

Introduction
F. Scott Fitzgerald: “A Writer Only”
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F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896–1940) lived in hopes of becoming a biographer’s subject – that came with being an important author, and during even the most desperate phases of his twenty-year career, he believed he was an important author. His eventful, legendary, sometimes inspiring and sometimes harrowing life story, forever linked with that of his flamboyant and tragic partner Zelda (née Sayre), ultimately made for several biographies, the first, Arthur Mizener’s *The Far Side of Paradise* (1951), appearing just over a decade after his death, and the most recent appearing in 2017, David S. Brown’s *Paradise Lost: A Life of F. Scott Fitzgerald*. If we can imagine him irritated by the emphases and invasive revelations (or speculations) of some of them, we can as readily imagine him pleased overall by the best of them, including Brown’s. This despite the aphorism in his notebook that “[t]here never was a good biography of a good novelist. There couldn’t be. He is too many people if he’s any good” (*Notebooks* 159). Fitzgerald seems to have meant that good novelists multiply themselves in the course of imagining then sympathetically inhabiting others and thus end up thoroughly diffused in the many fictional characters that live on under their names. Or to put this in a way that accords with one of Fitzgerald’s favorite writers, Marcel Proust, the “real” novelist must be sought in the writing – in the inimitable style, thematic compulsions, and various characters of the stories and novels – and not in the historically accidental, socially recognized person, in this case born and raised (for the most part) in St. Paul, Minnesota, educated at elite Eastern schools, and whose literary career took him from New York to the Riviera and Paris and ultimately to Los Angeles, where he died suddenly at the age of forty-four. But Fitzgerald the man lived the life of a writer in a notoriously self-dramatizing way, and his penchant for self-dramatization aligned with some of the dominant cultural tendencies of his time.

Fitzgerald hitched his wagon in particular to a rising American celebrity culture, as Ruth Prigozy emphasized in her excellent introduction to the

first *Cambridge Companion to F. Scott Fitzgerald* published two decades ago.¹ Increasingly ubiquitous new media like the movies and radio did much, of course, to transform performing artists into “stars,” but they could not have done so without popular print vehicles, “the daily press, in feature stories, news articles (public relations pieces), photos and gossip columns, and the popular magazines with their lavish illustrations” that could also make writers famous.² Scott and Zelda, the Southern belle he married in New York City a week after publishing his first novel, *This Side of Paradise*, in the spring of 1920, took full advantage of such journalistic opportunities to craft their everlasting image as an attractive, flamboyant, irreverent, urbane young couple whose sudden fame and fortune heralded a postwar era of American prosperity and possibility unencumbered by whatever remained of its Victorian moral order and residual genteel culture. It helped that *This Side of Paradise* owed its surprise success to the chord Fitzgerald struck with contemporary youth (however partially represented in the novel by a handful of Princetonians and a few spoiled debutantes) – “a new generation dedicated more than the last to the fear of poverty and the worship of success; grown up to find all Gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken” (*TSP* 260).

Looking back on the decade he retroactively dubbed “the jazz age,” Fitzgerald recalled fondly that “it bore him up, flattered him and gave him more money than he had dreamed of, simply for telling people that he felt as they did, that something had to be done with all the nervous energy stored up and unexpended in the War” (*MLC* 130). His “early success” – demonstrably figured in the jump from earning \$800 from his writing in 1919 to \$18,000 in 1920 – gave him “the conviction that life is a romantic matter” (*MLC* 189, 190). He was suddenly receiving hundreds of fan letters for his *Saturday Evening Post* story “Bernice Bobs Her Hair” (1920), and he happily assumed the new role foisted upon him, that of “the Author” instead of “the Lieutenant.” And then a bit more disingenuously he writes, “of course one wasn’t really an author any more than one had been an army officer, but nobody seemed to guess behind the false face.” How could they guess, when “the presses were pounding out ‘This Side of Paradise’ like they pound out extras in movies” (*MLC* 188)? The motif of opportunely performing as a celebrity author was expected to perform recurs in his reminiscences:

For just a moment, before it was demonstrated that I was unable to play the role, I, who knew less of New York than any reporter of six months’ standing and less of its society than any hall-room boy in a Ritz stag line, was pushed into the position not only of spokesman for the time but of the

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typical product of that same moment. I, or rather it was ‘we’ now [he and Zelda], 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 and we were quoted on a variety of subjects we knew nothing about. (*MLC* 109–110)

The citations above are from some of Fitzgerald’s great essays from the 1930s: “Echoes of the Jazz Age” (1931), “Early Success” (1937), and “My Lost City” (written 1935, published posthumously). They exemplify that effort, as Prigozy put it, “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”; but even during his more extravagant years, “Fitzgerald would consistently remind readers that he was a serious writer.”³ This insistence on his literary seriousness, though, was as much a way of performing the role of “Author” as were the more outlandish, sophomoric advertisements for himself meant to consolidate his arrival on the literary scene, such as “The Author’s Apology” inserted into the third printing (within a month of the first) of *This Side of Paradise*. There, under the staid photograph of the recent Ivy Leaguer, Fitzgerald admits to the novel being autobiographical (meaning he did indeed drink “all the cocktails mentioned” in it) and written in but three months as “a substitute form of dissipation,” while also offering his “whole theory of writing” in one pithy sentence: namely, that “an author ought to write for the youth of his own generation, the critics of the next, and the schoolmasters of ever afterward” (*IHOT* 164). The haunted, barely resuscitated author of the later confessional essay “The Crack-Up” (1936) was presumably shedding himself of all the extraneous baggage he had accumulated from his celebrity reputation when he declared himself from now on “a writer only” (*MLC* 153), poised to carve out a purer and lonelier path for himself. But “The Crack-Up” was one of his most scandalous performances.

His succinct three-part portrait of his own damnation in that essay worked as a non-fictional variation on a theme he tended to turn to in his more “serious” vein. He began capturing the dark side of his and Zelda’s glamorous public image as soon as it became current, giving his second novel, published only two years after his first, a title that has ultimately best encapsulated the Fitzgerald legend: *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922). And if that novel might strike us today – as it seems to have struck Fitzgerald after he published it – as pretentiously pessimistic, meant to impress H. L. Mencken, then one of the leading American literary critics,

it offered an early glimpse of a tragic theme harbored by the popular author of *Saturday Evening Post* stories about love and courtship among young, rich, and beautiful Americans: the dissipation and self-destruction, let alone disillusionment, imminent in early success – whether amorous or vocational or both. That theme would inform his most ambitious novel, *Tender Is the Night* (1934), when he had his years of reckless alcoholism and Zelda’s mental illness to draw on. He had, of course, another serious theme close to his heart: the class barriers affecting the dynamics of love and courtship in the United States. He would later tell a correspondent that being “a poor boy in a rich boy’s school; a poor boy in rich man’s club at Princeton” was one of his formative experiences, as a result of which, he added, “I have never been able to forgive the rich for being rich, and it has colored my entire life and works” (LL 352). He was least able to forgive the rich boy’s prerogative when it came to desirable women such as his first serious crush Ginevra King, whose father presumably conveyed the message that “poor boys shouldn’t think of marrying rich girls.”⁴ He drew in part on this painful experience to write *The Great Gatsby* (1925), the novel for which he is best remembered and that is widely considered one of America’s greatest.

How does one imagine Fitzgerald as “a writer only”? – writing without regard for what we might call the perks of authorship, or the kind of social capital fame might provide with which to win the girl (Zelda changed her mind about rejecting him after his first book was accepted), impress “elite” critical tastemakers like Mencken, and, last but not least, make a lot of money (which he notoriously spent faster than he earned). How does one distill the purer writer from the man whose colorful and in some ways cautionary life seems to have been partly determined by the sense gained from his early success that writing could be a viable and lucrative career?

A writer generally assumed to bear a deeply autobiographical connection to his “material,” as he called it in his unpublished 1934 introduction to *The Great Gatsby* (GG 265), Fitzgerald left us no novel with a literary artist as hero – nothing, for example, like James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) or Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice* (1912; translated 1924), works he expressly admired. In *This Side of Paradise* and *The Beautiful and Damned*, his respective heroes Amory Blaine and Anthony Patch have artistic temperaments without the talent or discipline to produce anything. Nick Carraway, the narrator of *The Great Gatsby*, presents himself at one point as *writing* the brilliant novel we’re reading (GG 68) but not *as a writer* intent on writing a brilliant novel. Safely returned to his relatively wealthy Midwestern family home, Nick is writing as an amateur

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(recalling that he “was rather literary in college” [GG 5]) and seems to be doing so for therapy, taking stock of his disastrous summer in the East and investing it with transformative, consolatory meaning. In *Tender Is the Night*, Dick Diver is a writer-genius of sorts, but displaced onto the figure of a pioneering psychiatrist. The same could be said of Monroe Stahr, the visionary Hollywood producer of *The Last Tycoon* (1941), the novel Fitzgerald was working on when he died. Actual writers though – meaning generally successful, published novelists like himself – appear in Fitzgerald’s novels in unflattering guises: Richard Caramel in *The Beautiful and Damned*, Albert McKisco in *Tender Is the Night*, to a less damning extent the screenwriter Wylie White in *The Last Tycoon*. (Celia Brady, like Nick Carraway, is another non-writer who seems to be “writing” *The Last Tycoon* – or at least most of it – after a breakdown of sorts.)

Fitzgerald gave us probably his truest self-portrait of the artist as a young man in “The Captured Shadow” (1928), one of the Basil Duke Lee stories – and the portrait is of no precious, culturally rebellious aesthete like Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus. Fifteen-year-old Midwesterner Basil returns home late from seeing a play, which more than anything else inspires him to write a play. He gets an extra boost of motivation by staring at a piece of sheet music,

the colored cover of a song from “The Midnight Sons.” It showed three men in evening clothes and opera hats sauntering jovially along Broadway against the blazing background of Times Square.

Basil would have denied incredulously the suggestion that that was currently his favorite work of art. But it was. (SSFSF 413)

He takes out his composition book, in which alongside an aborted list of conjugated French verbs are the aborted beginnings of a musical comedy (“Mr. Washington Square”) and a “hilarious farce in one act” called “Hic! Hic! Hic!” (SSFSF 413–14), retrospectively recalling Fitzgerald’s contributions as an older teenager to Princeton’s Triangle Club productions. He starts “THE CAPTURED SHADOW/ A Melodramatic Farce in Three Acts/by/ BASIL DUKE LEE” on a new page, and the late hours fly by as he fills the rest of the notebook. Of course, he’s working from contemporary Broadway models, as any provincial literary aspirant would be hard-pressed not to do:

There had been a season of “crook comedies” in New York, and the feel, the swing, the exact and vivid image of the two he had seen, were in the foreground of his mind. At the time they had been enormously suggestive, opening out into a world much larger and more brilliant than themselves that existed outside their windows and beyond their doors, and it was this suggested world rather than any conscious desire to imitate “Officer 666,” that had inspired the effort before him. (SSFSF 415, 416)

He takes out a new tablet to start Act II, he lifts a joke or two from “an old Treasury of Wit and Humor,” he suddenly discovers he’s been up all night and worries about incipient madness, and finally, with “the whole next scene in his head,” he gets into bed and writes for one more hour (*SSFSF* 416). Fitzgerald himself wrote, produced, and acted in a play called “The Captured Shadow” in his hometown of St. Paul, Minnesota, when he was fifteen. The precocious amateur who would make his name for real eight years later was a writer self-schooled in contemporary, popular American culture – “the feel, the swing, the exact and vivid image” of what was captivating audiences, first in New York City and then, by a kind of imperial extension, in the American provinces.

Fitzgerald’s literary ambition was partly nourished by the appeal of Broadway, just as his actual career would be partly sustained by the promises of Hollywood. Given the temptations of fame and, more obviously, the money that popular magazine stories, theatrical adaptations, and movie sales (the biggest and quickest windfall) brought, a career as a literary writer meant being to a greater or lesser degree in the entertainment business. It’s telling that Fitzgerald’s most famous character, the gauchely nouveau riche Jay Gatsby, hosts movie people among the crowds who descend upon his “place’ that Broadway had begotten upon a Long Island fishing village” (*GG* 129). Broadway and the new motion picture industry’s star-making capacity run like a recurrent motif through Fitzgerald’s work, from *The Beautiful and Damned*, through the 1927 story “Jacob’s Ladder,” through *Tender Is the Night*, ultimately to *The Last Tycoon*. Certainly suggestive in relation to this future thematic preoccupation with American stardom is the self-styled “trademark” he sent to female correspondents while at Princeton: a cartoonish drawing of himself in blackface, or in one extant instance alternative cartoons, one with and one without the blackface, with the question beside them, “do I look like this or like this?” (see *Correspondence* 10–13). These are from 1915 and 1916, in the latter of which Al Jolson was crowned “America’s Greatest Entertainer,” thanks largely to his trademark blackface Broadway character “Gus.” Fitzgerald’s reference twenty years later to the “false face” he wore during the heady days of his early celebrity (*MLC* 188) uncannily recalls the black face of his budding ambition, which entailed a bid for (women’s) attention and thus the hope of winning fame, but also his identification with what was popular, fun, and racy in contemporary urban American culture.

There is an obvious historical reason why Fitzgerald could figure the American popular entertainment of his moment as racially other: It was demonstrably open to racial outsiders (class interlopers by definition).

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The Jazz Age owed much of its music and its most memorable dances to African American artists. Some of its most famous composers like Irving Berlin and George Gershwin, as well as Jolson, one of its biggest stars, were first- or second-generation Jewish immigrants who appropriated African American expressive forms to create their distinctly American art. First- or second-generation Jewish immigrants were also establishing the movie business, first on the East Coast and then in Hollywood. And that business was turning other immigrants into stars, one of the biggest being the Italian-born Rudolph Valentino, who became a national sex symbol after starring in the 1921 movie *The Sheik* – which inspired the popular song “The Sheik of Araby,” overheard at a revealing moment in *The Great Gatsby* (*GG* 94). This was all part of the cultural air Fitzgerald breathed, and he was happy to be part of this exciting moment when American culture – its movies, its music, its dances, its fads and fashions, its speakeasies and cabarets, its very language, and, of course, its ostensibly easy money – was gaining world ascendancy. But Fitzgerald also cast an aspect of his literary ambition apart from all this, or at least at an ironic distance from it: Much of this culture was ephemeral in ways that great literature transcended. While buoyed by a moment when modern American literature seemed poised to flourish at home and abroad, being a “great” writer for Fitzgerald meant ultimately ranking alongside the English Romantic poets (Keats was emphatically his favorite), the great nineteenth-century novelists (Thackeray and Dickens as much as Flaubert), and those looming contemporaries like Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, Marcel Proust, and Gertrude Stein whom we sometimes capitalize as “the Modernists.”

Fitzgerald may have privately mused that a good novelist was too many people, but publicly he tended to present himself (or fictional surrogates) as divided in two, with the self-portrait and its blackface counterpart an early, rather glaring instance of this. The white man with a respectable pedigree stands divided from the “other” figure immersed in the subversive, performative, glittery, and shamelessly commercial culture of the moment – just as years later, Nick Carraway stands apart from, yet is so drawn to, “the great Gatsby,” the mysterious neighbor who has invented a false face for himself, so to speak, in “the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty” (*GG* 118). One of his earliest short stories, “The Offshore Pirate” (1920), offers a paradigmatic glimpse of this trope of self-division when we discover that the daredevil hero of the story, Curtis Carlyle, supposed leader of the jazz band “Curtis Carlyle and His Six Black Buddies,” is really a securely rich boy, Toby Moreland, who has orchestrated an elaborate show to seduce the rebellious heroine, Ardita (see *SSFSF* 79–80,

95–96). Fitzgerald’s “point of vantage” as a writer, he would later say in “Early Success,” was “the dividing line between the two generations,” so that Janus-like he was both facing backward at the moral sureties of the last genteel generation and forward at a decadent Jazz Age generation coming after those like himself who came of age – and felt the breach from their elders – during the Great War. He could project his self-division in politically charged ethnic and regional terms, as when he wrote John O’Hara that he was “half black Irish and half old American stock with the usual exaggerated ancestral pretensions” – those latter stemming from Fitzgerald’s Southern paternal roots, which connected him to Francis Scott Key, author of “The Star-Spangled Banner.” His petit-bourgeois Irish roots (on his mother’s side), he conceded to O’Hara, were an obvious source of his “intense social self-consciousness” (*LL* 233), as they are supposedly a source of his hero Dick Diver’s fatal need to charm people. Late in life, finally, he wrote his daughter Scottie that he too was once inclined to follow “the footsteps of Cole Porter and Rodgers and Hart,” “but I guess I am too much a moralist at heart and really want to preach at people in some acceptable form rather than entertain them” (*Letters* 63).

For twenty-first-century readers, such culturally charged divisions – between the lighter and heavier Scott Fitzgerald, the entertainer and the moralist, the popular magazine story writer and the artier novelist – should no longer have much, if any, bearing on our approach to his work. Or if they do, we might locate a key source of Fitzgerald’s greatness, and the pleasures of reading him, in the ambivalent cultural position(s) he occupied, which fostered the unsettling ambiguity of his writing. He was morally ambivalent about American wealth and power: “Riches have *never* fascinated me,” he bluntly told Ernest Hemingway, “unless combined with the greatest charm or distinction” (*LL* 302). Like Henry James, he could put a premium on the charm and distinction with which riches might be combined, as in the early chapters of *Tender Is the Night*, which owe the most to his fondest memories of friends Gerald and Sara Murphy, the novel’s dedicatees. But in ways that compare favorably with James, he could also hone in on the baffling unhappiness wrought by wealth – as in his great story “The Rich Boy” (1926). And few have offered so comically fantastic a portrait of the sociopathic dimension to the American pursuit of wealth as Fitzgerald did in his early story “The Diamond as Big as the Ritz” (1922) (which not incidentally links monopoly capitalism with the fantasy of a restored antebellum Southern racial order).

Like Charlie Wales in “Babylon Revisited” (1931), Fitzgerald was also morally ambivalent about the Jazz Age excess he and Zelda came

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to epitomize. He concluded the essay that might serve as that story's companion, "Echoes of the Jazz Age," by acknowledging the return to belt-tightening and responsibility that a (divinely?) retributive economic depression necessitated and summoning with his contemporaries "the proper expression of horror as we look back on our wasted youth." "Sometimes, though," he continues – and through that qualifying *though* spill the remembered, regretted sensual particularities that cumulatively manifest Fitzgerald's signature vision and prose style –

there is a ghostly rumble among the drums, an asthmatic whisper in the trombones that swings me back into the early twenties when we drank wood alcohol and every day in every way grew better and better, and there was a first abortive shortening of skirts, and girls all looked alike in sweater dresses, and people you didn't want to know said "Yes, we have no bananas," and it seemed only a question of a few years before the older people would step aside and let the world be run by those who saw things as they were—and it all seems rosy and romantic to us who were young then, because we will never feel quite so intensely about our surroundings any more. (*MLC* 138)

Like Dick Diver in *Tender Is the Night*, he could harbor a political nostalgia for "an older America" represented by mothers visiting Europe to honor their fallen soldier sons and, more troublingly, his father's stories of Confederate war heroes; but also like Diver he leaned toward modernism and the experimental morality of postwar American expatriates, "the whole new world in which he believed" (*TIN* 116).

Finally, Fitzgerald occasionally expressed aesthetic ambivalence (infused with moral ambivalence) about art that came too easily, that could seem too "trick and trashy," in the words of the former shimmy dancer Marcia Tarbox (née Meadows) in his first *Saturday Evening Post* story, "Head and Shoulders" (*SSFSF* 20). But his disparagement of his own stories or caustic comments about the movies usually occurred at moments of frustration or crisis: His worry in "The Crack-Up" that the "mechanical and communal art" of the movies would displace the novel as an art form emerged at one of the lowest moments of his life and after the disappointing reception of *Tender Is the Night* (*MLC* 148). Had he not been justifiably proud, however, of many of his roughly 180 stories, he would not have so carefully selected them for four of his books.

The several comic reversals of "Head and Shoulders," the funniest being Marcia Tarbox's sudden ascent to literary fame after whipping off an autobiographical novel called "Sandra Pepys, Syncopated" (modern *American* literature with a vengeance!), should be enough to remind us of Fitzgerald's

great sense of humor. He showcases it in several passages of *The Beautiful and Damned* and *The Great Gatsby*, in most of his early stories and essays, and in his correspondence with friends and fellow writers. The satirical side of his work was widely recognized by early reviewers – and one wonders if *Gatsby* would have fared better commercially had Fitzgerald serialized it first, as he had considered doing, in the magazine *College Humor*. One might wonder even further how Fitzgerald’s career might have gone if *The Vegetable* (1923), the satirical extravaganza of a play he wrote and saw produced (disastrously) at the time he was conceiving *Gatsby*, had made it to Broadway and brought him the quick bundle he was banking on. Chances are good that he would have tried another play without relinquishing his story and novel writing – so his earnest if largely failed attempts at screenwriting later in his career would suggest. Chances are also good that the satirical vein in his first play might have given way as in his later fiction to a darker, crueller irony – perhaps most pathetically figured by Dick Diver’s loud interior laughter at the end of *Tender Is the Night* (TIN 351), as he accepts being cast away by the latest avatar of the Tom Buchanans, the Warren family. But the occasionally tendentious and genuinely pessimistic *Tender Is the Night* hardly sums up Fitzgerald’s vision as an artist. Post-*Tender*, Fitzgerald conceived of a strange medieval historical novel that didn’t get very far; tried out new stories series for the *Post*; wrote his greatest essays; wrote an increasingly appreciated series of almost comic-strip-like short stories about Pat Hobby, a Hollywood hack – another showcase for some great deadpan comedy; tried harder at screenwriting; and, of course, worked on the novel about Hollywood he hoped might restore his reputation to what it was when he published *The Great Gatsby*.

My point in all this is that Fitzgerald was an astonishingly prolific and versatile writer. We are fortunate now to have his substantial body of writing gathered into fifteen meticulously edited volumes in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of F. Scott Fitzgerald* (not including the three additional versions of *The Great Gatsby*: manuscript, galley version [*Trimalchio*], and variorum edition). Hopefully, readers learning more about Fitzgerald through this *Cambridge Companion* will be prompted to explore the fuller range of his work, discovering for themselves several literary gems besides *Gatsby* and *Tender* as well as more broadly an astutely observed record of American mores, American sensibilities, and the American language in action during the two decades between the world wars.

What is hardest to represent about Fitzgerald the “writer only,” of course, are the countless hours spent alone at his desk with pencil in hand filling up countless sheets of paper: imagining and inventing, sketching,