believed that visual artists were compelled to create by a need to exorcise images that haunted them. Did she write about Mew to exorcise a story?

Fitzgerald's own explanation of the transition was matter-of-fact. She feared that the parts of her life she hadn't yet tapped were too sad. "The temptation comes," she wrote, "to take what seems almost like a vacation in another country and above all in another time." In her 1986 novel *Innocence,* her first attempt at a researched setting, the clicking of the gears is still audible, and the machinery never quite comes to life. But Fitzgerald's last three books are marvels, and whenever I'm tempted to parrot Henry James's indictment of the "fatal cheapness" of the historical novel as a genre, they stop me. James complained that imagining oneself into the consciousness of an earlier era is so difficult, and so little likely to be appreciated by most readers, that historical novelists almost always resort to papering over their failures with a decoupage of period-appropriate details. I'd add that imagining a past free of one's presentist assumptions requires so much intellectual labor that most historical novelists make the mistake of giving it their whole attention, forgetting that the most interesting thing about the consciousnesses of the past, while they were being lived, was that they were changing. Most historical novelists construct something too easy to know, too definite—no longer a mystery, as a living consciousness always must be, even to itself.

Fitzgerald didn't make these mistakes. Her heroes and heroines never quite understand themselves, or one another, no matter how hard they try. She was able to catch moments of transition, perhaps because she understood that to a responsive consciousness they may feel as much like loss as like opportunity.

She returned again and again to the question of the soul, which seemed a focus for these changes and mysteries. She handled it gingerly, touching it only through layers of irony. In *The Beginning of Spring* (1988), the owner of a printing house watches the blessing of an icon. He is struck by the reverent attention of one of his employees, who had previously asserted that "soul and body were like steam above a factory, one couldn't exist without the other," and begins to doubt his own doubt. Perhaps, he thinks, "I have faith, even if I have no beliefs." In *The Gate of Angels* (1990), an aspiring particle physicist defends the soul because he belongs to a university club called the Disobligers' Society, which requires its members to argue positions they don't believe in, and the intellectual exercise feels to him "like hanging upside down or breathing the wrong element." A confused older professor in the audience thinks he's in earnest. The poet-hero of *The Blue Flower* (1995) believes that only souls exist and that bodies are no more than shadows, destined to fall away in some future apocalypse, but he falls in love with a twelve-year-old girl who thinks that life after death sounds silly. "What insolence," he writes in his journal, "what enormity."

One can't quite figure out what Fitzgerald herself thought of the soul, but perhaps that's as it should be. True novelists don't think in syllogisms, after all, and it's motion, rather than structure, that gives a sense of life. One does get the impression, however, that the soul, as Fitzgerald understood it, is rather more in the plight of eel than of heron. ■

January Index Sources

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