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Therese Anne Fowler (2013-04-11). *Z: A Novel of Zelda Fitzgerald*. Hodder & Stoughton. Kindle Edition.

The professor, the historian, the writer

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When a literature professor speaks about a writer, she mainly concentrates on the minutiae of the fictional universe, which might provide understanding of the respective world of representation; if the writer's life casts a shadow upon that world of representation, then she speaks about the fictionalization of the self or about a split self in search of the other-within-the self; but most often, the professor can't stress enough that the real writer is not to be confounded with the narrator/writer-in-the-text, who lives a life independent of that of its creator. Compassion then for a writer's life stands in the way of an unbiased judgement of a writer's work. However much the professor is impressed by the misfortunes befalling a writer, she must either ignore them, or assume the charge of biographical reader. Either way, she is no less a hypocrite, since, as Elias Canetti rightfully pointed out in his *Die Blendung/The Deception* (1935), not one single professor has ever confessed shame for making a leisured, well provided and straight academic living out of the life of a writer who lived in misery and despair. What about the literary biographer/historian? Her duty is to objectively document a life, which contours itself out of all the traces the writer more or less fortunately leaves behind— which doesn't make her less biased, though, she is by profession bound to check on the existential details, and is liable to posterity for the verity of her reconstruction.

What is the case of the writer who writes a (biographical) *novel* or literary prose about a writer? Whose pose does she assume? That of the literature professor or that of the literary historian? The writer in point will certainly internalize the respective writer's work, very much like the professor does, but also check on all the biographies to date, which can render the factual reality of the writer in question, similar to the literary historian's endeavour. Nonetheless, the writer's devotion goes to fleshing out a living mind and soul, who can easily step out of the book pages and have a cup of gossip-flavour tea with the reader.

Here is the case of young American writer Therese Anne Fowler (b. 1967)—sociologist, creative writing professor, literary assistant editor-in-chief—, who, by chance (as she confesses in an interview given to Anca Peiu, her Romanian translator—*România Literară*, No. 14/2015), had the daring idea of writing about Zelda, Francis Scott Fitzgerald's wife and mother to Frances-Scottie, but, most significantly, the true daughter of the beginning of the century America.

Fowler's disclaimer and long list of acknowledgements, added at the end of her novel *Z: A Novel of Zelda Fitzgerald* (2013), stands proof of the laborious work of documentation that went into the making of the book. Those acknowledged are: biographers, the famous couple's daughter, Frances Scott "Scottie" Fitzgerald's *The Romantic Egoists,* Scott's and Zelda's rich correspondence and own works, as well as editors, sponsors, friends, family. Much in the above mentioned spirit, Fowler describes her endeavour as based "not on factual minutiae, but rather on the emotional journey of the characters," and her method, as that of a detective, who will consider all "known motivations, character, and events." Fowler best senses the difference between a novelist writing fictional biography and the literary biographer: "My respect and affection for both Scott and Zelda inspired this book, which, again, is not a biography but a novelist's attempt to imagine what it was like to be Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald" (p. 374).

With the precise aim in view "to create the most plausible story possible, based upon all the evidence at hand" (p. 374), Therese Anne Fowler manages to come up with a novel on Zelda by Zelda herself, which immediately gains the appreciation of The Press that counts, trespasses more than twelve national territories in translation, and is now being turned into a TV serial by the Amazon, the Killer Films, and Christina Ricci studios. This challenging cultural blending certainly bases on the writer's sleight of hand of impersonation, which benefits from an ample dialogue between arts—music (classical and jazz), dance (classical and modern), painting, and writing. The novel stands under the sign of delusion, the illusory, the unreal, thus replicating the post-war America of the so-called Jazz Age, as well as the all-dreams-come-true atmosphere of a lost generation's Paris. The game of seeming, believing and truth as writing strategy is set from "The Prologue": "Look closer and you'll see something extraordinary, mystifying, something real and true. We have never been what we seemed" (p.6). Hence forth, we are taken to real places (the American South—Montgomery, Alabama—, New York, Great Neck, Paris, Capri, The French Riviera, etc.), we meet real people (family members, nannies, friends, artists—writers, critics, editors, film producers, actors, painters, dancers), fact which gives the reader the titillation of déjà-vu/lu towards reinforcing *l'effet de réel* so much coveted with such literary productions. Of special interest to the novelist is the trio-relationship Zelda-Scott-Ernest (Hemingway), which is tentatively explored to the purpose of, on the one hand, flavouring the avant-garde world even more, and on the other hand, tackling the conflictual/schizophrenic disposition of Zelda Seyre—vacillating between a traditional Southerner with deeply embedded conservative views on most things, sex included, a "flapper" defying convention and eager to try on new experiences, and a postfeminist avant-la-lettre, who ironically contemplates the feminist movement of her time while striving hard for artistic self-affirmation in dance, writing and painting. Zelda Fitzgerald's self-portrait illustrates T. S. Eliot's words, prefacing the first part of the novel: "If you aren't in over your head, how do you know how tall you are? (p.8) Fowler's Zelda has pushed her limits to find out how tall Scott and she really are.

What is indeed memorable about this fictional autobiography, besides keeping the reader in a referential turmoil, is how Therese Ann Fowler manages, through a fractured chronology, a reluctantly decodable writing, at times, create a delusory perspective, reflective of Scott Fitzgerald's words prefacing the second part of the book: "Everybody's youth is a dream, a form of chemical madness" (p. 70). Also memorable is the pictorial quality of Zelda's language, which points to all her more or less failed artistic longings: writing, ballet, and painting. Here is how Zelda describes her first encounter with Scott, a lieutenant-officer in the American Army:

> A pair of tall boots paler than the others caught my eye. As I straightened, I followed the boots upward to olive-colored breeches, a fitted uniform tunic, and, above it, an angelic face with eyes as green and expressive as the Irish Sea, eyes that snagged and held me as surely as a bug sticks in a web, eyes that contained the entire world in their smiling depths, eyes like— (p. 21)

Or, how she describes her strenuous efforts when taking ballet lessons with Madame:

> In Madame Egorova's studio, I spent my hours lined up at the barre next to fourteen other women, all of them clustered at the cusp of twenty years of age. The day my twenty-eighth birthday came, I observed it silently except for the huffs and grunts and sighs that corresponded with my motions. The other girls all knew I was older than they were, that I had a husband and a child. But if my arabesques looked like theirs, if my jetés were executed as crisply, if I could turn, and turn, and turn, and turn, and turn, and turn, I wouldn't be bullied more than anyone else was, and I'd be allowed to stay (pp. 282-283).

But, what remains remarkable in case of such novels, despite the many possible pitfalls, is the deep feeling for understanding the emotional trajectory of the characters' lives. In Fowler's case too, this feeling is obsessively voiced by the heroine: "I wish, oh, you have no idea how much, that I could bottle up those days and then climb inside that bottle too" (p. 330), echoing Scott's own words ending *The Great Gatsby*, "SO WE BEAT ON, BOATS AGAINST THE CURRENT, BORNE BACK CEASELESSLY INTO THE PAST" (p. 372).

A feeling that neither the literature professor nor the literary historian bothers too much about.