Jay Gatsby and the Prohibition Gangster as Businessman

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Near the end of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby, Gatsby’s father says of his son, “Jimmy was bound to get ahead. If he’d of lived, he’d of been a great man. A man like James J. Hill. He’d of helped build up the country” (175–76). At this point in the novel, Gatsby is dead, a victim of the wrath of the crazed George Wilson, who shoots Gatsby in the mistaken belief that he was the driver of the car that ran down Wilson’s wife and killed her. Having come East to help bury his son, Gatsby’s father thinks of that son—whose given name was James Gatz—on equal terms with one of the handful of men who helped reshape the American economy in the previous 40 years. Notwithstanding the paternal pride evident in his claim of his son’s destiny for greatness, this brief but significant reference to Hill—an American railroad tycoon of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century—is an especially revealing but for the most part critically ignored moment, for it positions Gatsby as a self-made man and suggests his equivalency to major industrialist robber barons such as Hill, John D. Rockefeller, and Andrew Carnegie. Such a comparison is rather rarefied air for someone who is most likely a front man for a bootlegging, gambling, and loansharking syndicate, yet it demarcates a key ideology of the novel and of the 1920s culture that linked business and crime. In the years following World War I, a shift in the representation of criminals occurred; writers no longer portrayed them merely as figures operating on the margins of the culture, but also as individuals looking to move into the mainstream and into the seats of power.
James J. Hill was a well-known figure to early twentieth-century Americans, especially those with roots in the Northwest or the Midwest, such as Fitzgerald. Hill was instrumental in opening up the railroad passage between the Great Lakes and the Pacific, and he served as a useful model of the self-made man, having been born in modest circumstances but prospering and rising to great social and economic heights through hard work and intelligence. At 14, following his father’s death, Hill began working to support his family. At 17, he left home and settled in St. Paul, quickly finding a place there in the shipping business. He recognized the evolving importance of transporting goods across and through the Midwest as the population in that region skyrocketed, and he was fortunate enough to be in a position to take advantage of the vast economic opportunity that rail transportation offered. He embarked on a series of fortuitous and ultimately prosperous partnerships with a group of other businessmen to invest in railroads in the Northern Plains, and, by virtue of his shrewd business alliances, he vastly increased his range of influence and power. Thereafter, Hill grew into the foremost rail tycoon of the Northwest and one of the leading industrialists in the country, owning and operating the Great Northern Railway, which ultimately extended from Minnesota to the Pacific Ocean.

When Henry Gatz relates his vision of his son to Nick Carraway in Fitzgerald’s novel, he clearly means it as a lament for what his son could have been, a dream of the dazzling accomplishments he could have pulled off, if he had only had enough time. However, Mr. Gatz’s intentions aside—other than its function as a father’s mournful cry for a lost son—what else does this reference to James J. Hill near the end of Fitzgerald’s novel signify? Fitzgerald’s use of Hill does not merely serve as a suggestion of the greatness that Gatsby might have achieved; it is part of a larger rhetoric of self-making that is very much at the heart of the novel, a Machiavellian rhetoric that suggests that the means to success do not matter so much as the results. Though Hill had died in 1916, his impact and influence certainly still resonated in the middle of the 1920s. The reputations of the robber barons, however, were decidedly mixed. Historians had chronicled their ruthlessness in business matters from the beginning of their reign over the American scene. Their strict adherence to the tenets of capitalism, especially their stockpiling and display of wealth while other Americans were suffering economic
hardships, illustrated that personal success could have broader social costs.

Being a great man, “a man like James J. Hill,” was not merely a compliment; it suggested complications and even contradictions. By the early 1920s, the meaning of success in America was in transition from the traditional notion that linked work with virtue to a more “secular understanding of the American Dream” that was “entirely economic and free of moral obligation” (Berman 178, 172–73). As John Cawelti puts it in Apostles of the Self-Made Man, “The main trend in the development of ideas of self-help was away from the earlier balance of political, moral, religious, and economic values and in the direction of an overriding emphasis on the pursuit and use of wealth” (169). This concept of success defined in economic and not moral terms provides a useful means to consider the representation of the criminal in Fitzgerald’s novel, for the association of Gatsby and Hill reveals broad cultural implications in the connections between gangsters and businessmen and between the criminal and the self-made man during the 1920s.

Although Gatsby serves as little more than the handsome and elegant façade for Meyer Wolfshiem’s criminal enterprises—even if he is a well-dressed and good-looking gangster, Gatsby, after all, is still a gangster—he does offer a captivating example of self-making and the pursuit of the American Dream. The young James Gatz was a dreamer with bigger plans than a life of working on an unsuccessful farm in the Northern Plains. Even as a young boy he had kept a daily schedule and list of General Resolves in his ragged copy of Hopalong Cassidy. This list for improving himself and his station—with such items as “Bath every other day” and “Read one improving book or magazine per week” (181–82)—is, of course, strikingly reminiscent of the tenets set out by Ben Franklin in his Autobiography, one of the foundational texts of American self-making ideology. Franklin articulates an ideology with its roots in Puritan notions of hard work and virtue, as well as in the early capitalism of Adam Smith and the belief in the necessity of taking advantage of opportunity. Cawelti argues that “Franklin believed that the habit of industry and prudence . . . would create virtuous and happy people. How better to stimulate men to the practice of this habit than by showing that wealth and comfort could be achieved by this means?” (15). Horatio Alger and many others took up Franklinian ideology in the
nineteenth century and extended his emphasis on the need to recognize and take advantage of avenues of opportunity, and in the process the emphasis on virtue began to lose primacy. By the early twentieth century, Cawelti claims, “The old ideal of the moral pursuit of wealth had been replaced by new visions of sudden and massive enrichment” (110).

In The Great Gatsby, Fitzgerald situates his main character in this evolution of the self-making tradition. As a teen, James Gatz’s “heart was in a constant, turbulent riot. The most grotesque and fantastic conceits haunted him in his bed at night. A universe of ineffable gaudiness spun itself out in his brain” (105). Obsessed with making a better life for himself and puffed up by these romantic dreams of greatness and future glory, he stumbles on the figure of Dan Cody. A self-made man who had recognized an opportunity, Cody made his fortune in Montana copper. He was “a product of the Nevada silver fields, of the Yukon, of every rush for metal since Seventy-five” (105). When James Gatz sees Cody drop anchor in the shallows along the shore of Lake Superior, he rows out to the yacht to warn him that a strong wind might endanger the boat there. To the young man, Fitzgerald writes, “that yacht represented all the beauty and glamor in the world” (106). He tells Cody that his name is Jay Gatsby and wins Cody over with his “quick, and extravagantly ambitious” (106) personality. The older man soon becomes the mentor for the younger one, who embarks on the rest of his life with a new name and a new identity (106). Philip Castille has pointed out that Cody, who by virtue of his name seems to be something of an amalgam of Daniel Boone and Buffalo Bill Cody, symbolizes a type of frontier hero to the recent college dropout, an echo of his earlier interest in Hopalong Cassidy (Castille 232). However, Joseph Corso has convincingly articulated the close resemblance of the fictional Dan Cody to the industrialist Edward Robert Gilman. As Cody does in the novel with Gatsby, Gilman took on the young Robert Kerr and provided him with what Fitzgerald calls in the novel a “singularly appropriate education” (107).

Castille, Corso, and Matthew J. Bruccoli (“The Great Gatsby”) have done important work in determining the historical sources for Cody and other characters in the novel, and their work has enabled other critics now to focus attention on the larger socioeconomic and historical dynamics implicit in the choices Fitzgerald made. Fitzgerald’s construction of Cody emphasizes the self-making tradition so central
to the novel, harkening back—as Castille, Corso, and Brucoli have demonstrated—to the self-sufficient frontiersmen while also hinting at the new type of successful man in industrial America. Contextualizing how that tradition operated in the 1920s, as opposed to during earlier generations, helps us interrogate how the novel captures the conflation of business and crime. The “education” that Gatsby receives from Cody—“the pioneer debauchee who during one phase of American life brought back to the eastern seaboard the savage violence of the frontier brothel and saloon”—clearly emphasizes the potential of the American individual to realize his dreams if he is willing to do whatever it takes, including “savage violence,” to attain them (106). From Cody’s example, Gatsby learns to value the ends over the means, further distancing himself from his boyhood adherence to Franklin’s tenets of improvement that linked virtue and monetary gain. Thus, it should not come as a surprise that the penniless Gatsby, having returned Stateside after serving his country in the war, forms a partnership with the gangster Meyer Wolfshiem: This decision is a logical extension of what he has learned from Cody and what he has learned about how to succeed in America. Moreover, we should recognize that Gatsby embraces Wolfshiem as a means to an end, a way to move closer to the center of the culture from the margins. Only from there can he win back Daisy.

Following a postwar recession at the start of the 1920s, the American economy climbed to newfound heights, with the gross national product rising nearly 40 percent. This outstanding growth was stimulated in great part by the demand for consumer products, particularly the automobile—at the beginning of the decade 9 million vehicles were on the road, while by 1930 there were 27 million. This demand for consumer products offered new opportunities to those who were able to take advantage of the emerging markets for goods and services. And those markets included new ones created by the Volstead Act. The Prohibition years saw an upsurge in crime directly resulting from the need to supply a demand for alcohol and other related services that continued regardless of legality. In The Great Gatsby, the “services” that Gatsby and Wolfshiem provide their clients remain murky, but probably include bootlegging, gambling, loansharking, and selling stolen bonds. Like the real-life gangsters whose deeds these characters mirror—men such as Al Capone, Lucky Luciano, and Legs Diamond—they meet
the demand for leisure activities that include drinking alcohol and the other illegal outlets such as gambling and prostitution that often went hand in hand with the market for alcohol. Gatsby’s wealth demonstrates that they are highly successful in their business. As Tom Buchanan tells Nick Carraway, rather petulantly, but with a touch of legitimacy, “A lot of these newly rich people are just big bootleggers, you know” (114). Moreover, the life of the gangster does grant Gatsby entrée—if not a secure foothold—into the world of status that he desperately desires.

The gangsters of the 1920s, as represented in the novel by Wolfshiem and Gatsby, are a new type of entrepreneur, willing to use “savage violence” to win in the marketplace. Wolfshiem shows off his cufflinks made of human molars and tells stories of the shooting deaths of his friends. At the same time, he poses as a businessman offering to set up “a business gonnegtion” (78). Using the language of the self-making narrative, Wolfshiem says of his protégé, “I raised him up out of nothing, right out of the gutter. I saw right away he was a fine appearing gentlemanly young man and when he told me he was an Oggsford I knew I could use him good” (179). He even goes so far as to claim, when Nick asks him if he started Gatsby in business, “Start him! I made him” (179). Wolfshiem, as many critics have noted, is at least partly modeled after Arnold Rothstein. Rothstein was a well-known criminal figure in the 1920s, a gambler, bootlegger, pawnbroker, dealer of narcotics, and more. He was a mainstay in the exploding world of crime that overtook New York and all of urban America in the years following the implementation of the Volstead Act in 1919. Along with Capone, Luciano, and others, Rothstein occupied a dangerous world. In New York alone, more than 1,000 gangsters were killed during the 1920s. In winning the fight over the new markets created by Prohibition, Capone, Luciano, Rothstein, and select others came to emblematize the individual success story during the Roaring Twenties and were prominently featured on the front pages of the tabloid newspapers.

Fitzgerald situates his narrative in this culture, referring specifically to the Herman Rosenthal murder in 1912 by placing Wolfshiem at the scene with Rosenthal before he was killed, even though Rosenthal had in fact been sitting alone (Gross). Fitzgerald also has Gatsby explicitly state that Wolfshiem fixed the 1919 World Series, a crime widely attributed to Arnold Rothstein. Thomas H. Pauly, however, has suggested that
Rothstein serves not so much as a model for Wolfshiem but for Gatsby himself. Pauly emphasizes Rothstein’s conservative appearance, his ties to upper-class gamblers, and his large Long Island estate, along with Fitzgerald’s notes that he had met Rothstein, to suggest that Rothstein more closely resembled Gatsby than Wolfshiem. Indeed, the allusion to stolen bonds near the end of the novel recalls the famous Fuller-McGee trial, which made public Rothstein’s connections to stolen securities (Piper 171–84). Certainly Fitzgerald was well aware of the place of gangsters in American culture as he composed the novel. Brucoli (“How Are You” and Some Sort of Epic Grandeur 183–84) has suggested the influence of Max Gerlach, a minor bootlegger and Fitzgerald’s neighbor in the summer of 1923, on Fitzgerald’s creation of Gatsby; and Horst Kruse has recently offered an in-depth study of this connection that has extended and reinforced Brucoli’s supposition. Pauly (226–29) contrasts Rothstein with Gerlach and George Remus, a successful owner of drugstores that sold alcohol and who threw lavish Gatsby-like parties at his Long Island mansion in the early 1920s, as possible models for Gatsby, suggesting that Rothstein’s machinations more closely resembled the schemes that Gatsby was involved in, including the sale of stolen bonds. While Pauly suggests that Gatsby was more than just a front man for Wolfshiem, he also points out striking resemblances between Gatsby and Dapper Dan Collins, Rothstein’s own front man, a connection also recognized by Philip Castille (Pauly 235; Castille 231).

Whichever actual gangster, or combination of gangsters, critics want to locate as the source material for Gatsby, the connection between Fitzgerald’s construction of him and actual gangsters in the 1920s seems sure. But critics can do more to engage with the sociocultural dynamics implicit in the historical sources for the novel. Like the protagonists in most classic rags-to-riches stories, these gangsters of the 1920s came from humble origins and rose to make a fortune. They recognized and exploited emerging markets and operated as entrepreneurs who answered the demands of their time. Crime was not a new element in urban American in the 1920s; as Herbert Asbury suggested in his 1928 compilation of urban gang narratives, The Gangs of New York, crime had served as a way of life since the mid-1800s for individuals on the socioeconomic margins. Some turned to crime in order to provide for the basic necessities of food, sustenance, or shelter. Others approached it as
a career, stealing from local merchants, conning dupes of their money, pickpocketing visitors to the city, controlling districts in the city, and offering "protection services" to inhabitants of a neighborhood or town. However, by the 1920s, crime and gangsters had taken on a romanticized allure, an allure closely linked to the culture's language of success.3

In 1925, Fitzgerald was at the forefront of this type of characterization. The Great Gatsby offers an illuminating example of the narrative of success tied indelibly to the narrative of crime.4 At the heart of this connection is an emphasis on crime as a business and gangsters as businessmen, which echoed the representations of gangsters in media portrayals of the 1920s and 1930s. Moreover, Fitzgerald's representation of Jay Gatsby himself fits squarely within the parameters of the commodity fetishization that cultural critics such as David Ruth note characterized much of the portrayals of gangsters in this time period.5 Fitzgerald captures this best in his depiction of Gatsby's car as an exaggerated phallic symbol: "It was a rich cream color, bright with nickel, swollen here and there in its monstrous length with triumphant hatboxes and supper-boxes and tool-boxes, and terraced with a labyrinth of windshields that mirrored a dozen suns" (68). Gatsby's possessions—his house, the books in his library, the "soft, rich heap" of his shirts, arranged in "many-colored disarray" (97), that Daisy cries over—symbolize his wealth and authority and signify his success as a businessman.6 That success, of course, derives directly from what he has made through his "service" industry with Meyer Wolfshiem. Surely such a notion of broad-based individual success resulting from shady business dealings did not originate in the 1920s. The evolution of the story of self-making into the realm of crime had roots decades before the 1920s, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, when the robber barons of that time helped to shift Franklinian self-making from its close connection to virtue to an ideology fully embracing the exploitation of economic opportunity. Indeed, the robber barons served as transitional figures in the development of the criminal archetype in the 1920s. Fitzgerald's linking of Jay Gatsby and James J. Hill seems revealing, then, because in tapping into a history of self-making, Fitzgerald establishes a history of what gangsters in the 1920s were doing.

Just a few years before Fitzgerald wrote The Great Gatsby, Joseph G. Pyle published the biography of Hill that its subject officially recognized
as definitive and authorized.7 The Life of James J. Hill, in two volumes, stands as a fascinating document of hagiography, presenting Hill’s story as an Algeresque narrative of socioeconomic advancement from poverty to wealth and glory.8 Like Gatsby, Hill grew up the son of farmers. Pyle begins by illustrating how Hill’s parents struggled to make their small farm pay off and to raise a family on their modest income. He repeatedly stresses that Hill’s achievements came as a result of his willingness to work hard, arguing that Hill reached greatness through sheer will and determination: “These two conditioning circumstances, money and opportunity, are external, and neither is particularly important. The real sources of success lie within: knowledge, foresight, courage, honesty, labour” (2: 378–79). Moreover, at numerous moments, Pyle follows the traditional plot of the Franklinian self-making narrative. He describes Hill’s “kindness of heart,” his charity, and his generosity; he claims that Hill distinguished himself with his perspicacity, his “invaluable prescience”; and he suggests that Hill was destined for success because of his “familiarity with conditions and the grasp of details displayed in relation to almost every kind of business” (1: 37, 77, 180). It is this tone that leads Michael Malone to describe Pyle’s approach as “obsequious” (283).

Certainly not all of his contemporaries viewed Hill as such a positive model of the businessman. Historian Frederick Lewis Allen, in Lords of Creation, his 1935 account of the economic expansion between 1890 and 1930, notes the notorious battle over control of Northern Pacific stock in the spring of 1901. Along with J. Pierpont Morgan, Hill tried to fight off the attempt of E. H. Harriman to gain a foothold in the corporate powerbase that controlled so many of the Western railroads. In their weeklong battle over the common stock, these men caused a Wall Street panic as they cornered the market for Northern Pacific stock. Allen writes of the aftermath of the stock fight,

The one sure victor in the battle—a battle which from any broad social point of view, considering the railroads as public carriers rather than as pawns in a game of grab, appeared almost completely senseless—was the principle of consolidation and concentration of capital. The losers were the specu-
Allotors and investors, large and small, who had been trapped between the contending armies.

Allen’s contemporary Matthew Josephson also writes of Hill’s desire to win at all costs in his 1934 account The Robber Barons. The railroad tycoon, he asserts, “had no small scruples” (236). “With his low costs, his economical planning,” Josephson says of Hill, “he was equipped to compete as mercilessly as Rockefeller in his large-scale oil-refining. And like Rockefeller, Hill meant to ‘rule or ruin’” (237).

By the end of World War I, the gilded age of the robber barons was essentially over. Hill, Harriman, Morgan, Carnegie, and Jay Gould were all dead. Regardless of one’s feelings about this small group of men, Allen writes, one must recognize “the pervasive social influence—in the broadest sense—of the financial and industrial leaders; for they largely constituted our American upper class, and their standards and ideas tended to permeate the whole population” (xi). The public perception of the robber barons in the first third of the twentieth century was, not surprisingly, complex and even contradictory. Josephson contends:

They were aggressive men, as were the first feudal barons; sometimes they were lawless; in important crises, nearly all of them tended to act without those established moral principles which fixed more or less the conduct of the common people of the community. At the same time, it has been noted, many of them showed volcanic energy and qualities of courage which, under another economic clime, might have fitted them for immensely useful social constructions, and rendered them glorious rather than hateful to their people. (vii)

One must recognize the “paradox,” as Josephson puts it, in the vast changes that these men brought about in the economy and in turning the nation into a “unified industrial society,” the control of which was, disturbingly, “lodged in the hands of a hierarchy” (vii–viii). Such thinking points to the complexity of what it means to be a great man—“a man,” as Mr. Gatz says to Nick Carraway in Fitzgerald’s novel, “like James J. Hill.”

Pyle, in his biography, acknowledged the ways that Hill was at times portrayed in the media; but he directly sought to subvert any notions of wrongdoing:
Some few people in the muck-raking period included Mr. Hill in their general denunciation of the rich man as a criminal ipso facto. But the public as a whole showed juster discrimination. He alone, among the very wealthy individuals of his day, was singled out for a respect revealed by unmistakable indications. (1: 290)

His attempt to defuse any sense of Hill as anything other than exemplary is telling here, for Pyle notes that many of Hill’s wealthy contemporaries were seen as “criminals.” Again, it is this migration of the self-making narrative into the realm of the criminal that is evident. Regardless of whether Hill engaged in nefarious business practices or actual criminal activity, this passage from Pyle’s biography reveals at the least the perception that a link existed at the time between businessmen of the highest order and criminals. Pyle’s language in asserting that the basis of Hill’s fortune, “judged by any accepted standard, is sound and above reproach” (1: 292), speaks most strikingly of an anxiety that the basis of his fortune might not be interpreted as above reproach.

There are also moments when Pyle’s rhetoric betrays him and he fails in his attempts to portray Hill only in the most positive light. He introduces his subject by asserting, “He was not notably precocious but, from his earliest days, exhibited one tendency that persisted in the man to the end of his life and was one source of his wonderful fund of information. He was desperately fond of reading” (1: 9). This first presentation of the book’s protagonist rhetorically stresses a desire for self-improvement and knowledge which Pyle soon embellishes. After his father’s death, Hill was forced to work to provide for his family, and, Pyle suggests, “Formal education was transformed into a process of severe self-instruction, never to be interrupted even by the demands of such care and responsibility as rarely centre in a single individual” (1: 19–20). This emphasis on education, so foundational to Franklin’s notion of self-making, is the central element of Pyle’s representation of Hill. In a critical passage, he writes:

He read and studied increasingly, unceasingly. It was already his habit, whenever any new subject came within his horizon, to search out the highest authority he could find, to ask for a list of the best books on the topic that could be had, to send
for them and devour them in the hours that could be spared from work. He covered their margins with notes of his own. Once mastered, the contents were his for all time. . . He was omnivorous in his search for information; he tore the heart out of his subject and made it so thoroughly his own that it was at his service ever thereafter. (1: 36–37)

In contending that Hill "tore the heart out of his subject," Pyle describes a type of rapacious violence tied to his reading practices, one that is twice in this passage connected to "owning" his subject and putting it into "his service." He therefore locates the foundational element of Hill's rise to greatness in this fondness for reading that is rhetorically imagined as strikingly violent and predatory. This seems an especially interesting way of capturing the success of one of the robber barons on his way to "master[ing] a business" (1: 48).

Pyle energetically strives to place Hill's story along the continuum of the classic self-making narrative, but the implications of megalomania and violence in Hill's approach to business are very apparent in his biography. Although Pyle sought to consider Hill within a pantheon of great American men who rose up from poverty to wealth, his language actually demonstrates that violence has corrupted the self-making narrative, as in the description of Hill's reading practices. The end result of wealth appears more valuable than the means through which one seeks to achieve success. In arguing this I do not mean to sound naïve as to the reality of what success looked like before the 1920s, or even before the time of the robber barons; I do not mean to suggest that there was no violence or crime or unethical business practices involved in the rise of businessmen in the time before Hill. I am trying to argue, however, that the rhetoric for the self-making narrative took a sharp turn at this point in American history, one that helps us come to a greater understanding both of the larger culture and of Fitzgerald's novel. Why would Pyle offer a portrait of Hill as heroic while basing his characterization of his subject on a linguistic metaphor of violence?

We might ask if this portrayal is so different from that offered by Nick Carraway of his subject, Jay Gatsby. Carraway repeatedly idealizes Gatsby, even as he apparently seeks to distance himself from him:

"They're a rotten crowd," I shouted, across the lawn.
“You’re worth the whole damn bunch put together.”
I’ve always been glad I said that. It was the only compliment I ever gave him, because I disapproved of him from beginning to end.  (162)

This last statement is clearly misleading—an attempt on Carraway’s part as the narrator to maintain an ethical distance from Gatsby’s means of success. He has, after all, become one of Gatsby’s closest friends and has assisted him in his attempt to reconcile with Daisy. Nick’s dual response of attraction and rejection is evocative of the complexity of judging a man like Gatsby who embraces deeply held American values of success, but who also threatens the foundation of the moral framework of the society. Fitzgerald was strikingly prescient in The Great Gatsby in his recognition of a new type of cultural figure; the novel is one of the first representations of an emerging type of hero in the 1920s—the gangster as businessman. Fitzgerald recognized a shift in the culture not so much in terms of how businessmen were sometimes portrayed as criminals, for certainly that was not something new.11 Instead, Fitzgerald’s genius in this regard was in understanding that gangsters were now linked with business and should be understood in that context. His portrayal of Gatsby gets at the complicated nuances of a man who is celebrated for his success but criticized for the means to that success. Carraway’s assertion that he “disapproves” of Gatsby embodies this dual response: despite his claim of rejecting Gatsby, Carraway is certainly drawn to him and his charisma. (He is not the only one; Fitzgerald nicely contrasts the impressively long list of guests at Gatsby’s parties with the devastating lack of attendees at Gatsby’s funeral.) And perhaps we should not blame Carraway for being so taken with Gatsby—or blame Pyle, either, for his idealization of Hill. These responses are the complicated social processes through which men like Gatsby and Hill were valorized for what they represented in their self-making.

We can see additional evidence of the response to the gangster as businessman in the narrative of another figure from the same time period who, like Gatsby, was celebrated as an example of social mobility and the rise from the social margins to economic heights. Fred D. Pasley’s Al Capone: Biography of a Self-Made Man (1930) offers another sense of the characterization of the gangster as a businessman: “Coming to
Chicago in 1920 an impecunious hoodlum, in 1929 he was estimated by attachés of the internal revenue service to be worth $20,000,000” (9). Pasley lays out his vision of Capone’s rise in the criminal underworld of Chicago in much the same terms as the classic self-making narrative:

Poor little rich boy—the Horatio Alger lad of prohibition—the gamin from the sidewalks of New York, who made good in a Big Shot way in Chicago—General Al the Scarface, who won the war to make the world safe for public demand. (355)

Regardless of the irony that Pasley relies upon in this summary of Capone’s career, the use of the language of self-making is in itself a sufficient indication that he recognizes a strong connection between the representation of the gangster and the businessman. Much of what he writes in fact follows the model that Alger had popularized in the nineteenth century. Capone, like many Alger heroes, was forced early into labor and the responsibilities of adulthood. Pasley tells how he

had quit school in the fourth grade to help his parents in the struggle for existence in the slums . . . [and] had learned to prowl the streets and alleys with the sharp wits of those who begin as mischievous gamins, pillaging vegetable carts, and end as wharf rats, looting trucks and warehouses. He had soon commanded respect by reason of his fighting ability and fast thinking. (17)

His ability not just to survive but to distinguish himself, such a passage implies, came not only from his physical exploits, but from his intelligence.

The narrative arc of Capone’s rags-to-riches story, moreover, is based, Pasley suggests, upon his recognition of the value of modern business practices:

The unknown Capone of 1920, making a lowly debut into the Chicago underworld at the behest of Johnny Torrio, was ostensibly just one of the bourgeoisie; loud of dress, free of profanity; no paunch then; stout-muscled, hard-knuckled; a vulgar person; a tough baby from Five Points, New York City; bouncer and boss of the Four Deuces; Torrio’s all-round handy man.
Unheralded his coming, and considerable time was to elapse before the unsuspecting public and authorities were to be made aware of his presence and its epochal significance. For Capone was to revolutionize crime and corruption by putting both on an efficiency basis, and to instill into a reorganized gangland firm business methods of procedure. He had served with the A.E.F. overseas in the World War and the instilling was to be with machine guns. (10-11)

The shift in this passage in Pasley's portrayal of Capone—from vulgar underling, who, in the beginning of the 1920s, relied on his strength, to astute leader, who, just five or six years later, wisely reshaped the workings of his organization for maximum efficiency—demonstrates the way the language of business was so closely aligned with crime in the 1920s. The final sentence, in which Pasley alludes to Capone's use of "machine guns" as the means of taking control of the bootlegging, gambling, and prostitution markets, reinforces the image of "savage violence" as a justifiable method of operation in business.

Capone's success in dominating the illicit liquor market leads Pasley more than once to describe Capone as "the John D. Rockefeller of some twenty thousand anti-Volstead filling-stations" (9, 144). Like Rockefeller, who owned both refineries and gas stations, Capone understood the value of controlling both the manufacture and sale of the product. He controlled "the sources of supply from Canada and the Florida east coast and the operations of local wildcat breweries and distilleries" (9). Summing up Capone's organization, Pasley asserts, with seeming admiration, "Here was a supertrust operating with the efficiency of a great corporation. It had a complete auditing system, maintained by a clerical staff of twenty-five persons. There were loose-leaf ledgers, card indexes, memorandum accounts, and day-books. No item was overlooked" (70). Pasley's analysis of the organization portrays Capone as a new type of criminal who recognized the power of strong corporate practices as a means of maximizing profit and who had mastered modern corporate practices.

In fact, in his description of Capone's rise and in his repeated linking of Capone with the business tycoon Rockefeller, Pasley demonstrates the way in which gangsters of the 1920s could quite easily
serve as representations of self-made heroes. In so doing, he rhetorically echoes Fitzgerald’s presentation of Gatsby as a complex protagonist, a man who seems only to want to reunite with the woman he continues to love, but who uses crime and violence in order to get the chance to meet her again. Even Nick Carraway admits of Gatsby, when Tom Buchanan alludes to Gatsby’s latest business venture, “He looked—and this is said in all contempt for the babbled slander of his garden—as if he had ‘killed a man.’ For a moment the set of his face could be described in just that fantastic way” (142). And yet Carraway, as narrator, nonetheless imagines Gatsby as the doomed hero of the narrative, who “had come a long way to this blue lawn and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it” (189).

That same rhetorical sympathy seems elemental to Pasley’s presentation of Capone, who he seems to valorize even while asserting his viciousness. Pasley writes of Chicago in 1928, at the height of Capone’s reign over the city, that

> there were 367 murders, 129 of which were either unsolved or the principals not apprehended. Of those arrested, 37 were acquitted, 39 received jail sentences, 16 were sent to insane asylums, 16 committed suicide, and 11 (gangster cases) were killed. There were no executions. In other words, on the 1928 record, a murderer had a 300-to-0 chance that he would not be sentenced to death in Chicago. (151)

But even while bemoaning the lawlessness that accompanied Capone’s control of the city, Pasley portrays him as an astute businessman who gained dominance of the available markets for the services he provided. This contradiction is at the heart of the portrayal of gangsters in the 1920s and 1930s and illustrates the complicated social processes that went into both rejecting the violence with which these figures were associated and yet also celebrating what they represented in terms of self-making and the social mobility of the individual.

This commingling of the rhetoric of self-making and business in the crime narrative was, I have suggested, an inevitable next step after the representation of the robber barons of the previous generation, who were likewise portrayed as both heroic and criminal in histories and biographies of this time period. Fitzgerald’s achievement in his characterization of
Gatsby comes in his ability to render Gatsby as both sympathetic and also despicable. This dual construction is at the heart of the figure of the gangster as businessman and is the key characteristic that other writers of Fitzgerald’s time focused on. In pulp novels of the later 1920s and early 1930s, we can find numerous characters who follow the trope of the gangster as businessman. Donald Henderson Clarke’s *Louis Beretti* (1929), W. R. Burnett’s *Little Caesar* (1929), and Benjamin Appel’s *Brain Guy* (1934) are three crime narratives that closely follow the self-making model. The Warner Brothers’ gangster films of the same years often also pursued the same narrative arc. Many years later, of course, Mario Puzo would update the figure in *The Godfather* and make famous the phrase, “It’s nothing personal. It’s just business.” Such a philosophy is now commonplace in gangster figures in literature and film, but in the mid-1920s, the mixing of criminal and business rhetorics was something dramatically different. Fitzgerald perceived a cultural shift taking place and captured it in his novel, thereby opening up the possibility for other writers safely to render gangsters—fictional ones or actual ones like Al Capone—as contemporary emblems of the ideology of socioeconomic mobility that Benjamin Franklin had once tied to virtue and self-improvement.

**Notes**

1. Berman is one of the few critics who mention Hill in their analyses of the novel. While Berman is interested in conceptions of success in the novel, he does not try fully to explore the implications of the connection between Gatsby and Hill.

2. For the fullest portrait of Rothstein, see Katcher.

3. Berman goes so far as to suggest that Wolfshiem, just as much as the drastically more naïve and sheltered Henry Gatz, was a believer “in the morality of success” because he “takes it on faith that success is a matter of character and belief” (168). The link between Meyer Wolfshiem and Ben Franklin is wonderfully evocative.

4. A number of recent critics have noted connections between the rhetoric of self-making and the representations of criminals in the 1920s and 1930s. Jonathan Munby argues in *Public Enemies*, *Public Heroes* that the cinematic gangsters of such films as *Little Caesar*, *Public Enemy* and *Scarface*—characters based at least in part on Al Capone—“came to express the
desires of the culturally and economically ghettoized in an ethnic street vernacular . . . [that] help[ed] foster the nation’s collective identification with the desires of ‘new’ Americans for a fairer share of the American pie” (4). The gangster figure in these films sought a successful future, like any other working-class American pursuing his version of the American Dream of moving from the margins of society to a more secure economic position. In *Inventing the Public Enemy*, his study of the urban gangster figure in the 1920s and early 1930s, David Ruth notes that in media portrayals of the gangster, the “public enemy, energetic and confident, was successful in a competitive, highly organized business. A model of stylish consumption, he wore fine clothes, rode in a gleaming automobile, and reveled in expensive nightlife” (2). What is new in this type of representation of the criminal, and what both Munby and Ruth recognize, is the way that crime was operating as a move from the margins toward the mainstream.

5. See especially Ruth’s chapter (63-86) on fashion and the function of clothing in the crime narrative.

6. For more on the representation and critique of consumer culture in the novel, as well as Fitzgerald’s interest in Marxist politics and class issues, see Posnock and Donaldson.

7. While Pyle’s was recognized by Hill as the “authorized” biography, it lacks any sense of objectivity in its portrayal of its subject. Much better are two later biographies, by Albro Martin and by Michael Malone.

8. Drawing a straight connection between Alger and the robber barons in terms of the recognition of opportunity for gain, even if that gain derived from illicit means, Berman writes that the “Alger hero necessarily has a lot of Hill and Vanderbilt in him” (170–71).

9. While Allen is admirably measured in his approach to the robber barons, Josephson is more of a muckraker. However, his work was widely respected for its accuracy and attention to detail and went through numerous printings. For a truly vociferous attack on the robber barons from this same era, see McConaughy.

10. Malone has recently claimed that Hill “was not a man to disappoint, anger or cross” and, in contrast to Pyle’s portrayal of his subject, suggests that Hill was guilty of such malfeasance as corporate sabotage, collusion, and even bribery (81, 28, 63, 127).

11. Writers who, prior to Fitzgerald, had explored the criminality of busi-
nessmen include Herman Melville in *The Confidence-Man* (1857), Frank Norris in *The Octopus* (1901) and *The Pit* (1902), Theodore Dreiser in *The Financier* (1912) and *The Titan* (1914), and Abraham Cahan in *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917). In *Manhattan Transfer*, published in the same year (1925) as *The Great Gatsby*, John Dos Passos does offer a portrait of a gangster as businessman in the character of Congo Jake. Like Gatsby, Congo is an immensely likable and charismatic figure to the other characters in the novel.

12. Peter Baida, in *Poor Richard's Legacy*, his recent survey of American business values from Franklin to Donald Trump, shows that Rockefeller defended his business practices—rebates, bribes, and price fixing—as evolving from “the natural laws of trade,” though Baida notes that many of these practices had been made illegal by the Interstate Commerce Act of 1887. “Though its critics may have exaggerated,” Baida concludes, “it would be difficult to argue that Standard Oil did nothing to deserve its reputation of ruthlessness” (117). For more on readings of Rockefeller and Standard Oil from an earlier perspective, see two very different texts—Nevins and Tarbell. Nevins is perhaps overly sympathetic to Rockefeller, while Tarbell represents the muckraking perspective that was so bent on damning the robber barons.

13. I do not want to press the comparison between Gatsby and Capone too far: While Capone was a vicious thug who used violence to intimidate and destroy competitors, Gatsby is implicated in violence only by rumor. I have suggested that he is, after all, a gangster, but I am not trying to imply an equivalency between these characters. Instead, I am seeking to point to the rhetorical similarities in the representation of both figures—and of Hill—and to suggest that such a similarity derives from the cultural moment in the 1920s and 1930s.

**Works cited**


