A WHOLE HEAP OF ASHES
The Great Gatsby

If you're going to think much about American literature, you better prepare for irony. Not the sort that's in the books, although there's enough of that, I suppose. Rather, think about the ironies involved in, say, the most important statement about the evils of slavery coming in a book by a writer from a slave state, not from the abolitionist North. Or the funniest writing coming from the gloomiest characters.

Or this. The most penetrating critique of the excesses of capitalism in New York during the Roaring Twenties coming four years before the crash and from a young man who spent every waking hour trying desperately to take part in those excesses, to make sure the times roared. You might think that a fellow who turned himself into an instant success to get the girl he desired would lack the self-awareness to undertake such a project. That someone who one year in the 1920s earned the equivalent of today's $280,000 and by some accounts finished the year further behind than he started it, only to go charging ahead with the same extravagant lifestyle that would ultimately drain his bank...
account, his health, and his wife's sanity would be able to see what's wrong with conspicuous consumption. Yes, you just might think that. You would be wrong.

We hear talk from time to time about the Great American Novel, chiefly about why we have yet to see it appear. I've never known what people mean by that appellation or why they think there should be one. More significantly, I don't know why they think they lack one when they have any number of them already. There are several in this survey that can fill the bill, and quite a few that aren't but for which a case can be made. Maybe it's Tolstoy envy; hardly anything can be as all-encompassing as War and Peace. Maybe it's a matter of scale and scope: the GAN has to be vast, like us, wildly inclusive, like us, hugely ambitious, ditto. Yet when Thomas Pynchon gives us what we think we want, we run screaming into the night. More probably, though, it's a matter of bad attitude: we don't like the message of this or that novel that wrestles with the problem that is America. So many of our great novels are downers, showing us in an unflattering light. Maybe that's why when a slight novel by a hugely popular young novelist and short-story writer appeared in 1925 while the jazzy age of excess was roaring its loudest, despite huge expectation and good reviews, it went thud. Because it showed us in a bad light. Because it had all those things that should have been fun—wild parties and speakeasies and gangsters and affairs and jealousy—but was definitely not a romp. Because its main character was a fraud, a caricature of our dream of success who ended very badly. Who despite the title was by no means great.

If the universe were just, The Great Gatsby would have been F. Scott Fitzgerald's biggest novel. It is his biggest. It just wasn't in the moment. Today it sells a great many more copies per year than it sold in his lifetime. Granted, a huge chunk of those sales are to captive audiences, but don't you suppose there's a reason all those professors and high school teachers assign it? Aside from brevity and the eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg? It's his best book by a mile. Oh, I suppose you could make a claim for Tender Is the Night and no one would squawk too much, but nothing else comes anywhere close. It's almost as if some force took him over in writing Gatsby and made him better than he could be. It avoids the purple passages of overwriting, the infelicitous expressions, and the undisciplined excesses of his early novels and stories. The characters, for once, feel like real persons and not stylized types or convenient plot devices. Fitzgerald knew all this, worked at it, delayed completion to get things just right. He wrote to Maxwell Perkins, the legendary editor who made great novelists of him and Hemingway and made anything at all of Thomas Wolfe, that he was doing something quite different and better than his earlier work, a "consciously artistic achievement." That's a fair assessment. The earlier books were written at great speed and aimed at financial, rather than artistic, achievement. The first, This Side of Paradise, was written to get the money to get the girl, and it succeeded. The man who lost Ginevra King because he was too poor, who determined not to lose Zelda Sayre for the same reason, did not have to ransack the imagination too long to come up with Jay Gatsby, the dreamer who becomes rich by any means in order to reclaim the dream girl who declared him too poor. And here's the change: for the first time in his career Fitzgerald knew what to do with that story artistically and was master enough of his craft to get there.

Except for the title. The one we know, the one that works perfectly, was not his choice and was never his favorite. Max Perkins came up with it based on a single phrase from the novel. The author had other ideas. That's okay, you don't have to love the title The Great Gatsby. But seriously, Trimalchio in West Egg? The High-Bouncing Lover? Gold-Hatted Gatsby? Among Ash Heaps and Millionaires? That one at least
has some resonance. This list explains why there are editors. What professor of American literature is going to assign *Trimalchio in West Egg*? Even if we know Trimalchio as a randy upstart in *The Satyricon* of Petronius, and most of us don't, that title's just dopey. What tenth- or eleventh-grade teacher wants to explain to parents that *The High-Bouncing Lover* isn't some sort of porn novel? Say what you will about turning the million-word mess Wolfe gave him into *Look Homeward, Angel*, for my money Maxwell Perkins's greatest contribution to literature is giving this book its clean, slightly ironic title.

The book's story line is pretty simple on one level: boy loses girl, boy goes to incredible lengths to win girl again, boy briefly wins girl, boy destroys happiness for himself and girl and pretty much everyone around him. Which is swell, except that's not the story. This novel isn't about Gatsby. Strange, isn't it, when he's in the title? We'll get to that in a moment. First, let's lay out the story line a bit more fully.

The book begins when Nick Carraway, a young bond trader from the Midwest, moves into a house on Long Island in a place called West Egg. You will no doubt find that name improbable, as I did when I was sixteen, until you know that the author was living at the time in a Long Island town called Great Neck. West Egg is the home to a great deal of what is called "new money," fortunes earned by the persons themselves rather than by their great-grandparents. Those holders of inherited wealth, "old money" in the common parlance, live across the bay in East Egg (like you couldn't see that one coming), which is even farther out the island away from New York. Pay attention to that; geography matters immensely in this novel. In the paradise of parvenus that is West Egg the newest, biggest money belongs to Nick's neighbor, a mysterious creature named Gatsby. Everyone talks about Gatsby, just as everyone, seemingly, comes to his wild parties, but few have even spoken to him, fewer still know him, and hardly anyone has any definite facts regarding his life. This does not stop them from having definite opinions about him.

In fairly short order Nick, despite dwelling in a humble bungalow between two mansions, is invited to one of the parties. It is everything one might hope for, full of wild music and drunken revelry and bootleg liquor (remember, this is 1922) and antics of every description. And people. Lots and lots of them, of every attractive sort. He even meets the woman of his interest if not his heart, Jordan Baker, whom he had first encountered at his cousin's house, but they become separated while searching for Gatsby. Nick seems to stumble upon his host, and after some initial confusion, identities are revealed. Of course, nothing Gatsby does is accidental, and his meeting with Nick, like the invitation itself, is to a purpose: the aforementioned cousin, Daisy Buchanan, is the girl Jay Gatsby loved and lost five years earlier. Everything he has done since then has been accomplished with an eye toward winning her back, however far-fetched and ill-advised that plan might be. Daisy, from money herself, has married the very wealthy, old-money, former Yale football star, Tom Buchanan. What Gatsby cannot comprehend is how difficult that winning might prove and how his newly acquired fortune (he's a bootlegger and associate of mobsters) might not measure up. The parties, it turns out, have been part of that failure of understanding: he throws them to attract Daisy without seeing that his sort of party and his sort of crowd would be anathema to the old-money sorts of East Egg—too tawdry, too frenetic, too common. And maybe too much fun, although he doesn't enjoy them himself. He could learn from his parties, but he doesn't.

Persisting in his folly, he succeeds in getting Nick to arrange a meeting with his dream girl. He must have her, he must. Years before she had let him kiss her, and the universe shifted: "He knew that when he kissed this girl, and forever wed his unutterable visions to her
perishable breath, his mind would never romp again like the mind of God." Well, there you go. When your mind cannot romp like the mind of God ever again, you have to get the girl. And he does, for a while. She comes "quite often," Gatsby tells Nick, in the afternoons. But it can't last. Daisy is too shallow and spoiled, Gatsby too romantic and fantasy-driven. It all comes apart on a trip into the city.

This is actually the third trip Nick makes to the city with other major players. On the first, he meets Tom Buchanan's mistress, Myrtle Wilson, the wife of a garage owner. She is coarse and unrealistic, not understanding how Tom is using her in the relationship and truly believing that he will leave Daisy for her. She puts on a party—very tawdry and pompous and low-rent—at the apartment Tom keeps for their trysting, which ends badly when Tom breaks her nose during a row over his not leaving Daisy. On the second, Gatsby takes Nick to lunch with a gangster named Meyer Wolfshiem (modeled on Arnold Rothstein, the man who fixed the 1919 World Series). Nick hears stories of Gatsby's past, all of them deeply suspect, as well as tales of gangsters past replete with mob hits. Each of those occasions affords Nick the opportunity to lose respect for his associates, which chance he grabs more in Tom's case than in Gatsby's.

Neither of those gatherings, however, can match the third for melodrama and disillusionment. Daisy has invited Nick and Gatsby to lunch at her mansion. Both Tom and Jordan are there, and it is decided that they will set off for the city. En route, they stop at Wilson's garage, where Wilson asks to buy Tom's wonderful car—and more importantly where Myrtle sees the car. This scene is the cause of the ultimate calamity: the car is not Tom's but Gatsby's, Tom having insisted on switching cars for the drive to town, then boasted of it to Wilson. In the city, they take a room at the Plaza Hotel for what turns out to be a desultory and ultimately ruinous party. Gatsby and Tom act more and more like rivals, until Gatsby tries to force Daisy to say that she never loved Tom, which she can't quite do, although she insists that she loved Gatsby, too, even while agreeing to marry Tom. Daisy is emotionally stripped bare by the confrontation, "You want too much," she tells Gatsby. "I love you now—isn't that enough." Tom decries Gatsby as a bootlegger, which in other circumstances would be funny, since they are engaged in doing serious damage to some whisky at the time. But this is not a funny gathering. Daisy insists on being taken home by Gatsby, but at the car, we later learn, insists on driving to "calm her nerves." Myrtle sees the car and, believing it to be driven by Tom, runs in front of it. It may be the revenge fantasy of thousands of wronged wives to run over the other woman, but this collision brings no pleasure to anyone. Daisy arrives home in worse shape than ever. Wilson confronts Tom when he, Nick, and Jordan come along later and see the scene of the wreck, and Tom claims innocence, admitting his earlier lie to extricate himself from present trouble. The next day Wilson finds Gatsby floating in his pool and shoots him, then commits suicide.

Gatsby's funeral is as empty as a pauper's. The only mourners for the man who had hundreds at his parties are his father, Nick, a postman, a handful of servants, and the owl-eyed man who at the first party had admired the library. No Daisy, no Jordan, no Wolfshiem, no revelers, no sycophants. Mr. Gatz reveals the ambition of the young Jimmy, who would rechristen himself as Jay Gatsby, the first of many, many self-inventions.

Those of you with strong memories will recall that some pages back I said this novel isn't about Gatsby. That was right before I told you the story of Gatsby. So along about now you're thinking, "So what's it about, wise guy?" Easy. It's about watching. The proper title for this volume would probably be something like Watching Gatsby. Just a couple of years before this novel came out, in 1923, Wallace Stevens published
his first volume of poetry, *Harmonium*. The book contained a poem called “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” in which Stevens melded the short poem-of-a-moment’s-observation program of imagism to his own meditative, philosophical practice of versification. None of the “ways” of looking is definitive; each is partial, momentary, slightly cryptic. There is nothing to suggest that Stevens in general or this poem in particular influenced Fitzgerald in writing his masterpiece; I mention it instead as a way of understanding the design of the novel, which could be called *Thirteen (or However Many Characters There Are) Ways of Looking at Gatsby*. What those characters mostly see is what they need to see, or what they expect to see, or what explains their world to them. The moment he dies and ceases to be an item of contemplation, they vanish. Before that, however, the watchers are legion. And mostly, we’re interested in one of them.

Fitzgerald’s great coup in the novel, it has always seemed to me, is his choice of narrator. Nick Carraway is rather stiff and snobbish, so he can disapprove of almost everyone, including his main topic of conversation, yet he is young enough and impressionable enough to be won over by Gatsby’s—what? It isn’t charm exactly, more his need to be charming. Or maybe his neediness in general. Here is a person who seemingly has it all, yet he cannot have the thing he most wants, and his only hope of getting it is through intermediaries. Nick, as Daisy’s second cousin, once removed, is well placed for such a role. He knows her, but not well enough to be highly protective; a closer relative might rebuff Gatsby. He also disapproves of Daisy, as well he might, and actively dislikes Tom. He sees the unworthiness of Daisy as an object of Gatsby’s obsession yet colludes in the dream. And at every point in the novel, he is implicated in the tragedy that is moving forward. A hundred times he could stop the proceedings with a word but does not, yet in the end as in the beginning, the entire affair is about *them*.

He’s with Ford Madox Ford’s John Dowell, who declares that “I don’t know that analysis of my own psychology matters at all to the story,” yet without whose psychology *The Good Soldier* would not exist at all. Nick stands in that line of narrators who deny culpability while seated in the middle of the ruins. If not Nick, then who? He sees the tawdry affair between Tom Buchanan and Myrtle Wilson, sees the cynicism and brutality with which Tom conducts himself. He not only sees but abets the romance between Gatsby and Daisy, even as he knows it can come to no good. He learns things about Gatsby from Wolfsheim that no one else can know. And he can prevent the fatal gathering of the novel’s principals, or even bring sanity to the drive home, by leaving with his friend. He does none of these. Yet in his final analysis it is all about *them*—what they did and didn’t do, the way they conducted themselves.

What he does do is watch. He’s a bystander but no innocent. At times he seems not so much to be watching a slow-motion train wreck as to be watching for a wreck. Which he gets. He is the most prominent of voyeurs in a book chock-full of them. Herein lies the brilliance of Fitzgerald’s narratorial decision. Nick sees everything in the novel, which on one level is what it means to be a first-person narrator. And what Nick mostly sees is that the object of Gatsby’s obsession is unworthy of the herculean efforts made on her behalf. But also perhaps that the efforts are themselves corrupt, the product of a misunderstanding about the nature of the world. Daisy is simply not worth the efforts Gatsby makes to win her, nor are his successes anything to write home about. He’s a gangster, ruthless, amoral, willing to do whatever it takes to succeed. We can make whatever arguments we choose that a gangster is merely a businessman without a corner office, that he’s Fitzgerald’s emblem of American business at large or the frenetic and unprincipled stock market, but the fact remains, he’s a gangster. And
what Nick sees is that Daisy is not a good enough reason to have become one.

What he does not, perhaps cannot, see is that it's not about Daisy. Yes, Daisy is present as the object of immediate desire, and the Speaker who denied the poor youth Jay Gatsby admission into the club. But she's merely a dream stand-in, merely the embodiment of the Unattainable. Poor Jay Gatsby can never acquire social acceptance. His later wealthy avatar fares no better. His new wealth is suspect, along with his garish presentation of himself, his underworld connections, and his protean self-narratives. Besides, as we see with Daisy and Tom and Jordan Baker, privilege and social acceptance are no guarantors of happiness or tranquility. Gatsby's real dream, his Dream, is of something that doesn't really exist. He aspires to some platonic ideal of success. It's not so much dream as fantasy: the Daisy he imagines swooning into his arms forever is a fantasy woman, and his fantasy cannot survive its brutal clash with reality. Ultimately, he dies not of George Wilson's bullet but of a broken dream, of the smash-up of the fantasy he has spent years endlessly constructing. The dream, however, has been broken all along, a fact to which he has been entirely blind.

That's what the book is about, blindness. And vision, of course; you can't have one without the other. And seeing and not seeing, insight and its opposite, and watching, and eyes. That's why the book is presided over by the eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg, an enormous, fading sign for a probably defunct eye doctor. The eyes are enormous, faceless, blue, and creepy, looking out over the Valley of Ashes (we'll come back to that in a moment). That's why there's such emphasis on the man with owl-shaped glasses who peruses Gatsby's library at a party and then, unaccountably perhaps, is the only partygoer to show up at the funeral. Nearly everyone is watching someone else in the novel. Most, naturally, are watching Gatsby. But he's watching Daisy, even when he can't see her and can only see the green light on her dock. Myrtle Wilson watches for Tom to move through her field of vision. George Wilson is so busy watching for a deal that he doesn't see what his wife is getting up to. He does see her get killed but doesn't see what he thinks he sees: Daisy, not Gatsby, is driving the car, so when he goes looking for the owner of the yellow Rolls Royce, he finds him but does not, as he expects, find his wife's killer.

That's a pattern running through the novel: characters see things that aren't there and don't see others that are. And that's another major theme: illusion and disillusionment. Gatsby, of course, lives in illusion and dies, as I suggested earlier, of disillusionment. Before that, he has been a master illusionist, creating spectacles at which hundreds of persons deluded themselves into believing they were happy or celebrated or clever. The Buchanans are so wealthy that "they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or vast carelessness" or, I would add, their shared illusions that their money could make them happy or make everything all right. The disillusionment belongs chiefly to Nick, who has come east full of expectations and has them dashed: the "good" people are terrible, everyone is a cheat or a fraud, and the one person who fully embraces the principles of success and advancement is destroyed. Other than that, everything is fine. Seeing things clearly destroys Nick's illusion and sends him back to the West again.

What he sees and dislikes so intently is corruption. The East is a place of dust, rot, and ash. Those fading eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg reign over the valley of ashes, a vast dumping ground of ash and cinders from New York's countless coal-fired furnaces and power plants. The scene is gray and dismal and bears more than a passing resemblance to the Valley of the Shadow, and of course it is the site of one of the novel's literal deaths. Its function, however, is largely symbolic of the more general corruption in the story at large. Wolfsheim, like his model, Arnold
Rothstein, receives credit for fixing the 1919 World Series. Jordan Baker cheats at golf and doesn’t bother hiding it very much. Tom cheats on his wife but has no particular fondness for his mistress. The title character, of course, is into every sort of illegal mischief, some of which is so dangerous that people are afraid to talk about it. The parties are decadent, and each drink consumed is an illegal act in Prohibition. Everyone, it seems, is looking for an angle, an advantage, a dodge, a subterfuge. The resulting moral landscape, like the valley of ashes, is a wasteland.

So what’s the deal with a bunch of seedy people with challenged ethics? I hate to bring this up, but they’re us. In the hothouse atmosphere of New York in the 1920s, when fortunes were made and lost daily and stocks were being sold from pushcarts on Wall Street, greed and corruption were rampant. While Fitzgerald never says very much about the business side of Nick’s life, he encodes that immoral behavior in the general milieu. He presents all this as a perversion of the American Dream, which traditionally has had to do with freedom, opportunity, space to build a life, but which has been replaced by grasping, win-at-all-costs materialism. Had this novel appeared in the 1930s, that insight would not be remarkable. But it was published in 1925, more than four years before the crash, about which, I believe, it is prescient. The irony is that Fitzgerald the writer could diagnose the illness but Fitzgerald the man could not save himself with that knowledge. He was as caught up in the materialism of the age, as dazzled by wealth, as susceptible to the unworthy dream as anyone could be. As has often been observed, the person who writes is not the same as the one who eats breakfast in the morning or goes to parties on Saturday or shops at Macy’s, and in the case of Fitzgerald, the writer was not only vastly more insightful but evidently incapable of using those insights to save his ordinary self. As I said at the top of this piece, ironies accrue. Add this one to the list.