

F. Scott Fitzgerald's Third Act

Joseph Epstein

... how I would hate the reputation of being clever at writing but stupid at everything else.
—Montaigne

MICHEL de Montaigne's dread has been F. Scott Fitzgerald's fate. As his reputation has filtered down through biography, memoirs of contemporaries, and posthumous publications of various sorts, Fitzgerald has been judged something like a lucky genius as a writer and an almost pure disaster as a man.

Officially, this unenviable reputation began with a remark by the poet Edna St. Vincent Millay which was picked up by Edmund Wilson, with whom Fitzgerald had gone to Princeton. In an essay of 1922, when Fitzgerald was himself only twenty-six and had just published his second novel, *The Beautiful and Damned*, Wilson, already an important critic, wrote:

It has been said by a celebrated person that to meet F. Scott Fitzgerald is to think of a stupid old woman with whom someone has left a diamond; she is extremely proud of the diamond and shows it to everyone who comes by, and everyone is surprised that such an ignorant old woman should possess so valuable a jewel; for in nothing does she appear so inept as in the remarks she makes about the diamond.

Wilson went on to say that Fitzgerald was a clever enough fellow, but, nonetheless, "there is a symbolic truth in the description quoted above."

After this essay, Fitzgerald's reputation as the artistic equivalent of an idiot savant was firmly locked in place, so that Glenway Westcott, a much inferior novelist, could later call him "the worst-educated man in the world" and the poet John Peale Bishop, another Princeton contemporary, could remark that Fitzgerald had "left Princeton without a degree and without much of an education." More recently, Gore Vidal referred to him as "barely literate."

But, then, residing comfortably alongside the notion of F. Scott Fitzgerald as ignorant genius there is also the cult of Fitzgerald, which set in not long after his death at the age of forty-four. In this cult he is viewed as a tragic young god—

tragic because much too soon dead. The spirit of the cult was nicely caught by the English critic Cyril Connolly, who in 1951, the year Arthur Mizener's biography of Fitzgerald, *The Far Side of Paradise*, appeared, wrote that "apart from his increasing stature as a writer, Fitzgerald is now firmly established as a myth, an American version of the Dying God, an Adonis of letters."

Dying young, leaving behind work unfinished and promise unfulfilled, Fitzgerald has become enshrined as a great failure. He had himself cultivated this reputation long before his death, beginning with the publication, in *Esquire*, of the essays that were posthumously collected by Wilson under the title of *The Crack-Up* (1945). Of the many differences between himself and his contemporary, Ernest Hemingway, Fitzgerald wrote in his notebook: "Ernest speaks with the authority of success. I speak with the authority of failure." But in literature and the arts, if nowhere else, the authority of failure sometimes proves the greater—so much so that one can sometimes say that here nothing quite succeeds like failure.

Which is not to say that Fitzgerald never enjoyed success in the usual sense. On an imaginary graph, how wavy a line his reputation has ridden over the years! It begins headed straight up with the best-seller success of his first novel, *This Side of Paradise* (1920); it dips slightly with *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922); hits its artistic height with *The Great Gatsby* (1925); shows an eight-year gap between the publication of *Gatsby* and Fitzgerald's last completed novel, *Tender Is the Night* (1933); and then drops sadly, with all his books out of print and no one asking for or expecting more, which is where things stood at his death of heart failure in his Hollywood apartment in 1940.

At that point, Fitzgerald was broke and broken—as a man out of luck and as an author out of print. He had lived long enough to see his one unequivocal artistic triumph, *The Great Gatsby*, dropped from the Modern Library because it was not selling. He left his final book, *The Last Tycoon*, for which he had done the most meticulous planning, so incomplete that its potential quality was (and remains) difficult to judge. As a screenwriter, he had been dealt all the little humiliations Hollywood had to hand out. He had not

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had enough money to travel East to visit his daughter Scottie for more than a year, or to see his schizophrenic wife, the notorious Zelda, who would die eight years after him in a fire in an insane asylum of which she was an inmate. Debt and family obligations kept him on the griddle of hack production for the last decade of his short life.

A FAMOUS Fitzgerald tag line has it that "there are no second acts in American lives." Fine though the ring to that line is, it is not true when applied to Fitzgerald himself, whose literary life has had a powerful and continuing posthumous second and third act, and may even be in for an epilogue or two. For after his death there followed a slow rise in Fitzgerald's reputation, beginning with the publication of *The Crack-Up*, the return of all his books to print, the installation of the young-Adonis myth, and a steady flow of biographies and collections of letters.

True, there was the damage done in 1964 by the rivalrous Hemingway, who in his memoir, *The Moveable Feast*, portrayed Fitzgerald as a weak, sexually insecure, hopeless drunk. But this was more than offset by the steady rise in his literary stock, combined with heavy academic attention. "Academic" may be imprecise, for *The Great Gatsby* is one of those books that most children are asked to read in high school and even in grammar school, and for all one knows by now in Montessori preschools. Along with *Huckleberry Finn*, it is one of the few books that is a common literary possession of middle-class American children in a less and less literary age. Teachers continue to milk it, often finding fresh and wonderful things, as does Ronald Berman in *The Great Gatsby and Modern Times*,* who has recently discovered that the novel brilliantly foreshadows life in a mass society.

Yet even about *The Great Gatsby* there clings something of the quality of luck, of the one-shot deal, as if Beethoven had written the *Eroica* Symphony and otherwise only mildly interesting, largely botched, incidental music. How could this foolish, if not frivolous, young man, F. Scott Fitzgerald, ill-educated and not yet thirty, bring off so nearly perfect a book?

American literature has known other one-great-book authors—Mark Twain in some ways qualifies, and so, in others, does Melville—but none has quite the airy quality of Fitzgerald, who wrote two very boyish early novels that no one would bother reading today if their author had not also written *Gatsby*; a rich but perhaps overcooked fourth novel, *Tender Is the Night*; a handful of winning short stories; and an uncompleted final novel. Sometimes it seems as if Fitzgerald, in writing *The Great Gatsby*, had hit the lottery.

Especially does this seem the case when one totes up Fitzgerald's personal deficiencies. Rau-

cous, often pathetic drunkenness is high on that list. Churchill once said that he always got the best of alcohol and alcohol never got the best of him. Not so Fitzgerald, who may have been an alcoholic as early as his college years. The Fitzgeralds, Scott and Zelda, were to drinking what Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers were to dancing: the top, the colosseum, the Louvre museum, and so forth.

The Fitzgeralds achieved fame for jumping into the Pulitzer fountain near the Plaza hotel in New York, which sounds relatively harmless and even came to symbolize the good times of the 1920's, the so-called Jazz Age. But while drunk, the Fitzgeralds' idea of amusing behavior was to collect everyone's watch and jewelry and boil them in a can over the stove; or to call out the fire department—upon the arrival of which Zelda, pointing to her left breast, would claim that that the fire was in her heart; or to destroy apartments, their own and other people's; or to insult servants, friends, and anyone else in sight, with Scott often ending an evening by getting into a fist fight, which he would inevitably lose. Not quite, the Fitzgeralds, what we should today call a "fun couple."

If Fitzgerald could not control his alcohol, he was not much better with money. Although he earned vast sums, money seemed to slip away from him like genial groups from a confident bore. He earned as much as \$4,000 a shot for the many short stories he published in the *Saturday Evening Post* in the 1920's, a fee that would be roughly the equivalent of \$40,000 in 1994. But this was sloshed away in boozy, sloppy living. In the mid-30's, he was getting at first \$1,000, then \$1,250 a week writing for the movies. But this went to pay off old debts and private-school bills for his daughter and private-sanatorium bills for Zelda. Public institutions, he judged, were not good enough for either.

Poor Fitzgerald, the man thought to be the great chronicler of the American rich—"Let me tell you about the very rich," he wrote in a famous short story, "They are different from you and me"—was never able to accumulate enough to provide himself with the time to write the serious books he was certain were in him. Like the solid reputation as an artist he so ardently desired, money, too, always eluded him.

As Fitzgerald would have been the first to tell you, he botched it, and botched it badly. So do many of us, but what makes Fitzgerald's case poignant is, first, he really had something to botch; and, second, he was acutely, painfully aware of all that he had thrown away. To his daughter Scottie, to whom in her adolescence he regularly dispensed advice, he wrote in one of his last letters:

What little I've accomplished has been by the most laborious and uphill work, and I wish now

*University of Illinois Press, 208 pp., \$24.95.

that I'd *never* relaxed or looked back—but said at the end of *The Great Gatsby*: "I've found my line—from now on this comes first. This is my immediate duty—without this I am nothing."

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD was a contemporary not only of Ernest Hemingway but of William Faulkner, who was probably the most complete and dedicated artist of the three. Faulkner's artistry has long been recognized, yet while he is established as an academic subject, people seem to read him less and less for pleasure. Hemingway's novels now seem slightly ridiculous, the ideas at their center hollow if not sentimental (Fitzgerald himself called *For Whom the Bell Tolls* "a thoroughly superficial book with all the profundity of *Rebecca*"), and it is mainly his short stories, which achieve the magical status of poetry, that today hold the attention of serious readers.

Faulkner and Hemingway each won the Nobel Prize, but Fitzgerald has probably had the greater influence on the general culture of America. More clear than the precise nature of this influence is its pervasiveness: the designer Ralph Lauren, with his fantasies of 1920's elegance, hardly seems possible without the precedent of Fitzgerald's novels. The (fictitious) novelist, Richard Caramel, a character in Fitzgerald's *The Beautiful and Damned*, remarks that "Everybody in the next generation will be named Peter or Barbara—because at present all the piquant characters are named Peter or Barbara." He then adds: "And then I'll come along and pick up the obsolete name, Jewel, I'll attach it to some quaint and attractive character and it'll start its career all over again." Here is art as minor prophesy: consider all the young women named Nicole—after Nicole Diver in *Tender Is the Night*—currently in the world. Consider, too, all the boys named Scott, including the Scott Schwartzs, Feldmans, and Goldsteins. The writing of F. Scott Fitzgerald has always excited a yearning for elegance, perhaps because Fitzgerald himself so yearned for it.

Although Fitzgerald never graduated from Princeton—he did very badly there, and, technically, dropped out—his is the name more strongly associated with the school than any other, even that of Woodrow Wilson, once its president. Whereas the Princeton he entered was considered lazy and aristocratic, its characteristic note one of indolent elegance, its reputation that of "the pleasantest country club in America," after and because of Fitzgerald it has been thought of as literary and exclusive and in the snobbery sweepstakes an even better buy than Yale or Harvard. While he did not strike his contemporaries at Princeton as a powerful personality—"Fitzgerald," John Peale Bishop wrote about him, "was pert and fresh and blond, and looked, as someone said, like a jonquil"—the impression he

has made on posterity continues to be enormous.

When the young *Paris Review* crowd—George Plimpton, William Styron & Co.—went off to Paris in the 1950's, they did so in emulation of Fitzgerald as much as of any other writer. They were not alone in this. When I was an undergraduate at the University of Chicago in the 1950's, there was an entire fraternity—Beta Theta Pi—that seemed to be living on an F. Scott Fitzgerald script of stylish partying and heavy drinking. One of its members had published a story in *New World Writing*, an impressive accomplishment for a boy not yet twenty, and I remember him, drunk in his room, telling me before passing out that he could imagine the floor covered wall to wall with martinis and Anchor Books (the most elegant of highbrow paperbacks of the time). The performance was pure Fitzgerald.

Such extra-literary adoration—the Fitzgerald phenomenon—has complicated a clear view of Fitzgerald's talent. Perhaps no other American writer has so trickily presented the problem of separating the work from the life. Cyril Connolly, who as a reviewer wrote a great deal about him, concluded that "Fitzgerald is overrated as a writer, that his importance, apart from *Gatsby* and a few stories, lies in his personality as the epitome of a historical moment." Yet that historical moment seems to live on and with an interest that is more than historical. Books about, books studying, and books recalling Fitzgerald continue to appear. Can it be that there is something about him that transcends both his writing and his life—something centrally human that sustains our fascination?

IN HIS recent collection of Fitzgerald's letters,* Matthew J. Bruccoli maintains that "the dominant influences on F. Scott Fitzgerald were aspiration, literature, Princeton, Zelda Fitzgerald, and alcohol." If those were the influences, Fitzgerald's real *subjects* were ambition, snobbery, loss, and self-pity—the subjects both of his books and of his life. His depths, as Fitzgerald's own protagonist, Dick Diver, says of the young movie actress Rosemary Hoyt in *Tender Is the Night*, were "Irish and romantic and illogical." Fitzgerald was not least Irish in his concern with social status; from Henry James through John O'Hara, the Irish, once much contemned in American life, were sensitively attuned to the horrors of snobbery and stimulated by the delights of social attainment.

In good part, behind the continuing attraction of Fitzgerald is his style, his lush, lovely style, style to the highest power, which is style not merely as pretty writing—though Fitzgerald was able to produce vast quantities of that—but as an attractive way of viewing the world. Style of this power, style

* *F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Life in Letters*. Scribners, 503 pp., \$30.00.

this pervasive, is otherwise known as charm. Raymond Chandler, who thought Fitzgerald "just missed being a great writer," maintained that charm was the quality Fitzgerald had in superabundance—charm, he added, as Keats would have used the word: "a kind of subdued magic, controlled and exquisite, the sort of thing you get from good string quartets."

What made Fitzgerald a considerable artist was that he was able to get this charm into his writing—much more into his writing, one gathers, than into his life, which at times could have served as a reverse Dale Carnegie course. But if he was himself a living, breathing version of *How Not to Win Friends and Influence People*, in even the least of his stories one finds the magic, the fine touches, that seem to heighten life's possibilities.

The Fitzgerald charm does not disarm everyone. It has distinctly not disarmed Jeffrey Meyers, Fitzgerald's newest biographer.* Meyers, though an academic by paycheck, is by vocation a professional biographer who works in a manner with which I am in great sympathy. He writes biographies that do not seek to be definitive but instead to revitalize the discussion about particular 20th-century writers. He tends to be more interested in the life of a writer than in his work—or, perhaps more precisely, in relating the life to the work. He produces books of fewer than 400 pages—rare in contemporary literary biography—does not spend a decade or more on a book, and never pauses long enough between books to set up shop as a the great expert on a single writer, in the manner of the late Richard Ellmann (James Joyce) or Leon Edel (Henry James). One assumes that he writes a book because an author has, at one time or another, actively engaged his passions as a reader.

F. Scott Fitzgerald is hardly a fresh subject. At least six full-blown biographies have preceded Meyers's, not to mention many critical studies and a biography of Zelda. The Fitzgerald turf has been pretty well worked, which means that the time for revisionism has arrived. When literary ground has been thoroughly plowed, someone is sure to come along and attempt to blow it up. This, in part, is what Meyers has done.

MEYERS'S is not an entirely destructive work. No previous biographer, for example, has shown how heavily Fitzgerald drew upon aesthetic notions learned from Joseph Conrad. Meyers is excellent on the partly rivalrous, partly, one has to say, sadomasochistic relationship with Hemingway. By way of original research, he has tracked down a late-life love of Fitzgerald's named Bijou O'Connor.

Meyers's biography also comes, to return to my agronomic metaphors, after much spade work has been done by others, and so he is in a position to clear up matters of controversy. One such

has to do with a story told by Hemingway in *A Moveable Feast*. According to Hemingway, Fitzgerald once approached him to ask whether he thought his, Fitzgerald's, member was too small to give Zelda satisfaction; Hemingway thereupon took Fitzgerald into the men's room for an inspection, pronounced nothing wrong with him in that department, and said the whole thing was Zelda's way of trying to destroy him. In connection with this episode, Meyers is able to write, in a sentence whose ramifications I, for one, find depressing in the extreme: "There is a surprising amount of evidence about Fitzgerald's sexual organ and sexual performance." Meyers's own conclusion is that the Hemingway story is itself highly dubious—that Hemingway probably made it all up.

Yet, on the whole, so unsympathetic is Meyers to Fitzgerald that one wonders if he ever felt the attraction of his writing. Or might it be that he finds the chasm so great between the charm of the writing and the squalor of the life that he has felt the need to provide mainly a chronicle of the chasm? Whatever the case, the spirit of Meyers's biography tends to be prosecutorial. He does not forgive Fitzgerald much, and uses everything at hand against him.

Right out of the gate, we learn that "Fitzgerald inherited his elegance and propensity to failure from his father, his social insecurity and absurd behavior from his mother." Witnesses are brought in to testify that the young Fitzgerald was egotistical, solipsistic, undisciplined, a lightweight, a bad hat in almost every regard. "Fitzgerald joined the army for the same reasons that he went to Princeton," Meyers writes characteristically. "It was the fashionable thing to do."

As the chronicle continues, wherever possible Meyers underscores Fitzgerald's imperceptiveness, and he was, true enough, a young man on whom much was lost. Meyers also stresses Fitzgerald's irresponsibility, his obtuse politics, his selling-out to the temptation for easy money, his pathetic masochism when among men he took to be his betters (chiefly Wilson and Hemingway), his need for approval, his selfishness, his failure as a parent (the Fitzgeralds "had very little to do with Scottie's day-to-day life"), his infidelities, his endless dramatization of his own self-pity, and, to round things off nicely, his anti-Semitism (deployed when he was drunk, against his last lady friend, Sheila Graham).

Meyers's bill of complaint could be extended; and none of it, even an admiring reader of Fitzgerald is bound to allow, rings entirely false. Yet though Meyers has shown the depth of the discrepancy between the man and the work, he has not been able to account for the attraction of that work.

* *Scott Fitzgerald: A Biography*. HarperCollins, 400 pp., \$27.50.

WRITING in his later days to the young novelist and screenwriter Budd Schulberg, Fitzgerald said himself that he "used to have a beautiful talent once," adding that even now "nothing I ever write can ever be completely bad." He was right about that—just as he was right when, sadly, he told Joseph Mankiewicz, the Hollywood producer (who rewrote Fitzgerald's first and only credited screenplay, *Three Comrades*): "I'm a good writer—honest." And he was right, too, when, in the year of his death, he wrote to Maxwell Perkins, his editor at Scribner's, that "even now there is little published in American fiction that doesn't slightly bear my stamp—in a small way I was an original."

I used to think Fitzgerald was a writer best read when young, but now, having reread him, I find myself newly impressed with the quality of his prose, the acuity of his generalizations, his ability to create great lyrical moments through dialogue and description. He knew how to do purple in many different, splendid shades. He can put one on the French Riviera in a single sentence, as here, from *Tender Is the Night*: "They drank the bottle of wine while a faint wind rocked the pine-needles and the sensuous heat of early afternoon made blinding freckles on the checkered luncheon cloth." Sex in a Fitzgerald novel has a crisp, clean quality, and is left to the imagination of the reader, which is where it must remain if it is not to dominate a novel. The consummation of the flirtation between Rosemary Hoyt and Dick Diver, in *Tender Is the Night*, is handled with admirable economy: "She wanted to be taken and she was, and what had begun with a childish infatuation on a beach was accomplished at last."

Read alongside Jeffrey Meyers's biography, Matthew Bruccoli's recent collection of letters reminds us that the saving remnant in Fitzgerald was the part of him that was always the artist. He once declared that he "had done very little thinking, save within the problems of my craft." But about his craft he really did think long and deeply. "I honestly believed," he wrote to his daughter toward the end of his life, "that *with no effort on my part* I was a sort of magician with words—an odd delusion on my part when I had worked so desperately hard to develop a hard, colorful prose style." Not only did he come to understand that the lesson of the artist was effort, unremitting effort, but he understood quite well that the nature of his own talent was poetic, and what it required to come to fruition in prose was "assimilation of material and careful selection of it, or more bluntly: having something to say and an interesting, highly developed way of saying it."

Fitzgerald was a true artist, both by gift and by desire. This may be why he was such a bust in Hollywood. He wrote to Maxwell Perkins that "I just couldn't make the grade as a hack—that, like everything else, requires a certain practiced excellence." But perhaps more convincing is the

reason he gave to his wife: "As soon as I feel I am writing to a cheap specification, my pen freezes and my talent vanishes over the hill." His own most cherished hope was that "some day I can combine the verve of [*This Side of*] *Paradise*, the unity of *The Beautiful & Damned* and the lyric quality of *Gatsby*, its aesthetic soundness, into something worthy of the admiration of those few" people who knew what true literary art looks like.

NO ONE reading Fitzgerald's letters, or his novels, or the pieces in *The Crack-Up* can think him unintelligent. He was, for example, deft at reading other people's novels, and he could be penetrating about his friends. Already in his twenties he had Edmund Wilson's psychological number, writing to an acquaintance that Wilson "appreciates feeling after it's been filtered through a temperament but his soul is a bit *sec* [dry]"—which seems to me hang on about Edmund Wilson.

At the same time, one recognizes that Fitzgerald's intelligence was of a particular kind, being almost wholly at the service of imagination. Take the following lengthy passage about Dick Diver at a psychiatric congress in Munich:

He had no intention of attending so much as a single session of the congress—he could imagine it well enough, new pamphlets by Bleuler and the elder Forel that he could better digest at home, the paper by the American who cured *dementia praecox* by pulling out his patients' teeth or cauterizing their tonsils, the half-derisive respect with which this idea would be greeted, for no more reason than that America was such a rich and powerful country. The other delegates from America—Schwartz with his saint's face and his infinite patience in straddling two worlds as well as dozens of commercial alienists with hangdog faces, who would be present partly to increase their standing, and hence their reach for the big plums of the criminal practice, partly to master novel sophistries that they could weave into their stock-in-trade, to the infinite confusion of all values. There would be cynical Latins, and some man of Freud's from Vienna. Articulate among them would be the great Jung, bland, supervigorous, on his rounds between the forests of anthropology and the neuroses of schoolboys. At first there would be an American cast to the congress, almost Rotarian in its forms and ceremonies, then the closer-knit European vitality would fight through, and finally the Americans would play their trump card, the announcement of colossal gifts and endowments of great new plants and training schools, and in the presence of the figures the Europeans would blanch and walk timidly. But he would not be there to see.

Fitzgerald picked up such rich material through the years that his own wife spent in and out of insane asylums in Europe and America. But he knew how to use it—to integrate it beautifully

into the thought of a character, a practicing psychiatrist, Dick Diver, considered by many critics to be more intelligent than his creator, F. Scott Fitzgerald. This is what I mean by intelligence at the service of imagination. Dumb like a fox, they used to say; Fitzgerald was dumb like a writer.

But what chiefly continues to make Fitzgerald's writing of enduring interest is his great theme: loss. Only once did he find the perfect objective correlative—the perfect relation between theme and concrete case—and that was in the fantast Jay Gatsby, whose extravagant aspirations include buying back the past. Of course, Fitzgerald was more than a bit of a fantast himself, with a past he would himself spend many years wishing to recapture. "I remember riding in a taxi one afternoon between very tall buildings under a mauve and rosy sky," he once wrote about his early success in Manhattan; "I began to bawl because I had everything I wanted and knew I would never be so happy again." This was after his first novel had been established as a best-seller, he had won the hand of his beloved Zelda, and the future looked to be all caviar and champagne and beaches on the Riviera.

As everyone knows, it did not quite turn out that way. Fitzgerald's drinking quickly got out of control, Zelda broke down in a permanent way, and to keep his shaky but expensive ship afloat, he began writing things for which he had not much respect. As usual his own best analyst, Fitzgerald, in an essay entitled "Early Success," makes the case with penetrating precision:

The man who arrives young believes that he exercises his will because his star is shining. The man who only asserts himself at thirty has a balanced idea of what will-power and fate have each contributed, the one who gets there at forty is liable to put the emphasis on will alone. This comes out when the storms strike your craft.

Although nothing Fitzgerald wrote was utterly without interest—his winning style saw to that—he would never again, after *The Great Gatsby*, write anything that altogether pleased him. This, too, was part of his sadness. "I am not a great man, but sometimes I think the impersonal and objective quality of my talent and the sacrifices of it, in pieces, to preserve its essential value has some sort of epic grandeur," he wrote to his daughter near the end of his life, adding: "Anyhow after hours I nurse myself with delusions of that sort."

Too rarely did Fitzgerald hit this impersonal and objective quality in his fiction. So we are left with this Midwestern Irishman, who claimed to have "a two-cylinder inferi-

ority complex," and who seems to have spent at least a third of his adult life drunk and another third recovering from drunkenness or fighting to stay away from drink. With the last third, he wrote a handful of memorable stories, one slender, nearly perfect novel, two gallant fictional failures, and some confessional writing that brilliantly dramatized his own self-pity. Why does he continue to fascinate?

Some would read in Fitzgerald's life a cautionary tale. But what is its moral? If you drink, stay home? Don't marry a maniac? Be careful how you handle success, remembering, as he wrote in *The Beautiful and Damned*, that "the victor belongs to the spoils"? Not very edifying, any of this.

What is impressive is that, even after Jeffrey Meyers has reported the worst about Fitzgerald, he remains a poignant figure. There was no meanness in him; for a writer, he was singularly unmalicious. "I have honestly never gone in for hating," he wrote to Hemingway, attempting a rapprochement in their relations. One cannot even blame Fitzgerald for being a bad husband or father. For one thing, he beat us to the punch by asserting it himself; for another, it really was not quite true, because by his own lights, and under his own crippling difficulties, he did all he could, financially and spiritually, for his wife and daughter, even sacrificing his talent for them.

No, the interest in F. Scott Fitzgerald is that he felt so deeply, and, when he was going well, expressed so beautifully, so many things that other Americans have felt but have not been anywhere near so able to express: social unease in his own country, a yearning for an elegant and orderly life, and an inner sense (which in a letter to his daughter he ascribed to all great men) that life "is essentially a cheat and its conditions are those of defeat, and that the redeeming things are not 'happiness and pleasure' but the deeper satisfactions that come out of the struggle."

It was in *The Crack-Up* that Fitzgerald wrote that "the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function." Even though Fitzgerald could not always do this in his own life, he posed precisely this problem in his best fiction, where classic (one is tempted to call it American) optimism and yearning are countered by the tragic truth that, as he once put it, "the natural state of the sentient adult is a qualified unhappiness." These two opposed notions were at the heart of his fiction. They remain at the heart of not only American but all human life. That F. Scott Fitzgerald picked up on this contradiction in the human spirit as early as he did, and worked it as richly as he did, is the reason that he was perfectly justified in thinking that "in a *small* way I was an original."