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Alexander S. Fobes

Much has been made of the abundance of momentous moments portrayed in modernist literature, yet scant distinction has been offered between those moments described as sudden, involuntary revelations of particular characters and those that characters voluntarily elect and even elaborately strive to contrive. In their quest to represent in new ways the space and time of human experience, modernist authors have rejected the traditional paradigms and sometimes epic scope of their predecessors' works, as James Joyce illustrates with his reduction of the Homeric time frame—from the ten years of the *Odyssey* to the one single day of *Ulysses* (1922). The diminished scale and departure from convention in modernists' representation of time can be observed in the way privileged moments emerge as distinguishing elements of early twentieth-century art, whereby those spots in time previously disregarded or viewed as trivial receive new weight and focus, in some cases acting even as loci in story lines. Not all are precisely epiphanic, and, as Gerald Gillespie has shown, not all epiphanies begin and end with Joyce (50–51). In this light and worthy of special attention, is the manner in which two major early twentieth-century authors, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Virginia Woolf—heretofore unexamined side by side—render quintessentially important moments in the lives of two of their most celebrated protagonists, Mrs. Ramsay and Jay Gatsby, which these characters deliberately select and pursue. Reflecting on the way Woolf and Fitzgerald foreground spaces of time may throw light not solely on where their unique aesthetic kinship lies, but on how the moment came to be a modernist preoccupation and, for that matter, why one might even dare try to hold back the hands of time.

Given modernism's break with prior modes of representation, any attempt by one of its characters to recapture the past or halt the progress of time might be viewed as curiously contradictory, or antithetical to the thrust of the movement.

Yet Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* are not texts anomalous in their day: they are indeed both representative and influential modernist novels, perhaps all the more so because their characters seek to preserve or reestablish the order and stability of the pre-World War era. For Mrs. Ramsay, the aim is to achieve harmony and create a moment memorable for her dinner guests. While acutely aware of the transience of such order, she seeks to distill lasting qualities from this moment. For Lily Briscoe, the aim is to return to that space in time and capture on canvas the Mrs. Ramsay of that pre-war moment. For Jay Gatsby, insofar as we can tell, the aim is to "repeat the past" (*Gatsby* 116), to return to the moment of genesis in his relationship with Daisy Fay before he was called to war, his world became disordered, and "foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams" (6). And for Nick Carraway, the aim is to recapture in words the essence of Gatsby's dream and show what it was that "preyed on Gatsby" (6).

Whereas Woolf and Fitzgerald describe moments of vision on the part of Lily and Nick, as both painter and narrator contemplate the perspective that will enable them to reveal their ambivalence toward Mrs. Ramsay and Gatsby, what is perhaps more remarkable in both novels is the authors' portrayal of how Mrs. Ramsay and Gatsby themselves seek to arrest a fleeting moment with the purpose of extracting a certain order from it. Unlike Lily and Nick, neither Mrs. Ramsay nor Gatsby experience true epiphanies; rather, their futile attempts at tinkering with the master's clock lead only to the upsetting of expectations and may even arguably be the cause of their own undoing. As they portray the tragic demise of these time-honored protagonists, Fitzgerald and Woolf carve an aesthetic out of cataclysm, hinting that while we may be borne back into the past, we must nonetheless break with it and ineluctably beat on against the current, if we are not to be swept away by the inexorable flow of an ever-changing world.

Prior to engaging in closer analysis of these works, we may note that, as various critics have shown, the recording of significant moments is not exclusive to modernism and certainly did not originate in twentieth-century art. For the modernists, perhaps the most influential observer of moments was the English poet William Wordsworth. In *Epiphany in the Modern Novel*, Morris Beja argues that "the most influential Romantic statement on inspiration is probably Wordsworth's 'Preface' to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), an essay packed with phrases showing an awareness of the poetic value of moments of illumination" (32). Jack Stillinger contends that Wordsworth's passage on "spots of time" (XII.208) is "of crucial importance in showing

Wordsworth's ultimate view of the greatness of man's mental powers" (qtd. in Wordsworth xiv):

There are in our existence spots of time,
That with distinct pre-eminence retain
A renovating virtue, whence . . . our minds
Are nourished and invisibly repaired;
A virtue, by which pleasure is enhanced,
That penetrates, enables us to mount,
When high, more high, and lifts us up when fallen.
This efficacious spirit chiefly lurks
Among those passages of life that give
Profoundest knowledge to what point, and how,
The mind is lord and master—outward sense
The obedient servant of her will. (Wordsworth XII.208–23)

In Beja's opinion, Wordsworth's view of experience "foreshadows not only Joyce, but Proust as well" (34), and his exposition in Book XII of the "Preface" to the *Lyrical Ballads* "almost amounts to a theory of epiphany" (33). Robert Langbaum points out that for Wordsworth and Coleridge, poetry is "not determined by external signs but by a kind of mental operation that [these poets] called 'imagination'" (335). For this reason, Beja concurs: "Wordsworth therefore exemplifies a transition between the previous ages on external force and the modern concentration on the subjective elements of experience" (32).

Walter Pater, who in Jay B. Losey's opinion "refined" the "epiphanic mode . . . initiated by Wordsworth" (45), professed that Wordsworth "appeared to himself as but the passive recipient of external influences" (*Appreciations* 55); interestingly, for our purposes, Pater's emphasis on the passivity and subjectivity of the observer significantly influenced Fitzgerald's early representations of beauty and "the golden moment" of youth.¹ After Wordsworth's exposition on "spots of time," the most famous statement regarding privileged moments comes from Pater himself, who in the Conclusion to *The Renaissance* (1873) posits a more secular conception of epiphany, suggesting that the wisest way to pass our brief interval of existence—"this short day of frost and sun"—is to revel in as many pulsations and privileged moments as we can, specifically "in art and song," which can best give the "fruit of a quickened, multiplied consciousness" (223–24). "For art," Pater concludes, "comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for

those moments' sake" (224). As Langbaum explains, Pater in this way dissolves the distinction between life and art, seeing "epiphany as both encapsulated in the work of art and as taking place in the beholder of art" (339). In Fitzgerald's view, what he, Thomas Wolfe, and Ernest Hemingway have in common is their attempt "to recapture the exact feel of a moment in time and space"—an attempt he associates with "what Wordsworth was trying to do" (qtd. in Beja 19). Virginia Woolf, for her part, celebrated what she termed "moments of being," "moments whose intensity she felt in their full presentness, as meaningful, even ecstatic, moments that rose like mountain-peaks out of daily life" (Briggs 5). Woolf regards the novelist's art as the attempt "to reconstruct . . . in words" the instant when "a tree shook; an electric light danced; . . . a whole vision, an entire conception, seemed contained in that moment" (*Common Reader* 259–60).

Are all such moments inherently epiphanic? In seeking to define the term "epiphany," scholars frequently revert to a key passage in Joyce's *Stephen Hero* (1944). There is the "fragment of colloquy" whose "triviality made [Stephen] think of collecting many such moments together in a book of epiphanies. By an epiphany he meant a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or gesture or in a memorable phrase of the mind itself" (216).² Nevertheless, as Gillespie has noted, the use of epiphany as a literary term has at times unfortunately been "too narrowly circumscribed by its association with the aesthetics of its chief propounder, Joyce" (50). Gillespie further admonishes us to heed the advice of William T. Noon and "not take Stephen's more limited point of view in place of Joyce's larger poetic framework and development 'in the direction of symbolic transformation' of reality" (51). Beja describes the epiphany as a "moment of illumination" that in the West is a "Christian phenomenon, with only a few real antecedents in classical or Hebraic literature," adding that "until relatively recent times, in both East and West, the moment of revelation was invariably considered to be of divine origin" (24, 25). Langbaum, in his essay on the "Epiphanic Mode," traces the term to its religious roots: "An epiphany is the manifestation of a god, or of spirit in body. The Christian Epiphany is the manifestation of Christ to the Magi" (336). Yet, modernist epiphanies more often tend to be secular, even sacrilegious. For, as Fitzgerald's Amory Blaine remarks in *This Side of Paradise*, theirs was a generation "grown up to find all Gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken" (253). As Dieter Schulz points out, theories of visionary moments have undergone radical changes, most recently in the "modernist poetics of fragmentation and empty transcendence" (23).³

In this regard, Fitzgerald's story "Jacob's Ladder" (1927) concludes with a peculiar, yet peculiarly modernist epiphany verging on biblical satire. After

Jacob Booth's love for his protégé-turned-actress ultimately goes unrequited, he walks down Broadway in a daze:

[H]e stood for a moment puzzled. Then the heavy tide of realization swept over him and beyond him, leaving him stunned and exhausted. It swept back upon him and over him again. As one rereads a tragic story with the defiant hope that it will end differently, so he went back to the morning, to the beginning, to the previous year. But the tide came thundering back with the certainty that she was cut off from him forever[.] (*Short Stories* 370)

Like *Gatsby*, Jacob turns to the past, seeking perhaps to extract order from memory in the hope of resurrecting his romance. Nonetheless, unlike *Gatsby*, whom Richard D. Lehan describes as “a Sisyphus without self-knowledge or cosmic understanding” (109), Jacob experiences a moment of intuitive understanding, similar to that of Dexter Green in “Winter Dreams” (1922), apprehending at last that his dream has gone. Yet far from being truly transcendent, the moment for Jacob is rather one of stupefaction. In contrast to Merlin Grainger in “O Russet Witch!” (1921), who realizes too late that he “had angered Providence by resisting too many temptations” (Fitzgerald, *Jazz Age* 378), Jacob is dumbfounded and overcome. In lieu of the Almighty, the higher being on his mind as he is walking down Broadway is his former love, the star whose name hangs above his head from the movie house marquee:

Jenny Prince.

Now that she no longer belonged to him, the name assumed a significance entirely its own.

It hung there, cool and impervious, in the night, a challenge, a defiance.

Jenny Prince.

“Come and rest upon my loveliness,” it said. “Fulfill your secret dreams in wedding me for an hour.” (*Short Stories* 370)

In Alan Margolies's view, the language Jacob imagines coming down from the marquee above is “reminiscent of the King James Bible, possibly the Song of Solomon,” and “reminds us of the seductive power of Jenny Prince on the screen, and, more specifically, of the seductive power of film” (101).⁴ “Of course,” Margolies notes, “Jacob Booth's dream is not of angels going to and coming from heaven, but of another angel, Jenny Prince, who he hoped would rescue him from his humdrum life and, in effect, take him to heaven” (102). In this

way, Jacob's peculiar visionary moment—not divine but ironically secular—enables him to comprehend that his relationship with Jenny has ended, while leaving him, like Gatsby, looking to the past, entranced by an illusory image of his love, one “whose disembodied face floated along the dark cornices and blinding signs” (*Gatsby* 85).

The illusory aspect of Jacob's vision does not preclude it from being an epiphany, at least in Beja's view. Beja argues that all epiphanies share four characteristics: “the experience is irrational; it involves ‘intuitive insight’; it is authoritative (it cannot be refuted by ‘logical argument’); and it is ‘a momentary experience’” (25). Losey observes that Pater “uses [epiphany] in a number of specific ways: when a character derives personal meaning from a trivial or random event, train of associations, dream, or memory of a place or past experience,” yet he acknowledges that “epiphany cannot be limited to a strict definition” for its “variability . . . as a concept makes it difficult to define” (32). In this study, I employ the term “epiphany” in a relatively broad sense to signify a moment of vision. Furthermore, with an eye to the art of Woolf and Fitzgerald, I shall draw a distinction between “epiphany,” which necessarily involves insight, and a “significant moment,” a term that I will use to designate a moment of importance in a character's life that need not, however, necessarily afford him any particular insight or illuminate the nature of his reality. As an example, let us for a moment consider a critical juncture in Gatsby's formation that occurs during his courtship of Daisy Fay:

One autumn night, five years before, they had been walking down the street when the leaves were falling, and they came to a place where there were no trees and the sidewalk was white with moonlight. They stopped here and turned toward each other. Now it was a cool night with that mysterious excitement in it which comes at the two changes of the year. The quiet lights in the houses were humming out into the darkness and there was a stir and bustle among the stars. Out of the corner of his eye Gatsby saw that the blocks of the sidewalks really formed a ladder and mounted to a secret place above the trees—he could climb to it, if he climbed alone, and once there he could suck on the pap of life, gulp down the incomparable milk of wonder. (*Gatsby* 117)

Readers familiar with *The Great Gatsby* may be quick to clarify that the passage above is not truly Gatsby's own vision but rather the narrator's—Nick Carraway's—imaginative reconstruction of Gatsby's past from all that he has gleaned about Gatsby. Whereas for Nick, the passage represents an epiphany, a moment of vision in which he attains insight (insofar as we can trust his point

of view) into Gatsby's past, for Gatsby, however, it is but a significant moment, revealing to him nearly nothing about the nature of his relationship with Daisy and hence drawing him not closer to but further from reality.⁵

In her 1918 review of Logan Pearsall Smith's *Trivia*, Woolf despaired that "moments of vision are of an unaccountable nature; leave them alone and they persist for years; try to explain them and they disappear; write them down and they die beneath the pen" (*Essays* 251). Nonetheless, as Briggs reminds us, Woolf "was intensely aware of time, both as an impersonal force and as a personal experience, as shared time and individual time, as the regulated and measurable time of clocks, public and private . . . and of time in memory and thought" (3). Like Fitzgerald, she observed early in the twentieth century that the new generation's experience of time was strikingly different. Writing to a friend late in 1922,⁶ she remarked that the break between the young writers and their predecessors was more than "the usual smash and splinters. . . . The human soul, it seems to me, orientates itself afresh every now and then. It is doing so now. No one can see it whole, therefore. The best of us catch a glimpse of a nose, a shoulder, something turning away, always in movement" (Woolf, *Question* 598). As Briggs explains, Woolf believed that "literary history had been interrupted, and the fragmented nature of modernist writing . . . was the result: the writer could only see in glimpses, see glimpses rather than the wholeness that the high Victorians had reached for, both in words and painting" (7).⁷

Such glimpses are represented in consummate detail in the few short stories Woolf published in her lifetime. One of these, "Moments of Being: 'Slater's Pins Have No Points,'" appeared in the New York magazine *Forum* in January 1928, shortly after she finished *To the Lighthouse*. The story traces a moment of being for the protagonist Fanny Wilmot, who is receiving a piano lesson from Julia Craye. As Nick Carraway does with Gatsby, Fanny wonders about and imaginatively reconstructs the life of her music teacher. Inspired by the solitary remark from Miss Craye—that "Slater's pins have no points"—Fanny, in the short time that she pauses to search for her broach, ponders why it is that her teacher never married. In the moment of her imagining there is another moment encapsulated, as Fanny surmises that Miss Craye might have once spent a romantic afternoon with "an old friend of hers," the painter Mr. Sherman, and had "tea under the trees . . . while they looked at the Serpentine. . . . He may have rowed her across" . . . and then perhaps:

At the critical moment, for he had determined that he must speak now—it was his only chance of getting her alone—he was speaking with his head turned at an absurd angle, in his great nervousness, over his shoulder—at

that very moment she interrupted fiercely. He would have them into the Bridge, she cried. It was a moment of horror, of disillusionment, of revelation for both of them. I can't have it, I can't possess it, she thought. He could not see why she had come then. With a great splash of his oar he pulled the boat round. Merely to snub him? He rowed her back and said good-bye to her. (*Haunted* 107–8)

In this subtle story, we as readers are left to draw our own conclusions about Julia Craye. As we are able to see her only through the point of view of young, naïve Fanny Wilmot, our uncertainty as to the character of Miss Craye parallels Fanny's. In the abortive love scene, Woolf's suggestive symbolism enables readers to experience a revelation commensurate to Fanny's. (Is Mr. Sherman speaking in "great nervousness" because he wishes to propose, to have them enter into a matrimonial "Bridge"? So much is never made absolutely clear, neither for Fanny nor for us.) Although in Fanny Wilmot's mind Julia Craye believes she "can't possess it"—or at least not with Mr. Sherman—Fanny ultimately imagines that "Julia opened her arms. Julia kissed her on the lips. Julia possessed it" (111). Woolf portrays the brief ecstatic interval that Fanny spends hunting for her pin as significant, although whether it is also epiphanic is an open question. Can her young mind penetrate the essence of her teacher? "All seemed transparent, for a moment, to the gaze of Fanny Wilmot, as if looking through Miss Craye, she saw the very fountain of her being spurting its pure silver drops" (110). In the opinion of James Hafley, Fanny Wilmot's truth is "pointedly false; it has led her perhaps away from reality and certainly to a moment of complete self-deception; but, on the other hand, Slater's pins have no points" ("On One" 16).⁸

Whether Miss Craye's observation about Slater's pins that so stoked the fires of Fanny's imagination truly was laced with innuendo may be a moot point, if we consider Pater's theories regarding modes of perception. "The first step towards seeing one's object as it really is," Pater propounds in the "Preface" to *The Renaissance*, "is to know one's impression as it really is" (27). As Losey elucidates, Pater in this way "shifts the critic's mode of perception and argues that the impression produced by the object is more significant than the object itself" (30). In the aforementioned story, Miss Craye's remark about Slater's pins occasions Fanny's impression, and, of course, her impression is far more significant than the remark or the pin; through her moment of vision, we learn far more about Fanny Wilmot and her feelings for her teacher than we do about Miss Craye herself. Fanny may believe she has gained insight into Miss Craye's essential nature,

yet this truth may be “pointedly false”; were Fanny perhaps older and more perceptive, she might then have understood the moment for what it is—a revelation about herself. And as we readers vicariously experience Fanny’s revelation through avid attention to the symbolism Woolf infuses in Fanny’s stream of consciousness, we in a sense heed Pater’s advice, coming “to know [our] impression as it really is.” As Langbaum points out, “It is the sensitized condition of the observer that brings on epiphany, and the art of epiphany consists in establishing this sensitized condition” (338). In characteristic modernist fashion, Woolf exploits and aggrandizes a seemingly trivial, fleeting moment.

In the opinion of Erich Auerbach, this particular approach to fiction is Woolf’s supreme achievement in *To the Lighthouse*—her ability to illuminate “the wealth of reality and depth of life in every moment. . . . [I]t is precisely the random moment . . . the more it is exploited, the more the elementary things which our lives have in common come to light” (qtd. in Bloom 4). This coming to light Harold Bloom regards as “precisely Pater’s secularization of epiphany, in which random moments are transfigured” (Bloom 4). Like many of Woolf’s stories from *Monday or Tuesday* (1921), “Moments of Being: ‘Slater’s Pins Have No Points’” belongs to what Hafley describes as a “collection of tales telling tellers, versions inventing their inventors, ‘every one of those impressions . . . the impression of the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world . . . a single moment, gone while we try to apprehend it,’” in the well-known and beautiful words of Walter Pater, whose “Conclusion” to *The Renaissance* can be called upon to gloss Virginia Woolf’s fictions (“Virginia Woolf’s” 40; Pater, *Renaissance* 222–23). Although Fanny Wilmot does not cling to her significant moment in the way Mrs. Ramsay and Gatsby do (as we shall see), her impression is nonetheless similar to theirs—she indulges in her “own dream of a world,” all in “a single moment,” or as Dean R. Baldwin estimates, in “perhaps two minutes of ‘real time’” (52).

If, as Langbaum posits, “the sensitized condition of the observer . . . brings on epiphany” (338), establishing such a condition, for Nick Carraway and Lily Briscoe, requires far more than two minutes. Such sensitivity requires a significant emotional and temporal detachment. In this sense, the moments of vision that painter and narrator afford us in *To the Lighthouse* and *The Great Gatsby*, respectively, are perhaps not so random after all. Nick’s famous ambivalence toward Gatsby parallels that of Lily toward Mrs. Ramsay; furthermore, Nick gives us his impression of Gatsby from the perspective of two years’ time, and only after ten years have passed does Lily complete her painting of Mrs. Ramsay, having come “to know [her] impression as it really is.”

That Gatsby and Mrs. Ramsay should be both long dead by the time they are transmuted into art further suggests Pater's emphasis on the artist's impression rather than the object that produces it. Of all art critics and theorists, Pater provides perhaps the closest link between Woolf and Fitzgerald. Hafley's mention of Walter Pater in relation to the subjectivity of the storytellers in *Monday or Tuesday* is felicitous, for Woolf's manner of rendering individual experience and moments of vision shows the influence of Paterian aesthetics, as several critics have observed. Interestingly, Hussey notes that Clara Pater, Walter's sister and Virginia Woolf's tutor in Greek and Latin beginning in 1899, "is probably the model for Julia Craye in 'Moments of Being: "Slater's Pins Have No Points"'" (212). Perry Meisel considers that Pater's aesthetics were "an unacknowledged important influence" on both Woolf's fiction and critical writings (Hussey 212), and Bloom deems that "Woolf's sensibility essentially is Paterian" (2). Of all the great modernist novelists, Bloom regards her, F. Scott Fitzgerald, "the early Joyce, and in strange ways both Conrad and Lawrence" as Paterians (2). "Of all these," he writes, "Woolf is most authentically Pater's child. Her central tropes, like his, are personality and death, and her ways of representing consciousness are very close to his" (2). Apart from being an early and direct influence on Fitzgerald's aesthetic, Pater's ideas were to have a tremendous effect on Oscar Wilde, whose artistic views, temperament, and *Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) had a significant impact on Fitzgerald's early novels.⁹ As Losey points out, in the philosophy of both Pater and Wilde "artistic inspiration derives not from the object itself . . . but from the impression the object produces" (41).

For Fitzgerald, as well as for his early heroes, inspiration derives from beauty and beauty is forever young. For Gatsby, artistic inspiration—or the idea that engenders his mansion across the bay from Daisy's—stems from his impression of her childhood home in Louisville. Though

he had never been in such a beautiful house before . . . what gave it an air of breathless intensity was that Daisy lived there. . . . There was a ripe mystery about it, a hint of . . . romances that were not musty and laid away already in lavender, but fresh and breathing and redolent of this year's shining motor-cars and of dances whose flowers were scarcely withered. (155–56)

If for Gatsby, the impression derived from beauty is redolent of youth, for Gloria and Anthony Patch in *The Beautiful and Damned*, youth is an attribute of beauty, a precondition that must at all costs be met. Milton R. Stern puts it astutely: "Age," for Fitzgerald's major characters, *has* to be the moment of

youth" (145). As such, their tragedy is governed by time. Like Wilde's Dorian Gray, Gloria's principal aim in life is to be "young and beautiful for a long time" (*Beautiful* 276). Introduced in a playlet within the novel simply as "Beauty," Gloria, as Stern accurately observes, represents "the momentary rebirth of the essence of eternal beauty in finite form" (144). Unfortunately for Gloria, her husband Anthony is a superficial, foppish flaneur, idly awaiting his inheritance. In a letter to Charles Scribner II, Fitzgerald explained that Anthony Patch "is one of those many with the tastes and weaknesses of an artist but with no actual creative inspiration" (*Life in Letters* 41). Unlike Gatsby, Anthony does not need to create a "factual imitation of some Hôtel de Ville in Normandy" (*Gatsby* 9); unlike Basil Hallward, Anthony does not have to create beauty, he merely needs to coax it to his "reproachless apartment" (*Beautiful* 10). Anthony's lack of creative inspiration seems clearly linked to Gloria, whose "beauty had rendered him thoughtless" (59). After "the radiant hour" of their wedding, she in effect becomes "his sole preoccupation," and he indulges whatever strikes her fancy (277). Stern notes that "[t]he damnation of the beautiful moment begins to be apparent in Anthony's discovery that in his wedding to the spirit of beauty, he has also wed a mortal incarnation of it" (145).

Just as Nick Carraway—who, on the occasion of his thirtieth birthday, dreads "the promise of a decade of loneliness, a thinning list of single men to know, a thinning brief-case of enthusiasm, thinning hair" (*Gatsby* 143)—Gloria fears the coming of old age and tries everything in her power to preserve her youth. She "wanted to exist only as a conscious flower, preserving and protecting itself" (*Beautiful* 392–93). For much of the novel, she is granted this wish. It is only when Gloria attempts to capture her momentary beauty that it fades—and fades fast. Supposing that she, too, will one day be susceptible to the ravages of time, Gloria decides to enter the movies: "It cheered her that in some manner the illusion of beauty could be sustained or preserved perhaps in celluloid after the reality had vanished" (393). Yet, her one acting test consumes her. Returning to her mirror, she carefully inspects her reflection—in much the same way that Dorian Gray scrutinizes his own portrait—only to find "tiny wrinkles" (404). Even the "British freshness of her complexion" undergoes a blow from the hands of time—like Mrs. Ramsay, she cannot make of the moment anything that endures; like Gatsby, she is powerless to turn back the clock (371).

Gatsby himself is not so concerned with retarding the effects of aging as he is with recapturing a specific moment in the past and the order he believes his life had at that point in his relationship with Daisy. As Nick Carraway explains, Gatsby "talked a lot about the past and I gathered that he wanted to recover

something, some idea of himself perhaps, that had gone into loving Daisy. His life had been confused and disordered since then, but if he could return to a certain starting place and go over it all slowly, he could find out what the thing was. . . ." (117)

While Nick posits that Gatsby wished merely to "recover something, some idea of himself perhaps," Gatsby himself is more fanciful. "I'm going to fix everything just the way it was before," he tells Nick, "nodding determinedly. 'She'll see'" (117). Gatsby's greatest failure, perhaps, lies in his inability to conceive time in the Bergsonian sense, "as impenetrable and seamlessly continuous *flux*" (Goldman 61). As Bergson writes in *Duration and Simultaneity* (1922), "Everyone will surely agree that time is not conceived without a *before* and an *after*—time is succession" (65). After his initial reunion with Daisy, Gatsby functions about as well as Nick's defunct mantelpiece clock—he refuses to acknowledge, or is wholly oblivious to the fact that five years have elapsed. In one telling moment, Daisy introduces Gatsby to her baby daughter Pammy, and afterward, as Nick tells us, "he kept looking at the child with surprise. I don't think he had ever really believed in its existence before" (123). With subtle humor, Nick explains that Gatsby "wanted nothing less of Daisy than that she should go to Tom and say: 'I never loved you.' After she had obliterated three years with that sentence they could decide upon the more practical measures to be taken. One of them was that, after she was free, they were to go back to Louisville and be married from her house—just as if it were five years ago" (116).

Gatsby in this way rigidly refuses to acknowledge the succession of events, the continuous flow of time that has brought changes to Daisy's life. And, as Virginia Woolf asserts in her essay on Michel de Montaigne, "Movement and change are the essence of our being; rigidity is death" (qtd. in Kumar 98).

Though critical of Gatsby's illusion and wary of the dark business that sustains it, Nick essentially sympathizes with Gatsby's dream, and can relate to Gatsby's "vision of the receding and irrecoverable past" (Miller, *Fictional* 105), but he is sensible enough to approach the future pragmatically, like Jordan Baker, who is "too wise ever to carry well-forgotten dreams from age to age" (*Gatsby* 143). While critical of Jordan's dishonesty and Tom and Daisy's recklessness, Nick appreciates Jordan's idea that "Life starts all over again when it gets crisp in the fall" (125)—that all things must pass, even the "dramatic turbulence" of Tom's "irrecoverable football game" (10) and Gatsby's extravagant "career as Trimalchio" (119).

Even Mrs. Ramsay recognizes the transience inherent in her world, although she is often unwilling to admit it. Like Gatsby, she longs to halt the progress of

time: "Why, she asked . . . should [her children] grow up so fast? . . . She would have liked always to have had a baby" (*Lighthouse* 58). She is a mother to eight, yet even her babies must age: "Oh, but she never wanted James to grow a day older! Or Cam either" (58). Always seeking to arrange the order of things or harmonize relations between people, she knows but is reluctant to acknowledge that she is not the master of her world: "There rose to her lips always some exclamation of triumph over life when things came together in this peace, this rest, this eternity." Whereas for Gatsby the green light at the end of Daisy's dock betokens the harmony of things coming together, Mrs. Ramsay looks out across the bay at the three strokes of the lighthouse beam, associating herself with "the long steady stroke, the last of the three, which was her stroke."¹⁰ Unconsciously, she finds herself saying "It will end, it will end. . . . It will come, it will come, when suddenly she added, We are in the hands of the Lord." In this moment, Mrs. Ramsay instantly is "annoyed with herself," feeling that "she had been trapped into saying something she did not mean" (63). She questions, "How could any Lord have made this world," yet concedes she cannot control the ebb and flow of stability and change: "No happiness lasted; she knew that" (64).

Although she longs to believe herself the master of each of her moments, Mrs. Ramsay's compelling beauty and grace far overshadow the times when she, at her worst, may be slightly overbearing. Lily Briscoe, admiring and at the same time questioning of Mrs. Ramsay, is the character best suited to place her in perspective. In awe of Mrs. Ramsay's grace, Lily thinks what she might say to her—"I'm in love with you?" No, that was not true" (19). Lily is critical of the conventional femininity, of the traditional conception of family that Mrs. Ramsay represents, and particularly of her contention that "an unmarried woman has missed the best of life" (49). Yet she admires the beauty and harmony of her house and party. "I'm in love with this all," she decides, focusing her attention on her portrait of Mrs. Ramsay (19). Just as Woolf continually shifts point of view in the novel as she seeks to convey her theme of transience, beauty, subjectivity, and art, Lily Briscoe repeatedly struggles to attain the best perspective from which to depict Mrs. Ramsay: "One wanted fifty pairs of eyes to see with, she reflected. Fifty pairs of eyes were not enough to get round that one woman with, she thought" (198). Virginia Woolf's sister, Vanessa Bell, herself an established artist, admired *To the Lighthouse* greatly. "By the way," she wrote Virginia in 1927, "surely Lily Briscoe must have been rather a good painter—before her time perhaps, but with great gifts really?" (Woolf, *Change* 573). Henry R. Harrington muses that Lily "was only a little ahead of her . . . time," given that the first section of the novel is set in September 1910 (371).

Two months later, Roger Fry, the revolutionary art critic and eldest member of the Bloomsbury group, introduced England to “what he called ‘Post-Impressionism,’” a term which Fry used to “include not only Cézanne, Van Gogh, and Gauguin . . . but also Matisse, Picasso and Braque, who were featured in the Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition in 1912” (Harrington 371). Lily’s wish for “fifty pairs of eyes” to afford her perspective may call to mind Picasso’s and Braque’s Cubism, which has been described as a mode of showing an object simultaneously from all sides, or, as Guillaume Apollinaire puts it, “with the new possibilities of spatial measurement which . . . are designated by the term: the fourth dimension” (13).¹¹ Max Weber once defined the fourth dimension as the creative artist’s “ideal perceptive or imaginative faculties” (qtd. in Bohn 23); Apollinaire himself—like Lily Briscoe?—yearned for “an infinity characterized by omniscience and ubiquity, free from the constraints of time” (Bohn 19). As Lily completes the second painting in September of 1920, ten years after Mrs. Ramsay’s death, she strives to find an omniscient perspective and can still vividly imagine Mrs. Ramsay (“It was strange how clearly she saw her” [*Lighthouse* 181]). Through her art, Lily attains a vision of the past, recovering Mrs. Ramsay in an evanescent moment.

Lily’s work is not unlike Mrs. Ramsay’s or *Gatsby*’s—they are each creators, albeit in different mediums. As Hermione Lee suggests, “What Lily arrives at [in her second painting] is the proper balance of shapes. . . . Mrs. Ramsay’s dinner party is shaped out of disparate entities . . . into a coherent whole . . . whose effect is . . . grand and transcendental, because it has come about by a creative effort” (23). *Gatsby* himself “had thrown himself into [his illusion] with a *creative* passion, adding to it all the time, decking it out with every bright feather that drifted his way” (*Gatsby* 101; emphasis added). As Lily Briscoe ten years later struggles to understand and express on canvas her experience with the Ramsays, she marvels, on the verge of epiphany:

This, that, and the other; herself and Charles Tansley and the breaking wave; Mrs. Ramsay bringing them together; Mrs. Ramsay saying, “Life stand still here”; Mrs. Ramsay making of the moment something permanent (as in another sphere Lily tried to make of the moment something permanent)—this was of the nature of a revelation. In the midst of chaos there was shape; this eternal passing and flowing . . . was struck into stability. Life stand still here, Mrs. Ramsay said. (161)

Despite Charles Tansley’s odious presence, whispering in Lily’s ear, “Women can’t paint, women can’t write” (48), Lily succeeds in achieving her vision, and

Mrs. Ramsay succeeds in establishing harmony among her guests. Yet, can either Mrs. Ramsay or Lily make of the moment something that endures?

To this end Mrs. Ramsay applies herself with a creative passion. Like Gatsby, demiurgical Mrs. Ramsay attempts to “fix everything,” from candles to coffee, skins of vegetables, Bœuf en Daube, and even the marriage of Paul Rayley and Minta Doyle. Carefully helping Mr. Bankes to a specially tender piece of beef, Mrs. Ramsay thinks of eternity:

there is a coherence in things, a stability; something, she meant, is immune from change, and shines out . . . in the face of the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral, like a ruby; so that again tonight she had the feeling she had had once today, already, of peace, of rest. Of such moments, she thought, the thing is made that endures. (105)

But just what *is* that thing that endures, and how long precisely will it endure? As master of ceremonies, Mrs. Ramsay thinks “William must marry Lily. . . . Foolishly, she had set them opposite each other. That could be remedied tomorrow. If it were fine, they should go for a picnic. Everything seemed possible. Everything seemed right” (104). And so concludes *Gatsby*, in this idealized hereafter: “Tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther . . .” (189).

For Mrs. Ramsay, as for Gatsby, the future—every incandescent moment—offers another opportunity to recapture and rewrite the past. Yet that “orgastic future . . . year by year recedes before us” and any wish to re-create and preserve a past moment will assuredly go unfulfilled (189). “The past can’t be helped,” laments Thomas A. Pendleton, echoing Bergson’s view of time as succession, “it is true and irrevocable and continually participating in the present” (124). In both *Gatsby* and *To the Lighthouse*, time is the thieving, unavoidable enemy; and the immaculate, material, bygone moment that Gatsby and Mrs. Ramsay pursue and seek to re-create, at Daisy’s house in Louisville or at a dinner party on the Isle of Skye, respectively, has long since—the resilience and singularity of their hope notwithstanding—slipped away. For strive as we might to suck on the pap of wonder and gulp down the incomparable milk of illusion, therein lies no epiphany. It is art and art alone that yields us the “fruit of a quickened, multiplied consciousness” (Pater, *Renaissance* 224). It is Nick Carraway’s final, epiphanic meditations from a distance of two years, and Lily Briscoe’s meticulous, hard-won vision from a perspective of ten that endow writer and painter with the sensitivity necessary to make of the moment something that endures. As Lily finds the central line in her canvas, so Nick consummates and concentrates his vision of Gatsby’s dream, aligning it with the marvel of the first Dutch

sailors spying Long Island and with history that has since vanquished a world “commensurate to [man’s] capacity for wonder” (189). Thus, for Virginia Woolf and F. Scott Fitzgerald, it is not the dreamer or the world, but the artist and her impression of it that matter and cast epiphanic light. Nick, like Lily, has “had h[is] vision” (*Lighthouse* 209) and in so doing recovered the past, perpetuating it and defying—if only for “a transitory enchanted moment” (*Gatsby* 189)—the passing of time.

Notes

1. During Fitzgerald’s time at Princeton, “The decadent or esthetic movement dominated the undergraduate interest, and everyone was reading Swinburne, Pater, Dowson, Wilde, and Rupert Brooke” (Lehan 13). In *This Side of Paradise*, Fitzgerald indeed has the hero, Amory Blaine, reading Pater (*Paradise* 102). Lehan calls Pater “an important influence on Fitzgerald’s developing imagination” and observes that “[t]he emphasis that Fitzgerald puts upon youth is the same emphasis we find in *Marius the Epicurean*” (14). Lehan also asserts that “what Pater says of Marius could be taken, without qualification, to describe Jay Gatsby” (14):

Thus the boyhood of Marius passed; on the whole more given to contemplation than to action. . . . he lived much in the realm of the imagination, and became betimes, as he was to continue all through life, something of an idealist, constructing the world for himself in great measure from within, by the exercise of meditative power. (qtd. in Lehan 14)

2. Beja himself, a renowned Joyce scholar, chooses to define epiphany in much the same way as Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus. “If I had to commit myself to a brief definition of epiphany,” he writes, “then, I would call it a *sudden spiritual manifestation, whether from some object, scene, event, or memorable phrase of the mind—the manifestation being out of proportion to the significance or strictly logical relevance of whatever produces it*” (17–18).

3. In particular, Schulz observes that “From the perspective of the Romantic sublime (Burke, Schiller, Coleridge, Wordsworth, et al.) Emerson’s version of the visionary experience marks a crucial transitional stage between Wordsworth’s ‘glory beyond glory ever seen’ on the one hand and the artificial paradises of modernism on the other” (23).

4. The “great block letters” beckoning Jacob from “the porte-cochère of the Capitol Theater” (*Short Stories* 370) assume an even more ironic, secular aspect if one considers the reference to Jacob’s vision in Genesis that the story’s title suggests: “And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven, and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it” (Gen. 28:12; qtd. in Margolies 102). Margolies further observes that, in the galleys of *Taps at Reveille* (in which “Jacob’s Ladder” was collected), “Fitzgerald even changed the first description of her [Jenny] from that of a ‘saint’ to that of an ‘angel’” (102).

5. James E. Miller Jr. observes that Gatsby’s dream “begin[s] with Daisy but inflate[s] to an epic vision,” in the same way that “Dexter Green’s illusion of Judy Jones [in ‘Winter Dreams’] grows ridiculously out of proportion to its object” (*F. Scott Fitzgerald* 98). Miller adds a critical distinction: “with the major exception of the ending: Gatsby’s illusion is never

destroyed" (99–100). Dexter, in the end, attains an epiphanic moment of vision, whereas Gatsby's "unwavering devotion" (*Gatsby* 115) and "extraordinary gift for hope" (*Gatsby* 6) eclipse his view of the truth.

6. Gerald Brenan, an aspiring writer, whom Woolf and her husband Leonard visited in Spain in the spring of 1923 (Hussey 41–42).

7. In her 1924 essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," Virginia Woolf boldly declared that "on or about December 1910 human character changed" (qtd. in Briggs 7). In Briggs's view, the essay "provides a critique of the realist novel in general and Arnold Bennett in particular. . . . 1910 was the date she selected to distinguish Bennett's generation, the Edwardians, from her own" (8).

8. And, as Dean R. Baldwin has admitted, "It is tempting to analyze this story from a Freudian perspective and to see it as an unconscious portrait of frustration and repressed lesbianism through the eyes of a girl too young and inexperienced to know the full meaning of what she says about her teacher. In such a reading, Slater's pins would be phallic symbols and Miss Craye's comments a thinly veiled criticism of men in general" (53–54). Such an approach might be partly vindicated by Woolf's comment about the story in a 1927 letter to Vita Sackville-West—that she had just written "a nice little story about Sapphism, for the Americans" (qtd. in Hussey 165).

9. In 1927, Fitzgerald listed for an interviewer the books that had "been the greatest influence on [his] mind" at different stages of his life: "At 18, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*—Oscar Wilde," he noted (Brucoli and Baughman 83). Like his creator, Amory Blaine similarly passes several of his formative years under Wilde's spell. After "he found *Dorian Gray*," Amory "tried hard to look at Princeton through the satiated eyes of Oscar Wilde and Swinburne"; for a brief interval, he even responds to the moniker of Dorian Gray (*Paradise* 54). Sergio Perosa writes that "The presence of Oscar Wilde is clearly recognizable in the general tone of *This Side of Paradise*," and that Wilde "was a suggestive source for Amory's decadent attitude toward the world" (23). For his part, Lehan considers Anthony Patch in *The Beautiful and Damned* "a much better illustration of Wilde's dandy" (22). (Wilde's name appears in both novels [*Paradise* 6, 53–54; *Beautiful* 370].) For that matter, Gatsby himself, as an "Oggsford" (*Gatsby* 179), with his practiced "elocution" and "poise" (181) and his "gorgeous pink rag of a suit" (162) (not to mention his pseudo-British expression "old sport"), strikes us as a bit of an anachronistic dandy.

10. As a further sign of Woolf's and Fitzgerald's Paterian aesthetic, the impression produced by the light over the water proves far more significant than the light itself. Mrs. Ramsay herself identifies with the longest-lasting beam of the lighthouse, while for Gatsby (Nick speculates) the green light at the end of Daisy's dock signifies the nearness of the dream "that he could hardly fail to grasp" (189). Thus, in each novel, the character's impression of the light over the water reflects a hope to withstand the flow of time—but do Mrs. Ramsay and Gatsby know their impression for what it truly is?

11. While the extent to which Cubism may have influenced Fitzgerald's work remains a matter of speculation, it is quite likely that he was well aware of the movement. During their time in France, the Fitzgeralds developed a close relationship with Gerald and Sara Murphy, whose "close friends" included Picasso and Fernand Léger (Brucoli 200). According to Brucoli, "Fitzgerald's first mention" of the Murphys "is a *Ledger* entry for August 1924, although they could have met as early as May in Paris" (196). During this time, Fitzgerald was working on *The Great Gatsby*; the typescript was sent to Maxwell Perkins on 27 October 1924 (Brucoli 206). Brucoli further reports that "[b]etween 1922 and 1930 Gerald Murphy completed ten paintings that combined minute detail with Cubist techniques" (200). Ronald Berman tells us that "Picasso admired Murphy's work," and notes that Picasso used

Gerald as a subject and “did many drawings of Sara” during this period (“F. Scott” 130). In *Fitzgerald’s Mentors*, Berman writes that Gerald Murphy frequently discussed his ideas about “artistic technique” with his friends (78) and goes on to assert that he “influenced Fitzgerald’s visual perception of objects and scenes” (69). The various perspectives from which we learn about Gatsby—Nick’s, Jordan’s, those of guests at his parties, and information that Nick gleans from other sources—combine to form a somewhat fragmented portrait that might well be described as Cubist.

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