

ern symbol, where she began, "wide-open." As though making fun of Oe the artist, obsessed with his creation, he has his wife say nonchalantly, "You've been letting yourself get too involved with Marie lately, anyway. Maybe with her so far away your feelings will settle down a

bit." For Marie has been Oe—"I have already written a novel about Marie's life, 'my own story, one acceptable to me'"—as Marie writes to him, "I realized I was looking back at the event as though it were a novel, trying to interpret it in some new way." ■



## F.S.F., 1896–1996, R.I.P.

E.L. DOCTOROW

If that triumvirate of hero-novelists who came of age in the twenties, we may salute the big two-hearted pugilist, and stand in awe of the mesmerist from Mississippi, but it's the third one we mourn, the Jazz Age kid, our own Fitzgerald.

His was the most natural and unforced of the three authorial voices; his plots required minimal invention. He rarely felt the need for fiction's sturdier tropes—a self-indicating style, extremes of action, the exotic setting—being disposed to work the high wire without them. He lived rashly, susceptible to the worst influences of his time, and lacking any defense against stronger and more selfish personalities than his own; and when he died, at 44, he was generally recognized to have abused his genius as badly as he had his constitution. Yet at his best, in *The Great Gatsby*, much of *Tender Is the Night* and the incomplete *The Last Tycoon*, he wrote nearer to the societal heart than either of his august contemporaries.

After his death, his friend and mentor Edmund Wilson made a selection of Fitzgerald's uncollected pieces, letters and notebooks, and published them with New Directions as *The Crack-Up*. It is instructive reading. The Fitzgerald of the autobiographical pieces is the chastened, mature man, sober, alone, with nothing to lose. He is writing in the Great Depression, but ignoring it except as the turn of events that has, not without justice, dropped him and his Jazz Age ways into the dustbin of history. In a time of bread lines and hobo jungles, and with totalitarian states rising all over Europe, somehow the young man who one drunken night leapt into the fountain at the Plaza cannot expect, still, to be everyone's idea of the great American au-

thor. But he can reminisce. He can remember the twenties—he can look back on his early success, or the New York of his youthful illusions, or his and his wife's years of sybaritic hotel hoppings, or the circumstances leading to his nervous collapse—and he can render them, bring them back alive for our consideration. Not surprisingly, his tone is elegiac; the sense of a paradise lost infuses every line. But there is rarely a lapse into self-pity. And underneath all is the shrewd writer's assessment of his own rise and fall as a salable subject. The unstated presumption in the title essay, "The Crack-Up" (originally published in three installments in *Esquire*), is the author's still-lingering celebrity: That golden boy you all remember—see what's become of him.

Writing about himself or the changing manners and morals and social dynamics of the time that made him its symbol, Fitzgerald writes with clinical precision. At moments a poetic fever may take hold, when his metaphors stumble over one another in his determination to get through to his magazine audience, but he consistently offers the insights of a first-rate cultural historian. And whatever we say in criticism of him, we find that he has said it first. He is disarmingly confessional about his lack of sustained interest in the universal political crisis of his time, about the squandering of his literary capital in magazine hack work, about his life as a drunk, about his pathetic need always to prove something to somebody, about his snobberies and prejudices, all held with the passion of an arriviste. Everything we know about him, he knows about himself. And it turns out that all along he was haunted by his inauthen-

ticity—whether as the young lieutenant in his World War I overseas cap who never got overseas or as the urbane young Author carried on the shoulders of his generation, "who knew less of New York than any reporter of six months standing and less of its society than any hall-room boy in a Ritz stag line."

Repeatedly he disclaims his rôle as spokesman and symbol of the Jazz Age, but by reflecting upon it from his chosen distance, he tolls its dreadful excesses in his own life, and so finds its meaning in the body of his wrecked career. There is gallantry in that. We begin to understand our particular affection for this writer. He lacked armor. He did not live in protective seclusion, as Faulkner. He was not carapaced in self-presentation, as Hemingway. He jumped right into the foolish heart of everything, as he had into the Plaza fountain. He was intellectually ambitious—but thought fashion was important, gossip, good looks, the company of celebrities. He wrote as a rebel, a sophisticate, an escapee from American provincialism—but was blown away by society, like a country bumpkin, and went everywhere he was invited. Ambivalently willed, he lived as both particle and wave. "The test of a first-rate intelligence," he wrote, "is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function." And while he was at his first-rate quantum best, he used everything he knew of society—as critic, as victim—to compose at least one work, *The Great Gatsby*, that in its few pages arcs the American continent and gives us a perfect structural allegory of our deadly class-ridden longings.

The contemporary reader may have to work to understand the nature of the celebrated crack-up. Fitzgerald tells us that his "nervous reflexes were giving away—too much anger, too many tears." What can he be describing? A psychotic episode? Depression? A spiritual crisis? There is a muttering resolve in his account, a determination at the end to change, to be no longer available to the humiliations that have characterized his fate. "Cave Canem," he warns those of us who would come importuning to his door. We have to smile in our sadness for our graying Jazz Age kid. Such bitter resolution is not characteristic of a breakdown, or the drained energies of the depressive. It is more the angry romantic's expression of inconsolability—in having had an innocence and, having lost it, having to mourn it. That progression of states of the American mind was prevalent once upon a time but now, at the end of this century of industrialized war and genocide, is itself to be mourned. ■

*E.L. Doctorow's most recent novel is The Waterworks (Random House). This article is adapted from his introduction to the New Directions Biblot edition of The Jazz Age, a selection of essays from The Crack-Up, to commemorate the centennial of F. Scott Fitzgerald's birth.*

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