

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940) *The Crack-Up*

When “The Crack-Up” first appeared in *Esquire* in February, 1936, many of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s friends and fellow novelists were disgusted. The Great Depression had put millions of Americans in far more desperate straits than he was in, and he seemed to be whining. Such private confessions also seemed beneath the dignity of a novelist. To make matters worse, he was appearing in an expensive, upper-class men’s magazine. “Christ, man, how do you find time in the middle of the general conflagration to worry about all that stuff?” John Dos Passos wrote him. “We’re living in one of the damndest tragic moments in history—if you want to go to pieces I think it’s absolutely O.K. but I think you ought to write a first rate novel about it...instead of spilling it in little pieces for Arnold Gingrich (the *Esquire* publisher).”¹

In the years since, however, beginning with the book of Fitzgerald’s uncollected writings which Edmund Wilson edited and entitled *The Crack-Up* (1945), the version of his life which Fitzgerald gives here has become a basic part of his legend. It’s simple, affecting pieces—early dreams, despair, and resolute stoicism—are classic, recalling hundreds of religious and secular conversion stories. Yet its language is fresh, lean, impudent, and colorful. Many phrases have become almost as familiar as passages in *The Great Gatsby*.

The assumption behind most readings of these three confessional essays, however—both the favorable and the critical—is the same: In them Fitzgerald was being unusually candid, artless, and personal. He was letting go with “self-revelation.” He was writing from deep in “a real dark night of the soul.” Liking it or rejecting it thus depends, supposedly, on how one feels about public confessions. “There are always those to whom all self-revelation is contemptible,” says the author. But he brashly offends them in order to say what he has to say and reach other people who care.

A more cautious reading of these essays might begin by noting what they leave out. We know now from Fitzgerald biographers that at the point when he began them, in November, 1935, his wife Zelda had had several nervous breakdowns and been in a sequence of mental hospitals. His alcoholism was severe despite his saying that he had “not tasted as much as a glass of beer for six months.” And his debts were very high. Yet none of these things is mentioned. Nor does he write about his delays in finishing *Tender Is the Night* (1934) or complain about his fallen literary popularity. He could, in other words, have written more “self-revelation” than he did.

Instead, with his talk of “not being big enough to play football in college,” and “not getting overseas during the war,” he seems to be confessing “regrets” and broken dreams that many other men of his age and class may have had. This is true also of the “grave sentence” his doctor gave him. Even the metaphors, like the cracked plate, his “mortgaging” himself and “over-drawing at his bank,” tend to touch many other people’s experience and so universalize or disguise his own.

We might therefore ask whose autobiography this really is: his, his generations, or the nation’s? We might also ask, as we study the differences between “fiction” and “autobiography,” whether Fitzgerald was more self-revelatory here or in a short story like “*Babylon Revisited*,” which was written at about the same time.

The source of the text below is *The Crack-Up*, edited by Edmund Wilson, and all ellipses are from that edition. There are numerous good Fitzgerald biographies. The fullest is Matthew J. Bruccoli, *Some Sort of Epic Grandeur: The Life of F. Scott Fitzgerald* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981).

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1. John Dos Passos, “A letter from John Dos Passos,” in *The Crack-Up*, ed. Edmund Wilson, p. 311.

Reading

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<http://www.esquire.com/features/the-crack-up>