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Stanley Cooperman

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH, F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

"Rich people," said Ernest Hemingway, "are poor people with money." It seemed to F. Scott Fitzgerald, however, that they were nothing of the sort, and he devoted a great part of his work to proving that "rich people" are indeed "different from you and me." That Hemingway insisted upon reducing a complexity to some sort of manageable simplicity was totally characteristic of him both as a person and as a writer. And that Fitzgerald knew, perhaps all too well, that *money was* a crucial element in American culture, shaped the successes and the failures of his work—and of his life as well.

THE CITY-BOY: Like Ernest Hemingway, Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald was born in "the provinces" of America: the Mid-west. Unlike Hemingway, however (whose early years were influenced by the great outdoors so much a part of his small-town childhood), Fitzgerald was born in a large city—St. Paul, Minnesota —and remained a "city boy" all his life. His family, moreover, was very much a part of St. Paul "society," and this too had considerable influence in determining the direction of his art and the growth of his sensibility. Perhaps one might say that it was simply a matter of a different sort of "wilderness," but one thing is clear: if many of Hemingway's basic attitudes were shaped by his hunting and fishing experiences in the great North woods, many of Fitzgerald's basic attitudes were defined by the upper middleclass financial and social position that was his heritage.

Fitzgerald's maternal grandfather was the St. Paul merchant P. F.

McQuillan, a hard-working man with the "strict integrity" and "soundness" so characteristic of the middle-merchant group of the area. Although the McQuillan fortune by no means belonged to the foremost rank of St. Paul money, the wholesale grocery business founded by the old man was worth over a million dollars at his death, and the McQuillan will left $250,000 to be shared by Fitzgerald's mother and the four other McQuillan children: two sisters and two brothers. That the McQuillan name was one of "substance" in St. Paul is indicated by the fact that Fitzgerald's own activities at Princeton, where he achieved a modest success as both a playwright and athlete, received considerable coverage in the society pages of St. Paul newspapers.

UPPER MIDDLE-CLASS: It was, indeed, primarily due to his mother's family that Fitzgerald could be described as someone "born into the country-club set." The family's position in this set, however, was rather ambiguous; neither "aristocrats" nor "nobodies," they dwelt in a kind of social twilight-zone best symbolized by Fitzgerald's own description of one of the houses in which he lived as a St. Paul teen-ager: it was, he says, "a house below the average on a street above the average." Such a position is hardly conducive to personal security, and perhaps helps explain why F. Scott Fitzgerald, while born into the exclusive "club" of the privileged class, spent a lifetime worrying about his membership—and worrying, too, whether the membership itself was worth the emotional and artistic energy he felt obliged (often in spite of his own better judgment) to expend in order to maintain it.

On his mother's side, at any rate, Fitzgerald was the inheritor of a tradition in which financial "success" was still defined by a strong awareness of moral solidity and ethical responsibility, a tradition in

which good business was directly related (rather than irrelevant) to good citizenship and social responsibility. It was the kind of firmly based *ethic* referred to by Nick Carroway, narrator of *The Great Gatsby*, as he wishes for a world that would "stand at moral attention forever." And the nostalgia for such a world was, certainly, to become an important aspect of F. Scott Fitzgerald's rather schizophrenic personal development. Under the veneer of Princetonian aestheticism and despite his need for a "smart" identity (to be earned by "success"), Fitzgerald, in a very profound sense, remained a moral provincial; and it is precisely this moral provincialism—a nostalgia for moral qualities represented by the "West" and a scorn of the moral vacuum represented by the "East"—which is so basic to the dramatic structure of *The Great Gatsby*.

On his father's side, however, there was no such "solid" tradition —or rather, the tradition was of a different sort, at once more "romantic" and more vaguely defined. For Edward Fitzgerald's Maryland family could—and did—trace its kinship to Francis Scott Key; and Edward Fitzgerald was himself something of a Southern Gentleman whose manners were far more impressive than was his business acumen. Neither as a corporation executive nor as a broker was he particularly successful, and Fitzgerald's father remains a shadowy figure in Fitzgerald's life.

EARLY YEARS: Shortly after Fitzgerald's birth, on September 24, 1896, the family moved to Buffalo, New York, and lived for a time in Syracuse, but after Edward Fitzgerald lost his job the family returned to St. Paul, and it was in St. Paul that Scott reached his adolescence. By this time both his parents were past fifty. His father seemed to become more "Southern" as it became increasingly obvious that his business career had reached a dead end, and his

mother—having lost two previous children—lavished a rather baroque devotion on young Scott. The only other Fitzgerald child to survive childbirth was a girl, Annabel, but it was Scott who remained the focus of his parents' attention. Although details of Fitzgerald's early years in upstate New York are rather sketchy, the final portrait, as Kenneth Eble remarks, is that of "a somewhat pampered and sheltered boy, an occupant of apartments and rented houses, an inheritor of a sense of family superiority without much visible means to support it."

Back in St. Paul, the young Fitzgerald attended St. Paul Academy and demonstrated a growing affinity for literary expression. He published fiction in the school magazine, and kept copious journals. Even as an adolescent, however, Scott's attitude toward literature was ambiguous; writing, indeed, seems to have been merely one method among many for securing social position and "leadership," and Scott devoted himself with equal enthusiasm to club politics and athletics, not to mention "dancing class," as a means of achieving the status he so intensely craved even as a boy.

Reviewing his later activities at Princeton, commentators have often wondered whether Fitzgerald's literary career would have ever come into existence had he been more physically suited for major athletics or more emotionally suited for a sustained effort at campus politics. There is considerable justice, certainly, in the charge that for F. Scott Fitzgerald literature was a means rather than an end. Even as a schoolboy he felt no particular sense of *vocation* in literature, and his later career was to be seriously hampered by the fact that, for one reason or another, Fitzgerald was forced to use his work as a key to open doors which would otherwise have remained closed.

FITZGERALD AND LITERATURE: Such argument, of course, can easily be overstated; one can no more define the actual literature produced by Fitzgerald according to his motives in producing it, than one can define the prose rhythms of a writer like James Joyce through a mere description of his poor eyesight. What Edmund Wilson calls the "sacred wound" of the artist simply does not define the essence—or the value—of the art itself; and if the "sacred wound" of F. Scott Fitzgerald was a chronic inability to do his work for the sake of the work itself, one might also note that in this respect, as in so many others, his conflicts represented the conflicts of his time and his culture.

In art, perhaps more than in any other field of human endeavor, personal weakness is no less a resource than is personal strength; the artist, indeed, very often uses his work to redeem the weakness itself. It is true, for example, that if Ernest Hemingway had possessed greater social sensitivity and political intelligence, his work would have been richer; it is also true, however, that the unique power of his work depended, to a great extent, on the *lack* of certain qualities which in themselves and in general terms are indeed desirable. One cannot, after all, attack Hemingway because he was not Henry James or Charles Dickens.

By the same token, to say of Fitzgerald that he lacked certain elements of literary "purity" found in other writers is actually to make a retrospective demand that he ought to have been somebody else. That he was *not* somebody else, is a fact for which readers ought to be thankful. Granted that Fitzgerald's weaknesses prevented his development along certain lines, they also created his development along others, and this is true of writers like Hemingway, or Faulkner, or any other individual who sets himself the task of work-

ing words into literature. Given Fitzgerald's personal and social insecurities, one must indeed admit that he could never have produced *A Farewell to Arms*. And given Hemingway's own fears and preoccupations, he could never have produced a book like *The Great Gatsby*.

It is possible, in short, to recognize that Fitzgerald's preoccupation with social status and "making good" took up much of his energy throughout his career, while also recognizing that the unique value of his best work is the result of precisely this preoccupation. And if there were certain qualities of adolescence which Fitzgerald in his own way (like Hemingway in his) never outgrew, it was these qualities which provided the raw material for those Fitzgerald works which remain a vital contribution to American literature.

In 1911, he entered a Catholic boarding school in Hackensack, New Jersey, the Newman Academy, where he spent two years. During this time he visited New York on several occasions, saw several plays, and continued his own apprenticeship in literature, including several dramas—one of which was produced with Fitzgerald himself playing the lead: that of a very sophisticated "gentleman" burglar. And it was also during this time that Fitzgerald became aware of the glowing, romantic, and—for him—destructive power of sex, a power idealized into melodramatic sentiment, surrounded by adolescent "disillusions," and set about hy fears and distractions which he never completely outgrew.

FIRST LOVE: It was Ginerva King, a wealthy Chicago girl, who shaped his desire for—and fear of—the sort of "enchanting," careless, and essentially superficial female who was to reappear so often in his stories and novels. Fitzgerald met Ginerva after he had already

entered Princeton; it was during Christmas vacation of 1915 that he began his "romance," but as it became clear that the intensity of his own emotion was a source of embarrassment rather than joy for the young lady, Fitzgerald retreated into himself, and—as he so often did in moments of adversity—retreated back to St. Paul as well.

A TIME OF CHAOS: The next few years in Fitzgerald's life was a time of personal defeat and continued chaos. Forced to withdraw from Princeton because of low grades, he spent nine rather aimless months at home, and returned to Princeton in 1916 trailing the rags and tatters of his campus ambitions behind him. The Princeton experience is rather lushly recreated in *This Side of Paradise*: pursuing various emotional and psychological chimeras; with no firm commitment to literature or virtually anything else; holding only a vague faith that things would somehow work themselves out, Fitzgerald was at the most aimless point in his career.

Returning to Princeton for the fall term in 1917, Fitzgerald (like so many other young college men) was both distracted and delighted at the excitement of the European war—now America's war as well. His academic career came to an end when he was inducted into the army, and the prospect of military adventure—together with his engagement to Zelda Sayre, a lovely Alabama girl of good family with a background of considerable wealth—seemed to offer some alternative to emotional and intellectual drifting.

Both hopes collapsed, however, in rather ludicrous fashion: the war ended before Fitzgerald had so much as caught a glimpse of action (indeed, he never left the country), and his engagement to Zelda foundered in a welter of rejection-slips. For after being discharged from the army in 1919, Fitzgerald had set about "earning" his Gold-

en Girl by trying to write fiction while holding down a $90 per month advertising job. The magazines rejected his stories, and Zelda rejected Fitzgerald, who—in his own word—"crept" back to St. Paul to finish his novel, hoping to earn literary fame, financial security, and a wife, all at the same time. And he did just that.

SUCCESS AND BIG MONEY: It was, of course, a remarkable "pay off." When Scribners accepted the manuscript of *This Side of Paradise* in 1919, life turned into an Irish Sweepstakes, with Fitzgerald holding all the winning tickets. Suddenly the "breaks" were going his way, and the Great American Dream of "striking it rich" had, almost inexplicably, become a reality. The big markets—*Smart Set*, *Saturday Evening Post*, and *Scribner's Magazine*—accepted a total of nine stories as though on cue, and after *This Side of Paradise* appeared in 1920 to mixed critical notices but immediate popular success, Zelda picked up her cue as well; she and Fitzgerald were married in New York's St. Patrick's Cathedral. The world, for F. Scott Fitzgerald and his enchanting wife, was a fantasy come true—a party where champagne and kisses flowed like money, while the American reading public paid the bills.

FITZGERALD AND ZELDA: Fitzgerald's courtship of Zelda was in many ways *the* vital experience of his life. The matter was actually quite simple: either he proved that he was a "success" and won the girl, or he did not prove that he was a success, and lost the girl. Money, in short, was the magic wand that would turn the land of ashes into a Golden Palace, and Zelda herself was a Fairy Princess with a price-tag attached to each gossamer wing. Fitzgerald himself describes the intense money-consciousness that filled his mind after his discharge from the army. Even his novel was "an ace in the hole" to be used for a poker-game in which Zelda represented the

stakes. "I was in love with a whirlwind," said Fitzgerald, "and I must spin a net big enough to catch it out of my head, a head full of trickling nickels and sliding dimes, the incessant music box of the poor."

But Fitzgerald did indeed catch "the whirlwind"; the golden boy of American literature (he was in his early twenties when *This Side of Paradise* appeared) married his golden girl, and the year he and Zelda spent in New York (from the spring of 1920 to the spring of 1921) was a true-life fulfillment of "the infinite promise of American advertising." It was, as Fitzgerald later put it, a "carnival" which was to continue for several years in Europe as well as in New York, a merry-go-round which, at least for a time, featured an inexhaustible supply of golden rings.

The "parties," at any rate, continued—and so did the bills. Fitzgerald was living a frenetic life at this time, accumulating debts despite the explosive increase of his income, and turning out stories as though his typewriter were a money-machine. In retrospect, it seems astonishing that he produced some of his best stories during this time, and completed his second novel as well —*The Beautiful and the Damned*, which appeared as a serial in 1921 (in *Metropolitan Magazine*) and was published in book form in 1922. Fitzgerald was to describe this period of his career as the "greatest, gaudiest spree in history," but—if his work is any indication—he had always sensed a core of rottenness beneath the surface of splendor; a basic theme of his work is the futility, or rather the exhausting and febrile rush to *nowhere* which somehow characterized even the brightest promise of Success.

THE "DREAM" TOTTERS: After a brief and largely uneventful

trip to Europe, Zelda and Fitzgerald returned to St. Paul, where their daughter Frances was born; they then returned to New York, entered another round of the gay life, and finally rented a house in Great Neck, Long Island—an area which was to provide the setting for *The Great Gatsby*. Meanwhile the conflict between Fitzgerald's artistic hopes and need for money—and for providing all the baubles which Zelda demanded from life as a tribute to her existence—continued and intensified. Zelda, said Fitzgerald later, "wanted me to work for her and not enough for my dream." It was not, however, that simple; the "dream" of F. Scott Fitzgerald, glittering with much false gold, was neither constantly nor clearly defined—even to himself.

In 1924, on the strength of a renewed production of stories and income, the Fitzgeralds went abroad once again, and this time the excursion was to last over two years. *The Great Gatsby* appeared in 1925, and although Fitzgerald himself felt that he had at last produced an important work ("My book is wonderful," he wrote to the critic Edmund Wilson from France) the book received mixed notices from the reviewers, and fell far short of the financial harvest produced by the two previous novels. Never again, indeed, was Fitzgerald to strike it really "rich"; neither *Gatsby* nor *Tender is the Night* (his last completed novel, published in 1934) were best-sellers—an irony, of course, in the light of subsequent critical judgment.

EUROPE: THE "CARNIVAL BY THE SEA": Meanwhile, Fitzgerald's drinking had become both more intense and less "fun" than it had ever been. Long "rows" with Zelda ended in passionate reconciliations well-lubricated with tears and with alcohol. While Zelda moved inexorably toward her mental breakdown, pursuing her

own fantasies of a "career" in ballet and as a novelist in her own right, Fitzgerald moved closer to the bottle.

Most of the years between 1924 and 1931 were spent abroad and it was during this time that Fitzgerald became intimate friends with Ernest Hemingway. At the beginning of their relationship, it was Fitzgerald who was the "established" writer and Hemingway who was the unknown; by the end of the decade, however, their roles were reversed, with Hemingway well on his way to a career as "The Champ," and Fitzgerald the "has been" writer whom Hemingway was to characterize so sharply in his story "The Snows of Kilimanjaro."

Much of the Fitzgeralds' time during these years was spent on the Riviera, although they moved across Europe from Paris to the sea with a restlessness which itself was born of despair rather than happiness. Zelda became increasingly unbalanced, had one breakdown in Switzerland, and devoted herself to a short-lived "career" as a ballerina, while Fitzgerald found it increasingly difficult to work. Hardly into his thirties, he was convinced that his career was all but finished. They returned to America in 1931; Zelda's father died shortly afterward, and Zelda had her second breakdown in 1932.

THE MORNING AFTER: Living in Baltimore, while recuperating from her second attack, Zelda began *Save Me the Waltz*—an autobiographical novel which represented, she said, an attempt at a sort of self-therapy through work. Fitzgerald, however, saw the book in a somewhat different light; Zelda's motives, he wrote, were to reduce her husband to "a non-entity," to cut him down even as a man of literature as she already had, in so many ways, cut down his manhood itself (and in this connection readers of Fitzgerald will find

much fascinating material in Hemingway's posthumous *A Moveable Feast*).

While Zelda's condition worsened, Fitzgerald himself reacted to the shambles of his personal life by increasingly heavy drinking. He continued to work, however, and although his literary income had all but vanished, an important product of this period was *Tender is the Night*, written between bouts of illness, alcoholism, and obvious evidence that the condition of Zelda was becoming hopeless. After an attempted suicide, she suffered her final breakdown in 1934, and entered the clinic at Johns Hopkins University. She was to spend the rest of her life in various sanitariums.

LAST YEARS: *Tender is the Night* received mixed critical notices in 1934, and although Fitzgerald remained the subject of some perceptive literary comment, he seemed to be a "dated" literary figure, of interest largely to a limited circle of those who had known him personally. After 1935 his work was thin, although the essays later edited by Edmund Wilson as part of *The Crack-Up* (which appeared in 1945) continue to be of great interest, especially with the resurgence of Fitzgerald's reputation in the last two decades. Despite an inheritance from his mother's death in 1936, Fitzgerald was deeply in debt, and worked in Hollywood partly in order to pay off his creditors. Illness, alcohol, and personal instability marked his last years; except for a continued close relationship with his daughter, and a rather poignant attraction to Sheila Graham, he seemed incapable of any sustained social contact.

In 1939 Fitzgerald began work on a new novel, *The Last Tycoon*, which he never completed. Although extravagantly praised on its first appearance, critical judgment of the fragment has tended to re-

inforce the impression that the continued em[illegible] and physical exhaustion of Fitzgerald's life had taken its toll. *The Last Tycoon*—described by Fitzgerald himself as "an escape into a lavish, romantic past that will not come again in our time"—is something of an echo of the *Gatsby* theme (the "Dream" doomed by its own terms), but without the vital cultural relevance and narrative economy which make *The Great Gatsby* a major work of American literature.

END OF A GOLDEN SAGA: In 1940 the second of two heart-attacks killed F. Scott Fitzgerald. Seven years later, Zelda Fitzgerald burned to death in a sanitarium. The saga of the Fitzgeralds had come to an end. The "failure" of Scott Fitzgerald, however, in all its pathos, its vitality, and its brilliance, has been the sort of "failure" that few writers achieve during their lifetimes. For since Fitzgerald's death, critics and readers have come to see his work and his life as dramatizations not simply of "the twenties," but of American culture itself. And from his very weaknesses, from an imagination and romantic sensibility which, as Edmund Wilson has remarked, lacked "intellectual control," F. Scott Fitzgerald drew a portrait of his time which is also a definition of our own time, and a portrait of his people which perhaps has more meaning today than ever before.