

SCOTT FITZGERALD : ANOTHER VIEW¹

FROM all the evidence, Scott Fitzgerald is an important figure in American literature. Now, twelve years after his death, most of his work is in print: some of his books have been re-issued under the enthusiastic sponsorship of intelligent critics; several have been published in annotated editions; generous selections from the author's notebooks and the drafts of his novels and stories make possible a study of the origins of his fiction and the processes of its composition; a part of his correspondence has been printed and it is to be expected that more will be made available; an authoritative biography² was published last year; finally a volume of tributes, reviews, and critiques by distinguished contributors such as T. S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein, Edmund Wilson, John Dos Passos, and Lionel Trilling³ should complete the evidence of Fitzgerald's stature. It is certainly impressive; it would be almost intimidating but for a small receding fact: Fitzgerald's work itself. On the basis of that, and apropos of Mr. D. W. Harding's recent article in *Scrutiny*, I should like to question modestly what the fuss is all about.

Certainly it is a roomy subject: the man, his time and (usually by inference) his work. Fitzgerald was a bright, engaging person with undoubted literary talent who lived a flamboyant semi-private life, made and spent a lot of money as a very young man, suffered a nervous 'crack-up' complicated (or partially caused) by acute alcoholism, and died prematurely while at work on what (it is claimed on questionable evidence) was to be a landmark in the American novel. His time was that period in America (spaced by ebullient raids on Europe) between the First World War and (roughly speaking) the first Roosevelt Administration, a time variously known as the Jazz Age, the Roaring Twenties, and the Boom Years, for which Fitzgerald supplied in some minds, a rallying point and a symbol, and to whose vocabulary he largely contributed.

The fascination of the man for investigators and commentators is increased and complicated by Fitzgerald's own apparent candour in his autobiographical writings—particularly his account of his

¹An article on Scott Fitzgerald by D. W. Harding appeared in the last number of *Scrutiny*.

²*The Far Side of Paradise: a Biography of F. Scott Fitzgerald*. By Arthur Mizener, London; Eyre and Spottiswood, 18s.

³*F. Scott Fitzgerald: The Man and his Work*. Edited by Alfred Kazin, New York; The World Publishing Company, 1951. \$3.00.

collapse. For, says Alfred Kazin in the collection he edited, 'one feels in reading [*The Crack-Up*] that something is being persistently withheld, that the author is somehow offering us certain facts in exchange for the right to keep others to himself'. As a 'case', Fitzgerald is complete, even to his own testimony: he is on the couch for anyone who wants to have a go at him. As for the period and subject of Fitzgerald's literary activity, that bizarre recent interval is anybody's game: the 'twenties are part of the youth or manhood of almost anyone who wants to write about them; everyone has a stake in them, and so, presumably, nobody is yet to pretend to a final word on one's personal history. Fitzgerald's writings, too, in another but obvious sense, are the public domain: anyone who has taken an interest in them is invited to a critical opinion. There have been many opinions, but most of them (as I suggested above) have been oblique, or incidental to another kind of interest in the novelist, so that the enormous variety, and even contradictions, have never been forced head-on in any helpful elucidation. Fitzgerald has been, quite comfortably, all things to all critics.

Charles Weir, Jnr., writing in Mr. Kazin's collection about a number of articles published by the *New Republic* after Fitzgerald's death, said that they were 'less remarkable for the praise they accorded him than for their inability to make very clear just why the praise was merited'. I presume that Mr. Harding's interests in his article were other than critical, but in that case I wish he had implied why the *attention* was 'merited'. However, in a review of *Tender is the Night in Scrutiny* (reprinted by Mr. Kazin), Mr. Harding claims that 'the difficulty of making a convincing analysis of the painful quality of the novel, and the conviction that it was worth while trying to, are evidence of Scott Fitzgerald's skill and effectiveness'. Why are they? Given a complicated work of art, the difficulty of analysis may be granted, but the logic of Mr. Harding's 'evidence' suggests that the difficulty of refuting a man's guilt is evidence of his innocence. As for the basis of Mr. Harding's 'conviction', he goes on, in his next sentence, to suggest persuasively: 'personal peculiarities may of course make one reader react more intensely than another to a book of this kind'. Precisely, and many kinds of personal peculiarities (which might be illustrated from the essays Mr. Kazin has collected)—memories, curiosity, peculiar needs, prejudices and predilections, loyalty to the author, etc., and all operating in place of critical attention—have created Fitzgerald's reputation.

That may seem too easy, and besides, by such an account, it may be 'personal peculiarities' which handicap me for an appreciation of Fitzgerald. Rather, I want to suggest there is an emptiness in his work that makes 'convincing analysis' honestly difficult, but leaves a hollow space where critics can create their own substitute Fitzgerald. And I should probe for that hollow space in what we call the *centre* of a writer's work—that around which and with reference to which he organizes his experiences; in short, his values.

Most critics have recognized that the test of Fitzgerald's values is in his response to money, or more exactly, the rich. This, to simplify for a moment, was one of awed admiration. Its history is familiar and convincing: an imaginative boy was transferred from the poverty of decayed gentility in provincial Milwaukee to a fashionable and expensive boarding school in the East, and then to Princeton. Impressed and enraptured, and adjusting himself with a schoolboy's agility to his new life, all its externals became immensely important to him—its clubs, hotels, cars, clothes, and so forth. They were the substance of a new society that he was struggling to enter at an impressionable age, and they never lost their allure for him. Lionel Trilling (puzzled like so many others by this attraction and trying to put a favourable construction on it) interprets Fitzgerald's feeling for the rich as the artist's need for 'the nearest thing to an aristocracy America could offer him'. That's an ingenious way of accommodating it, but I think there's as much of Mr. Trilling as of Fitzgerald in the remark. He certainly idealized the rich, but these ideal rich in his books, and the moneyed people with whom he associated in New York, on Long Island, in Paris, and on the Riviera were, quite crudely, the Big Spenders. Fitzgerald liked the flash of money, the distorted exaggeration it lent his gestures and impulses. 'It was fun spending money' is a statement of fact that recurs, and there's no reason to doubt that he meant it. But it wasn't as simple as that; there was something additionally hectic in his exhausting efforts to make money—'big' and 'quick' money by his writing—simply for the pleasure of throwing it away.

In Fitzgerald's writings money is inextricably bound up with the possibilities of life—and with its defeats, but with the latter only by the way. The defeat is not inherent in the fact of money, although where failure has occurred, money is helpless, true, and because it is helpless, it takes the blame. The outcomes of Fitzgerald's stories are rather baldly contrived, and just so it is contrived that money bears the disgrace of failure because money couldn't meet all the problems of human personality. But first, money as a positive, almost transcendent value: this is from *Tender is the Night*, and the description is of Dick Diver, the hero, and his wealthy wife: 'She had gathered that they were fashionable people . . . Even in their absolute immobility, complete as that of the morning, she felt a purpose, a working over something, a direction, an act of creation different from any she had known . . . they seemed to have a very good time'. It goes on to describe the rhythm of the Divers' day as 'passing from the heat to the cool with the gourmandise of a tingling curry eaten with chilled white wine'. It is true that this is portentous—all is not well—but the quality of the experience and the quality of appreciation should be obvious in the solemn inflated language. (I don't know whether it is necessary to point out there is no irony here. The cruel Irony of Fate is invoked by Fitzgerald in his stories, but no critical irony works in the language. And in the passages just quoted that tongue isn't even in its cheek—it's hanging straight out.)

There is a celebrated passage in *The Great Gatsby* describing the heroine's voice: 'It was full of money—that was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the cymbal's song of it High in a white palace the king's daughter, the golden girl . . .'. In that opening phrase, if anywhere, one might expect a conclusive criticism, and it certainly lends itself to such an intention, but any such possibility surrenders abjectly before the crudely evoked glamour of what follows. And it is important that not only Gatsby, the adoring and *nouveau riche* farmboy, is enthralled at this point; the words are those of the supposedly detached narrator of the story. Apparently nobody—character or reader—is impervious to the 'inexhaustible charm' of money as represented by Daisy. In another place, 'Gatsby was overwhelmingly aware of the youth and mystery that wealth imprisons and preserves, of the freshness of many clothes, and of Daisy, gleaming like silver, safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor'. Disconcerting, that rather invidious 'hot struggles of the poor', but presumably Gatsby knew something of *them*; what he knew nothing about was the rich. Where was the 'mystery' in Daisy? There can have been no mystery in her (or in 'the freshness of many clothes') for her father, husband, or brothers; the mystery for Gatsby is in his ignorance, which overwhelms him. It overwhelmed Fitzgerald too—his own ignorance—which was why he couldn't write convincingly of the rich, only about his dazzled impressions of them, impressions that dominated his imagination, or until (one should add) it was dominated by something more immediate and personal, such as suffering or a grievance.

But Mr. Harding writes: 'A perfectly sure condemnation of much of the accepted behaviour of his set pervades *The Great Gatsby* and *Tender is the Night*'. 'Perfectly sure'? and 'pervades'? First, I should like to quote from a letter Fitzgerald wrote a friend about *The Great Gatsby*: 'That's the whole burden of the novel—the loss of those illusions that give such colour to the world so that you don't care whether things are true or false as long as they partake of the magical glory'. And that, I believe, is very nearly 'the whole burden' of Fitzgerald—an uncompromising romanticism for which the value of life is in the 'illusion' and the falsifying *glamour*, and everything he cared for—women, the rich, extravagant parties, success—subverted that happy condition. As long as they functioned successfully they were safe from criticism, but should the illusion be threatened by the exigencies of life, 'sure condemnation' was meted out in the form of an easy but latterly perspicacity. People whose personal safety shelters in fantasy talk in a noble aggrieved tone about 'losing their illusions' as though they were the victims of some treachery other than their self-deception. Gatsby's stature as hero derives from his 'incorruptible dream'. Actually, it is only too corruptible, this naïve daydream of a likeable gangster, and would have collapsed miserably had not Fitzgerald and Fate mercifully murdered him before the inevitable disaster. Daisy ('the king's daughter, the golden girl'), who served adequa-

tely as the substance of that dream throughout the novel is thus condemned at the end of the book: 'They were careless, [her husband] and Daisy—they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clear up the mess they had made'; a telling insight if only it had 'pervaded' the book instead of serving as an anti-climax to Gatsby's death. The condemnation of the 'set' in *Tender is the Night* must focus, if at all, on Nicole, Dick Diver's wife. A central character, and, with her great beauty and greater wealth, a flowering epitome of the rich, she must for dramatic logic incorporate their weakness as well as their strength. True, she off-handedly abandons her husband at the end of the book, but by that time he has 'cracked up' and turned against *her*. In any case, she is invalidated as a dramatically effective character or symbol of anything because she is introduced as a neurotic and continues convalescent through the book. And finally (as in the case of Daisy) it is too late to turn on her at the end of the book after she has been used for some 300 pages as the embodiment of the Fitzgerald glamour.

Certainly Fitzgerald had some insight into the corrupting influence of wealth; he is capable, on occasion, of penetrating and devastating observation. But I can't see that any critical attitude to the rich was a consistent impulse in his writing about them, and the support to his pretensions as a moralist given by Mr. Trilling and others (and endorsed, by implication at least, by Mr. Harding) seems to me only another device to inflate the Fitzgerald stock. At best, his attitude to the rich was ambivalent, which is to say it was emotional: he accepted the life of wealth for the immunities it granted and for whatever protection it afforded to the illusions it creates; then he indulged, at its expense, his *taste* for moralizing whenever its protection proved inadequate.

But if the negation of values (or the substitution for them of illusion) created a hollow space in *The Great Gatsby* and made Gatsby unreal and his fate unimportant, Fitzgerald still achieved there a real, if limited, success. I believe it was as far as he could go, and he could go so far because he made fantasy—illusion—the preposterous *subject* of his book, and for the happily short space of the novel created the illusion against the background of a nightmare country he calls New York and Long Island.

Tender is the Night, on the other hand, is (to my mind) a failure. It has been called (by Mr. Harding and others) his most ambitious work, and it certainly is—in the unhappy sense of the term: Fitzgerald was attempting something beyond his powers. It is the account of the disintegration of an apparently admirable and gifted doctor, and the intention (as far as one can guess from the performance) was one of large-scale tragic proportions. Fitzgerald's gift was for the catchy phrase, the mannerisms of a superficial set of people in a particular time and place, and a quasi-poetical evocation of atmosphere: these are scarcely the material for a psychological tragedy. He had but a limited understanding of character,

and the very sad thing about this book is that he apparently thought that if he understood the human complexity of any situation, he understood this one. His wife (like Dick Diver's) was in the harrowing throes of a mental collapse; he (like his hero) was 'cracking up'. But that was the trap (the question of adequate talent apart): he was so close to the situation and it was so important to him that he felt he need only state the facts themselves (like ciphers) to imply the experience and compel the emotional assent of his readers. Fitzgerald always depended on his readers feeling about things as he did, and that enough of them did partially accounts for his original success, but in the peculiar case he treats in this novel he relies on sympathy alone, without the possibility of imaginative identification. There was a certain *bluff* in his attempt, which is all very well when successful: in this novel its transparency only adds to the embarrassment. The simplest way to indicate the bluff is in the language, by a few quotations. First, he attempts to forward the action by mere statement, in bald summaries: 'He had lost himself—he could not tell the hour when, or the day or the week, or the month or the year'. Again: 'The most unhappy aspect of their relations was Dick's growing indifference, at present expressed by too much drinking'—the fatigue and the fallacy of 'at present expressed by!' In the flat statement, too, he lays claim to large social implications: 'The trio of women at the table were representative of the enormous flux of American life'. And in the same vein, the knowing and meaningless (?) observation: 'Certain classes of English people lived upon a concentrated essence of the anti-social . . .'. (That vague and pretentious 'essence' is a favourite word in the novel.) Then there is the psychological generalization: 'Women are necessarily capable of almost anything in their struggle for survival'. Crude simplification passes for 'intelligence'; there can be no need to indicate the inertia of 'almost anything' or the cliché 'struggle for survival'. Fitzgerald is obviously at a distance from his subject, whether separated from it by his ignorance, or indifference, or a second-hand acquaintance with it, and he tries to force the distance by the devices instanced, or by means of a pretentious jargon; e.g.: 'She would be able to hold him so long as the person in her transcended the universals of her body'. And of course he essays the old bright phrase: 'her brown back hanging from her pearls', and 'their eyes met and brushed like birds' wings', or 'perverted as a breakfast of oatmeal and hashish'. Is there any need to drag on the painful catalogue to suggest the uncertainties of this book?

Fitzgerald is said to have a documentary interest. That is frequently true, and in the most valuable sense. He not only provides the facts (those that interested him), he was so wholeheartedly dedicated to the life in which he was immersed that he provides also the emotional connotation of these facts. He had an acute sense of a time—of a particular year, a 'season'. It is as precise and as isolated as a season in an adolescent's scrapbook, and significant (for Fitzgerald) in the same way: it was the season of a particularly

uproarious party, or the year after so-and-so was thrown out of college. It is defined by the style of the cars, the length of the skirts, the historic consequences of a football match. And by songs—('a neat sad little waltz of that year')—or by their names and words: his books are littered with these dead songs, evocative, perhaps, for those who remember the tunes, but for most readers just sad little rubbish among the college boy's souvenirs. But 'dated' as they are, these odds and ends attest the more eloquently, by a trick of retrospection, to the undercurrent of Fitzgerald's writing. His sense of time is a sense of its quick passage and its losses, and if a moment in time exists by its fads and fashions, then quick indeed is its flight, and really dead the life that knew itself by its hair styles, waltz tunes, and football scores. 'This year's debutante is next year's mother'—such might serve as the melancholy moral. And so, with the nostalgia that wells up out of Fitzgerald's writing one is at last impatient. There is a limited interest in the humourless self-absorption of a romantic boy anticipating the loss of youth, and even embarrassment when that boy (now in his mid-thirties) writes years after the event (of his early success): 'I remember riding in a taxi one afternoon between very tall buildings under a mauve and rosy sky; I began to bawl because I had everything I wanted and knew I would never be so happy again'. Nor was he—that is the point whose pathos is solemnly offered us in that vignette of wistful near-innocence 'between very tall buildings under a mauve and rosy sky'.

JOHN FARRELLY.

THE NOVEL AS DRAMATIC POEM (VII):

'THE RAINBOW' (II)

THIS difference from George Eliot that strikes us simultaneously with the clear kinship comes out with great force in the courting of Lydia. When, 'twenty-eight, a thick-limbed, stiff, fair man with fresh complexion and blue eyes staring very straight ahead', leading his horse, with the load clanking behind, down the steep hill homeward, Brangwen meets and passes in the road the strange foreign woman, and says involuntarily, 'That's her', we have a very specific sense, even so early in the book, of the forces registered in the exclamation—the complexity speaking. Of what complex structure of needs love engages, and what marriage must involve for Brangwen, we know a good deal; and we know that what we have here is no drama of romantic love-at-first-sight. It might be said that the needs, as Lawrence presents Brangwen, are, *mutatis mutandis*, in a general way Maggie Tulliver's. But under that 'general' lies the immense difference between the two authors: it can be brought down here to the constation that Lawrence sees what the needs are, and understands their nature, so much better than George Eliot. In the comparison, in fact, we have to judge that George Eliot doesn't understand them at all. Her strength doesn't lie here. When she most deliberately attempts this theme she produces her Dorotheas and her Daniel Derondas.

The point I want to make in stressing this obvious enough difference is that the given strength of Lawrence's is not something separable from that strength which (I suggested) would have struck George Eliot as the poetic intensity of his art. This intensity is an extraordinary sensuous immediacy (it is no more merely sensuous than the charged intensity of Shakespearean poetry is). We can take in illustration the peculiarly, and characteristically, moving power (more to the point, it is *specifically* moving) with which we are given Brangwen's courting visit to the vicarage. The world here is, in one sense, very much George Eliot's and we may be sure that she would have admired the rendering—admired, in recognizing the immense unlikeness to anything she could herself have done. And the unlikeness, examined, comes down to the difference between the writer of whom (as I recalled) it has been said that the word for her is 'ethical' rather than 'religious' and the writer of whom that could not have been said.

'One evening in March, when the wind was roaring outside, came the moment to ask her. He had sat with his hands before him, leaning to the fire. And, as he watched the fire, he knew