

Fitzgerald's Narrative Technique in *The Last Tycoon*

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Compared with his earlier works, Fitzgerald's last novel, *The Last Tycoon*, has not received sufficient critical attention. Among a dozen book-length studies of Fitzgerald's novels, some completely exclude the novel from their discussions, while others treat it rather sketchily. In a sense this is inevitable, because the novel is unfinished; one cannot blame the author for the flaws in his book which he might have eliminated, nor praise him for what he might have accomplished. Nevertheless, it is necessary to do justice to Fitzgerald's final attempt, since this last piece of work is undoubtedly an essential part of the Fitzgerald corpus; and even if a minute thematic study is impossible, its unfinished state does not interfere, I think, with an examination of the author's craft. The discussion in this paper, therefore, will be centered on the narrative method he adopted and its reference to his earlier works. Reading the unfinished piece as it is, we can find as much evidence for its successful results as for the difficulties the author would have been faced with had he lived to finish it. Through an analysis of the text and related materials, I hope to define the potential difficulties in Fitzgerald's narrative scheme and measure the possible degree of his achievement.

Now we have two texts of Fitzgerald's unfinished novel: the time-honored Scribner's edition, *The Last Tycoon*, edited by Edmund Wilson and the recently published Cambridge edition, *The Love of the Last Tycoon: A Western*, re-

edited by Matthew J. Bruccoli. As the text for my discussion of the novel I will use Wilson's edition because it is familiar and long established. Bruccoli's edition, which includes outside of the text most of the materials he presented in *The Last of the Novelists* (1977) in revised form, will be used as a critical apparatus.

The earliest sketch for the novel is in Fitzgerald's letter to Kenneth Littauer of *Colliers*, dated September 29, 1939. Although the story Fitzgerald recounted to Littauer is in places markedly different from the one we know, he had already decided on the use of Cecilia Brady as the narrator of his novel. "Cecelia [sic] is a pretty, modern girl neither good nor bad, tremendously human," he wrote: ". . . rather a snob, though, in the course of the story, her character evolves *away from this*. That is, she was twenty when the events that she tells occurred, but she is twenty-five when she tells about the events, and of course many of them appear to her in a different light" (*Correspondence* 546); and of the technical merit of this method: ". . . by making Cecilia [sic] at the moment of her telling the story, an intelligent and observant woman, I shall grant myself the privilege, as Conrad did, of letting her imagine the actions of the characters. Thus, I hope to get the verisimilitude of a first person narrative, combined with a Godlike knowledge of all events that happen to my characters" (547).

This is much the same technique as the one Fitzgerald had used successfully in *The Great Gatsby*, paralleling its precedent to the extent that the narrator was originally "rather a snob." While writing *The Last Tycoon*, Fitzgerald always kept in mind this former succès d'estime; actually, he seems to have used it as a model for his new novel. In his letter to Littauer he wrote: "If one book could ever be 'like' another I should say it is more 'like' *The Great Gatsby* than any other of my books" (*Correspondence* 549); and in 1940, he told his wife: "It is a *constructed* novel like *Gatsby*, with passages of poetic

prose when it fits the action" (*Letters* 128). In his outline of the plot he defines the chapter that deals with Stahr's day of work as follows: "Chapter (C) is equal to guest list & Gatsby's party" (*The Love of the Last Tycoon* xli). But the most marked correspondence between *Gatsby* and *Tycoon* is concerned with the narrator. In both novels the narrators also participate in the novels' actions, and through the experiences that they tell us about their personalities go through a certain change for the better. Moreover, they both are morally and emotionally involved with what happens to the protagonists, and at the end are forced to some kind of judgment toward the world they know. The similarities between the two would have become still more pointed if Fitzgerald, as Edmund Wilson points out, had intended to use the sanitarium scene, which he had originally written for the beginning, at the end of his story; here Cecilia, wasted with tuberculosis, says to her fellow patients: "I don't owe them any loyalty. Oh they fly over and see me sometimes, but what do I care—I'm ruined" (*Tycoon* 144); a counterpart of Nick's indictment against the Buchanans: "They were careless people, Tom and Daisy . . ." (*Gatsby* 180).

But why a woman narrator? Relevant to this question is probably Fitzgerald's introductory use of Rosemary's point of view in the original version of *Tender Is the Night*. What Cecilia has in common with Rosemary is her emotional involvement with the hero of the novel; just as Rosemary was desperately in love with Dick Diver, so is Cecilia with Monroe Stahr, no less desperately. In his new novel Fitzgerald seems to have attempted to exploit the same possibilities as he had, not wholly successfully, in his former novel: to enhance the reader's sense of his hero's personal charm through a woman's loving eyes, so that "everything that surrounds him assumes a magical touch, a magical quality," as he explains in one of his working notes (*The Love of the Last Tycoon* 164). In *Tender* Fitzgerald failed because his necessity of emphasizing an ironic aspect of Rosemary's function practically cancelled out another, more straightforward merit of her point of view; the author-

narrator's ironic voice turned her admiration for Dick into unconvincing babble. In *Tycoon*, on the other hand, by making Cecilia the narrator of the story Fitzgerald manages to temper her infatuation for Stahr with her self-irony—the narrating Cecilia reflecting on her past folly and naïveté—without belittling Stahr's charm. A good example is the following passage, which describes Cecilia's abortive attempt to win Stahr's romantic attention:

“They asked me how I knew,” sang the radio, “—my true love was true.”

My heart was fire, and smoke was in my eyes and everything, but I figured my chance at about fifty-fifty. I would walk right up to him as if I was either going to walk through him or kiss him on the mouth—and stop a bare foot away and say “Hello” with disarming understatement.

And I did—though of course it wasn't like I expected: Stahr's beautiful dark eyes looking back into mine, knowing, I am dead sure, everything I was thinking—and not a bit embarrassed. I stood there an hour, I think, without moving, and all he did was twitch the side of his mouth and put his hands in his pocket. (*Tycoon* 70)

Cecilia's love for Stahr is as serious as Rosemary's love for Dick, but Cecilia the narrator makes a pleasantly comic scene out of it, at the expense of her own youthful rashness.

Another piece of work that has some interest in its relation to *The Last Tycoon* is a short story Fitzgerald wrote in 1932, “Crazy Sunday,” which is set in Hollywood and, like *Tycoon*, partly based on his impressions of Irving Thalberg. Although Edmund Wilson praised the piece—“your story in the Mercury was swell—wish you would do something more about Hollywood” (Piper 279)—it is, in fact, not particularly well-written. The main characters are Joel Coles, a young scenario writer newly arrived in Hollywood, Miles

Calman, an efficient and much respected director, and his wife Stella. The story represents the love triangle of the three, caused mainly by Calman's affair with another girl and Stella's resulting loneliness, and through his entanglement with Stella, Joel gets to know her husband more intimately, until, at the news of his death in a plane crash, he finally understands the true stature of the man: "In the awful silence of his death all was clear about him. He was the only American-born director with both an interesting temperament and an artistic conscience" (*Stories* 416). The story is concluded with Joel's exuberant tribute to Calman: "Everything he touched he did something magical to. . . . What a hell of a hole he leaves in this damn wilderness—already!" (418).

The trouble with this story is that Joel's passionate praise of Calman at the end scarcely convinces us. To be sure, Fitzgerald explains in the earlier part, through Joel's point of view, that "Miles Calman was the only director on the lot who did not work under a supervisor and was responsible to the money men alone" (403); and that he was "an artist" who "had never made a cheap picture though he had sometimes paid heavily for the luxury of making experimental flops" (409). But Miles Calman actually presented in action is a grim hypochondriac always talking about his psychoanalyst and having an affair with a girl from his mother complex. In this story, written several years before he started work on his last novel, the portrait of the great director seems tainted with Fitzgerald's own mixed feelings, as yet unresolved, toward Hollywood: contempt for what he thought to be an inferior art form, bitterness from his past failures, envy for the easy life of its inhabitants, as well as fascination with its new possibilities. He could not set for himself a proper perspective to view this strangely thriving community, and his story ended up hovering somewhere between a satire and a serious study, without becoming neither.

Significantly, in one of his *Tycoon* notes Fitzgerald puts in a lesson from

his past: "Remember my summing up in *Crazy Sunday*—don't give the impression that these are bad people" (*The Love of the Last Tycoon* 198). He is probably referring to the fact that he failed to show Calman's efficiency in action rather than in explanation, and that his grudge against the film industry pervaded the whole story uncontrolled. In *Tycoon*, his satiric intentions are given full expression while what he could admire in Hollywood and Thalberg is intactly embodied in the figure of Monroe Stahr. Most notably, that neurotic aspect of Hollywood which he formerly depicted as Calman's mother complex and obsession with psychoanalysis is incorporated into the novel in the form of a couple of minor details. One is the scene where an exceedingly popular film star obliquely seeks advice from Stahr on his nervous impotence; and another is the hilarious detail about an outwardly sturdy director with a certain traumatic peculiarity:

Stahr often caught him making the same scenes over and over—one scene about a rich young girl occurred in all his pictures with the same action, the same business. A bunch of large dogs entered the room and jumped around the girl. Later the girl went to a stable and slapped a horse on the rump. The explanation was probably not Freudian; more likely that at a drab moment in youth he had looked through a fence and seen a beautiful girl with dogs and horses. As a trademark of glamour it was stamped on his brain forever. (*Tycoon* 37)

The most remarkable advance from "Crazy Sunday" is, however, concerned with the problem of narrative perspective. Presumably, Fitzgerald concluded from his past attempt that from a visitor's point of view he would not be able to do much with the subject: an outsider, he must have known from his own experience, would be either naturally prejudiced against Hollywood or else blindly fascinated by it, and in both cases it would be difficult to penetrate

into its truth. In this respect, Cecilia, a producer's daughter, is a great invention. "Though I haven't ever been on the screen, I was brought up in pictures," she tells us at the beginning: "even before the age of reason I was in a position to watch the wheels go round" (*Tycoon* 3). She is an informed insider, and herself too much a part of Hollywood to idealize or to denounce it. She belongs to the motion picture community, and yet she is not professionally committed to the industry itself. Here Fitzgerald saw his best chance to build his story about Monroe Stahr, the epitome of the American film-making business at its best.

Fitzgerald's skill in his use of a first-person narrator—the skill he had shown abundantly in *The Great Gatsby*—is fully revealed in the opening paragraphs. "My father was in the picture business as another man might be in cotton or steel, and I took it tranquilly," Cecilia tells us: "At the worst I accepted Hollywood with the resignation of a ghost assigned to a haunted house. I knew what you were supposed to think about it but I was obstinately unhorrorified." The first sentence brings Cecilia nearer to us, suggesting, not disagreeably, that it was not her fault to be born a producer's daughter; the simile of "a ghost assigned to a haunted house," along with the deliberate choice of words in the last sentence—"obstinately unhorrorified"—shows not only Cecilia's intelligence but also her awareness and understanding of outsiders' reaction to Hollywood. Fitzgerald knew that in order to convey what he had to say about the place, it was necessary to put away at the start the prejudices against Hollywood, shared especially among conservative intellectuals. This is why he lets Cecilia recount her own experiences of such antagonism: the hypocritical indifference of her schoolteachers who really hate Hollywood "way down deep as a threat to their existence." And Cecilia resignedly puts in at the end: "That's what I half expect to happen to this story." Cecilia's half-conscious—and Fitzgerald's fully conscious—strategy is to mollify whatever hard feelings we may have against Hollywood by

anticipating our reaction: the narrator's resigned air works out the reverse effect. This is also true of the last paragraph of Cecilia's self-introduction. "You can take Hollywood for granted like I did," she says, "or you can dismiss it with the contempt we reserve for what we don't understand." And only after this provocative remark does she give us an intimation that through her story we might understand something about "the set-up," and reveal that her own aim is also to understand it through an attempt to understand one of the few men who really knew what it was meant to be. Thus Fitzgerald, in the very first page, outlines the content of the book, arouses our curiosity, modulates our sympathy, and deftly characterizes the narrator—a woman moderately intelligent and a bit cynical for her age, with pleasant wit and humor (*Tycoon* 3).

Fitzgerald also knew that Cecilia was in a sense a product of Hollywood, and even with her sober detachment at the time of her narration, a limited observer of the place; he needed to find some way to supplement her partial vision in order to complete his portrayal. For this purpose he subtly introduces another perspective, a sharply ironic viewpoint, the one similar to that which he had used in "Crazy Sunday." This is provided by Wylie White, a visiting script writer who, like Joel Coles, has not yet assimilated—or succumbed—to the peculiar manners and standards of Hollywood. He tells Cecilia about his own experience:

"I went to a garden party the first day. My host shook hands and left me. It was all there—that swimming pool, green moss at two dollars an inch, beautiful felines having drinks and fun—

"—And nobody spoke to me. Not a soul. I spoke to half a dozen people but they didn't answer. That continued for an hour, two hours—then I got up from where I was sitting and ran out at a dog trot like a crazy man. I didn't feel I had any rightful identity until I got back to the hotel and

the clerk handed me a letter addressed to me in my name." (*Tycoon* 11)

Here is an aspect of Hollywood that Cecilia would never see, its hard practical indifference to outsiders unless they prove to be of some use. And Cecilia's sudden realization that "such things could happen" is a preliminary to her deeper understanding of her world, to her mental maturity through self-knowledge.

Fitzgerald's manipulation of narrative perspective is, at least up to a certain point, quite masterful, and as far as the characterization of Cecilia through her actions and narrative is concerned, Fitzgerald's skill is unfailing. It is difficult to understand why some critics, often without sufficient evidence, express their dissatisfaction with Fitzgerald's narrator. Brian Way, for example, denounces her with these words: "His decision to use Cecilia Brady as a narrator seems little short of disastrous. Her empty selfish nature, and her callow hardness—the premature cynicism of an immature mind—make her quite unsuitable as a device for bringing out the essence of Stahr's complex activities and magnetic influence" (Way 161). Although Cecilia might be, as Fitzgerald defines her in his letter, "neither good nor bad," there is no indication that she has an "empty selfish nature," and Way does not present a particular passage which reveals it. Perhaps a touch of cynicism in the opening has something to do with this reaction. It might be easy for some readers to dislike her for that, just as some critics, though to a lesser degree, are inclined to dislike Nick Carraway for his snobbery.

A somewhat better grounded accusation against Cecilia's faculty as the narrator comes from another critic, Michael Millgate. He asserts that unlike Nick, Cecilia falls short as "a vehicle for moral judgements," because she is "too immature to be able to make worthwhile judgements or to help us to judge, and her own emotions are too deeply involved" (Millgate 83). The thesis that Cecilia is immature, however, ignores the dimensions in time created by

first-person narration. It is true that Cecilia was immature at twenty, but at twenty-five, after the events she recounts occurred, she is not; a fact which is solidly established from the beginning by her quietly intelligent voice. On the other hand, it is not always appropriate to refer to Nick's narrative function in *Gatsby* in measuring the success or failure of that of Cecilia in *Tycoon*. In the former novel, whatever "greatness" Gatsby has would amount to very little without Nick's imagining and surmising—in a sense "Gatsby" is Nick's creation—and his actions need explanations and moral judgments of his friend; whereas Monroe Stahr hardly needs any justification or explanation from the narrator; he is fully conscious of what he is doing, and there is nothing inexplicable in his actions. Cecilia does not have to "help us to judge," and the author makes this point clear by making her forfeit any intention of forcing anything on the reader. As we have seen, she does not try to persuade us to accept her world—"You can take Hollywood for granted ... or you can dismiss it"—and in the later part she goes so far as to remind us of her own limitation as the narrator, a limitation due to the circumstance that, as Millgate puts it, "her own emotions are too deeply involved": "As for me, I was head over heels in love with him then, and you can take what I say for what it's worth" (*Tycoon* 67). If Cecilia's narration is more exacting than Nick's, in that we have to draw mainly on our own resources to judge Stahr or Hollywood, it was part of Fitzgerald's plan.

However, another point raised by both these critics, apart from Cecilia's character, is worth consideration: the difficulty, caused by the range of Stahr's activities, in sustaining plausibility of Cecilia's narrative. In this respect Fitzgerald seems to have been confronted with a great deal of trouble. To some extent he manages to handle this problem by giving Cecilia various excuses for telling about the events that she could not have witnessed. About Stahr's first meeting with Kathleen on the back lot, we are told, she heard from Robinson the trouble shooter (25). As for the description of Stahr's day

at the studio, she tells us: "I have determined to give you a glimpse of him [Stahr] functioning, which is my excuse for what follows. It is drawn partly from a paper I wrote in college on *A Producer's Day* and partly from my imagination. More often I have blocked in ordinary events myself, while the stranger ones are true" (28-29). Later, she reveals her sources of information as to the "true" part of her story: "Prince Agge is my authority for the luncheon in the commissary. . . . Wylie White told me a lot, which I believed because he felt Stahr intensely with a mixture of jealousy and admiration" (67).

But in the later part, Fitzgerald skips the trouble of equipping Cecilia with an apology. For example, we have no idea why Cecilia could report the conversation between Stahr and Boxley, an English writer (104-106), and especially the following observation Boxley makes in his mind:

Boxley knew he could sit with Wylie White at the Troc raging at Stahr, but he had been reading Lord Charnwood and he recognized that Stahr like Lincoln was a leader carrying on a long war on many fronts; almost single-handed he had moved pictures sharply forward through a decade, to a point where the content of the "A productions" was wider and richer than that of the stage. Stahr was an artist only, as Mr. Lincoln was a general, perforce and as a layman. (106)

The passage is thematically important and often cited by critics, but strictly speaking, Cecilia is supposed to have no access to its content. This sort of problem would have become harder to deal with if the author had lived to continue his composition, since it would be absurd to make Cecilia every time excuse herself for not being on the spot. On this point we can only guess that Fitzgerald may have intended to allow himself a larger liberty with Cecilia's narrative than he had with Nick Carraway's in *Gatsby*; perhaps this was what he meant when he mentioned "the privilege . . . of letting her imagine

the actions of the characters." In any case, Stahr at the studio is consistently dealt with objectively, whether through Cecilia's viewpoint or Boxley's, which reduces a sense of incongruity we might feel to a minimum.

The problem in the passage above, as we read the novel, may be rather that we can hardly see why Boxley, who confesses in another scene that he never goes to a movie (32), could appreciate "the content of the 'A productions.'" As may be expected of an unfinished novel, such small inconsistencies are found here and there in the text, and some of them point to the difficulties of narrative control. For example, we come across the following description in the scene where a film star with sexual trouble visits Stahr's office: "Stahr had an impish temptation to tell him to go to Brady about it. Brady handled all matters of public relations" (35). Stahr's sarcastic reference to "Brady" is discrepant because it is Cecilia, Brady's daughter, who is recounting the story, and especially because at another point Fitzgerald deliberately stresses this problem by making Cecilia say: "My father—I will call him Mr. Brady, as Prince Agge did when he told me of this luncheon . . ." (46). What traps the author here is the complex relationships between his main characters: Cecilia is supposed to speak favorably of Stahr who dislikes her own father. Although the conflict between Stahr and Brady remains more or less submerged as far as Fitzgerald's unfinished manuscripts go, in the unwritten latter half of the novel their mutual antagonism was to become the main drive in the story development. They were, according to Fitzgerald's outline, to plot each other's ruin in their struggle for the control over the studio, and one of his working notes indicates that he was thinking of having Cecilia's father murdered by Stahr's agent (*The Love of the Last Tycoon* 133). Dealing with an unfinished novel, perhaps we should not go too far in this kind of speculation; but we may at least point out a possibility that Cecilia's relationship with her father, its effect upon her narrative considered, could have balked the author at some future point in his composition.

But the adequacy of Cecilia's first-person narration itself is called into question where Stahr's love affair with Kathleen, the heroine of the novel, is concerned. In this section, the narrative pops in and out of Stahr's thought and Kathleen's. Presumably, the excuse for Cecilia's knowledge about their rendezvous would be that Kathleen was to meet her at some later point in the story, for Cecilia tells us in the last unfinished chapter: "Later, when I heard the whole thing from Kathleen . . ." (*Tycoon* 120). Still, those passages that record Stahr's innermost reaction are left unexplained. Although Cecilia has known Stahr "since he became Father's partner a dozen years ago" (15), Stahr treats her, in spite of her occasional romantic appeals, basically as a child. Their relationship being such, it is difficult to suppose that Stahr should confide his personal thoughts or secret emotions to Cecilia just as Gatsby does to Nick; therefore, her faculty of imagining his intense reaction to Kathleen seems a bit implausible. Finally, the texture of writing itself is somewhat different in this section: occasionally, the language describing their love becomes so romantically inflated that it stands in weird contrast with the crispness of the rest of Cecilia's narration. The change comes as soon as Stahr, who has been looking for Kathleen, finds her: "Stahr's eyes and Kathleen's met and tangled. For an instant they made love as no one ever dares to do after. Their glance was slower than an embrace, more urgent than a call" (64). It is hard to believe that Cecilia, if it is she, here romanticizing, and the soberly cynical woman at the opening are the same person.

That Fitzgerald himself was most troubled by this section is evident from the text and his working notes. In the published text, Chapter V, which mainly deals with the love affair, runs almost three times as long as any of the previous chapters except very short Chapter II, whereas in the outline he worked on he had projected Chapter I, III and V of about the same length. Apparently, the author seems to have lost sight of his initial vision of "a *constructed* novel like *Gatsby*" as he let his narrative control slip away. Moreover, Fitzgerald is

twice forced to make an awkward transition in this chapter: "This is Cecilia taking up the narrative in person" (77); "This is Cecilia taking up the story" (98). Cecilia is, after all, not qualified to give a full detail of Stahr's private affair, nor can she be expected to describe his love for Kathleen, her rival, in purely romantic terms. If Fitzgerald was to maintain the formal integrity of his novel, he would have been forced to cut down the "love" interest to some extent.

But why, finally, did Fitzgerald so obstinately seek to incorporate a love story into his novel? Given his deliberate choice of the narrator, it might have been easier for him to limit himself to the artistic rendering of Hollywood and its inhabitants. This question can be answered only when we consider the predicament in which Fitzgerald found himself in his last days: he felt that he had lost his audience, who once had been waiting eagerly for his novel, and he was especially concerned that the younger readers would not be interested in what he had to say any more. "I think the nine years that intervened between *The Great Gatsby* and *Tender* hurt my reputation almost beyond repair," he wrote to his wife two months before his death, "because a whole generation grew up in the meanwhile to whom I was only a writer of *Post* stories" (*Letters* 126). These circumstances shed light on the meaning of a curious comment Fitzgerald put in at the bottom of his outline, which, with reason, Edmund Wilson deleted from his edition: "Written for two people—for S. F. at 17 and for E. W. at 45—it must please them both" (*The Love of the Last Tycoon* xlvi). This casual jotting eloquently expresses Fitzgerald's split ambition, or perhaps his dilemma, in writing *The Last Tycoon*. S. F. is his daughter, Scottie Fitzgerald, who probably represented in his mind the new generation, and E. W. is Edmund Wilson, a discriminating critic and also his literary companion who over the years had repeatedly prompted him to write about Hollywood. With this one novel, then, Fitzgerald was hoping to reclaim his critical reputation and, at the same time, to regain his lost public. As we

have seen, however, he took upon himself a considerable amount of trouble in consequence of this ambitious task. Fitzgerald's artistic achievement in *The Last Tycoon* might have largely depended on his ability to strike a balance between his conflicting purposes; or perhaps, ultimately, to choose between the two.

In overview, as a literary treatment of the film industry *The Last Tycoon* shows as much promise as an unfinished novel could show. Fitzgerald's idea about his narrative method is solidly based on a sober assessment of the success or failure of his past efforts, and Cecilia as the narrator is an effective device as long as the author is engaged in the portrayal of Hollywood and its tycoon. Even in its fragmentary state, we may conclude, the novel deserves the tribute that Edmund Wilson pays in his foreword: "*The Last Tycoon* is far and away the best novel we have had about Hollywood" (*Tycoon* x).

And yet, one may hesitate to be optimistic about whether Fitzgerald could finally have wrought his novel into a satisfactory form. Apart from the potential narrative difficulties caused by the complicated relationships between his characters, his determination to give a detailed account of the hero's romantic love affair threatens to spoil the formal neatness of the novel. Throughout his literary career, Fitzgerald struggled to reconcile his purely artistic ideal with his desire to appeal to a larger public. His attempt with *The Last Tycoon* was no exception.

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