



“I can’t tell you *exactly* who I am”: A Deleuzian Reading of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button”

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ABSTRACT

“The Curious Case of Benjamin Button” is a neglected short story by F. Scott Fitzgerald. It seems to have attracted more scholarly attention following the 2008 adaptation of the story by David Fincher. A review of the available literature on the short story evinces that instead of looking at how Benjamin experiments with new forms of thought and life, mostly the grotesque aspects of his reversed aging, as well as the moral evaluations of his actions are emphasized. In this regard, through the vitalistic philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, this article aims to argue that Benjamin’s reversed aging, as well as his against-the-grain actions, exemplifies nomadic life, which runs contrary to segmented or prefabricated modes of life and entails forgetfulness. In this regard, it is argued that Benjamin defies memory and history and assumes various identities to escape any signifying system. This article tries to illustrate how the philanthropic narrator of the story directs his readers’ attention toward reading the rhizomatic actions of Benjamin as deviant and pervert. In addition, this mode of narration, which endorses rationality and stability, operates in collusion with the paternalistic and normalizing father figures, including Benjamin’s father and son, in their suppression of fluidity, becoming, and childishness.

Keywords: “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button”, rationalizing narrator, forgetfulness, becoming, Gilles Deleuze



Where are you going? Where are you coming from?
What are you heading for? These are totally useless questions.
Making a clean slate, starting or beginning again from ground zero,
seeking a beginning or a foundation—all
simply a false conception of voyage and movement.
—Deleuze and Guattari (1987)

In his introduction to one of the short stories included in *Tales of the Jazz Age* (1922), F. Scott Fitzgerald indicated that he had written a story "inspired by a remark of Mark Twain's to the effect that it was a pity that the best part of life came at the beginning and the worst part at the end" (p. ix). This provoked Fitzgerald to create a character who would remain silent for nearly a century and would rise to prominence in an amazingly rebellious way. "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button" was the realization of Twain's dream, which was ultimately realized by Fitzgerald. The case was curious, novel, and challenging to the extent, as Mangum puts it, that it was rejected by the *Metropolitan*, which had already published three of Fitzgerald's stories under a contract, and also by the *Post*, which found fault with the story's excessive unconventionality (as cited in Mangum, 2009, p. 16). Yet, apart from the financial motives behind Fitzgerald's craft of writing, it seemed that he was still not content with the havoc he had created: "By trying the experiment upon only one man in a perfectly normal world I have scarcely given his [Twain's] idea a fair trial" (Introduction to *Benjamin*, 1922, p. ix). Fitzgerald's experimentation with the 'new' and the 'abnormal' in 1922, which in Curnutt's view is "the end result of a positive, vitalist outlook on life" (2002, p. 44), was about to gain prominence a century later, with all its hotly-debated discussions of transformation and novelty.

In the context of literary theory and analysis, Fitzgerald's short story, the plot of which is questionable in terms of originality (West III, 2009, p. 20), has brought about a number of reviews and analyses that have tried to shed light on the significance of Benjamin's reversed life and its consequences. The plot itself, be it in Fitzgerald's story or in David Fincher's notable film, is unparalleled in the sense that it has propounded a new possibility or conception of life. It could simply be said that it is about a character who is born a septuagenarian and who dies an unexpected death as a baby. However, such a simplification cannot satisfactorily settle the vital tension that informs every line of this curious narrative. It is time for us to scrutinize *how* Benjamin's life develops rather than to inspect *what* happens at its beginning or end. Instead of focusing on *what* happens in the story, it is time to analyze *how* Benjamin develops his life and how

he experiments with new possibilities and opportunities. Accordingly, the dominant critical view that considers Benjamin's life a failure, i.e., his anticlimactic itinerary from a mature beginning to an immature ending, needs to be set aside in favor of a better understanding of the journey itself.

Nevertheless, the authors believe that this view of Benjamin's life can be better explicated and delineated through Gilles Deleuze's philosophy of life and, hopefully, will lead to a new appreciation of Benjamin Button's life. Deleuze praises several writers, including Fitzgerald, and postulates that "[i]n them everything is departure, becoming, passage, leap, daemon, relationship with the outside" (Deleuze & Parnet, 1987, p. 36). Furthermore, to conceptualize his concepts, including becoming and lines of flight, Deleuze (1990), Deleuze and Guattari (1987), and Deleuze and Parnet (1987) consider Fitzgerald's novella *The Crack-Up* (1945) as a fruitful locale to discuss the feasibility of transformation in one's life. Therefore, we may come up with new interpretations of Benjamin's life through the 'immanent' philosophy of Deleuze. For this purpose, we may first object to the philanthropic narrator of the story as the one who works in collusion with the forces of rationality and normalcy, hence providing his readers with an image of Benjamin as deviant and pervert. Second, putting aside the teleological readings of Benjamin's life, we may trace his experimentations with new forms of life in a patriarchal culture predominated by paternalistic attitudes and pervaded by thirst for distinction, social status, and capital. Finally, we may see how Benjamin's actions part with the segmented and prescribed bourgeois life and how they lead to the invention of new modes of life.

Literature Review

"The Curious Case of Benjamin Button" can be regarded as one of Fitzgerald's most neglected short stories. In one of the articles devoted to an analysis of the short story published by *The F. Scott Fitzgerald Review*, Ruth Prigozy complains that "only Alice Hall Petry, John H. Higgins, and Lawrence Buell have analyzed the story in some detail and there have been only two scholarly articles published on it by Andrew Crosland in 1979 and by John Gery in 1980" (2009, p. 11). Bryant Mangum also follows the footsteps of Prigozy by asserting that the story has remained one of the most unnoticed of Fitzgerald's stories in the twentieth century (2009, p. 19). Meanwhile, he has praised Kirk Curnutt, Edward Gillin, and Fredrick Wegener as the forerunners of the thematic studies of the short story since 2003.

The successful adaptation of Fitzgerald's story by David Fincher on December 25, 2008, could be the reason that this once neglected short story finally received such acclaim from readers and critics. Acknowledging this issue, Mangum asserts that the cinematic adaptation has attracted the attention of more readers and has led to a great flourish of its text which is "now available in editions more numerous than Fitzgerald in his wildest fantasy would ever have imagined" (2009, p. 19). Apart from the vast body of criticism directed at it, Fincher's film has led to the instigation of more scholarly reviews on Fitzgerald's story, and this promises a bright future with fresher outlooks for the apparently curious story of Benjamin Button.

Considered as one of the prominent influences on reviews of Benjamin Button, Henry Alexander has notably classified the life of Benjamin Button as consisting of three distinct lines, including "chronological age" which starts in 1860 and ends in the 1920s, "bodily age" which is related to Benjamin's physical changes, and finally the "psychological stage" which refers generally to his status of mind throughout his life. Alexander avers that "[e]xcept for his middle years between thirty-five and forty, there was little congruence between his chronological age, on the one hand, and his physical appearance or his psychological life, on the other" (p. 2). Accordingly, Alexander concludes that while Benjamin does observe the grotesque aspect of his life, it is "forgetfulness [which] closed him off from changes he could have made," leaving its readers with a feeling of decline and desperation (2009, p. 8). Drawing on Alexander's classification of Benjamin's life and Martin Kohli's sociological theories of "life course," Michael Basseler argues that Benjamin's life course is a critique of modern chronopolitics, hence bringing up the cultural contractedness of life course in modern America (2015, p. 112). Alice Hall Petry's reading of the story seems to be to some extent critical of Roger Button's "primitive" disillusionment, which is a denial of reality. However, despite the disappointments faced in his life, Petry argues, Benjamin does not yield to these disillusionments (1989, pp. 7879). Focusing more on the adaptation of the story by Fincher, Kathryn Lee Seidel remarks that Fincher's Benjamin is an example of a homeless individual who forms their identity through exploring the world, while in Fitzgerald's story, Benjamin is "an embarrassment to his parents, his wife, and his child" (2009, p. 26). Finally, in an examination of both Fitzgerald's story and Fincher's film through Henry Bergson's philosophy of time and Deleuze's application of Bergson's ideas to cinema, Nathan Wagner argues that Benjamin experiences a few "moments of timeless beauty" (2010, p. 52). He locates the story within the framework of American modernism and considers it as a reaction to the linear movement of life.

The Curious Case of the Story's Narrator

Gilles Deleuze's reading of Herman Melville's short story "Bartleby the Scrivener" in his essay "Bartleby; or the Formula" offers an extraordinary contribution to the criticism of Melville's short story as well as a clinical treatment of American fiction. Here, Deleuze puts an end to the question of the reliability of the attorney narrator who attempts to talk his readers into his own righteousness. Deleuze's objection is significant: It is in the attorney that "the madness is growing" (1998, p. 70), not in Bartleby. This, along with Widmer's contention that the narrating attorney "provides an image of a descent, well-meaning, prudent, rationalizing enforcer of humanity" (1969, p. 449), brings an end to the dominance of the narrator and opens the door toward thinking about Bartleby and how he has been mortified and petrified. Following the same logic, we could question the credibility and truthfulness assumed by the narrator in Fitzgerald's "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button."

Among the reviewers of the story, few have taken issue with the fact that throughout the story, it is the narrator who fairly endeavors to grasp the control of the reader's judgment about Benjamin. His interventions and descriptions presuppose that the readers are already subjects who are about to deem the story an exemplification of an anomaly and curiosity. Thus, a careful reading of the narrative necessitates a critical detachment from the intentions and preferences of the narrator who actually strives to assume an objective and disinterested stance while imposing his own desired standpoint regarding Benjamin's case.

From the very first paragraph of the story, the narrator assumes an objective view in order to convince the reader of the verity of his narrative: "Whether this anachronism had any bearing upon the astonishing history I am to set down will never be known. I shall tell you what occurred, and let you judge for yourself" (Fitzgerald, 1922, p. 192). It seems that the narrator aims to detach himself from the readers through his recurrent use of the "I" pronoun while proving his own credibility and convincing the reader that his story will be of truthfulness and authenticity. This disposition is in line with Kim Kasser's discussion of Benjamin when he asserts that after providing the reader with an aura of reliability, quite ironically, "[t]he narrator never calls Benjamin's character into question or furnishes a rational explanation for something that appears supernatural" (2010, p. 184). Thus, it can be argued that the narrator directs the attention of the readers to a prefabricated reading of the story that induces in them a kind of sympathy—

and, at the same time, a feeling that Benjamin's case is definitely a strange one. This feeling is created from the very beginning through the title of the story which includes the word "case". With this regard, Stefan Willer postulates that the word "case" pertains to "the genre of case history" and "medical rejuvenation" (2012, p. 349), bringing to mind a rationalized and evidential account the accuracy of which is unquestionable. For instance, his satirical attribution of the decree of "the high gods of medicine" (Fitzgerald, 1922, p. 192) that children be born to a hospital as "fashionable" could convince the reader that the narrator is maintaining a position endowed with reliability and truthfulness, even exceeding that of medical discourses.

Following Roger Button's arrival at the hospital, his running after the doctor who "stood waiting, a curious expression settling on his harsh, medical face" (p. 193), and his being denigrated by the doctor, the narrator directs a biased question at the readers: "What horrible mishap had happened?" Also, it is necessary to ask why Roger might be "[s]wallowing his shame" (Fitzgerald, 1922, p. 194), as the narrator puts it, when he has not yet been informed of the apparent anomaly of his son. One possible answer could be that Roger was a well-known owner of a Hardware company in nineteenth century Baltimore, and even a tint of indecency and incongruency would probably damage his reputation. Nonetheless, the anonymous narrator seems to be going beyond this fact, hence trying to convince readers that what is going to come next about the appearance of Benjamin is extremely eccentric and strange. Numerous examples can be found in the text indicating that it is the narrator who is involved in making Benjamin's case curious, and this arouses our suspicion while providing us with a chance to look at Benjamin's case from another perspective. For instance, the narrator's description of Mr. Button's first impression of his son's "smoke-colored beard" waving "absurdly back and forth" and also his "dim, faded eyes in which lurked a puzzled question" (Fitzgerald, 1922, p. 195) all illuminate that the narrator overstates the apparent curiosity of Benjamin's case.

The narrator's moral intrusions into the narrative attempt to conceal the fact that *the existence of Benjamin is an example of a new form of life*. Of course, Benjamin is born into a social sphere owned by upper-middle-class money holders whose key to success lies in normalcy and constancy, and it is these codes that are endorsed by the narrator of the story as well. Therefore, a proper estimation of Benjamin's 'true' status can only be achieved once we free ourselves from the grips of these authorial prejudices in order to appreciate the significance of Benjamin's 'different' life and the possibilities that are created for him by his seemingly anomalous character.

Benjamin as a Forgetful Creature

One of Benjamin's characteristics that make him significant is his assuming forgetfulness when he faces the apparent incongruities of his body. Benjamin soon attempts to compensate for his wife's lack of attraction and increasing misery at home by following new pursuits (Fitzgerald, 1922, p. 215). This standpoint has been exhaustively explored by Alexander, whose argument that forgetfulness becomes a part and parcel of Benjamin's daily concerns is tenable (2009, p. 7). Alexander's reading of Benjamin's behavior, however, is highly informed by the Aristotelian moralistic view which puts emphasis on the ability of literature to shed light on and compensate for the deficiencies of human existence. For example, Alexander's contention that "forgetfulness is a character defect" (2009, p. 10), which needs to be corrected if one is to achieve happiness and well-being, could well describe the coordinates of this moralistic viewpoint. Nevertheless, the question that makes itself heard is as follows: Is it really necessary to focus exclusively on moral issues and totally ignore the significance of individual and cultural peculiarities? In other words, could it not be justified to focus more on the plethora of opportunities and possibilities which 'difference' brings to the social sphere, rather than struggling to hold to the limited choices offered by rules of normalcy? Deleuze is a supporter of this view which "rejects the search for moral consensus and the construction of transcendent values and ... conceives of society as experiment rather than contact" (2005, p. 85). Therefore, following a Deleuzian perspective, we may see that it is also possible to examine—and not judge—Benjamin's motives and conclude that Benjamin's case is a curious one in the sense that it is quite against the grain, and this is what makes it noticeable and challenging.

To begin with, it can be argued that Benjamin's actions constitute a means to discover new possibilities and progressions. In fact, he is a creature of 'becoming' in the sense that he merely looks ahead, rather than abiding by the incidents of the past. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) comprehensively elaborated on the notion of short-term and long-term memory, which can be related to the positivity of one's forgetfulness. As for these two terms, they remark that "short-term memory includes forgetting as a process," while long-term memory "(family, race, society, or civilization) traces and translates" (p. 16). Elsewhere, they assert that rhizome is "a short-term memory, or anti-memory" (p. 21), which means that one's rhizomatic movement does not follow the rules of memory or any commitment to the past. Benjamin tends to forget, and this is by no means strange since what he neglects is, in fact, the norms and conventions set by society. Along with

experimenting with a new form of aging, he justifiably assumes forgetfulness to continue his rhizomatic life. Upon his entrance to Yale College, which is presumably a new place for a man of eighteen (chronologically fifty-two), and after receiving a notification from the college registrar, Benjamin finds himself in urgent need of brown dye for his hair. However, he soon finds out that he has dispensed with it and dumped it the day before (Fitzgerald, 1922, p. 205). Doing away with something to which he was so much attached is exactly the case with a person who experiments with newness and novelty, and Benjamin has come up with a new opportunity at Yale to deal with new actions. Hence, we may say he is not a person who involves himself with memories of the past, to the extent that, upon his entrance, he has forgotten the fact that he has been dying his hair before. This is more highlighted when, upon being denigrated by the registrar, Benjamin protests repetitively: "I'm a freshman" (p. 205), a declaration that is conceived as a joke by the man.

Through his reading of Benjamin's life, Willer examines the recurrent presence of the mirror, as well as its significance, in the story, which appears to be in direct relationship with the forgetfulness on Benjamin's part. The first mirror scene in the story appears when Benjamin is twelve years old: "looking in the mirror, Benjamin made, or thought he made, an astonishing discovery" (Fitzgerald, 1922, p. 203). The second time, before meeting Mr. Hale at Yale College: "glancing in the mirror, [Benjamin] decided that his hair needed a new application of its brown dye" (p. 205). The third time, after returning home from war, "he saw his reflection in the familiar mirror" (pp. 213–214). The fourth time, after returning home from St. Midas (prep) school in 1914, he "stared at himself in the mirror" (p. 218). Willer's reading of these mirror scenes is remarkable when he writes: "What Benjamin—and with him the reader— discovers, checks and confirms in the mirror are the traces of his life that has always been mirrored" (2012, p. 355). That is to say, we see, nearly in all these scenes, that Benjamin's actions are against the mirroring of the looking glass. In other words, what Benjamin does throughout his life is, in fact, a flight from what the mirror reflects. The mirror itself might bring to mind representation and identification from which Benjamin gradually distances himself, and it is in this sense that the mirror's function can be related to memory. Thus, it can be argued that Benjamin assumes forgetfulness to eschew any given identity. He sees himself in the mirror and then ironically adopts forgetfulness to shatter the mirror function, get away from identification, and ultimately create lines of flight that are anathema to the signifying, organizing, and territorializing molar lines.

Wagner's reading, which more regards Benjamin's life as tragic, is noteworthy here: "Benjamin's inability to view himself in a self-consciousness manner expresses his plight: he moves through life without any memory, living in a perpetual present" (2010, p. 27). Although this reading can be countered in that one is not supposed to be stable and coherent, it is partly in relation to the way Benjamin defies memory, history, and being. On this account, Benjamin's living in the present reminds Deleuze's words: "Future and past don't have much meaning, what counts is the present-becoming: geography and not history, the middle and not the beginning or the end" (Deleuze & Parnet, 1987, p. 23). Wagner's contention can be credited in that it describes how Benjamin rejects memory and assumes various identities in the present, but we may also note that while constantly constructing themselves, creatures of becoming also attempt to get away from any sort of self-consciousness. Here, Petry's remark seems sensible: "And without memory, there is no sense of disillusionment" (1989, p. 79).

The Shocking Father Figures

Throughout the short story, we find Roger Button as a father figure who dedicates himself to the establishment of stability and permanence in his family. This fact is highlighted as Mrs. Button's name, as a mother figure, is merely mentioned two times in the story. Of course, this lack of maternal presence proves the dominance of male figures in the story, a point that stresses the desire of the narrator as well. Regarding this fact, Willer argues: "The mother, on the other hand, appears except in word *parents*, only under the name of husband: 'Mr. and Mrs. Roger Button,' 'the Roger Buttons.' Only the paternal-masculine genealogy guaranteed by the passing on of the name is thus discussed" (2012, p. 351). Furthermore, it is curious that Mr. Button expects his septuagenarian son to act like a newborn: "Benjamin was a baby and a baby he should remain" (Fitzgerald, 1922, p. 201). Apart from creating some eating plans for Benjamin, Roger brings home a rattle and obliges his son to play with it. What follows is that he expects Benjamin to play with it dutifully at specified times during the day (Fitzgerald, 1922, p. 201). To speak in Deleuzian terms, it can be said that Mr. Button is, in fact, playing the role of a father figure whose actions impede any progress of becoming. Benjamin's bodily features, and the fact that he is an old man in the early days of his life, show that he is experimenting with a new form of existence. In *Essays Critical and Clinical*, Deleuze urges his readers to resist the dicta of father figures. Based on his arguments, following the civil war in America, "the only real danger is the return of the father" (1998, p. 88). What Deleuze is diagnosing in

this context is the way "the society of brothers" has turned into a society that impedes becoming and transformation. Accordingly, Mr. Button is satisfied with Benjamin's behaviors as long as he finds them in line with the norms of society: "[Benjamin] even managed, quite accidentally, to break a kitchen window . . . which secretly delighted his father" (Fitzgerald, 1922, p. 202). Roger delights in disciplining his son to grow from a state of innocence toward experience, as if he is a force of normalization. Now we may see how the possibilities of becoming are blocked in this society and, more importantly, how Fitzgerald is warning us against actions that open up a door to pretension, duplicity, and reterritorialization. The horizons of possibilities available to Benjamin are doubly blocked by Roger since he seems to discipline his elderly child, i.e., born an old man with a given identity of old age, as Benjamin is expected not to act according to his age.

In the Deleuzian sense of the word, even if Benjamin is experimenting with age reversal, his father, as an agent of rationality, aims to restore his identity. In the same way, Roger does everything he can to convince his old son that he belongs to a given territory and that a bright future awaits him provided that he behaves himself, and, against his physical incongruity, that he has to behave like a newborn. It may be in this sense that Petry's reading of Roger's "strategies of denial" (1989, p. 78) seems to have become more comprehensible and tangible.

Likewise, Benjamin's experience of registering at Yale College and the way he is treated by the academia of the time exemplify the immaturity of society for changes and possibilities. This account is given by the narrator in Chapter IV which reads as follows: "Of the life of Benjamin Button between his twelfth and twenty-first year I intend to say little" (Fitzgerald, 1922, p. 204). This is also another maneuver on the part of the God-like narrator who labels these years as "years of normal ungrowth" (p. 204), refusing to give us the accounts of how Mr. Button might have disciplined his son, an example of which can be found at the end of Chapter III:

Finally a compromise was reached. Benjamin was to continue to dye his hair. He was to make a better attempt to play with boys of his own age. He was not to wear his spectacles or carry a cane in the street. In return for these concessions he was allowed his first suit of long trousers. (Fitzgerald, 1922, p. 204)

Accordingly, we should become suspicious of the narrator's concealing Benjamin's possibilities and discoveries, as well as instances of his defiance of the established norms. As soon as Mr. Button finds his son a seemingly normal man "whose step was firm" (Fitzgerald, 1922, p. 204), he sends him to Yale College. There, we are familiarized with another father figure whose demeanor and actions are presumably in line with that of the society of fathers. Mr. Hart, the college registrar at Yale College, soon mistakes Benjamin for his father, labels him a "dangerous lunatic" (p. 205) for not having maintained the identity of an 18-year-old, and warns the freshman to leave the town in eighteen minutes (p. 206). While being expelled from the college, Benjamin finds himself followed by a mob of undergraduates and professors' wives shouting after him and calling him a "wandering Jew" (p. 207). While he is a man of fifty (in terms of bodily age), Benjamin's experience at Yale can be regarded as an act of deterritorialization or acting against the norms set by the society of fathers. However, this betrayal of the norms is soon impeded by the reterritorialization on the part of the father figures. As Deleuze puts it, "[t]here is always a way of reterritorializing oneself in the voyage: it is always one's father or mother (or worse) that one finds again on the voyage" (Deleuze & Parnet, 1987, p. 38). While Benjamin intends to experiment with a new form of experience at this stage of his life, the molar lines seem to overpower him and end up in reterritorialization. Benjamin, to some extent, pities people when he sees their being merged in molar lines: "You'll regret this!" (Fitzgerald, 1922, p. 207) Accordingly, we can say that it is Benjamin who comprehends to what extent becoming is being blocked in this atmosphere and to what extent people have conformed to normative ideologies. The block of becoming is so deep-rooted that even the narrator comments: "It was the biggest mistake that Yale College had ever made" (p. 207).

Amidst the flourishing of the father figures, Benjamin opens up a new form of fatherhood that runs contrary to those common in his society. His experience of manhood entails his getting to know Hildegrade and the fact that he creates a picture of "health and vitality" (Fitzgerald, 1922, p. 212) in his society. More importantly, upon his marriage, a number of rumors begin to circulate in the city about his originality. This is followed by New York papers showing "sketches which showed the head of Benjamin Button attached to a fish, to a snake, and, finally, to a body of solid brass" (p. 211). In Deleuzian terms, all these show that the very existence of Benjamin has led to a new experimentation with the idea of manhood and fatherhood. Since Deleuzian philosophy praises becoming over being, it takes a becoming body as always on the move to produce new possibilities. To be more precise, this is related to the notion of

desire, which has its own exclusive meaning in Deleuzian philosophy. One can experiment with anything by becoming them in the way that an individual who seeks new horizons can become everything. It is in this sense that Benjamin's presence in this society and his very actions lead to his loss of face, which is equal to loss of identity. With regard to this, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) argue that "the face is produced in humanity" (p. 170), and elsewhere they remark:

[. . .] if human beings have a destiny, it is rather to escape the face, to dismantle the face and facializations, to become imperceptible . . . by strange true becomings that get past the wall and get out of the black holes, that make *faciality traits* themselves finally elude the organization of the face. (p. 171)

Benjamin's actions in these years of vitality create in society a new image of humanity and manhood. His bodily transformations from childhood and the related widespread rumors reveal that Benjamin has done his best to escape any given identity and faciality.

This is quite contrary to the conditions of Hildegrade, who becomes "too settled in her ways, too placid, too content, too anemic in her excitements, and too sober in her taste" (Fitzgerald, 1922, p. 213), whereas Benjamin creates a new image of manhood that resists being labeled and lends itself to new experimentations. For instance, when Benjamin returns from the Spanish-American War, Hildegrade highlights her difference from her husband in the following way: "You think you don't want to be like anyone else. You always have been that way, and you always will be" (p. 214). This, of course, is quite contrary to her image of manhood and the mellowness she had expected from Benjamin when he was a man of fifty. In fact, through the dicta of the fathers' society, she internalized the patriarchal ideas of conformity and stability: "Just think how it would be if every one else looked at things as you do—what would the world be like?" (pp. 214–215).

Unlike his father, Roscoe is another figure who follows in his grandfather's footsteps and adopts his views of manhood and fatherhood. Upon his graduation, the narrator informs us that Benjamin and his son were confused with one another, and this resemblance delighted Benjamin (Fitzgerald, 1922, pp. 215–216), because he cannot be distinguished from his son, and, as a result, he does not assimilate into a given identity. This explains why Benjamin has reached a "zone of indiscernibility" in Deleuzian terms. Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) discussion of the indiscernibility of nomads and

barbarians perhaps makes Benjamin's indiscernibility more palpable: While the nomads "venture a fluid and active escape" and "sow deterritorialization everywhere", the migrate barbarians "cross and recross frontiers, pillage and ransom, but also integrate themselves and reterritorialize . . . At other times, they will go over the nomads, allying with them, becoming indiscernible" (pp. 222–223). It is in this sense that we may deem Benjamin on the path of becoming. However, Roscoe later returns to the habit of labeling and making things discernible: "he wanted no scandal to creep out in connection with his family" (Fitzgerald, 1922, p. 217). Following the prominence that he gains in Baltimore, Roscoe's demeanor shifts to that of his grandfather's and the way he objects to Benjamin's seemingly anomalous growth: "you better turn right around and start back the other way. . . you behave yourself" (p. 218). Roscoe seems to be more concerned with his own face and even urges the now-teenager Benjamin not to call his son by his first name. The very actions of Roscoe fill us with the foreboding that the paternal disciplines will be restored in Benjamin's life once again.

As discussed previously, Alexander's moralistic reading of Benjamin's life is more consistent with the capitalist view of norms and regulations. The narrator of the story, as well as Alexander, lauds Benjamin as long as his motives are in line with those of the norms of patriarchal society. In Deleuzian terms, with the flourishing of his vitality and his new experimentations, Benjamin attempts to set himself as an example of a member of a "society without fathers" (Deleuze, 1998, p. 88). As Deleuze writes, "[i]f humanity can be saved, . . . it will be only through the dissolution or decomposition of the paternal function" (p. 84). With the restoration of the father figure, a reterritorialization of the previous regime takes place. In the same way that the newborn Benjamin had been in the habit of sneaking away from his father to read his *Encyclopedia Britannica*, now the nearly ten-year-old Benjamin has to leave the house one night, saying nothing to Roscoe, to join the United States army at Camp Mosby as a General. However, this proves fruitless, and the paternal society completely bans Benjamin's vitality and experimentation when Roscoe escorts him back to his home. This demonstrates the critical role discharged by the father figures who, instead of leaving subjects in indeterminate and obscure zones, tend to rationalize life and restore logic to the community.

To Become in the Middle

It has already been mentioned that Benjamin's actions exemplify new possibilities and new forms of life. That a person experiments with reversed aging is itself a novelty,

which is in direct opposition to the rationalist mind. From the outset, when Roger Button sets eyes on his son, he attempts to trace the origin of his son: "Where in God's name did you come from?" (Fitzgerald, 1922, p. 196). It is quite natural on the part of Mr. Button to resort to denial, as Petry has noted, since the rationalist mind looks for an origin or, in Deleuzian terms, "a point of departure" (Deleuze & Parnet, 1987, p. 27). Therefore, the very existence of Benjamin can be taken as an experiment that runs contrary to the established form of life, in that he rejects any dedication to the already-understood patterns of living. Upon his father's inquiry about his origin, Benjamin, quite comically, situates himself within a child-adult continuum that confuses Roger: "I can't tell you *exactly* who I am . . . because I've only been born a few hours" (Fitzgerald, 1922, p. 196). Benjamin's response makes the rationalist Roger resort to an outburst of anger and denial, "You lie! You're an impostor!", since he cannot rationally deal with his new-born son occupying a liminal space. This brings to the fore Deleuze's affinity with the idea of in-betweenness or being in the middle, "to grow from the middle, to be always-in-between" (Deleuze & Parnet, 1987, p. 93), which he recurrently uses throughout his *oeuvre* and can be understood in the light of his preoccupation with the idea of rhizome:

Rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*. . . The tree imposes the verb "to be," but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, 'and . . . and . . . and . . .' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 25)

Accordingly, we can see how Benjamin is experimenting with in-betweenness in that he plunges his father into a state where he may find his son an old man, a newborn child, and at the same time both of them. This is evident through Benjamin's pronouncement: "this baby's not going to wear anything in about two minutes." This is, however, followed by the baby's whining: "And a cane father. I want to have a cane" (Fitzgerald, 1922, p. 198). These are but a few examples that bear witness to the fact that Benjamin's very existence itself is an instance of becoming and indiscernibility amid a society that attempts to reinforce itself by seeking trees, images, histories, beginnings, and ends.

Of course, Benjamin's aging is not a mere reversal of aging, i.e., one's behaving like a child in adulthood followed gradually by behaving like an adult in childhood. Benjamin is a character who transforms our conception of adulthood and childhood. In contrast to the adaptation of the story by David Fincher, Fitzgerald's story illustrates a newborn

Benjamin as a child who possesses the physical features of a senior: “a *baby* of threescore and ten, a baby whose feet hung over the sides of the crib in which it was reposing” (Fitzgerald, 1922, p. 196). Contrary to Fincher’s adaptation, which, in Curnutt’s view, relates “the alienation of the outsider, who by virtue of his oddity, must observe rather than experience life” (2009, p. 7), Fitzgerald’s story illustrates a Benjamin who experiences a new form of childhood as well as a new form of adulthood in his childhood. In this sense, he experiments with what Deleuze terms as “becoming-child” and also, as argued here, “becoming adult.” In their discussions of becoming, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) assert that:

. . . girls and children draw their strength neither from the molar status that subdues them nor from the organism and subjectivity they receive; they draw their strength from the becoming-molecular they cause to pass between sexes and ages, the becoming-child of the adult as well as of the child. (p. 277)

Regarding Benjamin, we may see how, as a child, he interpenetrates through the experiences of childhood, and later experiences what it means to be an adult while he is a boy: “Benjamin opened a book of boy’s stories . . . But he found himself thinking persistently about war . . . Benjamin wanted to enlist, but, alas, sixteen was the minimum age, and he did not look that old” (Fitzgerald, 1922, p. 219). Benjamin experiments with adulthood and childhood in ages other than that of their physical and psychological attributes, and this shows that in each period, he selectively adopts the “particles, the speeds and slowness, the flows” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 277) of that particular age to become new and produce new conceptions of aging. It is worth mentioning how Fitzgerald depicts a society that totally banishes childhood, in order to show how Benjamin has been entrapped by father figures whose domineering position is shaken by the animality of childishness: one contending that he must perform childishness and the other warning him against childishness, one trying to impose his disciplined version of childishness and the other banishing childishness altogether. It is in this sense that we may take Benjamin’s story as a story of the suppression of childish nomadism at the cost of the stability of identity.

Even though he is born into an upper-class American family and at times he takes pleasure in being merged into its amenities, Benjamin might be seen as a character who easily turns away from these comfort zones. Ortolano’s reading of Benjamin situates

him more within the opportunistic realm of capitalism, as he argues that Benjamin's goals are exceedingly obvious and related to upper-class America (2012, p. 135). This can seemingly be creditable as long as we identify Benjamin as a person who attaches himself to a system. Nevertheless, it can be said that one may remain within the realm of capitalistic mores and at the same time constantly lose face, and this is evidently seen in Benjamin's actions. In 1898, when "his home had for him so little charm" (Fitzgerald, 1922, p. 213), Benjamin sets off to serve in the army in the Spanish-American War, "dancing with the prettiest of the young married women" (p. 215), handing over his sparkling business to Roscoe, attending Harvard university, attending the (prep) school later, and enlisting in the army as a General in his final years. All these bear evidence of Benjamin's dealing with new opportunities while escaping them, thus experimenting with both physical and mental nomadism. Deleuze's affinity with the term nomadism justifiably explains Benjamin's conditions: "To make thought a nomadic power is not to necessarily move, but is to shake the model of the state apparatus" (Deleuze and Parnet, 1987, p. 32). Thus, it can be said that Benjamin remains within popular culture and at the same time deals with what Deleuze calls "escaping the codes" (2004, p. 260) to become new and not take root. Benjamin's very existence and his defying of the system of aging, which deems him as a person without history, is actually an experimentation with escaping the codes defined by society. Therefore, it could be claimed that Fitzgerald's neglected short story has been tremendously successful at creating what Deleuze (1998) calls "inventing the people who are missing" (p. 4).

Conclusion

This article has attempted to offer a new reading of F. Scott Fitzgerald's neglected short story "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button". Considering the available literature on Benjamin's case as valuable, and at the same time, insufficient, this article offers some new directions in the life of Benjamin through the lens of Gilles Deleuze's philosophy. Hence, firstly, it has been argued that, similar to the narrator in Melville's *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, the narrator of Fitzgerald's short story seems to direct the attention of his readers to the marginal aspects of Benjamin's life. Instead of focusing on the vitalistic aspects of Benjamin's life, through making use of a number of strategies, the narrator seems to have devoted himself wholeheartedly to bring to the fore the anomalous and abnormal aspects of Benjamin's backward aging. Secondly, as opposed to part of the existing literature which conceives Benjamin's motives as fruitless or in line with capitalism, it has been argued that Benjamin's adopting forgetfulness can be taken as a positive measure to

experiment with new possibilities, new inventions, and new forms of life. In this manner, we may read the significance of Benjamin's life and its contribution to the creation of new forms of life rather than merely seeking starting points, endpoints, and origins. Finally, it has been argued that the very presence of Benjamin in postbellum American society can itself initiate the formation of a society of brothers. However, Benjamin is entrapped within a society in which father figures (his father earlier and his son later) act as normalizing figures blocking lines of becoming, resulting in reterritorialization.

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