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G. Thomas Tanselle and Jackson R. Bryer

THE GREAT GATSBY
A STUDY IN LITERARY REPUTATION

When the reviewer for the *Boston Transcript* commented on *The Great Gatsby* in the issue of May 23, 1925, he said that "no critic will attempt, even in the distant future, to estimate Mr. Fitzgerald's work without taking 'The Great Gatsby' into account, even though its author should create many more books." The statement is true: Fitzgerald did create many more books and we do think of *Gatsby* as Fitzgerald's central achievement. But this is not exactly what the reviewer had in mind. He was not advancing any extravagant claims for the excellence of the novel; by saying "even in the future," he was merely implying that *Gatsby* represents such an important development in Fitzgerald's career that it will remain historically and biographically important despite the later (and presumably greater) works that will be the full flowering of his talent. At first glance, the statement is one which, read in the light of present-day opinion, may seem farsighted and perspicacious, but which, if read in context and without the hindsight gained from years of Fitzgerald idolatry, is a typical reviewer's comment. The reviewer saw some merit in the book, to be sure, but there is no indication that his remark is anything more (or very much more) than a polite compliment, or that he had singled the book out as one which might possibly be ranked some day among the greatest works of literary art.

The fact is, of course, that it is difficult for a contemporary commentator to detect a future masterpiece—particularly when the work later comes to be thought of as a masterpiece representative of its times. The reviewer is likely either to dismiss the work as trivial or to say that no such people as it depicts ever existed. Fitzgerald, now regarded as the historian of the Jazz Age, was frequently criticized during his lifetime for writing about unreal characters or unbelievable situations. A book like *The Great Gatsby*, when it was praised at all, was praised for its style or its insight into American society; it was not given the kind of serious analysis it has received in the last twenty

years, with emphasis on its symbolic and mythic elements. The novel may have been compared to works by Edith Wharton, Henry James, and Joseph Conrad, but it was not felt necessary to draw in Goethe, Milton, and Shakespeare, as Lionel Trilling has done. The fact that *The Great Gatsby* has been elevated to such heights serves to emphasize the mildness of the praise (and the vehemence of the criticism) with which it was received. The vicissitudes of the book's reputation form an instructive illustration of the problems involved in literary judgment. Since the book is today read in such a different way from the approach used by the contemporary reviewers (indeed in a way impossible for them), must one conclude that time is a prerequisite for the perspective needed in critical judgments? that a contemporary can never see as much in a work as a later generation can? that it is necessary to get far enough away from the period so that questions of realism in external details do not intrude?

There have been—it goes without saying—admirers of the novel from the beginning. Gertrude Stein wrote to Fitzgerald of the “genuine pleasure” the book brought her; she called it a “good book” and said he was “creating the contemporary world as much as Thackeray did his.” T. S. Eliot, after referring to the novel as “charming,” “overpowering,” and “remarkable,” declared it to be “the first step that American fiction has taken since Henry James.” Edith Wharton wrote, “let me say at once how much I like *Gatsby*”; she praised the advance in Fitzgerald's technique and used the word “masterly.” And Maxwell Perkins' adjectives were “extraordinary,” “magnificent,” “brilliant,” “unequaled”; he believed Fitzgerald had “every kind of right to be proud of this book” full of “such things as make a man famous” and said to him, “You have plainly mastered the craft.”

But the reviewers were not generally so enthusiastic, and several were quite hostile. In the years following the book's publication, there were a few critics who spoke highly of the book from time to time, but the comments on *Gatsby* between 1925 and 1945 can almost be counted on one's fingers, and certainly the significant discussions require no more than the fingers of one hand. Between 1927 and the appearance of *Tender Is the Night* in 1934, there were fewer than ten articles on Fitzgerald, and in these only three important (though very brief) comments on *The Great Gatsby*; between 1934 and Fitzgerald's death in 1940 there were only seven articles, containing a few brief allusions to *Gatsby*, and one discussion in a book; in 1942 and 1943 there was one discussion each year. In 1945, however, with the

publication of essays by William Troy and Lionel Trilling, Fitzgerald's stock was beginning to rise, and the Fitzgerald "revival" may be said to have started. It continued at such an accelerated pace that in 1951 John Abbott Clark wrote in the *Chicago Tribune*, "It would seem that all Fitzgerald had broken loose." The story of the changing critical attitudes toward *The Great Gatsby* is a study in the patterns of twentieth-century critical fashions (since the mythic significance of the book was discovered at the same time that the New Criticism was taking over) as well as of the (perhaps) inevitable course of events in literary decisions. It is the success story of how "an inferior work" with an "absurd" and "obviously unimportant" plot became a book that "will be read as long as English literature is read anywhere."

I

WHEN SCRIBNER'S published *The Great Gatsby* on April 10, 1925, Fitzgerald was an author with a considerable reputation, for *This Side of Paradise* had aroused a great deal of comment five years before and four other books had come from him since. *Gatsby*, therefore, was given prominent reviews in many of the important newspapers and journals. If it can be said in general that the most distinguished periodicals praised the book and that the attacks came from the lesser ones, it can also be said that those attacks were quite vehement and reached a large audience.

For example, *Gatsby* was introduced to New Yorkers (just two days after its publication, on April 12) by the *World*, which headed its review, in large letters, "F. Scott Fitzgerald's Latest a Dud." The reviewer considered the novel "another one of the thousands of modern novels which must be approached with the point of view of the average tired person toward the movie-around-the-corner, a deadened intellect, a thankful resigning of the attention, and an aftermath of wonder that such things are produced." After discovering "no important development of . . . character" in the book, he dismissed it quickly—"with the telling of the plot 'The Great Gatsby' is, in newspaper parlance, covered."

Six days later, Ruth Hale, in the *Brooklyn Eagle*, carried the attack even farther when she wrote that she could not find "one chemical trace of magic, life, irony, romance or mysticism in all of 'The Great Gatsby'" and that Fitzgerald, whom she called "the boy,"

is simply puttering around. It is all right as a diversion for him, probably. He does, obviously, like to use hifalutin words and hifalutiner notions to concoct these tales. There may be those who like to read him. But why he should be called an author, or why any of us should behave as if he were, has never been explained satisfactorily to me.

America went on in the same vein the next month with a very brief comment on *Gatsby* in a review of several new books: "an inferior novel, considered from any angle whatsoever . . . feeble in theme, in portraiture and even in expression." And the *Springfield Republican* (July 5, 1925) found the book "a little slack, a little soft, more than a little artificial" because "the characters . . . are blurred and incomprehensible. The 'Great Gatsby' himself . . . is unconvincing at best. Jordan . . . is the only person who stands out at all from the faintly melodramatic plot. It is a half-hearted novel that might have been composed and might better be read during a hot wave." In other words, *Gatsby* "falls into the class of negligible novels."

Other periodicals were more charitable, if rather hesitant. The *Independent* (May 2, 1925) admitted that *Gatsby* was good (better than any of Fitzgerald's earlier work except *This Side of Paradise*, which contained "all he knew") and that Fitzgerald was now "over the awkward age" so that he might be able to write effectively "outside the field of sophisticated juveniles"; but his attempt at tragedy in *Gatsby* "somehow has the flavor of skimmed milk." Similarly Walter Yust, in a review published in the *New York Evening Post* on the same day as the *Independent's* comments, found decided weaknesses as well as strengths in the book. Although it was a novel that "refuses to be ignored," it was at the same time "one that reveals incredible grossness, thoughtlessness, polite corruption, without leaving the reader with a sense of depression, without being insidiously provocative."

May 2 also saw the publication of another long and balanced review, that of H. L. Mencken. He criticized the plot ("in form no more than a glorified anecdote"):

The story is obviously unimportant, and though, as I shall show, it has its place in the Fitzgerald canon, it is certainly not to be put on the same shelf with, say, "This Side of Paradise." What ails it, fundamentally, is the plain fact that it is simply a story—that Fitzgerald

seems to be far more interested in maintaining its suspense than in getting under the skins of its people.

That is, except for Gatsby himself, the characters are "mere marionettes—often astonishingly lifelike, but nevertheless not quite alive." But the book is redeemed by "the charm and beauty of the writing," and the story, "for all its basic triviality, has a fine texture, a careful and brilliant finish. The obvious phrase is simply not in it. . . . There is evidence in every line of hard and intelligent effort." Fitzgerald has taken to heart the stylistic criticisms of his earlier novels, so that now one can find pages "full of little delicacies, charming turns of phrase, penetrating second thoughts," "pages so artfully contrived that one can no more imagine improvising them than one can imagine improvising a fugue." Mencken sees Fitzgerald the stylist challenging Fitzgerald the social historian, but he surmises that the latter is Fitzgerald's chosen role—although Fitzgerald "does not go below the surface," he is very accurate in his depiction of it ("The Long Island he sets before us . . . actually exists"). When Mencken turned his attention to *Gatsby* again several weeks later for his *American Mercury* column (July 1925), he was still stressing the book's style, its "evidences of hard, sober toil." Fitzgerald's "whole attitude," he believed, "has changed from that of a brilliant improvisateur to that of a painstaking and conscientious artist," and, while *Gatsby* may be "in part too well-made," it is "sound and laudable work."

At least two other reviewers were in agreement with Mencken. On April 19, Isabel Paterson had declared (in the *New York Herald Tribune*) that the novel contained "not one accidental phrase . . . nor yet one obvious or blatant line" but that Fitzgerald was not able to go beneath "the glittering surface," and that the characters "remain types." Her ambivalent conclusion was that *Gatsby* "is the first convincing testimony that Fitzgerald is . . . an artist" and at the same time that it is "a book of the season only"—but "so peculiarly of the season, that it is in its small way unique." And on May 5 the *New York Post* made the same sort of distinction between the book's style and its content: Fitzgerald demonstrates "an admirable mastery of his medium," but the "plot and its developments work out too geometrically and too perfectly for 'The Great Gatsby' to be a great novel."

When this *Post* reviewer said that Fitzgerald, with *Gatsby*, "definitely deserts his earlier fiction which brought him a lot of money and a certain kind of renown and enters into the group of American

writers who are producing the best serious fiction," he was giving voice to the sort of observation that constantly reappears in these reviews—the place *Gatsby* occupies in Fitzgerald's career. Thus Llewellyn Jones, in one of the earliest reviews, believed that

F. Scott-Fitzgerald has got his second wind, and the people who were dolefully shaking their heads over him some time ago are going to be fooled. "The Great Gatsby" is written with all the brilliancy and beauty that we associate with youth and with a sense of spiritual values that is sincere and mature. (*Chicago Evening Post*, April 17)

Similarly, the following day, Fanny Butcher commented in the *Chicago Tribune* on the implications of the new novel ("as different from the other two as experience is from innocence") for Fitzgerald's development: "The Great Gatsby' proves that Scott Fitzgerald is going to be a writer, and not just a man of one book. It is bizarre. It is melodramatic. It is, at moments, dime novelish. But it is, despite its faults, a book which is not negligible as any one's work, and vastly important as Scott Fitzgerald's work." Edwin Clark, in the *New York Times* the next day, felt that the novel took "a deeper look at life" than any of Fitzgerald's earlier work and showed that his sense of form "is becoming perfected." The *Literary Digest* for May found in this "graceful, finished tale" with "a kind of delicate unreality" a Fitzgerald who exhibits "a new awareness of values" and who is "no longer the impudent youngster," who is "still gay and as extravagant as ever" though "not quite as tolerant, and no longer indifferent" since he displays a new emotion, for him—pity. Carl Van Vechten, too, saw a new element in Fitzgerald in this "fine yarn, exhilaratingly spun": "a quality which has only recently made its debut in the writings of this brilliant young author, the quality vaguely referred to as mysticism" (*Nation*, May 20). The *New Yorker* (May 23) declared that the novel "has Fitzgerald's extravagance but a new maturity, as well as any amount of flash and go. . . . The young man is not petering out." And Louis Bromfield (in the *August Bookman*) believed that Fitzgerald was now "freed of the excesses of youth," since the "gaudy world" of his earlier books "has been left behind somewhere in the middle distance."

The favorable reviews not only tried to ascertain the position of *Gatsby* in Fitzgerald's career but also compared it with the work of other writers. Edwin Clark, in his *Times* review, detected a resemb-

lance to *The Turn of the Screw*, for evil in both cases is suggested, he said, rather than made explicit. The *Bookman* (for June) compared the novel (a story of "a modern Cagliostro") with another one under review, Edith Wharton's *The Mother's Recompense*, and concluded that one "cannot deny its vitality. . . . It is Fitzgerald writing with his old gusto, with driving imagination, and with a sense of the futility of life. . . ." The *Outlook* proceeded, in July, to compare Fitzgerald's satiric catalogue of guests at Gatsby's party with Eugene Field's listing of the first families of Kentucky in his poem "The Peter-Bird" and decided (presumably on other grounds) that Fitzgerald "has serious intentions as a novelist." Early in 1926 Gilbert Seldes noted that Fitzgerald's "form is . . . derived from James through Mrs. Wharton, and there are cadences direct from the pages of Conrad"; yet Fitzgerald "has at last made his borrowings his own, and . . . they nowhere diminish the vitality of his work" (*New Criterion*, January).

This review of Seldes', with its statement that Fitzgerald "has certainly the best chance, at this moment, of becoming our finest artist in fiction," represents the opposite pole from the reaction of the *World*, which had labeled the book a "dud." Seldes' comments are a restatement of the highly favorable opinion he had expressed in the *Dial* several months earlier (August 1925), when he called *Gatsby* "one of the finest of contemporary novels." Fitzgerald, he believed, was no longer concerned only with the exterior of American life (or the "dubious tricks" of his earlier work) but has now "attacked the spirit underneath, and so has begun to report on life in its most general terms," recognizing "both his capacities and his obligations as a novelist." Conrad Aiken, reviewing the English edition in October 1926 for the *New Criterion* (where one of Seldes' reviews had appeared earlier), considered the book not "great" nor "large" nor "strikingly subtle" but nevertheless "well imagined and shaped," with a setting "admirably seized and admirably matched with the theme" and a "hard bright tone" that is "entirely original." He thought of the novel as not merely a satire, but a tragedy: Gatsby himself "comes close to being superb" as Fitzgerald reveals him to us with a "keen tenderness" that "makes his tragedy a deeply moving one."

At this pole of enthusiastic praise come also the reviews of William Rose Benét and Thomas Caldecot Chubb. Benét, in the *Saturday Review of Literature* (May 9, 1925), described *Gatsby* as "disil-

lusioned" and "mature," with "pace" and "admirable 'control.'" Chapter Two "could not have been better written," while the catalogue of guests in Chapter Four could have been brought off by no one but Fitzgerald. Contrary to the opinions of Mencken and Isabel Paterson, Benét felt that the author has "made the real people live and breathe in all their sordidness. . . . They are memorable people of today—not types."

But it is Chubb, writing in the *Forum* (in August 1925), who probably came closer than any other reviewer to expressing the present-day attitude toward the book. Fitzgerald's "most attractive book" is "a fable in the form of a realistic novel," "at once a tragedy and an extraordinarily convincing love tale and an extravaganza. . . ." While the publishers claimed that *Gatsby* "would only be possible in this age and generation," Chubb felt "that he would be possible in any age and generation and impossible in all of them. . . . there is something of Jay Gatsby in every man, woman, or child that ever existed." Referring to Fitzgerald's brilliance (he "has every bit of the brilliance that we associate with hard surfaces"), Chubb asserts, "To recommend this book on the ground of technical excellence is of course superfluous. I recommend it as a study of . . . sentimentalists by one whose heart does not ever beat erratically."

The British reaction to the book in 1926 was not markedly different from the American. That is, there were those who felt, with the *Times Literary Supplement* (February 18), that it was "undoubtedly a work of art and of great promise" and those who thought the story hardly "worth the telling," an example of "[u]ndoubted talent . . . wasted on the poor material of the melodramatic corruptions of America's over-rich 'smart set' in post-war times" (*Dublin Magazine*, July-September 1926). Edward Shanks found himself on the side of the *Times*, with L. P. Hartley in the opposing camp, while the *New Statesman* (March 27) was rather noncommittal about this "satirist with a pretty thick velvet glove." Shanks, in the April *London Mercury*, said that *Gatsby* leaves "no doubt as to Mr. Fitzgerald's talents" and shows him handling "his grotesque material with an artist's discretion and . . . moderation": "Where he might well be flamboyant, he is dry; where he might be ragingly sentimental, he is full of commonsense." Hartley, on the other hand, saw in *Gatsby* only "an absurd story, whether considered as romance, melodrama, or plain record of New York high life," the work of a man whose "imagination is febrile" and whose emotion is "over-strained"; and he hoped "that

Mr. Fitzgerald's heart is not in it, that it is a piece of mere naughtiness" (*Saturday Review*, February 20).

It would be a mistake to emphasize such unfavorable reviews and to say that *Gatsby* was not recognized as an excellent novel upon its appearance. The most striking characteristic of the reviews as a whole is not that they failed to praise the novel (for most of them did find something to admire in it) but that they praised it for the wrong reasons—or at least different reasons from those we now give. It was a good novel, they said, because 1) it reminded one of Conrad or James; 2) it showed an advance in Fitzgerald's artistry; 3) it had an admirable style, if not much could be said for the story; 4) it was a fine story, regardless of what one thought of the style. It was a good novel, in other words, but not extraordinary or great. Only one reviewer placed it among "the finest of contemporary novels," and only one thought of it as a "fable" and a "tragedy"; none discussed its symbolism nor its function as myth. And all their reactions perhaps serve to support Trilling's statement that "the book grows in weight of significance with the years."

II

AS THOSE YEARS PASSED, *The Great Gatsby* gradually began to receive more attention, but it was not until 1945, fully twenty years after the novel's publication, that any considerable amount of serious discussion was directed toward it. In 1934 John Chamberlain was able to say (in the *New York Times* on September 20) that "many critics have been extremely discerning and loyal about 'The Great Gatsby,'" but his comment could have been based (and one must remember that the book had been out nine years) only on a handful of brief discussions (probably three) in addition to the reviews. Rebecca West, in the January 1929 *Bookman*, had called it "surely a remarkable novel" (which had "not been superseded in the common mind by better books"). Two years later Gorham Munson had remarked (October 1931 *Bookman*), almost parenthetically, "There is more art in *The Great Gatsby* than there is in the whole shelf of Mr. Dreiser's works." And Lawrence Leighton, in his 1932 *Hound and Horn* survey of the state of the American novel, had turned to *Gatsby* with "complete admiration" for Fitzgerald's "technical skill" and had found the book "worth the whole of a Dos Passos novel in its exposition of the dreariness of American life." James Gray, in two reviews of

other Fitzgerald books for the *St. Paul Dispatch*, had also praised *Gatsby*—in 1926 as “a beautiful literary accomplishment” and in 1933 as “a skillful, wise and affecting book.”

When Gray then wrote in 1940, “Perhaps some day it [*Gatsby*] will be rediscovered,” he may have been a harbinger of what was to happen later in the decade, but he was speaking from the midst of a long period of neglect of the book—between Chamberlain’s remark in 1934 and the beginning of the revival in 1945, there were no more than five or six articles that could be thought of in any way as contributing to a study of *Gatsby* (only one of them exclusively on that novel) and two or three comments in books. There had been a significant brief mention of the work in a *London Mercury* article by Harry T. Moore in March 1935, referring to *Gatsby* as “almost a great novel” and “one of the few books of the 1920’s that can still stand on its feet,” and Harlan Hatcher’s description in the same year, in his book on modern American fiction, of the “pace and drive,” “proportion and firmness of structure” of Fitzgerald’s “best piece of work.” James Gray had written two articles, in 1937 and 1940, the first (*Saturday Review of Literature*, June 12) pronouncing *Gatsby* Fitzgerald’s “finest work” and the second (*St. Paul Dispatch*, December 24) describing it as “one of those small masterpieces which inevitably misses tremendous popular success because its implications are more subtle than the casual public cares to disentangle from a melodramatic story.” There had been a few comments on *Gatsby* in the rash of articles that appeared upon Fitzgerald’s death in 1940: John Dos Passos in the *New Republic* (February 17, 1941) labeling it “one of the few classic American novels,” *Esquire* (for March 1941) asserting that it “will undoubtedly be read and studied a century hence,” Margaret Marshall (*Nation*, February 8, 1941) believing that it “will continue to be relevant” because it “caught and crystallized the underlying ‘values’ of a period.” And, finally, there had been Peter Quennell’s study, in the *New Statesman* (February 1, 1941), of one of the book’s “many virtues” (“its delineation of two rich men during the American boom”), which concluded that it is “a period piece with an unusual degree of permanent value.”

As for critical books in the early forties, Oscar Cargill, in *Intellectual America* (1941), pointed out two weaknesses in what was “one of the swiftest moving of modern novels”; Alfred Kazin, in *On Native Grounds* (1942), considered *Gatsby* a “profound . . . burst of self-understanding”; and Maxwell Geismar, in *The Last of the Provincials*

(1943), found it "very skillful, often superb technically, and yet curiously hollow at times." The publication of *The Last Tycoon* in 1941 even caused some critics to waver in assigning first place to *Gatsby*. Clifton Fadiman (in the *New Yorker*, November 15, 1941) called the new novel "an advance over 'The Great Gatsby'"; J. Donald Adams (*New York Times*, November 9) saw in it a "detachment" lacking in *Gatsby*, previously Fitzgerald's greatest work; and James Thurber (*New Republic*, February 9, 1942) thought that, if finished, it would rank with *Gatsby*. By 1944 (during which year virtually the only remark about *Gatsby* was J. Donald Adams'—in *The Shape of Books to Come*—that it "will be read when most of the novels of the Twenties are entirely forgotten") there was still no general agreement about Fitzgerald, even though he was beginning to be discussed in more academic journals. If Charles Weir could then view the major works (in the *Virginia Quarterly Review*) as attempts at tragedy (generally unsuccessful because Fitzgerald failed "to make the reader contemplate the problem in its larger implications"), Leo and Miriam Gurko (*College English*) could rate him "a minor writer."

All this changed abruptly, however, in 1945. In the fall of that year the publication of *The Crack-Up* was the occasion for a general reassessment, in which, even if Isidor Schneider (writing for the *New Masses*, December 4) thought *Gatsby* not fully successful, J. Donald Adams (in the September *American Mercury*) reiterated his belief that it was "one of the few American novels of the period between the wars that has some lien on posterity" and that Fitzgerald was "Hemingway's born superior." But it was in two essays by Lionel Trilling and one by William Troy that the beginnings of the revival could most clearly be seen. On August 25, Trilling reviewed *The Crack-Up* for the *Nation*, discussing Fitzgerald in relation to practically all the important writers of the past: "I am aware," he said, "that I have involved Fitzgerald with a great many great names," but he declared that the "disproportion" would not seem large to readers of "the mature work." This mature work included *Gatsby*, which *New Directions* reissued with an introduction by Trilling that enumerated the excellences of the book: its form, its poetic style, its grasp of "a moment of history as a great moral fact," and, above all, its hero, who "may be taken not only as an individual character but also as a symbolic or even allegorical character . . . to be thought of as standing for America itself." Troy took a similar approach in the autumn issue of *Accent*, where he termed *Gatsby* "one of the few truly mytho-

logical creations in our recent literature" and analyzed Fitzgerald's preoccupation with failure and his "exasperation with the multiplicity of modern human existence." Even in a brief English survey of American literature (Marcus Cunliffe's Penguin history), *Gatsby* became "a brilliant little novel . . . with a moving elegiac quality"; and for Sterling North, reviewing the *Portable Fitzgerald* in the *Chicago Sun* (October 7), the novel "dates not at all." Almost the only dissenting voice was that of Charles Poore, who judged that *Gatsby* "did not have the insight" of *This Side of Paradise* (*New York Times*, September 27).

Between 1945 and the zenith of 1951-52, commentary on the book appeared steadily, if not exactly in large quantity. In 1946 John Berryman wrote in the *Kenyon Review* that *Gatsby*, "a masterpiece," was "better than any other American work of fiction since *The Golden Bowl*"; James Gray, in his *On Second Thought*, referred to *Gatsby* as Fitzgerald's "best book"; and Arthur Mizener, in the *Sewanee Review*, published his first attempt at Fitzgerald biography-criticism (although, in looking at the *Portable* in the *Kenyon Review* that spring, he considered *Tender Is the Night* to be "surely Fitzgerald's most important novel"). The rest of the forties found only specialized or peripheral articles, such as Milton Hindus' discussion of anti-Semitism in Fitzgerald's portrayal of Wolfsheim (which stirred up some letters about *Gatsby* from the readers of *Commentary* in 1947), Alan Ross's analysis (in the December 1948 *Horizon*) of the relation between the man and his work (*Gatsby* being "the one novel" in which Fitzgerald "exactly and beautifully canalized the various strands of his own temperament"), Martin Kallich's 1949 study in the *University of Kansas City Review* of Fitzgerald's attitude toward wealth, D. S. Savage's general chronicle (*World Review*, August 1949) of Fitzgerald's work (in which *Gatsby* is "superlative," "a masterpiece of sympathetic understanding"), Frederick J. Hoffman's comparison (in the 1949 *English Institute Essays*) of Edith Wharton and Fitzgerald (who had "an inadequate sense of the past"), Paul L. MacKendrick's comparison of the *Satyricon* and *Gatsby* in the *Classical Journal* (both contributing to the "literature of protest"), Michael F. Moloney's critique of "half-faiths" and "social awareness" in Fitzgerald (*Catholic World*, 1950), and the January 20, 1950, *Times Literary Supplement's* survey of Fitzgerald (with *Gatsby* seen as "extraordinarily successful in blending reflection and movement").

When 1951 came, however, there was no doubt that the revival

was in full swing. That year saw the production of more than thirty articles about Fitzgerald in addition to two books about him, reviews of those books, and commentary on him in still others. The most important sign of Fitzgerald's new stature was, of course, the biography by Arthur Mizener, *The Far Side of Paradise*, in which *Gatsby*, a "romantic," is discussed as an "embodiment of the American dream as a whole," with this dream being "the book's only positive good." Reviewers of the Mizener work also gave special mention at times to *Gatsby*. To the *TLS* (November 23, 1951), Fitzgerald "is now very generally recognized as having written in *The Great Gatsby* (1925), one of the best—if not the best—American novels of the past 50 years"; John Chamberlain in the *Freeman* (February 12) thought that *Gatsby* and *Tender Is the Night* "will be read as long as English literature is read anywhere"; and Orville Prescott in the *Times* (January 29) declared that "only a few in each generation write novels as good" as *Gatsby*, "a mature and integrated work of art." The extent of the enthusiasm is shown by the reviewer for the *Listener* (December 13): "Today, it does not seem so certain that Fitzgerald was right in thinking Hemingway the greater writer." The other book of 1951 was the collection of articles and reviews about Fitzgerald edited by Alfred Kazin, *F. Scott Fitzgerald: The Man and His Work*, which contained a number of reprinted pieces on *Gatsby* by Mencken, T. S. Eliot, and Maxwell Perkins.

Several other books that year discussed *Gatsby* as an important work of art, notably John W. Aldridge's *After the Lost Generation* (the theme of wealth), Riley Hughes in Harold C. Gardiner's *Fifty Years of the American Novel* (*Gatsby* will last because in it there is "disjunction between the author and the objects of his compassion"), Frederick J. Hoffman's *The Modern Novel in America*, and Heinrich Straumann's *American Literature in the Twentieth Century* (*Gatsby* has "an extraordinary unity of purpose in theme, plot, characterization and atmosphere"). But in general it can be said that the shorter discussions of *Gatsby* during 1951 fall into two groups: comments on *Gatsby's* relation to the man Fitzgerald, and disparaging remarks from those who disagreed with the new high valuation of Fitzgerald. Into the first category fall articles like Malcolm Cowley's "Fitzgerald: The Double Man" (*Saturday Review of Literature*, February 24), Leslie Fiedler's *New Leader* article entitled "Notes on F. Scott Fitzgerald" (which agrees that *Gatsby* is Fitzgerald's "best book"), Henry Dan Piper's analysis in Princeton's library journal of the father-image

in Fitzgerald, and D. S. Savage's psychoanalytical study (in *Envoy*) of wealth and the "incest motive" in *Gatsby* and *Tender Is the Night*. The other group, the camp of the dissenters, includes Edward Dahlberg (with his caustic indictment, in the November 5 *Freeman*, of Fitzgerald's "sloven writing" and of *Gatsby*, a "novel without ideas" and an example of Fitzgerald's "peopleless realism"), Baird W. Whitlock (who wrote to the *TLS* that the "peak" of twentieth-century American literature must be "a good deal higher" than *Gatsby*), several writers of letters to the *Saturday Review of Literature*, and Ben Ray Redman (who, in the same issue of that magazine, believed "that praise of [Fitzgerald's] work now outruns discretion").

Anyone familiar with academic criticism could predict the rest of the story. Given the facts so far—the "discovery" and elevation of a formerly underrated twentieth-century novel—the kinds of articles to follow, swept along in the giant wave of enthusiasm, conform to a pattern. There is no point in doing more than very briefly tracing this pattern since 1952. The spring of that year saw discussions of the "social thinking" in *Gatsby* (Richard Greenleaf in *Science & Society*) and of its "concern for the archetypal and essential forms of the American character and experience" (Charles Holmes in the *Pacific Spectator*); in the summer it was again studied as a "social document" (William Van O'Connor in *American Quarterly*); in the fall its symbolism and themes were treated in *College English* (by Tom Burnam); and before the end of the year its themes were scrutinized two more times, by Edwin Fussell (in *ELH*) and Henry Wechsler (in the *Washington and Jefferson Wall*). Through 1953, 1954, and 1955 many important critics turned their attention to the book, discussing it in terms of its commentary on money (Malcolm Cowley in the *Western Review*, 1953), its mythology (Douglas Taylor in the *University of Kansas City Review*, 1953), its criticism of America (Marius Bewley in the *Sewanee Review*, 1954), its theme of "time confused and disordered" (Robert Wooster Stallman in *Modern Fiction Studies*, 1955), even its telephone symbolism (B. B. Cohen in the *Indiana Folio*, 1954), bringing in comparisons with Benjamin Franklin (Floyd Watkins in the *New England Quarterly* and Hugh Maclean in *College English*, 1954), Dickens (Norman Friedman in *Accent*, 1954), T. S. Eliot (John Bicknell in the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 1954), Conrad (Robert Stallman in *Twentieth Century Literature*, 1955), and Sophocles' *Oedipus* (Hans Meyerhoff's *Time in Literature*). Frederick J. Hoffman, who felt *Gatsby* was "a sentimental

novel," also believed that its "details are presented with brilliantly accurate insight, greater than any other found in modern American literature" (*The Twenties*, 1955); R. F. Richards, in a 1955 "dictionary" of American literature, discerned in it "one of the most perfect structures in literature"; Robert Spiller, in his *Cycle of American Literature* (1955), thought it Fitzgerald's "most finished novel"; and Louis Untermeyer (in his Fitzgerald chapter of *Makers of the Modern World*) talked of its "unforgettable" scenes and "universal" implications.

In the late fifties there was no slackening of the pace. The comparisons continued—with Hemingway (Arthur Mizener in the fifteenth *Perspectives U. S. A.*), Conrad again (Jerome Thale in *Twentieth Century Literature*, 1957), and Dreiser (Eric Solomon in *Modern Language Notes*, 1958)—and there were studies focused on the narrator, Nick Carraway (Thomas Hanzo in *Modern Fiction Studies*, 1957), the theme of the "unending quest of the romantic dream" (Robert Ornstein in *College English*, 1956), and of reality versus imagination (Don Wahlquist in *Inland*, 1957), the language of the book (W. J. Harvey in *English Studies*, 1957), its use of legends and myth (John Henry Raleigh in the *University of Kansas City Review*, June and October 1957, and Richard Chase in his *American Novel and Its Tradition*), its blending of "the abstract, the ideal, and the mythical" with a "realistic treatment of our culture" (J. R. Kuehl in *Texas Studies*, 1959), its pattern and structure (John W. Aldridge in Charles Shapiro's collection of *Twelve Original Essays on Great American Novels*), and the symbolism of Dr. Eckleberg's eyes (Milton Hindus in *Boston University Studies in English*, 1957) and of noses (John C. Weston in *Fitzgerald Newsletter*, 1959). By 1958 Matthew J. Bruccoli was able to say (in the *Newsletter*) that Fitzgerald "is still the most consistently underrated American writer," even though, the year before, James E. Miller had published a full-length monograph on Fitzgerald's technique (including a detailed discussion of *Gatsby*) and that year the Bodley Head in London began reprinting Fitzgerald's work (with an introduction by J. B. Priestley). Also in 1958 some uncollected material was gathered together as *Afternoon of an Author*, which provoked from the *London Times* (on October 9) the obiter dictum that *Gatsby* "has a significance that can be accorded to few American books written between the wars." In 1959 Peter Munro Jack gave *Gatsby* a place in the "James Branch Cabell period" (in Malcolm Cowley's collection, *After the Genteel*

Tradition); Frederick E. Faverty (in *Your Literary Heritage*) praised the book's realism, its technique, and its "arresting" symbolism; and Mizener, in a new paperback edition of his biography, compared *Gatsby* to Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir*.

By 1960 *Gatsby* was without doubt thought of as a classic, so that no one was surprised to find it discussed in works with such broad titles as J. B. Priestley's *Literature and Western Man* or Leon Howard's *Literature and the American Tradition*, and Arthur Mizener found it in order to survey in the *New York Times* (April 24) some of the earlier criticism (concluding that only recently had "the obvious values" of the novel "been reasonably established"). From J. S. Westbrook's explication of the novel in *American Literature* in 1960, through Richard C. Carpenter's in the *Explicator* in 1961, Charles E. Shain's 1961 pamphlet in the Minnesota series, and the entire issue of *Modern Fiction Studies* (Spring 1961) devoted to Fitzgerald (with two articles on *Gatsby*), down to Andrew Turnbull's biography and the whole volume of material about *Gatsby* edited by Frederick J. Hoffman in 1962 (including Henry Dan Piper's discussion of the religious background of the novel), academic criticism has shown no sign of declining. Within the last year alone there have been detailed treatments of the novel in books about Fitzgerald (Kenneth Eble takes up its structure and "romantic vision," William Goldhurst its relation to the work of Mencken, Hemingway, Lardner, and Edmund Wilson) and articles on its "statement and technique" (Michael Millgate in *Modern Language Review*), its "imagery and meaning" (Guy Owen in *Stetson Studies*), its use of the grotesque (Howard Babb in *Criticism*), of "the artifact in imagery" (M. Bettina in *Twentieth Century Literature*), and of Platonic thought (Paul Lauter in *Modern Fiction Studies*). When one looks back over the seventy-five or more articles and chapters that have, since 1950, been wholly or partially devoted to *Gatsby*, one has no difficulty in agreeing with Charles Shain's statement that *Gatsby* "has been discussed and admired as much as any twentieth-century American novel." And when, on top of that, one looks at the dozen or so doctoral dissertations that discuss the book and the articles and books in French, Italian, German, Dutch, and Swedish, one is likely—if not totally overwhelmed—to have some disquieting thoughts.

Of course, doubts about the "revival" did go along with the enthusiasm—there is always the minority report. If Martin Schockley's decision in his 1954 *Arizona Quarterly* article that it was time to "place

upon Fitzgerald's brow the small and wilted laurel that is his" seems too harsh, Albert J. Lubell made the same point more temperately the next year in the *South Atlantic Quarterly* when he asserted that the "recent criticism of [Fitzgerald], attempting to correct the wrong of his undue neglect, itself needs a corrective." And P. K. Elkin, in the *Australian Quarterly* of June 1957, praised *Gatsby* very highly, but not until he had pointed out how a great deal of the revival had "obscured" Fitzgerald's "more substantial attributes." But the dissenters are a part of the general enthusiasm, and it goes without saying that any such revival of interest in a work of literature is not based entirely on cool and balanced judgment. In 1961 (for a summer reading issue of the *New York Herald Tribune's* book review) Jerome Weidman listed *Gatsby* as one of his seven favorite books because "it catches, better than anything I have ever read, heard, or can remember, the extraordinary time during which I grew up and, to return to its meticulously written pages strewn with incandescent images that grow brighter with the years, is to be again a part of that time." His statement perhaps explains the revival as well as anything does.

More is involved here than the question of whether contemporaries can accurately judge a work of art—or, indeed, whether we are still (only two generations after *Gatsby* appeared) too close to have perspective. There is more involved than the question of how accurate *Gatsby* is in portraying a particular period. It is rather a matter of the way we look back at that period and of the values we place on certain kinds of criticism. How often do our sentimental and nostalgic feelings determine our critical reactions? How often is a literary judgment self-perpetuating? An examination of the reputation of *The Great Gatsby* may serve as an index to the critical taste of the last forty years; but, beyond that, it is a case study in the workings of literary evaluation—of the critical snowballing process by which a work becomes established as a classic. Such an inquiry is disturbing, not in the sense that every subjective value judgment leaves room for doubts, but because one begins to feel that this process follows a pattern, that it has become mechanical, that a great deal of energy may have been misdirected. This is not to say that *Gatsby* does not deserve the attention it has received. It is merely a way of saying that *Gatsby* has provided us with more than one fable—that the story of its reception is itself a parable showing up what is best and what is worst in recent criticism.