

F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Autobiographical Essays and the “Bad problem” of Over- Identification

Helga Lénárt-Cheng, St. Mary’s College

F. Scott Fitzgerald had always been treated as a living symbol. His life and heroes were seen as epitomizing the “sad young men” of the Jazz Era, and to give a curious twist to this symbolic interpretation, he himself was said to be like a character from one of his novels. In the words of his obituarist, “Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald . . . was a stocky, good-looking young man with blond hair and blue eyes who might have stepped from the gay pages of one of his own novels” (“Scott Fitzgerald, Author, Dies at 44”).

Fitzgerald himself considered this “over-identification” worse than a burden of celebrity. To him, it was the ultimate sign of his failure as a writer. According to his self-diagnosis, the cause of the problem was his own over-identification with characters and readers. He found himself in a vicious circle: readers identified with him because he over-identified with his characters, who were mostly his own contemporaries. Fitzgerald warned about the potentially disastrous consequences of such an over-identification: “Lenin did not willingly endure the sufferings of his proletariat, nor Washington of his troops, nor Dickens of his London poor. And when Tolstoy tried some such merging of himself with the objects of his attention, it was a fake and a failure” (Fitzgerald 366). “Identification such as this spells the death of accomplishment” (366).

This warning, however, came too late. By the time Fitzgerald penned these lines, the problem of over-identification had already driven him into a lasting depression and silence. His autobiographical essay, *The Crack-Up*, is a final cry in the midst of this silence. Originally published as a three-part

HR

The Humanities Review
Volume 11, Issue 1
Spring 2013 pp 54-58.
St. John’s University

Dr. Helga Lénárt-Cheng
received her PhD
in comparative
literature from Harvard
University in 2007. She
currently teaches in
the Modern Languages
Department of Saint
Mary’s College
of California. Her
research focuses on all
forms of life-writing,
aiming to explore the
aesthetic, cultural,
and philosophical
implications of these
processes. Her articles
have appeared in
New Literary History,
Biography, and other
collected volumes.

series in the 1936 issues of *Esquire*, *The Crack-Up* recounts the story of the author’s gradual descent into depression. Trying to figure out “why [he] had become identified with the objects of [his] horror or compassion” (366), Fitzgerald revisits one by one the various stages of his life. He reminisces with nostalgia about his early days, when his emotional capacity was such an amazing source of power. The young Fitzgerald, like “the dullest platitude monger or the most unscrupulous Rasputin” (366), exploits the power of emotions to attract and control his contemporaries. He exchanges his cherished youthful dream of becoming a “leader of men” for the mass-hypnotizing role of the celebrity writer, and he spares no energy to guide, comfort, and heal others: “there had been many people who leaned on me, come to me in difficulties or written me from afar, believed implicitly in my advice and my attitude toward life” (366).

The source, however, is soon depleted and one morning he wakes up “cracked,” unable to identify with anyone. Overnight, his passion for emotional identification is replaced by the apathy of rational categorization. He begins to make daily lists of “cavalry leaders and football players and cities, and popular tunes and pitchers, and happy times, and hobbies and houses” (359), only to tear them up and to start all over again. This senseless activity is a reaction against his earlier fascination with individuals and their needs. The habit of list-making allows Fitzgerald to think of individuals, too, as mere items on a list, as members of a class: “in these latter days I couldn’t stand the sight of Celts, English, Politicians, Strangers, Virginians, Negroes (light or dark), Hunting People, or retail clerks, and middlemen in general, all writers . . .—and all the classes as classes and most of them as members of their class” (360). The process culminates in the disintegration of the writer’s own self. Fitzgerald splits his self into a five-point list and concludes: “there was not an ‘I’ any more” . . . “It was strange to have no self—to be like the little boy left alone in a big house, who knew that now he could do anything he wanted to do, but found that there was nothing that he wanted to do” (365).

And then, during one of these “harassed and despairing” nights, he suddenly remembers: “Once I had a heart . . . This was at least a starting place out of the morass in which I floundered” (366). He suddenly realizes that the problem in the first place was his passion for identification, and that list-making was already a step towards recovery. His vitality trickled away because he over-identified with his contemporaries and readers. “I was an average mixer, but more than average in a tendency to identify myself, my ideas, my destiny, with those of all classes that I came in contact with” (359). So he sets out to perfect his “laughing stoicism,” along with a voice of “polite acerbity,” hoping that this will allow him to hide even the last shadow of compassion. “And if you were dying of starvation outside my window, I would go quickly and give you the smile and the voice (if no longer the hand) and stick around till somebody raised a nickel to phone for the ambulance, that is if I thought there would be any copy in it for me” (368). That smile, he dreams, would

“combine the best qualities of a hotel manager, an experienced old social weasel, a headmaster on visitors’ day, ... [and] a ballet dancer with an infected toe” (368).

And here comes Fitzgerald’s cunning trick. For this cynical smile is actually that of the author of the *The Crack-Up*, and these autobiographical pieces are nothing but a means to perfect that smile. The main question in *The Crack-Up* is whether one can ever share the misery and happiness of others, whether identifying with others can ever offer any relief in that “qualified unhappiness,” which is “the natural state of the sentient adult” (369). This was a last hope for the writer who saw his forces trickle away, but also for his readers, who weathered the Boom and then the Depression by gaining strength from public figures like Fitzgerald. At stake was not only Fitzgerald’s healing, the question whether he can ever borrow enough vitality from others to recover from depression, but also his role as a writer. Fitzgerald knew that readers idolized him because he merged himself with them. But he also knew that such identification was always fake, that “vitality never ‘takes.’ You have it or you haven’t it, like health or brown eyes...” (361).

The Crack-Up does not offer a straightforward answer to this question. Instead, Fitzgerald plays out the dilemma of identification by telling one thing and doing another; by telling readers that identification “does not work,” while inviting them—through this very story—to identify with him. It is this playful game of attractions and rejections that makes this otherwise somber story into an elegant pas de deux between author and reader.

In *The Crack-Up* Fitzgerald lures his readers into identifying with him by literally offering himself to the public on a plate—or rather as a plate, as a “cracked plate” that “can never again be warmed on the stove nor shuffled with the other plates in the dishpan; it will not be brought out for company...” (362). Fitzgerald ponders “whether [this cracked plate] is worth preserving” (362), and he sees a glim of hope in a conversation with a friend, who suggests that a cracked plate could still be useful, but only if he can expand the crack, if he can look beyond his personal misery and recognize the fate of others in his own.

“Listen. Suppose this wasn’t a crack in you—suppose it was a crack in the Grand Canyon.”

“The crack is in me,” I said heroically.

“Listen! The world only exists in your eyes—your conception of it. You can make it as big or as small as you want to. And you’re trying to be a little puny individual. By God, if I ever cracked, I’d try to make the world crack with me. ... it’s much better to say that it’s not you that’s cracked—it’s the Grand Canyon.” (361)

Fitzgerald knew of course that the “crack” was not only in him, he knew that contemporary readers would recognize themselves in this story of “how an exceptionally optimistic young man experiences a crack-up of all values” (366).

So he showed himself willing to listen. He considered the possibility that his “self-immolation” might not be unique: “I saw it in others, saw it in a dozen men of honor and industry since the war” (367). He pretended to embrace the Grand Canyon-argument with such a conviction that he ended up conflating his trajectory with that of his generation (“my experience parallels the wave of despair that swept the nation when the Boom was over” (369), and he identified his own story with that of “his” century: “As the twenties passed, with my own twenties marching a little ahead of them...” (358).¹

And the strategy worked: a cracked plate is anything but grand, but then, what could be more emotional than the Andersen-style sad story of a cracked plate? Maybe the cracked plate “has to be retained in the pantry,” (362) suggests Fitzgerald, maybe “it will do to hold crackers late at night or to go into the icebox under leftovers” (362). And indeed, those “crack”-ers he offered to hold, the left-over generation of the Jazz Era, accepted the cracked plate—not simply out of pity, but as “a household necessity” (362).

Yet, was not the entire three-part essay one long plea against this type of parasitism? The one lesson that Fitzgerald had learned from his trip to hell was that this “standard cure” (362) of emotional identification does not work, that one can never borrow others’ “juices.” The cure via identification did not work for him, which means that it will not work for the reader, either. So Fitzgerald turns autobiographical intimacy into an opportunity to perfect his “laughing stoicism,” and with the same gesture that he offers his cracked plate, he turns his back to his readers, offering only a contemptuous grin: “not if [you]’d waited around for a thousand hours with the tin cup of self-pity” (361) would my story help you. And that is how Fitzgerald turns his Andersen-style story into a snub onto the reader’s nose.

Notes

1. Early critics had little appreciation for the personal “whining” of this poster boy, but the few critics who embraced *The Crack-Up* used Fitzgerald’s own Grand Canyon-argument to excuse the essay’s confessional tone. Edmund Wilson, for instance, admitted that he, too, “hated” the essays until he realized that they tell the story of an entire generation. “If you read *The Crack-Up* through,” he wrote, “you realize that it is not a discreditable confession but an account of a kind of crisis that many men of Scott’s generation have gone through.” (Wilson).

Works Cited

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. "The Crack-Up." *The Norton Book of American Autobiography*. Edited and introduced by Jay Parini and with a preface by Gore Vidal. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999. 357-369.

"Scott Fitzgerald, Author, Dies at 44." *The New York Times*. Dec 23. 1940.

<http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/12/24/specials/fitzgerald-obit.html>.

Wilson, Edmund. Quoted in, Patricia Hampl "F. Scott Fitzgerald's Essays From the Edge." *The American Scholar*. Book Essay. Spring 2012.

<http://theamericanscholar.org/f-scott-fitzgeralds-essays-from-the-edge/>