F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Evolving American Dream: The “Pursuit of Happiness” in *Gatsby, Tender Is the Night,* and *The Last Tycoon*

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Since the first stirrings of the F. Scott Fitzgerald revival in the 1940s, readers have been fascinated by the opposition in his work and character. Critics from several different generations have noted how Fitzgerald used his conflicts to explore the origins and fate of the American dream and the related idea of the nation.¹ The contradictions he experienced and put into fiction heighten the implications of the dream for individual lives: the promise and possibilities, violations and corruptions of those ideals of nationhood and personality “dreamed into being,” as Ralph Ellison phrased it, “out of the chaos and darkness of the feudal past.”² Fitzgerald embodied in his tissues and nervous system the fluid polarities of American experience: success and failure, illusion and disillusion, dream and nightmare.

“I did not care what it was all about,” Hemingway’s Jake Barnes confessed in *The Sun Also Rises.* “All I wanted to know was how to live in it.”³ Fitzgerald, who named and chronicled that brash, schizophrenic decade, was no stranger to the dissipation of values and the pursuit of sensation in the Jazz Age of the 1920s. But for all that, he strained to know what life is all about and how to live in it. To him, Hemingway’s *it* was not simply existence and the soul’s dark night of melancholia and despair. It also stood for an American reality that, combined with “an extraordinary gift for hope” and a “romantic readiness,”⁴ led to the extravagant promise identified with America
and the intense, devastating loss felt when the dream fails in one or another of its guises.

Face to face with his own breakdown, Fitzgerald traced his drastic change of mind and mood in his letters and Crack-Up pieces. From the conviction during his amazing early success in his 20s that “life was something you dominated if you were any good,” Fitzgerald, at the end of his life, came to embrace “the sense that life is essentially a cheat and its conditions are those of defeat, and that the redeeming things are not ‘happiness and pleasure’ but the deeper satisfactions that come out of struggle.” Abraham Lincoln was Fitzgerald’s American exemplar of this “wise and tragic sense of life” (Turnbull, Letters [L] 96). And in The Last Tycoon (LT) he associates Monroe Stahr’s commitment to lead the movie industry closer to an ideal mix of art and entertainment with Lincoln’s creative response to the contradictions of American democracy embodied in the Union.

Fitzgerald’s invocation of Lincoln recalls the proud and humble claim he made to his daughter from Hollywood. “I don’t drink,” he wrote; then, as if freed from a demon’s grasp, he recounted the inner civil war he fought to keep his writer’s gift intact: “I am not a great man, but sometimes I think the impersonal and objective quality of my talent and the sacrifices of it, in pieces, to preserve its essential value have some sort of epic grandeur.” “Some sort” he qualifies, as if preparing for the ironic, self-deflating admission in the next sentence. “Anyhow after hours I nurse myself with delusions of that sort” (L 62, 61). But Fitzgerald did preserve the “essential value” of his talent; the pages he left confirm that. Like Lincoln who lived only long enough to sketch out what a truly reconstructed nation might look like, Fitzgerald was defeated in his attempt to finish his last novel. Yet what he wrote is all the more poignant because, finished, The Last Tycoon might have recast and reformulated the intractable oppositions of The Great Gatsby and Tender Is the Night.

“The test of a first rate intelligence,” Fitzgerald wrote in The Crack-Up (Wilson, CU), that posthumous collection full of his sinewy, mature, self-reliant thought, “is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function” (CU 69).

By function, Fitzgerald means more than cope; he’s affirming that readiness to act in the world with something approaching one’s full powers—“a willingness of the heart” combined with enabling critical intelligence. Fitzgerald’s fictional alter egos, Jay Gatsby and Dick Diver,
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lost this stance of simultaneous detachment and engagement, if they ever possessed it, for they could live in the world only with a single, consuming mission. In his life, Fitzgerald, too, had to steel himself against the tendency toward Gatsby's self-destroying romantic obsession, and like Diver, he had to wrench free from the opposed, complimentary shoals of identification and alienation in his marriage with Zelda.

After *Tender Is the Night* and before his fresh start in Hollywood in 1937, Fitzgerald reflected on his earlier search for an equilibrium of craft, reputation, and power as expressed in the literary vocation and his large personal ambition. "It seemed," he remembered,

a romantic business to be a successful literary man—you were not ever going to be as famous as a movie star but what note you had was probably longer-lived—you were never going to have the power of a man of strong political or religious convictions but you were certainly more independent.

To the end, like the vivid, still-evolving Monroe Stahr in *The Last Tycoon*, Fitzgerald stays in motion, keeps the dialectic between life and craft going, if not to resolution—"Of course within the practice of your trade you were forever unsatisfied" (*CU* 69–70)—at least in pursuit of new and unrealized novelistic possibilities. "But I, for one, would not have chosen any other" (*CU* 69–70), he concludes, and keeps faith with his vocation by writing about craft and character in the life of a gifted movie man, whose form Fitzgerald feared might subordinate the novel, "which at my maturity was the strongest and suppliest medium for conveying thought and emotion from one human being to another," to "a mechanical and communal art that, whether in the hands of Hollywood merchants or Russian idealists, was capable of rendering only the tritest thought, the most obvious emotion" (*CU* 78).

Meeting Irving Thalberg, Fitzgerald becomes more open to the craft of the movies as practiced in Hollywood. Like Fitzgerald the novelist, Monroe Stahr produces movies, not opportunistically (for the most part) but from within. There is a fluidity to Fitzgerald's conception of Stahr missing from Gatsby and his dream, so ill defined in its worldly guise, so obsessive and absolute in its fixation on Daisy; and missing also from the aspiring hubris of Dick Diver, trapped by his misguided, innocent mingling of love and vocation in his dream of personality in *Tender Is the Night*. Stahr, like the writer who created him, learns that daring to function can be a first step toward loosening the paralyzing grip of "opposed ideas."

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Fitzgerald’s characters, like the seismograph alluded to in *Gatsby*, register changes in his sensibility. Not that Monroe Stahr is Fitzgerald; like the others, he is a composite character. "There never was a good biography of a good novelist," Fitzgerald wrote in his notebook. "He's too many people if he's any good." Nevertheless, Fitzgerald put into Stahr's character much of the awareness he came to have in the melancholy troubled years after *Tender Is the Night*. "Life, ten years ago," he wrote in 1936, "was largely a personal matter." Without telling how that's changed but making it clear that it has, Fitzgerald confronted his present imperative:

I must hold in balance the sense of the futility of effort and the sense of the necessity to struggle; the conviction of the inevitability of failure and the determination to "succeed"—and, more than these, the contradiction between the dead hand of the past and the high intentions of the future. *(CU 177, 70)*

To be sure, Fitzgerald did not always hold these contradictions of mind and will, memory and imagination, in equilibrium. But increasingly, as he worked on *The Last Tycoon* during his last year and a half in Hollywood, he sensed a progression from his earlier novels—enough that he strove to set a standard mingling intelligence with "a willingness of the heart." Intelligence identifies and holds in suspension "opposed ideas," but the "ability to function" in the midst of what Keats called "uncertainties, mysteries, doubts"? follows from that "willingness of the heart" Fitzgerald identified as a peculiarly intense American urge to do something about one's condition, to take risks for a better self, a better life, a better nation. "For example," Fitzgerald wrote, illustrating his embrace of contradiction, "one ought to be able to see that things are hopeless and still be determined to make them otherwise" *(CU 64)*. So he was. And as a writer, until the end of his life, Fitzgerald linked his pursuit of craft and personality, if not any longer simply happiness—"the natural state of the sentient adult is a qualified unhappiness" *(CU 84)*—with the unfolding story of America.

Perhaps because of Fitzgerald's struggles and his paradoxical, sometimes exhilarated serenity alongside the pain and loss reflected in the diminishing hourglass of his life, in *The Last Tycoon* he was able at least to break the stalemate between previously opposed ideas. For this reason, Fitzgerald's passing before he could finish *The Last Tycoon* is an incalculable loss, only to be guessed at from the drafts he left, however much in progress, and his rich, copious notes, charts, and outlines. With Hollywood as milieu and the producer Stahr as protagonist, the American dream becomes even more identified with the urge to inte-
grate private and public pursuits of happiness than in Fitzgerald's other novels.

In The Last Tycoon Fitzgerald does for the American dream what Ralph Ellison argues every serious novel does for the craft of fiction. Even as a fragment, the work extends the range of idea and phenomena associated with the dream. As a man and a writer, he became at home in that country of discipline and craft he had discovered but, later lamented, did not truly settle down in until it was too late. As he wrote to his daughter Scottie, a student and aspiring writer at Vassar, I wish I'd said "at the end of The Great Gatsby: 'I've found my line—from now on this comes first. This is my immediate duty—without this I am nothing'" (L 79). In 1939 and 1940, The Last Tycoon did come first. But burdened with expenses, lacking the quick, lucrative Saturday Evening Post markets of his youth, lacking in any case the "romantic readiness" to write stories with happy endings, and in sporadic, failing health, Fitzgerald had to balance his novel with other work, and eke it out in pieces. Nevertheless, he ended up a writer's writer. From that single window, he looked beyond his circumstances and saw the American dream not as a personal matter and no longer a nostalgic, romantic possibility but as a continuing defining characteristic of the American nation and its people. Far from being behind him, as Nick Carraway had claimed in The Great Gatsby, the dream, refigured in The Last Tycoon, is a recurring phenomenon in each phase, place, and guise of Fitzgerald's imagination of American experience.

The American story, Fitzgerald wrote late in life, "is the history of all aspiration—not just the American dream but the human dream..." The story that Fitzgerald told was his version of a dream hauntingly personal and national. "When I was your age," he wrote his daughter in 1938, "I lived with a great dream. The dream grew and I learned how to speak of it and make people listen." Like Keats, who, Fitzgerald imagined, was sustained to the end by his "hope of being among the English poets" (CU81), Fitzgerald aspired to be among the novelists. But, as he confessed to his daughter in a bone-scraping passage, he compromised his artist's dream by indulging the very thing that inspired it—romantic love. Of his marriage to Zelda, he wrote in retrospect, "I was a man divided—she wanted me to work too much for her and not enough for my dream" (L 32). The imbalance Fitzgerald attributed to Zelda was also his own tension and tendency. Nevertheless, what gave his life and work such fascination was exactly that dream of mingling craft and
accomplishment with love—first with Zelda, and at the end in more muted fashion with Sheilah Graham, his companion in Hollywood.

In its American guise, the dream Fitzgerald sought to realize flowed from that most elusive and original of the rights proclaimed by the Declaration of Independence. Framed as an “unalienable” right by Thomas Jefferson and espoused by the other founders of this revolutionary nation, the “pursuit of happiness” magnified the American dream into an abiding, almost sacred promise. Going back to that scripture of nationhood, it is striking to note that although Jefferson amended John Locke’s “life, liberty, and property or estate” to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” neither he nor any other signatory explained or remarked in writing on the change. But naming the “pursuit of happiness” an unalienable right confirmed the newly declared American nation as an experimental, necessarily improvisational society dedicated to the principle that every human personality is sacred and inviolable. Yes, blacks, women, Native Americans, and even indentured servants were excluded, but excluded then, not forever. For as Lincoln was to imply in the Gettysburg Address, the Declaration’s eloquent language strained toward the proposition that all persons were free, and, therefore, implicated in and responsible for the nation’s destiny. And the idea and covenant of American citizenship required that all individuals make themselves up in the midst of the emerging new society. And the process of creation would be vernacular, arising from native ground, the weather, landscape, customs, habits, peoples, and values of this new world in the making.

That was and remains the promise of America. But, Fitzgerald’s novels remind us, things were never this simple. And as the late Ralph Ellison, who seems closer and closer kin to Fitzgerald, put it, “a democracy more than any other system is always pregnant with its contradiction.”9 One such contradiction unresolved by the Declaration or the ensuing Constitution, and played out since in national experience and Fitzgerald’s novels, is between property and the “pursuit of happiness.” Certainly, as Eugene McCarthy has noted, the third unalienable right “undoubtedly included the right to pursue property as a form of happiness, or as ‘a happiness.’”10 For some the “pursuit of happiness” was simply a euphemism for property. Officially, the tension went unresolved and scarcely acknowledged until the 14th Amendment forbade the states to “deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law.” The less concrete, more elusive “pursuit of happiness” went unmentioned except by implication. Yet, for over 200 years, before and after passage of the 14th Amendment, Americans
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have sought to balance property’s material reality with the imaginative possibilities hinted at in the phrase the “pursuit of happiness.”

What if we were to read *Gatsby*, *Tender Is the Night*, and *The Last Tycoon* as projections of that sometime struggle, sometime alliance between property and the pursuit of happiness? As human impulses, property and the pursuit of happiness are sometimes contradictory, sometimes complementary metaphors for experience. Let property stand for the compulsion to divide the world and contain experience within fixed, arbitrary boundaries. And let the “pursuit of happiness” become imagination’s embrace of the complexity, fluidity, and possibility open to human personality. In Jefferson’s time, if not so strongly in Fitzgerald’s or our own, the “pursuit of happiness” also implied individual responsibility for the “spirit of public happiness” that John Adams felt so strongly in the colonies, which he judged the American Revolution won almost before it began. Jefferson did not include the word *public*, but his phrase implies the individual’s integration of desire with responsibility, self-fulfillment with the work of the world. In short, in this promissory initial American context, the pursuit of happiness was bound up with citizenship, and citizenship with each individual’s responsibility for democracy.

The first thing to be said about Fitzgerald’s novels is that these enactments of the American dream are expressed in the love affairs and worldly ambitions of Jay Gatsby, Dick Diver, and Monroe Stahr. In *The Great Gatsby* (TGG), *Tender Is the Night*, and *The Last Tycoon*, the matrix of the dream differs, but in each case, the hero is, like Fitzgerald, “a man divided,” yet he seeks to integrate love of a woman with accomplishment in the world. Telling his story to Nick Carraway after he has lost Daisy Fay for the second and last time, Gatsby remembers that when he first met her, he felt like the latest plunderer in the line of Dan Cody, his metaphorical father, and a mythical figure who, in Fitzgerald’s interpretation, “brought back to the Eastern seabord the savage violence of the frontier brothel and saloon.” Sensitive to the demarcations of background, money, and status, Gatsby

knew he was in Daisy’s house by a colossal accident. However glorious might be his future as Jay Gatsby, he was at present a penniless young man without a past, and at any moment the invisible cloak of his uniform might slip from his shoulders.

Meanwhile, “he had deliberately given Daisy a sense of security; he let her believe he was a person from much the same stratum as herself.” Jay Gatsby pursues Daisy knowing that her sense of happiness and the good
life depends on money and property. Nevertheless, "he took what he could get, ravenously and unscrupulously—eventually he took Daisy one still October night, took her because he had no real right to touch her hand" (TGG 76, 113). Ironically, Gatsby's lieutenant's uniform allows him proximity to Daisy simply as a man long enough to seduce her.

Until Gatsby makes love to Daisy, he projects little soul or feeling, only a self-absorbed passion mixed up with his urge to defy American boundaries of class, status, and money. The experience of love deeply moves and changes Gatsby, but so pervasive is the culture of material success that his new reverence and tenderness toward her are inseparable from money and possessions, and perhaps from Carraway's image of Daisy "gleaming like silver, safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor"—Gatsby's struggles, maybe, as a boy and penniless young man in North Dakota and Minnesota. Earlier that same day in 1922, Gatsby calls Daisy's voice a voice "full of money." But his subsequent words to Carraway about that experience of love in wartime 1917, a time that obscured boundaries of class and background in favor of a seemingly all-powerful fluidity and equality, convey the mystery and tenderness of his earlier emotion. "I can't describe to you how surprised I was to find out I loved her, old sport," Gatsby tells Carraway in his sometimes too well-chosen words whose tone nonetheless carries a touch of wonder. "I even hoped for a while that she'd throw me over, but she didn't, because she was in love with me too." The more vividly Gatsby remembers, the more the tricks of his voice yield to the feeling underneath. "She thought I knew a lot because I knew different things from her. . . . Well, there I was, 'way off my ambitions, getting deeper in love every minute, and all of a sudden I didn't care" (TGG 114, 91, 114).

Gatsby discovers that Daisy loves him because of his different experience, not despite it as he feared. He surrenders his ambitions, as yet inchoate, unfocused, adolescent, to his intense feeling for Daisy. But their love is an interlude, happening "in the meantime, in between time." More vividly alive because of his love for Daisy, Gatsby "did extraordinarily well in the war," becoming a captain and, following the Argonne, a major given "command of the divisional machine guns" (TGG 72, 114). He emerges as a leader. Although his ambitions are vague, thinking of other American trajectories, a pioneering future in politics or in some other new venture, aviation, say, or advertising, might have awaited Gatsby if Daisy had stayed true to her love for him.

Instead, Daisy Fay turns fickle and self-indulgent. Desperate for Gatsby to return, impatient and petulant over his mistaken assignment to Oxford, she must have her life "shaped now, immediately—and the
decision must be made by some force—of love, of money, of unquestionable practicality—that was close at hand” (TGG 115). Daisy’s pursuit of happiness in the form of her dangerous, defiant love for Gatsby surrenders to the palpability of a safe, material, unequal prop-ertyed union with Tom Buchanan. Afterwards, on his forlorn lover’s progress through the streets of Louisville, Daisy’s hometown and scene of their love, Gatsby understands: To win Daisy he gathers money and property, the latter transient and garish, in the quick and illegal ways open to him—Meyer Wolfsheim and the rackets. After another interval of love inspired by the possibilities of human personality—remember, Daisy sees Gatsby’s possessions for the Horatio Alger emblems that they are and responds only to the passion, will, and tenderness that lie behind them—the struggle over Daisy (and, parabolically, America) is fought on the field of property. Whose money is solid wealth, whose possessions land, oil, and the like? And whose property stays in the same hands for generations?

In *Gatsby*, sooner or later human feelings are negotiated in relation to property or some other form of material reality subject to ownership. Gatsby’s wonder of discovery, Daisy’s magic of “bringing out a meaning in each word that it had never had before and would never have again” (TGG 82), these unanticipated, intense moments of experience recede before Tom Buchanan’s relentless revelation of the shady transience of Gatsby’s wealth. But perhaps Gatsby, too, gives Daisy little choice between two opposed fixed ideas. When Tom Buchanan forces a showdown with Gatsby at the Plaza Hotel, the two men turn Daisy into a prized possession to be fought over on the basis of social and economic conventions. In effect, Buchanan invokes the *droit du seigneur*. He is the lord, Gatsby the serf, Daisy the woman belonging to the vast American estate. Contending on that ground, Gatsby may well pay an emotional tithe to the poor boy from North Dakota, and again feel he has no right to touch Daisy’s hand. In any case, the scene at the Plaza is an acrimonious “irritable reaching after fact or reason”\(^{11}\) without love. Who can blame Daisy for withdrawing after her perspective goes unheard by both men? On this occasion, Gatsby is no more able than Buchanan to consider Daisy a woman in her own right, a unique and equal person whose voice has had the power to give the words she sings singular feeling and meaning. For each man, Daisy is a possession; for Buchanan material, for Gatsby ideal. So Daisy, the actual woman, the flawed and vulnerable human personality, flees. Held to no standard of decency or accountability by either man after her hit-and-run killing of Myrtle Wilson, she once again chooses the conventional, worldly protection of Tom Buchanan.
Gatsby's dream of love corroded to nightmare, the passion ebbs from his work, such as it is. And no wonder. His flimsy network of "gonnegions" and sinister underworld deals in booze and bonds were all for love of Daisy. When she returns to Tom Buchanan and their leisure-class world, partly because of Gatsby's desperate bargain with the American underworld, and partly because of his narcissistic, romantic inability to comprehend her attachment to Buchanan, Gatsby is emptied of love and ambition alike. The heart and wonder are gone from him; there is no happiness to pursue. His time of love and "aesthetic contemplation" passed, Gatsby, Nick imagines, sees around him only a frightening physical landscape—"a new world, material without being real" (TGG 123), an American world bleaker and, for all its glut of accumulations, more insubstantial than the spare, monotonous prairie James Gatz started from in rural North Dakota. For all his romantic gifts of personality, lacking a discerning critical intelligence, Gatsby seems destined to have served that same "vast, vulgar meretricious [American] beauty" of which Dan Cody is the apotheosis (TGG 75).

"France was a land, England was a people, but America, having about it still that quality of the idea, was harder to utter." In this passage from "The Swimmers," a 1929 story later distilled into his Notebooks, Fitzgerald evokes the anguished intense patriotism he finds in American faces from Abraham Lincoln's to those of the "country boys dying in the Argonne for a phrase that was empty before their bodies withered" (CU 197). For Fitzgerald that American "quality of the idea" finds most worthy expression in the impulse to offer the best of yourself on behalf of someone or something greater than yourself. Directed toward the world, a "willingness of the heart" intensifies the individual's feelings and experience. In Tender Is the Night (TITN) as in Gatsby, the dream of love and accomplishment is distorted by the values of property and possession. Like Gatsby, Dick Diver has large ambitions: "... to be a good psychologist—maybe to be the greatest one that ever lived."12 Dick's colleague, the stolid Swiss, Franz Gregorovius, stops short hearing his friend's pronouncement, as did the aspiring American man of letters, Edmund Wilson, when the undergraduate Fitzgerald declared: "I want to be one of the greatest writers who have ever lived, don't you?"13 Like Fitzgerald, Diver mingles love with ambition, though passively, almost as an afterthought: "He wanted to be loved too, if he could fit it in" (TITN 23).
Reminiscent of *Gatsby*, Diver's dream resides initially in a masculine world in which one man's ambition and achievement are measured against another's. But, as with Gatsby, experience changes the values implicit in Diver's equation. Stirred by professional curiosity, he meets Nicole Warren. Because of her youth and beauty, the patient becomes in Diver's eyes primarily a woman, though a woman imagined as "a scarcely saved waif of disaster bringing him the essence of a continent." To the inexperienced Diver—"only hot-cheeked girls in hot secret rooms" (*TITN* 27)—Nicole is a figure for the romantic possibility of an America that, like the "fresh green breast of the new world" whose "vanished trees . . . had made way for Gatsby's house" (*TGG* 137) is, though violated and compromised, suggestive of innocence, vitality, and possibility, and above all, still worthy of love.

So Dick Diver gambles his "pursuit of happiness" on marriage to Nicole. But his desire to be loved—"I want to be extravagantly admired again," Fitzgerald said as he was writing *Tender*—seduces him away from his scholarly writing as a psychiatrist. Once diverted from his work, he does not find happiness as curator of the leisure-class expatriate American world he and Nicole create on the Riviera, or as psychiatrist in charge of the clinic bought with Warren money, or as Nicole's husband, or, finally, "wolf-like under his sheep's clothing" a pursuer of women more in mind than in actuality. For Diver, like Gatsby, the pursuit of happiness becomes personally hollow in love, and professionally so in his work. Again, perhaps like Gatsby, only more so, Diver is more responsible than he knows for the dissolution of his dream of love and work.

For her part, Nicole, like Daisy, only more poignantly, veers between two selves. Cured, she embraces her heritage as her robber baron grandfather Warren's daughter; her white crook's eyes signify a proprietary attitude toward the world. More vividly and knowingly than before, she becomes the goddess of monopoly and dynasty described early in the novel. "For her sake trains began their run at Chicago and traversed the round belly of the continent to California." Nicole, "as the whole system swayed and thundered onward," is, in Europe, remote product and beneficiary of her family's multinational corporate interests. Like Daisy, Nicole "has too much money"; like Gatsby, Dick Diver "can't beat that" (*TITN* 113, 311).

Yet in *Tender Is The Night*, the matter is not so simple. Marrying Nicole, Dick takes on a task demanding a heroic and perhaps a too stringent discipline and self-denial. After the most violent and threatening of Nicole's schizophrenic episodes, he realizes that "somehow [he] and Nicole had become one and equal, not opposite and comple-
mentary; she was Dick too, the drought in the marrow of his bones." Her personality reinforces rather than compensates for what is missing in him. Even more fatal for Diver's balance between husband and psychiatrist, "he could not watch her disintegrations without participating in them" (207). Underneath the historical overtones of the American dream gone terribly, incestuously, wrong, Fitzgerald explores the strained and, finally, chilling intimacy of a marriage turned inward against the autonomy and independence of each person. With slow excruciating inevitability, Diver's "willingness of the heart," so catalytic to his imagination, charm, and discipline, deserts him.

She went up to him and, putting her arm around his shoulder and touching their heads together, said:

"Don't be sad."
He looked at her coldly.
"Don't touch me!" he said. (TITN, 319)

Diver has come so far from his former love for Nicole, "a wild submersion of soul, a dipping of all colors into an obscurring dye" (TITN 235), that he now recoils from her touch. The Divers are no longer man and woman to each other. In truth, the conditions and pathology sustaining the marriage are played out. Nicole is rid of her incestuous dependence on Dick, and Dick seeks to recover the independence he sacrificed as Nicole's husband, doctor, and, above all, protector.

Discipline, spirit, and imagination attenuated if not broken, Diver returns to America a stranger. With Nicole now acting as Fitzgerald's chronicler, the last news of Diver tells of the "big stack of papers on his desk that are known to be an important treatise on some medical subject, almost in process of completion." So much for his craft; as for the dream of love, he becomes "entangled with a girl who worked in a grocery store" (TITN 334). Homeless in spirit, Diver drifts from one lonely, lonely Finger Lakes town to another, and whatever dreams he has, he dreams in oblivion without his former promise and intensity of feeling and action.

Fitzgerald created his deepest, most realized novel out of his own predicament. His dissipation and need to write short stories for the Saturday Evening Post to sustain his and Zelda's standard of living seduced him away from his craft and to some extent his dream of love. Still, Fitzgerald bled out Tender Is the Night at La Paix—"La Paix (My God!)" (L 345)—in Rodgers Forge outside Baltimore. He brought his "big stack of papers" to completion. But when reviews were mixed and sales modest, also perhaps because, exhausted, he had no new novel
taking shape in his mind, only the early medieval tale of Phillippe or The Count of Darkness, with its curiously anachronistic tilt toward Ernest Hemingway's modern code of courage, Fitzgerald sank deeper into drink and depression. Finally, as Scott Donaldson observes, Asheville, Tyron, and other North Carolina towns became suspiciously like the small towns of Diver's self-imposed exile at the end of Tender Is the Night.  

For more than three years after publication of Tender Is the Night, Fitzgerald continued to imitate the desolate trajectory he'd projected for Dick Diver. Everything was a struggle. Perhaps "to preach at people in some acceptable form" (L 63) and to show himself an unbowed Sisyphus, without the camouflage of fiction, he dove into the confessional Crack-Up pieces. To the chagrin of those who wished him well, and even some who did not, he wrote an even more exposed confession of faith than Tender Is the Night. His low point came with the appearance of "The Other Side of Paradise," a portrait of the novelist as a broken-down man and a failed writer that appeared on his fortieth birthday in the New York Post in September of 1936. "A writer like me must have an utter confidence, an utter faith in his star," he told the reporter. "But through a series of blows, many of them my own fault, something happened to that sense of immunity, and I lost my grip." The reporter featured the empty bottles and the desolate hotel room more than Fitzgerald's words, however, and the self-inflicted blow of humiliation Fitzgerald absorbed seeing the piece in print prompted him to make an abortive gesture at suicide.

Only an offer from Hollywood less than a year later broke the pattern of waste, the spell of despair, and roused Fitzgerald from his uneasy, purgatorial hibernation. Slowly, tortuously, he came back to life as a man and a novelist. Taking another crack at Hollywood, where the "inevitable low gear of collaboration" (CU 78) had twice mocked his sense of artistic vocation, Fitzgerald renewed his "pursuit of happiness." His theme was another variation of the American dream. For as a place and an industry, Hollywood was at once the consequence and the purveyor of the dream, often an eager expression of the culture's lowest common denominator. Unlike his earlier moves, to the south of France to write Gatsby in 1924 and Baltimore to write Tender in 1932, Fitzgerald saw going to Hollywood as a lucky last chance to recoup his fortunes. He had a screenwriter's contract; perhaps if he got himself together another novel would take shape. In the meantime, riding west
on the train in July 1937, Fitzgerald welcomed the chance to pay his
debts, educate Scottie, care for Zelda, and keep himself. And
Hollywood also offered a fresh start. "Of all natural forces," he had
written in The Crack-Up, "vitality is the incommunicable one" (CU 74).
And he did not flinch from taking stock of his condition. "For over
three years," he wrote his cousin Ceci, "the creative side of me has been
dead as hell" (L 419). So, he might have added, was the side of him that
lived in relationships at a high pitch of intensity.

In Hollywood almost two years, Fitzgerald pursued once more his
dream of love and craft. Cherished by Sheilah Graham who had her
own life and ambition, Fitzgerald felt alive enough in his pores to revive
the dream of being truly among the novelists. "Look," he wrote his
daughter late in October 1939 with a surge of the old vitality and self-
confidence, "I have begun to write something that is maybe great." And
he went on to tell her with touching understatement: "Anyhow I am
alive again" (L 61). In the last year of his life, Fitzgerald poured into
Monroe Stahr and The Last Tycoon the sense that life was ebbing and his
resolve to pursue happiness as a writer and a man to the end. Into Stahr
he put exhaustion—the sense of death in the mirror—and readiness
for love—"the privilege of giving himself unselfishly to another human
being," Fitzgerald's words for a love more mature than romantic. Into
his new book, he put the passion to make The Last Tycoon "something
new" that could "arouse new emotions, perhaps even a new way of
looking at certain phenomena."16 For him the "pursuit of happiness"
now meant, in Francis Kroll Ring's words, "the pursuit of the limits of
his craft," which she, who knew him well, notes that he felt "he had not
reached."17

Fitzgerald did not speak directly of the dream in The Last Tycoon as
he had in Gatsby, Tender Is the Night, and, with occasional bitter
nostalgia, the Crack-Up essays. But it was there in Monroe Stahr's pursuit
of private and public happiness, there with a measure of caution and
maturity as well as a dangerous, consuming intensity. Monroe Stahr is
both outside and inside the mold of Fitzgerald's previous heroes. Like
Gatsby, Stahr is self-made, a leader of men in Hollywood as Gatsby
briefly had been in France during the Great War. But Stahr's ambition
and creative power fuse with the public good; he does not become a
crook or a gangster to advance his ideal, romantic pursuit of happiness.
Neither does he confuse love with vocation. No,

Stahr like Lincoln was a leader carrying on a long war on many
fronts; almost singlehandedly 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. (LT 106)

Like Dick Diver, Stahr's mind puts him in select company, and also like Diver, Stahr is a man with a strong, specific sense of vocation. But unlike Diver, Stahr distills his passion into a sustained, disciplined appetite for his work. Stahr is also a Jew, whose identity as an American outsider is more fully, consciously felt and put to more palpable professional use than had been the case with either Gatsby or Diver.

Stahr makes it to the pinnacle in Hollywood—a world open to and largely created by Jews—by virtue of his brains, judgment, leadership, taste, and sense of craft and quality possible in the medium of film with its democratic accessibility and mass appeal. Compared to Lincoln by Fitzgerald, Stahr believes he's about to take a call from President Roosevelt in front of the woman he's just recently met and is fast coming to love. "I've talked to him before," Stahr tells Kathleen before the phone call turns out to be from an agent whose orangutan is "a dead ringer for McKinley" (LT 83). But Fitzgerald, always sensitive to the feel of a decade's turning points, implies parallels between Stahr's protective role in the movie industry and Roosevelt's in government. "There is no world but it has its heroes," he writes, "and Stahr was the hero." He evokes Stahr's staying power during the evolving phases of the movies, as well as in the making of an individual picture. "Most of these men had been here a long time—through the beginnings and the great upset, when sound came, and the three years of depression, he had seen that no harm came to them." Stahr was perhaps a paternal employer, as Roosevelt was a paternal, protective President. Both men preside over transitional circumstances in ways more evolutionary than revolutionary by force of character and impersonal compassionate intelligence, and by taking a personal interest in the problems of their constituencies. "The old loyalties were trembling now," Fitzgerald concludes in the passage describing Stahr mingling with those who work for him at the end of a day at the studio: "There were clay feet everywhere; but still he was their man, the last of the princes. And their greeting was a sort of low cheer as he went by" (LT 27).

Stahr dreams of and attains knowledge and success in Hollywood's ambiguous, often insincere world of entertainment, art, and profit, the solitary, Cartesian way. He "did his reasoning without benefit of books—and he had just managed to climb out of a thousand years of Jewry into the late eighteenth century." About the past, Fitzgerald notes that Stahr "could not bear to see it melt away" (LT 118). Reading this you can't help recall Fitzgerald's elegiac prose about the early promise
of America “where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night” (TGG 137), or those pioneering Virginia “souls made of new earth in the forest-heavy darkness of the seventeenth century” (TITN 222). In a word, Fitzgerald continues, Stahr “cherished the parvenu’s passionate loyalty to an imaginary past” (LT 118). But, having faced Stahr’s and his own nostalgia, Fitzgerald invokes checks and balances against the romantic pull of the past. Stahr invents a peculiar, involuntary collaboration among the screenwriters, and his broader accomplishment as producer—“I’m the unity”—comes from his radical pragmatic courage to grasp and implement innovations. In short, Stahr is able “to retain the ability to function” amidst the contradictions of democracy and corporate power and property. Fitzgerald, too, wanted to achieve in The Last Tycoon what he felt he and his contemporaries so far had not done with the novel. “I want to write scenes that are frightening and inimitable,” he writes in one of his notes.

Both Fitzgerald and Stahr are men whose creative powers flow more richly into the world when they are involved in a satisfying, intimate relationship with a woman. For all of Stahr’s love affair with an “imaginary past,” Kathleen awakens his passion for life in the present. Despite his “definite urge toward total exhaustion,” when he and Kathleen touch, Stahr feels the abiding elemental world again; at the coast he comes alive to the rhythms of land and sea and sky. After he and Kathleen make love at his unfinished Malibu beach house—“It would have been good anytime, but for the first time it was much more than he had hoped or expected”—they watch countless grunion fish come to touch land “as they had come before Sir Francis Drake had nailed his plaque to the shore” (LT 92, 108, 152).

Stahr’s love for Kathleen intensifies his confidence about his gifts and worldly aspirations in a way reminiscent of Fitzgerald. “I used to have a beautiful talent once, Baby,” Fitzgerald told young Budd Schulberg during the Dartmouth Winter Carnival debacle. “It used to be wonderful feeling it was there.” Page by page, Fitzgerald ekes out The Last Tycoon, his physical stamina no longer able to keep up with his mind. Nor keep up with his will. As Frances Kroll Ring, Fitzgerald’s then 20-year-old secretary tells it, he’d take a weekend off when he needed money to pay bills. With single-minded discipline fired by a desire to have the coming week free for his novel, he would plot and write a Pat Hobby story for Esquire. But always the dream of realizing his promise as a pioneering American novelist was there, perhaps made more palpable by his love affair with Sheilah Graham and his dedication to her education, and, for that matter, to his daughter Scottie’s
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education. The latter is especially poignant, for Scottie, of the same generation as Fitzgerald’s narrator, Cecilia Brady, and his contemporary and intellectual conscience, Edmund Wilson, were Fitzgerald’s two imagined readers of The Last Tycoon, and that connection kept him going on more than one desolate, discouraging occasion.

In the novel, Fitzgerald does not leave the connection between love and craft to speculation. While the grunions flop at their feet on the Malibu shore; Stahr and Kathleen encounter a black man who tells Stahr he “never go[es] to movies” and “never let[s his]children go” (LT 92). Later, at home alone, Stahr recalls the man—“He was prejudiced and wrong, and he must be shown somehow some way.” The man had been reading Emerson, and for Stahr he becomes the representative responsible good citizen whose allegiance Stahr must win for his soul’s sake, the movies’ sake, and the sake of American culture, of which Stahr sees himself a guardian. “A picture,” Stahr thinks, “many pictures, a decade of pictures, must be made to show him he was wrong.” And Stahr immediately commits himself to a specific action. “[H]e submitted the borderline pictures to the Negro and found them trash. And he put back on his list a difficult picture that he had tossed to the wolves, . . . to get his way on something else. He rescued it for the Negro man” (LT 95). Here Stahr puts his corporate property and producer’s power in service of a higher common good—democratic (e)quality. Here the “pursuit of happiness” expresses his best potential and the best of American popular culture. What’s more, Stahr’s responsiveness to the black man’s criticism is bound up with his passionate and tender love for Kathleen. His power to act as a public man is perhaps brought to brief, occasional fullness by the experience of love and intimacy.

Yet Stahr, Fitzgerald takes pains to observe, was not born to love and intimacy. He worked hard to shape the raw materials of his personality into a sensibility capable of an intimate relationship. “Like many brilliant men, he had grown up dead cold.” Looking over the way things were,

he swept it all away, everything, as men of his type do; and then instead of being a son-of-a-bitch as most of them are, he looked around at the bareness that was left and said to himself, “This will never do.” And so he had learned tolerance, kindness, forbearance, and even affection like lessons. (LT 97)

Not surprisingly, Stahr’s impulses toward the private happiness of intimacy are not as natural or sure-handed as his pursuit of public happiness in the world in the form of work and power, competition and money.
For all his mingling of love and craft in what seems a mature pursuit of happiness, Stahr hesitates with Kathleen. Perhaps Fitzgerald would have changed somewhat the terms of his story; we do not know. What we do know is that Stahr waits, fatally it turns out, though he is sure in his heart and his mind. “He could have said it then, said, ‘It is a new life,’ for he knew it was, he knew he could not let her go now, but something else said to sleep on it as an adult, no romantic” (LT 115).

What Stahr and Kathleen do not know is that outside forces are closing in. The man Kathleen calls “The American,” who rescued her from her old life’s quagmire in London, is already speeding toward Los Angeles and the marriage ceremony they’ve agreed to, his train hours early. If there’s something hasty, even amateurish about this twist of Fitzgerald’s plot, so be it. To say he might have changed it or refined the terms is to remember that he too, like Stahr, did not have the luxury of time.

In what Fitzgerald did write, Stahr says good night to Kathleen, but keeps his feelings to himself. “We’ll go to the mountains tomorrow,” he tells her with the public voice of the man in charge, the producer, as if that were all. For his part, Fitzgerald the novelist, unable to resist one of those asides that mark his relations with his characters, especially those he loves, reflects on Stahr’s temporizing judgment: “You can suddenly blunt a quality you have lived by for twenty years” (LT 116).

This line does not belong entirely to Fitzgerald but to Cecelia Brady, his narrator, who also loves Stahr, and in the way of a woman, not a novelist. Here, too, Fitzgerald was breaking new and different ground from that traversed in previous novels. He gambled that this young woman, “at the moment of her telling the story, an intelligent and observant woman” (LT 140), could reveal Stahr’s complexity as well as her own and that of Hollywood and American society in the transitional time of the Depression and the coming of the Second World War. Through Cecelia’s sensibility as insider and outsider, Fitzgerald registers changes in what Ellison has called the American social hierarchy.21

In The Last Tycoon, Stahr, a Jew not far from the shtetl, makes a black man his moviemaker’s conscience, falls in love with an Irish immigrant, and has his story told by another woman, a young Irish American who, by virtue of her father’s Hollywood money and her intelligence and grace, moves among the well-to-do on both coasts.

In Fitzgerald’s fascinating, fragmentary notes and sketches for the novel’s ending—three teenagers’ discovery of the fallen plane and the personal effects of Stahr and other passengers—and epilogue—Stahr’s lavish Hollywood funeral full of hypocrisy and intrigue—the dream fights on in life-affirming, life-denying variations. Whatever Fitzgerald
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... might have done, we glimpse in Stahr what might unfold if the pursuit of private and public happiness were to fuse in a common responsiveness. The one transforms and intensifies the other; the self trembles, now fully alive.

Stahr, whether in conversation or the act of love with Kathleen, or in his renewed sense of aesthetic possibility in response to a black man's rejection of the movies, comes to know that his vitality depends on mingling passion and tenderness toward Kathleen with the pragmatic imagination of his producer's craft. Without one, the other falters, as Fitzgerald shows in his draft of the last episode he wrote and his notes for the novel's succeeding chapters. In the last months of his life, Fitzgerald struggled toward the same equilibrium beyond Stahr's grasp, but not his imagination, in his settled relationship with Sheilah Graham and the steadfastness with which he pursued the limits of his craft. Despite his efforts to finish *The Last Tycoon*, Fitzgerald left a fragment that is, for all its promise, as Richard Lehan put it, "a brilliantly incomplete work that has all the limitations of being a draft and thus never fully conceptualized and polished by revision, where Fitzgerald always did his best work." Nevertheless, Fitzgerald's fragment is a palpable reminder, at once mocking and reassuring, about his novelist's dream and the American theme.

"So we beat on," to echo and recast Gatsby's ending, not necessarily "borne back ceaselessly into the past" (*TGG* 137). For in *The Last Tycoon*, there is a fluidity and ambiguity about property and the "pursuit of happiness" missing from the social structures underlying *Gatsby* and *Tender Is the Night*. Even more than *Tender Is the Night*, in its protean state *The Last Tycoon* appears a work of ceaseless fluctuations. Unlike *Tender*, *Tycoon*'s unfolding and denouement were to be governed by a moral and aesthetic principle underscored in Fitzgerald's notes. ACTION IS CHARACTER, he wrote in large block letters, and they are the last words in Edmund Wilson's edition of the fragment. As Fitzgerald's notes and outlines reiterate, Monroe Stahr was to struggle until the end. He would not await his fate passively like Gatsby or, like Dick Diver, abdicate to a private corner of America. Fitzgerald imagines Stahr a player to the last, and only the ironic contemporary deus ex machina of a plane crash would interfere with his decision to call off a retaliatory murder he's arranged in sick desperation. Gatsby operates in the shadows of American violence and power; Diver becomes a sleepwalking Rip van Winkle in a time of transition, but Stahr lives in the
glare never believing that “things are [entirely] hopeless.” Rather, he is “determined [to the end] to make them otherwise.” Such, at least, is the impression conveyed by Fitzgerald’s posthumous, very much in-progress fragment of a novel.

In Stahr’s case and Fitzgerald’s, the choices are contingent and pragmatic rather than ideal. It is no longer the case, as Fitzgerald once believed, that “life was something you dominated if you were any good” (CU 69). This romantic categorical imperative is long gone from his life and burned off the pages of The Last Tycoon. By 1940, life was the pursuit of equilibrium, and the dream has become an ability to put previously opposed ideas into relationship, what D. H. Lawrence, in praise of the novel, called “the trembling instability of the balance.”

Perhaps this is why Fitzgerald, and his evolving patriot parvenu, Monroe Stahr, come to the American dream still with a “willingness of the heart.” Its promise was not happiness at all, as Jefferson and Adams realized so long ago, but the pursuit of happiness. The American experiment looked toward an ideal of individuals straining for self-realization with every nerve and muscle, every thought and feeling, in order to create what Ellison identified as that “condition of being at home in the world which is called love and which we term democracy.”

For Fitzgerald the pursuit of happiness and the American Dream were inseparable. Digging deeply into his experience and the nation’s, Fitzgerald made Monroe Stahr’s story and character express the complexity of American life, its contradictions and possibilities alike. “The writing gave him hope,” Frances Ring remembers from Fitzgerald’s last months, “that something good was happening, that he was whole again.”

Perhaps the sense of his powers returning prompted Fitzgerald’s note to himself near the end. “I am the last of the novelists for a long time now,” he wrote, and who can know what he meant? Could he have meant that he was the last of his generation to keep faith with the nineteenth-century view of the novel as a testing ground for the experiment of American culture and democracy? Could he have meant his remark as a challenge to succeeding writers to pick up where he left off in exploring the American theme? Whatever he meant, even unfinished, The Last Tycoon has had the effect of leading readers and writers back to Fitzgerald’s work knowing, as he knew, that the story of America has an endless succession of takes, but no final script.
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NOTES


2 Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man, 433.

3 Ernest Hemingway, The Sun Also Rises, 148.

4 The Great Gatsby, 4. Henceforth The Great Gatsby will be cited in the text as TGG.

5 The Crack-Up, ed. Edmund Wilson, 69. Henceforth The Crack-Up will be cited in the text as CU.

6 Andrew Turnbull, ed., The Letters of F. Scott Fitzgerald, 96. Henceforth the Letters will be cited in the text as L.


8 Quoted by Andrew Turnbull in Scott Fitzgerald, 307.

9 Ralph Ellison, Going to the Territory, 251.

10 Eugene McCarthy, Complexities and Contraries: Essays of Mild Discontent, 112.

11 Keats, 193.

12 Tender Is the Night, 22. Henceforth Tender Is the Night will be cited in the text as TITN.

13 F. Scott Fitzgerald as quoted by Edmund Wilson in “Thoughts on Being Bibliographed,” 54.


16 The Last Tycoon, 139, 141. Henceforth The Last Tycoon will be cited in the text as LT. (Matthew J. Bruccoli, editor of The Love of the Last Tycoon [1993] is correct to say that Edmund Wilson assigned the title of The Last Tycoon. Nevertheless, Bruccoli’s evidence for his title is less than convincing; thus my decision to use the 1941 Wilson edition.)

17 Letter from Frances Kroll Ring to the author.

18 F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Notes as quoted by Matthew J. Bruccoli in The Last of the Novelists: F. Scott Fitzgerald and The Last Tycoon, 156.


20 Frances Kroll Ring, Against the Current: As I Remember F. Scott Fitzgerald, 52–55.

21 This is a recurring phrase and theme of Ellison’s, found in Shadow & Act, Going to the Territory, and in some of his unpublished or uncollected pieces included in Collected Essays.

22 Richard Lehan, letter to the author.

23 D. H. Lawrence, Phoenix: The Posthumous Papers of D. H. Lawrence, 528.

24 Ralph Ellison, Shadow & Act, 105–06.


26 Bruccoli, op. cit., 156.
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Hemingway, Ernest. The Sun Also Rises. New York: Scribner’s, 1926.


