PENGUIN BOOKS

The Great Gatsby

‘One of the best novels to have come out of America: concisely expressed, rich in imagination, lyrical in style’ Anthony Powell, *Daily Telegraph,* Books of the Century

‘Fitzgerald confronts no less a problem than what might be involved, what might be at stake, in trying to see, and *write*, America itself. *The Great Gatsby* is, I believe, the most perfectly crafted work of fiction to have come out of America’ Tony Tanner, in the Introduction

‘A modern classic, a key American novel… For once, Fitzgerald really had won what he wanted: to create, amid the glitter and the gold, “a conscious artistic achievement” ’ Malcolm Bradbury, *Mail on Sunday*

‘It must be one of the most perfect novels ever written. Technique and tact and moral sensibility are as finely tuned as in any of Turgeniev’s great novels, and yet it is as American as Hollywood’ John McGahern, *Irish Times*

‘A prose that has the tough delicacy of a garnet’ Brad Leithauser, *The New York Review of Books*

‘Lost time and the irretrievability of the past are themes which filter through almost every page of this exquisite novel’ Jason Cowley, *Sunday Times*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND EDITOR

F. Scott Fitzgerald was born in 1896 in St Paul, Minnesota, and went to Princeton University, which he left in 1917 to join the army. He was said to have epitomized the Jazz Age, which he himself denied as 'a generation grown up to find all Gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken'. In 1920 he married Zelda Sayre. Their traumatic marriage and her subsequent breakdowns became the leading influence in his writing. Among his publications were five novels, *This Side of Paradise, The Great Gatsby, The Beautiful and Damned, Tender is the Night* and *The Last Tycoon* (his last and unfinished work); six volumes of short stories and *The Crack-Up*, a selection of autobiographical pieces. Fitzgerald died suddenly in 1940. After his death *The New York Times* said of him that 'He was better than he knew, for in fact and in the literary sense he invented a "generation"… he might have interpreted and even guided them, as in their middle years they saw a different and nobler freedom threatened with destruction.'

Tony Tanner was a Fellow of King's College, Cambridge, and Professor of English and American Literature. He taught and travelled extensively in America and Europe. Alongside books on Conrad and Saul Bellow, he published *The Reign of Wonder* (1965), a study of American literature; *City of Words* (1970); *Contract and Transgression: Adultery and the Novel* (1980); *Jane Austen* (1986); *Scenes of Nature, Signs of Men* (1987); *Venice Desired* (1992); and *Henry James and the Art of Non-Fiction* (1995). Tony Tanner died in December 1998.

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

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Introduction

It was not always to be called *The Great Gatsby*. In a letter to Maxwell Perkins Fitzgerald wrote: 'I have now decided to stick to the title I put on the book. *Trimalchio in West Egg' (circa* 7 November 1924). Trimalchio is, of course, the vulgar social upstart of immense wealth in the *Satyricon* of Petronius – a master of sexual and gastronomic revels who gives a banquet of unimaginable luxury in which, unlike Gatsby who is a non-drinking, self-isolating spectator at his own parties, he most decidedly participates. He is a most literal glutton, while Gatsby stands at a curious distance from all he owns and displays, just as at times he seems to stand back from his own words and consider them appraisingly, as he would the words of another, just as he will display shirts he has never worn, books he has never read, and extend invitations to swim in the pool he has never used.

If Fitzgerald thought of Gatsby as some sort of American Trimalchio thrown up by the riotous licence of the Twenties, he certainly subjected him to some remarkable metamorphoses. (He is called Trimalchio just once in the novel.) But there are some distinct genealogical traces of Gatsby's ancient ancestor. In the *Satyricon* Trimalchio is first mentioned in the conversation of two friends discussing where that night's feast is to be held: 'Do you not know at whose house it is today? Trimalchio, a very rich man, who has a clock and a uniformed trumpeter in his dining-room, to keep telling him how much of his life is lost and gone.' Gatsby's concern with time – its arrestability, recuperability, repeatability – is equally obsessive (as was Fitzgerald's – he seemed to write surrounded by clocks and calendars, said Malcolm Cowley). One of the 'punctilious' Gatsby's few clumsy physical movements nearly results in the breaking of a clock. No doubt in some corner of his being he would like to break them all. The obsession is partly the Trimalchian fear of transience – there is always too little time left: more grandly (if more foolishly), it comes from some deep refusal to accept the linear

irreversibility of history. ‘Banish the uniformed trumpeter!’ would be Gatsby’s cry: ‘I will not hear his flourish.’

When Gatsby’s illustrious forebear Trimalchio is first seen he is ‘busily engaged with a green ball. He never picked it up if it touched the ground.’ Gatsby comes to orient his life in relation to not a green ball but a green light. ‘You always have a green light that burns all night at the end of your dock,’ he says to Daisy. Seen from across the water – and everything else – that separates him from Daisy, the green light offers Gatsby a suitably inaccessible focus for his yearning, something to give definition to desire while indefinitely deferring consummation, something to stretch his arms towards, as he does, rather than circle his arms around, as he tries to. The fragile magic of the game depends on keeping the green light at a distance or, we might say, on keeping the green ball in the air. The green ball fallen to the ground would be too much of a reminder of that ineluctable gravity that pulls all things back to the earth, balls and dreams alike. Likewise with the annulment of distance: lights too closely approached may well lose their supernal lustre and revert to unarousing ordinariness. You can wish only on the star you can’t reach.

Daisy put her arm through his abruptly, but he seemed absorbed in what he had just said. Possibly it had occurred to him that the colossal significance of that light had now vanished forever. Compared to the great distance that had separated him from Daisy it had seemed as close as a star to the moon. Now it was again a green light on a dock. His count of enchanted objects had diminished by one.

Possibly – and possibly not. Or possibly something different. Certainly in this book there is abroad a hunger for ‘enchanted objects’, a taste for the ‘colossal’ and a concern to try to establish and differentiate those times – moments, configurations – when a light might be a star of ‘colossal significance’ as opposed to just another dock light. This is Nick Carraway’s version, and we may wonder whether, in retrospect, the green light didn’t shine more brightly for him even than, possibly, for Gatsby.

Of the many exotic courses served at Trimalchio's banquet I want to single out one:

a tray was brought in with a basket on it, in which there was a hen made of wood, spreading out her wings as they do when they are sitting. The music grew loud: two slaves came up and at once began to hunt in the straw… Peahen's eggs were pulled out and handed to the guests… we took our spoons and hammered at the eggs, which were balls of fine meal. I was on the point of throwing away my portion. I thought a peachick had already formed. But hearing a practised diner say, 'What treasure have we here?' I poked through the shell with my finger and found a fat baccafacio rolled up in spiced yoke of egg.

In October 1922 the Fitzgeralds moved to a house in Great Neck, Long Island, on a peninsula at the foot of Manhasset Bay. Their house was a relatively modest one compared with the opulent summer homes of the seriously rich old American families – the Guggenheims, the Astors, the Van Nostrands, the Pulitzers – on another peninsular across the bay. This, of course, provided Fitzgerald with the basic topography for his novel: new-money Gatsby and no-money Nick on one side of the bay and 'old-money' (but what is 'old' money in America?) Buchanans on the other. In the course of being transposed into the novel the 'Necks' became 'Eggs'.

Twenty miles from the city a pair of enormous eggs, identical in contour and separated only by a courtesy bay, jut out into the most domesticated body of salt water in the Western hemisphere, the great wet barnyard of Long Island Sound. They are not perfect ovals – like the egg in the Columbus story, they are both crushed flat at the contact end – but their physical resemblance must be a source of perpetual wonder to the gulls that fly overhead. To the wingless a more interesting phenomenon is their dissimilarity in every particular except shape and size.

A deep, generating question behind the whole book is just this. As a result of the 'domestication' of the great wild continent discovered by Columbus, what has been hatched from it? What will you find if you take your spoon to the great egg – or is it eggs? – of America? A disgusting, aborted, stunted and still-born thing, fit only to be thrown away? Or a treasure, something special (baccafacio, a