

Literary Influences

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F. Scott Fitzgerald declared to himself: “Great art is the contempt of a great man for small art” (*N* 162). His literary influences reflect that maxim, in that the writing he most admired and the work he most often adapted for his own fiction were of lasting quality. John Keats and Joseph Conrad are the most frequently cited of his literary exemplars. Fitzgerald’s art steadily evolved through each of his five novels, demonstrating how consciously he aspired for greatness and how assiduously he crafted his literary influences toward a distinctive personal style and particular structural and thematic aims. While Fitzgerald could be caustic about some of the publications of his contemporaries and offered specific reasons for their failings in his critiques,¹ he was just as often an enthusiastic advocate of those among his fellow writers who had broken new ground in ways that further stretched and enhanced the canon. The novelist demanded excellence and a sense of legacy from his fellow writers (and critical understanding from his readers, beyond those “curious children nosed at the slime of Mr. Tiffany Thayer in the drug-store libraries” [*MLC* 148]). John Dos Passos and Archibald MacLeish, among others, testified to his acuity in matters of technique and narrative structure, and Ernest Hemingway benefited from his advice on drafts of both *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms*.² Fitzgerald’s conception of his place in literary history was announced early on, in his first successful short story, “Tarquin of Cheapside,” with its clever revelation about a young William Shakespeare.³ Frances Kroll Ring’s memoir includes this supportive comment: “His hope was to attain a measure of immortality in the literary world and that stubborn objective repeated itself throughout his lifetime.”⁴ Lionel Trilling also emphasizes the reach of Fitzgerald’s ambition: “[H]e put himself, in all modesty, in the line of greatness, he judged himself in a large way.”⁵ “My whole theory of writing,” Fitzgerald wrote in May 1920, “I can sum up in one sentence: An author ought to write for the youth of his own generation, the critics of the next, and the schoolmasters of ever afterward.”⁶ The statement is both

callow and perceptive, for Fitzgerald was highly conscious of the permanent mark he might make, and he was a confident critic of the American writers of his generation; only two others, Hemingway and Thomas Wolfe, did he consider his rivals. Instead, Fitzgerald looked mainly toward England and its literary tradition when he envisioned his career. However, applying Harold Bloom's conception of literary influence does not sit particularly well in Fitzgerald's case. Bloom argues from a long history of English poetry and prose that authors engage in "creative misreading" of their literary predecessors in order to unlock new technical paradigms and achieve canonical ascendancy.⁷ The dominant feeling that emerges from Fitzgerald's comments on literary artists is that he was a novelist striving to enter the guild of prestigious authors. Nevertheless, in comparing himself with and utilizing the lessons from other writers, Fitzgerald most often employed creative reading, not so much to argue with or denigrate the work of others but to capture the most useful elements of their craft, apply it to his own plans, and discard or avoid influences that no longer served his purposes.

The emergence of Fitzgerald's distinctive balance of romantic lyricism and realist determinism can be traced to foundational sources in poetry and prose. Fitzgerald thought of his reading as both career- and character-forming, stating, "one's first influences are largely literary but the point where the personal note emerges *can* come very young (*vidé* Keats)" (L 593). Keats provided him with a touchstone, a model for a controlled romantic style and thematic juxtapositions of the imaginary and the real. The poet also demonstrated how, as André Le Vot explains, the writer's presence in the world could be affirmed through language that is sumptuous and musical as well as focused on ideas.⁸ Fitzgerald's love for Romantic poetry was instilled in him during his childhood, when his father would recite to him from Byron's *The Prisoner of Chillon*. At Princeton he was unimpressed by his poetry tutors, but he spent months intensely discussing Wordsworth, Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Keats with his Princeton classmate John Peale Bishop, who would be characterized in *This Side of Paradise* and epigraphed in *The Great Gatsby* as Thomas Parke D'Invilliers. "You need, at the beginning, some enthusiast who also knows his way around," he wrote to his daughter, Scottie, while she was beginning her undergraduate courses at Vassar, "– John Peale Bishop performed that office for me at Princeton." He elaborated on his ideas about poetry to Scottie in this way:

Poetry is either something that lives like fire in you ... or else it is nothing, an empty formalized bore around which pedants can endlessly drone their notes

and explanations. The Grecian Urn is unbearably beautiful with every syllable as inevitable as the notes in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony or it's just something you don't understand . . . Likewise with The Nightingale which I can never read through without tears in my eyes; . . . and The Eve of St. Agnes, which has the richest, most sensuous imagery in English, not excepting Shakespeare. And finally his three of four great sonnets, Bright Star and the others.

Knowing those things very young and granted an ear, one could scarcely every afterwards be unable to distinguish between gold and dross in what one read. In themselves those eight poems are a scale of workmanship for anybody who wants to know truly about words, their most utter value for evocation, persuasion or charm. For awhile after you quit Keats all other poetry seems to be only whistling or humming. (LL 460)

The evaluation, written within the last five months of his life, reveals Fitzgerald's own artistic aims to evoke, persuade, and charm in his prose; to use lyricism pointedly within structural imagery and metaphor; to provoke readers to both feel and think. Creating something "unbearably beautiful" requires more than self-indulgent aestheticism; it demands a richer poignancy, associated with the losses and failures of life. Great writers, Fitzgerald implies, also need to discriminate between gold and dross in their own work by weighing it against the excellence of others.

Setting himself up against the youthful Romantic poets in his own early success, Fitzgerald also drew upon more contemporary sources, most of which he abandoned as he grew in confidence about his ability and as he developed the range of his material. Aestheticism flowed through his youthful reading of Wilde and Swinburne while the social reform literature of Wells and Shaw served as counterpoint. Compton Mackenzie's *Sinister Street* was an inspiration for a generation of American Ivy Leaguers, including Dos Passos at Harvard; certainly for the aspiring Fitzgerald the appeal of this narrative of Cambridge undergraduate life was embedded in the formation of *This Side of Paradise* (although "much more in intention than in literal fact," he later explained, adding that "my literary taste was so unformed that *Youth's Encounter* [*Sinister Street's* first volume in the American edition] was still my 'perfect book'" [L 468–69]). Booth Tarkington's novel *Seventeen* (1916) and Owen Johnson's *Stover at Yale* (1912) were also backdrops for his exuberant debut, with its vaudeville mixtures of form and technique. "I am a professed literary thief," he admitted in what was probably a self-penned newspaper interview shortly after the novel was published. Writing about style as "color," Fitzgerald announced his intentions while revealing his admirations: "I want to be able to do anything with words: handle slashing, flaming descriptions like Wells, and use the paradox with the clarity of Samuel Butler, the breadth

of Bernard Shaw and the wit of Oscar Wilde. I want to do the wide sultry heavens of Conrad, the rolled-gold sundowns and crazy-quilt skies of Hichens and Kipling, as well as the pastelle dawns of Chesterton.”⁹ In correspondence with Edmund Wilson in 1918 about the first draft called “The Romantic Egotist,” Fitzgerald confessed “It shows traces of Tarkington, Chesterton, Chambers[,] Wells, Benson (Robert Hugh), Rupert Brooke and includes Compton-Mckenzie like love-affairs” (LL 17). A more stable influence was Samuel Butler’s *Notebooks* (1912), from which he derived narrative sketch-patterns and confessional passages, but also a professional manual for gathering material for later reflection and composition. When he described the novel as “A Romance and a Reading List” he was not so much denigrating its naivety as acknowledging its eclectic form – since the rest of that entry in his *Notebooks* reads “Sun Also Rises. A Romance and a Guide Book” (N 158). Despite what seems a hodgepodge of youthful enthusiasms and immediate associations, *This Side of Paradise* nevertheless exhibits a distinctive American voice and energy that shows how the author was able to mold literary sources to his own ends.

Fitzgerald took that first effort in novel writing to a different level with *The Beautiful and Damned* two years later. Originally he planned to use the title *The Beautiful Lady Without Mercy* (L 464), and Keatsian rhythms run through the first half of the finished novel. But by early 1921 the name and focus of the project had altered, as he turned to new inspirations – novels by American naturalists, especially Theodore Dreiser, Frank Norris, and his brother, Charles G. Norris, along with the work of Joseph Conrad – sources introduced to him by H. L. Mencken, the co-editor (with George Jean Nathan) of the *Smart Set* literary magazine, where Fitzgerald first announced himself as the spokesman for the Jazz Age. In large measure, *The Beautiful and Damned* can be seen as a repudiation of the fruitless indulgences behind his generation’s new freedoms that he wrote about in *This Side of Paradise* and his early stories. He chronicles in his second novel the physical and moral deterioration of the wealthy and glamorous central characters, Anthony Patch and Gloria Gilbert. He explained to his editor at Scribners, Maxwell Perkins, how the new perspective arrived: “I’ve fallen lately under the influence of an author who’s quite changed my point of view. He’s a chestnut to you, no doubt, but I’ve just discovered him – Frank Norris” (*S&M* 28), citing the naturalist novels *McTeague* (1899) and *Vandover and the Brute* (1914). Fitzgerald would add them to his store of deterministic fiction, along with Charles G. Norris’ *Salt* (1917) and Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* (1900).

Moreover, a new discovery appeared who would come to play a key role in how the young novelist thought about his approach to writing, as he told Perkins: "I'm not so cocksure about things as I was last summer [1919] – this fellow Conrad seems to be pretty good after all" (*S&M* 28). Although Conrad's influence would later be integrated with modernist techniques and ideas in *The Great Gatsby* and more fully in *Tender Is the Night*, it already demonstrates its sway in *The Beautiful and Damned's* pessimistic mood and its characters' spiral into anomie.¹⁰

Those qualities reappear in *The Great Gatsby*, but Conrad's structural and stylistic presence is more prominent in this text. The narrative focus of Nick Carraway, who is both "within and without" as both secondary character and observer-narrator, is paralleled by Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* – although Jay Gatsby is much more at the center of action than is Kurtz in Conrad's more psychologically refined study. The stylistic similarities emerge from a deeper vein, as Fitzgerald often expressed a debt to Conrad's preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, with its delineation of new aesthetic objectives. The preface asserts that "A work that aspires, however humbly, to the condition of art should carry its justification in every line," and because it "appeals primarily to the senses" it should achieve "the perfect blending of form and substance; it is only through an unremitting, never-discouraged care for the shape and ring of sentences that an approach can be made to plasticity, to color, and that the light of magic suggestiveness may be brought to play for an evanescent instant over the commonplace surface of words: of the old, old words, worn thin, defaced by ages of careless usage."¹¹ Andrew Hook argues that reading Conrad's preface "could only have resulted in an enormous renewal of Fitzgerald's artistic self-confidence,"¹² after the relative disappointment of *The Beautiful and Damned*; certainly Conrad's revivalist artistic credo, formal devices, and emphasis on sensual colorings and nuances would have appealed to Fitzgerald's judgment of his own strengths. His older contemporary also had an enviable record of critically acclaimed success; Conrad's arguably five most distinguished novels appeared within eleven years, from 1904 to 1915.¹³ As he began what would become his third novel within five years, Fitzgerald consciously looked toward the critics and his reputation when he composed *The Great Gatsby* with a tight structure and a sophisticated narrative form ("in protest against my own formless two novels," he told Mencken). As the manuscript neared completion in 1924 he exclaimed to Perkins that "My book is wonderful" and "I think my novel is about the best American novel ever written" (*LL* 110, 77, 80).

Proof of Fitzgerald's maturation as an artist in *The Great Gatsby* is that he was able to draw upon a number of literary pathfinders in the achievement of his own goal. Besides the crucial template provided by Conrad, he also found inspiration from Mark Twain's explorations of Western myth in the face of America's new commercial and industrial forces. From Henry James came the international theme, converted to an East-West divide within the borders of the United States, the Atlantic gap condensed to the Long Island inlet separating East and West Egg. "Daisy Miller" provided the first name for the femme fatale of Gatsby's dreams. For Fitzgerald, James also represented – along with Conrad, Edith Wharton, H. G. Wells, and W. M. Thackeray – the epitome of career achievement, a figure to be emulated, as James himself viewed Balzac and Flaubert. More specifically, the plot of Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* is centered on a poor boy's pursuit of a beautiful rich girl, and Trimalchio's ostentatious feast in *The Satyricon* by the Latin satirist Petronius was updated into the descriptions of Gatsby's parties. Fitzgerald also came under the spell of Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, shown in the tussle of egos between Carraway and Gatsby, the merging of their social consciousnesses into a mutual understanding of the weight of American ideals. In addition, modernist techniques of time bending, layered narrative, color symbolism, and omission are applied in the text. Fitzgerald completed the *Gatsby* manuscript in Europe during his first major exposure to modernist thinkers and practitioners,¹⁴ and a revealing comment from April 1923 welds two sides of his outlook, citing Conrad's *Nostromo* as "The great novel of the past fifty years, as 'Ulysses' is the great novel of the future" (qtd. in Bruccoli, *Epic Grandeur* 173). Joyce was the modern master for him along with T. S. Eliot, "the greatest living poet in any language" (*LL* 137). Fitzgerald famously drew upon *The Waste Land* and related poetic visions of sterile landscapes and hollow lives when he included the Valley of Ashes setting in *Gatsby*, yet it was also more generally Eliot and Joyce's daring technical and aesthetic innovations combined with the self-belief that drove them toward greatness that inspired the American novelist. His later meetings with Joyce and Eliot (as well as with Edith Wharton and an attempted audience with Conrad) illustrate his tendency to hero-worship famous literary contemporaries but also demonstrate how Fitzgerald saw himself as a worthy member of their company. Following the publication of *Gatsby*, he reveled in receiving insightful letters of admiration from Eliot, Wharton, and Willa Cather, treating their correspondence as if he had been awarded badges of honor for admission to the pantheon.

While Conrad remained a constant presence in his thinking about literary art, Fitzgerald was also mindful of maintaining his own originality, not only in subject matter but in his own contribution to a distinctive modern form. Thus he warned himself and Hemingway to “beware Conrad rhythms in direct quotation from characters” (L 300). Yet it was Conrad and Keats as standards of excellence whom he referred to when working through the nine-year gestation of *Tender Is the Night*. Fitzgerald took the title from, and quoted for an epigraph, the fourth stanza of “Ode to a Nightingale,” omitting key lines to highlight loss and doubt over invocations of literary immortality. He explained to Perkins not long after the publication of *Gatsby* that his fourth novel would be “something really NEW in form, idea, structure – the model for the age that Joyce and Stien are searching for, that Conrad didn’t find” (S&M 104). Entering his second decade as a professional writer, as one of the most highly paid American authors for his short stories in popular magazines, with one modern American classic novel to his credit already, by the early 1930s Fitzgerald had made three false starts on the new novel but had integrated his aesthetic guides within its plan. Rather than specific technical borrowings, he turned to broad conceptual frameworks, intellectually to Oswald Spengler’s historical theories, and artistically to past masters who delivered social criticism through character study. Comparing his two best novels after the publication of *Tender*, he wrote this to Bishop: “*Gatsby* was shooting at something like *Henry Esmond* while this was shooting at something like *Vanity Fair*. The dramatic novel has cannons quite different from the philosophical, now called psychological novel. One is a kind of *tour de force* and the other a confession of faith” (LL 255). The shift in genres was bold, aided by Fitzgerald’s thorough assimilation of modernist narrative disjunction and multiple perspectives derived from *Ulysses* and Virginia Woolf’s novels, especially *Mrs. Dalloway*. Demonstrating his ability to control the disparate technical and philosophical elements in *Tender*, Fitzgerald would also assuage the structural shortcomings of his first two novels. He emphasized to Perkins how *Tender* “conformed to a definite intention” and that “the motif of the ‘dying fall’ was absolutely deliberate . . . from a definite plan.” He further explained: “That particular trick is one that Ernest Hemmingway and I worked out – probably from Conrad’s preface to ‘The Nigger’ – and it has been the greatest ‘credo’ of my life, ever since I decided that I would rather be an artist than a careerist” (LL 256).¹⁵ Thus, Conrad’s prototype in authorship gave Fitzgerald the impetus to stake out new ground for the American novel. He shared that artistic goal with Hemingway; and while *Tender*’s dying fall in Book

III and the final chapter outlining Dick Diver's life after his divorce can be compared with the constrained closure of *A Farewell to Arms*, what seems more pertinent is these two authors' larger efforts to fashion individual voices within what had become an increasingly commercial and fashion-conscious literary marketplace from the 1920s, meaning that they faced challenges unknown to their predecessors in creating work that would last.

Fitzgerald's head-hunting of Hemingway for Scribners and the editorial assistance given on *The Sun Also Rises* point to the initially one-sided nature of the two authors' relationship, but Hemingway soon became for Fitzgerald in literary judgment "as near as I know for a final reference," his "artistic conscience," as Edmund Wilson was always his "intellectual conscience" (*Se&M* 219; *MLC* 148–49). What Hemingway also reinforced in his fellow novelist was integrity of artistic purpose and a determination to overcome life's vicissitudes for the ultimate pursuit of literature. Fitzgerald had to avoid the influence of Hemingway's distinctive style, remarking after the publication of *Tender* that he did not read Hemingway's work for a year and a half "because I was afraid that your particular rhythms were going to creep in on mine by process of infiltration" (*LL* 263). What came to dominate Fitzgerald's thinking was the *idea* of Hemingway, as his once-close friend became the most important public figure in American literature of the 1930s. Planning a historical novel tentatively entitled "Philippe, Count of Darkness," Fitzgerald sketched his theme: "Just as Stendahl's portrait of a Byronic man made *Le Rouge et Noir* so couldn't *my* portrait of Ernest as Phillipe make the real modern man" (*N* 159). Literary history surely benefited from the abandonment of that novel, but Hemingway's fame and artistic example also helped to stir Fitzgerald in his last major effort, the unfinished novel *The Last Tycoon*.

The author, struggling with his health and residual financial debt in Hollywood, found another heroic figure in Monroe Stahr to ground *Tycoon's* narrative of social change and moral choice. One vital note in Fitzgerald's letters indicates the new direction he intended: "It is a novel a la Flaubert without 'ideas' but only people moved singly and in mass through what I hope are authentic moods" (*LL* 470). He told Perkins that he was "digging it out of myself like uranium," but in a letter to Zelda Fitzgerald he was firm in his conviction that "It is a constructed novel like Gatsby, with passages of poetic prose when it fits the action, but no ruminations or side-shows like Tender. Everything must contribute to the dramatic movement" (*LL* 470, 467). The remaining evidence of his

achievement of this aim is compelling, but bittersweet in what is absent. Yet the letters about *Tycoon* also record the lasting influence of classic literary models, of Conrad's lesson in evoking moods and feelings, and of modern narrative structure as an essential foundation for novels that employ idealized characters as ideas. While he was writing, Fitzgerald was also thinking about an ideal curriculum for reading in classic (mainly English) literature: Giving tutorial instruction to his mistress Sheila Graham, he devised what they called the "College of One."

That the most informative letters about *Tycoon* were sent to his wife and to his editor also reveals the limits of the present essay on Fitzgerald's literary influences, focused as it is on important writers that the author connected with his novels' formal design and style, and with his quest for artistic distinction. Another study might conclude that Perkins should be called to center stage, for his discovery and management of Fitzgerald's talent, his editorial suggestions about the arrangement of chapters in *Gatsby* and the characterization of Gatsby, his dubious influence in rushing *Tender* into print, and his casual proofreading of Fitzgerald's manuscripts. A different interpretation might place Zelda in the foreground, not for her role as muse (or, as she and others would consider it, his plagiarism of her notebooks and of events in their lives together), but as her husband's most ardent and attentive reader. Finishing *Gatsby* in southern France, for instance, Fitzgerald explained her role as more than just a sounding board for his writing: "Zelda + I are contemplating a careful revision after a weeks complete rest" (LL 79).

However, a conclusion based on what writers of significant merit, with long and productive careers, contributed to Fitzgerald's standing in the art of the novel must emphasize how thoughtfully he took what he wanted and needed from them, while applying what he was most capable of achieving from his own natural creative gifts. By the mid-1930s Fitzgerald had relinquished "[t]he old dream of being an entire man in the Goethe-Byron-Shaw tradition, with an American touch" (MLC 153). Yet at about the same time he would emphasize to Bishop: "I believe that the important thing about a work of fiction is that the essential reaction shall be profound and enduring" (L 362), and the "writer only" in him continued to strive for the next best work. Edmund Wilson introduced him to the novels of Franz Kafka, and a week before his death Fitzgerald wrote to Perkins: "He will never have a wide public but 'The Trial' and 'America' are two books that writers are never able to forget." Considering that Fitzgerald included the poignant comment that he had "been doing a lot of ruminating as to what this whole profession is about" (LL 474), his

analysis of Kafka as a writer to be admired by writers signifies how much his own desire for literary legacy was a marker against oblivion.

NOTES

- 1 A sampling might include Fitzgerald's view that "Dorothy Canfield as a novelist is certainly of no possible significance" (L 571). Fitzgerald's rant in 1925 about some recently published novels is equally blunt. He writes that a group including Sinclair Lewis's *Arrowsmith*, Edith Wharton's *The Mother's Recompense*, and Sherwood Anderson's *Dark Laughter* "were just lousy," while others including Willa Cather's *The Professor's House* were "almost as bad" (LL 132). See also his comments on work by Thomas Boyd and Thomas Wolfe (LL 118–19, 280, 473).
- 2 See A. Turnbull, *Scott Fitzgerald* (London: Vintage, 2004), 234. Hemingway's gratitude for Fitzgerald's assistance became increasingly subdued. "Kiss my ass" was his initial written response to Fitzgerald's revision notes for *A Farewell to Arms* (LL 167).
- 3 This was first published in the *Nassau Literary Magazine* (April 1917) as "Tarquin of Cheepside," revised and expanded for the *Smart Set* (Feb. 1921) as "Tarquin of Cheepside," and reprinted in *Tales of the Jazz Age* (TJA 196–203).
- 4 F. K. Ring, *Against the Current: As I Remember F. Scott Fitzgerald* (Los Angeles: Figueroa Press, 2005), 35.
- 5 L. Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950), 249–50.
- 6 See F. S. Fitzgerald, "The Author's Apology," in M. J. Bruccoli, *F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Descriptive Bibliography*, rev. edn. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1987), 19.
- 7 H. Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).
- 8 A. Le Vot, *F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Biography*, trans. William Byron (London: Allen Lane, 1984), 40.
- 9 H. Broun, "Books," *New York Tribune*, May 7, 1920, 14. Qtd. in M. J. Bruccoli, *Some Sort of Epic Grandeur: The Life of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, 2nd rev. edn. (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2002), 137–38; and see n. 50, p. 587. Subsequent references to Bruccoli's *Epic Grandeur* are included in the text.
- 10 In a June 3, 1920, letter from F. S. Fitzgerald to J. G. Hibben, president of Princeton University, Fitzgerald replies to an earlier letter from Hibben with what reads as dramatized world-weariness beyond his years: "My view of life, President Hibben, is the view of Theodore Dreisers and Joseph Conrads – that life is too strong and remorseless for the sons of men" (LL 40).
- 11 J. Conrad, Preface, *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus': A Tale of the Sea*, *The Works of Joseph Conrad*, vol. 3 (London: William Heineman, 1921), vii, ix–x.

- 12 A. Hook, *F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Literary Life* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 59.
- 13 *Nostromo* (1904), *The Secret Agent* (1907), *Under Western Eyes* (1911), *Chance* (1911), and *Victory* (1915).
- 14 In an August 1926 letter, F. S. Fitzgerald explained to M. Perkins: “God, how much I’ve learned in these two and a half years in Europe” (*SC&M* 145).
- 15 See *LL* 263–64 for Fitzgerald’s comment to Hemingway about taking from Conrad the theory “that the purpose of a work of fiction is to appeal to the lingering after-effects in the reader’s mind.”