

## F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

### THE AUTHORITY OF FAILURE

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Thus ends one of the most perfect of American novels, *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. The story is both a celebration of and a lament for a romantic view of life. Its sense of romance is thoroughly American: a dream of wealth and social grace and expensive diversion in exotic places. Fitzgerald presents powerfully and from the inside this national longing to be elsewhere, otherwise, higher, engaged in some enhanced mode of existence. At the same time, he chronicles the necessary defeat of such dreams. The first aspect he owed to his country, the second to his faith.

F. Scott Fitzgerald ended as a lapsed Catholic but not before his imagination had been formed by the faith. The Catholic formation came early, in St. Paul, but from the beginning it was at war with the hunger for upward mobility he acquired from both his parents.

He grew up in a series of homes on and around Summit Avenue. In the longish story, "Winter Dreams," his hero Dexter White might be

Fitzgerald, the caddy fallen in love with the member's daughter. The phrase "shabbily genteel" comes to mind when one thinks of his family. But they sacrificed for Scott. His prep school, Newman, no longer exists, but he went on to Princeton.

The early lives of Fitzgerald would lead you to believe that he left his religion behind him when he went off to college. The excellent biography of Matthew Broccoli corrects this, but then we should have noticed the influence of Shane Leslie and the dedication of the first novel, *This Side of Paradise*, to Monsignor Sigourney Fay. The novel itself is shot through with a sense of the stakes of life. The devil makes a personal appearance. Broccoli tells us that Fitzgerald had signed on with Fay for a war time mission to Moscow on behalf of the Vatican that never came off.

The practice of Catholicism seems to have just seeped away. He and Zelda Sayre, the Southern belle he had desperately pursued and, unluckily, won, were married in the sacristy of St. Patrick's cathedral. She accepted him when the novel he had gone back to St. Paul to finish was accepted for publication. During this time, he often visited a priest on the faculty of the major seminary at the end of Summit Avenue. Could he have lived with his family and not practiced his faith? In a letter to Edmund Wilson he says he no longer tells his crystalline beads, but this may tell us more about Wilson than about Fitzgerald.

Success came immediately and overwhelmingly, transforming the

beautiful young Fitzgeralds into celebrities. Back east on Long Island the party raged on. The second novel had an ominous motto: The victor belongs to the spoils. In the depths of dissipation, Fitzgerald achieved the imaginative and moral distance that enabled him to write *Gatsby*. In it the east becomes a metaphor for dissolution; the remedy is the one taken by Nick Carraway at the end, a return to the moral geography of the midwest. Writing of the return trip home from college at Christmas, Fitzgerald wrote of leaving Chicago on the last leg of the long journey when the train headed northwest through the snow to innocence.

From the pinnacle of early success, his life spiraled down. Zelda went mad, Scott went to Hollywood. In the early '30s, when his star had fallen, he published a series of essays that became *The Crack Up*. Nowhere is the Catholic imagination of Fitzgerald more evident than in these cool reflections on where his life went wrong. Cool but bewildered. He sees himself as the man who did not make the team in college, as the soldier who never got overseas, as the parvenu who might frolic with the *nouveaux riches* but was forever conscious that "the rich are different from you and me." Writing during the Depression, he toyed with economic reasons for his fate. But throbbing beneath the self-examination is a persistent religious sensibility. Who but a Catholic could speak of his ordeal as the dark night of the soul (his mention of it propelled the phrase into the secular vocabulary)? Who but a Catholic, thinking of the noonday

devil, would quote Psalm 90 in the Latin vulgate? The story "Babylon Revisited" evokes a wispier Dante regarding the scene where the moral battle was lost.

*Tender is the Night*, the story of what went wrong with him and Zelda, appeared in 1934 when superficially grimmer fare was wanted. When he died in 1940, at forty-four, he was a burnt-out case, not even successful (as Faulkner had been) in Hollywood. The Pat Hobby stories, a wry self-portrait, are wildly comic yet melancholy too. His books were out of print, he was forgotten, he was at work on *The Last Tycoon*.

When Dorothy Parker came to the wake she looked down at the waxen face and said, "The poor sonofabitch." She was of course quoting from *Gatsby*, with all the dread of one lapsed Catholic at the death of another.

Fitzgerald put Hemingway (himself briefly a Catholic) on to his publisher, Charles Scribner. Ever after, an imagined version of the Oak Park novelist he so admired functioned as a kind of artistic conscience for Fitzgerald. Ernest, he once said, speaks with the authority of success. I speak with the authority of failure. But is any recognized failure ever complete?

Reading of Fitzgerald's last days, I find myself hoping that he will find himself, go back to St. Paul, rediscover the roots of his imagination, recover his faith. Of course it is not a question of geography. Still, it is a

comfort to know that his remains, at first refused burial in a Catholic cemetery, were eventually transferred to consecrated ground. Cardinal Baum, who authorized it, sought in Fitzgerald's writing the hope that he had not entirely left the faith of his fathers. He lies now in a Maryland churchyard, with Zelda beside him and now their daughter too. "So we beat on, boats against the current..." Let's hope that they were all safe in harbor at the end.

September 1996 marked the centenary of the birth of F. Scott Fitzgerald. The thought of the writer who became all but identified with flaming youth and the roaring Twenties as a hundred years old rattles the imagination. When he died in 1940, at the age of 44, Fitzgerald seemed to have outlived his material and to have been reduced to the role of hack writer on the fringes of the Hollywood establishment. Not even his friends would have imagined that he would emerge as the most important American writer of his generation.

Of course it would be Hemingwayesque to rank the writers of the twenties and thirties as if they were contenders for the heavyweight championship. One need not disparage Faulkner and Hemingway and Dos Passos and Cather in order to notice that Fitzgerald seems to have transcended the limitations of his times more surely than they. Whether more biographies and studies have been written about Hemingway or Fitzgerald is a nice question and it is fitting that there is a joint newsletter

devoted to the two of them.

Hemingway became a Catholic when he married for the second time, but it does not seem to have taken in any profound sense. Imaginatively he had already appropriated the faith in *The Sun Also Rises*, set during the festival of San Firmin in Pamplona and the most religious and Catholic of his novels. Fitzgerald became what the Australians call a retired Catholic. He and Zelda Sayer married in the sacristy of St. Patrick's and their daughter was baptized in St. Paul but there is not much evidence of anything like an ordinary Catholic life on his part. But all three now lie in consecrated ground in Maryland and their fate, like ours, is in the hands of God.

I have sometimes thought that Fitzgerald was a "Kennedy Catholic" before the time. Although he went to a now defunct Catholic prep school it was the Princeton from which he never graduated that conferred on him his surface scale of values. The influence of Edmund Wilson, ever jealous, often malignant, prompted Fitzgerald to mock his own origins. Under the influence of Shane Leslie and the priest to whom he dedicated his first novel there was an effort to acquire a Catholic sensibility. But Princeton prevailed. Yet somehow he was Catholic to the soles of his feet and it comes out again and again in the writing.

The most striking thing about Fitzgerald, as a moralist, was his ability to gain imaginative distance from the forces that drove his own life.

He had a mad American appetite for money and fun and social ascendancy, and all of these are coldly analyzed and condemned in his work. "The victor belongs to the spoils," in the mordant motto of *The Beautiful and the Damned*. His very style exhibits this duality, combining often in the same sentence lyricism and matter-of-factness. Pervading it all was the continuing hunger for that which the singular objects of appetite cannot give. He associates this with the past of the country and doubtless with his own past too. "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."

I have often wondered why, when his life smashed and his wife went mad and his drinking got out of control, he did not go back to Minnesota and get reoriented. It is not because, as his great contemporary said, you can't go home again. Very likely we can't go anywhere else, finally. But there is a Minnesota of the mind and that accompanied Fitzgerald to his premature death in the apartment of his mistress just before Christmas in 1940.

The debt that lovers of American literature owe Matthew Bruccoli is enormous, and this is especially true because of his long devotion to Fitzgerald. A definitive edition of the works is appearing from Cambridge University Press, thanks to Bruccoli. And it is thanks to him that we have the best biography, a facsimile edition of the ledger, and all the previously uncollected stories. We must marvel at the sheer industry and output of

this allegedly flighty author.

Too many have accepted Fitzgerald's own low estimate of most of his short fiction. I think this is unfortunate. After all, he was appraising it by his own high standards. I have recently reread the Pat Hobby stories, written for *Esquire* for a fraction of his usual fee. Hobby is a failed screenwriter, a con man in the kingdom of con (I will resist saying Condom), improvident, mistrusted, triumphant in his failures. Did Fitzgerald fear that this is what he himself might become? The mastery exhibited in these slight, extremely funny, stories was the best exorcism of that fear.

At his death he was engaged in writing what we must now call *The Love of the Last Tycoon, A Western*. This unfinished book, like *Tender is the Night*, falls short of his masterpiece, *The Great Gatsby*, but it is infinitely preferable to shelves of finished novels. And Brucoli presents us, as he did in his first book on the composition of *Tender is the Night*, the author at work, constructing his story, revising his text, pondering its implications.

Scott Fitzgerald one hundred years old! It boggles the mind. May his literary reputation know many centuries more. And as for him, may he rest in peace.