In a novel in which language is consistently seen to work against the demands of veracity, at least one formulation in *The Great Gatsby* rings true: Nick Carraway’s pronouncement, near the start of the novel, that “Gatsby turned out all right at the end” (Fitzgerald 1999, 6). Jay Gatsby, a figure marked by failure and shadowed by death throughout most of the novel, nevertheless achieves a form of “greatness” in the final paragraphs of his story; it is at this point, in the words of Lionel Trilling, that Gatsby “comes inevitably to stand for America itself” (1963, 17). For it is in the final, lyrical paragraphs of the novel that Gatsby’s fate takes on mythic dimensions, becoming an allegory for the course of the American nation and for the struggles and dreams of its citizens. This transformation occurs when the novel’s narrator, Nick Carraway, finally perceives what lies beneath the “inessential” sur-

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face world of his surroundings: a vital impulse, an originary American hope. Nick sees Gatsby as the incarnation of this national impulse, this “extraordi-
nary gift for hope,” using the same term—“wonder”—to describe Gatsby’s
desire for Daisy Buchanan and that of the first American colonists gazing at
“the fresh green breast of the new world.” For Nick, Gatsby’s lies, his pre-
tensions, and his corruption are “no matter”; nor is his failure to win back
Daisy; what matters is the sustaining belief in the value of striving for a
“wondrous” object, not its inevitable disappearance and meaninglessness. And
in a significant shift in pronouns of the novel’s final sentences, Nick unites
Gatsby’s effort with a general, if unspecified, national collective: “Gatsby
believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before
us. It eluded us then, but that’s no matter—. . . So we beat on, boats against
the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past” (Fitzgerald 1999, 141; my
emphasis). What matters to Gatsby is what matters to “us”; Gatsby’s story is
“our” story; his fate and the fate of the nation are intertwined. That Gatsby
“turned out all right in the end” is thus essential to the novel’s vision of a
transcendent and collective Americanism.

Yet this ending is in fact at odds with the characterization of Gatsby in
the rest of the novel. For if Gatsby ultimately represents a glorified version of
“us,” then he does so only if we forget that he is for most of the novel a force
of corruption: a criminal, a bootlegger, and an adulterer. As critics have often
noted, the text stakes its ending on the inevitability of our forgetting every-
thing about Gatsby that has proved troublesome about his character up to
this point. What critics have generally overlooked, however, is the fact that
the text also self-consciously inscribes this process of forgetting into its own
narrative. Appearing to offer two discrepant views of its protagonist, The
Great Gatsby in fact ultimately challenges its readers to question the terms
through which “presence” or “visibility” can be signified.

This, to my mind, is the point of one of the most important yet least crit-
ically examined scenes in the novel: the novel’s penultimate scene, the tran-
sitional scene that immediately precedes the last four paragraphs of the text.
It is a scene that begins with Nick Carraway wandering idly down to Long
Island Sound past Gatsby’s house, killing time on the eve of his return to the
mid-west: “On the last night, with my trunk packed and my car sold to the
grocer, I went over and looked at that huge incoherent failure of a house
once more. On the white steps an obscene word, scrawled by some boy with
a piece of brick, stood out clearly in the moonlight and I erased it, drawing
my shoe raspingly along the stone” (Fitzgerald 1999, 140). A fleeting, transi-
tory scene; in the next instant, Nick is already down at the shore, “sprawled
out on the sand,” at which point his epiphany about Gatsby and the green
light begins. Yet what this immediate sequence of events implies is that Nick’s
final epiphany about Gatsby is contingent for its emergence on the act that precedes this epiphany: the repression or erasure of an “obscene word.” In order for Gatsby to “turn out all right at the end,” to come to “stand for America itself,” his link to this word must be erased. Yet by foregrounding the process of this erasure, this “forgetting,” Fitzgerald also seems to be problematizing the inevitability of the text’s ending: Gatsby “turn[s] out all right” only if we forget, or repress, his obscenity.

While it is easy for a reader to overlook this scene, it requires no real effort to understand why the graffiti scrawled on Gatsby’s house would be an obscenity, for the link between Gatsby and the obscene has been repeatedly suggested in the text up to this point: in Nick’s reference to Gatsby’s “corruption”; in his opening claim that Gatsby “represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn” (Fitzgerald 1999, 6); in his description of Gatsby’s career as “Trimalchio” (88). In this penultimate scene, it is also a link that Fitzgerald frames explicitly in terms of signification, or rather, in terms of what eludes or threatens signification. For by linking Gatsby with an obscene word, Fitzgerald appears to be deliberately drawing attention to the etymology of “obscene”: as that which is either unrepresentable or beyond the terms of the presentable (“obscene,” from the Latin “obscenaeus,” meaning both “against the presentable” and “unrepresentable”). Whatever the word scrawled on Gatsby’s steps may be, the point is that we cannot know it; it is a word that, precisely in its obscenity, points to a signifying void. Yet as its etymology suggests, the “signifying void” of the obscene can be understood in two ways. On the one hand, the obscene is what eludes representation: it is the unrepresentable, the pre-linguistic, or the anti-linguistic, a force of disruption and implosion, of psychosexual and linguistic shattering. It is similar in process to what Julia Kristeva terms “the abject”: that which “draws me toward the place where meaning collapses” (1982, 2). Yet the obscene is also what questions—and thus denaturalizes—the normative thrust of signification. The obscene works against the presentable, as Mary Caputi argues, “in its determined violation of established norms, its eagerness to proclaim from beyond the acceptable, its appeal to the uncanny” (1994, 7). Freud, speaking of “smut,” defined it as an “undoing” of repression, while Bakhtin identifies “low” language (“on the stages of local fairs and at buffoon spectacles”) as “parodic, and aimed sharply and polemically against the official languages of its given time” (Freud 1957, 101; Bakhtin 1981, 273). In this second sense, the obscene predominantly functions as a threat to the conventional language of narration or the normative discourses of a nation, throwing into question the status of the acceptable or the normal, of the seemingly representable and meaningful, including the political and social hierarchies that sustain “meaning.”
As sections two and three of this essay will suggest, both senses of the term "obscene" summarize the life of Jay Gatsby. While Gatsby is a "mystery" for those who attend his parties, he is even more, as Nick Carraway notes, "an elusive rhythm, a fragment of lost words" (Fitzgerald 1999, 87). With his "unutterable visions" that lead to "unutterable depression" and ultimately "incoherent failure," Gatsby is constantly vanishing on the horizon of significance; and this is a problem for characters like Nick and the Buchanans, whose own sense of location in time and social space is very much dependent upon a clear distinction between truth and lies, insiders and outsiders, natives and aliens. Put another way, Gatsby is a figure who problematizes the nature of figuration itself, drawing the text toward an abject void, "toward the place where meaning collapses." But Gatsby is also a figure whose obscenity lies in the challenge he poses to "the presentable," to the natural and the normal—a particularly unsettling idea given not only the text's immediate concerns with the nature of belonging but also the historical moment in which Fitzgerald is writing, an era marked by widespread anxiety about the possible dissolution of the "natural" American in the face of an encroaching "alien menace." As we shall see, such concerns over the nature (and "naturalness") of American identity in the 1920s were shared by Fitzgerald himself, whose own politics at the time of writing *Gatsby* were directed toward immigration restriction and who remained throughout his life suspicious of those who threatened the group to which he felt he belonged, "the old American aristocracy." Given this historical context, Gatsby's indeterminacy and transgressiveness could be said to embody nothing less than the "obscene" fulfillment of Fitzgerald's own suspicions: Gatsby as the threatening figure of the alien, unassimilable to the discourse of political and social Americanism toward which the text is ultimately directed, "unutterable" within the narrative framework that seeks to represent him.

By having Nick erase "the obscene word" from the text as Gatsby's story draws to a close, however, Fitzgerald makes it possible for this story to emerge as the story of America itself. Gatsby the obscene becomes Gatsby the American. Yet while the fact of this transformation is incontestable, its terms remain troubling. Through foregrounding Nick's erasure of the obscene word from Gatsby's house, Fitzgerald deliberately emphasizes the process through which the "whitewashing" of Gatsby's reputation takes place. And as this essay will finally suggest, to emphasize this process is to reveal a central uncertainty, or void, that lies at the heart of the text's final, transcendent vision.
In an early draft of the novel, Nick Carraway makes an interesting observation about Gatsby: “He was provokingly elusive and what he was intrinsically ‘like’ I’m powerless to say.”¹ Nick’s crisis of linguistic disempowerment here accompanies the “provokingly elusive” nature of his subject; the problem of Gatsby’s “intrinsic likeness” bears wholly on the project of signification. In a character with not enough “likeness” and no apparent “intrinsic” essence, Gatsby is nowhere and everywhere, a “vanishing presence”; and this, as Derrida reminds us, is also the nature of “différence . . . which prevents any word, any concept, any major enunciation from coming to summarize and to govern from the theological presence of a center the movement and textual spacing of differences” (1981, 14). If Gatsby—“the man who gives his name to this book”—is meant by Nick to “summarize” and “govern” the work of the text, the meaning and direction of its signifiers, then his “elusiveness” is also what prevents this governance from taking place. An “elusive rhythm,” Gatsby could be said to embody différence, if embodiment can be understood as the “being-there of an absent[ce]” or the “disjointure in the very presence of the present” (1994, 6; 25). It is in his fractured and incoherent embodiment, his ever-vanishing “presence,” that Gatsby throws into crisis Nick’s effort to speak.

“Vanished” is indeed the predominant term in this text, as when at the end of Chapter I Nick first encounters Gatsby, only to find “he had vanished, and I was alone again in the unquiet darkness”; or when, after an awkward meeting with Tom Buchanan, Nick “turned toward Mr. Gatsby but he was no longer there” (Fitzgerald 1999, 59).² Gatsby “vanishes” at other key moments in the text: in his failure to appear at his own parties, in his unknowable past and shady business dealings, and in his smile, which “assured you that it had precisely the impression of you that, at your best, you hoped to convey. Precisely at that point it vanished”—(40). As this last sentence suggests, Gatsby even vanishes—literally—from the signifying system of the text itself: the dash, the graphic mark of his unrepresentability, is insistently emphasized whenever he speaks or is spoken about.³ Although to Nick Gatsby seems at once utterly conventional, utterly knowable—being with him, he notes, was “like skimming hastily through a dozen magazines” (53)—he is also “provokingly elusive,” both extending the promise of meaning or presence and “vanishing” at the moment in which that promise leans toward fulfillment. This process is apparent in a number of scenes throughout the novel. Most haunting is Nick’s statement following Gatsby’s confessional account of his first kiss with Daisy:

Through all he said, even through his appalling sentimentality, I was reminded of something—an elusive rhythm, a fragment of lost words, that
I had heard somewhere a long time ago. For a moment a phrase tried to take shape in my mouth and my lips parted like a dumb man’s, as though there was more struggling upon them than a wisp of startled air. But they made no sound and what I had almost remembered was uncommunicable forever. (Fitzgerald 1999, 87)

Nick’s effort to speak is here seen to be awakened by Gatsby’s own words, with their “elusive rhythm” and nostalgic promise of a return to lost origins; yet memory is also inevitably attended by a failure of articulation (“and what I had almost remembered was uncommunicable forever”). Whoever Gatsby is, whatever he reminds one of, this “presence” ultimately lies outside the limits of the communicable. As in the earlier description of Gatsby’s smile, this passage is structured around a contradictory movement (or “disjointure,” to recall Derrida) in which presence and appearance pivot into absence and “vanishing” at the precise moment of seeming apprehension. Another such example is found in the party scene of chapter III, which begins with a series of gossipy suppositions about Gatsby’s identity by passing partygoers: “Somebody told me they thought he killed a man once”; “it’s more that he was a German spy during the war”; “he told me once he was an Oxford man.” With this latter claim, notes Nick, “A dim background started to take shape behind [Gatsby] but at her next remark it faded away” (40). Here, again, the promise of presence or “shape” vanishes at the moment of its emergence; suppositions lead not to truth but to indeterminacy, and who Gatsby is remains just beyond the reach of the “next remark.”

Nor is Gatsby’s indeterminacy within the text simply an issue of Nick’s own notably distorted vision, as the comments of fellow partygoers make clear. While it is true that Nick’s perceptions, especially while drunk, contribute exponentially to the idea of Gatsby’s elusiveness, other observers also fail to illuminate Gatsby’s character. In a crucial (and again, often overlooked) moment during the chapter III party scene, Nick and Jordan encounter a man “with enormous owl-eyed spectacles” sitting in the library of Gatsby’s house, who informs them that the books on the shelves are, indeed, “real”: “Absolutely real—have pages and everything. I thought they’d be a nice durable cardboard. Matter of fact they’re absolutely real. . . . It’s a triumph. What thoroughness! What realism! Knew when to stop too—didn’t cut the pages. But what do you want? What do you expect?” (Fitzgerald 1999, 37–38). As a figure who, like Doctor T. J. Eckleberg, is linked metonymically in the text to the trope of perception, “Owl Eyes” is presented as one who pierces the façade of social life in the Eggs, exposing—as at Gatsby’s funeral—the despair and loneliness that lie underneath the forced gaiety of appearances. In the library scene, Owl Eyes’ ability to “expose” is both emphasized and undermined, as the fake-appearing books turn out to be
real, yet semi-unreadable. The “realness” of the books signifies presence and meaning; yet their uncut pages underscore the opacity of the text—that-would-be-read. Gatsby, too, is both “really” there and absent, a figure who resists being perceived even by those with “corrected” vision, who voids the signifying process of its meaningful end. “What do you want? What do you expect?” Owl Eyes finally asks himself, Nick, Jordan, and implicitly the reader, calling into question any desire or expectation for knowledge that might attend the experience of “reading” Gatsby.

Hence those few crucial scenes where Gatsby’s character promises to be revealed as meaningful and directed toward a significant end invariably prove to be “provokingly elusive.” In the famous flashback scene of chapter VI, for example, Nick recalls Gatsby’s past as “James Gatz of North Dakota” in order to explain Gatsby’s present, portraying his youthful rejection of family and original name as a necessary precondition to his later “glory” as a wealthy, upwardly-mobile adult (Fitzgerald 1999, 76 ff.). Nick’s account of Gatsby’s adolescence attempts to cast him in a familiar mold: the self-made man, “spr[inging] from his Platonic conception of himself,” the spiritual descen- dent of other hard-working national icons like Horatio Alger or Benjamin Franklin (whose famous “Plan for Self-Examination” would be invoked later in the text in Gatsby’s own childhood “Schedule”). Yet the text consistently undermines these seeming “causes” of Gatsby’s actions at the very moment of their “revelation.” For what this chapter in fact reveals about Gatsby is not so much his identity with an American tradition of hard work and “luck and pluck” but rather his dreaminess, his entrapment in “a universe of ineffable gaudiness,” his belief “that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy’s wing.” What motivates Gatsby is not the desire for material betterment (“food and bed”) but the evanescent and the intangible; what satisfies him is confirmation of “the unreality of reality.” Whatever is, for Gatsby, can be contradicted, “the real” is always “the unreal,” and this is troubling both to the descriptive terms and to the larger narrative of American achievement within which Gatsby is meant to emerge as “great.” To be sure, to tell the story of a figure trapped in the oxymoronic “unreality of reality” is to tell a modernist story, if modernity, as Jean-François Lyotard suggests, “does not occur without a shattering of belief, without a discovery of the lack of reality in reality—a discovery linked to the invention of other realities” (1992, 9). Consistently dreaming beyond the material, social, economic, and temporal boundaries of his surroundings, overturning and reimagining the hierarchies of power and social status that constrain him, Gatsby could be seen as a modernist figure, a deconstructive figure, a figure of difference, whose “motivation” is to “shatter . . . belief” and hence “invent . . . [new] realities.” Yet The Great Gatsby is no Ulysses, capturing in the play of signifiers the movement of Gatsby’s “dif-
ferance”; however “modernist” Gatsby may be, his character can only be revealed through the moments in which he vanishes from the narrative, through oxymorons, through dashes—all of which point to an unrepresentability at the center of this textual reality.

III.

In a text so haunted by indeterminacy and unrepresentability, what stands out are precisely those efforts that work against “vanishing,” that attempt to affirm, make visible, and police boundaries of meaning, identity, community, sexuality, and nation. These are also efforts directed against Gatsby and his elusiveness: efforts either to make sense of Gatsby’s character (as in Nick’s effort to “reveal” Gatsby’s formative past) or to cast him as inherently corrupt and “obscene,” as outside the boundaries of sense, propriety, and order, as racially and sexually perverse. These latter efforts are centered in the character of Tom Buchanan, denizen of the isolated town of East Egg, two-timing husband of Daisy, and single-minded adherent to the nativist views of a tome called “The Rise of the Colored Empires,” modeled on Lothrop Stoddard’s 1920 volume The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy.4 For Buchanan, following Stoddard, “The idea is if we don’t look out the white race will be—will be utterly submerged,” a statement whose characteristic use of the dash emphasizes the anxiety that underwrites American nativism in the 1920s, its sense that the process of Nordic “submersion” by an ever-expanding “colored empire” may already be underway. What the dash in Tom’s statement represents is what, for him, would be unspeakable—miscegenation, a process through which “whiteness” and “color” become undifferentiated, through which “race” itself, and the white race in particular, become indeterminate. For Tom, it is Jay Gatsby in particular who represents a mode of racial indeterminacy or “vanishing” that threatens to violate not only the immediate community of East Egg but also the very concept of Americanism itself.

In his recent study of nativism and American literature in the 1920s, Walter Benn Michaels argues that the threat of a disappearing white race constitutes Tom’s real concern about Gatsby’s union with Daisy; it is the fact that “[f]or Tom . . . Gatsby (né Gatz, with his Wolfsheim [sic] ‘gonnegtion’) isn’t quite white,” that sustains his antipathy toward his rival (Michaels 1995, 25).5 Gatsby’s “off-white” status is confirmed earlier in the novel by the comment of Tom’s relation—by—marriage Nick Carraway that “I would have accepted without question the information that Gatsby sprang from the swamps of Louisiana or from the lower East Side of New York” (Fitzgerald 1999, 41), a statement that associates Gatsby not with radical otherness but with creole or Jewish difference, both in the 1920s “assigned to the not-fully-
white side of the racial spectrum.”6 What most disturbs Tom, and clearly troubles Nick, is not just the fact that Gatsby is a mystery but more that he signals the “vanishing” of whiteness into indeterminacy, and thus threatens the whole economic, discursive, and institutional structure of power supporting the social distinctions and hierarchies at work in The Great Gatsby. For Tom (and possibly Nick), whiteness and its attendant privileges—material well-being, entitlement, the feeling of being “safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor”—is something that must be preserved, safeguarded, barricaded. Thus when Gatsby is most dangerously close to “winning” Daisy, it is not so much his social ambition that threatens Tom as the fact that his pursuit portends “intermarriage between black and white.” Gatsby’s “obscenity” for Tom lies in the challenge he poses to sexual and racial norms. In exposing Gatsby’s link to miscegenation, Tom brings out the deeper social menace against which his own claim to whiteness stands as guardian: “Flushed with his impassioned gibberish he saw himself standing alone on the last barrier of civilization” (101).

That Gatsby is associated with a Jewish crime syndicate, moreover, only redoubles his threatening presence in the text. With his “Wolfsheim ‘gonnega-shon’” Gatsby seems contaminated by more than just criminality and sexual perversity; for it is the fact of Wolfsheim’s crudely stereotyped, animalistic Jewishness that most seems to “taint” Gatsby. The same “taint” is also suggested by Gatsby’s layered, problematic name. “Jay Gatsby,” of course, is only a WASP fiction adopted by one “James Gatz of North Dakota,” yet although the text is directed toward exposing this fiction, the significance of this exposure remains obscure. While the name of “Gatz” is clearly haunted by ethnic, and specifically Jewish, overtones, “Gatz” is also a decidedly ambiguous name. Not not Jewish (as opposed to “Gaty,” the first version of “Gatz” shown in Fitzgerald’s drafts), the name “Gatz” is also not identifiably Jewish (as opposed, for example, to the more common “Katz”). Both Jews and non-Jews have the surname Gatz; moreover, the name “Gatz” sometimes appears as a germanicized alteration of a Yiddish name, “Gets.”7 That Fitzgerald knew of this etymological complexity would not be surprising; as Lottie R. Crim and Neal B. Houston have pointed out, Fitzgerald’s use of names in Gatsby is remarkably rich and nuanced.8 By choosing a name, “Gatz,” that can generate both Jewish and gentile chains of associations, Fitzgerald seems to be emphasizing once again the way in which his protagonist is always “vanishing” into racial and hence social indeterminacy. Neither identifiably black nor identifiably Jewish, the shifting, obscure, ever-vanishing figure of James Gatz/Jay Gatsby troubles the category of “whiteness,” problematizing the force of this category at a moment when such force is of crucial significance.
As Michaels suggests, the specter of a beleaguered whiteness in *The Great Gatsby* needs to be understood in light of the historical moment in which *Gatsby* was written, the early 1920s. This is a moment in which American isolationist fervor is at its peak, a moment in which fears over “the expanded power of the alien” are being openly expressed in political, intellectual, and literary forums. It is a moment marked by the social movement of nativism, with its support of the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924 and its battle cry “America for the Americans.” It is also a moment in which the discourse of “Americanism”—the nativists’ privileged term—is linked indubitably to the discourse of whiteness: “Americanism is actually the racial thought of the Nordic race, evolved after a thousand years of experience,” writes Clinton Stoddard Burr, author of *America’s Race Heritage* (1922).9 “The great hope of the future here in America lies in the realization that competition of the Nordic with the alien is fatal,” warns nativist writer Madison Grant in his 1920 introduction to Lothrop Stoddard’s *The Rising Tide of Color, “... In this country we must look to such of our people—our farmers and artisans—as are still of American blood to recognize and meet this danger”* (Stoddard 1920, xxxi). Charlotte Perkins Gilman, author and agitator for women’s rights, simply worried in 1923, “Is America Too Hospitable?” (Higham 1973, 386, n. 25). For these and other nativists, keeping “American blood” pure—i.e., purely white—in the face of alien expansion was a predominant concern; and one that contributed its ideological part to a host of post-War social measures, from quotas to IQ tests, that were meant to establish and affirm the whiteness or “Nordicism” of the nation.

In *The Great Gatsby* (composed between 1922-24), nativist feeling is clearly exemplified by the views of Tom Buchanan, but also, though more subtly, by the discourse of Nick Carraway, with his “scorn” for the working classes, his stereotyping of immigrants, Jews, and blacks, and his claim to be “descended from the Dukes of Buccleuch”—an aristocratic lineage that, however fictional, is meant to appease any nativist fears about the non-whiteness of the Scottish. Yet while Fitzgerald presents such attempts to shore up whiteness against “alien elements” as “impassioned gibberish,” external, biographical evidence suggests that the nativist ideas of Tom and Nick may not be so far from Fitzgerald’s own. “Raise the bars of immigration and permit only Scandinavians, Teutons, Anglo Saxons + Celts to enter,” Fitzgerald writes in an infamous 1921 letter to Edmund Wilson after a disappointing tourist trip in France and Italy: “... My reactions [are] all philistine, anti-socialist, provincial + racially snobbish. I believe at last in the white man’s burden” (1994, 47).10 Some fifteen years later, in an undated letter from the 1930s to his daughter Scottie lamenting her choice of friends, Fitzgerald reiterates these views:
Jesus, we’re the few remnants of the old American aristocracy that’s managed to survive in communicable form—we have the vitality left. And you choose to mix it up with the cheap lower middle class settled on Park Avenue. You know the distinction—and in most of your relations you are wise enough to forget it—but when it comes to falling for a phoney—your instincts should do a better job. All that’s rude, tough (in the worst sense), crude and purse proud comes from vermin like the ______. (Undated note to Scottie from F. Scott Fitzgerald)11

“Mix[ing] it up with the cheap lower middle class,” Scottie fails to let her “instincts” create the necessary distinction that would preclude her “falling for a phoney.” The “distinction” Fitzgerald refers to is one of class, to be sure, but even more of race—a point made clear by his emphasis on familial “vitality,” which directly echoes contemporary nativist discussions of race and degeneracy. Lothrop Stoddard, for one, would differentiate between “Nordics” and “aliens” on the basis of “vitality”: “there seems to be no question that the Nordic is far and away the most valuable type; standing, indeed, at the head of the whole human genus” (1920, 162). Yet Stoddard also fears that in the post-War period, “Nordic vitality” has suffered a two-fold blow: decimated by the War, which has left “the men twisted by hereditary deformity or devitalized by hereditary disease ... at home to propagate the breed,” Nordics are also victims of immigrant ambition: “the Nordic native American has been crowded out with amazing rapidity by ... swarming, prolific aliens, and after two short generations he has in many of our urban areas become almost extinct” (181; 165). Given Fitzgerald’s own failure to see action in the War, his lifelong battle with alcoholism, tuberculosis and neurasthenia, and his confession, in the 1930s, “that lack of success of physical sheer power in my life made trouble,”12 it is somewhat ironic that he would appeal to Scottie on the grounds of their shared claim to familial “vitality.” Yet “vitality” is precisely what distinguishes “the old American aristocracy”—or in Stoddard’s terms, “the Nordic native American”—from “vermin,” and it is the terms of this distinction that Fitzgerald means to emphasize in his letter.

Whether or not Fitzgerald means to emphasize this distinction in The Great Gatsby is another matter; beyond his presentation of Tom’s ideas as not only hopeless but “pathetic” is the fact that Jay Gatsby is not identifiably Other—like the “modish Negroes” on the Queensboro Bridge or the Greek Michaelis—but simply “not quite white.” Yet again, being “not quite” is perhaps Gatsby’s most troubling aspect. Located in the liminal space between categories, the space of indeterminacy and difference, Gatsby consistently eludes the terms of both national and textual belonging, and it is these terms which, as Fitzgerald explains to his daughter, enable “distinctions” between self and other, white and non-white, American and un-American, to emerge
with clarity. To this extent, finally, Gatsby is not only a mystery in the text, a signifier of indeterminacy and unrepresentability; he is also, quite simply, an obscene threat to the national “vitality” of which Tom Buchanan laments the loss, and which The Great Gatsby itself purports to celebrate in its final pages.

IV.

When, near the end of his story, Gatsby dies, the event is deemed a “holocaust”—a striking term given his possible link to Jewish origins—yet this is far from the last word that the text provides about the significance of Gatsby’s life and death. There is another word closer to the end of the text that seems more nearly to serve as Gatsby’s epitaph: an “obscene word, scrawled by some boy with a piece of brick” on the “white steps” of Gatsby’s house—a word explicitly framed as a defilement of whiteness, as a mark of impurity.13 “Jew” or “colored” or “alien” or “Other”—any or all of these terms might appear on Gatsby’s steps; but what is perhaps most significant about Nick’s reference to “the obscene word” is the illegibility of this word, its location outside or beyond the presentable, its “vanished” status. For it is fitting that the sum of Gatsby’s “corruption,” his obscurity and indeterminacy, might be expressed by a word that literally cannot be read.14

I have attempted, up to this point, to trace both ways in which the figure of Gatsby might be seen as a problem for the signifying project that bears his name. Drawing the reader toward “the place where meaning collapses,” Gatsby’s “unutterable visions,” his evanescent dreams, and his “uncommunicable” presence all point to a narrative and linguistic void that is at odds with the counter effort by Nick and others to make Gatsby into the “governing” presence in the book, into a figure of significance. Moreover, Gatsby’s racial indeterminacy, his troubling “off-whiteness,” and his link to ethnic criminality further obscure the significance of this figure in a context in which racial difference is seen to be defining and of crucial importance to American identity. Thus it is not surprising that as Gatsby’s story draws to a close what was once “provokingly elusive” would come to be figured as “obscene.”

What is surprising is the way in which the novel finally ends: with Gatsby’s obscenity erased as speedily from the text itself as it is from the front steps of his house. After Nick’s act of erasure, Gatsby’s elusiveness, corruption, and “off-whiteness” are forgotten; in the next moment, a moment in which “vanished trees” appear and the “whispers” of a lost continent become intelligible, a new vision of Gatsby’s significance is revealed:

[At] the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors’ eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby’s house, had once pandered in
whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.

And as I sat there, brooding on the old unknown world, I thought of Gatsby’s wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy’s dock. (Fitzgerald 1999, 140-41)

In these famous concluding lines, Nick creates an explicit analogy between the gaze of the Dutch colonists as they first catch sight of the “fresh, green breast of the new world,” and Gatsby’s vision of the green light at the end of Daisy’s dock: Gatsby and the Dutch are joined in contemplative “wonder” as they come face to face with their objects of desire; both represent in their contemplation “the last and greatest of all human dreams.” This linkage reverses Gatsby’s trajectory toward unrepresentability and recasts his desire in terms of a transcendent national narrative; at this moment, the problem of Gatsby’s “intrinsic likeness” disappears, for what Gatsby is “intrinsically ‘like’” turns out to be nothing less than “America” itself. If nationalism, as Benedict Anderson writes, “always loom[s] out of an immemorial past and . . . glide[s] into a limitless future” (Bhabha 1990, 1), then the final lines of Gatsby establish “America” as eternal mode of human yearning, as a quest narrative that stretches across generations from the Dutch to Gatsby, and hence from the Dutch, to Gatsby, to “us” (“It eluded us then, but that’s no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther . . .”). To be sure, this passage is also haunted by another idea of America—an “old island” that precedes the transforming gaze of the colonists and that, like Myrtle’s torn and bloody breast, seems momentarily to challenge and render ironic the final, transcendent vision of “the fresh, green breast of the new world.” This “old” America, this lost America, reminds us again of Kristeva’s notion of the abject: that which threatens meaning, especially in its association with the irreparable loss of the mother’s body. Yet abject America is quickly glossed over. What matters here, finally, is the way age, violence, and obscenity—seemingly inevitably—give way before Gatsby’s and the colonist’s Dream.

But what is perhaps most significant about these concluding paragraphs is their investment not only in resignifying Gatsby but in refiguring the racialist overtones that previously haunted this indeterminacy. By situating Gatsby in a chain of likeness with the “Nordic” Dutch, the text effectively asserts Gatsby’s ties to whiteness and “erases” his problematically off-white status, just as it refashions his “uncommunicable” presence as nationally significant. Inasmuch as this ending articulates a triumphalist nationalist credo, it does so in terms that ring with the ideology of nativism. The very figure
who represented a threat to the boundaries of linguistic and national meaning is now revealed as the inheritor and guardian of Americanist values, as the natural descendent of the “Teutons, Anglo-Saxons + Celts.” Gatsby’s problem of being “not quite white” is finally dismissed as so much “foul dust float[ing] in the wake of his dreams” (Fitzgerald 1999, 6).

V.

Jay Gatsby, in other words, “turns out all right at the end”—as Nick Carraway had promised in the opening pages of the novel. This essay has questioned the necessity of that promise, noting the discrepancy between the novel’s elegiac conclusion and the larger narrative in which Gatsby figures as troubling and suspect, as liminal and unknowable. Other critics have made similar note of Fitzgerald’s desire in his conclusion to move beyond the indeterminate, skeptical, paranoid, and morally relativistic world he chronicles: Gatsby as a sign of his times and of the transcendence of his times. Jeffrey Louis Decker, for one, suggests that the resolution of the novel represents Fitzgerald’s “anxious” eagerness to retain “the traditional narrative of virtuous ambitions” despite the bankruptcy of this narrative in a post-War, nativist American society: “In death Gatsby is freed from his venal partnership with immigrant gangsters and remembered within a lineage of northern European explorers,” despite the fact that it is precisely Gatsby’s connection to immigrant “indeterminacy” that has earlier distinguished him as a threat to Nordic ideology (1997, 78; 97).15 Chris Fitter writes that the ending of Gatsby represents Fitzgerald’s “misty melancholia” for a prelapsarian, precapitalist ideal that the text has, up to this point, worked hard to demystify (1998, 14). And Joyce A. Rowe succinctly captures the paradox that “Nick’s epilogue . . . keeps alive the very form of that aspiration we have seen issuing in a wasteland of social and moral emptiness” (1988, 103).

As these critiques suggest, Gatsby’s final transformation is far from inevitable, but rather “willed” by a Fitzgerald who, as his harshest critic Chris Fitter writes, ultimately prefers “tearful patriotic frisson” to any more critical or complex vision of contemporary American culture (1998, 14). Given Fitzgerald’s own nativist and isolationist leanings in the 1920s, this assessment seems at least plausible: that The Great Gatsby, for all its demystification of American self-definition, might ultimately succumb to a “final reflex of conservative reaction” marked by an essentializing, dehistoricized vision of national belonging (19). Yet to my mind, it is also significant that Fitzgerald deliberately marks the process of this final transformation through Nick’s erasure of the “obscene word” on Gatsby’s front steps. By calling attention to Nick’s act, Fitzgerald seems to be suggesting that the crucial turn in the text—Gatsby’s apotheosis into the carrier of the American Dream—takes
place by means of the same mechanism of “vanishing” that lies at the heart of his obscene indeterminacy. If the threat of Gatsby in the text lies precisely in the way in which he “vanishes” from categorization and social or racial signification, then Nick’s erasure of the obscene word stages a similar process, making the obscene word “vanish” in order to cancel out the obscenity of vanishing. Gatsby is purified by this gesture, but the gesture itself reasserts the primacy of indeterminacy in the text. Put “under erasure” in the Derridean sense, Gatsby’s obscenity becomes the absence that allows the text’s ultimate presence to emerge: the presence of generations of Nordic American settlers, mythically united for a moment in Nick’s transhistorical vision of national essence.

Ironically, the same play of absence and presence is evident in the only two other instances in the text of Fitzgerald’s use of the word “obscene.” The first use of the term occurs during the party at Myrtle’s New York apartment, when in response to a question about her affection for her husband Myrtle lets out a “violent and obscene” answer: an answer that nevertheless remains unrepresented in the text (Fitzgerald 1999, 29). A similar but even more telling use of the term appears in a scene excised from the novel’s final version, a scene in which Nick hears a comment Daisy makes to Gatsby at his party:

“We’re together here in your garden, Jay—your beautiful garden,” broke out Daisy suddenly. “It doesn’t seem possible, does it? I can’t believe it’s possible. Will you have somebody look up in the encyclopedia and see if it’s really true. Look it up under G.”

For a moment I thought this was casual chatter—then I realized that she was trying to drown out from us, from herself, a particularly obscene conversation that four women were carrying on at a table just behind.

(Fitzgerald 2000, 85)

Although Fitzgerald would delete this passage from *Gatsby*, it clearly prefigures the extant scene in the final version in which Nick erases “the obscene word” from the steps of Gatsby’s house. As with the latter, Nick’s reference here to “a particularly obscene conversation” is inextricably linked to the problem of Gatsby’s signifying status. Daisy’s effort to make sense of her present by making Gatsby legible and identifiable, by making him signify (“Look it up under G”) is reinterpreted by Nick as an effort to repress, “to drown out from us, from herself, a particularly obscene conversation that four women were carrying on at table just behind.” Gatsby “turns out all right” in this scene precisely because Nick and the reader cannot hear underneath Daisy’s words the “obscene language” that has no place in this text—the language of drunken, sexually- liberated women, of criminals, of the working classes, of immigrants and blacks—all threatening, as we have seen, to the elite white social order that both Nick and the Buchanans inhabit. Daisy’s act
of “whitewashing,” in short, represses Gatsby’s link to the obscene in order to reveal him as someone socially significant and unquestionably white. Yet to drown out the obscene, in this instance or in the ultimate conclusion of *Gatsby*, is also, as Fitzgerald himself was well aware, to foreground the power of the obscene to disrupt and undo normative structures of social, national, and linguistic signification. “We have the vitality left,” claims Fitzgerald to his daughter, but the anxious indeterminacy of his own novel seems to tell another story.

Notes

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1 Undated note by F. Scott Fitzgerald. From the F. Scott Fitzgerald Archive, Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

2 Gatsby’s vanishing during the encounter with Tom in Chapter IV precipitates one of the oddest structural shifts of the narrative, when Nick’s narration suddenly gives way to the voice of Jordan Baker narrating the true story of Gatsby and Daisy’s past. This is the only place in the novel in which the first-person narration is not controlled by Nick, and seems to impugn Nick’s ability to keep his own subject in his sights. Jordan’s momentary control over the text at the end of Chapter IV serves briefly to make Gatsby more intelligible, but her voice, no less than Nick’s, fails ultimately to “correct” Nick’s vision. Jordan remains “incurably dishonest” (Fitzgerald 1995, 63): a “hard, limited person” (84) with her own perceptual blindnesses, as she reveals in the end when she admits that she misread Nick’s own honesty.

3 To be sure, the dash—the mark of graphic attenuation or of a “break” in dialogue or thought; the sign of signification in suspension or in the process of hemorrhaging into silence—is also the most prevalent stylistic mark in the text. “What was that word we—,” Daisy asks (Fitzgerald 1999, 14), the dash performing stylistically what the questionponders. “I just meant—,” George Wilson states (22), as his “voice faded off.” Dashes appear throughout most of the narration and dialogue of the novel, as they do in Fitzgerald’s writings in general; perhaps only Emily Dickinson, among American writers, is more liberal in her use of the dash (see Crumbley 1997). Yet in *The Great Gatsby*, it is Jay Gatsby who most often “speaks” in dashes: “It’s the funniest thing, old sport,” he remarks upon finally finding Daisy in his bedroom, “I can’t—when I try to—” (72). “And she doesn’t understand,” he laments later about Daisy, “She used to be able to understand. We’d sit for hours—” (86). “At least—’ He fumbled with a series of beginnings. “Why, I thought—why, look here, old sport’” (65). Gatsby’s speech, as Nick himself notes, struggles awkwardly to mimic the “old euphemisms” of East Egg; his “old sport” and “Oxford man” represent a painstakingly studied insouciance that, according to Nick, “just missed being absurd” (40). Yet in the midst of Gatsby’s effort to “certify” his social status in language, to lay claim to the terms of WASP social belonging, the repeated appearance of the dash reminds the reader of the attenuation or failure of Gatsby’s effort. Like an obscene word, the dash could be said to work against “the presentable,” marking textual moments of
effacement, moments in which language simply fades into silence. The literal sign of his indeterminacy in the text, the dash emphasizes Gatsby’s absence and presence; it is perhaps telling that Gatsby balances with a “formless grace” on the “dashboard” of his car as he greets Nick one morning (51).

4 In the text, Buchanan alludes carelessly to “‘The Rise of the Coloured Empires’ by this man Goddard”; according to Matthew Bruccoli, “Fitzgerald did not want to provide the correct title and author” (Fitzgerald 1995, 183). However it is interesting to speculate about Buchanan’s “mistake.” “Goddard” may refer to screenwriter and playwright Charles William Goddard, mentioned by Bruccoli as a possible source for the figure of Gatsby himself (see Bruccoli 1981, 184 n.). More likely, Fitzgerald may have been indirectly citing the work of Henry Herbert Goddard, author during the teens and twenties of works on mental deficiency, “the criminal imbecile,” and school training of “defective” and “gifted” children. Goddard was a contributor to the same educational series as Lewis Terman, director of the Stanford/Binet IQ tests. Goddard’s views on gifted and defective behavior bear a striking resemblance to Lothrop Stoddard’s schema of racial types, as well as the latter’s claim that the superior “Nordic” races were being actively threatened by a defective “tide” of non-white peoples.

5 Ironically, Tom makes a similar claim about Daisy when he hesitates to include her in his category of “‘Nordics’” (“This idea is that we’re Nordics. I am and you are and you are and— ’After an infinitesimal hesitation he included Daisy with a slight nod” [Fitzgerald 1999, 14]). As Michaels points out, whiteness, for Tom, operates through a rigid system of inclusion and exclusion, one threatened by ethnic difference and femininity alike; in order for the category to sustain itself it must exclude anyone who isn’t “quite” identifiable.

6 For a discussion of Jewish assimilation in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century, see Brodkin (1998, esp. 103).

7 In a biographical search, “Gatz” appears to be both a Jewish and a Gentile name. As noted, “Gatz” also appears as a germanicized form of the Yiddish “Gets.” Thus the reader of Gatsby is faced with the possibility that Henry Gatz, father of Jay Gatsby, may already be “passing” as Gentile and is thus much more of a significant prototype for his son’s own self-transformation than has previously been acknowledged.

8 The layered complexity of Gatsby’s name is consistent with other names in the text that emphasize masquerade and pretense: for example, Mrs. Chrystie, who accompanies Hubert Auerbach to Gatsby’s party, “whose name, more than likely, suggests the famous Christie Minstrels of the early nineteenth century. Mrs. Chrystie masquerades as a wife, and while she wears the name of her husband, she pretends to be someone she is not” (Crim and Houston 1989, 83). There is also “the prince of something whom we called Duke” at Gatsby’s party (Fitzgerald 1999, 51), as well as the novel Simon Called Peter that Myrtle Wilson keeps in her apartment (25). Most telling, for our purposes, is the name “Meyer Wolfshiem,” whose odd spelling has rarely been noticed by readers (see Michaels [1995], above), but which represents a marked variant from the German “Wolfsheim.” One could argue—as does Edmund Wilson when he “corrects” the text for his 1941 edition (see Bruccoli’s...
“Introduction,” Fitzgerald 1995, liv)—that Fitzgerald, a notoriously careless speller, was simply in error in his spelling of “Wolfshiem.” However, one could also see this spelling as deliberately emphasizing the same ethnic uncertainty as the name “James Gatz.” “Wolfshiem” is a name that sounds and looks “foreign” (and, in this context, “Jewish”), but it does not conform to a Germanic (or German-Jewish) origin. It is a name that troubles, that confuses; a name that masks rather than reveals identity.

9 Clinton Stoddard Burr quoted in Higham (1973, 273), whose work on American nativism offers the most sustained analysis to date of the social and ideological positions adopted by intellectuals of the 1920s.

10 Fitzgerald’s youthful correspondence is filled with similar sentiments. In an undated letter to Thomas Boyd, he writes, “All these ‘marvellous’ places like Majorca turn out to have some one enormous disadvantage—bugs, lepers, Jews, consumptives, or philistines” (F. Scott Fitzgerald Archive, Special Collections, Princeton University Library). For a discussion of how Fitzgerald’s attitudes toward ethnic and racial difference changed over the course of his life, see Margolies (1997).

11 Undated note to Scottie from F. Scott Fitzgerald Archive, Special Collections, Princeton University Library. In a letter dated 17 November 1936, Fitzgerald further explicates this typology: “Park Avenue girls are hard, aren’t they? Usually the daughters of ‘up-and-coming’ men and, in a way, the inevitable offspring of that type” (Fitzgerald 1965, 17).

12 Undated note from F. Scott Fitzgerald Archive, Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

13 Ironically, it is a form of whiteness that illuminates this obscenity: Nick first notices the word because it “stood out clearly in the moonlight” (Fitzgerald 1995, 188). Yet while the moon may make visible Gatsby’s link to “off-white” obscenity, moonlight also serves the opposite purpose several lines later when it illuminates the “essential” vision of Gatsby and the Dutch explorers that lies underneath the “inessential houses” of Long Island Sound (189). In short, the moon, like the sun and other objects in the firmament—notably, the eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg—is a force of both illumination and obscurity in this text.

14 It is interesting, in this context, to consider the striking parallels between this scene in Gatsby and a similar scene in J.D. Salinger’s The Catcher in the Rye, where Holden Caulfield’s fantasy of going West and becoming a deaf-mute, thus rendering himself both unintelligible and uncomprehending, is shattered when he sees an obscenity scrawled on the wall of his sister Phoebe’s school. Unlike Gatsby, Catcher makes this obscenity both literal and visible—“Fuck you”—as if to mock Holden’s fantasy of disappearance into indeterminacy. Moreover, Catcher emphasizes this shattering by repeatedly restaging Holden’s encounter with the obscene word (in the stairwell, in the museum) until he finally is forced to acknowledge that “if I ever die, and they stick me in a cemetery, and I have a tombstone and all, it’ll say ‘Holden Caulfield’ on it, and then what year I was born and what year I died, and then right under that it’ll say ‘Fuck you’” (1951, 264). Like Gatsby, however, the encounter with the obscene word in Catcher occurs at precisely the same moment in the text, preceding the novel’s final scene of redemption and reconciliation between Holden and Phoebe. To this extent, both texts seem to be emphasizing the transitional necessity
of a confrontation with the obscene in their efforts to assert a final, redemptive vision.

15 Michaels makes a related point, focusing on the bond between Tom and Nick that enables this lineage ultimately to emerge: "the differences the novel works to establish between Tom and Nick... are in the end—to use Gatsby's phrase—'just personal.' Ironizing Tom's Nordicism, Nick nevertheless extends it" (1995, 41). In its final celebration of a "Nordicist" worldview, Michaels writes, *The Great Gatsby* is "the most obvious example" of a new literary definition of "Americanism" in the 1920s: "Americanism would now be understood as something more than and different from the American citizenship that so many aliens had so easily achieved" (47).

**Works Cited**


