It is hard to read *The Great Gatsby* with a fresh eye, not only because it is a famous novel by a famous author, but also because, along with his characters, Fitzgerald's observations and phrases have become so much a part of the way Americans think of themselves. The novel is also a principal American entrant into the pantheon of world greatness, so it bears the burden of universal critical acclaim.

Most Americans are familiar with the story. Jay Gatsby, a man of vast wealth, mysteriously appears in a fashionable town on Long Island and begins throwing fabulous parties to which everyone comes, not because they have been invited or know the host, but just because everyone else is there. As our narrator, Nick Carraway, comes to know Gatsby, however, he learns that Gatsby has two secrets—that he is in love with Nick's cousin, Daisy, who is married to an unpleasant man named Tom, and that Gatsby's apparent wealth comes from questionable investments and gangster connections. When Gatsby reveals himself to Daisy, she at first resumes their five-year-old romance, but Tom quickly reasserts his power over her. Then, during a drive from New York to Long Island, Gatsby's car is involved in a hit-and-run accident in which Tom's mistress, Myrtle, is coincidentally killed. Myrtle's husband then finds Gatsby and kills him, afterward shooting himself. Gatsby has told Nick that Daisy had been driving the car, but this crime is covered up and Tom and Daisy famously "retreat... back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made..." (p. 188). In the meantime, Nick arranges Gatsby's funeral, to which no one comes. Sound implausible?

I have to admit that I don't care as much for *The Great Gatsby* as many people do. I think it should have been a hundred pages longer and that Fitzgerald should have developed the characters and their relationships more meticulously and in more detail. As it is, each character has only a few scenes, and those are mostly short. Once the author elaborately introduces each character, they do not develop or change as a result of the action, they only reveal their true natures, and their true natures are shallow. This is especially true of Daisy. Even Gatsby is disappointed in her; when he finds her again, it takes him only an hour or two to realize she is not what he thought she was. Nick admits that he
can’t describe her particular charm—it is in her voice or her face, but he doesn’t actually describe either one, he merely tries to capture in a couple of phrases the impression her face and her voice give. Tom’s signal quality is that he is threatening; Gatsby’s, that he is romantic; Nick’s, that he is honest; Daisy’s, that she is strangely desirable. But Fitzgerald doesn’t build these personalities so that they are truly convincing, by showing them to us action by incremental action. For scenes and dialogue he substitutes his own aphoristic style (rendered by Nick Carraway). Some of it is apt and smart, but much of it is sentimental and even nonsensical. The problem is that the tone of the novel is bittersweet before the action has earned the right to be bittersweet. Nick is already elegiac before anything is lost. A good comparison can be made to Zeno. Zeno is straightforward and occasionally ironic until the reader comes to know what has been lost and what Zeno feels about it; only then does Svevo allow his narrator to wax lyrical. A good example of Fitzgerald’s sort of mistake takes place in the first two pages. The novel opens with the line, “In my younger and more vulnerable years, my father gave me some advice that I’ve been turning over in my mind ever since.

“Whenever you feel like criticizing anyone,” he told me, ‘just remember that all the people in this world haven’t had the advantages that you’ve had.”’ On the next page Nick rephrases the advice: “I am still a little afraid of missing something if I forget that, as my father snobbishly suggested, and I snobbishly repeat, a sense of the fundamental decencies is parcelled out unequally at birth.” Whether these two ideas are related is unclear. They seem not to be. Fitzgerald should have been aware that they are not the same, and he should have developed his argument beyond these flashy phrases to make it clear. The same is true of his last observation: “So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past” (p. 197). The image is lyrical and paradoxical but it doesn’t really make sense.

What is Fitzgerald arguing for? The only way in which Gatsby is great is that he has devoted himself to an illusion and given up every virtue except the virtue of style to attain it. The illusion is not precisely Daisy, but rather the class that Daisy seemed to embody, with its comfort and elegance. We know that he doesn’t actually honor Daisy from a dropped remark about their earlier interlude—that he seduced her or, as Nick says, “took her” before they were married or even engaged, and then didn’t contact her because he wasn’t wealthy yet, and he didn’t want her without the wealth. Nick is skeptical of the sort of illusion Gatsby is susceptible to from the beginning (because he went to college and also has known Tom for a while), but for some reason he respects Gatsby for not being as skeptical as he is. This is a vividly written novel of a very young man (Fitzgerald was twenty-nine when it was published). It is not the wisdom of the ages. All the qualities of youth are present in the novel—snap judgments about others, overblown emotions, sharp observations about surfaces, self-doubt, self-hatred, and a lack of insight into women—plus considerable promise, of course—but I don’t think it is careful enough, wise enough, or well enough thought through to be a masterpiece.

The Trial was published after Kafka’s death by his friend Max Brod, who defied Kafka’s own expressed wish that all of his papers and manuscripts be burned. Although Brod was right to save and publish his friend’s work, thereby furnishing the twentieth century with its most uncannily truthful voice, it is also easy to understand why Kafka might have wanted to keep his work private. What is new in Kafka’s work is an astonishing degree of intimacy and honesty—what is utterly original in fiction is always more private than what is original in other forms, because it is uncircumscribed by conventions (like poetry) or the presence of other people (like drama and movies). What makes novels public are traditional themes and stories: Will the boy and the girl get together at last? Will the husband be cuckolded? Will the individuals be reconciled to their communities? But Kafka’s works have no traditional stories and so possess a much smaller public dimension. Reading Kafka’s work can seem like no less an intrusion upon him than reading his diaries. His protagonists, often full of shame, also seem shameless in their readiness to confess their shame.

In the opening chapter of The Trial, Josef K., a bank manager in his twenties in some central European city, is arrested for an unknown crime by authorities whose jurisdiction he doesn’t recognize. In the