

Team Scott vs Team Zelda

Scenes from the messy intertextuality of a marriage

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F. Scott Fitzgerald

THE GREAT GATSBY

A Variorum edition

Edited by James L.W. West III

266pp. Cambridge University Press. £69.99

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Zelda Fitzgerald

SAVE ME THE WALTZ

288pp. Handheld Press. Paperback, £14.99.

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Cover illustration for *Vanity Fair*, 1927

“People always believe the best story” wrote Zelda Fitzgerald in her novel *Save Me the Waltz* in 1932. For a long time, that story of the Fitzgeralds starred a brilliant, self-destructive golden boy tethered to a golden girl, whose glamour eventually dulled into madness. It was the quintessential tale of the Jazz Age, the era christened and commercialized by F. Scott Fitzgerald himself. Then in 1970, Nancy Milford’s *Zelda: A biography* twisted the kaleidoscope and a new story tumbled into view, one in which a brilliant woman was overshadowed, plundered and abandoned by her husband. Ever since, biographers and fans have aligned themselves with either Team Zelda or Team Scott, who live on as ghosts at an endless party, pinballing from New York to Paris to the French Riviera.

The accretion of myth makes it difficult to assess the Fitzgeralds’ work on its own terms, not least because from the very start, the couple treated each other, and their life together, as a story. Their shared fondness for blurring the lines of autobiography and fiction does not make Scott and Zelda equals, however. These new editions of their definitive works highlight the difference in stature between the canonized, era-defining author of five novels and multiple short stories, and the endlessly aspiring, yet endlessly frustrated artist who published only one uneven work of fiction. The Variorum *Gatsby* is sturdy and scholarly, aiming to enumerate and examine minor textual variations over the years – the capstone to a thirty-year project to produce authoritative editions of all Fitzgerald’s published writing. It describes the novel as “a near-perfect work of art”, and is aimed at an audience already convinced of its importance. By contrast, the much prettier Handheld Press edition of *Save Me the Waltz* is the latest in a series of “rediscoveries” of Zelda’s only novel, which still calls for explanation and, to an extent, justification. Erin E. Templeton, in her introduction, makes it clear that a definitive textual analysis of the novel would be all but impossible: the initial drafts are lost, and, according to the Fitzgerald editor and biographer Matthew J. Bruccoli, it is “one of the most sloppily edited novels produced by a distinguished American publisher”, requiring more than 500 corrections when it was reissued in 1967. This new edition follows Bruccoli’s 1991 text, correcting only typos and spelling

errors. Its explanatory notes translate foreign phrases and explain ballet terminology and contemporary pop-culture references.

When it was first issued by Scribner, her husband’s longtime publishing house, Zelda’s novel was a flop, selling less than half its initial print run of 3,000 copies. At the depth of the Depression, the life story of a heedless flapper was out of style. *Gatsby*, too, had been a disappointment when it appeared in 1925, despite positive reviews. As the Variorum introduction points out, after selling out a first print run of just over 20,000 copies, the novel’s second run, *again* another 3,000, “sufficed at Scribner for the next sixteen years”. But beginning in the early 1940s, shortly after Scott Fitzgerald’s death, the publisher issued a new edition of *The Great Gatsby*, introduced by Edmund Wilson, and the novel’s star began to rise. Today, this brisk mixture of romance, greed, class, violence and the high-wire hypocrisy of the rich remains a touchstone for the way America

understands its modern soul.

The Variorum *Gatsby* is a textual analysis uninterested in the larger mythology of its author, but it does take note of Fitzgerald’s dedication, “Once again, to Zelda”, which is missing from some editions. The editors note that the dedication “reverberates throughout the novel” and acknowledges Zelda’s role as “muse and inspiration”. The text itself, however, is a production between men: Fitzgerald and his editor Max Perkins; and, later, Edmund Wilson. This approach does not allow for the messy intertextuality of a marriage, not even one in which the literary borrowings from life are well documented, most famously, in *Gatsby*, when Daisy hopes that her baby daughter will be “a beautiful little fool” – Zelda’s own words just after giving birth. Zelda was part of the voice of F. Scott Fitzgerald. She wrote stories and articles that were published under his name, and she accused him of lifting passages from her diary verbatim for his novel *The Beautiful and*

Damned. She seems to have held literary recognition cheaper than her husband’s fame, money, and his public and private devotion, understanding that to stake her claim as a chronicler of their marriage would provoke his jealousy. No editor of Scott’s novels is likely to credit Zelda as a co-author, but she was undoubtedly much more than his muse.

Save Me the Waltz, which Zelda drafted in three weeks, is a messier book than *The Great Gatsby*, perhaps because it sticks closer to the middle of the author’s life. The heroine, Alabama, marries David Knight, a precociously successful painter, and right from the start their marriage is a public spectacle. “It says in the paper we’re famous”, David tells his wife, who is delighted, although he is worried about their reputations: “it says we’re in a sanitarium for wickedness”. They have a child, who is mostly ignored and raised by nannies and governesses. They set off first to the Riviera, and then to Paris, where Alabama throws herself, as Zelda did, into the work of becoming a professional ballet dancer. The novel is sharp on David’s shallow fame – “You heard his name in bank lobbies and in the Ritz Bar, which was proof that people were saying it in other places” – but holds back from condemning him simply as a dilettante, perhaps because Zelda was still reliant on her husband’s money, judgement and connections. The novel is weakened by its hesitant view of David. In her first draft, Zelda had rather comically named him Amory Blaine, after Scott’s alter ego, the hero of his successful first novel *This Side of Paradise*. The audacity of that move hints at the deadly satire lurking in *Save Me the Waltz*, which sometimes surfaces in a parody of Scott at his emptiest and most florid: “Glimmering buildings hazed the sky in a luminous patchwork quilt. Bits of philosophy, odds and ends of acumen, the ragged ends of vision suicided [*sic*] in the sentimental dusk”.

Zelda is not Alabama any more than Scott is Amory Blaine, yet it is Alabama Zelda knows best, and the novel is strongest when it focuses most tightly on her experiences and perceptions – in its opening, describing Alabama’s upbringing as the youngest daughter of a pampering Montgomery judge, and especially the sections on her dance training in Paris. *The Great Gatsby* also begins by describing the protagonist’s relationship with his father; but unlike Nick Carraway, not a lot gets past Alabama Beggs. The story Nick tells of his slow disillusionment requires illusion to begin with, and Alabama has none – not about her father, not about money, and not about men. Her first kiss is at fourteen with the divorced man dating her older sister, who asks (afterwards), “You’re almost grown, aren’t you?”

There is such sharpness and wit to Zelda’s dialogue that one can’t help thinking she might have done better in Hollywood than her husband did, punching up scripts alongside Dorothy Parker. Her descriptive language, on the other hand, is as lush and suffocating as summer heat in the South. A page-long litany of flowers Alabama buys in Paris includes “deep-red roses ... black and velvety as an

insect wing”, “malignant parrot tulips” and “a bowl of nasturtiums like beaten brass”. When she first kisses David, Alabama imagines crawling up into his brain and poking around like a tiny tourist at the ruins of an ancient civilization. Her most powerful writing is about the physical toll of dancing, the stink of the studio and the proximity of other bodies, about hard work, sickness and femininity. When Alabama is invited to dance as a soloist with a ballet company in Naples, her life decisively breaks with her creator’s – she accepts, whereas Zelda turned the opportunity down, in a failure of nerve, or ambition, or commitment from which she never fully recovered. She gets to live the dream through Alabama, who finds the experience hard, lonely and exhilarating, until it is cut short by an infection in her foot: a respectable, physical reason to fail, to never dance again.

The diagnosis of schizophrenia that ended Zelda’s dance career in 1930 was far more complicated, frightening and poorly understood than an injured foot. It spelled the end not only of her creative ambition as a dancer but of any true autonomy over her own life: she would spend almost two decades either institutionalized or under the close control of doctors, before dying in 1948 in a fire at Highland Hospital in Asheville, North Carolina. While Scott was alive, the couple were tethered by love, money and mutual dependency, constantly writing to and about one another. Zelda struggled to keep writing and painting within the limits set by her doctors and her husband, who feared her creativity was overstimulating. She often worked in bursts of energy that have led later biographers to speculate that she was probably bipolar. The freedom to make art might not have cured her – treatments to stabilize bipolar disorder were not discovered until decades after her death – but it might have given her some relief. It is true that she lacked the focus and self-belief that can turn a passionate amateur into a professional artist, but she was also climbing a particularly steep hill. A century ago, it took a great deal for the young woman designated a “muse” to mature into a serious writer, and to do it without the benefit of patient, dedicated editors.

Both of these novels are documents of their time – deliberately in the careful charting of fads and fame, and accidentally in the way attitudes are revealed through the way characters speak and behave. Children, for instance, are largely an inconvenience whose care is to be outsourced. In *Save Me the Waltz*, David and Alabama’s daughter Bonnie is raised by French governesses and English nannies. She grows up into a poised and judgemental stranger, who refuses to submit to dancing lessons alongside her mother. More troubling is the novel’s deep-rooted racism. From the description of the Beggs sisters as “incubated in the mystic pungence of Negro mammies” to David’s fondness for slurs like “Kikes”, *Save Me the Waltz* reflects an America stratified by hierarchies of race and an author unwilling to question her own place in it. *The Great Gatsby*, too, deploys uncomplicated racial stereotypes even as the narrator distances himself – and us – from Tom Buchanan’s white-supremacist rants. These attitudes illuminate Scott and Zelda’s ways of seeing, or not seeing, the world and the people around them. For all their clarity when looking in the mirror, their wider perspective was marked by blind spots.

Moral perversity

Czech stories from the turn of the century

KATHRYN MURPHY

AND MY HEAD EXPLODED

Tales of desire, delirium and decadence from fin-de-siècle Prague

Translated by Geoffrey Chew

200pp. Jantar Publishing. £15.

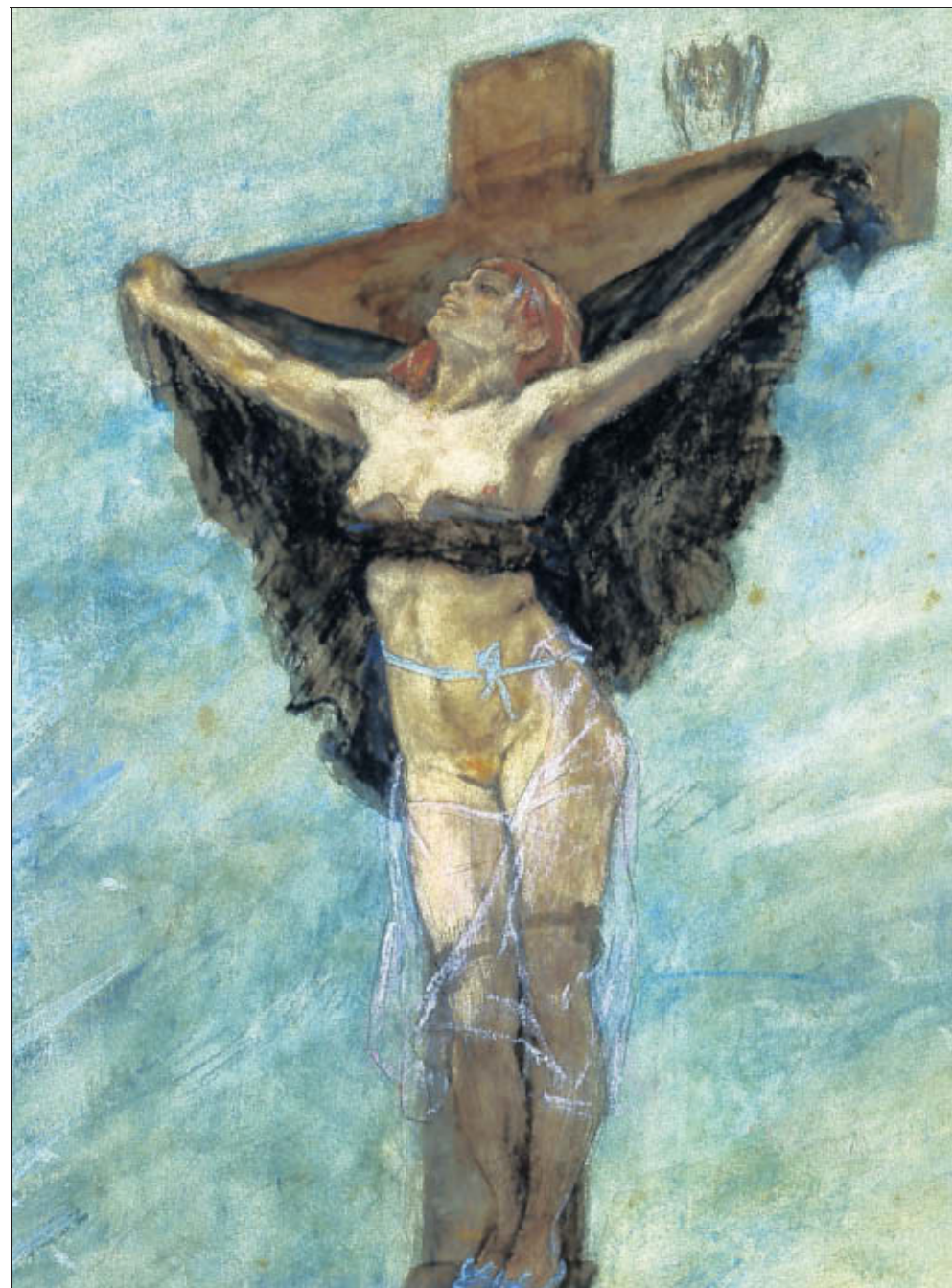
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In the summers of 1897 and 1899, the British decadent poet and critic Arthur Symons visited Prague. His impressions were mixed. Underneath a “modern Prague ... in the image of Vienna”, he wrote, “the Bohemian still sees a phantom city”, a “strange” and “sombre” place. He found uncanniness in Prague’s traces of the Gothic and Baroque, and described them in ways that echo his own earlier characterization of decadent literature as a blend of “over-subtilizing refinement upon refinement”, “spiritual and moral perversity” and fantasy. “Bernini in his most fantastic mood never conceived anything so fantastic [as Charles Bridge]”, Symons claimed; the Jewish quarter, especially the cemetery with its haphazard layering of antique graves, offered an eerie melancholy.

Czech literature, however, he dismissed: with the exception of Comenius’s *Labyrinth of the World and Paradise of the Heart* (1623), it was “for the most part given up to histories of piety and savagery”, not worth the sophisticated British reader’s attention. This anthology shows what Symons missed, bringing together for the first time in English ten short stories that exhibit in abundance the self-consciousness, neurosis, indolence and luxurious excess with which Symons himself had characterized decadence. Written between 1892 and 1917, they feature perverted Catholic imagery, stifling southern European atmospheres, syphilis, mania, vampiric femmes fatales, occultism and alchemy, cemeteries and smoking.

The opening story, Julius Zeyer’s “Inultus: A Prague legend”, involves a crucifixion performed in the name of the perfection of art; Miloš Marten’s “Cortigiana” tells of Isotta, a Neoplatonic scholar turned courtesan in medieval Florence who infects her lovers with the plague; in Arthur Breisky’s “Prose Poem, after Félicien Rops, *Mors syphilitica*”, a syphilitic young man offers Death a cigarette in a dream. Most of the stories are less invested in plot than in atmosphere, and in description of sumptuous fabrics and luminous skin. Others, by Božena Benešová and Richard Weiner, are more naturalistic in scene and tone, but strikingly inventive in their modes of narration. Geoffrey Chew’s excellent translations manage the impressive feat of rendering these writers’ combination of overripe succulence and austere archaism in an English that’s both ornamental and fluent.

Peter Zusi’s concise introduction frames the book as an opportunity to correct the distorted views of a “small” literature generated by trends in translation. These cosmopolitan tales, he argues, offer a counterweight to the dominance of the picaresque satire of Jaroslav Hašek and the cerebral, absurd or tragicomic prose



“Study for the Temptation of St Anthony” by Félicien Rops, 1878

written under communism by Milan Kundera, Ivan Klíma, Václav Havel and Bohumil Hrabal. This is welcome: of the writers represented here, only Jiří Karásek ze Lvovic has received substantial attention in English (a translation of his novel *Gothic Soul* was published in 2015).

Unfortunately, the brevity of the introduction and biographical notes leaves the stories largely uncontextualized. These Czech tales were written in a bilingual Prague during the declining years of the Austro-Hungarian Empire: in Vienna, Sigmund Freud and Arthur Schnitzler were writing, Gustav Mahler was composing, Gustav Klimt was painting. They share their literary time and space with Franz Kafka and with Gustav Meyrink’s Prague novel *The Golem* (1915). Written as Czech nationalism and pride in Bohemian language and literature were rising, they are proudly and distinctively Czech. Yet they also stand as a contribution to Austro-Hungarian *fin-de-siècle* culture and an assertion of broader cosmopolitan allegiances in their appeals to American, English and French literature.

The lack of context is particularly glaring when it comes to Zeyer’s “El Cristo de la Luz: A Toledo legend”, in which a Jewish protagonist plots to murder the Christian population of Toledo by poisoning a crucifix, only to be thwarted by a miracle and ultimately converted by a vision of Christ as he dies under torture. Its egregious antisemitism, and the reasons for its inclusion, go unremarked. It is certainly representative of some of the nastier strains of Czech literature and society of the period. The reader would have also benefited from the addition of more information about Zeyer – himself a German-speaking Jew, though raised a Catholic, who wrote other plays and stories investigating Jewish occultism and legend more sympathetically – and a comparison of his tales with his contemporaries Meyrink and Kafka. Without more framing, this volume is as confusing and suggestive as Symons’s experience of Prague. It acts, however, as a tantalizing invitation to explore further the complex, thwarted and rich culture that left these only partially explicable traces.