## ARTS & LETTERS

### F. Scott Redeemed

"F. Scott Fitzgerald at the End" by Jeffrey Hart, in *Commentary* (Mar. 1985), 165 East 56th St., New York, N.Y. 10022.

F. Scott Fitzgerald, of *Great Gatsby* fame, died in Hollywood in 1940; at age 44, he was an alcoholic with a fading literary reputation. Hart, who teaches English at Dartmouth College, thinks a reassessment of the author's last years is overdue.

Hart sees signs of a special maturity in Fitzgerald's later work, including the screenplays he wrote for Hollywood at the end of his career. His work on *Madame Curie* (between 1938 and 1939) forced him to step beyond the adolescent self-absorption of his earlier writings into an "adult world of love and of achievement based on professional commitment." Fitzgerald himself had changed; he shuttled between a shaky marriage to Zelda, his great love, and a Hollywood affair with columnist Sheilah Graham. After MGM let his contract lapse, he churned out more than 17 short stories, several of them "first-rate" in Hart's view.

But the literary yield of Fitzgerald's Hollywood stint, says Hart, turns up in his final incomplete manuscript, *The Last Tycoon* (1940). In it he describes a compelling character, Monroe Stahr—based on MGM's boy-wonder chief, Irving Thalberg. A stenographer at Universal Pictures at age 17, Thalberg rose to head production for MGM at 25. Unlike Gatsby and other Fitzgerald heroes, Hart notes, Stahr overcomes "any seriously disabling moral weakness." He is "a new kind of Fitzgerald hero"—a hardworking, uneducated artist and entrepreneur, a "romantic professional" who believes in the American dream.

Stahr, like Thalberg (and Fitzgerald), dies young, but not tragically. He works hard to the end. Hart sees "something grimly heroic in Fitzgerald's transmutation of his own mortality [his failing health] into art." Monroe Stahr, as Hart points out, bears the name of James Monroe (whose Monroe Doctrine affirmed a unique American destiny), while Andrew Jackson and Abraham Lincoln appear too as characters in the story. Fitzgerald ultimately reaffirms his belief in American values— captured in the sterling line: "America is a willingness of the heart."

### Mr. Wu

"The Outrageous Mr. Wu" by Joseph Epstein, in *The New Criterion* (Apr. 1985), 850 Seventh Ave., Ste. 503, New York, N.Y. 10019.

It would be hard to find a more extreme case of a divergence between art and life than Evelyn Waugh (1903–66). At his London club or at parties, the author of *Vile Bodies* (1930), *Scoop* (1938), and other hilarious novels did not stop at being a curmudgeon. Outside his home, he could be a nasty fellow.

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"In its whimsy, in its obliquity, sometimes in its cruelty, Evelyn Waugh's comedy is not for everyone," notes Epstein, the editor of the *American Scholar*. Typical of Waugh's comic vision is a passage in *Black Mischief* (1932) describing young Basil Seal's view upon awakening on an alien sofa after a night of excess: "There was a gramophone playing. A lady in a dressing jacket sat in an armchair by the gas fire, eating sardines from the tin with a shoe horn." Waugh's humor, Epstein says, "would not have been possible if not dressed out in his carefully measured prose . . . the straight face from behind which the smashing punch lines are delivered."

The English writer's personal life was far from carefully measured. A convert to Catholicism at age 27 (after his first wife left him for another man), later a heavy drinker and drug user, Waugh was renowned for his social brutality. Posted to Yugoslavia during World War II, he even chided his second wife, Laura, for her letters. "[There is] no reason to make your letters as dull as your life. I simply am not interested in Bridget's children. Do grasp that." At a testimonial dinner honoring him late in life, he pointedly directed his ear trumpet away from the keynote speaker. "You have no idea," he told a friend, "how much nastier I would be if I was not a Catholic."

Waugh was doctrinaire on religion and a frank political reactionary. He cherished an idealized vision of life during England's Victorian era; he had an "instinctual aversion to all social progress." Yet he also had a romantic side, most apparent in the popular *Brideshead Revisited* (1945). Literary critic V. S. Pritchett, however, saw a change in Waugh's vision. His early works are inspired by the notion that human beings are mad; his later World War II trilogy, *Sword of Honor* (1952–61), "draws on the meatier notion that the horrible thing about human beings is that they are sane."

For all his eccentricities, however, Waugh was a loving husband and father, and a devoted companion to his few friends. "Evelyn Waugh, alias Mr. Wu," wondered writer Chips Cannon in 1934. "Is he good trying to be wicked? Or just wicked trying to be nice?"

## Hopper's Art

"Hopper: The Loneliness Factor" by Mark Strand, in *Antaeus* (Spring 1985), Ecco Press, 18 West 30th St., New York, N.Y. 10001.

Edward Hopper's famed paintings of urban scenes—closed shops, empty streets, and lonely souls bathed in the light of dusk—are noted for their general feeling of desolation.

"It is not the figures themselves . . . that establish the element of loneliness," contends Strand, a critic and painter. Rather it is "something in the formal disposition of the painting."

To him, the answer lies in Hopper's use of trapezoidal shapes and missing or sealed-off vanishing points to structure his images—instead of conventional, rectangular, one-point perspective. "We often feel left