The Usable Past: Reading Within and Without *The Great Gatsby*

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Thank you, Philip Davies and the Eccles Centre, for the invitation to speak here today and for the support you’ve shown for my work, and thanks, too, to Joe Street, for all your hard work, and special thanks for not making me get you a title in time for the program. In one sense I’ve always known what I would like to talk to you about tonight, because it is the project I’ve been working on since 2009 at least: understanding *The Great Gatsby* in its cultural and historical contexts.

For the fun of it, I looked up plenary, thinking it had probably accrued more meanings beyond the familiar ones of an assembly or a speech given to a full assembly, and discovered to my dismay that the first definition — the primary definition — given by the *OED* is: ‘A. adj. 1: Full, complete, or perfect; not deficient in any element or respect; absolute.’ So that was horrifying. And then I realized something else: that I would be delivering my full, complete, perfect, and absolute remarks about *The Great Gatsby* on the exact 90th anniversary of its publication. It was 10 April 1925 – precisely 90 years ago today.

In November 1924, as he was completing *The Great Gatsby*, Scott Fitzgerald wrote to his editor, Max Perkins, commenting: ‘I am confused at what you say about Gertrude Stein. I thought it was one purpose of critics & publishers to educate the public up to original work. The first people who risked Conrad certainly didn’t do it as a commercial venture. Did the evolution of startling work into accepted work cease twenty years ago?’

Twelve years later, at what would prove the nadir of his life and career, Fitzgerald wrote to a reader: ‘I trust you’ll understand that I don’t mind criticism a bit – the critics are always wrong (including you!) but they are always right in the sense that they make one re-examine one’s artistic conscience.’

What are critics for? As far as Fitzgerald was concerned, critics are meant to be advocates for originality, and they should help clarify a writer’s

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2 *Life in Letters*, 301.
artistic conscience, but they are inevitably wrong. This may seem a bit harsh, but to be fair to him, he had good reason to think so. It is a chastening experience to be a literary critic and read what most writers have to say about us. Fitzgerald certainly had plenty to say about the ‘boob critics,’ as he called them in another letter, following Mencken, but he also knew perfectly well how much he learned from critics, and that is the subject of my talk today.\(^3\) It turns out that being a critic may not be quite as useless an occupation as we are so frequently told.

Thinking about Fitzgerald’s relation to the critics, for reasons that will become clear, has prompted me to ask: what would happen if we tried to restore pleasure, or even beauty, to literary criticism? As I have written elsewhere, argument and analysis are not coterminous, and criticism can employ the techniques and forms of literature: not only narrative but also figuration, implication, mimesis, trope. Such a project would imagine a critical form that is sympathetic to the art it explores, and can still be original, rigorous, and scrupulous. One version of the attempt to forge a more aesthetically and formally adventurous kind of literary criticism, to expand it beyond the bounds of argumentation, is certainly what I tried to do in my book about *Gatsby*; and so today I thought it might be worthwhile to explore the further contexts that informed my book as background, and bring them at last, poor belated ghosts, to the foreground.

After *Gatsby* came out, Fitzgerald wrote to Edmund Wilson complaining that none of the novel’s initial readers, not even the most enthusiastic, had any idea what the book was about. But we know, now: it’s the Great American novel, it’s about the American dream, it’s about the roaring twenties. And then if we’re careful we explain that the phrase ‘American Dream’ wasn’t coined until 1931, but still, especially for students, we recycle a few stock examples to stand in synecdochally for the 1920s: Green lights! Fast cars! Flapper dresses! The Charleston!

*The Great Gatsby* is set in 1922, Fitzgerald began thinking seriously about it in the summer of 1923, he wrote it across most of 1924, and finished it that October; it was published, as I said, in April 1925. Cultural contexts become pertinent to the novel only within a very specific two-year window:

\(^3\) *Life in Letters*, 108.
anything that came after 1925 has to make a different kind of argument for its relevance. For my research I was asking: what meanings were available to Fitzgerald as he wrote the novel in 1924, and reimagined the very recent past of 1922?

To take just one example, the symbolic meanings of the novel’s iconic green light have become an American cliché: green for hope, spring, envy, the colour of money. But would a green light have meant ‘go’ to Fitzgerald and his audience – would it have meant ‘go’ to Jay Gatsby, or is that a later meaning that has been anachronistically projected back on to the novel? In 1922, New York traffic lights were, in fact, brand new. The Fitz Kenns arrived in Manhattan September 1922, and moved to Great Neck, which inspired West Egg, that October; two months later, in December 1922, 23-foot-high ornamental bronze traffic signal towers opened on Fifth Avenue. They did not use electricity: each tower was topped by a small room in which a policeman sat, using a lever to open and close glass windows on all sides, displaying different colored signals: red, yellow, green. But the lights were confusing. Although the railroads had long used signal colors consistently, and everyone knew the code (red for stop, yellow for caution, green for proceed) the Fifth Avenue traffic lights used the same colors, but differently, and the signals were confusing.

In the autumn of 1922 a letter was sent to the New York Times complaining that on the new signal towers the green light seemed to indicate ‘a cross movement or a side-shoot of some kind,’ while yellow seemed to mean proceed.4 Things only got worse. By 1924 New Yorkers were demanding ‘traffic signal uniformity’: ‘At Broadway there was a green light on the tower, and for once I remembered that green in this city when displayed on a tower means stop, so I stopped, only to find that when green is displayed to the east and west it means “go.”’ Another letter-writer interpreted the signals differently: ‘our signal system provides an orange light for go, a green signal really for stop … and a red signal which may mean stop, but is actually taken as a “getaway” signal.’5 Accidents were the inevitable result. The symbolic import of the accident that culminates the plot of Gatsby is neither an anachronism nor Fitzgerald’s pure invention; it was, rather, the obvious conclusion that an impressionistic imagination drew when looking

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5 New York Times, September 1, 1924.
at a symbolically rich jazz-age world. Gatsby’s confusion is the confusion of the world; the question ‘what does the green light mean?’ is not a question reflecting our anachronistic ignorance, but rather one indicating the uncertainty of new modern systems of meaning to jazz-age Americans. The green light thus becomes a symbol for Gatsby’s difficulty in navigating his world, his uncertainty about where he is being given permission to go.

Green lights are just one example of iconic aspects of the text that prove to have different historical meanings in 1922 from the ones we think we know. Similarly, American women like Daisy Buchanan and Jordan Baker were not wearing knee-length dresses in 1922; women’s hemlines were nearly to the ankle that year. Nor were they dancing the Charleston, which was not a dance craze until the summer of 1925, months after the novel was published. Instead, the big dance of 1922 was the shimmy, made famous by Gilda Gray, whose understudy one of the girls dancing at Gatsby’s first party is rumoured, incorrectly, to be.6

My point is that all of these meanings were still primary when Fitzgerald wrote the novel and when it was received, and they had no way of knowing where history was going. In *Gatsby,* of course, the past is irrecoverable. But we are trying to discover what James called a ‘visitable past.’ In his 1918 essay ‘On Creating a Usable Past,’ Van Wyck Brooks argued that we should ‘approach our literature from the point of view not of the successful fact but of the creative impulse,’ to ‘throw it into an entirely new focus. What emerges then is the desire, the aspiration, the struggle, the tentative endeavor, and the appalling obstacles our life has placed before them. Which immediately casts over the spiritual history of America a significance that, for us, it has never had before.’7 A ‘usable criticism,’ Brooks argued, ‘would discover, invent a usable past.’8

For Brooks and his colleagues in the Seven Arts movement, including a critic called Paul Rosenfeld to whom I’ll return, this was a specifically American project, a nationalist encounter with our spiritual heritage. Jay Gatsby’s fundamental belief is that history doesn’t matter. *The Great Gatsby* is a novel

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8 Brooks, 339.
dedicated to the proposition that he is wrong, that history is determinative. Gatsby will not be brought to believe that his dream might be dead: but we could put it more bluntly. Gatsby seems quite incapable of changing his mind.

The novel is, in one sense, about the failure of the education of Gatsby’s imaginative life: his imaginative life is not susceptible to education. This makes him admirable and monstrous, an arrested adolescent. It also makes him stupid, which nobody likes to talk about. But from what little direct experience we have of him, Jay Gatsby comes across as distinctly humorless, not to mention quite obsessive. I’ve said before that in a different kind of story Jay Gatsby would be a stalker, complete with his unsettling collection of photographs and cuttings about the ex-girlfriend whose loss he will not accept. Usually this annoys several people in the audience quite a bit, but it’s true.

Another way of saying this is that critical thinking is not Gatsby’s strong suit. And this is precisely what Scott Fitzgerald had been accused of by every critic he respected in the four years between his arrival upon the literary scene with the publication of This Side of Paradise in March 1920 and his settling down to serious work on The Great Gatsby in May 1924. To offer one familiar example now (I’ll offer several more, much less familiar, examples in a moment), in 1922, Edmund Wilson published an essay about Fitzgerald, in which he famously wrote: ‘Nor is he in the least stupid, but, on the contrary, exhilaratingly clever. Yet there is a symbolic truth in […] the idea] that Fitzgerald has been left with a jewel which he doesn’t know quite what to do with. For he has been given imagination without intellectual control of it; he has been given the desire for beauty without an aesthetic ideal; and he has been given a gift of expression without very many ideas to express.’ Fitzgerald later called Wilson his intellectual conscience: if so, in this review his intellectual conscience was giving him homework. Fitzgerald had three tasks, according to Wilson: he needed to demonstrate intellectual control, locate an aesthetic ideal, and get some more ideas. And if there is any critical consensus today about what The Great Gatsby demonstrates, surely it is its near-perfect marriage of control, aesthetics, and ideas. Less noticed, I think, is that those ideas are partly about control and aesthetics, and about their role in American art.

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novel Fitzgerald produced is about the force of vision and will that is necessary to sustain any impossible project. For Fitzgerald, that impossible project was to write the novel that was being demanded of him, to find the control, the vision, the critical intelligence that would take him from a clever writer to a great one. If *The Great Gatsby* were merely concerned with the failure of Gatsby’s vision, it would be only, as many critics have deemed it, an elegy, Nick’s ‘In Memoriam JGG.’ But because Fitzgerald links Gatsby’s vision with the American experiment, it becomes not Gatsby’s failed spiritual quest but Fitzgerald’s successful aesthetic one, in which he appropriates the past in order to redefine the present and conquer the future.

Wilson was not alone in accusing Fitzgerald of failing to live up to his potential. As anyone who has spent any time on Fitzgerald’s reception knows, that was not just the leitmotif of the early reception of Fitzgerald, it was the alpha and the omega of the entire contemporary response to his work. The idea that Fitzgerald was not fulfilling his genius was not a theme that emerged after his decline in the 1930s, but from the moment that he emerged into celebrity in 1920 with *This Side of Paradise*, through *The Beautiful and Damned* and on through the end of his life. It shaped a great majority of the response to nearly everything he ever published. ‘So much potential, but when will he realize it?’ They said it after *The Great Gatsby* was published: ‘One finishes *The Great Gatsby* with a feeling of regret, not for the fate of the people in the book, but for Mr. Fitzgerald. When “This Side of Paradise” was published, Mr. Fitzgerald was hailed as a young man of promise, which he certainly appeared to be. But the promise, like so many, seems likely to go unfulfilled.’

Fitzgerald was constantly accused of untapped potential, at a moment in American history when American critics were deeply concerned that American art itself would prove unrealized and unrealizable, a false dawn. It’s a critical commonplace that in *This Side of Paradise* Fitzgerald wrote a Künstlerroman, dramatizing his own coming of age as an artist; in *The Beautiful and Damned* he dramatized his own fears over being nothing but a commercial sellout; in *Tender is the Night* he dramatized his fear of disintegration and disappearance. These are all critical clichés. Far less commented upon is the fact that each of those books also tells the story of an encounter with criticism, of a coming into criticism.

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10 *Dallas Morning News* May 10 1925.
But it is equally true, and rarely (if ever) remarked upon, that Fitzgerald also dramatized his own aesthetic and critical evolution in *The Great Gatsby*. We tend to treat *Gatsby* as an exceptionalist text about an exceptionalist vision – but *Gatsby* is a story that thematizes the idea of untapped potential, on both an individual and a national level, while countering that sense of failed promise with the suggestion that aesthetic potential can be fulfilled, on both an individual and a national level.

*The Great Gatsby* is about the art of the possible. Although it is another critical commonplace that Jay Gatsby stands as a representative figure for Fitzgerald, one of the important distinctions between author and character is that Gatsby is a fetishist: he worships objects that have no intrinsic value, and stand as a screen between the viewer and the void behind them. Fitzgerald is regularly accused of having been a fetishist, a materialist in thrall to luxury, who couldn’t see beyond it. Hemingway had a lot to do with promulgating this canard, but Fitzgerald was not a fetishist, he was a symbolist. He loved things that had meanings beyond themselves: he had a profoundly metaphorical, even allegorical imagination.

Gatsby’s great failure is that he believes in the reality of the mirage: he thinks it promises an oasis in the desert, and so rushes out and builds his Caesar’s Palace. But Fitzgerald was never fooled by the mirage into thinking it was an oasis. He believed in the mirage, to be sure: but he believed in its value as a mirage, understanding that a real mirage is, in its way, more miraculous than a real oasis. What Fitzgerald reminds us is that the potential has an imaginative magic the real can never have. And his literary and historical brilliance was to wed this aesthetic or epistemological sense of the aspirational to the political aspirations of the American experiment.

The possible becomes not the future, but the past, in the novel’s famous closing passages, because it is that which we have already imagined and failed to realize: the present is only the future manqué. The real punctuates the possible: it doesn’t define it, but it pierces and shapes it. The potential is the excess, the atmospheric pressure that surrounds the real. The metaphysical, symbolic potential of objects, the supplemental meanings that existence seems to promise, are what lead Gatsby astray, but they are also what the artist must be able to register: Fitzgerald knew that enchanted objects give life a grandeur it doesn’t otherwise have. Gatsby’s responsiveness is an artistic measure, a sensitivity to the symbolic, sacramental possibilities of one’s environment.
In 1934, Fitzgerald wrote an introduction to a reprint of *The Great Gatsby*, which had been published almost a decade before, discussing the ideas that went into the novel. He had been reading Joseph Conrad while drafting *Gatsby*, he said, and then added defensively: ‘and I had recently been kidded half haywire by critics who felt that my material was such as to preclude all dealing with mature persons in a mature world. But, my God! It was my material, and it was all I had to deal with.’

This is a famous statement, but I’m not certain it’s ever been taken entirely at its word. So for the rest of this lecture I want to consider a few of the critical materials that went into *Gatsby*, and the role that anxieties about immaturity and the shaping of one’s material played in its composition. Fitzgerald’s ‘material,’ as he always called it, warrants much more scrutiny, and it left more traces, than we are encouraged to think. But we have to spend some time and energy treasure-hunting. This effort also seems to me warranted not least because it was Fitzgerald’s own method for gathering material: part of his genius was the ‘responsiveness’ that he grants to Jay Gatsby, ‘a heightened sensitivity to the promises of life, as if he were related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away.’

Fitzgerald had a heightened sensitivity to the symbolic, lyrical possibilities of the material world around him: but he also had a heightened sensitivity to criticism. He was following literary conversations closely, and especially scrutinized his own reviews, as a simple scan of the scrapbooks he kept (now housed in the archives at Princeton University) demonstrates. In particular, he clearly registered that accusation of immaturity, of unfulfilled promise, with which the critics hounded him. By 1923 he’d published two novels, two short story collections, and a play, in three years, all of which received a barrage of critical responses harping on his immaturity, calling him juvenile, callow, naïve, acknowledging his talent, but constantly complaining that he was yet to fulfill his promise.

In the interests of of time I’ll offer just three quick, characteristic criticisms that Fitzgerald’s second novel, *The Beautiful and Damned*, received in March 1922, just before his ambitions turned toward *Gatsby*:

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‘This Side of Paradise’ had a mental honesty about it... It was sincerely callow. For that reason it was charming and important. ‘The Beautiful and Damned’ has a semblance of sophistication which is just as callow but which, somehow, doesn’t seem so charming and so important. Mr. Fitzgerald is still too young to be a good picker of other men’s minds.13

There’s no restraining Fitzgerald when he gets into the swing of his story. He may be prolix at times, and we are sure that he is, and he may utter things that are to us the bleats of an immature contemplation ... 14

His chief merit, however, is that with him there has stepped into the ranks of the young novelists a satirist; so rare an apparition in this—indeed, in any—country, that he ought to be rocked and dandled and nursed into maturity.15

And so on. What’s worth noting here is that the accusation of immaturity is always countered against the maturity they believe should ensue, the talent they want to nurture; but immaturity became a definite and consistent trope in the reception, and The Great Gatsby is, in a very straightforward way, responding to what they said. But what we think they said and what they actually said are not self-identical. Instead, we tend to take a few representative criticisms and recycle them.

On 21 September 1922, the day after the Fitzgeralds arrived in Manhattan, an advertisement appeared in the New York Tribune explaining the new concept of public relations and popular opinion. ‘They say bobbed hair is going out of style; they say sleeves are to be tight and long; they say that a certain drama is the season’s best play; they say A’s new book is a milestone in the making of American literature... Advertising is an intentional molding of public opinion.’16 It is worth pausing a moment to remind ourselves of current conversations about literature in America in 1922, bearing in mind the widespread national self-consciousness this advertisement suggests about the

16 New York Tribune September 21 1922
‘making’ of American literature: it is something transitively, contingently under construction, like the Holland Tunnel, which was also begun that autumn. In 1922 the relationship of American letters to European culture remained quite defensive and anxious. That year D H Lawrence published his *Studies in Classic American Literature*, in which he dismissed American literature as ‘a false dawn,’ and many in American literary circles were inclined, anxiously, to agree: ‘The real American day hasn’t begun yet,’ Lawrence wrote. ‘Or at least, not yet sunrise. So far it has been the false dawn. That is, in the progressive American consciousness there has been the one dominant desire, to do away with the old thing. Do away with masters, exalt the will of the people.’

Many of the people forming public opinion whom I discovered in the course of my research, or more properly rediscovered, came from Fitzgerald’s scrapbooks, hundreds of clippings he saved that were never carefully examined, and the voices in them had sometimes completely dropped out of the story of the genesis of *The Great Gatsby*. One of them was a man named Burton Rascoe, the literary editor of the *New York Tribune*, and a friendly acquaintance and drinking companion of the Fitzgeralds. He was also an eyewitness, writing a literary gossip column called ‘A Bookman’s Day Book’ for the *Tribune*, which often mentioned the exploits of the era’s golden couple, and he became an important figure in my study into the origins of *Gatsby*. In 1922 Rascoe offered a pithy summary of his own assessment of the potential for a genuine American art to emerge from the materialistic, philistine backwater that most of the intelligentsia considered America to be: There were only two things left for a genuine artist in America to do, Rascoe observed in the summer of 1922 – stay drunk or commit suicide.

In his influential and important research into Fitzgerald’s intellectual and cultural contexts, Ronald Berman uses Charles and Mary Beard’s 1927 *The Rise of American Civilization* and its faith that the moment of American supremacy was at hand, to suggest that this was the ideological milieu within which Fitzgerald composed *Gatsby*. But that’s already retroactive: Berman observes that the Beards’ book came out ‘two years later,’ but that’s two years after publication. It’s three years after completion, four years after commencement, five years since Fitzgerald began formulating it and five years

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after he set the novel. Using 1927 as a context for framing 1922 is already distorting our ideas about the cultural milieu that produced *Gatsby*: 1927 is the milieu into which it was received, but not necessarily the milieu from which it arose. The stirring sense of an American ascendancy remained very much emergent and inchoate in the year in which Fitzgerald conceived and set his novel, and over the year or so of its composition. Contemporary writers like Charles and Mary Beard and Lothrop Stoddard are used by many critics now as a synecdoche for the variously nationalist and nativist conversations that by the 1950s would consolidate into the tenets of American exceptionalist rhetoric.

But the demands for American exceptionalism in the early 1920s were not purely domestic and jingoistic. In 1922 British literary readers were demanding American exceptionalism, too, insisting that American art and letters must justify themselves by producing something original. That November the *Tribune* commented on a brief article called ‘An English Impression of American Literature’ that had recently appeared in *The Bookman*, demanding ‘Americanism’ in American literature:

> when American writers come before us, it is only natural that we should ask what it is that they have which is peculiar to themselves. If they have nothing peculiar, if what they offer us might just as well have come from London or Paris or Munich, they stand under strong suspicion of not being in touch with the life they claim to portray: they are under suspicion of having merely imitated other writers... Since the Civil War it has been increasingly probable that any good American writer would be distinctively American.19

Our reliance upon historical periodization tends to leave us thinking of American literature as something that had more or less consolidated ‘by the 1920s’: but in the summer of 1921, Scott and Zelda had taken their first trip abroad, during which Fitzgerald wrote to Edmund Wilson: ‘You may have spoken in jest about N. Y. as the capitol of culture but in 25 years it will be just as London is now. Culture follows money & all the refinements of aestheticism can’t stave off its change of seat (Christ! what a metaphor). We will be the Romans in the next generation as the English are now.’20 That letter and

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19 *New York Tribune* November 12 1922.
20 *Life in Letters*, 47.
the Beards’ *American Civilization* are equidistant from the composition of *Gatsby*: why privilege the later over the earlier, when Fitzgerald was aware of the earlier but not of the later? It’s also worth remembering that Fitzgerald was very much a contemporary novelist: he always wrote about the precise moment in which he lived.

There is abundant evidence that in 1922 London continued to be the presumptive capitol of literature in English, for American literati as well as the British. But the centre of literary power was just beginning to show signs of shifting west. That spring, Burton Rascoe wrote a column recounting Sinclair Lewis’s reaction to a recent trip he’d taken to England, and the attitudes to American literature he encountered there. Lewis was now, Rascoe reported,

> convinced that the only literature to be produced during the next few years is to be written by Americans... Europeans are charming and gracious, he said, ‘but they haven’t any pep. They are disillusioned and disinterested. They have no life, no vitality left in them. Over here there is life, vigor, adventure and experiments... England can no longer be the “mother country” to American literature. We are of age now, intellectually and literarily... English writers and the English public are woefully ignorant of what has been written in America. Almost any Englishman feels he is qualified to dismiss American literature with a sneer, but if you ask him to name some American authors he has heard only of Upton Sinclair, Jack London...’

That summer Ernest Boyd, an Irish critic living in New York, also friends with Fitzgerald and Rascoe, had similarly returned from abroad to report: ‘the situation in London with regard to American literature is highly amusing. “Sinclair Lewis has got them all stirred up,” he said. “They don’t know whether to begin to regard American literature seriously and they are much upset about it. They ask questions, anxious to be reassured that American literature is a joke, so they won’t have to bother about reading it. You can’t find anything except the worst class of American fiction on the bookstalls. Jonathan Cape keeps on bringing out American writers, such as Hergesheimer and Mencken, but the majority of English intellectuals think he is crazy for doing so.”’

By the autumn of 1922, however, Rascoe was

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22 *New York Tribune* August 20 1922.
reporting that a recent surge of books including Lewis’s *Babbitt* seemed to be changing the English tune: ‘American literature, for the first time, it seems, is being treated with seriousness and respect by English critics. The recent reviews of the novels of Joseph Hergesheimer, Floyd Dell, Newton Fuessle, Scott Fitzgerald, Stephen Benet, Harry Leon Wilson and others are peppered with the adjectives of praise.’

Fitzgerald started thinking about writing *The Great Gatsby* in the precise moment when this shift began to occur: and his novel responds to that shift. In 1922 and 1923 he began for the first time locating his thinking about America within a burgeoning cultural nationalism that was seeking an authentic literature, but which it was not at all confident it would find. Fitzgerald’s own half-anxious, half-hopeful ambitions of greatness, he came to see, were also his nation’s. On 15 July 1923, in the midst of Fitzgerald’s intermittent work on his novel and many parties, Burton Rascoe reported in the *Tribune* that at midnight a week earlier, Scott and Zelda had joined a party with him, during which ‘Fitzgerald showed us some card tricks he had learned from Edmund Wilson, Jr., and told us the plot of “the great American novel” which he is just writing (and asked me not to give it away).’ Rascoe’s tone is facetious, even sarcastic; he had no expectation that Fitzgerald was really writing ‘the Great American novel.’ If only Rascoe had given it away, we might know more about how Fitzgerald’s conception of the great American novel changed over the course of the fifteen months that he worked on it: but what we learn from rediscovering this lost snippet of literary conversation is that Fitzgerald was not only talking about his ambitions for *Gatsby* as ‘the great American novel’ after it was finished; from the beginning, this was his ambition. He was setting out to write the great American novel, in the summer of 1923, in a milieu that was unconvinced such a concept wasn’t a category error.

As he settled into composition, Fitzgerald was still joking about American inferiority, jesting to Tom Boyd, ‘Well, I shall write a novel better than any novel ever written in America and become par excellence the best second-rater in the world.’ But by the time he was finishing it, his ambitions for it had consolidated: he wrote to Max Perkins in August 1924, ‘I think my novel is about the best American novel ever written.’ Fitzgerald wasn’t the only one

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23 *New York Tribune* November 12 1922.
24 *New York Tribune* July 15 1922.
26 *Life in Letters*, 80.
whose hopes were rising in 1924. That spring, as Fitzgerald sailed for Europe, he read a book by the critic Paul Rosenfeld called *Port of New York* about the bourgeoning American art scene; it listed many rising American artists, but did not include Scott Fitzgerald in its field of consideration. Just before he joked to Tom Boyd that writing the best American novel would make him the best second-rater in the world, Fitzgerald commented on the book: ‘Paul Rosenfeld is quite a person … & *The Port of New York* is quite an adventure in our nervous critical enthusiasm.’

I mentioned Rosenfeld at the beginning of this lecture and promised to return to him. Rosenfeld was a hugely popular and influential critic during the 1920s and 1930s, but died in 1946 in virtual obscurity. He was famous for producing ‘impressionistic’ criticism; it was also described as ‘romantic criticism,’ which to our critical ears probably sounds suspiciously like an oxymoron. Rosenfeld was unapologetically subjective, his imagery rapturous and lyrical. When Rosenfeld died in 1948, Edmund Wilson wrote that Rosenfeld ‘when I first knew him – in 1922, I think – was one of the most exciting critics of the “American Renaissance”… Paul Rosenfeld seemed the spirit of a new and more fortunate age, whose cosmopolitanism was not self-conscious and which did not have to be on the defensive about its interest in the variety of life. [His first book] brought into range a whole fascinating world, coherent though international, of personality, poetics, texture, mood. Paul Rosenfeld at that time enjoyed a prestige of the same kind as Mencken’s,’ Wilson added, although it was not so widely registered. But Wilson also complained, around the same time, that ‘the purely impressionist critic approaches the whole of literature as an exhibit of belletristic jewels, and he can only write a rhapsodic catalogue.’ Rosenfeld was known for ‘the romantic and impressionistic school’ of criticism ‘that he enthusiastically represented,’ wrote Wilson in 1950, disapprovingly. Fitzgerald, too, was (and continues to be) often accused of being merely a rhapsodist, someone enthusing over a jewel he owned but didn’t quite understand.

27 *Life in Letters*, 69.
Less than a month after *The Great Gatsby* was published, Rosenfeld released a collection of essays called *Men Seen*. This time, his list of promising American artists included Scott Fitzgerald. He was complimentary, but agreed with the critical consensus that Fitzgerald had yet to fulfill his promise:

Fitzgerald has not yet crossed the line that bounds the field of art. He has seen his material from its own point of view, and he has seen it completely from without. But he has never done what the artist does: seen it simultaneously from within and without; and loved it and judged it, too…

There is good reason to believe that Fitzgerald paid close attention to this essay: to begin with, he recommended it in a letter to a reader soon after *Gatsby* was published, and he underlined his inscribed copy of the book, focusing particularly on metaphors. More important for our purposes, he also underscored Rosenfeld’s charges about his attitudes toward his ‘material,’ a term that became a touchstone for Fitzgerald, to which he would return defensively, touchily, frustratedly, again and again, in public work such as his 1926 essay ‘How to Waste Material – A Note on my Generation,’ which was a review of Hemingway’s *In Our Time*, and in private, such as a letter he wrote to his friend John Peale Bishop just before *Gatsby* came out, merrily hailing his friend’s latest letter as proof that an authentic American literature was finally emerging: ‘I am glad that at last Americans are producing letters of their own. The climax was wonderful and the exquisite irony of the “sincerely yours” has only been equalled in the work of those two masters Flaubert and Ferber … Write me the opinion you may be pleased to form of my chef d’oeuvre + others’ opinion. Please! I think it’s great but because it deals with much debauched materials, quick-deciders like Rascoe may mistake it for Chambers. To me it’s fascinating. I never get tired of it…’

Of Fitzgerald’s material, Rosenfeld wrote: ‘The utmost that can be charged against F. Scott Fitzgerald is that too oftentimes his best material eludes him. Of the ultimate value of said material there is no dispute.’

That Rosenfeld’s opinion mattered to Fitzgerald is clear from a famous letter he wrote to Edmund Wilson soon after *Gatsby*’s publication, complaining that

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33 The first sentence of the essay is underlined in pencil: Fitzgerald’s copy of *Men Seen* is available in the Fitzgerald archives at Princeton University.
no one, ‘including Mencken,’ who notoriously dismissed *Gatsby* as a ‘glorified anecdote,’ had any idea what his novel was actually about:

> Without making any invidious comparisons between Class A and Class C, if my novel is an anecdote so is *The Brothers Karamazoff*. From one angle the latter could be reduced into a detective story. However the letters from you and Mencken have compensated me for the fact that of all the reviews, even the most enthusiastic, not one had the slightest idea what the book was about and for the even more depressing fact that it was in comparison with the others a financial failure (after I’d turned down fifteen thousand for the serial rights!) I wonder what Rosenfeld thought of it.\(^{34}\)

Fitzgerald had long followed Mencken’s literary advice, and scholarship about Mencken’s influence on Fitzgerald abounds. But the fact that Rosenfeld’s opinion was one Fitzgerald sought has dropped out of the conversation. Instead, Mencken, Wilson, and the Beards come to substitute for a whole host of complex, specific conversations and conditions to which Fitzgerald was responding, in which Rosenfeld played a forgotten but significant role.

Before long Fitzgerald learned what Rosenfeld thought, because he received a letter, which he kept in his scrapbook:

> *The Great Gatsby* would have given me a diving rock better than any I had. It’s beautifully done, breezy throughout like Daisy’s sitting-room. And extraordinarily American, like ice cream soda with arsenic flavoring, or jazzmusic in a fever-dream... There were hints, to be sure, that [Nick] too was a Great Gatsby who learned vicariously. But really, Mr. F. Scott, the story is unfolded with all the suavity of the late H. James. And the writing! ... The book felt like a dawn.\(^{35}\)

When Rosenfeld has been recalled at all in Fitzgerald scholarship, he has been taken to task for not realizing that Fitzgerald was about to publish a novel that did just what he demanded in *Men Seen*, viewing his material, as an artist does, from within and without. Several of these essays, including at least two by one of the most prominent Fitzgerald scholars, quote Rosenfeld, criticizing him for not realizing that Fitzgerald was producing in *Gatsby* just the novel Rosenfeld wanted.

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\(^{34}\) *A Life in Letters*, 109.

Critics often observe that the scene in which Nick Carraway imagines himself both inside and outside Myrtle Wilson’s raucous party, a watcher on the street looking up, is the moment at which Carraway can be identified as an artist-figure in the novel. ‘Yet high over the city our line of yellow windows,’ Nick famously reflects, ‘must have contributed their share of human secrecy to the casual watcher in the darkening streets, and I was him too, looking up and wondering. I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life.’ The standard critical reading of this passage from *Gatsby* is that in it Fitzgerald articulates his conception of the necessary dual perspective of the artist, as in this representative example:

An artist more than a participant, Nick is always an outsider, a voyeur, looking through windows … only half-there at any moment, the other half watching and transforming the scene: ‘Yet high over the city our line of yellow windows must have contributed their share of human secrecy to the casual watcher in the darkening streets, and I was him too, looking up and wondering. I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life.’

As Laura Barrett’s entirely typical reading shows, it is this passage specifically that is routinely cited as the moment in *Gatsby* in which Fitzgerald articulated an *ars poetica*, the moment that we see Nick as an artist. But no one notices that it was Rosenfeld who articulated the idea, in relation to Scott Fitzgerald, that this is how a genuine artist should view his material.

Even the scholars who cite Rosenfeld in discussing Fitzgerald’s achievement of artistry in the novel fail to notice that Fitzgerald’s image of the artist in this passage quotes verbatim Rosenfeld’s 1925 description of what the artist must do. As recently as 2013, Jackson Bryer complained that Rosenfeld and other critics ‘chastised [Fitzgerald] for having seen his material “from its own point of view … competely from without” rather than doing “what the artist does: seen it simultaneously from within and without; and loved it and judged it, too … It is ironic that Rosenfeld’s piece,’ Bryer added, ‘appeared shortly after the publication of *The Great Gatsby*, a novel that is now regarded as a masterpiece of American literature precisely because of the sort of depth and resonances

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that they found lacking in Fitzgerald’s fiction.” It is also ironic that Bryer, a critic who knows *Gatsby* backwards and forwards, did not recall in writing these words Nick Carraway’s famous image of the watcher at the window, simultaneously within and without the scene, loving it, and judging it, too.

This blind spot stretches back at least to 1965, when Henry Dan Piper walked right up to the connection and still apparently didn’t see it. Piper quotes the same passage from *Gatsby*, Carraway at the window, the watcher within and without, and then adds a gloss:

> ‘Yet high over the city our line of yellow windows must have contributed their share of human secrecy to the casual watcher in the darkening streets, and I was him too, looking up and wondering. I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life.’ Here, for the moment [writes Piper], Nick and Fitzgerald are one. Here, too, is the first intimation that we have had of Nick’s tragic sense, of that capacity for compassion coupled with moral judgment that is the hallmark of his humanity. In a way *The Great Gatsby* is the story of how Nick developed a genuinely tragic sense of life … It is because of Nick’s artistic existence as a controlling point of view that Fitzgerald was able to treat his own personal history with a detachment missing from his previous novels; consequently, *Gatsby* succeeds as a work of art where the other two failed. Here, finally, Fitzgerald has done ‘what the artist does’ – as Paul Rosenfeld, in his 1922 essay, had hoped he someday might: He has ‘seen [his material] simultaneously from within and without; and loved it and judged it, too.’

And the discussion carries on, without returning to Rosenfeld or making the echo explicit. Piper juxtaposes the two quotations so nearly that perhaps he realizes that they are virtually identical, and assumes that his reader will, also. But it seems nonetheless remarkable that he would not point out the resemblance, or attempt to account for it. Nor does he anywhere notice that the ‘capacity for compassion coupled with moral judgment that is the hallmark of his humanity,’ and of his artistry, is precisely what Rosenfeld had advocated.

Ten years later, Kenneth Eble quoted “Wilson’s early criticism that Fitzgerald was “left with a jewel which he doesn’t quite know what to do with”’ before turning to Rosenfeld. Expanding on the metaphor of Fitzgerald as an admirer

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of jewels, he quotes Rosenfeld, who used a similar trope in discussing Fitzgerald’s artistic achievement:

“‘Ideas of diamond are somewhat indiscriminately mixed with ideas of rhinestone and ideas of window glass; yet purest rays serene are also present in veritable abundance’ [wrote Rosenfeld]. Rosenfeld was writing before the appearance of The Great Gatsby,’ Eble continues, ‘and he observed that Fitzgerald had not yet crossed the line that he felt bound the field of art. “He has seen his material from its own point of view, and he has seen it completely from without. But he has never done what the artist does: seen it simultaneously from within and without; and loved it and judged it, too.” Looking back, one is amazed at how closely Gatsby answered Rosenfeld’s specific demands. His style and structure were never so closely attuned to substance and theme. And never again until The Crack-Up essays was Fitzgerald’s double vision so skillfully employed.’

One certainly is amazed at how specifically Gatsby answered Rosenfeld’s specific demands: one is further amazed at how many critics have noticed this but failed to see that he answered Rosenfeld’s specific demands with Rosenfeld’s specific language, or that the double vision for which Fitzgerald is praised was Rosenfeld’s aesthetic criterion. It is difficult not to conclude that Rosenfeld helped show Fitzgerald what he needed to do, and that Fitzgerald lifted Rosenfeld’s phrase ‘within and without’ – either as tribute, a salute to Rosenfeld, or like a determined student including the question in his essay so that his work couldn’t be missed.

Rosenfeld’s Men Seen was published in May 1925, while his preface is dated ‘February 1925.’ We know that Rosenfeld didn’t see Gatsby before his book was published, because he wrote Fitzgerald after reading the novel, saying that it would have provided him with a much better ‘diving-rock’ for his essay than Fitzgerald’s previous novels. (And anyway it wouldn’t make sense, for if Fitzgerald’s image of seeing within and without had come first, it would be nonsensical for Rosenfeld to accuse him of failing to see within and without.) We also know that Fitzgerald saw an early copy of Gilbert Seldes’s 1925 review of Gatsby, and Seldes and Rosenfeld both wrote for The Dial; they all read each other in draft. Presumably Fitzgerald must have somehow seen an early copy of Rosenfeld’s essay, although I have yet to turn up any traces of such an exchange. It isn’t clear how Fitzgerald saw Rosenfeld’s passage before Gatsby

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came out, but it seems difficult to accept such a precise echo as a simple coincidence. That said, even if (and it’s a mighty big if) this overlooked consonance of phrasing is a coincidence, it would return us to my earlier proposition: that artists and critics may be drinking from the same springs.

In fact, however, Rosenfeld gave Fitzgerald something else, in addition to the idea of the artist’s perspective being within and without. In October 1925, Fitzgerald wrote a letter to a young woman he’d met named Marya Mannes, telling her: ‘You are thrilled by New York – I doubt you will be after five more years when you are more fully nourished from within. I carry the place around the world in my heart but sometimes I try to shake it off in my dreams. America’s greatest promise is that something is going to happen, and after awhile you grow tired of waiting because nothing happens to people except that they grow old and nothing happens to American art because America is the story of the moon that never rose.’ Several scholars have picked up on this evocative phrase; at least two have used it to title their essays. Tony Tanner wrote an essay called ‘The Story of the Moon that Never Rose: F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby’; in it he also noted Fitzgerald’s phrase ‘within and without,’ but Tanner never mentions Rosenfeld in his essay. Udo Hebel also quotes ‘The Moon that Never Rose’ in the title of his 1985 essay examining the novel’s final passage, concluding that what is significant is ‘the image of the “moon” – the very image that reappears at the beginning of Nick’s vision,’ which it seems ‘stuck in Fitzgerald’s mind from the early drafts of Chapter I to the time the letter was written.’ This may be true, but this phrase must certainly originate with Rosenfeld’s essay on Fitzgerald, as it’s how Rosenfeld concludes his discussion of Fitzgerald’s material, his dual perspective, and the entire essay:

Fitzgerald has not yet crossed the line that bounds the field of art. He has seen his material from its own point of view, and he has seen it completely from without. But he has never done what the artist does: seen it simultaneously from within and without; and loved it and judged it, too. ... Should Fitzgerald finally break his mold, and free himself of the compulsions of the civilization in which he grew, it might go badly with his popularity. It will be a pathetic story he will have to tell, the legend of a moon which never rose; and that is precisely

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the story a certain America does not wish to hear. Nevertheless, we would like hugely to hear him tell it. And Fitzgerald might scarcely miss his following.40

The only person I can find who’s made the connection was Milton Stern, in 1970, a moment never again picked up or acknowledged, and he says that Fitzgerald was ‘unconsciously, perhaps, plagiarizing from Rosenfeld’s review of The Beautiful and Damned.’ (Rosenfeld’s essay wasn’t actually a review of The Beautiful and Damned, although Rosenfeld discusses it.) Fitzgerald might be unconsciously plagiarizing, but I see no reason to doubt that he was consciously lifting it, because he was thinking about it.

Criticism has always been part of the story of The Great Gatsby, deconstructively and narratively intertwined with the meanings of Gatsby, in ways that have not been clearly articulated. Rosenfeld implies that modern America was the story of the moon that never rose, and Fitzgerald says point blank in his letter to Marya Mannes that the story of American art is the story of the moon that never rose. If so, it becomes even more interesting to note that in Gatsby’s famous ending, as Nick imagines the Dutch sailors discovering America for the first time, his reverie begins with a moon rising, over the discovery that America itself might inspire an aesthetic encounter that is only half-understood.

Bearing in mind the mounting demands for a making of American literature, widespread fears that American literature was so far a false dawn, a moon that hadn’t risen, then these two anxieties about immaturity – cultural immaturity, and authorial immaturity, both manifesting themselves as artistic immaturity – converge in a different way. Suddenly this final passage looks rather less unilaterally elegiac and rather more as if there might also be a bit of sly triumph smuggled in: the rising moon that might also be a jubilant declaration of an encounter with an American aesthetic at last. Viewing art and America in foreground and background, Fitzgerald was seeing his country clearly from a detached perspective, transforming himself into the artist who could make the moon rise, who could see his country from within and without, ready to embrace an aesthetic contemplation, inspired by his own reading, of the moderns and the masters, to fling American art from the limited present tense into the future.

40 Rosenfeld, Men Seen, 225.
Their job was to forge an American art they could believe in. Ours, it seems to me, is to restore plenitude to our paradigms of reading. The joylessness of their arguments against the modern finds its concomitants in the limitations we place on our notions of serious reading, and serious arguments. These are the cold exhalations of a kind of dehumanized conception of art, the legacy of new criticism and indeed of a distorted vision of TS Eliot’s notion of ‘impersonality’ in art, an idea which (as Frank Kermode noted) did not mean that Eliot ever forgot that it was persons who made art. And in the case of the person who made *The Great Gatsby*, rhapsodic criticism was, on the evidence, one of the signposts that helped him map his way, one of the guides who casually conferred on him the freedom of the neighborhood.

We are left where we began, with a wild surmise that leads us to a fantasy of reparation and wholeness: call it a perfect novel or a new world, call it America, call it art, call it literature, call it aesthetic contemplation, call it understanding or even expertise. Call it a fantasy of a usable past: or maybe just the plenitude of trying to know at last what it is that we’re talking about.

Thank you.
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