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Introduction to *The Great Gatsby* (Wordsworth Editions)

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The Great Gatsby

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INTRODUCTION

The 'constant flicker' of the American scene

Why is *The Great Gatsby* such a quintessential twentieth-century novel? After mixed reviews and a slow start in sales, Fitzgerald's 1925 novel has moved to the centre of literary history, to the extent that to many readers this is *the* modern American novel. *Gatsby* is widely loved, and has achieved the unusual status of appealing to both that mythical creature the 'Common Reader' and an academic audience. The novel's stature has increased exponentially with age, and it is probably regarded with more fondness and read with greater critical sophistication today than in the seventy-five years since its publication. One reason for the growing status of the novel might be that it was in many ways prescient. Prescient, first of all, in the narrow sense that Fitzgerald's portrayal of

dizzying, narcissistic wealth and its sudden corruption eerily prefigured the US stock-market's 1929 'Great Crash' and the subsequent Depression. But the novel was also astute in its mapping of a contemporary urban world: a technological, consumerist, leisure society seen here in one of its first fictional representations. Even on the very first page of the text, Nick Carraway's narrative introduces us to a world of insistent modernity and technological innovation. He compares Gatsby's 'heightened sensitivity to the promises of life' to that of a seismograph, 'one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away' (p. 3). Gatsby's character is understood through comparison with a piece of recondite, advanced machinery. The impress of such technological modernity is felt throughout the text. Even comic touches often depend on such notation: 'There was a machine in the kitchen which could extract the juice of two hundred oranges in half an hour if a little button was pressed two hundred times by a butler's thumb' (p. 26).

The narrator, Nick Carraway, will confess that what fascinates him about New York is its mechanical vitality: 'the satisfaction that the constant flicker of men and women and *machines* gives to the restless eye' (p. 37 – my emphasis). This strangely oxymoronic 'constant flicker' is characteristic of the novel, and Nick uses the phrase again to describe the ceaseless glints of light on the city's shining, metallic surfaces: 'Over the great bridge, with the sunlight through the girders making a constant flicker upon the moving cars' (p. 44). 'Constant flicker' echoes a key phrase from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (written 1899; published 1902), a text which we know played an important part in teaching Fitzgerald about the organisation of narrative. Conrad's narrator, Marlow, surveys British imperial history and the history of civilisations, imagining empire as a "running blaze on a plain". Now, he says, "We live in the flicker."¹ Fitzgerald shifts 'the flicker' to the US, where it functions as the distinctive symbol of modernity, of the new. The flicker of electric light off a car; the flicker of an image as movie film clatters through a projector; the flicker of the distracted modern consciousness. The flickering of consciousness is particularly important, and Nick's distinctive state of mind is one of edgy alertness – an alertness that is very urban and modern. As he becomes fascinated with Gatsby's war record, for instance, Nick reflects: 'My incredulity was submerged in fascination now; it was like skimming hastily through a dozen magazines' (p. 43).

1 Conrad, p. 30. For full details of this and other references turn to the Bibliography at the end of this Introduction. 'Flicker' became a key word for modernist writers. Cf. T. S. Eliot, 'Prufrock': 'I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker' (Eliot, p. 15).

'Skimming', like flickering, is a verb at the centre of the *Gatsby* world, and note too how Nick imagines himself skimming a 'dozen magazines' (a powerful image of febrile superficiality).

This is a novel of glancing but pinpoint details, shards of recognition gradually pieced together into a mosaic of American modernity. What makes the novel modern and therefore not Victorian is its alert receptivity to a culture that had first begun to emerge around the time of Fitzgerald's birth (1896) and had established itself in the 1910s and 1920s. Fitzgerald was born into the America of the horse, gaslight and railroad, but by 1925 the world was made of electricity, cars and telephones. Think about all the things we see in the novel, how new they were in 1925 ('new' is one of *Gatsby's* favourite words) and how perceptively noted these details are. The 1920s were a decade of great technological innovation and circulation, when many of the inventions of the previous thirty years finally achieved a common currency in American society: electricity, especially electric lighting; cars; telephones; the movies and photography.

In *The Great Gatsby* these discoveries are ever-present, and are felt as new, creating strangely disconcerting effects in the lives of characters. Most readers remember the novel as tremendously atmospheric, but the ambient effects rest on Fitzgerald's precise details of light and colour. Electric light, for instance, creates a strange, Edward Hopper-esque urban lyricism. Early in the novel Carraway notes how the 'new red gas-pumps sat out in pools of light' (p. 15). Short, lovely passages punctuate the narrative, creating memorable effects of lighting:

I sat on the front steps with them while they waited for their car. It was dark here; only the bright door sent ten square feet of light volleying out into the soft black morning. Sometimes a shadow moved against a dressing-room blind above, gave way to another shadow, an indefinite procession of shadows, that rouged and powdered in an invisible glass. [p. 69]

A poetic effect, certainly; but what such images do is to create a repeated pattern of strangeness in the text – resonant metaphors for the glamour, allure and ultimate artificiality of the jazz age.

Stylistically, the text itself is 'lit' by a succession of bright, jewel-like sentences and phrases. For Nick's first-person narrative creates a written counterpart to the material world of *Gatsby*. Like *Gatsby's* shirts, the narrative is gorgeous and shining, opulent, almost too much. It is built around a parade of glittering effects, brilliant phrases, bursts of poeticism; Nick illuminates his meditations with sudden, radiant images. 'A universe of ineffable gaudiness spun itself out in his brain while the clock ticked on

the washstand and the moon soaked with wet light his tangled clothes upon the floor' (p. 63). The surreal luxury of Gatsby's mansion is rendered in terms of how extravagantly lit the building is:

When I came home to West Egg that night I was afraid for a moment that my house was on fire. Two o'clock and the whole corner of the peninsula was blazing with light, which fell unreal on the shrubbery and made thin elongating glints upon the roadside wires. Turning a corner, I saw that it was Gatsby's house, lit from tower to cellar. [p. 52]

Gatsby learnt from T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) that modern urban settings could be given symbolic and even mythic resonance; the 'valley of ashes' episode is often seen as a sour, Eliotic contemporary landscape. In this passage, that strangely unidiomatic phrase (in a novel where the phrasing seems uncannily acute) 'fell unreal' recalls T. S. Eliot's lines:

Unreal City,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.²

Fitzgerald had adapted Eliot's sense of the contemporary landscape to an American setting, creating an analogous amalgamation of the modern and the mythic. For Eliot, the London Underground was unmistakably contemporary and also freighted with overtones of Hades. For Fitzgerald, these blazing lights create a similar effect: brazenly new, but reaching back into fairytale to suggest a magical castle. For Fitzgerald and Eliot the new city-scape is 'unreal', but Fitzgerald inverts Eliot's sense of place. Eliot's unreal London is brown, foggy, subterranean. Fitzgerald's New York is bright, even blazing, and structured around the height of Gatsby's mansion or advertising billboards or Manhattan's buildings; it is a delicious confection, 'the city rising up across the river in white heaps and sugar lumps' (p. 44).

Artificial light creates an original form of American landscape, a kind of urban pastoral that is both natural and man-made. The novel will then develop a contrast between the 'natural' and the 'artificial' through these lighting effects. Gatsby's meeting with Daisy in Chapter 5 is poetically organised around an interplay between real and artificial light. When Nick returns, Daisy and Gatsby have had their chat. 'He

2 T. S. Eliot, p. 62

literally glowed; without a word or a gesture of exultation a new well-being radiated from him and filled the little room.' And when it stops raining, Gatsby 'smiled like a weather man, like an ecstatic patron of recurrent light' (p. 57). On the next page Gatsby declares: "My house looks well, doesn't it? . . . See how the whole front of it catches the light" (p. 58). Meanwhile, the buttons on Daisy's dress 'gleamed in the sunlight' (p. 58). The details here mesh together, all turning around images of light and sunshine. The key question about Jay Gatsby is here being posed poetically. Is Gatsby a natural being, a genuine bringer of sunshine? Or is the light he brings to Daisy (and Nick too) artificial – a lighting effect produced by money rather than personality?

The car is central to the novel, and is used both as a symbol of the new civilisation and, even more daringly, as a dynamic part of the plot. Thus, as they drive into Manhattan, Nick and Gatsby notice a car: a 'limousine passed us, driven by a white chauffeur, in which sat three modish negroes, two bucks and a girl' (p. 44). The race of the occupants (registered with Nick's typical abruptness) and the luxurious extravagance of the car complement one another. Unsettling, exciting, modern New York is both a technological and a dynamic cultural space. This is how the novel works: through the compression of sociological or cultural insights into the 'flicker' of brief, flashing images. Again, at one point Nick complains that his own car is 'old': 'I had a dog – at least I had him for a few days until he ran away – and an old Dodge and a Finnish woman, who made my bed and cooked breakfast and muttered Finnish wisdom to herself over the electric stove' (p. 4). With this one adjective Fitzgerald reveals a world where a young man can already own a car and, even more tellingly, where he can bemoan its age. Brand names are also important – the car is a Dodge. Newness is now vital to one's personality. Jay Gatsby is a fascinating character, and distinctively of his society, because he simply extends this observation into a principle of behaviour. Just as Nick would really like a new car, and laments his old one, so Gatsby trades in his old self for a new one. *The Great Gatsby* explores, through this kind of logical circuit, the consumerisation of the self, a self constituted of surfaces.

Fitzgerald's carelessness about facts and empirical knowledge is well known: he frequently wrote about France when his knowledge of French was poor; his spelling (in French *and* English) was execrable. In *Gatsby* he touches on subjects (notably, the doings on Wall Street) about which he knew little and imagined a good deal. His fiction tends to circumvent these problems by selecting significant realistic detail rather than accumulating a mass of facts. As a record of a particular time and place, the novel is focused, selective and distilled: a historical concentrate.

Fitzgerald rejected the massively accretive Realism pioneered by a previous generation of American novelists (including Theodore Dreiser and William Dean Howells); instead, he concentrated on deploying representative and symbolic details.

It is also a novel where phone conversations are very important. There are around a dozen moments where phones are seen being used, in a variety of contexts. Most significantly, Nick gains the vital clue to Gatsby's criminality in Slagle's aborted phone call from Chicago.

'Young Parke's in trouble,' he said rapidly. 'They picked him up when he handed the bonds over the counter. They got a circular from New York giving 'em the numbers just five minutes before. What d'you know about that, hey? You never can tell in these hick towns -'

[p. 106]

Note the rapid, breathless rhythm of the speech, and that Slagle's commentary is based on a misunderstanding (he thinks he is talking to Gatsby); it is a keenly urban way of speaking, where the American hinterland is abruptly dismissed as "hick towns". Fitzgerald realised that the phone had altered the ways in which we speak and listen, and that patterns of social interaction were consequently being transformed. The new conversational style, brought into being by the telephone and a capital market ('bonds', 'circular'), is edgy, fractured and elliptical; it is also informal, marked by colloquialisms and slangy outbursts. Crucially, the telephone conversation can conceal as much as it reveals. We cannot see the speaker at the other end, so inference of tone becomes important. To the listener who overhears someone on the phone, there is further complexity (what is being said at the other end?). To the contemporary, accustomed to the technology, these might seem banal or obvious points. But Fitzgerald registers the impact of the telephone with an anthropologist's eye for the idiosyncrasies of quotidian behaviour. The elusiveness and mystery of phone conversation is used to give a modern feel to one of the novel's questions: how do we 'know' what lies within the human heart? Nick might never know the final truth about Gatsby; and Gatsby himself misunderstands Daisy. But the novel's catalogue of elusive and fractured phone conversations poignantly and ironically suggest that even in an age when communication is supposedly getting easier, misunderstanding proliferates.

'In making us a homogeneous people,' announced a telephone advertisement in 1915, 'the telegraph and the telephone have been important factors.'³ That the phone would help to unify a vast and diverse nation was one of the early claims of the telephone companies; but *The Great*

Gatsby sardonically notes the criminal usage of technology. Gatsby can only maintain his shady contacts back in the Midwestern towns of Detroit and Chicago because the telephone has now shrunk the United States. To a large extent, he has only been able to get away with it because he is physically removed from the places where his crimes take place. He drives into Manhattan; he telephones Chicago. West Egg itself is a kind of glittering retreat, umbilically linked by phone wire and road to the sites of the actual criminality. The telephone thus aids and abets that most typical of American fictional characters, the confidence man. Stories about confidence men, about trickery, imposture and conning, were important in earlier American writing; Herman Melville's *The Confidence Man* (1857) and Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885) are the most famous works within this notable sub-genre. Confidence has been an important theme for American writers because it enables the novelist to explore, in plots constructed from sensationalist tales of duplicity and trickery, the nature of community in the new nation. The confidence theme provides a dark, antiphonal voice to the republican brotherhood celebrated by Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson. *The Great Gatsby* is the confidence novel rewritten for the modern machine age. Now, trickery and gulling have been given a further twist: Fitzgerald's protagonists cannot even see those who might be tricking them. At least in the nineteenth-century novel of confidence (as with those conmen 'the King' and 'the Duke' in *Huckleberry Finn*), one could rely on face-to-face contact; Nick Carraway finds himself in a yet more duplicitous world, where crooks, criminals and conmen talk by phone.

A fourth sign of Fitzgerald's fascination with American modernity can be seen in the novel's references to film and its technical indebtedness to both cinema and photography. The novel is very much written as a dialogue with movie culture. Guests at Gatsby's parties include film stars, and Myrtle's first action when she arrives in New York is to buy 'Town Tattle and a moving-picture magazine' (p. 18). But there is a more general cinematic or photographic feel to the text, as cinema starts to shape (however indirectly or subtly) the construction of fictional narrative. Fitzgerald had learnt from the Joseph Conrad of *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim* the value of a highly-shaped narrative, emphasising tight cutting and concision. His own novel then fused this modernist narratology with a cinematic formalism: *The Great Gatsby*'s concision and splicing together

3 Fischer, p. 163. Fischer makes a strong claim for the telephone as a factor in changing how we perceive geographical space and 'community'.

of scenes echo the urgent rhythm of film. The novel's visual immediacy also reminds us that this was the age when photography began to be popularised and domesticated. Fitzgerald generates an extended comic passage from his character Mr McKee, a photographer who creates banal landscapes with titles such as '*Montauk Point – The Gulls*' (p. 22). The novel mildly mocks the photographic craze, but it is also indebted to the camera. Its bright, snapshot quality (*Gatsby* is formalistically a catalogue of vignettes) might owe something to the development of lightweight, portable photography. Eastman Kodak invented the Brownie camera in 1900, and Fitzgerald was therefore one of the first writers to have grown up with snapshot photography (he became a much-photographed writer himself). Is it too fanciful to suggest that the novel's fondness for a very distinctive staging (or *mise-en-scène*) owes something to this new photography? The novel's distinctive vignettes rest in the mind like a series of photographic images: Gatsby stretching his arms out to the green light; the panorama of the great party; the car crash; Gatsby's body in the pool.

At the heart of *The Great Gatsby* is a central insight: Fitzgerald's near-clairvoyant understanding that the twentieth century was to be structured by consumerism, financial speculation and the rise of the 'leisure class'. The last phrase had been coined in 1899 by the maverick social scientist, Thorstein Veblen. His *The Theory of the Leisure Class* mapped society in terms of class and status in an era of 'conspicuous consumption'. Veblen analysed a society that had gone beyond industrialism to become driven by leisure and consumption. In 'Dress as an Expression of the Pecuniary Culture', he wrote about the importance of appearance and the fetishisation of good clothes within modern society. Veblen's treatise provided one of the first analyses of a new aspect of the social and economic order – a society that was also distinctively American. *The Great Gatsby*, with its set-piece parties, its shopping trips and dry notation of prices (Daisy's wedding pearls cost \$350,000), its references to golf and cinema and jazz, is one of the major fictions about the 'leisure class'. Like Veblen, Fitzgerald takes leisure absolutely seriously, and lavishes on his subject all the analytical intelligence that a Victorian novelist would have brought to topics such as religious nonconformity or the rising middle classes. He takes leisure seriously because it represents a monumental theme: the diminution and eventual corruption of American idealism ('the American Dream'). The idealism of the colonists and the Founding Fathers has now mutated into a consumerist ideology; 'liberty' and the 'pursuit of happiness' become a series of choices about where one plays golf or what shirts to buy.

For instance, Fitzgerald maps the relationship between Daisy and

Gatsby by squarely placing their romance within this consumerist environment. *The Great Gatsby* is a love story, of course, but love is here fashioned and shaped by other desires, especially an acquisitive urge that is a form of materialism. Daisy's love for Gatsby is conditioned by fascination with his wealth. The lover's sobbed confession of her feelings becomes in *Gatsby* a confession about love of *things* – the plethora of beautiful shirts ordered from England:

While we admired he brought more and the soft rich heap mounted higher – shirts with stripes and scrolls and plaids in coral and apple-green and lavender and faint orange, with monograms of Indian blue. Suddenly, with a strained sound, Daisy bent her head into the shirts and began to cry stormily.

'They're such beautiful shirts,' she sobbed, her voice muffled in the thick folds. 'It makes me sad because I've never seen such – such beautiful shirts before.'

[p. 59]

And when Daisy finally makes her love for Gatsby explicit, in a confession that is overheard and understood by Tom Buchanan, she doesn't tell Gatsby that she loves him, rather she comments on his appearance. 'You always look so cool' (p. 75). For Daisy, a man *is* the shirt he wears. And in a further emphasis of her utter superficiality, she then says, 'You resemble the advertisement of the man . . . You know the advertisement of the man –' (p. 76). This is surely a devastating moment, since it means that the doomed romance of Daisy and Gatsby is largely founded on her love for shirts and his capacity to remind her of the advertising image of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg: a passion founded on appearances and the consumerist self.

Underpinning the leisure society is a new formation of capitalism, driven by finance and speculation. Again, we note that Fitzgerald might have been ignorant about the detailed workings of Wall Street, but what he did know, he used with great symbolic economy. Nick Carraway, the narrator, comes from a family of Midwestern industrialists; they incarnate the old American economy of the self-made man, solid workmanship and materialism. Carraway's great-uncle founded 'the wholesale hardware business that my father carries on today' (p. 4). Nick himself works in an area far from the reassuring solidity of 'hardware'. Indeed, exactly what Nick himself *does*, is rather elusive. He has decided to learn the 'bond business', a decision met by his pragmatic relatives with 'very grave, hesitant faces' (p. 4). Well might they be hesitant. Compared to the hardware business, Nick's work is mysterious, new, unproven. The books he learns from are lavish and brand new; and in one memorable

flourish Nick compares the banking business to the magic of alchemy: 'I bought a dozen volumes on banking and credit and investment securities, and they stood on my shelf in red and gold like new money from the mint, promising to unfold the shining secrets that only Midas and Morgan and Maecenas knew' (p. 5). This is 'new money' because the business of finance is new; Nick buys books to help him understand a business where the rules and guidelines were being constructed. The American Stock Exchange and the bond market remained unregulated until 1933, and Nick rightly proceeds into money-making on Wall Street as if into uncharted territory. This, surely, is where one affinity between Carraway and Gatsby arises. The two men are 'secret sharers', complicit in their commitment to businesses that seem elusive to the point of criminality. Each man has rejected the 'hardware' and Victorian morality of the Middle West. Dan Cody, Gatsby's adoptive father and mentor, is a metals merchant, a speculator in Montana copper. Gatsby and Carraway are the errant 'sons' of fathers who made their money from real metal; but these inheritors of the American can-do spirit now chase false gold or base metal. Whatever else he was involved in, Gatsby was, like Nick, in the bond business – the issuing of long-term secured loans to companies and governments. Compared to older ways of doing business, the bond business, with its huge sums of money and its reliance on paper guarantees, would seem remarkably abstract. To this elusiveness, Gatsby adds criminality; his bonds are probably counterfeit. Money in *The Great Gatsby* is inherited or derives from the mysteries of high finance or comes from crime or is made on the sports field. The novel contains a gallery of Americans, of what Emerson called 'representative men'; but these figures have none of the stature of the transcendentalist's heroes. In *The Great Gatsby* the American is a sportsman, a stockbroker or a crook inhabiting a fluid, mobile, society. The brilliance of Fitzgerald's insight, here, rests in his recognition of an affinity (an affinity of invisibility) between these various ways of making money. And crookedness is everywhere. The 1919 baseball World Series has been fixed by gamblers and 'thrown' by the players. Jordan is rumoured to cheat at golf; there are rumours 'that she had moved her ball' (p. 38). Cheating at games might seem trivial, but in Nick's disquieted responses to these stories we sense real intimations of moral collapse. As he firmly says of Jordan, 'She was incurably dishonest' (p. 38). As sportsmen, stockbrokers or criminals, Fitzgerald's characters either live on thin air or break the rules.

From his focus on the 'new money from the mint', Fitzgerald developed many other features of the world of *Gatsby*. New York's financial capitalism, he shows, creates a distinctive geography and urban

space. For although the novel is often thought of as a novel of the city, it would be fairer to say that it describes the city and more importantly its environs. It is a rather suburban novel. Gatsby's opulent mansion is on Long Island, outside the city itself; Nick has also become a resident there, and lives in what he explicitly calls a 'commuting town' (p. 4). One might think of Nick as a fictional prototype of that quintessential late twentieth-century figure, the 'bridge and tunnel' commuter. And the movement of money is already beginning to hollow out and transform the nineteenth-century American city. On his journeys into Manhattan, Nick travels through a kind of interzone, a post-industrial landscape that is quite literally a 'valley of ashes'. Here are the reminders of the old way of doing things, notably Wilson's car workshop (a further link in the chain of metals that continues through the book). And here, Nick's magical sense of financial capitalism finds its terse opposite, in another text about making money in the United States, the sign on Wilson's garage which brutally reads, '*Cars bought and sold*' (p. 17).

If there is a leisure class, then there is also a class outside the leisured world. We witness American society through the eyes of Nick Carraway. Nick, scion of a wealthy Midwestern family, educated at a prep school and a graduate of Yale, is a member of an élite. On his travels to and from the city, he unwittingly illuminates the gaps between his class and that lower down the ladder. For, although this is America, the 'new world' lyrically celebrated in the novel's last paragraphs, it is also a society marked by class and racial divisions. Nick's first-person narration reveals his mild snobbery; he repeatedly monitors the oddities of the novel's 'ordinary people', their (to him) strange ways of talking or behaving. Thus, when he first sees George Wilson he notes that he is 'faintly handsome' but also 'spiritless' and 'anaemic' (p. 17). After Myrtle's death, Nick watches the policemen take names 'with much sweat and correction' (p. 88). Myrtle herself is unkindly introduced as 'the thickish figure of a woman' (p. 17). Waiting for Myrtle, Tom and Nick watch a 'grey, scrawny Italian child' (p. 18). Passing a funeral cortège, Nick sees 'the tragic eyes and short upper lips of south-eastern Europe' (p. 44). All these descriptions help to define Nick's fastidiousness, his sense of distance from the working and lower-middle classes, and his sharpened response to immigrants. He sees their bodies as plain or awkward or ill; he notes their weariness or their failings. The leisure class, in contrast, are uniformly good-looking, well dressed, smart, sporty. What is particularly powerful about this contrast (to use the title of another Fitzgerald novel, the opposition between *The Beautiful and Damned*) is that Nick himself unwittingly reveals the social fissures of 1920s America through his own waspish observations. Nick is both symptom and analyst of a class-based society.

Fitzgerald's purpose, in the broadest sense, was to write a compressed and poeticised novel about 'production' in America. 'Production' in the narrow, industrial meaning of the cars, phones and buildings of the roaring twenties. 'Production', too, as a metaphor: the production of people (Gatsby's self-production), and of ideas (the idea of America). As Fitzgerald worked on the manuscript, production also came to signify the making of the text. *The Great Gatsby*, as an act of literary production, had its own history. Fitzgerald wrote in July 1922 to his editor at Scribner's, Maxwell Perkins, that he wanted to write something 'new – something extraordinary and beautiful and simple + intricately patterned'.⁴ Woven through the text's intricate pattern is a common thread that deals with the various ways in which the United States 'produces': produces things, ideas, ideals, people. Gatsby magically produces his magical self out of the base metal of an ordinary upbringing. Carraway wants to produce money out of the thin air of financial dealing. America itself is produced out of the dreams of the first discoverers. In counterpoint to these motifs, Fitzgerald presents images of failed production, notably the leaden, impoverished industrialism of the valley of ashes and Wilson's garage.

For Fitzgerald himself, *The Great Gatsby* marked a new stage in his own methods of literary production. The famed revisions of the manuscript, in Rome during the winter of 1925, were a vivid illustration of Fitzgerald's minute attentiveness to the production of literary meaning.⁵ Revising *Gatsby*, he used the brisk language of the can-do, pragmatic, disciplined American entrepreneur. Typically, in letters to his editor Maxwell Perkins, Fitzgerald used a lists of tasks very much akin to the young Gatsby's 'schedule'. Gatsby's own schedule was itself a parody of the self-disciplining that Benjamin Franklin had outlined in *The Autobiography* (1791). Franklin had created a 'Scheme of Employment for the Twenty-four Hours of a Natural Day', and Fitzgerald ironically parodies this 'Scheme' (written as it is in a copy of the popular dime novel, *Hopalong Cassidy*).⁶ When Fitzgerald revised his manuscript he too became a Franklin/Gatsby figure, a technocrat who makes lists of jobs and then proceeds methodically through them while ticking off his accomplishments. Thus the youthful Gatsby (p. 110):

4 F. Scott Fitzgerald to Maxwell Perkins, in Brucoli (ed.), *Correspondence of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, p. 112

5 In revising the manuscript, Fitzgerald heavily rewrote the text, reordering the sequence of the narrative by, for example, incorporating key events from the latter stages of the novel into the earlier Chapter 6.

6 Franklin, pp. 71–2. The text now known as the *Autobiography* was started in 1771, revised and extended between 1788 and 1790, and originally published in Paris (in French) in 1791.

Rise from bed	6.00	A.M.
Dumbbell exercise and wall-scaling	6.15-6.30	"
Study electricity, etc.	7.15-8.15	"
Work	8.30-4.30	P.M.
Baseball and sports	4.30-5.00	"
Practise elocution, poise and how to attain it	5.00-6.00	"
Study needed inventions	7.00-9.00	"

Note how two of the key activities are technological: 'Study electricity', 'Study needed inventions'. Fitzgerald's approach to writing was similarly technocratic, brisk and compartmentalised, and similarly boastful about 'labor' and 'uninterrupted work':

Dear Max – After six weeks of uninterrupted work the proof is finished and the last of it goes to you this afternoon. On the whole it's been very successful labor.

- (1) I've brought Gatsby to life.
- (2) I've accounted for his money
- (3) I've fixed up the two weak chapters (VI and VII).
- (4) I've improved his first party.
- (5) I've broken up his long narrative in Chapter VIII.⁷

The series of letters to Maxwell Perkins, and later letters to his wife Zelda, reveal Fitzgerald's obsessive interest in every aspect of making, producing and selling a work of literature. At the time of his death, as he worked on the unfinished manuscript of *The Last Tycoon*, Fitzgerald claimed in a very telling phrase that he wanted to write 'a *constructed* novel like *Gatsby*'.⁸ This 'construction' had manifested itself in the celebrated series of letters to Perkins during 1924 and 1925, when Fitzgerald had repeatedly considered and revised his manuscript, polishing and perfecting a text that he had claimed at first was 'about the best American novel ever written'. When he wrote this sentence to Perkins around 27 August 1924, Fitzgerald had still to undertake a momentous series of revisions that would radically focus the text, and he was fiddling with the title of his novel (he also admitted that the novel was 'rough stuff in places').⁹ He proclaimed the novel's greatness, but continued to hone his literary product. His indecision about the title is another sign of this machine-tooled perfectionism: Fitzgerald wanted his text to be

7 F. Scott Fitzgerald to Maxwell Perkins, c.18 February 1925, in Turnbull (ed.), *Letters*, p. 177

8 Letter to Zelda Fitzgerald, 23 October 1940, in Turnbull, p. 128

branded correctly, to signal in its title the exact allure, mystery and glamour of Gatsby as he stands on his terrace. Fitzgerald played with titles such as *Trimalchio*, *On the Road to West Egg*, *Gold-batted Gatsby*, *The High-bouncing Lover*.¹⁰ What unites these titles (and the early working title, *Under the Red, White and Blue*) is their catchiness – a seductive blend of the enigmatic and the enticing. Intriguingly, Fitzgerald was to admit that the title he finally chose was in a sense inaccurate: ‘*The Great Gatsby* is weak because there’s no emphasis even ironically on his greatness or lack of it. However let it pass.’ But, of course, the title achieves its effect not in terms of logic but because of its alliterative, snappy quality. It sounds like the title of one of the early pop songs that are alluded to in the novel, tunes to which one imagines Gatsby’s guests danced. The alliteration, with its logo-like immediacy, fits neatly into a world where Myrtle reads a magazine with a similarly jazzy name, *Town Tattle*. *The Great Gatsby* seems apposite, utterly *right*, because rhythmically and tonally, it marks our entry to a world where magazines like *Town Tattle* are objects of desire. And at the same time, the title powerfully foregrounds Gatsby’s remaking of himself: he has altered the harsh immigrant name Gatz to the melodious Gatsby. Identity is plastic and can be remade or rebranded.

The Great Gatsby is a novel about production, and it has also served as an example to later producers: the twentieth-century US novelists who are clearly working within the territory mapped by Fitzgerald. For contemporary authors such as Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon and Brett Easton Ellis, the glinting surfaces of America continue to fascinate (‘the satisfaction that the constant flicker of men and women and machines gives to the restless eye’). For all these writers, the superficial things of modern life (brand names, television, cars) possess paradoxical depths. Fitzgerald’s technological brio is echoed in Thomas Pynchon’s famous comparison between highways and radio circuits in *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966): ‘The ordered swirl of houses and streets, from this high angle, sprang at her now with the same unexpected, astonishing clarity as the circuit card had.’¹¹ Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* (1984) opens with a riveting list of consumer goods, a compendium which surreally recapitulates *Gatsby*’s sense of plenitude: ‘the junk food still in shopping bags – onion-and-garlic chips, nacho thins, peanut crème patties, Waffelos and Kabooms, fruit

9 Letter to Maxwell Perkins, ‘before 27 August 1924’, in Turnbull, p. 166

10 Letter to Maxwell Perkins, c. 7 November 1924, in Turnbull, p. 169

11 Pynchon, p. 14

chews and toffee popcorn; the Dum-Dum pops, the mystic mints.' DeLillo's narrator, Jack Gladney, says, in words that one can imagine Nick Carraway using, that this is a 'spectacle': 'It's a brilliant event, invariably.'¹² In his care for detail, and his desire to improve his product, Fitzgerald was every bit as much an American producer of goods as was Henry Ford, the automobile manufacturer. And, like an early Ford car, the status of *The Great Gatsby* rests not only in its technological acumen, but in its exemplary resonance for later producers: the writers who continue to read the United States as the 'brilliant event', invariably and recurrently.

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¹² DeLillo, p. 3

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