



Out of Minnesota: Mythography and Generational Poetics in the Writings of Bob Dylan and F. Scott Fitzgerald

James D. Bloom

Affinities

“You’ve been through all of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s books. You’re very well read. It’s well known.” So runs a memorable line in Bob Dylan’s “Ballad of a Thin Man” on his 1965 album *Highway 61 Revisited*. Not only did this song provide “an instant catchphrase for the moral, generational, and racial divisions” that, in Greil Marcus’ formulation, separated the cognoscenti from the “squares” (8-9); this album also marked Dylan’s controversial introduction to LP buyers of his paradigm-shifting hybrid, “folk rock.” Brian Morton’s 1991 novel, *The Dylanist*, describes the appeal of this watershed: “Dylan gave . . . hope: He showed that you could make your life a work of art” (91). Morton’s protagonist “loved the way” Dylan “remained fluid, reinventing himself endlessly, refusing to be trapped by other people’s expectations.” Reflecting the pervasiveness of this appeal, Fred Goodman’s social history of rock-music business declared Dylan “unquestionably the most influential artist of his generation” (96).

In view of Dylan’s singular impact on his generation, his citation of Fitzgerald points to the aspiration and the achievement that place both writers among the select few, among a handful of modern writers who turned themselves into generational idols and their work into durable models. Dylan’s famous 1965 breakthrough (the momentum of which persisted through his 1975 album *Desire*) clinched this icon status. The decisive point in this breakthrough occurred at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival, when Dylan scandalized fans by marrying his signature acoustic folk protest style with a seemingly more “commercial” electric

rock-and-roll idiom. Ratifying this sea-change, Dylan framed this “folk-rock” assault on generic boundaries with the release of two albums, *Bringing it all Back Home* and *Highway 61 Revisited*. Fellow protest folksinger Phil Ochs’ reaction to one cut on *Highway 61* illustrates this impact: “Phil, a huge fan of Dylan to begin with, was thunderstruck by this latest composition,” entitled “Mr. Tambourine Man.” Ochs believed that “Dylan, already being labeled a spokesperson for his generation . . . had suddenly in the course of one song, come dangerously close to becoming a generation’s poet” (Schumacher 82).

Beyond such claims for Dylan as the 1960s generational poet, which invite obvious comparisons with Fitzgerald’s status as a generational novelist in the 1920s—another youth-centered decade, and beyond coincidental geographical parallels—each artist’s bourgeois Minnesota origins, the affinity between the two artists rests most significantly on a shared career narrative and cultural critique. Dylan’s early song, “North Country Blues,” a reminder of their shared Minnesota background, sums up this shared aesthetic as the discovery that “there ain’t nothing here now to hold them.” This poetics of unmooring lies at the heart of what Ronald Berman characterizes as “the movement in Fitzgerald . . . toward existential heroism” (*World* 114) and the product of this movement: an art that recurrently depicts inconclusive arrivals, such as *Tender is the Night* hero Dick Diver’s incessant beginnings of a “career . . . like Grant’s in Galena” consisting well into middle age of “biding his time . . . in one town or another”(315), with each town-to-town movement impelled by the decision Dylan affirms in “A Hard Rain’s Gonna Fall,” as the decision to keep “goin’ on out,” the commitment reaffirmed throughout his songs, to “move on to the next hope” with “hard-eyed . . . skepticism” (Edmundson 54) in the face of whatever defeat or humiliation looms.

Careers

This sort of language also greeted the 1920 publication of Fitzgerald’s first novel, *This Side of Paradise*, and the later turns in Fitzgerald’s career that came to be regarded as betrayals by many of his fans (Mangum 3-7). *This Side of Paradise* came “to influence us profoundly,” according to the publisher, autobiographer, and self-appointed generational spokesman Donald Friede. Fitzgerald “set the pattern for the mood of the day,” laying a “solid foundation for the basic philosophy of the whole decade. . . . We were never the same again” (180). Favoring Dylan, English critic Michael Gray made the Fitzgerald-Dylan parallel explicit in suggesting that “there is a sense in which, more fully than Fitzgerald, Dylan created a generation” (5). Similarly, David Dunaway argues that “for the generation coming-of-age in the 1960s . . . there was no comparable . . . influence” to Dylan’s. Dunaway elaborates by associating Dylan with earlier, cultural paradigm-shifters in an account recalling Fitzgerald’s meteoric rise between 1920 and 1925. “Like that of Rimbaud, Dylan’s recognition came impossibly fast, but being a god turns out to be a short-lived occupation.” Consequently,

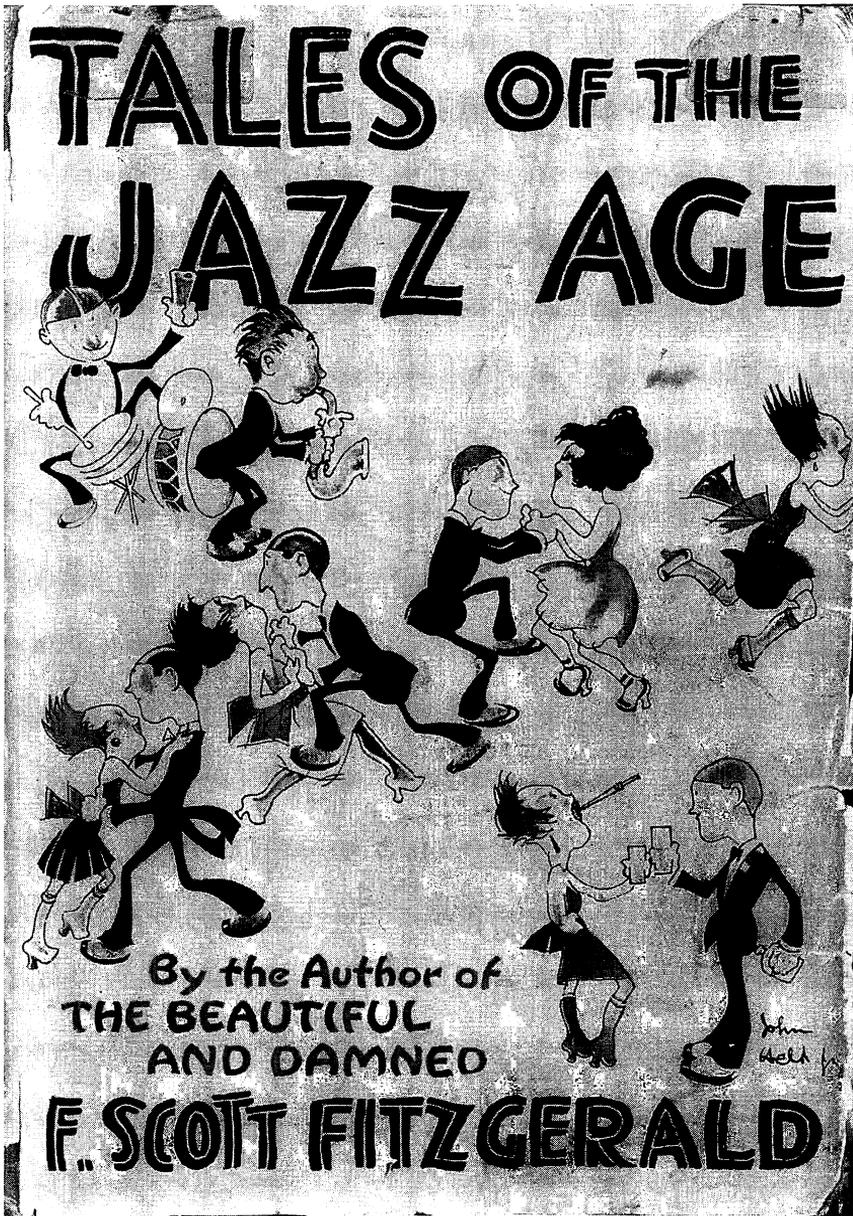


Figure 1: Cover of F. Scott Fitzgerald's 1922 book, *Tales of the Jazz Age*. Courtesy of the Berg Collection of English and American Literature, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

Dylan “has spent many years of his life trying to get to where he once was. To find another writer who so thoroughly affected his time, one has to probe in history—Voltaire, Shakespeare, Dickens” (154).

Dunaway’s potted history of cultural change recalls Nick Carraway’s mid-novel rhapsody in *The Great Gatsby* equating the eponymous hero with “a son of God” (105) as well as his closing summary of his own “awkward unpleasant” (185) effort to return home. Dunaway’s view of Dylan points to *Gatsby* as the center of Dylan’s debt to Fitzgerald’s legacy and underscores the lasting vitality of that legacy. Dylan’s seizure of this legacy constitutes an enrichment, in contrast to the appropriations of it that became especially marked during the Reagan-era plutocracy revival—the Jay McInerney era to chroniclers of American fiction. A *Gatsby*-like Roaring 20s look (derived from a 1974 screen adaptation starring Robert Redford as *Gatsby*) briefly colored fashion advertising in the early eighties (Hurowitz), and at the end of the decade Calvin Klein turned to *Gatsby*—along with *Madame Bovary* and *The Sun Also Rises*—to caption print-ads for a new fragrance called *Obsession* (Foltz), while *New York Times* columnist Anthony Lewis more solemnly devoted an entire column to the Reagan administration’s uncannily *Gatsby*-like “emptiness” and the way it “corrupted the American Dream.” Four months earlier a *Times* editorial argued that “the eighties aren’t so far past the twenties” inasmuch as “Jay Gatsby would be right at home today” in the company of Michael Milken and Ivan Boesky. More recently, an Atlanta antiques shop called *Gatsby’s* drew national media attention when it bought the auctioned belongings of convicted CIA mole Aldrich Ames.

Unlike such merchandising ventures, Dylan’s citation of Fitzgerald goes beyond name-dropping and glamour-mongering. In the context of Dylan’s larger body of work, his Fitzgerald line belongs to an oeuvre-saturating acknowledgement of his debt to Fitzgerald and a profitable reinvestment of that legacy. In sarcastically singling Fitzgerald out as an index of cultural arrival, a measure of cultural-capital, Dylan prompts listeners to the songs of his most influential and most conspicuously literary period, between 1964–1975, to account for Fitzgerald’s endurance as artistic resource and incitement.

This affiliation extends beyond obvious biographical parallels between the two Minnesota college dropouts who grew up non-Protestant in America’s Lutheran heartland before heading east to triumph as artists, to transform radically their respective media, and to become generational icons. Dylan’s pursuit of this Fitzgeraldian agenda seems most evident in his refashioning of Bobby Zimmerman into Bob Dylan. This move recalls how Jimmy Gatz, also a fugitive from the Lake Superior littoral, where he fatefully rescued a grateful tycoon’s yacht, began refashioning himself into Jay Gatsby. The extent to which Dylan “sprang from a Platonic conception of himself” (106) and thus the extent to which Dylan, like Fitzgerald, regards “the crafting of identity as demiurgic activity” (Weinstein 131) resonates in Martha Bayles’ image of “Zimmerman hanging around every coffeehouse in Greenwich Village, playing for pennies and

promoting a mythic identity as 'Bob Dylan,' a precocious drifter who had spent his youth traveling the highways and byways and learning his music directly from the folk" (210-217). This mythic identity contrasts markedly with the prosaic stability of Dylan's Hibbing, Minnesota, boyhood in "the Jewish mercantile middle class of America's Midwest" (Friedlander 136) and his brief stint at the University of Minnesota before departing for Greenwich Village in 1960.

Such transformations involve efforts to ride the zeitgeists of their respective decades—in Gatsby's becoming a sporty Anglophile bootlegger and in Dylan's becoming an indignant bohemian iconoclast. "By taking a new name," biographer Justin Kaplan notes, "an unfinished person may hope to enter into more dynamic—but not necessarily more intimate—transactions, both with the world outside and with his or her 'true soul,' the naked self." The description of Gatsby's self-transformation in chapter 6 of the novel stresses its lack of "intimacy" and the extent to which both Gatsby himself as well as his various audiences only got to regard him at a distance: as an "invention," as a "conception," as a "legend," and as "news" (103-104). This chapter also emphasizes the turbulence or "dynamism" of Gatz's metamorphosis with such verbs as "spin" and "rock" and "tangle," complemented by images of Gatsby as a master of "bracing" outdoor manual labor (104-105).

Romantic Readiness

As a commentator on his own pursuit of such dynamic transactions and on the conditions shaping it, Dylan also takes on attributes of Nick Carraway, the commentator and Fitzgerald alter-ego, who records Gatsby's transformations. Like Dylan, *Gatsby* changes his name, with Carraway registering both Gatsby's "dynamic transactions" and his own repression of intimacy. In the confession that opens *Gatsby*, Carraway remembers joining in disparaging college friends' "quivering . . . revelations" with an insistence that "the world be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever" (6). With its refrain, "I was so much older then/ I'm younger than that now," Dylan's 1964 song "My Back Pages" even more emphatically enunciates a similarly divided stance. After the singer recalls his quest for a world "at moral attention" by picturing himself "in a soldier's stance," he stresses in the last stanza his once overly vigilant antipathy to intimacy: "my noble guard stood hard when abstract threats/Too noble neglect/Deceived me into thinking I had something to protect."

Dylan's confession early in "My Back Pages" of having "dreamed/ Romantic facts of musketeers/Foundationed deep somehow" pointedly aligns his persona with the most pronounced effort *Gatsby*'s narrator makes: finding or making "something gorgeous" out of "everything for which I have unaffected scorn" (6). The tension this effort produces helps account for Carraway's admittedly "rather literary" (8) voice. This voice swerves repeatedly in its account of Gatsby, sometimes displaying and sometimes chastening its own romantic excesses. In their self-satisfied version, these excesses appear as "romantic readiness" (6) and,

in the censorious version, as “appalling sentimentality” (118). Such responses to *Gatsby*, to “the romantic speculation he inspired” (48), reflect the narrator’s own susceptibilities to sentimental and romantic constructions. These surface in his early attraction to Jordan Baker, to “the way the last sunshine fell with romantic affection upon her glowing face” (18)—an attraction for which he later fastidiously censures himself—and in the voyeuristic rhapsody his “restless eye” prompts as it “picks out the romantic women on Fifth Avenue” and follows home in “the enchanted metropolitan twilight” as “loitered” with fellow solitaries “in front of windows” (61–62). Recurrently showing Nick as a window-gazer (182, 184), Fitzgerald has him evoke and embody here the romance of voyeurism and resigned exclusion that the Japanese novelist Haruki Murakami’s appreciation of Dylan locates at the core of his achievement: “His voice,” which sounds “like a kid standing at the window watching the rain” (345), like the rain repeatedly filtering Nick’s and the reader’s closing glimpses of *Gatsby* (180–183). This romance of voyeurism abounds in Dylan’s writing, though perhaps nowhere as effusively and self-reproachfully as in the 1966 *Blonde on Blonde* cut, “Visions of Johanna,” which opens with the singer observing “Louise and her lover so entwined” and then tempting listeners with rumors of “the all-night girls’ escapades out on the E train,” only to deride, after a drawn-out harmonica interruption, his Carrawayesque alter-ego as a “little boy lost” who “takes himself so seriously” while recalling her “farewell kiss to me.”

Despite the Dylan singer’s projecting this voyeuristic self-regard onto an alter-ego and despite Nick’s self-reassurance that “no one would ever know or disapprove” of his Romanticized voyeurism, of course both the reader or listener and retrospective narrator or singer “know,” though perhaps only Fitzgerald’s narrator “disapproves.” While Nick’s seemingly conclusive abandonment of the ambiguous metropolis for the straightforward Midwest—the “city” in the “West” where “dwellings are still called through decades by a family’s name”—appears to confirm this censure, the confounding of any linear sense of arrival and departure at the end of *Gatsby* erodes the moral high ground on which Nick strives to stand, both in abandoning Eastern urban “sophistication and in reproaching his “younger and more vulnerable” (5) self.

American Time-Space

The contrast between Carraway, the decamping narrator, and Fitzgerald, his doggedly metropolitan author, also anticipates Dylan’s narrative geography and the array of inconclusive arrivals and provisional departures this geography contains. One of Dylan’s geographical narratives transforms an abandonment of the Midwest, which Dylan also views retrospectively and metonymically as simply “the West,” into a disheartening inescapable “story of the West.” “Talking New York,” the very first song on Dylan’s first album concerns a guitar-toting young man “ramblin’ outta the wild West/Leavin’ towns that” the singer claims to “love the best” as he “come into New York town.” Just as his incredulity at

“buildings goin’ up to the sky” echoes Carraway’s memorable view of “the city rising up across the river as the city seen for the first time” (73), so too Dylan’s image of his West as a congeries of towns in “Talking New York” calls to mind Carraway’s confession of his preference for “the bored, sprawling, swollen towns beyond the Ohio” over the “superiority” of the East (184). Dylan plays with familiar East-West “superiority/inferiority” tensions in showing the song’s hero “in one of them coffee-houses” in Greenwich Village where the proprietor unwittingly affirms the narrator’s western authenticity by rejecting him, telling him “You sound like a hillbilly/We want folksingers.” Calling someone a “hillbilly,” as Cecelia Tichi observes, encapsulates a broad historical and sociological narrative by which a monied, mannered, urban East has sought to exclude by disparagement and condescension a presumably vulgar, upstart, disruptive West (133-34). Carraway invokes this narrative with the realization that *Gatsby* “has been after all a story of the West, after all—Tom and Gatsby, Daisy and Jordan, and I were all Westerners, and perhaps we possessed some deficiency in common which made us subtly unadaptable to Eastern life” (184).

In an ironic turn at the end of “Talking New York,” the singer’s return to the West, his announcement that he “headed out for them western skies” becomes self-canceling, like the first ending, the autobiographical homecoming ending of Nick Carraway’s own narrative. After this first ending seems to resolve Nick’s own autobiographical plot, Fitzgerald shows Nick recollecting a return to New York on business about a year after *Gatsby*’s murder. This return prompts the novel’s actual conclusion, Carraway’s famous transhistorical meditation, his evocation and imaginative replacement of the suburban Long Island landscape where most of *The Great Gatsby* takes place (189).

Deferred and alternative endings abound in Dylan’s songs, often turning on his signature switches between guitar and harmonica self-accompaniment. More memorably, endings turn on Dylan’s management of lyrics and narrative, as in “The Ballad of Frankie Lee and Judas Priest.” In a false farewell reminiscent of *Gatsby*, Dylan’s would-be Village folksinger in “Talkin’ New York” welcomes the “western skies” to which he retreats with the phrase “Howdy, East Orange”—naming a suburban New Jersey city about ten miles from Manhattan, far closer to Times Square than even West Egg. This desire for and irreparable exile from the West surfaces comically in a single line on Dylan’s next album, *Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan*, in “Bob Dylan’s Blues.” The line,

The Lone Ranger and Tonto
They are ridin’ down the line
Fixin’ everybody’s troubles
Everybody’s ‘cept mine

sardonically deprives the singer of the superior virtue and justice public mythmakers customarily attribute to the West.

In a more elegiac vein, “Bob Dylan’s Dream” on Dylan’s next album, situates the Dylan persona “on a train going west,” a stance identical to Carraway’s evoking “vivid memories” of school friends on Chicago-bound trains at the end of *Gatsby* (183). Here Dylan’s narrator recollects “the first few friends I had” and the way “we longed for nothin’ and were quite satisfied” in their illusion of immunity from “the world outside” and the conviction that “we could never get old.” Dylan’s narrator seems to buy into Gatsby’s illusion that “of course you can repeat the past” (116) until mid-song, when he points out that the “chances” of recovering this state “really was a million to one” and in closing merges this Gatsby stance with the chastening Carraway position that opens this exchange, the reminder that “you can’t repeat the past” (116). Just as Fitzgerald lets the gap between a diminished present and an irretrievable past linger by having both Carraway and Gatsby repeat the phrase, “can’t repeat the past,” Dylan’s recorded vocal and instrumental performance reinforces this gap. It punctuates each intimation of his diminished present by interrupting the vocal’s steady guitar accompaniment with fermata harmonica solos.

Though elegiac strains in both works make time and history appear intractable, both Dylan’s songs and *Gatsby* present space and geography as easily manipulated. Gatsby’s striking relocation of San Francisco to a transcontinental “midwest” (67) and the drunken displacement of Biloxi to Tennessee (134) later in *Gatsby* belong to the same cartographic revisionism whereby Dylan places East Orange under “western skies.” Dylan also indulges in such remapping in “Just Like Tom Thumb Blues,” which sets a redundantly bilingual “Rue Morgue Avenue” in Juarez, and in “Bob Dylan’s 115th Dream,” which shifts the Mayflower landing to “the Bowery slums.”

Dylan elaborates this Gatsbyesque move most extravagantly at the close of his 1975 ballad “Tangled Up In Blue,” a trans-American odyssey like *Gatsby*. The song opens with the singer “headin’ out for the East Coast” and then abandoning a “car we drove as far as we could” somewhere “out West” and then working “in the great north woods and drifting down to New Orleans.” It ends with the narrator “still on the road headin’ for another joint.” All this map-scrambling moves, like Fitzgerald’s most accomplished prose, “in two directions at once” (McInerney 26), and culminates, like *Gatsby*, in giving the last word to the narrator’s sententious recognition that “the past was close behind.” Thus Dylan’s remembered odyssey ultimately fails, though providing much pleasure, in the form of verbal pyrotechnics, instrumental exuberance, and vocal surprise in reaching this realization. This argument between extravagance and fatalism gives narrative and descriptive credence to his closing realization that he and whomever he encountered on his odyssey “just saw” all the pursuit and evasion the song renders “from a different point of view.” With the acknowledgment of this contingency, the singer achieves a Carraway-like distance on his own odyssey. This distance promises liberation from youthful parochialism, the code of the Carraway “clan,” (7) or from the “illusion” that Dylan, voice dropping, associates with “all the people we used to know” at the end of “Tangled Up in Blue.”

This distance also provides both writers with the same sort of rhetorical leverage by turning their residual attachment to a lost home in the West into a distant, even Olympian, vantage point for viewing Americanness *tout court*. According to David Minter, “Fitzgerald made the history and myths of the U.S.—promises kept and betrayed—his own” (112). Dylan claims a similar agenda as the omniscient first-person narrator who tells the history of American violence in “God on Our Side,” on his third album. Dylan follows Carraway in postulating the midwestern perspective as the national one: “My name it ain’t nothing, my age it ain’t less, the *country* I come from they call the midwest.”

This critical, even jeremiadic, distance presents all of U.S. history as a fiction, a story, a collection of hegemony-making books. In the last verse of “With God on Our Side,” Dylan admits that “words fill my head” rather than facts or convictions. A similar recognition informs both the self-referential epigraph to *Gatsby* and the opening paragraphs, which show the narrator mulling over his father’s words, along with his subsequent timetable name-scribbling (64). Dylan’s sense of reality as verbal construct appears most succinctly in “Love Minus Zero/No Limit”:

In the dime stores and bus stations
 People talk of situations
 Read books repeat quotations
 Draw conclusions on the wall.

As Carraway illustrates at the end of *Gatsby*, the advantage of such a conviction lies in the susceptibility of “reality” to revision, critique, and erasure: “an obscene word, scrawled by some boy with a piece of brick, stood out clearly in the moonlight and I erased it, drawing my shoe raspily along the stone” (188). Central to both writers’ sensibilities is the understanding that the power of erasure and revision, which rest on an appreciation of the constructedness of our verbal and ideological universes, at once provokes and disciplines romanticizing impulses.

In Dylan’s songs and in *Gatsby* this preoccupation with words extends to larger verbal packages, books. Early in “With God on Our Side” Dylan sings, “the history books tell it, they tell it so well the cavalry charged and the Indians fell,” while the next verse announces via poetic inversion, “the names of the heroes I was made to memorize.” The penultimate verse appeals to the most canonic book of all, citing the Bible’s account of Judas betraying Jesus, but it leaves an opening for the reader to step outside its ordained constructions and those of school history books, by reminding the listener, “you’ll have to decide whether Judas Iscariot had God on his side.” From Tom Buchanan’s proto-Nazi reading recommendations in chapter one (17) to *Gatsby*’s bookish self-fashioning as reflected in the Franklinesque plan-making that Mr. Gatz presents to the narrator before *Gatsby*’s funeral and in the Hopalong Cassidy dime novel in which the narrator finds *Gatsby*’s life-plan, a similar awareness of how books and words make people and



Figure 2: Bob Dylan with Joan Baez in the Civil Rights March on Washington, D.C., August 28, 1963. *Courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration.*

peoples—or nations—pervades *Gatsby*. Fitzgerald plays on the distinctly American reverberations in the word “West” by inscribing Hopalong Cassidy, as does Dylan with recurring references to the dime-novel and Hollywood West: to the Lone Ranger, to the Cisco Kid, to cavalry-and-Indian battles.

Dylan’s most conspicuous stress on the verbal and imaginative construction of America comes in “Bob Dylan’s 115th Dream,” which provides a critical retrospect on the familiar stock of formative discovery and settlement narratives with references and allusions that recall the “Dutch explorers” and the “New world” that “pandered” to these explorers’ utopian fantasies in Carraway’s closing meditation. Dylan’s singer frames his announcement, “I think I’ll *call* it America I *said* as we hit land” (emphasis added), with references to “riding on the Mayflower” and to “Captain Arab” (for Ahab) “saying boys forget the whale.” The song closes with the narrator’s abandonment of the New World, leaving “Arab stuck on some whale,” out West and “married to the deputy sheriff of the jail.” Dylan’s dream song saves for last “the funniest thing,” his final encounter with “three ships” whose captain “said his name was Columbus,” to whom the singer “just said, ‘Good luck.’”

Standing at once beyond and within such constructions of self and nation, both Fitzgerald’s narrator and the recurring voice of Dylan’s first, most influential, decade strive for and achieve a cosmopolitan perspective that takes them and their audience beyond the U.S. western substratum of their work. The cover picture of Dylan’s suggestively titled 1965 album *Bringing It All Back Home*

depicts the artist very much at home, viewing the album's owner from a worldly rather than a parochial vantage point. Shot in "an old Victorian mansion" along the Hudson, this mockingly Gatsbyesque "stagy cover photo" situates the performer in "a setting" that was "elegant and chic" with Dylan looking "alert and interested . . . [,] not detached as he had been on his previous albums" and projecting an "image of choice—the sophisticated Bob Dylan—the jet-setter, arbiter of taste. . . . [,] not some hayseed folksinger" (Spitz 272). The most emphatic announcement of Dylan's integrating worldliness—politics and commerce—with the imperatives of artistic expression appears in the foreground of this cover. A cover-within-a-cover picture of *Time* features President Lyndon Baines Johnson as man-of-the-year standing out in a field of competing covers, a blurred Jean Harlow magazine and a fanned-out pile of albums by blues and folk artists who influenced Dylan. The pairing here of the "respectable" history-producing *Time*, which with its ubiquitous, Big Brother-like "staring covers" threatened, according to Allen Ginsberg, to "run" every American's "emotional life" ("America"), with down-market fanzine, recalls Fitzgerald's agenda in "evoking newspapers, magazines, and their influence" in *Gatsby*: to indict the way the mass-circulation magazine "represents coerced common judgment" (Berman, *World 135*; cf. *Gatsby 48, 103*) or, as the *a clef* Dylan figure in Scott Spencer's novel, *Rich Man's Table*, puts it :

What kills you is the consensus, what you read in the papers and hear on the television, it's an invisible fence of received wisdom, and government-inspected ideas, it's the conspiracy of common knowledge. Common knowledge is worse than lies. Common knowledge eats the truth and then shits it out and buries it. (236)

In the background of this album cover, holding a bent elbow over LBJ's face, a swarthy raven-haired young woman in a short-sleeved red peignoir points a cigarette at an off-white neoclassical mantle while looking defiantly at the camera. Her pose intimates stereotypically Old World worldliness, if not decadence. Evidence of Dylan's attention to pitting clichés of European sophistication and corruption against equally compelling, equally hackneyed, ideas of American innocence and ignorance surfaced comically in the utopianly titled talking blues, "I Shall Be Free," on Dylan's second album, in which the singer imagines:

Well, my telephone rang it would not stop.
It's President Kennedy callin' me up.
He said, 'My friend Bob, what do we need to make the country
grow?'

Posing as presidential confidant, the sort of mysteriously influential role popularly imputed to *Gatsby* (*Gatsby 48, 103*), Dylan recalls his counsel:

I said, 'My friend, Jack, Brigitte Bardot, Anita Ekberg, Sophia Loren.' (Put 'em all in the same room with Ernest Borgnine.)

A similar though subtler play on images informs the *Bringing It All Back Home* cover: In contrast to the woman's pose, Dylan faces the camera with a weary gaze, his lips on the verge of pout. He wears all muted colors and shares the foreground of the photo with a gray long-haired kitten set between his hands and staring straight at the camera and with a Cold War-style yellow and black "fallout shelter" sign turned on its side and partly blurred by the overexposure-induced circle of light that serves as an inner frame for the photo. This *mise-en-scene* seems to aim at the "continuous and cumulative effect" Lionel Trilling ascribed to Fitzgerald's *Gatsby* style, which weds "tenderness" with "a true firmness of moral judgment" (243-44).

Critique also seems to inform the topical allusiveness that textures *Gatsby*: allusions to immigration-policy controversies; to popular songs, movies, and familiar advertisements (Berman, *Modern* 19-20, 24-28, 46-48, 128). Recurring snippets from the 1920s hit song "Ain't We Got Fun," the looming image of an optician's billboard, Myrtle Wilson's utopian shopping fantasies, and Daisy Buchanan's vision of *Gatsby* as "you know the advertisement of the man" (125) all illustrate the extent to which consumption and mass entertainment contest Fitzgerald's narrator's opening demand for unstinting "moral attention" (6). Topicality (in the form of Bette Davis, Hitchcock's *Psycho*, James Meredith, Medgar Evers, Emmett Till, boxers Davey Moore and Hurricane Carter, hit man Joey Gallo, No-Doz caffeine pills, and pillbox hats) functions similarly throughout Dylan's songs. Often this topicality belongs to an American exceptionalist utopianism and the claims to virtue it sanctions, as in Dylan's "Gates of Eden," "The Hour that the Ship Comes In," and Dylan's answer to the labor anthem, "I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hill Last Night," "I Dreamed I Saw Augustine." In contrast to these compositions' meditative and elegiac politics, Dylan protest songs, such as "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carol" (Edmundson 52-3) and "Masters of War," call to mind Nick Carraway's unsettling turn from "reserving all judgments" (5), the balancing of contraries and ironies and ambiguities that Fitzgerald judged the crux of genius in *The Jazz Age*, to the expressly moralizing sentence Fitzgerald has Carraway pronounce against the Buchanans at the end of *Gatsby*. Carraway states, "They were careless people, Tom and Daisy—they smashed things and creatures around them and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made" (187-88). Morally charged commentary in both artists' writings seems at once to prompt and to deny hopes of social betterment.

Conclusion: Sharing an Impasse

Both Fitzgerald's and Dylan's ambivalent stress on worldly, even topical, engagement demands a commensurate verbal style. In his reassessment of

Gatsby, George Garret calls it a “wildly experimental novel” with a “composite style whose chief demonstrable point appears to be the inadequacy of any style (or any single means of perception or single point of view) by which to do justice to the story” (114). Dylan articulates just such an artistic credo in his early song, “Restless Farewell,” which begins complaining that “the silent night is shattered by the sounds inside my mind,” prompting the singer to turn back to consider “the signs,” just as Carraway ponders signs in the form of a Long Island Railroad timetable and an optician’s billboard. After an interruptive, contemplation-provoking harmonica break, Dylan concludes:

I got the restless hungry feeling
That don’t mean no one no good.

He then softens this confession of malevolence with a Whitmanesque gesture, a profession of egalitarian inclusiveness:

. . . everything I’ve been saying, friend,
You could say it just as good.
You’re right from your side and I’m right from mine.
We’re both just one too many mornings and a thousand miles behind.

Dylan’s rhyming here of “good” with itself hammers home the inadequacy, the inevitability of stylistic impasse, the recognition of which Garret imputes to Fitzgerald. This recognition echoes in Carraway’s resignation at his failure to communicate with Tom Buchanan at the close of *Gatsby*: “I felt suddenly as though I were talking to a child” (188).

The management of such difficulty in *Gatsby* and Dylan’s songs is remarkably similar. It consists of rehearsing the inadequacies Garret cites in order to overcome them, embracing stock vocabularies and tropes as a means of purging their staleness. Christopher Ricks (who treats Dylan as a legitimate heir to Fitzgerald’s precursor, Keats) praised Dylan as Shakespeare’s equal, citing Dylan’s “intuition as to how a cliché may incite reflection, and not preclude” it (“Clichés” 61; *Keats* 98). Such an intuition surfaces in Fitzgerald’s play on almost of all of Tom Buchanan’s global pronouncements—on the Nordic race (17), on “self-control” and in coining the cliché “Mr. Nobody From Nowhere” (137).

Fitzgerald’s rendering of Wolfsheim’s mawkish redundant reminiscence about the “old Metropole” rests on sustained elaboration of this intuition (74-75). While lunching with Carraway and Gatsby, Wolfsheim “brooded gloomily” under “Presbyterian nymphs”—a brutal counterpoint to the virile, Jewish, unabashedly corrupt Wolfsheim presiding over a space “filled with faces dead and gone. Filled with friends now gone forever.” The redundant phrase “dead and gone” and the presiding nymphs evoke a “sentimental atmosphere”—a decidedly clichéd ambience, which Fitzgerald empties of reassuring familiarity by having

Wolfsheim turn from the cliché to a cheerful account of his friend Rosy Rosenthal's gangland-style execution at the Metropole, a turn the narrator stretches with the observation that "a succulent hash" prompted Wolfsheim to forget the "sentimental atmosphere" he had established. Fitzgerald completes this scene's alienation effect with an oxymoronic modifier, which at once stresses the inadequacy of language to depict Wolfsheim and the narrator's pleasure in trying: "he began to eat with a ferocious delicacy."

Fitzgerald also purges "sentimental atmosphere" from matters even more susceptible to sentimentalizing, from "love" itself. As Leslie Fiedler observed, "For Fitzgerald, 'love' was essentially frustration and yearning"(316). Fiedler went on to ascribe Fitzgerald's antipathy to conventional, sentimental renderings of love to the way in which Fitzgerald "identified himself with that sexual revolution which the '20's thought of as their special subject." As the voice of a successor "sexual revolution," Dylan further unpacks the sentimental discourse of romance by disclosing its unspoken sexual underside, which the phrase "four-letter-word" usually fits, most forthrightly in the refrain and title phrase of "Love is Just A Four Letter Word."

This impetus and talent for unpacking bromides and platitudes also shapes many of Dylan's rhyme-and-image sequences. The 1965 "Tombstone Blues," for example, takes "Gypsy Davey" from an old English folk ballad and has him arrive with a "blowtorch" and an assistant from the Cisco Kid TV westerns, "his faithful slave Pedro." Pedro provides a stamp collection and, with it the hoariest modern American cliché of all, a phrase right out of Dale Carnegie's best-seller—"a fantastic collection of stamps to win friends and influence. . . ." In the 1965 recording, Dylan's voice pauses at "influence," thus calling into question its grammatical status: Is "influence" here Dale Carnegie's verb, minus its predicate, or a sentence-ending noun? After this pause, Dylan swerves away from Dale Carnegie's stock phrase and substitutes the expected predicate "people" with the phrase "his uncle." This substitution reinforces the cliché-defeating switch by breaking the rhyme-pattern in the verse (camps/ tramps/ stamps—uncles) as Dylan does throughout "Tombstone Blues."

The force of these lines also lies in their image juxtapositions, a characteristic of Dylan's style that peaked in the late sixties on the album *Blonde on Blonde* and in such narratives on the *John Wesley Harding* album as "The Ballad of Frankie Lee and Judas Priest." In the Wolfsheim passage above, Fitzgerald presents Carraway as a student of "startling juxtapositions," the most memorable of which may be the juxtaposition of Gatsby's soft, rich billowy shirts and Daisy's stormy crying (97-98). This stress on juxtaposition in *Gatsby* anticipates Fitzgerald's famous pronouncement in *The Crack Up* that "the test of a first-rate intelligence" is "the ability to hold to opposed ideas in the mind at the same time" (69). Just as Fitzgerald's *Gatsby* style results from the way his "sentences achieve an unhappy marriage" (Godden 80), Dylan's style in his most memorable songs rests on "awkward marriages" between melody and lyric, image and syntax (Thomson). The result in both writers' work is, in Philip Weinstein's assessment of Fitzgerald,

art that “mocks both closure and exposure” (143) and writing, in Frank Kermode’s verdict on Dylan, that’s “tough on allegorists” (188).

Throughout American literary history such resistance to allegory and antipathy to closure has marked the aspiration and the differentia of distinctly American writing, as hallmarks of the poet Emerson famously summoned in 1844 the artist who provokes “the imagination . . . to flow and not to freeze,” the antithesis of the mystic who “nails a symbol to one sense, which was true for a moment but soon becomes old and false” (322). Leading up to Emerson’s account of language as “vehicular and transitive,” this devaluation of belief in favor of irresolution echoes in the “transitory moment” at the center of the narrator’s closing meditation in *Gatsby*, a meditation that follows from Nick’s inconclusive departure from the East and from the romance he sought there.

The “un-American” “mysticism” that Emerson disparages also figures as Fitzgerald’s antagonist in his rigorously ambivalent limning of Catholic priestcraft throughout his fiction. The most notable instances include Father Schwartz, whom Fitzgerald’s sympathetically severe narrator leaves “muttering inarticulate and heart-broken words in ‘Absolution,’” which Matthew Bruccoli cites as *Gatsby*’s precursor (*Babylon* 150; *Gatsby* vii-ix), and the defeated “papal cross” with which Dick Diver “blessed the [Riviera] beach” he created and from which his own corrosive charm and corrupting knowledge has banished him (*Tender* 5-6, 314). Similarly acknowledging the aesthetic appeal and the cognitive dubiousness of priestcraft, Dylan’s 1967 anti-allegory, “The Ballad of Frankie Lee and Judas Priest,” features an unnamed pallbearer reminding listeners that “nothing is revealed” before announcing “the moral of this story, the moral of this song.” This “moral” boils down to an admonition: “Don’t go mistaking paradise for that home across the road”—or, as *Gatsby* instructs, that home across the bay.

These two passages chasten utopianism while warning against the sort of “revelation” sanctioned by the apocalyptic and utopian ideologies to which *Gatsby*’s eponymous hero and his Veblenian antagonist, Tom Buchanan, both subscribe. This convergence illustrates the role that Fitzgerald and Dylan share, as anti-prophets who made myths of their *selves* while in their art they undermined the very ground on which such myths rest.

Works Cited

- Bayles, Martha. *Hole In Our Soul: The Loss of Beauty and Meaning in American Popular Music*. New York, 1994.
- Berman, Ronald. *The Great Gatsby and Fitzgerald’s World of Ideas*. Tuscaloosa, 1997.
- _____. *The Great Gatsby and Modern Times*. Urbana, 1994.
- Dunaway, David. “No Credit Given: The Underground Bob Dylan.” *Virginia Quarterly Review* 69 (Winter 1993):149-155.
- Dylan, Bob. *Lyrics, 1962-1985*. New York, 1985.

- Edmundson, Mark. "Tangled Up in Truth." *Civilization* 4 (October/November 1997):50-55.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Selected Writings*. Edited by William Gilman. New York, 1965.
- Fiedler, Leslie. *Love and Death in the American Novel*. 1960. Rev. 1966. Briarcliff Manor, NY, 1982.
- Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *Babylon Revisited and Other Stories*. New York, 1934.
- _____. *The Crack Up*. Edited by Edmund Wilson. New York, 1945.
- _____. *The Great Gatsby*. 1925. Edited by Matthew Bruccoli. New York, 1995.
- _____. *Tender Is the Night*. New York, 1934.
- Foltz, Kim. "A New Twist for Obsession." *New York Times* (15 August 1990): D19
- Friede, Donald. *The Mechanical Angel*. New York, 1948.
- Friedlander, Paul. *Rock and Roll: A Social History*. Boulder, 1996.
- Garrett, George. "Fire and Freshness: A Matter of Style in *The Great Gatsby*." *New Essays on The Great Gatsby*. Edited by Matthew Bruccoli. New York, 1985.
- Ginsberg, Allen. *Howl and Other Poems*. San Francisco, 1956.
- Godden, Richard. *Fictions of Capital: The American Novel From James to Mailer*. New York, 1990.
- Goodman, Fred *The Mansion on the Hill: Dylan, Young, Geffen, Springsteen and the Head-on Collision of Rock and Commerce*. New York, 1997.
- Gray, Michael. *Song and Dance Man: The Art of Bob Dylan*. New York, 1972.
- Hurowitz, B. "The 20's Roar Back Into Style," *Macleans* (2 August 1982): 30-33.
- Kaplan, Justin. "The Naked Self and Other Problems." in Pachter, Marc. *Telling Lives: The Biographer's Art*. New York, 1979.
- Kermode, Frank & Spender, Stephen. "The Metaphor at the End of the Funnel." *Esquire* (May 1972):109-118, 188.
- Lewis, Anthony. "The Great Gatsby." *New York Times* (6 August 1987): A 27.
- Life Styes of the Rich and Shady. *New York Times* (7 April 1987): A24.
- Mangum, Bryant. *A Fortune Yet: Money in the Art of F. Scott Fitzgerald*. New York, 1991.
- Marcus, Greil. *Invisible Republic: Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes*. New York, 1997.
- McInerney, Jay. "Fitzgerald Revisited." *New York Review of Books* (15 August 1991): 23-28.
- Minter, David. *A Cultural History of the American Novel From Henry James to William Faulkner*. New York, 1994.
- Morton, Brian. *The Dylanist*. New York, 1991.
- Murakami, Haruki. *Hard-Boiled Wonderland*. Tr. Alfred Birnbaum. 1991. New York, 1993.
- Ricks, Christopher. "Cliches." *The State of the Language*. Ed. Ricks & Leonard Michaels. Berkeley, 1981.

- _____. *Keats and Embarrassment*. London, 1974.
- Schumacher, Michael. *There But For Fortune: The Life of Phil Ochs*. New York, 1997.
- Spencer, Scott. *Rich Man's Table*. New York, 1998.
- Spitz, Bob. *Dylan: A Biography*. New York, 1989.
- Thomson, Liz. "Fighting in the Captain's Tower." *New Statesman & Society* (5 February 1992): 39-40.
- Ticchi, Cecilia. *High Lonesome: The American Culture of Country Music*. Chapel Hill, 1994.
- Trilling, Lionel. *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society*. 1950. New York, 1953.
- Weinstein, Arnold. *Nobody's Home: Speech, Self, and Place in American Fiction From Hawthorne to DeLillo*. New York, 1993.

