

Self/Other/Lover: Construction of Identity in the Life-Writings of F. Scott Fitzgerald and Sheilah Graham

Evan Knutla

ABSTRACT

F. Scott Fitzgerald's final unfinished novel, *The Last Tycoon*, was written during his tumultuous twilight Hollywood years, while he engaged in a romantic relationship with the English gossip columnist Sheilah Graham. Just as Graham figures as a character in Fitzgerald's novel, Fitzgerald became the subject of several memoirs Graham composed in the decades after Fitzgerald's death: *Beloved Infidel*, *The Rest of the Story*, and *The Real F. Scott Fitzgerald*. Using the work of the autobiographical theorist Paul John Eakin, this article analyzes the ways in which Fitzgerald's thinly-veiled fiction and Graham's dubious memoirs work in tandem to construct autobiographical selves. Incorporating a range of biographies and letters, in addition to the "fictions" and "memoirs" of these two intimately interlinked writers, this essay challenges the easy binaries between supposed narrative forms, and seeks to uncover new angles into these two authors, their work, and their literary legacies.

In 1937, after a decade of personal disaster, F. Scott Fitzgerald made his third attempt at becoming a successful screenwriter in Los Angeles. His wife, Zelda, had been institutionalized for schizophrenia, and his daughter, Scottie, was attending expensive finishing schools, which Fitzgerald was adamant that she would see all the way through. Fitzgerald himself struggled to remain sober; his novel *Tender is the Night*, eight long, hard years in the making, had been a commercial flop. This desperate venture to Hollywood was Fitzgerald's final valiant attempt to stage a personal and professional comeback—to rescue his financial affairs as well as his own dignity.

Meanwhile, not long before Fitzgerald's arrival in California, a mysterious Englishwoman had herself floated into Hollywood as a burgeoning journalist. Sheila Graham had come far from the slums of London. After an aborted turn as a stage actress, she had made an appearance at the Royal Court as the fiancée of a Major John Gillam. She then became an entertainment journalist in New York before landing finally in Hollywood, where one fateful night she locked eyes with F. Scott Fitzgerald across the room of a party given to celebrate her engagement to another wealthy, titled man named Lord Donegall. From the night of that party—July 14, 1937, to December 21, 1940, when Fitzgerald succumbed to a fatal heart attack in her apartment—he and Graham become lovers and fighters, a teacher and a student, but ultimately close friends and confidants. In this last year of his life, Fitzgerald poured the remnants of his serious literary energy into his final, unfinished novel, *The Last Tycoon*, which he envisioned as the as-yet unwritten, definitive novel about Hollywood. Fitzgerald, as always, drew significantly from his own life. While the hero of *The Last Tycoon*, Monroe Stahr, was modeled initially after the movie producer Irving Thalberg, but in the course of the novel, the character ultimately becomes Fitzgerald himself. The novel's emotional core is a romance between Monroe Stahr and Kathleen Moore, who is clearly modeled after Sheila Graham. Years later, Graham wrote her own account of her romance with Fitzgerald in her 1958 memoir, *Beloved Infidel*. In both of these texts, Fitzgerald and Graham practice the art of life-writing. The shared method was apt: while all of Fitzgerald's significant fiction had contained nakedly autobiographical elements, all of Graham's memoirs had contained deliberate fictionalizations. In these works, the authors compose—and construct—both the self and the other. Viewing them together provides a rich exemplification of self-construction and mutual portrayal, of intertwined lives and literary legacies.

For both writers and both texts, there are challenges and complexities that, at first blush, may threaten to obscure their reliability. As Fitzgerald did not live to complete *The Last Tycoon*, the novel was initially edited and completed by Fitzgerald's close friend and literary conscience," Edmund Wilson. Later, a more definitive version of the novel was published by Fitzgerald scholar Matthew Bruccoli. *Beloved Infidel*, on the other hand, was written with the collaborator Gerold Frank. In both works, self-construction and mutual portrayal is complicated: by incompleteness and posthumous editorship on Fitzgerald's end, and by the ghostwritten edition and white lies on Graham's end. This naturally raises questions of authorship and authenticity, seemingly obscuring the identity construction of self and other.

The noted scholar of autobiographical studies, Paul John Eakin, has devoted several books to theorizing the construction of identity among life-writers. In *Fictions in Autobiography*, Eakin posits the notion that what he calls the autobiographical act "is inherently diluted by fictional elements: 'Autobiographical truth is not a fixed but an evolving content in an intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation,'" Eakin writes, adding, "the self that is the center of all autobiographical narrative is necessarily a fictive structure" (3). If autobiography is, by nature, partially and necessarily fictive, and if Fitzgerald's major fictions are undeniably autobiographical, then the application of Eakin's framework to Fitzgerald's fiction provides opportunities to yield fresh observations about Fitzgerald's—and Graham's—life and work. It might also open vistas into other autobiographical life-writers, especially as reflective of the era in which the novel was the dominant literary form. In accepting the presence of *fiction in autobiography* as inherent to the form, it becomes possible to view Fitzgerald's *autobiographical fiction* through a similar lens, asking similar questions: How is the self constructed? What does this say about the art of life-writing? And, for both Fitzgerald and Graham, how are constructed selves mediated and

complicated by outside authorship?

Both Fitzgerald and Graham engage in relational acts of self-construction: each composes the self via the other, blurring boundaries between fiction and memoir. Their texts bear out Eakin's claim that identity is always co-authored, or shaped by others. These relationships and inadvertent collaborations, constructions and mediations, can be subject to an analysis that moves to subvert the often arbitrary binaries that exist between narrative forms.

Roland Barthes said, "'The one who speaks (in the narrative) is not the one *who writes* (in real life) and the one *who writes* is not the one *who is*,'" Paul John Eakin reminds us. "Barthes [wisely senses the] need to discriminate among the plurality of identities concealed in the 'person' of the first-person singular" (Fictions 25). There is no singular, constant self—seemingly offering confirmation of Whitman's famous statement about containing "multitudes." (Biology has even further revealed that the cellular "self" is more less entirely reproduced every seven to ten years.) For Eakin, and for the other life-writers he analyzes, the process of autobiographical composition is an *intentional reconfiguring* of the self from its many disparate parts. That, of course, is the compelling art of the form—the "I, now," attempting to make sense of the "I, then," as memoirists often insist. But perhaps that this intentional construction of identity is as inherent in "strict" autobiography as it is in certain well-known life-writing novelists. (It is certainly true of Scribners' lineup of titan 20th century novelists writing contemporaneously under the editorship of Maxwell Perkins: Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Wolfe.) According to Eakin, identity is produced *through* the very process of writing. Identity in narrative—whether autobiography, memoir, autofiction, letter writing, or the semi-autobiographical novel, is always a construction. While the term "autofiction" was not used in Fitzgerald's day, and while it refers to an intentional merging of a "real life" author with their "fictional" characters, Fitzgerald's work, it can be argued, is an anticipatory demonstration of what life writers do: fracture, construct, and mythologize the self.

We readily accept the presence of autobiographical elements in fiction," Eakin writes. "Thoreau wisely reminds us of the inevitable presence of autobiography in fiction when he observes that it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking" (Fictions 9). Thoreau, in the mid-nineteenth century, is unwittingly echoing the "observer effect" that has become, in recent decades, a given fact in the scientific community: there is no removing the "I" when the "I" is observing a phenomenon. Moreover, as Eakin writes elsewhere, "The latest developments in brain science today confirm the extent to which memory, the would-be anchor of selves and lives, constructs the materials from the past that an earlier, more innocent view would have us believe it merely stored" (*How Our Lives Become Stories* 106). This unreliability of memory confirms that any conception of the past is not set in stone, but is, rather, an "evolving content." Life-writing, regardless of form, is always a kind of performance, never a pure process of truth-telling.

If we accept that elements of fiction are inherent to the form of autobiography, it is no great leap to accept that a writer like Fitzgerald, whose fictions are widely acknowledged as extremely autobiographical, is as occupied with composing the self as much as any life-writer. In 1935 Fitzgerald revealed to his secretary, quite tellingly, "My characters are all Scott Fitzgerald. Even the feminine characters are feminine Scott Fitzgerald's"; Asked if he used any other models, he said, "Not any single person but a melange of the characteristics of several together, interpreted through my eyes" (Hearne). Such self-splicing is a hallmark of life-writing. Both Fitzgerald and Graham, whether working in fiction or memoir, enact the autobiographical process as Eakin describes it.

While Fitzgerald did not live to complete *The Last Tycoon*, the reality of its posthumous editorship doesn't strip away Fitzgerald's authorship or detract from the authenticity of the self-construction therein. All selves are relational, an idea that is itself expressed in the novel: "Writers aren't people exactly," says Cecelia, the narrator, "Or, if they're any good, they're a whole lot of people trying so hard to be one person" (12). One of the central ideas of Paul John Eakin's autobiography theory is the "relational self." Any self, whether constructed in a text or in simply one's own mind, is a composite, constituted from the web of relations that define a human life. The relational self is that which is understood as in connection with family, friends, lovers, colleagues—even audiences, which is important for authors who *write themselves into existence*, constructing

their identities for posterity—or for each other, as in the case of Fitzgerald and Graham. Both Fitzgerald and Graham constructed public personae in addition to their written selves; Both had to make sense of their disparate elements and somehow cohere them.

“The process of self-discovery is finally inseparable from the art of self-invention,” Eakin writes (*Fictions* 55). Fitzgerald, although he famously said there are no second acts in American lives” (qtd. in Meyers 325), did reinvent himself, several times: his glittering early success gave way to a midlife crack-up, from the depths of which he reinvented himself in Hollywood. As early as 1924 he had written Max Perkins, on the eve of embarking on the composition of *The Great Gatsby*: “I’m tired of being the author of *This Side of Paradise* and I want to start over” (Letters 188). His old wish to discard a previous self and establish a fresh identity also resurrected itself when his name no longer commanded the huge sums they once did in popular magazines. “I’m awfully tired of being Scott Fitzgerald anyhow, as there doesn’t seem to be much money in it” he wrote his editor at *Esquire* in 1940 (Letters 624). This fractured self shows up in *The Last Tycoon* as well, although Fitzgerald puts the words into Kathleen’s mouth, speaking to Stahr (himself): “Don’t you always think—hope that you’ll be one person and then find you’re still two?” (89). Yet a coherent, stable self is not something that is even possible to achieve in life-writing. In both of their personal lives, not to mention their literary texts, Fitzgerald and Graham were individuals divided. Fitzgerald was caught between the competing demands of his art, of surviving in Hollywood and supporting his family. But if anyone knew how to construct a self, and then sell it convincingly to the world, it was Sheila Graham. She, too, seemed eager to reinvent her image every time she put pen to paper in her tell-all memoirs.

Beloved Infidel was published eighteen years after Scott’s death. If any text demonstrates the porous boundaries between fiction and memoir, it is this one, and not necessarily less so than any of her subsequent books. Years later, Sheila wrote, *Beloved Infidel* was a romanticized version of my love for Scott, not fully exploring our story’s complexity. It gave *the facts as I viewed them* in 1958, looking through the discreet haze of the times and the gloss of my experienced collaborator” (13) [emphasis mine]. This “discreet haze” could be the fold of years that stretched between 1937 and 1958, highlighting again the unreliability of memory. Or perhaps the “haze” Graham refers to is her own autobiographical ambivalence; her recollection of events is often unreliable, even self-serving. But once again, given the innate relationality of life-writing, we would do well to consider the influence that Graham’s collaborator, Gerold Frank, brought to bear on the composition of *Beloved Infidel*, what Graham called her ghostwriter’s “gloss.” This “gloss” and this “haze” obscure the self-construction that Sheila strove for in *Beloved Infidel*. But two decades after the publication of that first memoir, she tried again to explicate a life-writing philosophy: I shall do my best to present an objective picture of what Scott Fitzgerald was really like, seeing him partly through his own eyes and also judging him from my present vantage point. I think I can do this because I am no longer the young woman mesmerized by his love for me and mine for him” (*Real* 16). This moment encapsulates the time element of memory, and memoir itself: the memoirist, or the autofictionalist—whatever genre the life-writer is working in—can only do their best to adhere to *the telling of the truth as they see it*. “Any [life-writer], acting in the best of faith, is going to produce a narrative that will have fiction in it, like it or not,” Eakin insists (*Fictions* 10). Life-writing allows us to see how people present themselves—and what that presentation has to say about them.

Fitzgerald told a young journalist much the same thing about his process while discussing his craft. Although most of what I’ve told you is fact, I did take liberties,” he said. “The sort I take when I turn a personal experience into fiction. I was telling you what I may some day get a chapter out of. Or a story. I didn’t intend to deceive you. There’s a *kinship between fiction and reality as a situation takes shape* in the writing” (Buttitta 80) [emphasis mine]. This “kinship” between fiction and nonfiction is the nebulous space that offers the possibility to see how life-writing theory can open new windows into Fitzgerald’s process. Just as Fitzgerald’s writer’s mind worked its “double vision,” as Malcolm Cowley called it, so this fractured self shows up repeatedly in his fiction. Life and art were inextricably bound up, as Fitzgerald acknowledged: Sometimes,” he said, “I don’t know whether I’m real or whether I’m a character in one of my own novels” (qtd. in Cowley

65-66). In *The Last Tycoon*, Fitzgerald builds in two moments where he admits the multiplicity of his own self. In neither instance is Monroe Stahr the speaker—offering further proof that all of Fitzgerald's characters are in some way reflected and refracted versions of his own identity: "Are you surprised?" [Kathleen asks Stahr]. "At what?" Stahr responds. "That we're two people again," says Kathleen, "Don't you always think—hope that you'll be one person and then find you're still two?" (88). In another scene, the novel's occasional narrator, Cecelia, seems to speak for Fitzgerald: Writers aren't people exactly," Cecelia says. "Or if there any good, they're a whole lot of people trying hard to be one person" (12). Perhaps no moment in Fitzgerald's fiction is as apropos to Eakin's notion that fixed selves are illusory.

"When we settle into the theater of autobiography," Eakin writes, "what we are ready to believe—and what most autobiographers encourage us to expect—is that the play we witness is a historical one, a largely faithful and unmediated reconstruction of events that took place long ago." But it isn't that simple. "In reality, the play is that of the autobiographical act itself, in which the materials of the past are shaped by memory and imagination to serve the needs of present consciousness" (*Fictions* 56). The life-writer looks back upon the history of the life, the self, what Fitzgerald called "that terrible door into the past through which we all must go" (*Crack-Up* 173). Making sense of self is the *modus operandi* of memoir. For F. Scott Fitzgerald, nearly all of his writings were autobiographical attempts to make sense of the self he was, the self he had been, and the self he wanted to be.

Jeffrey Meyers writes of Scott and Sheilah that their attachment developed "because they were both eager to put the past behind them, to establish a new identity in the alien and rather ruthless society of Hollywood" (343). Both were, in a sense, refugees. Sheilah had "invented a glamorous past and a new identity to disguise her humble origins. When Fitzgerald met her, she had established herself as an upper-class Englishwoman and consistently maintained this role in her professional life. During her three and a half years with Fitzgerald, and for many years afterward, she kept up this *carefully constructed public persona*" (Meyers 343) [emphasis mine]. Sheilah is not the only one who concealed parts of herself and emphasized others, for Scott was careful to do the same. Life-writing is about image creation. But, identity and narrative in life-writing are selfsame: Self and story are complementary, mutually constituting aspects of a single process of identity formation," Eakin writes (*Fictions* 100). Identity is constructed *through* narrative—the stories we tell ourselves *become* our reality.

The Fitzgerald that Graham constructs in her memoirs is not a full portrait, even though she published multiple versions of the same stories across the span of several decades. Deliberate omission, it seems, came as naturally to her portrayal of Fitzgerald as they were to her own autobiography. One of Sheilah's adamant statements—that is, one consistent across her memoirs—is that Fitzgerald remained entirely sober during the last year of his life as he worked on *The Last Tycoon* in between various short-lived script assignments. But the truth is that Fitzgerald did drink, only apparently in Sheilah's absence. Fitzgerald's secretary informed Sheilah about his secret drinking in the late 1950s, while she was writing *Beloved Infidel*. Nonetheless, "Sheilah and her collaborator Gerold Frank deliberately omitted this information from her autobiography since it contradicted the clean dramatic tale they wished to spin—that Scott Fitzgerald never touched another drop of alcohol after their big fight in November 1939" (Westbrook 488). Considering Sheilah's gift for first creating a reality, and then launching herself into it without a backward glance, it is fair to wonder if she had somehow actually convinced herself of this untruth over time. This was the Scott she had deliberately constructed. Perhaps it was as real to her as the other fabrications—stories, selves—that she clung to for the rest of her life.

These texts reveal how autobiography and autobiographical fiction are interdependent modes of self-fashioning. Both writers enact Eakin's autobiographical act" as a performance—one shaped by mediation and construction in various narrative forms. Although we are accustomed to thinking about identity as individually owned, it is rather a social, relational construction. The intertwined legacies of life-writers like Fitzgerald and Graham dramatize how to write the self is always to write the other—a mysterious, complicated truth at the heart of modern life-writing.

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