

MICHELE BOTTALICO

The Illusion of Myth: Hollywood in
The Love of the Last Tycoon: A Western

Matthew Bruccoli's critical edition of Francis Scott Fitzgerald's last novel raises some fairly valid doubts about Edmund Wilson's edition of the work. Describing the latter as "cosmeticized",¹ Bruccoli goes on to give back to Fitzgerald's fragments their true aspect as an unfinished text, an outline maybe, but one that "signifies" far more than the finished drawing. The work thus reacquires the fascination of a sinopia, allowing a glimpse of the completed fresco; its generative mechanisms are unveiled and the text grows before one's eyes. What emerges is an open structure, not unlike a dramatic script, falling into that category of sign systems defined by Maurizio Grande as "double-statute", intrinsically twofold or bidimensional, in which "it is the sense - since it goes beyond the form - which accomplishes the text, and not vice versa".²

In answer to the much-debated question as to whether the fragments and unfinished texts in which every literature abounds should be considered "autonomous", I would respond in the affirmative. In this particular case, for example, the remnants of the novel left to us - which here I shall refer to for the last time as *The Last Tycoon* - form undoubtedly a discernible whole, thus excluding the necessity of considering any substantial alteration to the project as foreseen, which would have given rise to a novel other than the one we have. The novel in progress as published by Bruccoli shows that flexibility is inherent in *all* texts, even those which are finished, but it possesses likewise a resistance to the effects of time, precisely because it is a text which is not necrotized, but still living and capable of generating meaning. Like the stone of a fruit, it is less perishable than

the flesh, and, since the stone is also a "seed", it allows for the germination of even greater hermeneutic possibilities than would a text whose potential for growth has been frozen within certain limits.

The vital nucleus of the novel has been highlighted by Matthew Bruccoli mainly in his decision, interpretative in itself, to accept as a possible definitive title of the work *The Love of the Last Tycoon: A Western*, a title which Fitzgerald was considering in the last months of his life.³ The change from *The Last Tycoon* shifts the axis of the text from the main character's "titanic" side to his human side, to his feelings as a man, and his tortured relationship with the world. Stahr's neurotic love story thus becomes fundamental in the novel, inseparably linked as it is to the disquieting myth of Hollywood. The whole meaning of Fitzgerald's text rests, in fact, on two fundamental myths: the primordial myth of Eros, or Love, symbolizing the internal cohesion of the universe and the forces of attraction which impel the elements of nature to unite, and the modern myth of Hollywood, which was too close to Fitzgerald for him to have been able to perceive it as such. That full consciousness of this myth was yet to come is evident from a much-quoted letter which Fitzgerald wrote to his friend, the publisher Maxwell Perkins, in which he states that his novel "is distinctly *not* about Hollywood",⁴ and from the synopsis forwarded to Kenneth Littauer in 1939 in which he promises "a love affair [...], an immediate, dynamic, unusual, physical love affair [...]. This love affair is the meat of the book".⁵

In thus rescuing the work from the danger of a sociological reading, Fitzgerald focuses his attention on those slenderest of threads linking human passions and anxieties to the context in which they grow. Just as Eros was born out of Chaos, the love story between Stahr and Kathleen is presented as being generated out of the supreme disorder and fragmentation afflicting Hollywood. In this fractured world, symbolized by the earthquake episode and the consequent bursting of the water mains in the studios, Love's appointed role should be that of reassembling the fragments, at least in the private life of the main character, shattered by the tension between pragmatism and idealism, between the demands of the marketplace and those, no less tyrannical, of aestheticism.

However, Stahr's feelings for Kathleen are merely a surrogate

for his undiminished love for Minna, his dead wife, since, in T.S. Eliot's wasteland, love is as material as stone, and, even as such, of no greater effectiveness against the lacerations caused by the world, of no greater effectiveness than the passing myth of Hollywood. The only love possible for Stahr is "the love of the last Tycoon", his love for cinema which, in a transitional period such as the thirties, from its modest origins almost as a craft was growing ever more destructive, on its way to becoming the ruthlessly regulated industry which we know today.⁶ Even Cecilia's love for the producer remains unrequited. Stahr responds curtly to her first veiled advances ("Pictures are my girl. I haven't got much time"; *LLT*, p. 71), and on another occasion confides to Kathleen: "I enjoy working most [...]. My work is very congenial" (*LLT*, p. 79).

The physical resemblance which Stahr sees between Kathleen and Minna, and his illusory conviction that he can in some way revive his love affair with his wife, interweave with his obstinate belief in cinema's "quality" as pure art, evoking that recurrent Fitzgerald *topos*, the impossibility of resurrecting the past, of remaining anchored to a dream.⁷ When I think of the character of Monroe Stahr—who in other respects is the incarnation of the archetypal American Adam, holding out zealously against the corrupting forces of a civilization which has overtaken the wilderness - I am reminded of an aphorism inscribed in a painting by Joel Shapiro (*Untitled*, 1984), which I admired recently in an exhibition at the Albuquerque Museum in New Mexico. On a canvas where the milky colors of dawn mingled to fuse - in dissolving - with the dramatic shades of the dying sun, emblems of the cycle of life and death, written in the stuff of color were the following words: *I forgot to remember to forget*. What better epitaph for Monroe Stahr, whose greatest failure in life was his failure to forget, to resign himself to changing times? Like his somewhat less embittered counterpart, Gatsby, Stahr is struggling to keep his dream alive in the present, rather than consigning its integrity and power to memory, which alone can defeat time. In *The Love of the Last Tycoon* - as in *The Great Gatsby* to which Fitzgerald explicitly compared it while planning the later novel⁸ - there is an allusion to the ambitious dream of American Puritanism, which in the twenties had served as a stimulus for a society avid for material gain,

but had then revealed itself to be an illusion. This driving myth, diagnosed by Hawthorne in *The Gray Champion*, is rooted in the collective memory of the Americans, but when it clashes with the degradation of the present, is unveiled in all its rottenness and corruption, or, to paraphrase Fitzgerald himself, is sullied by that same dust which contaminated Gatsby's dream. The truth is that this myth was already corrupt when the Pilgrim Fathers founded a theocracy in the American colonies. It proved itself to be no less so when, in the terms of Fitzgerald's own metaphor, Dutch sailors transformed the green heart of Manhattan into a materialistic dream.

In Freudian terms, the relationship between love and the Hollywood setting of the novel mirrors that of *eros*, the instinct of self-preservation, and *thanatos*, the drive towards death, which external circumstances conspire in encouraging. However, I would prefer not to analyze what I have described as Fitzgerald's sinopia in these terms. The facile equation of Hollywood with Babylon, death and destruction, suggested by so many critical readings,⁹ may be a correct one, but seems to me inadequate and reductive in respect to the polysemic fertility of the Hollywood myth in Fitzgerald's novel. I would turn, therefore, to another aspect of the text, its absolutely modern language, which presents an undoubtedly negative myth as it is, yet at once frees the reader of those prejudices against it which threaten to hinder the author's revisiting and redemption of it.

It is Roland Barthes, master interpreter of modern myth, who helps us to understand this process when, analyzing the language of certain advertisements which generate contemporary myths, he lays bare their strategies and observes:

Insinuer dans l'Ordre le spectacle complaisant de ses servitudes, c'est devenu désormais un moyen paradoxal mais péremptoire de le gonfler. Voici le schéma de cette nouvelle démonstration: prendre la valeur d'ordre que l'on veut restaurer ou développer, manifester d'abord longuement ses petites, les injustices qu'elle produit, les brimades qu'elle suscite, la plonger dans son imperfection de nature; puis au dernier moment la sauver *malgré* ou plutôt *avec* la lourde fatalité de ses tares.¹⁰

The features outlined here are those which appear in *The Love of the Last Tycoon*, in which the negative attributes ascribed to the

capital of cinema in the by now canonical "Hollywood novel" clearly emerge.¹¹ The scene of allurements is also the birthplace of neurosis and hysteria, leading many of the characters to brutality or suicide. It crushes intellectuals and writers who—like Fitzgerald himself—follow this last baleful mirage hoping to renew their creativity, and instead find themselves battling with a world of barter and subterfuge in which they are relegated to the margins. Talking about a screenwriter, for instance, Cecilia says:

I knew she was a writer but I grew up thinking that writer and secretary were the same [...]. They were spoken of the same way when they were not around—except for a species called playwrights who came from the East. These were treated with respect if they did not stay long—if they did they sank with the others into the white collar class. (*LLT*, p. 100)

In the Hollywood undergrowth, teeming with nymphets pursuing chimeras of lives they have never lived, we find brutality, moral corruption and, just as often, brazen vulgarity: one striking example is when Cecilia finds a nude secretary hidden in the closet of her father's office, but many others could be cited. Hollywood is also the theatre of "pretence", which stands in for reality when reality is unacceptable. According to Carolyn See, this is a metaphor for the deception which permeates American society, reflecting "the discrepancy between what America leads us to expect and what it has to give".¹² Many episodes of Fitzgerald's text, and particularly the eleventh (*LLT*, pp. 49-62), show from within the creative process of film, an illusion always on the verge of being perceived as reality. Sometimes it seems that Fitzgerald's analysis of these mechanisms alludes to the most chilling aspect of Hollywood, the strategies of hidden persuasion with which it manipulates the public at large.

Yet one cannot but perceive Fitzgerald's love-hate relationship with Hollywood, with this menacing colossus which towered above the writer's art, its shadow pointing towards the destiny of literature. "Pasting It Together" (1936) anticipates contemporary debate on the demise of the bourgeois novel, which developed in the sixties, as well as Fitzgerald's fear of sophisticated technology which threatened to become a substitute for thought. He wrote:

I saw that the novel, which at my maturity was the strongest and supplest

medium for conveying thought and emotion from one human being to another, was subordinated to a mechanical and communal art that, whether in the hands of Hollywood merchants or Russian idealists, was capable of reflecting only the tritest thought, the most obvious emotion. It was an art in which words were subordinated to images, when personality was worn down to the inevitable gear of collaboration. As long past as 1930, I had a hunch that the talkies would make even the best selling novelist as archaic as silent pictures. [...] there was a rankling indignity, that to me became almost an obsession, in seeing the power of the written word subordinated to another power, a more glittering, a grosser power. . .¹³

However, despite the concern expressed here, *The Love of the Last Tycoon* is not grotesque and apocalyptic in tone like its contemporary *The Day of the Locust*, in which Hollywood is portrayed as a virtual reality, a hallucinatory vision of the fate of America and the world. The overall picture of Hollywood which emerges from the ending of the novel, sketched out in Fitzgerald's notes, may be negative, but there are stirrings of positive vitality. The machine continues to run, and Johnny Swanson is given work. There is no surrender either to the mass hysteria with which Nathaniel West's novel ends, or to images of total destruction, however cathartic, such as those depicted in the painting "The Burning of Los Angeles".

The tragic psycho-physical condition which emerges from Fitzgerald's last letters and from the texts in the "The Crack-Up" collection would lead us to expect an *entirely* negative and pessimistic view. And yet, the writing has a renewed freshness, and is illuminated by flashes of vitality, such as to demonstrate the contrary. As Roland Barthes explains in the passage quoted above, in *The Love of the Last Tycoon* the myth of Hollywood ends up acquiring a new significance, as if this last resort had become the starting point of a new life. As a counterpoint to brutal reality, Monroe's moral legacy is taken up by one of the three young people who rummage in the wreck of the airplane hidden in the white snow, a symbol of radiance, perhaps, of purity, or of purification.¹⁴

One could probably affirm that in Fitzgerald's novel, Janus-like, tomorrow's smiling face is masked by the tragic scowl of today. Nor are Fitzgerald's notes lacking in hints of this redemptory vision of the myth of Hollywood. In the end, Monroe Stahr, who comes from the

East, affirms his creativity in the West, in Hollywood, and there constructs what is defined as his empire, until the financial tentacles of the East reach the West and contaminate everything. The conflict between East and West introduces into the novel a vaguely Jamesian element often discernible in Fitzgerald's fiction, resolving itself into a dialectical tension between twin poles, constituting a radically American myth.

Moreover, the pages which describe the frenetic activity of the cinema studios, earlier referred to, do also demonstrate their extreme *vitality*, while, as if to prelude movements of regeneration, the motifs of death in the novel alternate and intertwine with those of life. I will refer only to one brief example among many. The appearance of Kathleen, which heralds the main character's rebirth, is preceded by the earthquake presaging death, accompanied, as is every natural birth, by a metaphorical "breaking of the waters", or rather the bursting of the water mains. The ineluctable cycle of death and regeneration is suggested also by the grunion who "came swarming in with the tide and Stahr and Kathleen stepped over them barefoot as they flicked slip-slop in the sand. [...] They came in twos and threes and platoons and companies, relentlessly and exalted and scornful around the great bare feet of the intruders, as they had come before Sir Francis Drake had nailed his plaque to the boulder on the shore" (*LLT*, pp. 92-93). These fish, typical of the Californian coast, who with the spring tides return punctually to spawn on sandy beaches, are indeed caught en masse by a Negro man, but not before, an instant before, they have given birth to new lives.

If one accepts, then, Barthes' definition of modern myth as a communication system, or rather a synthesis of possible signifiers, a "word" chosen by history and not an object arising of its own will from the nature of things,¹⁵ a semiotic analysis of the myth of Hollywood in *The Love of the Last Tycoon: A Western* will yield other significations existing independently of its "content". It is in this that the myth of Hollywood becomes a "form" enclosing another myth and its concomitant form, that of the great frontier, then in decline. In the oracular closing pages of *The Great Gatsby*, the frontier seems to be opened and the myth of America given life; in this, Fitzgerald's last novel, the mythic horizon begins to close and we are shown the dis-

appointment and deception hidden in Roosevelt's first New Deal. And yet a space is left for some rebirth out of a dream which has reached its end. With a touch recalling Spengler, Fitzgerald accepts the organic necessity of becoming, of history as the repetition of life and death. Nor does he exclude that the new vital cycle foreseen by Spengler might soon begin.¹⁶

Hence, *The Love of the Last Tycoon* is simultaneously a point of departure and arrival in Fitzgerald's writing, which, up to *The Great Gatsby*, had, to a degree, been a writing of "desire", describing the world as the author would like *all* reality to be. A certain kinship can be perceived here with the paintings of Giovanni Boldini of Ferrara, who interprets the Parisian *belle époque*, illustrating it with sumptuous decorative effects, at times bordering on bitter, subtle caricature. It is writing which in my view gives off a stench of death and desperation in its desire to escape from imminent catastrophe by immersing itself in the counterfeit glitter and light-heartedness of the "segment" of society which it chooses to describe. In *Tender is the Night*, even this superior light dies away in a definitive surrender to decay and exhaustion as inalienable realities of contemporary society.

Fitzgerald had planned to deal with the theme of twilight, or the "fall of the West", in a historical novel, provisionally titled "Philippe, Count of Darkness", which he left off writing when he started work on *The Love of the Last Tycoon*. The renewed vital impulses which have already been identified in the latter novel, and which are evident in the style as well, sprang therefore from suffering, from Fitzgerald's effort to renew his writing without recourse to commercial expedients. It evinces a conviction that good can come from evil, and the mature, serene awareness that both are inseparable parts of historic experience. This is further demonstrated by the contrast between the corruption which is Hollywood and a certain moral integrity in Monroe Stahr, who is not a corrupted idealist like Jay Gatsby, the bootlegger who is prepared to resort to illicit means. Stahr is, rather, a professional of cinema, despotic and sometimes contradictory, torn between his rejection of the corruption spreading from the East and the impossibility of being completely democratic, because his attachment to the old paternalistic culture prevents him from being so.

Returning to the myth of Hollywood, we can say that in the end, in one way or another, this fatal myth becomes a saving one. This is reinforced by implicit allusions to those constant factors of American experience which demonstrate how much the coexistence of the negative and the positive, rather than pertaining exclusively to the present, is the dynamic structure of history itself, the prerequisite of becoming. Hollywood is the place where the loss of the old identity and the painful acquisition of a new one—the experience of every American immigrant—is repeated and perpetuated. Now, as in the past, dreams are realized by men themselves, or fade into the twilight. Here, the parallel with the chimeric elusiveness of the frontier myth, discussed above, begs for attention and has become the staple of critical writing on the novel in hand. It dovetails paradoxically with Calvinistic dogma and its vision of success as an inalienable right. Indeed, the elect are favored in life with a prosperity commensurate with their favor with God.

The fracture and contradiction at the anguished heart of Hollywood become a metaphor for the world and human experience. The "unfinished", represented by Stahr's half-built house, becomes a significant motif of the work and a symbol of the impossibility of giving a finished form to life. In this novel, with its clear correspondence between a semantic project and its textual manifestation, where style and narrative strategy are profoundly influenced by cinema technique, Fitzgerald fuses those ancient and modern myths in which human needs and experiences, both intellectual and emotional, are shadowed forth and lived. As in the work of Joyce, Eliot and the other great Modernists, the myths of the past reemerge, but in distorted forms, forms which coincide with present reality. Meanwhile, new myths emerge, forming a mythological *corpus* recognized by Leslie Fiedler in the early sixties as that which makes of America, perhaps, Hellenic Greece.

¹ In the rich introduction to his own critical edition of Fitzgerald's text, Brucoli blames Edmund Wilson for conveying, in his 1941 edition of *The Last Tycoon*, the impression "of a more finished work than is represented by the working drafts" and for having arbitrarily organized the existing material into chapters, sometimes emending its language and punctuation and also excluding two scenes. Fitzgerald drafted only seventeen out of the thirty "episodes" which he had planned

to include in his last novel, leaving some gaps in the narration, which is by no means organized into a final and definitive layout. Such material - Brucoli rightly observes - is to be considered objectively in its provisional shape, whereas "that procedure has been impeded because the working drafts have heretofore been published only in the cosmeticized text edited by Edmund Wilson". See "Introduction" to *The Love of the Last Tycoon: A Western*, ed. Matthew J. Brucoli, Cambridge-New York, Cambridge U. Press, 1993, pp. XIV- XIII.

I have based myself on Brucoli's edition of Fitzgerald's text hereafter quoted as *LLT*; page references will be given in brackets after each quotation.

2 Maurizio Grande, "Non finito/non compiuto nei linguaggi a statuto duplice", *L'Asino d'oro*, II, 4 (Novembre 1991), p. 9.

Grande, who in his study draws a sharp distinction between unfinished text and incomplete text, specifies: "This is true for every sign system and textual production, since even in a literary work which is closed and finished the interpretative co-operation 'accomplishes' the text, bringing its sense into being (that is, accomplishing its 'semantic project' [...]). So, from this perspective the 'finished' does not coincide with the 'accomplished'. It coincides only with a definable sense of the text in relation to the period, the genre, contemporary style, the individuality of the text and of the author, etc. However, this is absolutely determinant for those textual productions which can be defined as twofold statute systems, as can more easily be seen in the theatre" (*Ibid.*, translation mine).

On the problems relating to the unfinished in literature and in the arts, see also the other essays which are included in the above-mentioned issue of *L'asino d'oro*, as well as those in the following issue (III, 5, Maggio 1992).

3 On the complex and more or less justified conjectures about a possible preference of Fitzgerald for one of the many titles which appear in his private papers, see "Introduction" to *LLT*, cit., pp. XIV-XVII. Matthew Brucoli's choice cannot but be considered an interpretative one, in so far as his motivations for this choice are rather weak and unconvincing. After having isolated two titles, which, in his opinion, are eligible to be chosen, namely "Stahr: A Romance" and "The Love of the Last Tycoon: A Western", Brucoli concludes by saying: "The latter is preferable because it is close to the title by which the novel has been known and because it has the Fitzgerald bouquet. Fitzgerald was in fact writing a western—a novel about the last American frontier, where immigrants and sons of immigrants pursued and defined the American dream" (p. XVII).

4 Letter to Maxwell E. Perkins, 22 May 1939, *Dear Scott/Dear Max: The Fitzgerald-Perkins Correspondence*, eds. John Kuehl and Jackson R. Bryer, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971, p. 256.

5 Letter to Kenneth Littauer, 29 September 1939, *Correspondence of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, eds. Matthew J. Brucoli and Margaret M. Duggan, New York, Random House, 1980, p. 547.

6 For an extensive exploration of the American film industry in the 1930s, see the chapter "Mass Culture in the Age of Movies" in Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, New York, Vintage Books, 1976, pp. 159-246.

7 For example, this is the supreme tragedy woven into Jay Gatsby's life. It may be useful to recall the often quoted, and crucial exchange between Nick Carraway and Gatsby which, in Chapter VI of *The Great Gatsby*, synthesizes Gatsby's obstinate refusal to surrender to the impossibility of reviving the past:

"I wouldn't ask too much of her,' I ventured. 'You can't repeat the past.' 'Can't repeat the past?' he cried incredulously. 'Why of course you can!'

He looked around him wildly, as if the past were lurking here in the shadow of his house, just out of reach of his hand."

Francis S. Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953, p. 111.

8 "I have a grand novel up my sleeve and I'd love to go to France and write it this summer. It would be short like "Gatsby" but the same in that it will have the transcendental approach, an attempt to show a man's life through some passionately regarded segment of it"; Letter to Beatrice Dance, 11 October 1938, *Correspondence of Francis Scott Fitzgerald*, cit., p. 517.

"If one book could ever be 'like' another I should say it is more 'like' *The Great Gatsby* than any other of my books"; Letter to Kenneth Littauer, 29 September 1939, *Ibid.*, p. 549.

9 Among the best critical studies on Hollywood as a symbol of dissolution, see Walter Wells, *Tycoons and Locusts: A Regional Look at Hollywood Fiction of the 1930's*, Carbondale, Southern Illinois U. Press, 1973, pp. 103-121.

10 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1970, pp. 44-45.

11 Fitzgerald's work, however, presents features both of the Hollywood novel and of the film novel. In a dense and extensive study, in which Luigi Pirandello's *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore* is viewed as the archetype of the film novel, Gavriel Moses draws out the resemblances between Pirandello's and Fitzgerald's novels. Moses prefers to include *The Pat Hobby Stories* in the genre of the film novel because they focus on Hollywood as a theme and as a metaphor of life and society. Such a neat classification is not possible in the case of *The Love of the Last Tycoon*, for although there is a complex treatment of Hollywood the novel also abounds in film-derived elements. Cfr. Gavriel Moses, *The Nickel Was for the Movies: Film in the Novel from Pirandello to Puig*, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London, University of California Press, 1995, pp. 174-192.

12 Carolyn See, "The Hollywood Novel: The American Dream Cheat", *Tough Guy Writers of the Thirties*, ed. David Madden, Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1968, p. 201.

13 Francis S. Fitzgerald, "Pasting It Together", *The Crack-Up*, ed. Edmund Wilson, New York, New Directions, 1956, p. 78.

14 In one of the many working notes Fitzgerald wrote: "Jim has, by this time, read the contents of Stahr's briefcase and late at night, taking it from the woodshed where he has concealed it has gotten an admiration for the man... In any case, something in one of Stahr's letters that Jim reads at night decides him to go to Judge—and tell the whole story which he does against the threats of Dan who is bigger than he is and could lick him physically". Quoted in "Introduction" to *LLT*, cit., p. LXIV.

15 Cfr. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, *cit.*, pp. 193-195.

16 The reference, here, is to the German philosopher of history Oswald Spengler who, in his noted work *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (published in America as *The Decline of the West*, 1918-22), maintained that western culture was in the last stage of its development and predicted the rise of a new and "different" civilization. Fitzgerald was deeply influenced by the philosophy of Spengler whose name is recurrent in his novels as well as in his letters. He was conscious, though, of the distortions to which Spengler's philosophy had fallen prey and in a letter to Maxwell Perkins wrote: "Spengler believed that the Western world was dead, and he believed nothing else but that—though he had certain ideas of a possible Slavic rebirth. This did *not* include Germany, which he linked with the rest of Western Europe as in decline. And that the fine flower of it was to be the battle of Vittorio Veneto and the rise of Mussolini—well, Spengler's turn in his grave must have been that of an airplane propeller... Did you ever read Spengler—specifically including the second volume? I read him the same summer I was writing *The Great Gatsby* and I don't think I ever quite recovered from him. He and Marx are the only modern philosophers that still manage to make sense in this horrible mess—I mean make sense by themselves and not in the hands of distorters...". Letter to Maxwell E. Perkins, 6 June 1940, *The Letters of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, ed. Andrew Turnbull, London, The Bodley Head, 1964, pp. 289-290.