F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

A COLLECTION OF CRITICAL ESSAYS

Edited by
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PRENTICE-HALL, INC.
Englewood Cliffs, N. J. 07632

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

ISBN 0-13-320846-XP
0-13-320853-2C

Current printing (last digit):
20

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG CARD NO.: 63-9306

Printed in the United States of America

C 32084

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LATE WORK

Introduction

by Arthur Mizener

Almost from the start of his career—at least from the publication of *This Side of Paradise* in 1920—Scott Fitzgerald was a popular and successful writer. During his professional career, a period of just about twenty years, he produced something like 160 short stories, mostly for the high-priced magazines. (During a period of just about the same length Hemingway wrote his "first forty-nine stories," as his publishers optimistically called them when they brought them together in a book in 1938.) Of the four novels Fitzgerald published during these twenty years, two—*The Great Gatsby* (1925) and *Tender Is the Night* (1934)—were more successful than serious books usually are, and two—*This Side of Paradise* (1920) and *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922)—were best-sellers. This success, and Fitzgerald's financial and psychological dependence on it, had an important effect on the character of his work and a striking effect on his reputation.

His early success combined with his personal expectations to determine his relations with his society; more than any other gifted writer of his generation, he was committed to and lived in his time, so that for him the tension between his own serious standards as a writer and the conventional standards of the magazine audience was very great. The effects on his work of this tension between his gift and his commitment were both good and bad. On the one hand, it meant that he wrote a great deal which, if it was not out-and-out hackwork, was the expression of a carefully limited range of his understanding. On the other hand, it gave to his best work the quality that distinguished it most strikingly from the work of other good writers of his time, that is, the normality of its conception of life and the sense of intimacy it creates in his readers.

But the very fact that such a normal conception of life was rare among the writers of his time—as it perhaps is among writers at most times—meant that his work was regarded with some doubt by his fellow writers and by the critics. One of the most unfortunate consequences of the clumsiness with which American society and its intellectual community have handled their relations with one another is the way they have blundered when a gifted man who can communicate with his society has

come along. Fitzgerald was very much a victim of this clumsiness; during his lifetime he was under constant pressure from his audience to write less honestly and at the same time rarely taken seriously by writers and critics he himself respected.

This Side of Paradise was—with some justification—violently attacked by serious critics and, what was much worse for Fitzgerald, treated by them as if it were hardly literature at all. H. L. Mencken, the most influential critic of the time, pronounced *The Great Gatsby* "no more than a glorified anecdote," and the well-known reviewer, Isabel Paterson, called it "a book for the season only." Peter Quennell described *Tender Is the Night* as "a rather irritating type of *chic*." Only a few critics, and those mostly Fitzgerald's personal friends, took his work seriously during his lifetime, and even they gave a good deal of their attention to lecturing him about the way he was wasting his talent. His good friends Edmund Wilson and John Peale Bishop, both of whom wrote carefully and responsibly about his work, were very stern with him on this point;[1] Hemingway took him so severely to task in a letter about *Tender Is the Night* that he felt it necessary to apologize by adding, "About this time I wouldn't blame you if you gave me a burst. Jesus its marvellous to tell other people how to write, live, die, etc." The exceptions to this general attitude, like the admirable reviews of Malcolm Cowley, James Thurber, John Chamberlain, and Dennis Harding (in *Scrutiny*),[2] were rare.

It was not until the 1940's, when Fitzgerald was dead and the careful editorial work of Edmund Wilson had made available *The Last Tycoon, The Great Gatsby,* half a dozen of Fitzgerald's best stories, and the fascinating personal material of *The Crack-Up,* that critics generally began to concern themselves seriously with Fitzgerald. There had been a small flurry—again mostly the work of old friends—at the time of his death, in December, 1940, when *The New Republic,* then under Malcolm Cowley's literary editorship, produced a group of obituary comments by Dos Passos, Glenway Wescott, and Budd Schulberg, and *The New Yorker* contributed a short but devastating note on *The Herald-Tribune*'s inaccurate obituary. But until Mr. Wilson did his work, the established view of Fitzgerald remained the one that Westbrook Pegler expressed with his usual excess of vulgarity at the time of Fitzgerald's death, when he described Fitzgerald as the representative figure of a "group or cult of juvenile crying-drunks." As late as 1939, The Modern Library dropped *The Great Gatsby* because it failed to sell.

But between Fitzgerald's death and the publication of *The Crack-Up* in 1945, the reputation of *The Great Gatsby*—and along with it, of Fitzgerald's work in general—gradually increased; by 1945, Lionel Trilling

[1] See, for example, Edmund Wilson's essay, pp. 80-81 below.

[2] See pp. 143-145 below for Mr. Harding's review of *Tender Is the Night*

could fairly say in his introduction to New Directions' reissue of *Gatsby* that "Fitzgerald is now beginning to take his place in our literary tradition." Thus, when *The Crack-Up* appeared that same year, Fitzgerald received the kind of thoughtful and perceptive attention that is represented in this book by the essays of Lionel Trilling, William Troy, and Andrews Wanning. There was a similar concentration of serious criticism in 1951, when two full-length books about Fitzgerald were published (three, if one counts Budd Schulberg's *The Disenchanted* a book about Fitzgerald). The essays in this book by Edwin Fussell, Malcolm Cowley, Leslie Fiedler, Tom Burnam, and D. S. Savage are products of that time.

Since then Fitzgerald's work has had the same kind of attention from critics that the work of the other important writers of the twenties has had, as a glance at the annual bibliographies in *PMLA* will show, and nearly half the essays in this book were produced after 1951.

II

If the unusual combination of serious and popular writer in Fitzgerald has had a marked effect on the development of his reputation, it had an even more important effect on the character of his work itself. He was, to begin with, only partially successful in living as a writer with the tension between the two sides of his nature. His best work was frequently rejected; "Outside the Cabinet-Maker's" was turned down by seven magazines before it was finally accepted by *The Century Magazine*. It constantly exacerbated him that, as he once wrote his agent and friend, Harold Ober, "a cheap story like *The Popular Girl* [*The Saturday Evening Post,* February 11 and 18, 1922] written in one week while the baby was being born brings $1500.00 & a genuinely imaginative thing into which I put three weeks real enthusiasm like *The Diamond in the Sky* [the working title of "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz," eventually published in *The Smart Set,* June, 1922] brings not a thing."

Part of the time he deliberately wrote what the high-priced magazines wanted, what he called, speaking of the stories in *Flappers and Philosophers,* "passably amusing stories, a bit out of date now, but doubtless the sort that would then have whiled away a dreary half hour in a dental office." He was never casual about such stories; he worked on them conscientiously and "there was" as he wrote in his Notebooks, "one little drop of something—not blood, not a tear, not my seed, but me more intimately than these, in every story, it was the extra I had." But again and again, to the very end of his life, he would be carried away by the delight of writing out of his full understanding of life without thinking about the needs of the magazines at all. Less than a year before his death, when he began the actual writing of *The Last*

Tycoon, he was filled once more with the old, irrepressible excitement; you can hear it in the letter he wrote his daughter: "Scottina: . . . Look! I have begun to write something that is maybe great. . . . It may not *make* us a cent but it will pay expenses and it is the first labor of love I've undertaken since the first part of 'Infidelity.' "

But considering the difficulties of the situation, Fitzgerald, despite his complaints about the magazines and his self-criticism, did manage a good deal of the time to satisfy both impulses of his nature, to write from a familiar point of view about the actual world and to write something that was "maybe great." His best work in fact grows out of his precise understanding of his time, out of a concentration on the actualities of his world unequalled in the work of any contemporary. He lived, as Malcolm Cowley once put it, in a room full of clocks and calendars, haunted by the minute particulars that represented any given year and its attitudes because the precise quality of the feelings associated with these particulars was so vivid to him. His work is full of brilliant, casual observations of them—of the sound of " 'Three O'Clock in the Morning,' a neat sad little waltz of that year [1922]" that could be heard floating out of the door of Gatsby's house late at night after a party, of the feel of the year (1927) when "a widespread neurosis began to be evident, faintly signalled, like a nervous beating of the feet, by the popularity of cross-word puzzles," of the impression made by those who "drift here and there unrestfully wherever people played polo and were rich together."

This is not social history or even nostalgically evocative social history; if it is history at all, it is the history of a consciousness. What Lionel Trilling says of *The Great Gatsby* is true of all Fitzgerald's best work: "It keeps fresh *because* it is so specifically conscious of its time . . . . its continuing power comes from the courage with which it grasps a moment in history as a great moral fact." (My italics.) But if we are to understand the "great moral fact" embodied in the moment of history Fitzgerald's best work grasps, we need some knowledge of that moment. Indeed, we need this kind of knowledge for all writers who are, like Fitzgerald, partly novelists of manners. According to Boswell, Doctor Johnson once "observed, that all works which describe manners, require notes within sixty or seventy years, or less." Anyone who has, for example, tried to convey to students of a later generation the wonderful absurdity of the conversation between Bill Gorton and Jake Barnes in Chapter XII of Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* knows how necessary such knowledge is. Very little of what Hemingway means comes through to the reader who does not know enough to see the point of imagining Mencken and Frankie Frisch at Holy Cross, or Bishop Manning at Loyola, or Wayne B. Wheeler at Notre Dame—or, possibly, at Austin Business College. What is true of Hemingway is even truer of Fitzgerald, who lived far more intimately than Hemingway the life of his times.

That life was, as I have tried to suggest, his means of conveying his understanding of life; as he himself well knew, it was "my material . . . all I had to deal with."

III

It is not easy to get a real sense of the life of the twenties because the decade has been so heavily exploited by the easy, vulgar, sentimental nostalgia of magazines like *Life*. Too many people think they know that the twenties were a silly, happy age when everyone was busy getting drunk in speakeasies or out of silver hip-flasks at Yale-Princeton games in the Bowl, or dancing to the pretentiously bad "jazz" of Paul Whiteman and George Olson, though no one of any intelligence in the period itself took this aspect of its life seriously. As Fitzgerald observed, it was—like every period—well supplied with foolish people, "people you didn't want to know [who] said, 'yes, we have no bananas.' "

In *The Sun Also Rises* Hemingway goes to some trouble to dissociate himself from such people by having Bill Gorton, fresh from America, say mockingly to Jake Barnes, "You're an expatriate. You get precious. Fake European standards have ruined you. You drink yourself to death. You become obsessed by sex. You spend all your time talking, not working. You are an expatriate, see? You hang around cafés." And Jake says, "It sounds like a swell life. When do I work?"—thus reminding us of all the responsibility and sheer hard work that is represented by the astonishing number of good books produced in that short decade.

The truth is that the 1920's was a time of great cultural change in America marked by an outburst of creative activity so vigorous that we are still a little stunned by it. Until the end of the first world war, the United States was a provincial nation, even—at least culturally—a colonial nation. Americans believed that, with very few exceptions, only Europeans could write significant books, and one of the results of their thinking so was that by and large only Europeans did. This provinciality is still clearly evident at the beginning of the twenties, even in those who felt themselves in rebellion against it. The world of Harding and Coolidge ("the heir," as Mencken called him, "of Washington, Lincoln, and Chester A. Arthur"), of Wayne B. Wheeler and his Anti-Saloon League, of Anthony Comstock's salacious-minded censoring of books, was obviously provincial. But we ought also to remember the widespread opinion among the rebellious intellectuals of the early twenties that James Branch Cabell's *Jurgen* (1919)—which was spectacularly suppressed—was the work of a subtle, worldly, and brilliant talent. That was very provincial, too, for *Jurgen* is an affected and superficial book, much more like the work of Jeffrey Farnol than anything else.

At the beginning of the twenties Fitzgerald was saying, with the portentous air of a man revealing the shocking realities of life, that the hero

of *This Side of Paradise* "saw girls doing things that even in his memory would have been impossible: eating three-o'clock, after-dance suppers in impossible cafés, talking of every side of life with an air half of earnestness, half of mockery, yet with a furtive excitement that Amory considered stood for a real moral let-down." Their mothers, he said, had no "idea how casually their daughters were accustomed to be kissed." It was all quite shocking, and the way *This Side of Paradise* was taken by the general public as a revelation of the wickedness of The Younger Generation shows that they thought it quite shocking too. Only a few old intellectual roués like Heywood Broun dared to say of the book that "there is too much footwork and too much feinting for anything solid and substantial being accomplished. You can't expect to have blood drawn in any such exhibition as that."

By the end of the 1920's Fitzgerald's attitude—and the general public's—had changed almost beyond recognition. From the vantage ground of 1931, Fitzgerald could recall with remote, unshocked amusement how, in the middle twenties, "a perfectly mated, contented young mother [asked] my wife's advice about 'having an affair right away,' though she had no one especially in mind, 'because don't you think it's sort of undignified when you get much over thirty?' "

IV

The revolutionary change in manners that occurred during the twenties—perhaps unequalled in American history except during the period of the Civil War—was accompanied by a sudden flourishing of talented writers. These are the writers whom Gertrude Stein somewhat misleadingly named The Lost Generation—Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Faulkner, Dos Passos, Lewis, and the rest. They were anything but "lost" in the sense of being in uncertainty or doubt. It was, to be sure, fashionable in the twenties among people you did not want to know to talk about being disillusioned, but even the gloomy Mr. Eliot went out of his way to disillusion those who imagined *The Waste Land* was meant to express their alleged disillusionment; he said the idea was "nonsense" and added acidly that "I may have expressed for them their illusion of being disillusioned, but that did not form part of my intention."

The writers of the twenties were not disillusioned. They were only released from what seemed to them the stifling restrictions of the previous generation's narrow, hypocritical attitudes, into a freedom that was heady with optimism. As Fitzgerald remarked afterwards, "it seemed only a question of a few years before the older people would step aside and let the world be run by those who saw things as they were—and it all seemed rosy and romantic to us who were young then. . . ." This is not the attitude of a lost generation, except in the sense that explorers

convinced that El Dorado is over the next mountain range may be said to be lost. It is rather the attitude of the first generation of a country that has become capable of imagining its own greatness. It is not easy to determine how much the work of these young writers had to do with causing the change in our manners that came about in the twenties and how much that change had to do with releasing their talents; in any event, the two things occurred together.

"There had been a war fought and won and the great city of the conquering people was crossed with triumphal arches and vivid with thrown flowers of white, red, and rose," as Fitzgerald said in 1920. This was the striking effect. With his eye for the only apparently insignificant detail that makes clear the imaginative source of such change, Fitzgerald also observed that "with Americans ordering suits by the gross in London, the Bond Street tailors perforce agreed to modify their cut to the American long-waisted figure and loose-fitting taste, *something subtle passed to America, the style of man.*" (My italics.)

A time had come when American writers could think it possible to make major works of literature out of American experience. Freed in fact from the provinciality of the previous generation and in imagination from a sense of the insignificance of their world, they set about with enthusiasm to clear away the grubby little world their parents had lived in and to imagine a new one. This new world was not, on the whole, conceived in social and political terms.

The political attitudes of intellectual people in the twenties were—except for a very small number of socialists—libertarian and individualistic rather than, in our sense, liberal. The most influential political voice of the period was Mencken's—"We didn't even remember anything about the Bill of Rights," Fitzgerald recalled, "until Mencken began plugging it." But Mencken was a conservative, even a reactionary, in his basic political feelings.

He was prepared to be arrested when Boston suppressed an issue of *The American Mercury* for printing an article about prostitution called "Box-Car Molly," and he spoke out strongly in favor of freedom of speech, even for Communists, even during the hysteria of the Palmer "Red Raids" that followed the first world war. But it is characteristic of Mencken that he did so by attacking—in the name of individual liberty and the Bill of Rights—collective attitudes of every color.

> Let a lone Red arise to annoy a barroom full of Michigan lumberjacks, and at once the fire-alarm sounds and the full military and naval power of the nation is summoned to put down the outrage. But how many Americans would the Reds convert to their rubbish, even supposing them free to spout it on every street corner? Probably not enough, all told, to make a day's hunting for a regiment of militia. The American moron's mind simply doesn't run in that direction; he wants to keep his Ford even at the cost of losing the Bill of Rights.

That shows a talent amounting almost to genius for insulting everybody's sacred cow, for making all ideologies appear beneath contempt. Mencken thought them all absurd, just as he thought absurd the stock attitudes of the American businessman who, he said, "goes to bed every night with an uneasy feeling that there is a burglar under the bed, and gets up every morning with a sickening fear that his underwear has been stolen." It was perfectly consistent of Mencken to be, when the time came, a violent anti-New Dealer and to remain, despite his professional newspaperman's knowledge of American elections, convinced right up to the end that Alfred Landon would defeat Franklin Roosevelt.

The courage with which Mencken accepted the consequences of his almost anarchic individualism was bound to gain the respect and admiration of a generation filled with doubts about the democracy which —they had been told too often—they had fought a war to make the world safe for. "We had heard ["the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in vain"], sometimes standing in the rain almost out of earshot, so that only the shouted words came through, and had read them, on proclamations that were slapped up by billposters over other proclamations, now for a long time, and I had seen nothing sacred, and the things that were glorious had no glory and the sacrifices were like the stockyards at Chicago if nothing was done with the meat except to bury it," as Frederic Henry puts their feelings in *A Farewell to Arms.*

Most thoughtful people in the twenties were libertarians like Mencken, though many of those who agreed with him then turned out to be liberals rather than conservatives when a decision was forced on them by the Depression and the decade that followed. But even though many of them were, as Fitzgerald says in his Notebooks he was, "essentially Marxian" (in the quintessential sense in which many businessmen are today), few of them ever lost the libertarian feelings Mencken had encouraged in them.[3]

Meanwhile, until late in the twenties when the Sacco-Vanzetti case aroused them, the question of politics hardly existed for them. Fitzgerald caught their attitude perfectly when he said in 1931, after the question of politics had begun to trouble people in a big way, "The events of 1919 left us cynical rather than revolutionary, in spite of the fact that now we are all rummaging around in our trunks wondering where in hell we left the liberty cap—'I know I *had* it'—and the moujik blouse. It was characteristic of the Jazz Age that it had no interest in politics at all." How "the events of 1919" produced this effect on them is beautifully realized in "May Day" (1920), the story Fitzgerald wrote about them at the time. The characteristic attitude of the twenties to-

[3] There is a fine illustration of the conflict that went on in such people in Daniel Aaron's account of Malcolm Cowley's inner struggle during the thirties, when he was trying to cooperate with the Communists. See Professor Aaron's *Writers on the Left.*

ward the *volonté général* is clearly expressed by Anthony Patch in *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922):

> He tried to imagine himself in Congress rooting around in the litter of that incredible pigsty with the narrow and porcine brows he saw pictured sometimes in the rotogravure sections of the Sunday newspapers, those glorified proletarians babbling to the nation the ideas of high-school seniors! Little men with copy-book ambitions who by mediocrity had thought to emerge from mediocrity into the lustreless and unromantic heaven of a government by the people. . . .

V

The positive aspect of the twenties' attitude is implied in Anthony's meditation by the phrase, "lustreless and unromantic heaven." Perhaps better than any other writer of the time Fitzgerald expressed this positive feeling, this vision of a lustrous and romantic heaven that seemed "rosy and romantic to us who were young then," and the feeling that—when defeat came—it was because a stubbornly unimaginative society with an incurable preference for a meretricious life prevented people capable of imagining this heaven from achieving it. When Gatsby's life is finished, only Gatsby himself seems to Nick Carraway to have been all right, and what seems to him to blame for the disaster "is what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams. . . ."

With his "extraordinary gift for hope, [his] romantic readiness," his "heightened sensitivity to the promises of life," Gatsby constructed a Platonic conception of himself and a dream of a romantic heaven that he focused—almost deliberately, certainly with a full consciousness of what was happening—on Daisy Fay. "He knew that when he kissed this girl, and forever wed his unutterable visions to her perishable breath, his mind would never romp again like the mind of God." To this conception, and its embodiment, "he was faithful to the end." But it had, sadly enough, only "a vast, vulgar, meretricious beauty," because it was unavoidably made out of the materials Gatsby's society provided him. Perhaps no human being would have been adequate to that vision; certainly Daisy Fay and her kind were not. Gatsby could invent only the kind of heaven "that a seventeen year old boy would be likely to invent" in Fitzgerald's time, a world filled, for Gatsby, with "interesting people. . . . People who do interesting things. Celebrated people"—like "Mr. Buchanan, the polo-player," and Jordan Baker, that "great sportswoman" who would "never do anything that wasn't all right," though Tom Buchanan is in fact a vicious, self-deceived sentimentalist and Jordan Baker an incurable liar and cheat.