

A Study of Fitzgerald's "Crack-up" Essays —A Legacy from Benjamin Franklin—

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Introduction

It is widely known that the ups and downs of F. Scott Fitzgerald's life paralleled specific situations in America, as Alice Hall Petry describes as follows:

...even Fitzgerald himself recognized that his personal life eerily paralleled historical events in the United States, with his own young manhood coinciding with America's emergence in World War I, with his career—and excess—peaking with the dynamic but self-indulgent 1920s, and with his troubled early middle age coexisting with the miserable 1930s.... (Petry 253)

And furthermore, Petry presents a guideline to us that we should follow in reading Fitzgerald's works:

This was a man, in other words, for whom his personal life, his writings, and the historical moment constituted a kind of trinity—a trinity that must be borne in mind if one is to respond correctly to his writings (253).

There are quite a few critics who follow the guideline in order to "respond to [Fitzgerald's] writings." First, they create a framework—"a kind of trinity"—in which "his writings" show that "his personal life" corresponds to "historical events in the United States," and then, after having found out the situation of the writer, they try to determine that of the United States. Such a critical tendency is prominent in the studies

of Fitzgerald's "Crack-up" essays.

The "Crack-up" essays are made up of "The Crack-up," "Pasting It Together," and "Handle with Care," and they were published in *Esquire* in February, March, and April 1936. Pitiabale conditions of the author are frankly set down in the essays. It has been ages since Andrew Turnbull, author of a classic critical biography of Fitzgerald, recognized the "Crack-up" essays as "a post-mortem on his nervous and psychological breakdown" (Turnbull 269). Many critics have been ready to fit the essays into the "trinity" framework, consider them "a post-mortem" of American society, and find out the difficult conditions of America in the 1930s suffering from the Depression in the predicament of Fitzgerald himself at the same period. Certainly it is quite easy for us to see Fitzgerald's adversity parallel America's economic crisis in the essays. But there is still a question: do the "Crack-up" essays suggest merely the partial movements of America from the 1920s through the 1930s which are reflected in Fitzgerald's tumbling down from the height of success to the abyss of grief?

In this essay, in the first place, I will examine the detail of Fitzgerald's own crack-up. Next, I will check the correspondence of the "Crack-up" essays with *The Great Gatsby*, and then try to reveal a message hidden in the essays.

I

In the 1920s, an aroma of the unprecedented prosperity hung over America. By request of publishers, Fitzgerald repeatedly wrote witty and refined stories in which flappers had wild love affairs with handsome guys with a splendid party for a background. The stories brought Fitzgerald a fame and vast manuscript fees. But the situation changed entirely: in October 1929, the Depression devastated the Jazz Age thoroughly and the hilarious 1920s was replaced by the miserable 1930s. Flappers in gorgeous dress had disappeared and the streets were filled with hundreds of workers out of their jobs. The flowing and elegant writing style of Fitzgerald was no longer suitable for the

period when "[the] new fashion was for fiction about strikes, migrant workers, and proletarian hero-victims" (*Literary Masters* 99) and he was left behind the times before long. That led to his exhaustion of creativity and financial predicament. His alcoholism and the mental disorder of his wife, Zelda, which were caused by their dissipated life style in the 1920s, urged his life to decline. It was Arnold Gingrich, editor of *Esquire*, that extended a helping hand to Fitzgerald in adversity. Gingrich encouraged Fitzgerald to describe frankly why he had fallen into such a painful situation. As a result the "Crack-up" essays were published in *Esquire* in 1936.

In the context of the publication mentioned above, we have no difficulty in seeing the essays apply to Petry's guideline presented at the beginning of this essay. They fit completely into the "trinity" framework consisted of "[Fitzgerald's] personal life," "historical events of the United States," and "his writings" showing the correspondence of the both. Bruce L. Grenberg argues the "Crack-up" essays in detail, in addition to introducing the preceding studies of the essays. He regards the essays as "a compound record of disintegration—not merely of Fitzgerald, but of the audience to which he writes—and, by extension, of America itself" (Grenberg 206). "The pervasive theme of the essays is the crack-up of America, which had already taken place in the boom of the 1920s, the economic and social collapse of 1929, and the depression that followed" (208), and so according to Grenberg, in the "Crack-up" essays, the problem which Fitzgerald had from the 1920s through the 1930s expands into that of America in the same period of time. Grenberg considers Fitzgerald as "a pained observer and reluctant recorder of the demise of 'old America'" (208) and suggests that the truth of Fitzgerald's problem, namely America's problem is "the demise of 'old America'." In this essay, however, it is not my intention to make an exhaustive study of the problem that America was confronted with in those days. Whatever it may be, we should notice that Grenberg also tries to find out nothing but the partial movements of America in Fitzgerald's crack-up, as if he were under the spell of Petry's guideline. I wonder

if Fitzgerald's crack-up is really just the reflection of the partial movements of America.

With regard to Fitzgerald's crack-up, its process isn't so simple. Reading the essays carefully, we will realize that Fitzgerald's crack-up doesn't end up with his miserable situation like "a cracked plate" (Pasting It Together 145) after the decline from the height of glory in the Jazz Age to the depth of despair in the 1930s. Fitzgerald tells us "in a real dark night of the soul it is always three o'clock in the morning" (145). He continues that in this "real dark night of the soul," or at the extreme point of his crack-up, "one is not waiting for the fade-out of a single sorrow, but rather being an unwilling witness of an execution, the disintegration of one's personality" (146). But in the next paragraph, Fitzgerald unexpectedly relates to us that "...this phase comes to a dead-end, eventually, and is succeeded by a vacuous quiet" (146), and furthermore, gives us a detailed explanation of the "vacuous quiet" as follows:

...—a feeling that I was standing at twilight on a deserted range, with an empty rifle in my hands and the targets down. No problem set — simply a silence with only the sound of my own breathing (147).

Fitzgerald's crack-up doesn't end when he is compelled to be "an unwilling witness of an execution, the disintegration of [his] own personality" in the "real dark night of the soul." Such an extreme situation "comes to a dead-end" and "a vacuous quiet" descends over him. And then, as though the situation changed for the better, it gets slightly bright and the "real dark night" turns into the "twilight." It seems that at this point Fitzgerald is in a state of "No problem set." However, he is actually up against the wall: he has no choice but to stand "on a deserted range, with an empty rifle in [his] hands and the targets down." Thus the situation is, as it were, just a "reprieve" (Crack-up 140) which is far from a recovery and it is still unpredictable. We hardly expect that the "real dark night" will be replaced by the hopeful

and brilliant light of the morning. It can only change into as far as the "twilight."

Fitzgerald isn't allowed to remain in this state of "reprieve" in the "twilight." He remarks to us "Well, when I had reached this point of silence, I was forced into a measure that no one ever adopts voluntarily: I was impelled to think" (148). He is compelled to meet the crisis with "the measure that no one ever adopts voluntarily," namely, the act of thinking, being scared of a gloomy foreboding of "an execution." And the foreboding comes true, as he immediately says to us in the next paragraph "So there was not an "I" any more—not a basis on which I could organize my self-respect" (149). This description shows that the suspended "execution"—"the disintegration of [his] own personality"—has been carried out. As soon as the "real dark night of the soul" has changed into the obscure "twilight," everything is plunged into the real darkness again: everything is back where it started.

At this point we grasp the process of Fitzgerald's crack-up: first, his state of difficulties shifts from dark despair to an obscure "reprieve," secondly, in the state of "reprieve," he tries to overcome the crisis in vain, and finally, he is thrown to his dark despair again. In this way Fitzgerald's crack-up seems not to have an introduction, adequate development, and a conclusion and that's because it continues to repeat endlessly. This is why Fitzgerald tells us "Only when this quiet came to me, did I realize that I had gone through two parallel experiences" (146), referring to the "quiet" in the "reprieve." It must be a sign of his own idea that Fitzgerald, who compares himself to "a cracked plate," published the essays in the order of "The Crack-up," "Pasting It Together," and "Handle with Care" in *Esquire*. Once a "plate" has "cracked," it's impossible to get rid of the trace on it completely, although we "paste it together." Even if we "handle" it "with care," we always have to worry whether the "plate" will "crack" again. Thus the circumstances of the "plate" begin to take an aspect of going round and round in circles.

II

Fitzgerald gives us a definition as the prologue to his own crack-up in the second paragraph of the first essay:

Before I go on with this short history let me make a general observation—the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function. One should, for example, be able to see that things are hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise. (Crack-up 139)

There are many who consider “the test of a first-rate intelligence,” or “the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function” as the “double vision” Malcolm Cowley presents as a characteristic of Fitzgerald⁽¹⁾. But I would like to emphasize that Fitzgerald uses the words “a general observation” here, because Fitzgerald suggests, I think, “the test of a first-rate intelligence” is something universal rather than a personal characteristic of the author.

We find the evidence of it in the correspondence between *Gatsby* and the “Crack-up” essays. Jay Gatsby dies tragically after his unreciprocated love with Daisy Buchanan. In the final part of the story, Nick Carraway, narrator, goes to Gatsby’s magnificent mansion, and then he sits alone on the beach inside the site, mourning over his death, when the following scene begins:

And as I sat there, brooding on the old unknown world, I thought of Gatsby’s wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy’s dock....

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that’s no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther.... And one fine morning—

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past. (*Gatsby* 141)

When Daisy living in the house with "the green light" at its dock turns into a "daisy" flowering in the green "old unknown world" which reminds us of the dawn of America⁽²⁾, Gatsby's affection for her sublimates into the dream which early settlers from the Old World once had, facing the new continent, that is, the American Dream. However, "the orgasmic future" in which we can realize the dream does nothing but to "[recede] before us," and so no matter how far we "stretch out our arms" toward the future, the "one fine morning" when we can seize it will never come. No matter how hard we row our "boats against the current," we can't reach the future so long as they are "borne back ceaselessly into the past." It goes without saying that the "one fine morning" which will never come corresponds to the above-mentioned "real dark night of the soul" that will never come to end. The arms stretched out in vain and the boats advancing and retreating endlessly correspond to Fitzgerald's crack-up in that they all go round and round in circles waiting for the hopeful morning that will never come.

And now, turning to the "Crack-up" essays, we will find a passage—"the contradiction between the dead hand of the past and the high intentions of the future" (Crack-up 140). This is nothing but the wake of the above-mentioned boats which have difficult voyages, tossed about by the strong current stretching from the past to the future. Thus, by the correspondence to *Gatsby* with the dawn of America for a background, the universality of Fitzgerald's crack-up in America is suggested in a grand perspective.

What happens if we pass "the test of a first-rate intelligence"? We will find the answer in the correspondence of the both, too. Just before the scene I have quoted above, Nick looks at the opposite shore across the sound after he got to Gatsby's mansion. And then a poetic and mysterious scene begins as follows:

Most of the big shore places were closed now and there were hardly any lights except the shadowy, moving glow of a ferryboat across the Sound. And as the moon rose higher, the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder. (*Gatsby* 140)

It is not the “real dark night of the soul” that envelopes Nick here. “[As] the moon [rises] higher, the inessential houses [begin] to melt away,” until the “twilight” comes on, in which “the shadowy, moving glow of a ferryboat” flickers across the surface of the dark sea. And all of a sudden, the scene is filled with strong Americanism, which works Nick into an ecstasy; he goes beyond time and space and secretly fraternizes with “Dutch [sailors],” being completely intoxicated “for a transitory enchanted moment” with an indescribable “aesthetic contemplation” — the American Dream, which is exaggeratedly paraphrased as “the last and greatest of all human dreams.” But we should not overlook the point that there is no cheerful mood nor sense of accomplishment here. A significant atmosphere which never allows Nick to rejoice exuberantly pervades the scene and that is because Nick can't help feeling dark despair derived from Gatsby's tragic death and his ecstasy only lasts for a “moment.”

According to the process of Fitzgerald's crack-up—going round and round in circles without getting out of the predicament in spite of the desperate endeavor made in the twilight of a reprieve between one dark night of despair and the next—, the ecstasy strongly colored by Americanism, which Nick can experience in the twilight for a moment,

is, I think, the result of the endeavor which is vainly made in the middle of despair. As I have quoted above, "the test of a first-rate intelligence" depends on whether we are "able to see that things are hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise." I think that Nick has passed "the test." We should recall at the end of the story, he remarks " [the future] eluded us then, but that's no matter" in order to encourage himself, even though he has witnessed Gatsby's dream perish mercilessly. In this way, if we pass "the test of a first-rate intelligence," we can enjoy a benefit—an ecstasy strongly colored by Americanism, which we can momentarily experience only after making every endeavor in the "hopeless" situation, knowing that it will be in vain.

III

Why does Fitzgerald's crack-up take on universality? And in connection with it, what is the truth of "the test of a first-rate intelligence" that allows us to experience momentarily the ecstasy colored by Americanism if we pass it? In order to answer these questions I need to introduce one of America's most famous, Benjamin Franklin into the discussion.

It is well known that the "SCHEDULE" (135) James Gatz (Gatsby's real name) wrote on the back cover of a popular book when he was still a boy is derived from the thirteen virtues in *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. We can also find answers to the above questions in the following quotation from *Autobiography*:

But on the whole, tho' I never arrived at the Perfection I had been so ambitious of obtaining, but fell far short of it, yet I was by the Endeavor a better and a happier Man than I otherwise should have been, if I had not attempted it.... (*Autobiography* 90)

Autobiography has been read by generation after generation of so many Americans that its influence in America is immeasurable. Here Franklin urges on the American people the necessity of "Endeavor," even "tho' [he] never arrived at the Perfection [he] had been so ambitious of

obtaining, but fell far short of it.” In other words, here Franklin urges on the American people to pass “the test of a first-rate of intelligence” which requires us to do every endeavor in the hopeless situation, and so the “happier” state of mind he mentions here is exactly the same as the benefit of having passed “the test”—the ecstasy Nick experiences in the twilight. Franklin, one of the Founding Fathers, tries to lead the American people to the state of ecstasy.

In “The Swimmers” Fitzgerald tells us that America “[has] about it still that quality of the idea” (*Bits* 110). I should think that there is no need to refer to its lofty ideal in American Revolution, but America is a nation which is constantly pursuing ideals. However, as we know, it has been extremely difficult for America to pursue ideals. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. devotes one chapter of his *The Cycles of American History* to depict the way the Founding Fathers were running about in confusion, worrying about the future of the newborn republic. Schlesinger tells us that the “apprehension of the mortality of republics pervaded Philadelphia in 1787” (Schlesinger 6), and this “apprehension” was never swept away. On the contrary the republic has been haunted by the “apprehension” since then. Should the New World have pushed ahead under the gold-brocade flag of freedom and democracy so that it might be an innocent utopia opposite to the corrupted Old World? Schlesinger points out sharply:

We carelessly apply the phrase “end of innocence” to one or another stage of American history. This is an amiable flourish when not a pernicious delusion. How many times can a nation lose its innocence? No people reared on Calvin and Tacitus could ever have been innocent. No nation founded on invasion, conquest and slaughter was innocent. No people who systematically enslaved black men and killed red men were innocent. No state established by evolution and thereafter rent by civil war was innocent (9).

It is nothing but the track of America which has had great difficulty in

pursuing its ideals that emerges in the quotation. It reminds us of ugly and bizarre ruts in a muddy road. In such a nation, despair caused by setbacks and renunciations must have been quite common. This is the reason why Fitzgerald's crack-up goes round and round in circles without getting out of the predicament, and moreover, why his crack-up takes on universality in America. In America it sounds suspicious that one can dance for joy after the attainment of a great ambition, for it is like building a castle in the air, and therefore, according to his own experience, Franklin explains to the American people that it is possible for them to enjoy happiness even if they fail to attain their ambitions. I venture to say that Franklin suggests there should be the happiness which they can experience all the more because their ambitions collapse. He persuades the American people that the transitory ecstasy similar to a serene sense of fulfillment which one can enjoy only after doing one's best and making every endeavor even in the middle of despair is much more suitable for America and that this state of ecstasy is exactly what they should long for. Thus the state of ecstasy Fitzgerald presents in the process of his own crack-up might be said to be an intensely practical ideal state of mind that Franklin has urged the American people to pursue since he first proposed it almost 250 years ago. At this point we grasp the truth of "the test of a first-rate intelligence": it is a legacy from Franklin, or the "test" he has required the American people to pass. The legacy has been continuously taken over since the dawn of America and still lived distinctly in the Jazz Age and the following difficult economic period.

Conclusion

I have mentioned a message hidden in the "Crack-up" essays at the beginning of this essay and here we realize what it is. From the above it goes without saying that it is no better than a superficial inspection to find out merely the partial movements of America from the 1920s through the 1930s in the essays. The essays conceal something to be seen from a much wider perspective, namely the legacy from Benjamin

Franklin. The “Crack-up” essays inherit the legacy and unceasingly point the right direction for the American people to keep.

Notes

1. Mizener, *The Far Side of Paradise*, 63-64.
2. Lehan, *The Great Gatsby: The Limits of Wonder*, 65.

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