Scott Fitzgerald’s “Thoughtbook”

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY JOHN KUEHL

The title-page of Scott Fitzgerald’s adolescent diary, like the flyleaf of Stephen Dedalus’s geography, tells us “his name and where he was”: “Thoughtbook/of/Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald/of/St. Paul Minn. U.S.A./Me.” But while Stephen Dedalus hints at his great expectations by relating himself to “Europe/The World/The Universe,” Scott Fitzgerald implies his thorough reference to his prominent Southern ancestors, the Scotts and the Keys. He became fourteen on September 24, 1910; therefore, most of the dated entries, which extend from August, 1910 to February 21, 1911, fall within “a year of much activity but dangerous.” Of this period, Fitzgerald also wrote in the unpublished “Outline Chart of My Life” or “Ledger”:


Dec. Joan Orton’s booby-ride. The petition about Eleanor Alair.


The “Ledger,” begun during the summer of 1922 and probably indebted to the “Thoughtbook” for information, is less fragmentary, less unintelligible than the earlier work, whose divisions are erratic—two giving date and heading, one giving only date, and four giving date, heading and chapter. Nevertheless, “Thoughtbook’s” progress seems easy enough to follow. The first surviving entry (August, 1910) runs from page eight through page ten and is entitled “My girls.” It treats two infatuations Fitzgerald experienced while living in Buffalo: one (November—December, 1905) with Nancy Gardener when he was nine years old and one (October, 1907—Spring, 1908) with Kiddy Williams when he was eleven. The next entry, “Indians and Violet,” consists of seven pages and is dated “Sept. 1010.” It treats a past infatuation too, this time (July—September, 1908) with Violet Stockton, an Atlanta beauty who visited St. Paul the summer Fitzgerald returned from Buffalo. Two pages, either near the end of entry number two or between entry number two and entry number three, are missing. The third entry (XX-II) is dated “November 1910,” but includes “an extract from something I wrote after dancing school in Buffalo one night.” Both entry and extract rank acquaintances according to the author’s shifting taste. Entry number four (XXIII), which reflects his increasing involvement in the present and with male friends and which describes a specific example of fickleness, is headed “Paul and Art. Chap. VI Feb. 12, 1911.” Because he mentions neither Art nor the club referred to on pages thirty-one and thirty-two, several pages of entry four may be missing. The fifth entry, “Chap. VII Dancing school in 1911. [Feb. 12, 1911]” and the sixth entry, “Chap VIII The goosera and other clubs. Feb 24—11,” embrace pages twenty-nine through thirty-four and render intimate details concerning these two kinds of social institutions. “Chap. IX Alida & Margaret Feb 24” (XXXV-XXXX) introduces the last entry, although the comment “more about Margaret later on” could indicate the loss of subsequent material. In any event, Fitzgerald has come full circle back to his “girls.”

Between August, 1911 and September, 1914, he annually wrote a play for St. Paul’s Elizabethan Dramatic Club. The manuscripts are among the F. Scott Fitzgerald Papers in the Princeton University Library and, with one exception, are exclusively in the autograph of Elizabeth Magoffin, the directress, who preserved them until her death in 1951. The first two have Fitzgerald appear-

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Sept.
Third and last year at the S.P.A. [Saint Paul Academy].
Played on the Summits. End and punter. Missed kick in crucial game. Became football expert and kept book. Moved to Shotwell's house, 509 Holly Ave. Fred Foley, Grandfather McQuillan: "Well, if it wasn't for him would we be now." Mr. Hill wouldn't allow smoking. When you enter a room speak first to the oldest lady, says father. Proud Ames quarterback on Central Highschool team.

Dec.
Joan Orton's bob-ride. The petition about Eleanor Alair.

Jan 1911

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ing as Jack Darcy, a Yale student "from Frisco," and Thornton Hart Dudley, "alias 'The Shadow.'" The third lists him as Lieutenant Charles Douglass, C.S.A. and Private Johnson, while the fourth lists him as Peter Weatherby. A number of the girls and boys whose names "Thoughtbook" mentions contributed to these productions too: Dorothy Greene, Constance James and Richard Washington played roles in "The Girl from the 'Lazy J,'" which was presented at Miss Magollin's house (August, 1911); Laurence Boardman, Dorothy Greene, Paul Ballion, Margaret Winchester, Eleanor Alair, James Porterfield, John Mitchell and Julia Dorr played in "The Captured Shadow," which was presented at Oak Hill (August 23, 1912); Laurence Boardman, Robert Clark, Wharton Smith, Dorothy Greene, Eleanor Alair, Katherine Schulze and Julia Dorr played in "Coward," which was presented for the benefit of The Baby Welfare Association at the St. Paul Y. W. C. A. Auditorium (August 29, 1913) and "Repeated upon urgent request" at the White Bear Yacht Club, Dellwood, Minnesota (September 2, 1913); and John Mitchell, Robert Clark, MacNeil Seymour, Eleanor Alair, Katherine Schulze, Margaret Armstrong, Dorothy Greene and Betty Mudge played in "Assorted Spirits," which was also presented for The Baby Welfare Association at the Y. W. C. A. Auditorium and the White Bear Yacht Club (September 8 and 9, 1914). The Letters of F. Scott Fitzgerald (Andrew Turnbull, ed., New York, 1968) contains letters from Fitzgerald to Marie Hersey (Mrs. William Hamm) and to Alida Bigelow (Mrs. Francis Butler). Arthur Mizener's biography The Far Side of Paradise (Boston, 1951) and Andrew Turnbull's Scott Fitzgerald (New York, 1968) contain references to both ladies as well as to Cecil Reed and Reuben Warner, while Mizener refers to Thomas Daniels, Robert Clark, Laurence Boardman, Paul Ballion and Richard Washington and Turnbull to Samuel Sturgis and Margaret Armstrong (Mrs. Francis Dean).

Between March, 1928 and February, 1929, Fitzgerald wrote nine so-called "Basil Duke Lee" stories. Eight appeared in the Saturday Evening Post and later in either Taps at Reveille (New York, 1935) or Afternoon of an Author (Princeton, 1951) and one, "That Kind of Party," in The Princeton University Library Chronicle (Summer, 1951). These stories constitute a fictional autobiography of the author from St. Paul Academy (Mrs. Cary's Academy) days through his enrollment at Princeton (Yale). Three—"The Scandal Detectives," "That Kind of Party," and "A Night at the Fair"—treat Basil's (Fitzgerald's) life before entering St. Regis (Newman School), but only "That Kind of Party" and "The Scandal Detectives" treat the period "Thoughtbook" encompasses. In the first, this exchange, which concerns the Gilrays (Robin's?) party where Terence (Basil-Fitzgerald) "had been summoned and embraced" by Dolly Bartlett (Kiddy Williams?), occurs:

"I'm beginning to think you played kissing games," Mr. Tipton [Mr. Lee-Mr. Fitzgerald] guessed casually.

"Oh, they had a crazy game they called Clap-in-and-clap-out," said Terence indiscreetly.

"What's that?"

"Well, all the boys go out and they say somebody has a letter. No, that's post office. Anyhow, they have to come in and guess who sent for them." Hating himself for the disloyalty to the great experience, he tried to end with: "And then they kneel down and if he's wrong they clap him out of the room.

Can I have some more gravy please?"

"But what if he's right?"

"Oh, he's supposed to hug them," Terence mumbled. It sounded so shameful—it had been so lovely.

Arthur Mizener has commented upon the second: "He was the leader and idea man for a club, known first as the Scandal Detectives and later as the Goosrah [sic], which had its headquarters in the loft of his friend Cecil Reed's barn on Holly Avenue and later in the attic of the Reed's house on Summit. Here, when Fitzgerald was reading The Three Musketeers, they were taught by him to fence and, when he read Arsène Lupin, to be detectives: everything he read had to be lived. Under the stimulus of romances about the Ku Klux Klan, the Goosrah [sic] also organized "adventures." One of these was an attack on another boy of their own age, Reuben Warner, who had captured the affections of the girl Fitzgerald admired. Their skillfully conceived piece of terrorization...ended with Mr. Warner's calling out the police." (The Far Side of Paradise, pp. 16-17.) Actually, if we may trust the "Thoughtbook" and "Ledger," the sequence of clubs was: "the white handkerchief," the "boy's secret service of St. Paul," the Goosrah club," and "The Scandal Detectives." In the story, Cecil Reed, Reuben Warner, and Paul Ballion serve as models for Riply.
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"What's that?"

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Buckner, Hubert Blair, and Bill Kampf. More importantly, the “Thoughtbook,” which Fitzgerald kept locked under his bed, has become “THE BOOK OF SCANDAL,” which Basil and Ripley have “concealed beneath a sawed-out trapdoor.” The points of similarity and difference between the two will be clear to the reader who peruses the “Thoughtbook” with the following description from “The Scandal Detectives” in mind:

In this book ["THE BOOK OF SCANDAL"] they had set down such deviations from rectitude on the part of their fellow citizens as had reached their ears. Some of these false steps were those of grizzled men, stories that had become traditions in the city and were embalmed in the composition book by virtue of indiscreet exhumations of family dinner tables. Others were the more exciting sins, confirmed or merely rumored, of boys and girls their own age. Some of the entries would have been read by adults with bewilderment, others might have inspired wrath, and there were three or four contemporary reports that would have prostrated the parents of the involved children with horror and despair.

The “Thoughtbook,” however, is not being reproduced solely because it enriches our understanding of a brief period in the author’s life or helps us to appreciate better the “Basil Duke Lee” series, but also because it gives evidence of Fitzgerald as a born storyteller. That he already considered himself to be such—and, indeed, was—would seem apparent from references like “and that is the story of Violet Stockton,” and that he had already developed the racenteur’s temporal sense from the way he juxtaposed the definite past, the indefinite past and the present. For instance, “Indians and Violet” recounts incidents of the indefinite past (“a summer”) and of the definite past (August 20, 21, 25, 30; September 25) during September, 1910, two years later. Moreover, events are often consciously dramatized. Some take place on a memorable day: “My recollections of Nancy are rather dim but one day stands out above the rest”; “Kitty Williams is much plainer to my memory. . . . As in the case of Nancy there was one day which was preeminent in my memory”; “However I am wandering from the subject. Finally Violet had a party which was very nice and it was the day after this that we had the quarrel.” Some conclude with a climactic statement: “He was awful mad. He said he’d kick me off and that it wasn’t my toboggan and that I couldn’t play. However Nancy smoothed it over and we went into lunch”; “That Christmas I bought a five pound box of candy and took it around to her house. What was my surprise when Kitty open the door I nearly fell down with embarrassment but I finally stammered ‘Give this to Kitty’ and ran home.” And some include passages which attest to the young writer’s ear for natural though heightened dialogue:

“Jim was so confident the other night that you had a crush on him.”
“Well Jim gets another think”
“Shall I let him know you don’t like him.”
“No: but you can let him know that he isn’t first.”
“I’ll do that”
“Now if you had thought that it might be different.”
“Good” said I
“Good” repeated she and then the conversation lagged.

Further evidence in the “Thoughtbook” of Scott Fitzgerald’s early storytelling ability may be gathered from his successful endeavors as a psychologist and sociologist. He characterized two of his friends thus [Paul Ballion] “was awfully funny, strong as an ox; cool in the face of danger polite and at times very interesting”; [Margaret Armstrong] “is not pretty but I think she is very attractive looking. She is extremely grateful and a very good dancer and the most interesting talker I have ever seen or rather heard.” He recorded other peoples’ reactions to him—“Violet’s opinion of my character was that I was polite and had a nice disposition and that I thought I was the whole push and that I got mad too easily”—and his reactions to other people—“Bob Clark is interesting to talk to because he lets me do a lot of talking”; “Now I don’t dislike him [Paul Ballion]. I have simply out grown him”;
“I think it is charming to hear her [Margaret Armstrong] say, ‘Give it to me as a comp-pliment’ when I tell her I have a trade last for her.” And he recorded his own fluctuating group-status—
“At that time I was more popular with girls than I ever have been before”—as well as the vacillating fortunes of others—“This list of favorite girls changes continually Only authentic at date of chapter.” Briefly, then, while the “Thoughtbook’s” psychological and sociological insights are far less keen, they do prefigure those which we associate with Fitzgerald’s subsequent work.

They prefigure one of his most effective characters and themes too: the femme fatale. At eleven, he found Kiddy Williams irre-
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sensible: "I dont remember who was first but I know that Earl was second and as I was already quite over come by her charms I then and there resolved that I would gain first place ... We talked and talked and finally she asked me if I was going to Robin's party and it was there that my eventful day was. We played postolice, pillow, clapp in and clapp out and other foolish but interesting games. It was impossible to count the number of times I kissed Kitty that afternoon. At any rate when we went home I had secured the coveted 1st place. I held this until dancing school stopped in the spring and then relinquished it to Johnny Gowns a rival. On valentines day that year Kitty received no less than eighty four valentines." The childish affair immediately succeeding the one with Kiddy had involved Violet Stockton: "She was very pretty with dark brown hair and eyes big and soft. She spoke with a soft southern accent leaving out the r's. She was a year older than I but together with most of the other boys liked her very much. I met her through Jack Mitchell who lived next door to her. He himself was very attached as was Art. Foley ... She had some sort of a book called flitting by sighs and Jack and I got it away from Violet and showed it too all the boys. Violet got very mad and went into the house. I got very mad and therfor I went home. ... I just hate Violet ..., Not much has happened since Violet went away. The day she went away was my birthday and she gave me a box of candy. Her latest fancy is Artie Foley. He has her ring. She wrote him a letter to ask him for his picture."

The following passage concludes the "Thoughtbook":

One Saturday night about two weeks later my finish came. We were over at Ben Grigg's four boys, Reub, Ben, Ted & I, and four girls Margaret, Marie, Elizabeth & Dorothy & that evening Margaret got an awful crush on Reuben which at the time I write this is still active. More about Margaret later on.

Alida is considered by some the prettiest girl in dancing school. Bob Clark, E Driscoll, D Driscoll, A Foley, and I all had a crush on her last winter and this fall. Evry night Bob & I would go over to see Don (?) and incidently, see Alida. She liked Art 1st, Egbert 2nd and I third & Bob 4th. Bob is south now & writes her a letter 9 times a week.

We, too, have come full circle back to "Fitzgerald's girls"!
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The Thoughtbook is here reproduced in facsimile in its entirety through the courtesy of Fitzgerald's daughter, Mrs. Samuel J. Lanahan, from the manuscript in her possession. The original leaves measure 9⅞ x 7¼ inches. Portions of the text have previously been published in Life, XLVI, No. 7 (February 16, 1950), 88, and an excerpt in Donald A. Yates, "The Road to 'Paradise': Fitzgerald's Literary Apprenticeship," Modern Fiction Studies, VII, No. 1 (Spring, 1961).