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I

RUTH PRIGOZY

Introduction: Scott, Zelda, and the culture of celebrity

F. Scott Fitzgerald is one of the most recognized figures in American literary and cultural history, not only as one of the major writers of the twentieth century, but also as a man whose life story excites the fascination of a public that knows him primarily as the author of *The Great Gatsby*. Any study of Fitzgerald's career must trace its familiar trajectory: early success, then public oblivion, and finally posthumous resurrection; had he lived a few years longer, he might have proved the exception to his own belief that there are no second acts in American lives. Fitzgerald's life and work were intertwined from the very beginning; his career spanned one of the most turbulent eras of the century, and from the very start he was part creator, part victim of the new culture of celebrity which accompanied the rise of modern technology. His fame and his marriage coincided, and so today, as in the 1920s, the names of F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald are linked in public perception; indeed, for the last three-quarters of a century they have been indissolubly tied to American popular culture.

Scarcely a week passes that we do not notice an allusion to one or both of them in our mass media. In a bestselling paperback mystery, a leading character marries a beautiful but hopelessly mad woman who slashes the bathroom mirror with lipstick before shattering it, and then collapses bleeding on the floor. He later tells his friend, "I've got Zelda for a wife" (Patterson, *Escape the Night*, 1984, 31). In a 1970s film, *Getting Straight*, the protagonist, played by Elliott Gould, rebels against his questioners at an MA oral examination when they state that Nick Carraway and Gatsby have a homosexual relationship, that Jordan Baker is probably a lesbian, and that Fitzgerald, Gould's favorite author, was driven by "a terrible need to express homosexual panic through his characters." The candidate, outraged yet afraid at first to offend his mentors, finally retorts, "It's possible . . . but it's gonna be a surprise to Sheilah Graham. Sheilah is not gonna believe that." (Sheilah Graham was Fitzgerald's lover during the last three years of his life.) He then explodes in fury, throws away his academic career, salvaging his soul in the process.

And in the fall of 1993, the Turner Network presented *Zelda*, a barely fictionalized television drama on the Fitzgeralds' troubled marriage, with the glamorous Natasha Richardson in the title role and Timothy Hutton as Fitzgerald. (Both actors playing the diminutive Fitzgeralds are over six feet tall, suggesting perhaps contemporary media inflation of celebrities.) The three examples, drawn from three mass media, are not unique. Fitzgerald has been played on the screen by Gregory Peck (1959), on television by Jason Miller (Tuesday Weld was *Zelda*, [1976]), and countless one-man and one-woman shows have played throughout the country purporting to disclose the inner struggles of either Scott or *Zelda*. For better or worse, mostly worse, they are part of our lives, appropriated probably forever into mainstream American culture.

Why Scott and *Zelda*? Other major American writers from Mark Twain and Jack London to Ernest Hemingway have entered the public's consciousness without the spousal link. Indeed, although she was a more talented writer than *Zelda*, there has never been, to my knowledge, a conference dedicated to Martha (Gellhorn) and Ernest Hemingway. Clearly the Fitzgeralds' lives together had a mythic quality, and their symbiosis made both their successes and their tragedies, like the actors who impersonate them today, larger than life. As Mary Gordon has remarked, "The case of *Zelda* and Scott Fitzgerald . . . as creator and object of creation, may be unique in the history of literature – at least in the history of literary married couples" (Introduction, *Zelda Fitzgerald, The Collected Writings*, xvii). Further, they were extraordinarily attractive, and both worked studiously at developing public personalities that at first enchanted and later repelled the audience they had always courted. Fitzgerald had, as Scott Donaldson has noted (*Fool for Love*, 190), a "histrionic" personality, which coincided with *Zelda*'s lifelong need for self-dramatization. So they became popular culture icons, and the story, so irresistible in its dimensions, has become fixed in the imagination of a mass public larger and more curious than they had ever imagined. There is another dimension to the connection between the Fitzgeralds and American popular culture: Fitzgerald knew and liked that culture, he drew on the stories of his youth to retell episodes from his own life, he was a fan of movies, musical comedy, popular songs, songwriters and stars, and the study of the Fitzgeralds and popular culture involves a dialectic between their public performance and public image on the one hand and their use of popular culture in their creative language on the other.

Popular culture may be over-simply but usefully referred to as one "well-liked or widely favored by many people" (Storey, *Introductory Guide*, 7). Certainly in twentieth-century America it has been a commercial culture created for mass consumption, and a culture whose "texts and practices . . . are seen as forms of public fantasy . . . a collective dream world" (Storey,

Introductory Guide, 11). Popular culture is not a fixed entity; it emerged after the industrial revolution and the urbanization of America, and because it is not historically fixed, it is highly responsive to economic and social change. It is often distinguished from “high culture,” but the cross-over is not only from “high” to “popular” but the reverse as well. (And we have not even mentioned the category of “pulp” which too has managed to infiltrate formerly fixed categories.) Popular culture, in the world of the twenties, meant the illustrated magazines (a negligible element in contemporary life), newspapers, bestsellers, drama, radio, and movies. As technology grew and shifted throughout the twentieth century, television largely supplanted popular magazines and forced changes in movies and the moviegoing public. Thus, any discussion of the Fitzgeralds and popular culture inevitably reflects the changes in that culture throughout the twentieth century.

The relationship between the Fitzgeralds and American cultural life may be traced through three stages that reflect their popular image in the twentieth century: first, the creation of the legendary couple in the mass media of the 1920s and their disappearance during the Depression; second, the Fitzgerald revival of the 1950s signaled by the almost simultaneous publication of Budd Schulberg’s *The Disenchanted* and Arthur Mizener’s *The Far Side of Paradise*, and lasting through the 1960s; and third, the revisionist legend, propelled by Nancy Milford’s biography of Zelda, from the 1970s to the present day. In the uneasy alliance between a writer and the vast audience to which he or she aspires, the relationship between a successful writer and the public is never simple. Whether he or she courts its favor and develops the kind of persona suitable to a mainstream audience, like Hemingway,¹ Fitzgerald, and Mailer, or rejects it and remains personally unrecognizable like Bellow or in an extreme case, Salinger (although his hermetic existence exerts its own fascination on an admittedly smaller public), the public arena is seductive, the rewards for personal notoriety great, and the temptations eternal. For Fitzgerald, there was never a doubt.

The Fitzgeralds create a legend

That Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald throughout their life together were acutely conscious of their public image, is attested to by their scrapbooks, into which they pasted newspaper articles about themselves as well as brief mentions, photographs from magazines and newspapers together with others from their own collections, reviews of Fitzgerald’s books, films adapted from books and stories, theater reviews of his play and dramatic adaptations, Zelda’s varied artistic endeavors, and even advertisements which alluded to either of them. Near the end of his life, Fitzgerald pasted in his scrapbook

clippings which compared other writers to him, or even mentioned his name in passing, heading the page, “The Melody Lingers On” (Bruccoli *et al.*, *Romantic Egoists*, 204–5). From the start, immediately following the success of *This Side of Paradise* (1920), the Fitzgeralds courted public attention, and in that quest, the press was a strong ally in creating their public personas. Today we are accustomed to manipulation of the press by celebrities, but in the twenties, only a skilled self-publicist could dictate the form his public image would take, and the Fitzgeralds had an innate instinct about their own popular appeal. Critics have noted that even a close friend of Fitzgerald, Alex McKaig, was distrustful of the couple’s antics – even those likeliest to provoke a storm of criticism. He wondered if the couple’s brawls were “all aimed to hand down the Fitzgerald legend” to a public eager to read of their exploits.² After Scott’s death, Zelda wrote to Scottie, “Daddy loved glamour & I also had a great respect for popular acclaim” (quoted in Mellow, *Invented Lives*, 491), so it is fair to conclude that much of what they did in those apparently unthinking times in the twenties was in some way aimed at keeping their image alive for the public and further enhancing their legend.

James Mellow’s description of their “invented lives” is only half the story; popular culture itself dictated the terms of that invention, and Fitzgerald was, from childhood, adept at self-promotion. In “My Lost City” (1932), he remembers how the “offices of editors and publishers were open to me, impresarios begged plays, the movies panted for screen material. To my bewilderment, I was adopted . . . as the arch type [*sic*] of what New York wanted.” He recalls that he

was pushed into the position not only of spokesman for the time but of the typical product of that same moment. I, or rather it was “we” now, did not know exactly what New York expected of us and found it rather confusing. Within a few months after our embarkation on the Metropolitan venture we scarcely knew anymore who we were and we hadn’t a notion what we were. A dive into a civic fountain, a casual brush with the law, was enough to get us into the gossip columns . . . (“My Lost City,” *Crack-Up*, 27)

And he reveals what the publicity, the notoriety, the public life meant to him: success is linked with “eternal youth” (33). The narrator of that and other autobiographical essays, Fitzgerald’s literary persona, is recasting earlier events as part of a lifelong pattern of constructing a popular image; we cannot take at face value his apparent bewilderment at his notoriety. As Budd Schulberg has noted, “He himself had been a prime mover in this god-making and god-smashing” (*Four Seasons*, 142).

Fitzgerald was a keen observer of the cultural marketplace. He once suggested to Scribners that they reprint Scribner titles in low-priced editions, suggesting that “known titles in the series” would “carry the little known or forgotten” (*Life in Letters*, 57–8). He decided to remake his image before *Gatsby* appeared, writing to his editor at Scribners, Maxwell Perkins, “I’m tired of being the author of *This Side of Paradise* and I want to start over” (*Life in Letters*, 84). He was an expert judge of advertising, and directed his publisher where to advertise his books, and what kind of blurbs, if any, were to be printed on the jackets. And he advised Ernest Hemingway, no amateur at creating his own legend, that a published Hemingway parody “would make you quite conscious of your public existence” (*Life in Letters*, 151). His investment in his self-created image was so great that we can comprehend and sympathize with his outrage over Zelda’s effort to tell their story in *Save Me the Waltz*: “My God, my books made her a legend and her single intention in this somewhat thin portrait is to make me a non-entity” (*Life in Letters*, 209). So intent was Fitzgerald on controlling the public’s perception of him, that he wrote suggesting to Perkins in 1933 how his new novel should be advertised so as to preserve the precarious balance he always sought between the popular figure and the serious writer:

For several years the impression has prevailed that Scott Fitzgerald had abandoned the writing of novels and in the future would continue to write only popular short stories. His publishers knew different and they are very glad now to be able to present a book which is in line with his three other highly successful and highly esteemed novels, thus demonstrating that Scott Fitzgerald is anything but through as a serious novelist. (*Life in Letters*, 241)

What was the public image of the Fitzgeralds in the 1920s, and how did it arise? Clearly, the daily press, in feature stories, news articles (public relations pieces), photos and gossip columns, and the popular magazines with their lavish illustrations, were the prime shapers of the legend of F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald.

From the outset, the Fitzgeralds readily granted interviews to reporters. Their physical attractiveness was a key element in their successful seduction of the media. One reporter marvels at the “blue-eyed, frank-faced, fastidiously dressed author” (Brucoli and Bryer, *In His Own Time*, 256), and another notes Zelda’s beauty, concluding, “The two of them might have stepped, sophisticated and charming, from the pages of any of the Fitzgerald books” (Brucoli and Bryer, *In His Own Time*, 278). A woman reporter confesses archly after noting how handsome Fitzgerald is, “My interest was perhaps a bit more than professional” (Brucoli and Bryer, *In His Own*

Time, 278). Thomas Boyd's 1922 description is representative of the journalist's vision of the author:

His eyes were blue and clear; his jaw was squared at the end which perceptibly protruded; his nose was straight and his mouth, though sensitive looking, was regular in outline. His hair which was corn-colored, was wavy. His were the features that the average American mind never fails to associate with beauty. But there was a quality in the eye with which the average mind is unfamiliar. (Brucoli and Bryer, *In His Own Time*, 247)

That last quality is, of course, intellect, or genius, and Fitzgerald sought to portray himself as both hedonistic and intellectual at the same time. Boyd concludes, "To be with him for an hour is to have the blood in one's veins thawed and made fluent" (Brucoli and Bryer, *In His Own Time*, 252). Years later, when Fitzgerald could no longer control the press and his own public persona, he was to read Michel Mok's notorious description which stands in such stark and painful contrast to those of a decade earlier: "His trembling hands, his twitching face with its pitiful expression of a cruelly beaten child" (Brucoli and Bryer, *In His Own Time*, 294).

As the image of the fun-loving Fitzgeralds captured the public imagination, Fitzgerald would consistently remind readers that he was a serious writer. (Later, when his exploits became less attractive, and his need for the money that his stories brought in became greater, he tried to distance himself from the image he had so consciously created in the early 1920s, and to remind his public that he was a writer first.) Even in the earliest interviews, he called attention to his drinking, which was not nearly the problem then that it would become in just a few years. On the one hand, he boasts of drinking, and on the other asserts that he does not let it interfere with his artistry. He cannot drink and write, he tells Boyd, "For me, narcotics are deadening to work. I can understand anyone drinking coffee to get a stimulating effect, but whiskey – oh, no" (Brucoli and Bryer, *In His Own Time*, 253). In "The Author's Apology," which appeared in the third printing of *This Side of Paradise* (April 1920) distributed to the American Booksellers Association convention, however, Fitzgerald, under an extremely flattering photograph, advises them to "consider all the cocktails mentioned in this book drunk by me as a toast to the American Booksellers Association" (Brucoli and Bryer, *In His Own Time*, 164). In 1926, he was quoted in the *New Yorker*, "Don't you know I am one of the most notorious drinkers of the younger generation?" (Brucoli and Bryer, *In His Own Time*, 443). And in 1929, he published a clever, tongue-in-cheek "A Short Autobiography" in the *New Yorker*, tracing his life from 1913 through the present in terms of varied alcoholic beverages consumed through the years.

The same interview pattern was repeated so frequently that it seems clear it was orchestrated by the Fitzgeralds and the press. After answering the obligatory questions on the current state of flapperdom, Fitzgerald would launch a stream of apparently spontaneous observations on the state of the world, on marriage, on the modern woman, on writers both classical and modern, on the Leopold–Loeb case, and even on the future of America from a Spenglerian perspective. His magazine pieces attempt to shock (mildly, of course) the mass-audience readership, but more important, to establish Fitzgerald as the authority on male–female relationships of the era, unafraid to reject the sexual codes which were no longer as widely held as both he and the reporters would have the reader believe. The Fitzgeralds were challenging public notions of sexual morality in the traditionally conservative, pseudo-rebellious fashion characteristic of the popular media. None of their apparently outrageous remarks would have been truly shocking to the audience reading their breezy comments in *Metropolitan*, or the *New York Evening World*. Indeed, remarks like, “I believe in early marriage, easy divorce and several children” (Brucoli and Bryer, *In His Own Time*, 184) are thrown out for their shock effect with no serious discussion of their implications. He was not a bit perturbed when a reporter said, “He is an actor . . . vivacious, imaginative, forceful – slightly imbalanced. The latter is his chief charm” (Brucoli and Bryer, *In His Own Time*, 416). Fitzgerald played at publicity with childlike ingenuousness, little suspecting that a sensation-seeking biography seventy years later would devote pages to his public and probably facetious confession of a “pedentia complex” (Brucoli and Bryer, *In His Own Time*, 416), his exaggeration of his psychological quirk as a four-year-old-child (*Ledger*, 155). As in *Vanity Fair* articles today, the reader’s interest is piqued, but the “shocking” revelations generally prove to be far less revealing than the headlines and advertising suggest. In this particular instance, the biographical accuracy of Jeffrey Meyers’s discovery of Fitzgerald’s “foot fetish” and all of its psychosexual implications is highly questionable. He writes, to confirm his assertions, that Frances Ring (Fitzgerald’s secretary during his last years) told him that Fitzgerald “always wore slippers and never went about in bare feet” (Meyers, *Scott Fitzgerald*, 13). Mrs. Ring told me³ that she was asked by this biographer what kind of clothes Fitzgerald wore, and she replied, that because he arose late and preferred to work before he dressed, he usually wore a bathrobe and slippers during the day. She was horrified, she says, to find her words distorted to support the lurid conjectures of her interviewer. She also explains Sheilah Graham’s remarks about Fitzgerald’s not taking his shoes and socks off at the beach (Graham, *Rest of the Story*, 33) as stemming not from a “mysterious shyness” (he had told Sheilah about his childhood complex), but from his extreme hypochondria in

his last years. He was always worried about TB, about colds, about flu, and indeed, did not play tennis and swim with Sheilah at their Malibu home. In support of Mrs. Ring's version, we should look at the photographs of Fitzgerald with bare – and well-formed – feet clearly displayed at the beach in four photographs reprinted in Bruccoli *et al.*, *The Romantic Egoists*, in Hyères in 1924 (117), in Vevey in 1930 (177), at Lake Annecy in 1936 (181), and at Myrtle Beach in 1938 (219). Thus do myths begin and grow until they enter into popular culture. This particular one is foolish and irrelevant, but it is a good example of the kind of mythologizing to which the lives of the Fitzgeralds have been subjected over the years.

Interviews with Zelda and her own pieces for the popular press from this period are designed to reinforce the public's perception of the two Fitzgeralds as overgrown children having a riotous good time, very much in love, and happily married. Her apparent unconventionality (masking the real disturbances she experienced) is part of her charm, and in no way threatens her marriage or her role as wife and later mother. Indeed, Zelda is for her public the new flapper grown up. (The flapper was the new young woman of the 1920s, considered bold and unconventional.) One of the popular essays published under Fitzgerald's name, but written by Zelda, states that flapperdom is a necessary brief period in a young woman's development that will better prepare her to be safely settled as wife and mother. Zelda writes (in Scott's name), "I believe in the flapper as an artist in her objective field, the art of being – being young, being lovely, being an *object*" (italics mine) (Bruccoli and Bryer, *In His Own Time*, 398). In another flapper piece, she argues that if women are allowed to be free and to express themselves fully when young, there will be fewer divorces and women will be content to marry and settle down (Bruccoli and Bryer, *In His Own Time*, 392). Zelda publicly presents herself as a partner in the Fitzgeralds' life-as-extravaganza. Her tongue-in-cheek review of *The Beautiful and Damned* offers as the reason why people should purchase the book the "aesthetic" one that "there is the cutest cloth-of-gold dress for only three hundred dollars in a store on forty-second street" (Zelda Fitzgerald, *Collected Writings*, 387). Zelda never challenges the frivolous, Southern belle persona publicly. (All of the interviewers comment admiringly on her Southern drawl, her indolence around the house, her easy charm.) And as early as 1924, both of the Fitzgeralds were eager to tell the world that Zelda was a writer too, with a "queer decadent style. Scott incorporates whole chapters of his wife's writing into his own books" (Bruccoli and Bryer, *In His Own Time*, 419). Just as everything else they wrote and enacted for public consumption is exaggerated, if not a set of elaborate fantasies, we should note that the source of contemporary mythology surrounding Fitzgerald's putative use of Zelda's material lies in the couple's

public role-playing, as fabricated as everything else they concocted for public consumption in those days. That mythology is no less suspect than such early Fitzgerald public pronouncements as “I am a pessimist, a communist (with Nietzschean overtones), have no hobbies except conversation – and I am trying to repress that” (Bruccoli and Bryer, *In His Own Time*, 270). Similarly, in a 1928 interview (where he again boasts of his drinking prowess), he informs the reporter that “happiness consists of the performances of all the natural functions, with one exception – that of growing old. Sunday, Washington, D.C., cold weather, Bohemians, the managing type of American woman, avarice, and dullness are his principal dislikes” (Bruccoli and Bryer, *In His Own Time*, 282). His confessional public pronouncements in the 1920s, so essentially different from those of the 1930s, must be seen, for the most part, as coyly self-conscious celebrity exaggerations.

Magazine illustrations and photographs in newspapers and magazines also helped feed the Fitzgeralds’ mythmaking enterprise. Perhaps the most characteristic shot of the couple was originally published in *Hearst’s International* in 1923 (Bruccoli *et al.*, *Romantic Egoists*, 105) along with the often reproduced photo of the family in their Paris apartment at Christmas. The Fitzgeralds were not only good-looking, but they were ideally suited to the 1920s’ need for models illustrating the culture of youth, and they exploited their own personal appeal accordingly. Their pictures accompanied the movie magazine articles written during their 1927 trip to Hollywood. Magazine illustrations of Fitzgerald’s fictional heroes all look like taller versions of Fitzgerald, and all of his characters, whether true to the story or not, are dressed in elegant evening clothes. John Held Jr. cartoons accompany their dual articles on “What Became of Our Flappers and Sheiks” for *McCall’s* (October, 1925, Bruccoli *et al.*, *Romantic Egoists*, 132–3), and James Montgomery Flagg’s glamorized drawing of Scott and Zelda accompany the *College Humor* 1928 essay, “Looking Back Eight Years” (Bruccoli *et al.*, *Romantic Egoists*, 162–3). The headline for a Westport, Connecticut, newspaper photograph of the Fitzgeralds in 1920 is “Illustrating His Own Title!” (Bruccoli *et al.*, *Romantic Egoists*, 72). The caption continues, “This fortunate youngster has won not only an enviable reputation as a writer but also an undeniably charming wife to share with him the joys of ‘This Side of Paradise’.” The comic essay, “The Cruise of the Rolling Junk” for *Motor* magazine (1924), is accompanied by photos of the Fitzgeralds in matching white touring outfits which were to scandalize observers in small Southern towns on the route to Montgomery (Meyers, *Scott Fitzgerald*, 69). Fitzgerald’s famous profile adorned advertisements for his novels, and in the advertisement for *Scribner’s Magazine’s* serialization of *Tender is the Night*, “Richard Diver: A Romance” (January 1934, Bruccoli *et al.*, *Romantic*

Egoists, 194), the portrait forever links the author and the hero of his novel. Further publicity photographs for the novel use *both* Fitzgeralds, in recognition of the public's memory of the couple when both commanded attention. Perhaps the most memorable illustration of the Fitzgeralds was Reginald Marsh's drawing for the drop curtain of *Greenwich Village Follies* showing Zelda's dive into a downtown New York fountain and Fitzgerald with a group of young literary celebrities riding down Seventh Avenue. Photographers and illustrators could not resist their appeal; as John Dos Passos described them, "There was a golden innocence about them and they both were so hopelessly good looking" (Mellow, *Invented Lives*, 161). Virtually every reporter commented on his coloring, her complexion, their eyes, and their style. Zelda was, in those years, Scott's equal in physical attractiveness, and the combination of outrageous behavior, youthful exuberance, and personal beauty secured their place in the public eye.

Their public image was further enlarged by the gossip columnists who reported their exploits, by occasional editorials criticizing Fitzgerald's "attempts to be an aristocrat" (Louisville *Courier-Journal*, April 4, 17, 1922; Brucoli and Bryer, *In His Own Time*, 410), and above all by the impression they made on their circle of friends and acquaintances who would remember, with Donald Ogden Stewart, "I felt like some embarrassed spectator caught by the unexpected rising of the curtain on the stage of a comedy in which the two stars were competing for the spotlight" (*Fitzgerald/Hemingway Annual* [1971], 179); or with Gilbert Seldes, who recalled, "The two most beautiful people in the world were floating toward me" (Milford, *Zelda*, 127). As Scott himself wrote in sad retrospection,

There'd be an orchestra
 Bingo! Bango!
 Playing for us
 To dance the tango,
 And people would clap
 When we arose,
 At her sweet face
 And my new clothes.

(*Crack-Up*, 159)

Fitzgerald's early magazine pieces are pseudo-confessionals where he eagerly seizes on whatever print opportunities are available to define himself for his public. Thus "Who's Who – and Why" (1920) (his first public print appearance for a mass audience – readers of the *Saturday Evening Post*) also marks the beginning of his self-created legend, shrewdly rewriting the text of his life so that, for example, there is no hint of his dismal performance at Princeton. The essay is a brief autobiography culminating in an account of his

brilliant success, written as though in dazed wonder, but there is considerable calculation behind the simple recitation (*Afternoon*, 83–6). Similarly, his mock confessionals, “How to Live on \$36,000 a Year” (*Saturday Evening Post*, April 5, 1924) and “How To Live on Practically Nothing a Year” (*Saturday Evening Post*, September 20, 1924) are ironic and humorously self-deprecating, yet convey the excitement, a “kind of unconscious joy,” the couple experienced in those early years. Their self-revelation was itself self-creation in its most extreme form. The author’s stated fear in 1922 of “conventionality, dullness, sameness, predictability” (Brucoli and Bryer, *In His Own Time*, 213), his lack of patience with the older generation, his distaste for the parasitic leisure class, the diatribe against education for women, along with his advice to insure that the new generation will avoid the fate of its elders, is Fitzgerald’s way of seizing public attention at the outset, and then, forced by the confessions themselves, to continually raise the stakes, until the lives of the Fitzgeralds (which later would include their daughter) soon became the popular myth they had always planned, but larger, and ultimately more destructive to them than they could realize at the outset. Fitzgerald quotes in “My Lost City” (*Crack-Up*, 28) a headline he read years earlier “in astonishment”: “Fitzgerald Knocks Officer This Side of Paradise.” He notes his difficulty remembering this and other exploits from the heady period of his success, admits ruefully how ephemeral that success was, and at the same time, he attempts to cast an elegiac glow on events that might have been too humiliating and self-destructive to report unless they were transmuted into a portion of the ongoing legend of his life.

The Fitzgeralds were equally aware of other popular media. As a young boy, Fitzgerald was captivated with the theater, and described in his scrapbook his first appearance in a play, “The Coward” (1913) as “The great event” (Brucoli *et al.*, *Romantic Egoists*, 18). The theatrical season in New York in the 1920s was particularly exciting to a young man who had long worshiped musical comedy and had written his own at Princeton. Zelda’s love of the theater was as intense as Scott’s, and her self-dramatization was integral to her personality at a young age. When these two people at the height of their success met the Broadway of the 1920s, the effect on both was electric. They saw Ina Claire, Theda Bara, Marilyn Miller, and the Barrymores, and in their delight at the dramatic spectacles, they were moved to enact dramas of their own. A public greedy for stories about celebrity hijinks relished the dramatic antics of the Fitzgeralds which gossip columnists painted in expectedly sensational colors. Today we cannot disserve the real from the fabricated, so successful were they at self-publicizing. But they have surely provided fodder for the few contemporary biographers seeking to sensationalize and in the process trivialize their lives.

Fitzgerald's interest in the theater remained unabated throughout his lifetime, although his involvement in Hollywood drew his attention to that popular medium. He was enormously pleased by the success of Owen Davis's stage version of *Gatsby*, directed by George Cukor in 1926 ("Cukor's Breakthrough," McGilligan, *George Cukor: A Double Life*, 52), particularly since the theatrical world "had not anticipated such a shrewd adaptation" by a playwright "best known for his hundreds of cheap melodramas and Hippodrome extravaganzas" (*George Cukor: A Double Life*, 52). The play had a substantial run, 113 performances, some compensation for the failure of his own work, *The Vegetable* (1923), which had a disastrous opening night when the audience walked out during the second-act fantasy (Brucoli, *Some Sort of Epic Grandeur*, 187).

Fitzgerald was a movie fan too. As Schulberg has noted, he "believed in film as an ideal art form for reaching out to millions who might never have read a serious novel" (*Four Seasons*, 98). Movies, for Fitzgerald, were foremost a popular entertainment. He declared in 1921, "I like to see a pleasant flapper like Constance Talmadge or I want to see comedies like those of Chaplin's or Lloyd's. I'm not strong for the uplift stuff. It simply isn't life to me" (Brucoli and Bryer, *In His Own Time*, 245). He was always looking for opportunities to see his work adapted for film, remarking to Perkins in 1924 that he thought he had hard luck with the movies. "I must try some love stories with more action this time," he wrote (*Life in Letters*, 82). Before the publication of *Gatsby* he was interested in moving-picture bids, and in 1936, he proposed to Harold Ober a movie about a ballet dancer based on Zelda's life (*Life in Letters*, 297). "Of course," he wrote, "the tragic ending of Zelda's story need not be repeated in the picture. One could concede to the picture people the fact that the girl might become a popular dancer in the Folies Bergère" (*Life in Letters*, 296). He proposed an alternative ending that reveals how well he understood the popular marketplace: "One could conceive of a pathetic ending à la Hepburn in which because of her idealism she went on being a fifth rate 'figurine' in ballets all over Europe – this to be balanced by a compensatory love story which would make up for her the failure of her work" (*Life in Letters*, 296). Fitzgerald maintained a lifelong admiration for D.W. Griffith (Prigozy, "From Griffith's Girls to *Daddy's Girl*"). He recalls in 1935 how as a young author in the 1920s he had tried to interest Griffith in a film about Hollywood and a studio romance (*Life in Letters*, 297), indicating how apt a student he was of public taste, for shortly thereafter such self-reflexive films as *What Price Hollywood?* (1932) and *A Star Is Born* (1937) showed how accurately he took the public pulse. Beginning with the sale of "Head and Shoulders" (1920) to Metro Studios for \$2,500 as a vehicle for the popular actress, Viola Dana (produced as *The Chorus*

Girl's Romance, 1920), Fitzgerald was tireless in seeking opportunities to see his fiction translated into film. Indeed, in the same year, he sold the options for "Myra Meets His Family" (1920) and "The Offshore Pirate" (1920), and signed a contract with Metro for future film rights to his short stories. His lifelong association with Hollywood would last until his death. In 1939, whether it was true or not, he was proud to inform Harold Ober that Alfred Hitchcock had put him at the top of his list as a possible writer for *Rebecca* (*Life in Letters*, 297).⁴

Fitzgerald's connection with movies extended beyond film adaptations of his own work. He and Zelda wanted to play the leads in a possible adaptation of *This Side of Paradise*, and during his 1927 Hollywood sojourn, Lois Moran arranged a screen test for him which proved unsuccessful. As Alan Margolies has pointed out, screenwriter Edwin H. Knopf and director King Vidor believed that the lives of Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald could provide material for a popular movie. An early version of the 1935 film, *The Wedding Night*, with Gary Cooper and Helen Vinson, and featuring Anna Sten, was known as "Broken Soil," and it was based on their lives – indeed their names are Scott Fitzpatrick and Zelda; the author in the screenplay has as his publisher Scribners, and his first book is titled *This Side of Heaven*. As Margolies tells us, both Knopf and Vidor knew Fitzgerald from the late 1920s into the 1930s, and although the filmed version differs from the early screenplay, there is still some resemblance to the famous couple (Margolies, "F. Scott Fitzgerald and *The Wedding Night*," 224–5). The story of Fitzgerald and Hollywood has been told many times, including Fitzgerald's allusions to movies in many fictional works. But that the Fitzgeralds as a couple would themselves become the subject of popular films – in their own time and years later – is another illustration of their absorption into American popular culture.

Fitzgerald was aware that he was no longer a literary or public celebrity in the 1930s, although brief items about the Fitzgeralds' several moves in the early thirties found their way into mostly local newspapers. He was deeply concerned about his reputation both as popular and serious writer, desperate for the public attention that had attended him so devotedly a decade earlier. As Scott Donaldson has suggested, *The Crack-Up* essays were in part public confession, in part an effort to recast his private life into a public image with which readers who might have forgotten him could identify (Donaldson, "The Crisis of Fitzgerald's 'Crack-Up'"). Letter after painful letter to Zelda, to Perkins, to Ober attempt to explain the public's neglect. On the one hand, he would tell Zelda, in 1940, that "a whole new generation grew up in the meanwhile to whom I was only a writer of Post stories" (*Life in Letters*, 466), and on the other, in the same year, he would

tell her of a “new idea . . . a comedy series which will get me back into the big magazines – but my God I am a forgotten man” (*Life in Letters*, 439). To Perkins, he would write, “But to die, so completely and unjustly after having given so much” (*Life in Letters*, 445). He is mourning, of course, his neglect as a serious writer, but again, he is looking for any way back into public favor – even taking the route of the “commercial” stuff he claimed had destroyed his reputation. In his last letters, he frequently linked the public image of the Fitzgeralds with the unaccountable public neglect. He wrote to Zelda in 1940, “It was partly that times changed, editors changed, but part of it was tied up somehow with you and me – the happy ending” (*Life in Letters*, 467, 469).

Both the Fitzgeralds were largely forgotten in the 1930s, save for brief newspaper accounts of the 1934 exhibition of her paintings. As one biographer has noted, “The press was less interested in the work than in the resurrection of a legendary figure from the Jazz Age” (Mellow, *Invented Lives*, 427), and photographs of Zelda in *Time* magazine were not flattering. Accounts of the exhibition all noted that Zelda had been released from a mental institution to attend the opening.

And Scott Fitzgerald’s brush with the press in the 1930s took the form of the notorious interview with the *New York Post*’s Michel Mok in 1936, who established the picture of the writer that would remain with the public for years to come: a foolish, drunken failure whose degradation was matched only by that of his mad, suicidal wife. Anthony Powell, meeting Fitzgerald in 1937, noted, “It was almost as if he were already dead; at best risen from the dead, and of somewhat doubtful survival value” (Dardis, *Some Time in the Sun*, 3). Powell was then surprised to discover that the mythical failure was very much alive, sober, and anything but the broken man he and the few who still recalled the writer expected. Even Sheilah Graham, who was to create a new public Fitzgerald mythology for later generations, remembered him at their first meeting only as a figure out of the past:

I thought, he’s the writer of the gay twenties, of flaming youth, of bobbed hair and short skirts and crazy drinking – the jazz age. I had even made use of his name: in SHEILAH GRAHAM SAYS when I wanted to chide women for silly behavior, I described them as passé, as old-fashioned F. Scott Fitzgerald types, though I had never read anything he wrote. (Graham, *Beloved Infidel*, 174)

Ironically, Fitzgerald was to spend the most memorable days of his last years with one of that great public who knew him only by his popular reputation, one who had never read his books.

It is now part of the legend that when Fitzgerald died in 1940, he was remembered as “the best chronicler of a short and parochial chapter in

American history,” “part and parcel of the twenties,” who “dramatized an American state of mind, wild and reckless, and when it petered out, as much from emptiness as anything else, he, too, petered out – tragically and completely” (Bryer, *Critical Reputation*, 202–4). His genius was trivialized in the *New York Times*, which described his “real talent which never fully bloomed” (Brucoli and Bryer, *In His Own Time*, 469). Friends of Fitzgerald paid tribute to the forgotten author in a special edition of the *New Republic* (February 17, 1941), remembering him fondly, with Glenway Wescott, as “a kind of king of our American youth” in the 1920s (Kazin, *F. Scott Fitzgerald: The Man and His Work*, 116). Budd Schulberg, reminiscing in the same issue, connected Fitzgerald’s rise and fall to the massive social upheavals of his era (one of the first of many attempts to connect Fitzgerald’s life to American history): “My generation thought of F. Scott Fitzgerald as an age rather than as a writer, and when the economic strike of 1929 began to change the sheiks and flappers into unemployed boys or underpaid girls, we consciously and a little belligerently turned our backs on Fitzgerald” (Kazin, *The Man and His Work*, 110). Fitzgerald finally achieved in death a new, if smaller public life, as our American failure – and the legend of Fitzgerald, the failure – would haunt the second stage of Fitzgerald’s life in popular culture. By the 1950s, not only would the public meet the failed alcoholic writer, but they would be reintroduced to his wife, now a pathetic madwoman whose life had literally gone up in flames.

The Fitzgerald revival in the 1950s

The Fitzgerald revival in the 1950s was inaugurated by Budd Schulberg’s best-selling novel, *The Disenchanted* (1950), a thinly veiled portrait of Fitzgerald as a failed alcoholic has-been writer, Manley Halliday, who accompanies a young man – like Schulberg himself – to a college winter carnival to write a screenplay. The book was a huge success, and was followed almost immediately by Arthur Mizener’s scholarly biography, *The Far Side of Paradise* (1951). Schulberg and Mizener were in close contact, and much of the material in the Mizener book about the Hollywood years was in fact the product of a Mizener–Schulberg collaboration which Sheilah Graham felt it necessary to correct in both *Beloved Infidel* (1958) and in *The Rest of the Story* (1964). Schulberg was happy then, and has been since, that the “one-two punch” of these books “brought to Scott . . . the new generation of readers, admirers, and enthusiastic critics he had been hoping for in vain throughout the thirties” (Schulberg, *Four Seasons*, 140), and indeed, Schulberg has been actively involved in contemporary tributes and conferences devoted to Fitzgerald.

The Schulberg and Mizener books stressed Fitzgerald's great success and equally stunning failure, and they stimulated ruminations among scholars and journalists about the price of success and failure in America. Indeed, America in the 1950s was embarking on a postwar period of expansion; as in Fitzgerald's own youth, life seemed to be starting all over again as if we could put behind us the traumas of a war, the dropping of the atomic bomb, and the revelations of the Holocaust. New York City was once again a magnet that drew young writers and artists. (Dan Wakefield has recently compared his youthful days as a writer in New York with Fitzgerald's in *New York in the Fifties*, [1992]). Treatises on the lonely crowd and the man in the gray flannel suit led to speculation on the meaning as well as the price of success in America. Undoubtedly, as Malcolm Cowley has suggested, Fitzgerald's "was a story that appealed to something deep in the American psyche" (Cowley, "The Fitzgerald Revival," 12). For Americans, he suggests, the words "success" and "failure" had always been weighted, the question "Will I be a success?" giving way to "Mightn't it be better to be a failure, that is, to fall from some dizzy height and yet in the end to be better than those who kept on rising?" By 1950 Scott and Zelda had become "the hero and heroine of an American legend" (Cowley, "The Fitzgerald Revival," 12). Leslie Fiedler's 1951 essay, "Some Notes on F. Scott Fitzgerald" (Fiedler, *An End to Innocence*, 174–82), was written during the revival spurred by the Schulberg and Mizener books, and he asked why we had seized on Fitzgerald as a great writer. Discounting, as too many of the popular sociologists and psychologists of the era consistently did, the brilliance of the writing, Fiedler attributes the revival to nostalgia for the 1920s, but beyond everything else the seduction of his failure for the American public. Quoting Schulberg's line, "Nothing fails like success," he feels that for American artists, whose prototype was Poe, "Nothing succeeds like failure," that "Fitzgerald *willed* his role as a failure" (176). Fiedler links Fitzgerald's failure to his great flaw, alcoholism, decries the author's penchant for "composing himself," and concludes, "when the lives of Scott and Zelda are forgotten, or when they have become merely chronologies without the legendary distortions and pathos, his books will be less rewarding" (178). The words "success" and "failure" in the 1950s would become associated with Fitzgerald as with no other American writer. In his recent book on Fitzgerald and Hemingway, Matthew Bruccoli quotes from "Prince" Michael Romanoff, whose description of Fitzgerald in Lillian Ross's 1950 *New Yorker* article became the popular starting point for a discussion of Fitzgerald in the 1950s: "Scott Fitzgerald was a failure as a success – and a failure as a failure" (Bruccoli, *Fitzgerald and Hemingway*, 7). Unquestionably, the Schulberg and Mizener books forced that legend into popular culture mythology, while at the same time, writers

like J. D. Salinger and Dan Wakefield were responding to the words behind the image. And I should mention here that the revelations by Mizener about Zelda Fitzgerald's insanity and death served both to keep her image alive and to enhance the mythology of Fitzgerald's all too public rise, fall, and posthumous resurrection.

Schulberg's *The Disenchanted* introduced the subject of glamorized failure, in the scene when Manley Halliday is dying and thinks, "Take it from me, baby, in America nothing fails like success" (388), and Halliday is the consummate American failure. In the 1950s and subsequently, Schulberg stated that Halliday was a composite of many writers he knew (particularly with regard to popular culture – "unlike my Manley Halliday . . . Scott was quite the opposite of a film snob," [*Four Seasons*, 97]), but the book was so superficially accurate that readers and reviewers accepted it as a barely fictionalized account of Fitzgerald's last years. It was a bestseller, and brought Fitzgerald's name back into the arena of popular culture.⁵ Author James M. Cain praised the novel in the *New York Times*, while disparaging Fitzgerald's artistry. However, Alfred Kazin in the *New Yorker* (November 4, 1950) perhaps spoke for many writers and scholars when he challenged Schulberg's portrait: "Schulberg pities Fitzgerald, but he does not really approve of him, with that approval which starts from creative sympathy and understanding. That is the trouble with the book all along." Burke Wilkinson's laudatory essay in the *New York Times Book Review* (December 24, 1950) surveyed the writer's career and hailed Schulberg's book for reintroducing Fitzgerald to the American reading public. But *The Disenchanted* and the Mizener biography also spawned new criticism of the Fitzgeralds' lives, as in the *New Leader* (March 12, 1951), which intoned, "The secret of the problem of F. Scott Fitzgerald is that the author and his wife actually believed that money could buy happiness" (Bryer, *The Critical Reputation*, 219).

One of the more interesting contributors to the popular Fitzgerald mythology in the 1950s was his old friend, Ernest Hemingway. In January 1951, *Life* magazine ran an article on the Mizener biography, which was being serialized in the *Atlantic*, and included five pages of photographs of pages from Fitzgerald's scrapbooks. Hemingway was outraged by the captions and headings which the *Life* editors wrote, particularly the subheading, "The rediscovered novelist of the 20s was beset by drink, debt, a mad wife" (quoted in Brucoli, *Fitzgerald and Hemingway*, 219). Hemingway's anger at the article which criticized writers and artists of the twenties, although it did not mention him, led him to write to Harvey Breit of the *New York Times Book Review* and to Malcolm Cowley castigating the "Schulberg–Mizener axis" (Brucoli, *Fitzgerald and Hemingway*, 222). Publicly, he responded only by citing as among six titles he would like to have read had they

been published, “*Longevity Pays: The Life of Arthur Mizener* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, and *The Schulberg Incident* by F. Scott Fitzgerald” (Brucoli, *Fitzgerald and Hemingway*, 222). Whatever outrage Hemingway might have felt at the time, it did not prevent him from adding to the public mythology of Fitzgerald the failure. Whatever Hemingway’s motives,⁶ his portrait of Fitzgerald, very precise, and very damning, particularly the last line of the description, “The mouth worried you until you knew him and then it worried you more” (Brucoli, *Fitzgerald and Hemingway*, 149), fed into the image of Fitzgerald created by Mizener and Schulberg. And because those memories of Fitzgerald were published in *Life* (April 10, 1964), they were assured a wide readership. Hemingway’s dislike and distrust of Zelda Fitzgerald, whom he described as “more jealous of [Scott’s] work than anything” (Brucoli, *Fitzgerald and Hemingway*, 183), as well as Hemingway’s conviction that he knew she was crazy at the outset, enhanced her image as one of the prime causes of Fitzgerald’s failure. As if that were not sufficient to garner public attention, Hemingway’s remarks about the size of Fitzgerald’s male organ generated a very public debate in the pages of *Esquire* (December 1966, 188). Entitled “Scott, Ernest and Whoever,” it was an unprecedented controversy to which *Esquire* editor, Arnold Gingrich, and Sheilah Graham added their perspectives. *Getting Straight* certainly indicates the extent to which the debate had become part of Fitzgerald’s popular culture persona. One of the first plays on the friendship between Fitzgerald and Hemingway, *Before I Wake*, opened at the Greenwich Mews Theater on October 13, 1968. Ninety-five percent of the dialogue was drawn from the letters between the two writers and to others commenting on each other. Both writers were now in the public domain.

In 1958, the dramatic version of *The Disenchanted* opened on Broadway to generally excellent reviews (December 3, 1958, Coronet Theater). Again, the Fitzgerald-as-failure story became public entertainment; critics described it as “the story of the waning life and ebbing faculties of F. Scott Fitzgerald” (John Chapman, *Daily News*, December 4, 1958); or “He and his wife led a gay life. He made money fast, and she spent it faster. Eventually, both were broken physically” (Robert Coleman, *Daily Mirror*, December 4, 1958); or “the destruction of a writer haunted by the past, possessed by the demons of the present, weary, disillusioned, overwhelmed on every side by the practical realities that he has never faced” (Brooks Atkinson, *New York Times*, December 4, 1958). But the film version was never made, largely as the result of efforts by Sheilah Graham and Scottie Fitzgerald, who threatened legal action (Graham, *Rest of the Story*, 14). (Schulberg has indicated that he and Graham, after a long misunderstanding, reviewed the events which she had challenged and mended fences [*Four Seasons*, 122].)⁷

Sheilah Graham's book, *Beloved Infidel* (1958), a genuinely moving account of Fitzgerald's last years with her, attempted to offer a corrective to the Schulberg–Mizener version of that period, and to tell the public about their love. It too became a bestseller, and was made into a 1959 Cinemascope film which Schulberg describes as “just as screwed up as *Winter Carnival*” (*Four Seasons*, 142). Articles by Frances Ring (1959) and Budd Schulberg (1962) in *Esquire* responded to public fascination with Fitzgerald's Hollywood years, and Calvin Tompkins's well-received *Living Well Is the Best Revenge* (1971) shed light on the Fitzgeralds' sojourns on the French Riviera with Gerald and Sara Murphy. Andrew Turnbull's 1962 sympathetic biography of Fitzgerald was widely reviewed throughout the United States and became a bestseller. Although it was a warm response to Turnbull's boyhood friendship with the author, it did little to dispel the contemporary popular view of the author.

Perhaps the best contemporary view of the Fitzgeralds as they appeared to the American public in these years is that of Wakefield, who recalls meeting a friend accompanied by a girl identified as “Zelda.” It was not her name but “she could have passed for a twenties flapper that night. She loved the legend surrounding Zelda and Scott Fitzgerald, our generation's idols of literary glamor and doom” (*New York in the Fifties*, 39–40). In the seventies, both the glamor and the doom would be held up to new scrutiny as the scholarly world joined the media marketplace to create a new image of Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald that has persisted to the present.

The revisionists: 1970 to the present

Public perception generally lags behind that of critics and scholars. During the early 1970s, the influence of Hemingway's and of Sheilah Graham's revelations shaped the popular culture images of the Fitzgeralds, even though Nancy Milford's revisionist biography, *Zelda*, was published in 1970, creating a new interpretation of the couple which has lasted until the present. Thus, the early 1970s television dramatization of their lives on ABC-TV with Jason Miller and Tuesday Weld presented the story of the Fitzgeralds and of Sheilah Graham according to the accepted biographies of the 1960s. Nancy Milford's frankly feminist book drew upon new material to cast Zelda in the light of an artist whose talents were thwarted by her husband, who was fearful that she would use material drawn from their lives together that properly belonged to him as the established writer and financial support of the family. In her introduction, she proclaims her emotional involvement with her subject: “Reading Zelda's letters to her husband moved me in a way I had never been moved before” (xiii). (I might add here that one might be equally moved by *his* letters to her and others, revealing his desperation about earning

enough to support her and their daughter, and by Sheilah Graham's memoir of her desperate efforts to save his life and work.) Milford paints Zelda as "the American girl living the American dream," who "became mad with it" (xiv). Milford passes quickly over the many mental illnesses in the Sayre family, choosing to stress Zelda's relationship with Scott as the chief contributor to her breakdown, although she does provide sufficient instances of Zelda's youthful bizarre escapades to raise questions about her mental and emotional balance. Unfortunately, she relies upon Sara Mayfield's biased memories (later appearing in Mayfield's *Exiles From Paradise*) which recall Zelda as not mentally ill (for her, Scott was the unbalanced one), and as the true genius of the family. Milford's book appeared at a crucial period for women in America, indeed, at the beginning of the women's movement, which needed heroines, particularly women whose creativity had been stifled by a patriarchal society. What figure better fits that paradigm than Zelda Fitzgerald, and what better male oppressor than F. Scott Fitzgerald? Scottie Fitzgerald Smith perhaps put it best in her comment on the phenomenon of her mother's new status in life and letters:

I was surprised when Women's Lib finally became part of our national consciousness to find that my mother was considered by many to be one of the more flamboyant symbols of the movement. To a new generation, the generation of her grandchildren, she was the classic "put down" wife, whose efforts to express her artistic nature were thwarted by a typically male chauvinist husband . . . Finally in a sort of ultimate rebellion, she withdrew altogether from the arena; it's a script that reads well and will probably remain a part of the "Scott and Zelda" mythology forever, but is not, in my opinion, accurate. (Preface, *Zelda Fitzgerald, The Collected Writings*, v)

Scottie was correct, of course, for to the revisionists, Zelda was a literary talent of the first rank. Mary Gordon sees her work as a *Bildungsroman*, "a female self coming to maturity in the age of the flapper" (Gordon, Introduction, *Zelda Fitzgerald, The Collected Writings*, xxi). Gordon sides with Zelda in her accusations against her husband, and advises that we should apply new criteria to Zelda's writing, "discarding the notion that the formal, finished and pared down is aesthetically superior to the associative and fragmentary" (xvii), that we give a more "open" reading to her work, "to make a place for the 'You see what I means,' and the 'Can't you understands'" (xvii). Feminist critics have been unwilling to look at the Fitzgeralds' troubled relationship from both perspectives: he *had* to support his family; he was the professional writer; he had been working on *Tender is the Night* for years (interrupted by his having to earn money to pay for her care), and was understandably disturbed by her use of the same material for her book. They