More than half a century after its publication, The Great Gatsby is still a vexed case, seen variously as a portrait of the 20s, a picture of the American Dream that is at once lyrical and critical, an example of point-of-view narrative that draws shrewdly on James and Conrad. All these things Fitzgerald does, no one would deny; what is vexing is what to make of them? Is the novel, ultimately, a critique of either Gatsby or his dream? What, ultimately, does Nick Carraway or the reader learn? Finally, what does the greatness of Gatsby and Fitzgerald’s novel consist of?

In looking at Fitzgerald criticism, one frequently discerns a certain petulancy: Gatsby’s dream is itself so meretricious and vulgar, why all the ado? Nick himself is too smug on the one hand ("I am one of the few honest people that I have ever known") and too conniving on the other (Jordan Baker’s not-so-broad hint at the book’s close). Or else, Fitzgerald the author comes up short: unable to see through his tinsel materials, unable to sort out his ironies, unable to curb his rhetoric. The book seems to be imbued with excess: the tawdry excesses of the Flapper Age, the wild parties, the flashy and not-so-flashy materialism of Gatsby, the excesses of capitalism, the sentimental and blinding excesses of the rags-to-riches story itself, the American Dream. It is in this light that Gatsby criticism often seems to dig its heels in, roll up its sleeves, and perform analysis, i.e., reveal these puffed-up Appearances and Myths for what they truly are: spurious, specious and inflated. The critical act itself—practiced in all our disciplines—seems imaged here: to see through, to become undeceived, to deflate, to deconstruct. Fitzgerald criticism, even more than most, is marked by the moral fervor of exposure and judgment.


2 Here, too, everyone has had his say, but the essay of Charles Samuels, “The Greatness of Gatsby,” reprinted in Piper’s critical edition, remains a pithy and strong tribute to the artistic and moral beauty of Fitzgerald’s book.

3 This posture in Fitzgerald criticism seems to set in, right at the outset, with H. L. Mencken’s review of Gatsby in the Baltimore Evening Sun (May 2, 1925), also reprinted in Piper. The latest variant of it can be seen in the jaundiced but brilliant Fitzgerald commentary offered by Hugh Kenner in A Homemade World: The American Modernist Writer (New York: Morrow, 1975), pp. 20-49; Kenner is petulant not only about the spurious glamor that is Fitzgerald’s subject, but also the mellifluous, overdone cadences of the author’s “high style.”
On the face of it, indeed, The Great Gatsby falls into the 19th-century tradition of “great expectations” and “lost illusions,” as two of its greatest exemplars termed it. Such a fiction chronicles the lure of worldly success and the gradual education of the hero as he comes to measure the moral cost involved in secular achievement. The focus of such texts is quintessentially critical, as Pip and Rastignac and their followers encounter and expose the rottenness of social systems and, hence, the illusory nature of any triumph within that context. Nick Carraway begins the narration of Gatsby in a posture much like that of Pip as he finishes his narrative: he has seen—and seen through—the parade and pretensions of high society, and he returns to the Midwest where principles might still be found: “Conduct may be founded on the hard rock or, the wet marshes, but after a certain point I don’t care what it’s founded on. When I came back from the East last autumn I felt that I wanted the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever.” The figurative gesture of peering behind or beneath appearances, zeroing in on the “foundation” can in fact be recognized as the fundamental realist act.

It is worth passing a minute with this critical metaphor of examining foundations. One thinks of Mrs. Eberhardt whom Myrtle Wilson mentions at her party, Mrs. Eberhardt who “goes around looking at people’s feet in their own homes” (37). Nick Carraway is, at the outset, appropriately disenchanted, disillusioned, for the grand pageantry has been exposed for a very small and mean operation. Dickens calls Pip’s expectations “great,” just as Renoir titles the illusion of his film “grande”; we see a recurring feature of realism in this movement from large appearances to small explanations. As I have suggested, a good deal of Gatsby criticism works along these lines: the critic begins work, if you will, on July 5th, just as Nick listed the names of those who came to Gatsby’s parties on an old timetable of July 5, 1922, and he metaphorically sizes up the damage done the night before. Things always look smaller, less glamorous, on July 5th, because the magic, the Rausch, is over, the grand and ecstatic moments of the party are now, in the harsh light of day, embarrassments. Criticism deflates, exposes, shows the ugly underpinnings which support the show. Nick expresses the sobering effect of such an education in graphic terms: his stint with Gatsby and Co. is akin to his carefree 20s, indeed the entire nation’s 20s; but now he is 30—and one can hardly

4 The Great Gatsby (1925; Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1982), pp. 7-8. All subsequent citations in parentheses in the text are to this edition.

5 The list of Gatsby’s guests has been the frequent subject of Fitzgerald criticism, although Kenner takes the honors here as well:

(Real names are extraordinary; Gus Mozart sells Volkswoagens a morning’s drive from where this page you are reading was drafted.) And G. Earl Muldoon, further down, is “brother to that Muldoon who afterward strangled his wife.” We have heard of him, surely? We seem to have. Dickens is behind this characterization by naming, and so is J. Alfred Prufrock, whose surname came from a St. Louis furniture house. (“You bring the girl,” said the sign on a window full of bridal suites; “Prufrock does the rest.”) T. S. Eliot and the mother of William S. Burroughs, the eminent junkie, used to walk past that sign en route home from dancing class. Whoever can believe that—and it is true—understands how to go about according Fitzgerald the order of belief he is soliciting.) (A Homemade World, pp. 40-41)

July 5th itself has frequently been noted as the “day after,” but no critic, to my knowledge, has invested this day with the kind of artistic challenge that I am interested in.
avoid thinking of the American '30s here: "Thirty—the promise of a decade of loneliness, a thinning list of single men to know, a thinning briefcase of enthusiasm, thinning hair" (142). "Thinning" betokens the same shrinkage that July 5th brings, and the question that must be posed here is, "Is Gatsby still great, once the novel is over?"

There can be little doubt that he appears dreadfully exposed in his own underpinnings. Surely, the thinnest, barest document in the novel is the pathetic SCHEDULE on the flyleaf of Hopalong Cassidy which graphically spells out the young Gatz’s program for success, including such exhortations as "Practice elocution, poise and how to attain it" and "Read one improving book or magazine per week." Here is the meanest prop of all, a July 5th document if ever one existed, the vulgar, irreducible blueprint underlying Gatsby’s fabulous career, a humble and humbling Fitzgeraldian Ding an sich which emerges at the novel’s close. In its factual, evidential status, as ultimate as an X-ray, this SCHEDULE wrings the neck of fiction and glamour, showing it all to be no more than a con game. One imagines Tom Buchanan’s glee in the face of such a document, the final demystification of Gatsby, brought back at last to his lowly origins. Let Gatsby be pegged as no more than the outgrowth of his SCHEDULE, and immediately an edifying congruence is revealed between first stages and last stages, origins and destiny, illuminating the kind of causality achieved by centripetal thinking, homing in on the hidden center, moving mercilessly from the grand circumference back to the pitiful center: Jay Gatsby and his mansion exposed as Jimmie Gatz and his SCHEDULE.

But, of course, that is not The Great Gatsby, or more precisely, it is Gatsby in reverse. The living truth of the novel is centrifugal rather than centripetal, projected outwards rather than homing in, generating reality rather than proving it, invested in a “fattening” rather than a “thinning” enterprise, dedicated to the heroic cause of making July 5th rival with July 4th, the chronicle of the Dream thereby capturing its enduring beauty and magic, its “elusive rhythm” as well as displaying the “foul dust [that] floated in the wake" (8). I share Hugh Kenner’s conviction that Nick Carraway’s role is not so much to critique Gatsby as to preserve him, that, in Kenner’s words, “a man hard to convince shall have been convinced of his worth,” because, as Kenner concludes, “it is important, in short, that Gatsby shall be Great. It is important because the central myth of the Book has to do with Appearance made Real by sheer will: the oldest American theme of all” (37–38).6

It is doubtful whether Americans have a monopoly on that particular theme, but Fitzgerald’s book is peculiarly modern in its focus on belief rather than truth. Ford Madox Ford, in a different book entirely devoted to the dismantling of illusions, expressed the nostalgic hope that beauty is not destructible, even though destruction is real, that the dream continues strangely to live even if it has been wholly discredited:

6 I want to acknowledge my indebtedness to Kenner’s reading of Fitzgerald in particular, and of American literature in general. His notion of the “homemade world” and his frequently zany illustrations of such American tinkering strike me as a perfect framework for considering Gatsby.
You can’t kill a minuet de la coeur. You may shut up the music-book, close the harpsichord; in the cupboard and presses the rats may destroy the white satin favors. The mob may sack Versailles; the Trianon may fall, but surely the minuet—the minuet itself is dancing itself away into the furthest stars...  

Fitzgerald’s interest, I think, is in that minuet that can’t be killed. His book stands, then, on the far side of the divide marked by Balzac and Dickens; exposure and education are their central purposes, whereas Gatsby is about the power of belief. In that light, the death of Goriot is radically different from that of Gatsby: Balzac’s figure dies so that all can witness the collapse of an ethos, but Gatsby’s death is, in words he himself applied to Daisy’s love for her husband, “just personal,” in no way affecting his potency as a figure, a legend, an image.

Images, more than minuets, may be said to have a life of their own. They certainly appear to do so in The Great Gatsby. It is no accident that Henry Gatz so treasures the photograph of his son’s house that it seems “more real to him now than the house itself” (179). The so-called “real thing” can hardly compete with constructs of desire; hence, a green light on a dock can embody and figure forth all of Gatsby’s longing, but such magic can have no truck with real people. Reunited with Daisy, Gatsby realizes that “it was again a green light on a dock. His count of enchanted objects had diminished by one” (100). Gatsby himself senses that the flesh-and-blood Daisy can not measure up to the image he has made of her:

There must have been moments even that afternoon when Daisy tumbled short of his dreams—not through her own fault, but because of the colossal vitality of his illusion. It had gone beyond her, beyond everything. He had thrown himself into it with a creative passion, adding to it all the time, decking it out with every bright feather that drifted his way. No amount of fire or freshness can challenge what a man can store up in his ghostly heart. (102-03)

In responding to such a passage, we are at a very real critical crossroads. To be sure, Fitzgerald is not shying away from the theme of disappointment, but his ultimate game, I think, is the bigger game of belief and illusion. Gatsby, even knowing that Daisy is incommensurate with the Dream, goes on, and much of the novel’s pathos hinges on his efforts to remake the world, the past, to fashion a reality of his own that would correspond to the dream. Whereas a writer like Flaubert is corrosive when it comes to dreams and hyperbole, Fitzgerald’s subject is more truly that of creation rather than defla-

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8 This cult of the image is an inverted view of the “aura” that Walter Benjamin ascribed to the original, in his fine discussion of photography, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Illuminations (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1955). Fitzgerald seems closer to the kind of image-worship that one finds in Genet, as strange as that association may appear.
tion. Note the sense of magnitude expressed in that passage: "colossal," "beyond her, beyond everything" and finally, we are told that the "ghostly heart" outrivals matter, that it generates and stores up visions to which flesh and blood and things cannot measure up.

The mean, phenomenal world of flesh, blood and things is of interest only to the extent that it can be transformed into "enchanted objects." Even the most debunking literature gets an unavowable mileage out of enchantment. The scalpel-like probing and lucidity of Flaubert and Joyce depend, parasitically, on the prior energies of belief: Emma and Frédéric and Félicité; Stephen in the Portrait and all the huffers and puffers of Ulysses are so many entryways through which the indispensable "stuff of dreams" can be freighted into the work. Indispensable because the "after" critique feeds on a "before" illusion, just as getting thin hardly makes sense if you haven't been fat; but indispensable also because literature has always known itself to have common cause with illusion, has always taken con men like Gatsby to its bosom because they have been its truest apostles. Whereas the realist mission is "to show things as they are," Fitzgerald seems altogether more committed to the project of making things from nothing. Daisy does not measure up, because Gatsby's dream cannot be outfitted with checks and balances, or any kind of external referent; it is, instead, supremely autonomous, auto-generative, fed from within.

The larger thesis which I would now like to develop is that the notion of making something from nothing, or, in Kenner's words, "appearance made real," is not only an American theme but also a paradigmatic formula for literature itself. The Great Gatsby depicts things being made from nothing, and objects becoming enchanted objects. Both these operations depend, quite simply, on belief. Nothing in the novel is more endowed with this magic power than Daisy's voice. Everyone remembers Gatsby's own definition of that voice: "Her voice is full of money" (126), and money has long been seen as the central magic in Fitzgerald's scheme; but Daisy's voice is still more crucially defined in other ways: in it Fitzgerald finds a miraculous equivalent to the Dream, something beyond disenchantment: "I think that voice held him most, with its fluctuating, feverish warmth, because it couldn't be overdreamed—that voice was a deathless song" (103). Daisy's voice is a veritable siren song, enchanting all men who come her way, Tom and Nick as well as Gatsby, and we would do well to attend to it, indeed, as voice, as language:

_Daisy began to sing with the music in a husky, rhythmic whisper, bringing out a meaning in each word that it had never had before and would never have again._

_When the melody rose her voice broke up sweetly, following it, in a way contralto voices have, and each change tipped out a little of her warm human magic upon the air._ (115)

This voice which "men who had cared for her found difficult to forget" (15) transforms the world in a remarkable way: its magic is equated with new
meanings, meanings never before seen and never to be seen again. Daisy’s voice has the promise of genesis, of making things anew. Daisy’s voice points us to a world of dazzling freshness and mobility, a world responsive to our will, unbound by old definitions and dispensations. This is to be Fitzgerald’s New World, and it is also his book. Thus, the characters and setting in The Great Gatsby are oddly maneuverable, alterable. In this realm the World Series is quite naturally “fixable” and alterable, rather than given. The dog bought by Tom for Myrtle Wilson is significantly both a boy and a bitch, and at Myrtle’s party everything seems to be strangely fluid: people’s names seem especially up for grabs, as Nick tries to read a chapter of Simon Called Peter: Myrtle’s sister Catherine is “said to be very beautiful by people who ought to know,” much as they “say [Gatsby’s] a nephew or a cousin of Kaiser Wilhelm’s” (34, 38). The entire party has a theatrical, improvisational dimension to it; characters seem to be posing, as if Mr. McKee, who is in the “artistic game,” were going to photograph them. Things are strangely malleable here, so that the tapestried furniture, with its “scenes of ladies swinging in the gardens of Versailles,” seems to spawn a new Myrtle Wilson, one whose “personality had also undergone a change,” and whose vitality “was converted into impressive hauteur” (36). Anything can happen in these precincts, just as Nick claimed of Fifth Avenue that he “wouldn’t have been surprised to see a great flock of white sheep turn the corner” (34). There is a “musical chairs” element to The Great Gatsby, and at critical junctures Myrtle Wilson will mistake Jordan for Daisy, and Gatsby will be fatally mistaken for the driver of the car, just as the party will predictably go to and from New York in swapped cars. One might argue, feebly I think, that the plot requires some of these confusions, but we will be on firmer ground if we acknowledge that The Great Gatsby has a bizarre ludic quality, that its materials refuse to stay put, that Fitzgerald, in pirouetting his materials, is doing pretty much the same kind of thing that he ascribed to Daisy’s voice: “bringing out a meaning in each word that it had never had before and would never have again.” The mean phenomenal world can be altered. As the song intones “I’m the sheik of Araby,” we sense a yearning for metamorphosis as well as romance. Innocent prose reveals odd linkage and twinning: “We backed up to a grey old man who bore an absurd resemblance to John D. Rockefeller” (33). Just as some chemicals, when brought to a certain temperature, decompose and change form, so does Daisy become catalyzed by the New York heat: “We’ll meet you on some corner. I’ll be the man smoking two cigarettes” (131). None of these passages has any literal truth, nor do they further the plot; but they are indices of the novel’s figurative activity, of the play of metaphor and masquerade, of self-projection and self-creation, which are at the heart of the book. To be free from the constraints of proof or evidence, to alter one’s identity, to be multiple rather than single, to overcome the laws of time and space and background: such are precisely the virtues of fiction, of the American Dream, and of Jay Gatsby.

It turns out that most of these delightful, surrealistic touches were added when Fitzgerald was revising Gatsby; see Kenneth Eble, “The Craft of Revision: The Great Gatsby,” reprinted in Piper.
All the items just named involve the creation of belief, the making of something from nothing, the sovereign power of language and imagination over against the paltriness of evidence. Gatsby is the consummate hero of belief: his belief in Daisy, in the green light, is of such a magnitude as to move worlds; no less important is others' belief in him. It is possible to regard Fitzgerald's novel as an experiment in semiosis, the ways in which meaning is produced and belief established. This text is especially illuminating here, because it spews forth signifiers, sometimes as metaphors, sometimes as lies, sometimes just as an exercise in dissemination; but its secret truth is that there is no truth, no reliable referent, no fixed center to which the signifiers point. Fitzgerald has discovered that the secret of the self-made man is hardly a secret for the novelist, for such a man is pre-eminently made of words rather than flesh, and thus heir to a peculiar freedom which flouts all constraints. And what is the American Dream if not a limitless freedom of the sign? The American Dream, like Daisy's voice, may be confused with money, but it is ultimately an exhilarating kind of liberty which deifies the individual will and erases all its impediments. The American, more than most, dreams of being freed from his origin, so as to make his or her self and world in an endless process of generative activity. Thus, that "green breast of the new world" which the Dutch sailors saw, like the "pap of life" and the "incomparable milk of wonder" which Gatsby sucked and gulped, are Edenic in their promise that desire and reality shall be one, that "fiction" and "fact" shall be coerced into a new etymological unity as made things, subservient to human will. In this dream, as perhaps in all dreams, the word produces the deed, the desire forges the object, the imagination makes the world. Desire and will are entirely potent here, capable of producing their own artifacts and setting up their own regime. Not only is the traditional bugbear of social origin transcended, but, in the process, all impediments to self-enactment are removed. This New World is a sorcerer's apprentice world in which naming something brings it into existence, in which the signifier is endlessly potent. Granting some exaggerations, such is the ontology of the American Dream; it is also the modus operandi of the con man and the writer, specialists as well in passing off the word for the thing itself, dependent on belief for whatever success they are to enjoy.

We have come at last, although obliquely, to Gatsby, and this is as it should be, since no single path leads to him, no single past has produced him. Like the ancient gods for whose birth multiple legends can be found, so Gatsby is at once "a nephew or a cousin of Kaiser Wilhelm's," "a German spy during the war," "an Oxford man," "a bootlegger," "a person who killed a man." Mysterious, elusive, multiple, "Mr. Nobody from Nowhere," Gatsby

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10 I realize that a semiotic interpretation of the American Dream will seem harebrained to those who regard this topic as a strictly "substantive" history-of-ideas proposition, dating at least from the legacy of Benjamin Franklin. Yet, the dynamic of the dream is what fascinates Fitzgerald, and it clearly fuels his narrative; there is a crucial volitional element in both language and desire, and I think there is considerable evidence (see the Biloxi section later) that Fitzgerald was aware of their common virtues.
has no single referent. He is not there when you look for him, and mysteriously present when least expected, such as in Nick’s first encounter, or when Nick arranges his meeting with Daisy. He seems endlessly replicated and mirrored in the text, and there is something apt in Daisy’s admiring claim: “You resemble the advertisement of the man,” she went on innocently. “You know the advertisement of the man—” (125). Likewise, when Tom Buchanan announced that he has “made a small investigation of this fellow,” Jordan’s humorous reaction seems closer to the poetic truth: “Do you mean you’ve been to a medium?” (128). Jordan, as we shall see, is close to the mark in pointing us to the spirit world if we want to find Gatsby’s origins.11

It is in this light that the delayed disclosure of Jimmie Gatz and his SCHEDULE must be seen as essentially a foil, the mockery of an origin. To be sure, the “young roughneck” that Nick sees derived biologically from Mr. and Mrs. Henry Gatz, just as James Gatz was “really, or at least legally, his name” (104). The search for origins, which is a hallmark of realist fiction, is not absent from this novel, but it is rendered peripheral; it is quite simply backstaged by the dazzling appearances, the performance of Gatsby as persona, and the impact he has on others. The book itself is a testimonial to his enduring reality, and Nick invariably identifies Gatsby with the future: his “heightened sensitivity to the promises of life,” his “extraordinary gift for hope,” his “romantic readiness.” Even in the most literal sense, Gatsby cannot be pinned down: “He was never quite still; there was always a tapping foot somewhere or the impatient opening and closing of a hand” (70). And there is the matter of his smile. Like Daisy’s voice, Gatsby’s smile is infinitely seductive, for it projects the archetypal magic fable to which we never fail to respond: our own life. Here too, Gatsby’s business is with the future, a future for us, one that we liked. Gatsby’s smile is truly generative, “constituting” not so much himself as you:

It was one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it, that you may come across four or five times in life…. It understood you just so far as you wanted to be understood, believed in you as you would like to believe in yourself, and assured you that it had precisely the impression of you that, at your best, you hoped to convey. (54)
Gatsby embodies the power of belief. He extends it to others, and he exists only insofar as they extend it to him. Belief, as I have repeatedly said, does not require evidence or proof or referent or origin. The believer makes his own world, and that is what Gatsby has done:

His parents were shiftless and unsuccessful farm people—his imagination had never really accepted them as his parents at all. The truth was that Jay Gatsby of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself. (105)

There is doubtless no more perfect piece of Americana in all of literature. Horatio Alger, rags-to-riches, the American Dream, upward mobility: it is all there. Fitzgerald has grasped the enormity of the American cliché, the self-made man, and he has properly understood it to be a spiritual, even an artisanal phenomenon, every bit as much as an economic statement. Yet we know that self-made men are cluttering the offices of analysts and doctors all over the United States, looking backward, often painfully, to determine where in fact they came from. Gatsby, as we know, finishes up supine as well, lying afloat in a pool, abandoned by all except Nick Carraway. We know too that Gatsby's exploits are even a bit darker than those of con men, that his shady dealings and obsession for power mirror some of the most diseased aspects of the American psyche. Ultimately, one must also ask just how far fiction can take you, at what point the world of fact and referent finally catches up to the high-flying gold-hatted imagination that longs to make its own world.

*The Great Gatsby* is great, I think, because it is willing to hint, more than once, that fiction just might take you all the way. This book is, from beginning to end, despite its revelations and weary narrator, committed to the power of the dream. Or more precisely and more to the point, the power of fiction. It is now time to substantiate this claim by looking at some central passages that depict the complex war between fact and fiction. Let us begin with Gatsby's own impassioned statement of origin to Nick:

"I'll tell you God's truth." His right hand suddenly ordered divine retribution to stand by. "I am the son of some wealthy people in the Middle West—all dead now. I was brought up in America but educated at Oxford, because all my ancestors have been educated there for many years. It is a family tradition." (71)

This sequence begins right at the top, as God, the final guarantor of all utterances, the one who separates the true from the false, is invoked as authority. God's truth would be pure referent, and Gatsby's speech act would be totally at one with its meaning, so much so that divine retribution is standing by to punish any and all discrepancies between language and truth. This assurance of verbal legitimacy has, as its social cohorts, "all my ancestors," "family tradition" and Oxford itself, all venerable displays of origin, all respected emissaries of the Old World. Now my argument all along has been that
Fitzgerald is depicting a New World, one that dispenses with those fixed entities, and either invents or projects its own data; Nick indeed suspects that Gatsby’s claim is spurious:

“What part of the Middle West?” I enquired casually.
“San Francisco.”
“I see.”
“My family all died and I came into a good deal of money.”
His voice was solemn, as if the memory of that sudden extinction of a clan still haunted him. (71)

One hardly knows what to admire most here: Gatsby’s answer of San Francisco or Nick’s assent, “I see.” Where is God’s truth here? For there is a choice. Either this is outright balderdash, part of Gatsby’s flimflam, the sort of thing you’d expect from a bootlegger; or this just may be, on some level, real if not true. Nick’s “I see” opens just the tiniest bit of space for squeezing San Francisco into the Midwest, but a very special map will be needed for this. The more Gatsby talks—and he talks very little in this book—the more extravagant he becomes:

“After that I lived like a young rajah in all the capitals of Europe—Paris, Venice, Rome—collecting jewels, chiefly rubies, hunting big game, painting a little, things for myself only, and trying to forget something very sad that had happened to me long ago.” (71–72)

The hackneyed character of these clichés is so pronounced, the phrases themselves, as Nick realizes, are “so threadbare,” that the whole performance seems patently theatrical, literary, evoking “no image except that of a turbaned ‘character’ leaking sawdust at every pore as he pursued a tiger through the Bois de Boulogne” (72). But now the fun begins, because in Fitzgerald fraud can be the beginning rather than the end of things. Gatsby quite simply authenticates his performance: he produces signs of legitimacy, such as the military decoration from Montenegro and the Oxford photograph, and in the face of such evidence, Nick is “converted.”

Then it was all true. I saw the skins of tigers flaming in his palace on the Grand Canal; I saw him opening a chest of rubies to ease, with their crimson-lighted depths, the gnawings of his broken heart. (73)

Nick’s musings are deliciously tongue-in-cheek, but they are hardly an indictment; on the contrary, they are an homage to Gatsby’s version of things, and they express Nick’s willingness to play Gatsby’s game, to add furnishings of his own to Gatsby’s place. We see Nick moving into Gatsby’s sphere in this passage, and it is worth noting that the whole transition from hoax to belief has a distinct literary coloration. The Romantic clichés are found to have
some life left in them, so that even the jaded and condescending Nick Carraway can come under their spell.

Breathing life back into melodrama is just one of Fitzgerald’s tricks. At privileged moments in this narrative, we may see objects become enchanted and characters spawn new identities, as Fitzgerald gently reminds us that literature has a pulse and a heartbeat of its own. Consider, for example, the fine passage when Nick and Gatsby cross the Queensboro Bridge and encounter the City. Fitzgerald ushers in this scene with language that pointedly foreshadows his famous concluding image of Dutch sailors and the New World: “The city seen from the Queensboro Bridge is always the city seen for the first time, in its first wild promise of all the mystery and the beauty in the world” (74–75). As we shall see, this New World is very much, to use Tony Tanner’s significant phrase, a “city of words,” a place whose verbal freedom turns it into a “lexical playfield.”

Here is what Nick sees:

A dead man passed us in a hearse heaped with blooms, followed by two carriages with drawn blinds, and by more cheerful carriages for friends. The friends looked out at us with the tragic eyes and short upper lips of southeastern Europe, and I was glad that the sight of Gatsby’s splendid car was included in their sombre holiday. As we crossed Blackwell’s Island, a limousine passed us, driven by a white chauffeur, in which sat three modish negroes, two bucks and a girl. I laughed aloud as the yolks of their eyeballs rolled toward us in haughty rivalry. (75)

On the face of it, we have here an innocent slice of American life; if pushed, one might claim that this scene has a mildly symbolic dimension, a discreet evocation of the American Dream in petto. In this light we see America the melting pot, with its southeastern Europeans and its Negroes, and the possibility of limousines and wealth for all; looking still more closely, we note the death or decline of the Europeans and the rise or dawning of the Blacks, this too an apt figure for American freedom and mobility. But, the more one scrutinizes this passage, the more playful and sibylline it becomes. There is an uncanny fixation with eyes, as each segment concludes by an ocular close-up, and one begins to wonder if there is not something pathological in this book about perception, perspective, Owl-Eyes, T. J. Eckleburg and the like. One is also entitled to question whether southeastern Europe is as

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12 Tanner’s general view of American letters in terms of a search for freedoms that are verbal as well as moral is one that has greatly influenced my view of Fitzgerald (City of Words: American Fiction, 1950-1970 [NY: Harper and Row, 1971]). He and Kenner strike me as the two most congenial interpreters of American literature, because they brilliantly fuse the social and the aesthetic at every turn.

13 The Queensboro Bridge episode has been mentioned by several critics, usually in cautionary terms. Richard Lehan (F. Scott Fitzgerald and the Craft of Fiction [Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967], p. 119) stresses the death motif in the passage, and Joan Korenman devotes an entire article to the moral implications of this vignette (“A View from the [Queensboro] Bridge,” in Fitzgerald/Hemingway Annual 1975, pp. 93–96). To be sure, this sequence does its share of foreshadowing, but its sheer verbal inventiveness, its strange lexical autonomy, have not been noticed.

14 The emphasis on perception is a stock item in most Gatsby criticism. The fun begins, however, when Fitzgerald’s prose starts to look “decentered”; i.e., the various motifs of this novel, such as “seeing,” or the automobile, begin to acquire a life of their own, a demonic kind of authority, so that one feels that events take place because the language and the metaphors “will” them. Once T. J. Eckleburg is on the scene. Owl-Eyes cannot be far behind. Perhaps all art has its subtle teleology,
fixed a proposition as is the location of San Francisco in the Middle West. Certainly the Negroes appear to have come verbally from "Blackwell's Island," indeed to have emerged from the "sombre holiday" every bit as much as to make a social statement. The passage starts to appear far more pictorial than social, with its arrangement of black and white, its flower-heaped hearse and splendid cars. It is a portrait of life and gaiety, and the lead-off item that begins the procession, the man with the four-letter adjective "dead," is no more without life than "black" and "white" are sociological. "A dead man passed us . . . ," and he is merely, grandly, part of the parade, filled with verbal life, here in Fitzgerald's New World where language actualizes "the wild promise of all the mystery and the beauty in the world." And tucked in the middle of this mystery and beauty is one of the most shimmering sights of all, that of Gatsby's car, which can demonstrably bring to life as well as put to death. \(^{15}\) Nick himself sums it up: "'Anything can happen now that we've slid over this bridge,' I thought; 'anything at all . . . '" (75). To "slide" over that magic bridge is seductively easy in Fitzgerald, for the glamor of that other world, its "haughty rivalry," beckon to us at every turn. That bridge turns out to span realms more distant than Queensboro and the City, and the final scene I want now to analyze illustrates the freedom which Fitzgerald found on its far side.

On that far side we encounter what is arguably the most fascinating sequence in The Great Gatsby, and the most ignored: namely, the saga of "Blocks" Biloxi. \(^{16}\) This is the centerpiece of my interpretation, and therefore I need to quote it in full:

"Imagine marrying anybody in this heat!" cried Jordan dismally.
"Still—I was married in the middle of June," Daisy remembered, "Louisville in June! Somebody fainted. Who was it fainted, Tom?"
"Biloxi," he answered shortly.
"A man named Biloxi. 'Blocks' Biloxi, and he made boxes—that's a fact—and he was from Biloxi, Tennessee."
"They carried him into my house," appended Jordan, "because we lived just two doors from the church. And he stayed three weeks, until Daddy told him he had to get out. The day after he left Daddy died." After a moment she added, "There wasn't any connection."

but when the form-imperative becomes truly noticeable, when it seems more urgent than any meanings that limp afterward, then we are in the presence of a playful text that is asserting the kind of peculiar freedom I am investigating. My argument, obviously, is that we associate such verbal behavior with the Surrealists or Joyce, but rarely with Fitzgerald.

\(^{15}\) The automobile has claimed the lion's share in a goodly amount of Gatsby criticism. The imagery and rhythm of this modern form of locomotion have been assessed in various ways, ranging from a celebration of technology to a foreboding sense of the demonic. Kenner's designation of Gatsby riding in a majestic vehicle "bright with nickel, swollen here and there in its monstrous length with triumphant hat-boxes and supper-boxes and tool-boxes, and terraced with a labyrinth of windshields that mirrored a dozen suns!" (70) as a "Renaissance Magnifico" seems closer to the mark than any kind of futurist nightmare scenario, like, say, Stephen King's horror movie Christine. Above all, Gatsby's fabled car with its dozen suns, outrivals poor life by a score of 12 to 1, once again flaunting the supremacy of art over reality.

\(^{16}\) Amazingly enough, Biloxi has escaped the attention of Fitzgerald criticism. People have, of course, known that he was there, but it was never thought necessary (or worthwhile) to attend to him. Lehan is one of the few critics who mentions him (p. 102), but he has nothing to say about the spectacular performance which Biloxi carries off.
“I used to know a Bill Biloxi from Memphis,” I remarked.

“That was his cousin. I knew his whole family history before he left. He gave me an aluminum putter that I use to-day.” The music had died down as the ceremony began and now a long cheer floated in at the window, followed by intermittent cries of “Yea-ea-ea!” and finally by a burst of jazz as the dancing began.

“We’re getting old,” said Daisy. “If we were young we’d rise and dance.”

“Remember Biloxi,” Jordan warned her. “Where’d you know him, Tom?”

“Biloxi?” He concentrated with an effort. “I didn’t know him. He was a friend of Daisy’s.”

“He was not,” she denied. “I’d never seen him before. He came down in the private car.”

“Well, he said he knew you. He said he was raised in Louisville. Asa Bird brought him around at the last minute and asked if we had room for him.”

Jordan smiled.

“He was probably bumming his way home. He told me he was president of your class at Yale.”

Tom and I looked at each other blankly.

“Biloxi?”

“First place, we didn’t have any president—”

Gatsby’s foot beat a short, restless tattoo and Tom eyed him suddenly.

“By the way, Mr. Gatsby, I understand you’re an Oxford man.”

“Not exactly.”

“Oh, yes, I understand you went to Oxford.”

“Yes—I went there.”

A pause, then Tom’s voice, incredulous and insulting: “You must have gone there about the time Biloxi went to New Haven.” (133–35)

Perhaps it is best to start with the truism that The Great Gatsby is never regarded as an experimental novel, nor is Fitzgerald generally appreciated as the creator of narrative high jinks, say, in the manner of Joyce or Faulkner. Moreover, this particular scene is postively crucial, from a realist point of view: it is, in effect, Fitzgerald’s showdown scene, his “high noon” moment of truth in a sweltering New York hotel room where the two males finally fight it out for the golden girl. Tom has done his sleuthing, and Gatsby has finished his courting; who will carry the day? Here, if ever, Fitzgerald needs tame, univalent prose, needs to etch this battle with clarity and force.

But what do we have? Coming out of nowhere—and this, from any perspective in which you care to examine it—is “Blocks” Biloxi. He enters this story very like an unbidden but irrepressible ghost, like tidings that must be proclaimed. Almost like an epiphany, he is a radiant image of what Gatsby has only been striving to be: the complete self-made man.

More even than other fictional characters, Biloxi is a construct of words: “A man named Biloxi. ‘Blocks’ Biloxi, and he made boxes—that’s a fact—and he was from Biloxi, Tennessee.”
Like a child’s game, “Blocks” are put together to make Biloxi; he is a fabrication, and he makes such objects for others: “he made boxes,” boxes which contain whatever fictive meaning we insert in them. To emphasize the pure artifice of this gambit, Fitzgerald makes name and place exactly the same, much like a child who had only one kind of block for two separate purposes: “and he was from Biloxi, Tennessee.” We are indeed in a New World, a writerly wonderland, where the artist’s blocks and letters and boxes can deliver up a geography and a history all of their own making, claiming as truth—“that’s a fact”—all his magic, including the location of Biloxi in Tennessee, which can only have “left” Mississippi in the same way San Francisco “moved” to the Middle West: by verbal fiat. 1

Outfitted with a dazzlingly specious origin, the Biloxi-character can now begin to perform with the fiction. Jordan first contributes to his career by “appending” the story of Biloxi’s momentous stay at her house. He enters her house supine (from drink, supposedly), and his exit three weeks later triggers the supine departure of Daddy (from death, this time). Jordan hastens to explain, “There wasn’t any connection,” but the reader who has any experience with blocks is bound to suspect a pattern here, at least a metaphorical linking, a Wolfsheim-type “connexion” forged by the text’s generative activity. Coming into Jordan’s house “just two doors from the church,” Biloxi is perhaps even more a ghost than we thought, a somehow holy figure whose presence is life and whose leaving is death.

Nick joins in the collective fabulation and spreads Biloxi a little further, adding a block in Memphis: “I used to know a Bill Biloxi from Memphis.” Jordan provides the missing referent (“cousin”), and returns to the mystery of origin: “I knew his whole family history before he left.” This is, of course, oral history, “Blocks” own tale of his past, forcing any “constructive” reader to think of that other inventor of his past, Jay Gatsby. The “connexion” between Biloxi and Gatsby is only beginning.

As the noises of the marriage ceremony and the subsequent jazz music filter into the hotel room, Daisy muses, “We’re getting old.... If we were young we’d rise and dance.” She is cautioned by Jordan, “Remember Biloxi,” causing the reader once again to ponder the connections here. Daisy is obviously recalling her own marriage to Tom, but beyond that she is encountering time itself. “We’re getting old” is a recognition that one’s romance and youth are going (if not gone), and her wistful statement, “If we were young we’d rise and dance,” connotes a “rising and dancing” of special poignancy, a retrieval of youth, a hint even of resurrection. 18 Jordan warns her by

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17 There will doubtless be some readers who think I’m insane on this Biloxi, Tennessee issue since their text reads “Biloxi, Mississippi.” But textual reality here is as slippery as the World Series. The more recent editions of Gatsby, including Scribner’s latest paperback, the current Penguin edition, and the Scribner’s text used by Henry Dan Piper, op. cit., in 1972, all print “Biloxi, Tennessee.” The older Scribner’s editions carry “Biloxi, Mississippi.” Scribner’s has not responded to my inquiry as to why the “Mississippi” was changed to the more interesting (to me) “Tennessee.” Whatever Fitzgerald’s original wording was, the book exists as public domain, and the more modern version, one is tempted to say, “the more modernist version,” does read “Tennessee.” The very confusion itself gives evidence that Biloxi is alive and well, at least in the newer reprints.

18 The American Dream, as Edwin Fussell and others have emphasized, is never far from the cult of youth. Ponce de León is
referring to Biloxi, yet Biloxi’s presence maintains life; only when he leaves, do we die. How can we not recall Gatsby’s own imperious desire to stop time, his spirited answer to Nick’s earlier warning:

“I wouldn’t ask too much of her,” I ventured. “You can’t repeat the past.”
“Can’t repeat the past?” he cried incredulously. “Why of course you can!” (117)

I do not for a moment suggest that the ghost imagery I have used has a genuine religious significance. But it is clear that the issue of lost youth and irretrievable past is at the heart of the book, as it is at the heart of the dream. And the radiant answer, the splendidly American response, is to recreate what has been lost, to invent one’s past and to harness desire as the very reality principle itself. Nothing need be over for the self-made man. The “gift of hope” may be illusory, but it is life-sustaining, and once it is gone, once “Blocks” Biloxi leaves your house, life is not worth living. The “realist” exposure of illusion, the sleuthwork of Tom Buchanan and his ilk, is not so much an education as a loss of something magic and indispensable; this, Fitzgerald took to be the burden of his novel: “the loss of those illusions that give such color to the world so that you don’t care whether things are true or false so long as they partake of the magical glory.”

But the dreamer has to awake, and no fiction can ignore the inescapable constraints of Reality. Moreover, the object of the dream cannot be protected against time, nor can its beauty ever match that of the dream. Finally, the achievements furthered by the dream may be tawdry and corrupt, although the dream never can be.

Fitzgerald had no choice but to expose his quester for a fraud, the quester’s materials for vulgar and meretricious. But the deeper challenge he faced, and the one he met so perfectly that The Great Gatsby continues to perplex its readers today, is the dilemma of conveying the beauty and power of the dream, while discrediting its object, its “occupant” and its effects. The power of belief is Fitzgerald’s true subject, and he brilliantly saw that it is allied to semiosis, to the production of meaning. He intuitively grasped that the virtues of the dream are synonymous with the virtues of language. Time cannot kill it, nor can origin or fixed referent determine or immobilize it. Language “rises and dances” in The Great Gatsby, and it offers its most perfect performance in the figure of “Blocks” Biloxi. Biloxi, the put-together amalgam of person and place, spewing cousins, putters and death in his wake, commences to look more and more like Gatsby. No one knew him, but he was allegedly “a friend of Daisy’s.” She claims that he was not, that he had come down in “the private car,” which points at both Gatsby and the railway coach. Biloxi made his own story, claiming that he knew Daisy, was raised in Louisville,

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19 Quoted by Mizener in his Introduction, F. Scott Fitzgerald, p. 10.
had done more yet. His most extraordinary achievement, the novel’s very finest transposition of fiction to fact, dream to reality, and language to deed, is the rank he acquired: “He told me he was president of your class at Yale.” No longer “out there” in Tennessee or even Louisville, Biloxi has finally come home, home to the Fitzgerald citadel where he takes his rightful place on the throne. Here is the “high noon” showdown at last, in a different key, reminiscent more of the Quixote’s encounters than those of gunfighters. If “Blocks” Biloxi can be president of your class at Yale, then America is not only a genuine “rags-to-riches” virgin land, but literature has finally out-trumped life by getting its own man elected.20

The forces of order man their defenses at once:

Tom and I looked at each other blankly.
“Biloxi?”
“First place, we didn’t have any president—”

But it is manifestly too late in the game for such reneging, and Tom Buchanan rises oddly to the occasion, dropping Biloxi and moving on to Gatsby, with a sure sense that the story of one is the life of the other, and vice versa. Closing in on Gatsby’s Oxford stint, approaching ever more closely the so-called boundary between fact and fiction, Tom finally makes the ultimate connection and delivers one of the most perfect lines of the book: “You [Gatsby] must have been there [Oxford] about the time Biloxi went to New Haven.” At this point Gatsby produces a compromise answer, and the interlude with Biloxi comes to a close. In some sense, the remainder of the book is something of a come-down, a return to Reality and its unavoidable assortment of evidence and corpses and cold fried chicken.

But the issues raised in the Biloxi episode and the ringing identification of Biloxi and Gatsby as one, their careers as intertwined, these concerns illuminate the larger purposes of the novel, and to shed light on them has been the object of this study. “Blocks” Biloxi is not only a “made” person, a construct; he is also positioned in a homemade world of the group’s devising, the kind of place where Biloxi can be in Tennessee and San Francisco in the Middle West. This flim-flam man who manufactures his past, crashes the wedding, does in Jordan’s father, and is president of your class at Yale, is a potent figure, free of all prior conditioning and constraints (since he is shaped and constructed in front of our eyes) and strangely memorable (he is only “there” in the narrative because he is memorable). Pure artifice, yet he intrudes into the Real World, leaving Jordan a putter and leaving her father to die. His meteoric career is a bold parable of Jay Gatsby’s life, a shorthand version of the same magic and creation of belief which constitute Gatsby’s particular greatness. “Blocks” Biloxi is the liberated signifier, the unit or “block” of language that can be molded and connected in countless ways, to yield countless boxes, each with countless possible contents or signifieds.

20 All parallels with the current American political scene are unintended.
The novel does not close with Biloxi, nor shall I. Jay Gatsby is also a hero of self-creation, but unlike the enigmatic Biloxi, he is a passionate, tragic character, one who brought to the potential of signs the energy of his life. His smile, his parties, his love are profoundly creative, constitutive gestures, enabling others to take form and life. He is the prime mover in Fitzgerald’s scheme, the “Son of God” who is a consummate fiction-maker, acting through the shape he gave to himself and to others. There is a remarkable kind of freedom in this act of shaping, and I have argued that it can be understood as a peculiarly American freedom, an imperious desire to make reality rather than to undergo it. But, this freedom can only be exercised by dint of energy and will. The con man, like the artist, replaces the given world by a construct of his own, but it can rival with reality only if he invests it with life, with his life. Those splendid parties of Gatsby’s and the aura which surrounds the scattered details of his life, these are the properties of legend, and they bear witness to a strange kind of public belief, a kind of reciprocity whereby Gatsby is himself brought to life by those who surround him. Such reciprocity also defines the basic aesthetic miracle that brings art to life, that makes the page seem real, that makes it endure. Hero of dreams, Gatsby is dreamed by others. Only in such a way can the artist then act on his public, appeal to or coerce their belief, and ultimately withdraw from the scene, confident that his creation is alive, kept alive by the belief of his public.

Fitzgerald achieved that final transfer in *The Great Gatsby*, and the book is endowed with an indigenous energy and power that mocks both closure and exposure. This brings me back, even if circuitously, to the question with which I began: what is Gatsby’s greatness? My answer is in my title: fiction as greatness. There can be no fixed, measurable index of greatness, no specifiable amount of dollars or military victories or literary prizes which must be earned before greatness is bestowed. I am not suggesting that it therefore does not exist. Greatness has common cause with fiction because it hinges on belief, because it can only be achieved if it is conferred. To be great requires a crucial measure of public endorsement; indeed, it requires being “ratified,” much as one must be “elected” president of your class at Yale. Biloxi achieved his ghostly triumph in these precincts, yet his more flesh-and-blood cousin Gatsby remains ultimately the more compelling candidate. The fiction-making for which he stands is a passionate act of transformation not unlike Rimbaud’s *alchimie du verbe*, but it can make its magic and enchanted objects only through the gift of self and the response of others. To phrase it that way is to run the risk of Gatsby’s own “appalling sentimentality,” but it is also to underscore the humane value of belief, even fictional belief, as the goal of language and literature.