

BOOKS and the ARTS

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

BY LIONEL TRILLING

"So be it! I die content and my destiny is fulfilled," said Racine's Orestes; and there is more in his speech than the insanely bitter irony that appears on the surface. Racine, fully conscious of this tragic grandeur, permits Orestes to taste for a moment before going mad with grief, the supreme joy of a hero: to assume his *exemplary* role.

THIS heroic self-awareness—André Gide speaks of it in his essay on Goethe—was granted to Scott Fitzgerald for what grim joy he might find in it. And perhaps it is a seal set upon his heroic status that he could utter his vision of his own fate, publicly and aloud and in *Esquire*, not only with no lessening but even with an enhancement of his dignity. Edmund Wilson has gathered together the several essays in which Fitzgerald examined his life in crisis and has published them, together with Fitzgerald's notebooks and some letters, as well as certain tributes and memorabilia, in a volume called, after one of the essays, "The Crack-Up."* It is a book filled with the grief of the lost and the might-have-been, with physical illness and torture of mind. Yet the heroic quality is so much here that it occurs to us to say, and not merely as something we would like to feel, but as the true expression of what we actually do feel:

Nothing is here for tears, nothing to wail
Or knock the breast, no weakness, no contempt,
Dispraise, or blame, nothing but well and fair,
And what may quiet us in a death so noble.

It is not what we may fittingly say on all tragic occasions, but the original occasion for these words is strikingly apt to Fitzgerald. Like Milton's Samson, he had the consciousness of having misused a gift of strength—"I had been only a mediocre caretaker . . . of my talent." And the parallel carries further, to the sojourn among the Philistines and even to the maimed hero exhibited and mocked for the amusement of the crowd—readers of the *New York Evening Post* of September 25, 1936, will remember a front-page feature story in which the sick and incoherent Fitzgerald was "interviewed" in a Southern nursing home, and they will find a special pleasure in the recovered poise and fortitude which marked Fitzgerald's words in the few but vindicated years that were left to him.

The root of Fitzgerald's heroism is to be found, as it often is in tragic heroes, in his power of love. Fitzgerald wrote much about love, he was preoccupied with it, but it is not merely where he is being explicit about it that his power appears. It is to be seen where eventually all a writer's qualities have their true existence, in his style. Even in Fitzgerald's early, cruder books, or even in his commercial stories, and even when the style is careless, there is a tone and pitch

to the sentences which suggest his warmth and tenderness and, what is rare nowadays, his mildness without softness. In the equipment of the moralist and therefore in the equipment of the novelist, aggression plays an important part, and although it is of course sanctioned by the writer's moral intention and whatever truth of moral view he may have, it is often none the less fierce and even cruel. Fitzgerald was a moralist to the core—his desire to "preach at people in some acceptable form" is the reason he gives for not going the way of Cole Porter and Rogers and Hart: let us always remember how many real choices he was free and forced to make—and he was gifted with the satiric eye, yet we feel of him that he is more drawn to the celebration of the good than to the destruction of the bad. The satire is there, the attack is made. But Fitzgerald, we feel, did not attach himself to the good because that attachment would sanction his fierceness toward the bad; his first impulse was to love the good—and we feel this the more surely because we must be aware that he loved the good not only with his mind but also with his quick senses and his youthful pride.

He had but small impulse to blame. "Forbearance, good word," is one of the jottings in his notebook. When it came to blame, he preferred, it seems, to blame himself. He even did not much want to blame the world. Fitzgerald knew where "the world" was at fault. He knew that it was the condition, the field, of tragedy. He is always conscious of "what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams." But he never made out that the world imposes tragedy, either upon the heroes of his novels, whom he called his "brothers," or upon himself. When he speaks of his own fate, he does indeed connect it with the nature of the social world in which he had his early flowering, but he never finally lays it upon that world, even though at the time that he was most aware of his destiny it was fashionable with minds more pretentious than his to lay all personal difficulty whatever at the door of the "social order." It is *his* fate—and as much as to anything else in Fitzgerald, we respond to the delicate tension he maintained between the sense of personal free will and the sense of circumstance—we respond to that moral energy. ". . . The test of a first-rate intelligence," he said, "is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind, at the same time, and still retain the ability to function."

The power of love in Fitzgerald, then, went hand in hand with a sense of personal responsibility and perhaps created it. But it often happens that the tragic hero can conceive and realize a love that is beyond his own prudence or beyond his power of dominance, so that he is destroyed by the very thing that gives him status and stature. From Proust we know about a love that is destructive by its corrosive nature. But from Fitzgerald's two mature novels, "The Great Gatsby" and "Tender Is the Night," we learn of a love—perhaps, in its ideal, peculiarly American—that is destructive by its tenderness. It begins in romance, sentiment, even "glamor"—no one, I think, has remarked how innocent of mere "sex," how charged with sentiment is Fitzgerald's description of

* The Crack-Up. By F. Scott Fitzgerald. With other Uncollected Pieces, Note-Books and Unpublished Letters, Together with Letters to Fitzgerald from Gertrude Stein, Edith Wharton, T. S. Eliot, Thomas Wolfe, and John Dos Passos, and Essays and Poems by Paul Rosenfeld, Glenway Wescott, John Dos Passos, John Peule Bishop, and Edmund Wilson. Edited by Edmund Wilson. New Directions. \$3.50.

love in the jazz age—and it takes upon itself reality and permanence and duty discharged with an almost masochistic scrupulousness of honor. In bright dreams begins the responsibility which needs so much prudence and dominance to sustain; and Fitzgerald would seem not to have been a prudent man and he tells us that at a certain point in his college career "some old desire for personal dominance was broken and gone." He connects that loss of dominance with his ability to write and he set down in his notebook the belief that "to record one must be unwary."

The phrase from Yeats, the connection of the "dreams" with the "responsibility," reminds us that we must guard against dismissing, with easy words about its immaturity, Fitzgerald's preoccupation with the bright charm of his youth; for Yeats himself, a wiser man and wholly fulfilled, kept to the last of his old age his connection with his vanity of youth. A writer's days must be "bound each to each" by his sense of his life, and Fitzgerald the undergraduate was father of the best in the man and the novelist.

His sojourn among the Philistines is always much in the mind of everyone who thinks about Fitzgerald and indeed it was always much in his own mind. Everyone knows the famous exchange between Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway (Hemingway refers to it in his story, *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, and Fitzgerald records it in his notebook) in which, to Fitzgerald's remark, "The very rich are different from us," Hemingway replied, "Yes, they have more money." It is usually supposed that Hemingway had the better of the exchange and quite settled the matter. But we ought not to be too sure. The novelist of a certain kind, if he is to write about social life, must always risk a certain ambiguity in his social attitudes. The novel took its rise from a sense of a disrupted society and from the interpenetration of classes, and the novelist must still live by his sense of class differences and must be absorbed by them, as Fitzgerald was, even though he despise them, as Fitzgerald did.

But the "very rich" were more for Fitzgerald than a field of social observation. They were all the aristocracy that America could offer him and we cannot be too simple about what a critic has recently noted, the artist's frequent "taste for aristocracy, his need—often quite open—of a superior social class with which he can make some fraction of common cause—enough, at any rate, to account for his own distinction." And despite the immunity to all worldly considerations which is of course the free privilege of every reader, must we not admit that there is a special charm in the writers who snatched at social establishment, in those risen gentlemen, Shakespeare and Dickens, in those fabricators of the honorific "de," Voltaire and Balzac? Their snobbery—let us call it that—is of a large and generous kind and we cannot be entirely wrong in connecting their peculiar energies of mind in creation with whatever it was they wanted from gentility or aristocracy. Yeats, to mention him again, spoke of the falseness of the belief that the "inherited glory of the rich" really holds richness of life—"Mere dreams! mere dreams!" he said:

Yet Homer had not sung

Had he not found it certain beyond dreams

That out of life's own self-delight had sprung

The abounding glittering jet. . . .

And Henry James, at the threshold of his career, allegorized in his story, *Benvolio*, the interplay that is necessary for some artists between their creative asceticism and the bright, free, gay world, noting at the same time the desire of the bright world to destroy the asceticism.

With a man like Goethe the balance between the world and his asceticism is maintained, and so we forgive him his often absurd feelings (but perhaps absurd only in the light of our present opinion of his assured genius) about aristocracy. Fitzgerald could not always keep the balance true; he was not, as I have said, a prudent man. And no doubt he deceived himself a good deal in his youth, but certainly his self-deception was not in the interests of vulgarity, for aristocracy meant to him a kind of distinction of personal existence which, presumably, he was so humble as not to expect from his art. That this was so we can learn from the hero of one of his *Saturday Evening Post* stories for whom "it was not so bad—except that when the infantry came limping back from the trenches he wanted to be one of them. The sweat and mud they wore seemed only one of those ineffable symbols of aristocracy that were forever eluding him."

I am aware that I have involved Fitzgerald with a great many great names and that it might be felt by some that this can do Fitzgerald no service, the disproportion being so large. But I think the disproportion will seem large only to those who think of Fitzgerald chiefly through his early, public legend of heedlessness; those who have a clear recollection of the mature work or who have read "The Crack-Up" will at least not think of the disproportion as one of kind. Fitzgerald himself did not, and it is by a man's estimate of himself that we must begin to estimate him. For all the engaging self-deprecation which was part of his peculiarly American charm, he put himself, in all modesty, in the line of greatness, he judged himself in a large way. When he writes of his depression, of his "dark night of the soul" where "it is always three o'clock in the morning," he adduces Wordsworth, Keats, and Shelley. A novel with Ernest Hemingway as the model of its hero suggests to him Stendhal portraying the Byronic man, and he defends "The Great Gatsby" from some stricture of Edmund Wilson's by comparing it with "The Brothers Karamazov." Or again, here is the stuff of his intellectual pride at the very moment that he speaks of giving it up as he had given up the undergraduate dreams of valor: "The old dream of being an entire man in the Goethe-Byron-Shaw tradition . . . has been relegated to the junk heap of the shoulder pads worn for one day on the Princeton freshman football field and the overseas cap never worn overseas." And it was by no means, in its magnitude, an unjustified dream. To take but one great name, the one that on first appearance seems the least likely—between Goethe at twenty-four with "Werther" and Fitzgerald at twenty-four with "This Side of Paradise" there is really not so entire a difference as piety and textbooks might make us think, both young men so handsome and ridiculously successful, both rather more interested in life than in art, each the spokesman and symbol of his restless young generation.

It is now twenty years since T. S. Eliot said of "The Great Gatsby" that it was "the first step that American fiction has

taken since Henry James"; and although "Tender Is The Night" is not in every way a success, it is another step and it embodies the great conception of the novel to a degree that few American books can match. To read the notebooks that Fitzgerald kept—indexing them in the manner he had learned from Samuel Butler's—and to perceive how closely they make us apply our mind to our life, or to read his letters to his daughter (they are among the best and most affecting letters I know) and hear his tone as he writes about literature, the tone of a master among equals, is to be happily sure of his quality.

He lacked prudence, as his heroes did, lacked that blind instinct of self-protection which the self-fulfilling writer needs and which the American writer seems to need in a double measure. But that is all that he lacked—and it is the generous fault, even the heroic fault. He said of his Gatsby:

If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures, then there was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life, as if he were related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away. This responsiveness had nothing to do with that flabby impressionability which is dignified under the name of "the creative temperament"—it was an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which it is not likely I shall ever find again. No—Gatsby turned out all right at the end; it is what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams. . . .

And it is so that we are drawn to see Fitzgerald as he stands in his "exemplary role."

BRIEFER COMMENT

Where Realists Meet

THERE IS ONLY ONE THING WRONG about David J. Dallin's very readable book, "The Big Three" (Yale University Press, \$2.75). It is the first paragraph: "There shall not, there must not, be a Third World War. The piled-up corpses already reach the sky," etc. After this outburst of wishful thinking and tear-drenched sentimentality, Dallin reverts to sound realism of the Homer Lea, Halford Mackinder kind: there is nothing in this world but power, and power leads inevitably to armed conflict. The book simply lists a large number of sore spots, each likely to infect the whole body.

Dallin has no remedy to offer. He came to us after a long and tragic experience abroad. He met, I surmise, a number of tough journalists, and maybe a few Yale or Columbia professors, tougher still. They confirmed him in his "muscular" thinking. He does not know us well enough to realize that in due course the people will have the last word, and that the American people want peace and justice, not empire.

The limitations being granted—the book is elementary in thought and information—the presentation of the facts is both fair and clear. Every state is presented in the sharp and morose light of *Realpolitik*, and Russia is no worse than ourselves. *In cauda venenum*: in the conclusion, there is more than a hint that the disturbing element is the U. S. S. R.; and that it is high time for England and Amer-

ica to take up the work of Hitler and Franco, so unfortunately interrupted. But this is a strong hint, not a thesis.

At any rate, it is not the logical conclusion of the book. The final paragraph should be a complete reversal of the first: "There shall be, there must be, a Third World War, and so *ad infinitum*." But the book is thoroughly honest in its narrow way; the style is pleasing, half-way between the journalistic and the historical. As I enjoyed "The Big Three," I should like to close this dubious appraisal with two points which I whole-heartedly indorse (realists of various schools do meet in the end): "Europe needs German industry; without the economy of her most industrialized nation, Europe will be the poorer." "The predominance of the Big Three cannot be durable. A wartime combination, it will end soon after the war."

ALBERT GUERARD

Latin-American Writing

AT LEAST SINCE the moment when cultural relations with South American countries became of official interest to the American government, it has been considered a sign of intellectual immaturity to talk of the Southern continent as a whole. The recognized mark of wisdom in these matters has become an insistence upon differentiation between the various nations. Not only do the knowing refrain from mentioning Mexico and Argentina in the same breath, they even distinguish between types of folk songs, for instance, in such neighboring microcosms as Honduras and Costa Rica, or between the development of prose styles in Colombia and Ecuador.

Now comes the distinguished scholar Pedro Henríquez-Ureña and reverses the process in his "synthetic" history, "Literary Currents in Hispanic America" (Harvard, \$3.50) which his publisher sub-titles "A cultural survey of Latin America from the time of the Conquistadores to the present." Perhaps because Señor Henríquez-Ureña was born offshore, in the small island republic of Santo Domingo, he prefers to look at the Latin-American portion of the hemisphere whole. Even the fact of its two languages, Spanish and Portuguese, fails to shake his calm consideration of its literary currents in terms of "our America," "our literature," "our development." Separate countries he treats as chance geographic units whose borders are matters of historical accident. The important thing to him is their common Hispanic background and the currents related to a common "search for expression."

The result of this heresy is an urbane, scholarly, and seasoned work of a quality hitherto unknown in English writings on this subject. The author treats of Latin-American literature as though it was as much a part of the stream of world literature as anything written in England, France, or Russia. He presents Hispanic-American writers not as clever children or sublime geniuses—two classifications hitherto favorites among critics—but as talented men seeking the forms of expression suited to their needs. His history has form, substance, wit, authority. It gives literature its proper status as a generic part of the development of civilization in the southern hemisphere.

The book is made up of eight lectures delivered at Harvard during the winter of 1940-41, given at the invitation of the university as the Charles Eliot Norton lectures. The

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