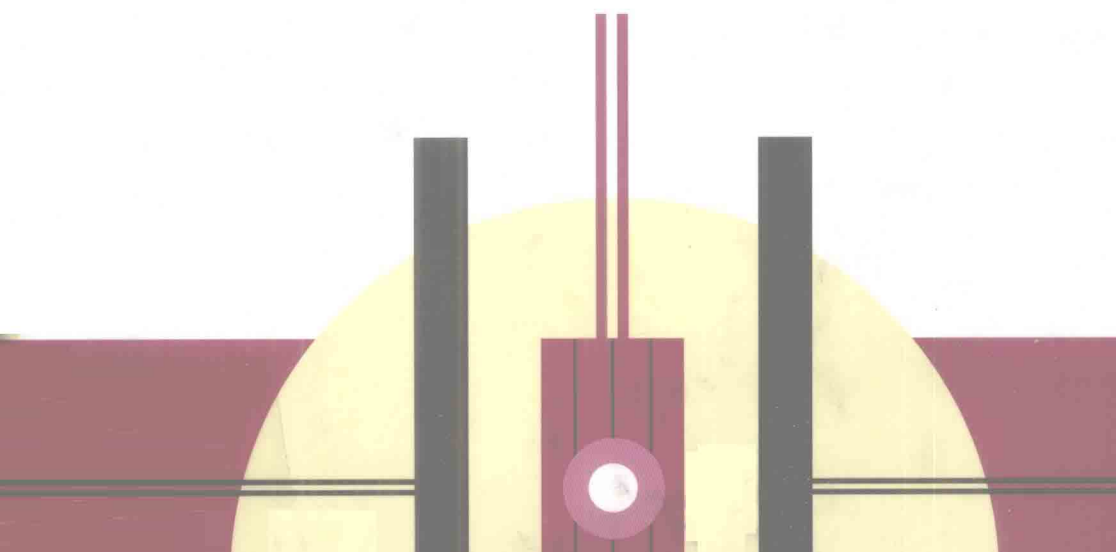


Fitzgerald-Wilson-Hemingway

Language and Experience

RONALD BERMAN



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Ronald Berman

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Introduction

We get a sense of immediacy from novels of the twenties. However, we are now further from *The Great Gatsby* and *The Sun Also Rises* than Lionel Trilling was from the late work of Henry James at the time of *The Liberal Imagination*. The twenties are rapidly receding. We need to do a certain amount of rediscovery, to examine terms that were in use then that mean something else now. Writers of the twenties dealt with concepts of experience, perception, and reality. They had ideas about what language could do and what literature might be. But we have elided meanings, and we assume that F. Scott Fitzgerald was a romantic whose themes were love and the American dream; that Edmund Wilson's criticism was based on common sense without much theory; that Hemingway succeeded in capturing experience by simplifying language, making it ever more precise. The facts are broader. Fitzgerald was a romantic but also a close student of romanticism, which is something different. Wilson was much concerned with writing as one of the "outcomes of science."¹ He was seriously interested in the transubstantiation of facts (the phrase comes from John Dewey) by language. Hemingway's best work is not a result of objectifying experience but rests, I think, on the uneasy awareness of its resistance to language.

From 1919 on, Fitzgerald's reviews, essays, and interviews displayed ideas about language. They were done in the absence of contemporary literary criticism—H. L. Mencken was useful in small doses, but Fitzgerald had justifiable contempt for the rest. He was well informed on

romantic theory, applying it ruthlessly to his own writing and to the work of other novelists. Books now coming into play remind us that he was an active critic.² His 1929 letter to John Peale Bishop about basing novels on any "philosophical system" indicates acquaintance, however partial, with both subjects.³ The letter is a stinging reminder of Fitzgerald's capacity for textual detail—as is the concurrent letter to Hemingway identifying good and bad points of *A Farewell to Arms*.

Fitzgerald had expectations about language and ideas. He recognized the arguments of romanticism and brought them up-to-date. We don't want to think of him as being himself "romantic" about the character, situation, or fate of Jay Gatsby. He applied doctrine developed by Coleridge, Keats, and Wordsworth. Life was short and one accepted that. It needed meaning—something literature supplied. But the statement of meaning was difficult, and in order to ascertain it, certain patterns of experience needed to be understood: the inexorable passage of time and life that compelled existence to define itself; the universal desire to repeat experience; the great constant of subjectivity. These things were also philosophical issues of the twenties: the idea of repeating early experience, for example, underlay Walter Lippmann's fairly hardheaded analysis of political idealism.⁴

While Fitzgerald often used the term "romantic" in his critical writing, it rarely applied to sensibility, sensation, or emotion. It did mean heightened perception of what he described as exactness of detail. His own diction was simple, representing an attempt to renew the significance of familiar things. In the margin of the typescript of *A Farewell to Arms*, he wrote about the reunion of Frederic Henry and Catherine at Stresa: "This is one of the most beautiful pages in all English literature." Here is the passage he had in mind: "If people bring so much courage to this world the world has to kill them to break them, so of course it kills them."⁵ It seems unremarkable, monosyllabic, repetitive. But it puts the pressure on words themselves. It may be that Hemingway's simplified language resonated in some special way, a way that the following passage conveys. Both writers base their attack on meaning on the conception—one should say the shock—of renewed familiarity: "Michaelis and this man reached her first but when they had torn open her shirtwaist still damp with perspiration they saw that her left breast

was swinging loose like a flap and there was no need to listen for the heart beneath. The mouth was wide open and ripped at the corners as though she had choked a little in giving up the tremendous vitality she had stored so long."⁶ The intellectual momentum is extraordinary, cutting from short bursts of action to longer, more conceptual ideas that impose—and also severely contain—meaning. Because nothing is sacred, the passage conjoins haberdashery and hardware and dying without a touch of metaphysics. There is no interpretation (Daisy's car swerves away "tragically," distanced both as object and conception), so the excluded is as meaningful as the included. Fitzgerald too had a fairly hard-edged idea of actual circumstance and of its disconnection from meanings.

Fitzgerald's novels, which are centrally about the creation of American identity, are not clarified by politics alone. The idea of "America" was connected to and modified by other terms such as "rise," "fall," and "civilization." The last of these terms—it is the great catch phrase of the decade—is on the small but crowded mind of Tom Buchanan. He is attuned to ideas that, at the end of their diaspora from William James and Walter Lippmann, alight finally on the *Saturday Evening Post*. They have to do with the idea of progress, disguised in the Jazz Age as success. When Babbitt speechifies about America to the realtors of Zenith, his subject seems at first out of place: "In other countries, art and literature are left to a lot of shabby bums living in attics and feeding on booze and spaghetti, but in America the successful writer or picture-painter is indistinguishable from any other decent business man."⁷ But the allusion makes sense; even in Zenith, "civilization" now is American. (We glory in the fact that of the four hundred or so colors known to humanity, "more than one-third are used in women's stockings."⁸) The "rise" of American civilization was one of the ideas in place during the twenties. Fitzgerald was on the other side of that idea. His characters live out the disputed issues of Americanism, immigration, and the new, uneasy relationship of province and metropolis. But they understand the difference between promise and embodiment.

Fitzgerald shared convictions that had for some time been aired by William James, Walter Lippmann, and George Santayana. The same is true of Edmund Wilson. Wilson, however, was a more rigorous thinker,

and he cast a wider net. Like Fitzgerald, he began to think about writing from the viewpoint of romanticism. In order to find some historical room for modernism, Wilson bypassed Victorian poetry, finding what he needed in Wordsworth and Shelley. Both his fiction and criticism in the late twenties make the point that romanticism provided the intellectual underpinning for modernism. He did not get that idea from literary histories; it came from Alfred North Whitehead's *Science and the Modern World* (1925) and his essays on symbolic logic.

Whitehead influenced Wilson profoundly, to the point of appearing as a character, the charismatic Professor Grosbeake, in *I Thought of Daisy*. Whitehead had worked out a theory of the translation of phenomena to language, a process that needed a good deal more than the words and ideas available to science. In fact, *Science and the Modern World* argued that science had to understand the larger language available to poetry. The central issue was that Wordsworthian poetry "expresses the concrete facts of our apprehension." This goes further than acknowledging that such poetry (in this case he refers to Shelley) symbolizes "joy," "peace," and "illumination." So far as Whitehead was concerned, we begin to understand through romanticism the description of the inorganic, the functioning of organisms, and "the full content of our perceptual experience."⁹

Wilson was able to write about symbolism and modernist poetry because of Whitehead's 1927 lectures on symbolic logic. Whitehead stated several major points: first among them, that "perception of the external world" depends upon its presentation; second, that there are "symbolic references" in almost every perceived thing or quantity. The latter, more complex than it looks, involves the idea that our own experience is "relational." Each "actual physical organism enters into the make-up of its contemporaries."¹⁰ Because of this input from Whitehead, *I Thought of Daisy* shares some of the critical importance of *Axel's Castle*. It follows Whitehead's work on poetry, notably his idea of "presentational immediacy." The phrase (originally Wordsworth's) means, for both Whitehead and Wilson, the ability to wield language complex enough to describe phenomena. One of Whitehead's most important points is that concrete, individual things, organic or not, become related to, even part of the conceiving mind. A problem is raised be-

cause, as we see in the cases of William James, Whitehead, and Wilson, this leads to the mystical side of romanticism.

On the scientific side, Whitehead seems to have formulated Wilson's systematic perception. Whitehead repeatedly stressed the importance of "colour" and "substance." These terms show up consistently in the symbolic logic essays, referring to the ways in which we react to things outside ourselves. They have a long history, and Whitehead himself seems to have found them in romantic poetry. In any case, he invariably describes the operation of light when he characterizes phenomena. It is as if he provided Wilson with a map: the governing idiom of the second (and most important) part of *I Thought of Daisy* describes ambient, reflected, and refracted light in immense detail. Santayana, a good representative of the turn-of-century generation, wrote that "the primacy of sight in our perception . . . makes light the natural symbol of knowledge." It is, he continued, "a logically natural link between the metaphysical and the actual."¹

From the consideration of this sector of ideas, Wilson began to think in terms of their equivalents. Whitehead had not been alone in requiring a language complex enough to do justice to perception; both William James and John Dewey had argued at length about the form such language should take. One of the most interesting things about the public philosophy was its sympathy for literature. To go through the pages of James and Dewey, to say nothing of Josiah Royce, Lippmann, Santayana, and James's disciple Horace M. Kallen, is to be immersed in nineteenth-century poetry and fiction. In one burst of commentary on William James, Royce invokes Coleridge, Dostoevsky, Kipling, Shakespeare, and the Brownings. In part, philosophical allusion to literature was a way of finding exempla for human behavior; this allusion is morally rather than critically intense. But an important part of such allusion, especially in James, Whitehead, and Dewey, was directed at the capacity of literature to reveal reality. "Reality" was an important term in the twenties, as was "literature," which meant more than art or story.

We can get some sense of what literature meant by reading Walter Lippmann on Upton Sinclair. Lippmann loathes early-twentieth-century fiction, calling it lazy, slack, timid, sentimental, untrue. The heart of

the matter, to Lippmann, is that fiction is *philosophically* untrue. Its unconvincing characters cannot illuminate the issues of the real world, and “you cannot send a man to American literature so that he may enrich his experience and deepen his understanding.” In this regard, Lippmann comes close to issues that mattered to Edmund Wilson and to Hemingway, especially the central issue of stating “concrete passions and actual sensations.”¹² It was a small step from there to the examination of what exactly constituted perception, consciousness, and experience. Dewey, who dominated philosophy in the twenties, argued that art best understood consciousness. He stated, in fact, that “poetry, the drama, the novel, are proofs that the problem of presentation is not insoluble.”¹³ It could reasonably be put that he framed philosophical analysis in novelistic terms. One of his 1929 essays on experience assesses literature as epistemology: “a comment on nature and life in the interest of a more intense and just appreciation of the meanings present in experience.”¹⁴ A second essay written in the same year describes experience in terms of the plots of fiction: “*what* men do and suffer, *what* they strive for, love, believe and endure, and also *how* men act and are acted upon, the ways in which they do and suffer, desire and enjoy, see, believe, imagine—in short, processes of *experiencing*.”¹⁵ Whitehead has the same habit of mind.

The emphasis, however, should be put on knowing. Both Edmund Wilson and Lionel Trilling referred themselves to ideas of Dewey and of William James; both were intensely concerned with the idea of “reality’s thickness,” a Jamesian phrase invoked by Trilling to account for the *resistance* of experience to its formulation. In terms of phenomenology, it was to be understood that reality quickly exhausted the modes of discerning it. There was, in short, a realm of experience beyond the powers of perception and of articulation. For Trilling especially, this meant that there was a boundary for critical ideas. There could be no possible point to evolving a scheme insufficient to its elements. One understood that reality was many layered and could not be captured except in some partial way. Trilling transferred the idea to social thought, which may be why he is so much out of favor today. He argued that the equipment of liberalism was insufficient to perceive or understand the complex nature of experience. His remarkable essay on Hemingway stated that when “fine social feelings” were directed at literature, when

noble sentiments and optimism determined literary attitudes, and when there was impatience with irony and indirection, literature could no longer serve as a public art. But the issue was always Jamesian: the thickness of reality resisted not only perception but the cathexis of idealism.¹⁶ The point so important to Trilling had been taken up by Lippmann, who had this to say about the problem of “reality” in Upton Sinclair: “The power to drive home brutal facts—raw, bloody, screaming facts—made ‘The Jungle’ great. But when in ‘The Metropolis’ he came to expose the vices of the rich, he had to deal with subtler, quiet things: with manners, with snobbishness, idleness of soul, with evils that are often attractive. He hated them as intensely as he had hated poisoned meat. He hated them so intensely that he hardly saw them. ‘High Society’ couldn’t see the reality, because of the wildness of Mr. Sinclair’s emotions about it, and the world went on unimpressed.”¹⁷ Trilling reworked this argument around the “actuality of personal life” that Fitzgerald had represented in his fiction. He used the same comparison of the subtle gradation of manners among the rich.¹⁸

Early-twentieth-century philosophy had allocated to literature the depiction of reality, actuality, and experience. Lippmann thought it the natural province of a good novelist to show the world as it was; Santayana agreed that “language has its function of expressing experience with exactness”; Bertrand Russell assumed “that a certain sentence should assert a certain fact.”¹⁹ But Hemingway had less confidence in the powers of language. We need to take seriously Rinaldi’s remark in *A Farewell to Arms* that “I know many things I can’t say” because it is a Hemingway rubric. There were, Jake Barnes says of his *afición*, “no set questions that could bring it out.” And Brett Ashley is Bergsonian by temperament, knowing that words not only fail to describe but actually turn against their subject. In *The Sun Also Rises* silence is an intellectual and moral value. Dialogue rejects what Jake Barnes and Brett Ashley often call “talk.” Talking about things doesn’t resolve anything, much less does it accomplish the by-now mythological end of understanding reality. As Mike says of that particular issue, “I’m not one of you literary chaps. . . . I’m not clever.” That is to say, reality is their line of work, but its statement is duplicitous.

“A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” understands the large investment of philosophical language in the depiction, uncovering, and understanding

of reality. Wilson and Whitehead wrote endlessly about the primacy of light because it is (I am using Santayana's phrase once again) "the natural symbol of knowledge." But the story is situated phenomenologically and metaphorically in darkness. What we take to be setting is symbol. The extraordinary descriptions of substance and quantity that begin the story—line, movement, light, shade, dimensionality, solidity of placement, corporeality—depict reality *as if description were explanation*. But even the passage of time is false reassurance that we are getting somewhere. The story displays all of the counters of reality, invites the conclusion that by perceiving the scene with such clarity we can unwind it. The opening is a parable of the work assigned by philosophy to literature.

But it is a scene without an interpretation. Both waiters fail entirely to penetrate the meaning of the old man—the younger waiter because he is a kind of sump of our own worldly wisdom, the older waiter because the kind of ideas needed to understand things are no longer available in 1932. I don't think it an exaggeration to say that this story has political overtones, because if nothing avails, politics can't be exempt. The well-policed setting implies the hostile presence of the state, and the ideas diffused by the younger waiter imply the way it thinks. The story closes off a generation of inquiry into the understanding of life by literature. We don't understand it, and language works mainly to prevent the understanding of it. The story has its effect because it is a coda.

I concentrate on this story and on *The Sun Also Rises* because they react so strongly against the idea that language is definitive. They follow Wittgenstein, not Dewey. The dialogues of the novel will allude to the difficulty of following one's own consciousness, and to the greater difficulty of communicating the answerable. The dialogues of the story end in blind alleys of inquiry. In certain ways these two works of fiction shadow the development of thought about language and literature. They have memorable characters with enormous, misplaced confidence in denotation and explanation. Robert Cohn and the younger waiter in the short story have obdurate faith in fake ideas. But the others, less easily formulated, are indirect, usually without much confidence (itself an important term in "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place") in the ability to undo any of the layers of reality's thickness.



The Last Romantic Critic

In any discussion of romanticism the number of respondents will equal the number of definitions proposed. It is sobering to read Isaiah Berlin's "In Search of a Definition," the first of his Mellon Lectures on romanticism, in which he goes over ground covered by A. O. Lovejoy, adding his own thoughts on its thematic elements of youth, exuberance, the natural, the morbid, decadence, radiance, turbulence, darkness, the strange, the weird, the familiar, the antique, novelty, desire to live in the moment, rejection of knowledge, the love of innocence, timelessness, creativity, will, dandyism, art, and primitivism.¹ I have condensed liberally; the above is a fraction of what Lovejoy and Berlin respectively listed.

In regard to Fitzgerald a certain amount of defining needs to be done. His romanticism takes specific tactical form, extending images past reality and past the capabilities of realism; he creates an extraordinary sense of the spirit of place; and he reminds us of emotional powers not easily understood by (mere) rationality.² He is rightly linked to Keats, whose verses "stick in your memory."³ But Fitzgerald's romanticism went against the national grain. Simply to assert romanticism was to take part in a cultural argument loudly conducted. Romantic expectation was a theme, he recognized, not of high culture but of movies and magazines.⁴

The American tendency in literature had been to affirm or (as H. L. Mencken wrote at comic length) to avoid reality.⁵ We sense the former in the grand finale to William James's *Pragmatism*. James was an ex-

traordinary intellectual presence. But he had a Victorian conception of literature, understanding it as a guide to moral action. The last chapter of *Pragmatism* begins, remarkably, with fifty-two lines cited from Walt Whitman's long poem "To You." James then translates these lines into moral suasion: they "may mean your better possibilities phenomenally taken, or the specific redemptive effects even of your failures, upon yourself or . . . your loyalty to the possibilities of others." They set "definite activities in us at work."⁶ As James and other late-Victorian critics understand the issues, poetry civilizes, gives us workable advice. Characteristically generous, James allows for many interpretations of Whitman's poem. He was himself more complex, but Victorians understood poetry in terms of the moral quality of what was said—and romanticism arrived in the twentieth century as interpreted by Victorians.

The problem was recognized by Van Wyck Brooks, who between 1915 and 1927 published a group of essays attacking late-Victorian sensibility. He took on both James and Whitman, finding in the former literary ideas that were far too simple, really only forms of poetic utilitarianism. Brooks wrote that the great pragmatists (he called them "awakeners" of the twentieth-century American mind) deserved respect, but that "they were not sufficiently poets to intensify the conception of human nature they had inherited from our tradition. Their own vein of poetry, golden in William James, silver in John Dewey, ran too thin for that." The crucial point was that they converted poetry into something else. "Assuming that the intelligence is the final court of appeal . . . all they can do, therefore, is to unfold the existing fact in themselves, and in the world about them." Referring to Emerson's utilitarian view of Shelley, Brooks sums up what a new generation of writers should know: Victorians understood poetry as public advice.⁷

The problem with "original" early-nineteenth-century romanticism was that it had been transvalued by Victorianism. Transvalued, one might say, with a vengeance: the *Shelburne Essays* of Paul Elmer More, published before and during the war years, understood romantic sensibility as social philosophy. More saw great danger in the creation of "the infinitely craving personality, the usurpation of emotion over reason, the idealization of love, the confusion of the sensuous and the spiritual,

the perilous fascination that may go with the confusions." Not a good entry into *Gatsby* for the common reader. More was especially hostile to the effects of romanticism on individuality—which was raised, he said, "to a state of morbid excess"—and he hated the confusion of things finite and infinite.⁸ He was joined by Irving Babbitt, whose *Rousseau and Romanticism* of 1919 famously described Keats as beauty without wisdom, and Shelley as feeling without understanding. Neither poet was, he thought, useful to Americans—their ethics were simply too confused—and they should be read only now and then for purposes of wary "recreation."⁹ If we are to judge from these evaluations of artistic purpose, Victorians taught Fitzgerald's generation that romanticism should be identified with advice either good or bad directed toward some ulterior purpose.

Romanticism had become less persuasive as an intellectual mode after the propaganda of the Great War ground out thousands of posters of soldiers in shining armor and circulated the awful "epic" poetry of Henry Newbolt and W. E. Henley encouraging patriotism—and enlistment.¹⁰ Intellectuals had little faith left in those themes of quest, chivalry, idealism, and sacrifice that inform *The Great Gatsby*.¹¹ In any case, after Wittgenstein, John Dewey, and Bertrand Russell had attacked politicized rhetoric in the early twenties one no longer trusted high-sounding intent.¹² Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and T. E. Hulme exerted their influence in favor of a different sensibility. As Geoffrey H. Hartman puts the matter, "in the years following World War I, it became customary to see classicism and romanticism as two radically different philosophies of life, and to place modernism on the side of the anti-romantic."¹³

We need only remind ourselves of Edmund Wilson's position as the decade began: If the new subjects of poetry were to be "blank buildings and slaughter-houses and factories . . . Claxon-blowing motor-cars and typewriters cracking like machine-guns, taxicabs, jazz-bands, trick electric signs, enormous hotels plastered heavily with a garish magnificence, streets and street-cars . . . the crash and grinding of the traffic . . . the whole confused and metallic junk-heap of the modern American city" then it would no longer be possible for emotions to "find expression in

the forms of Milton and Shelley."¹⁴ In the face of such attitudes, it took some determination to announce romantic purpose between the Great War and *The Great Gatsby*.

During that period, Fitzgerald produced not only novels and short stories but essays, reviews, and letters, also. He gave some notable interviews. In general, his critical work will identify his literary allegiances; compare romanticism (favorably) with realism; and introduce, recall, and elaborate romantic theory. An interview of 1923 invokes a list of literary godfathers: Henry James, Nietzsche, H. G. Wells, Shaw, Mencken, Dreiser, and Conrad. All are to be admired. But Fitzgerald understands something that Wells, Shaw, and Mencken do not: the idea of criticism has changed. Here is how the interviewer puts the matter: "F. Scott Fitzgerald, the prophet and voice of the younger American smart set, says that while Conrad's *Nostramo* is the great novel of the past fifty years, *Ulysses* by James Joyce is the great novel of the future."¹⁵ We see the silent presence of Edmund Wilson who had shortly before this reviewed *Ulysses*, recommended it to Fitzgerald, and begun to elaborate modernism's own great tradition.¹⁶

Fitzgerald is consistently interested in what is happening among other writers. For example, his review of Sherwood Anderson's *Many Marriages* tries to set that novel within the intellectual context of the twenties. He raises public issues and issues of moral intention and consequence. Although self-consciously a modern, he notes that opinion about society matters very little in the business of writing. Fashionable ideas about the end of monogamy (a subject now and then on Tom Buchanan's mind) may be simply "propaganda" for intellectuals. Ever conscious of fact, Fitzgerald criticizes the failure of Anderson to measure up to the social thickness of Dreiser, Joyce, and Wells, stating that "for purpose of the book no such background as Dublin Catholicism, middlewestern morality, or London Fabianism could ever have existed."¹⁷

This kind of assessment is often made in Fitzgerald's short pieces, requiring us to know something about the literary scene in the generation before the twenties. But, even more emphatically, we keep being referred by his allusions to ideas that long antedate the twenties. When Fitzgerald uses the term "romantic" to analyze contemporary fiction—

and he uses the term a lot—he expects us to understand particular sources and to arrive at some sense of their modern applications.

Fitzgerald's "Public Letter to Thomas Boyd," which appeared in the *St. Paul Daily News* in the winter of 1921, reflects on the opposition between the real and the romantic. Fitzgerald admitted that fake romanticism—exemplified by novels such as Floyd Dell's *Moon-Calf*—might be entirely *too* successful. (Fitzgerald often mentioned this particular novel when he was irritated by best-seller banality. Dell became his W. H. Hudson, and the *Moon-Calf* his *Purple Land*.) The great flaw of such novels was, Fitzgerald wrote, their mindless dependence on formulaic sentimentality. How many novels about the *weltschmerz* of the privileged young could the public absorb? It was a warning to himself, and he wrote with a certain sympathy that "Dreiser would probably maintain that romanticism tends immediately to deteriorate to the Zane Grey–Rupert Hughes level, as it has in the case of Tarkington." But "the romantic side" was bound to have a great deal of support from other writers, because facts are insufficient as a basis for narrative. Reporting has no plot, cannot substitute for meaning. The interview displays a man of letters who knows how hard it is to navigate between realism and romance, and who is fully aware of the literary scene. He distrusts his audience, a theme often to be invoked. He uses the term "romantic" as if it were a synonym for insight, implying knowledge as well as feeling. Most important, it allows us to understand how facts affect our consciousness.¹⁸ Later statements of the point will emphasize that romantic ideas are philosophical ideas, not effusions, and that they work better for fiction than other ideas propounded in the drab, unintellectual American milieu of the early twenties.

Later that year, in reviewing *Three Soldiers* by John Dos Passos, Fitzgerald again argued that the conventional audience for fiction is an adversary to its writing: "This book will not be read in the West. *Main Street* was too much of a strain. I doubt if the 'cultured' public of the Middle Border will ever again risk a serious American novel, unless it is heavily baited with romantic love. No, *Three Soldiers* will never compete with *The Sheik* or . . . Zane Grey." He knows from his own work how difficult the choice is between genuine feeling and sentiment. He then argues an issue that goes considerably beyond the literature of