SAVE ME THE WALTZ AND ZELDA FITZGERALD'S 'VISUAL MUSIC': AN INTERVIEW WITH ERIN E. TEMPLETON

ESTA VALSA É MINHA E A "MÚSICA VISUAL" DE ZELDA FITZGERALD: UMA ENTREVISTA COM ERIN E. TEMPLETON

Marcela Lanius[1]

Erin E. Templeton is a Professor of English and Dean of the School of Humanities, Sciences, and Business at Converse College. She wrote the introduction to the 2019 Handheld Press edition of Zelda Fitzgerald's novel *Save Me the Waltz* and contributed to a cluster of essays titled "Reading *The Waste Land* with the #MeToo Generation" in *Modernism/modernity*'s PrintPlus platform. She has also published essays on William Carlos Williams's long poem *Paterson* for the *Cambridge Companion to William Carlos Williams* and contributed several entries to *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism* on figures such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, Zelda Fitzgerald, T. S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound.

Following the 15th International F. Scott Fitzgerald Society Conference that took place at the University of Toulouse-Jean Jaurès in June 2019, Professor Templeton agreed to discuss Zelda Fitzgerald's *Save Me the Waltz,* her preface to the 2019 Handheld Press edition of the novel, and how the #MeToo movement has prompted new readings of well-established literary works.

Marcela Lanius: *Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald is still widely known as the wife of F. Scott Fitzgerald and as a woman who was diagnosed as schizophrenic and died in a fire while undergoing treatment at a psychiatric institution. Not only that, over the decades there has been a tendency to either ignore or discredit her authorial works as mere copies or reproductions of her husband's work. What were the challenges you faced when writing the new introduction to Save Me the Waltz, published earlier this year by the Handheld Press?*

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Erin E. Templeton: The biggest challenge when writing the introduction was not letting biography, both hers and his, overwhelm the novel. The Fitzgeralds life story is fascinating, and Zelda's novel draws heavily upon her lived experience; both of these statements are true. But not only has that ground already been covered extensively by generations of scholars and critics, it is also only one lens through which to view the novel. My goal was to provide several different ways into the book in the hope that it might help the text to speak to a wider variety of readers.

ML: *As you discussed in your introduction, Save Me the Waltz is a book that evades direct and plain classification: it can be read as a roman a clef, as a bildungsroman, as a kunstlerroman, as a jazz bildungsroman and even as a surrealist work of literature*[2]*. We could also add to the list such classifications as an exercise in self-analysis*[3]*, trauma or disability fiction, experimental prose*[4] *and even autonarration*[5]*, but the most common and often-used characterization is still that of "autobiography". Do you feel that the tendency of poising her novel as merely autobiographical is linked to the fact that such a huge part of the Fitzgerald's public identities was built on the idea of a marriage between a great writer and his "muse and inspiration"*[6]*? And why does a solely biographical analysis hinders a proper critical discussion of Save Me the Waltz?*

EET: Yes absolutely.

A purely biographical analysis of the novel focuses our attention on the ways that Alabama Knight resembles Zelda Fitzgerald. Zelda's life was singularly glamorous and tragic. But, as I argued in Toulouse, *Save Me the Waltz* is not simply the story of one woman. It's a novel that traces a shift in women's lives as more freedoms and opportunities were becoming available both in the United States and in Europe. Women were finding autonomy: economic, political, and sexual. And yet, the institutions of marriage and motherhood still exerted a strong pull. Alabama Knight embodies these contradictory impulses and desires. And while it is certainly true that Zelda confronted them in her own life, so too did a generation of women.

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[2] Templeton, 2019, p. xx-xxi
[3] Bryer & Barks, 2003
[4] Legleitner, 2014
[5] Diermet, 1998
[6] Churchwell, 2013, p. 28

Moreover, biography is insufficient when it comes to understanding the prose style of *Save Me the Waltz*. One of the most interesting and most challenging elements of the book is its long and convoluted sentence structures in which metaphors and analogies are piled on top of each other. It can be very disorienting and disconcerting. If readers enter into *Save Me the Waltz* expecting to read a linear narrative filled with the more accessible prose of Zelda's magazine pieces, they are likely to be very confused and possibly repelled by what they encounter in the novel.

ML: *Save Me the Waltz's second edition, published in the 1960s, included an overwhelmingly negative preface written by Harry T. Moore, in which the scholar describes Zelda as not only the jealous and envious wife of Scott Fitzgerald but also as someone who had a merely "surface ability"*[7] *to write, paint, and dance. Do you think that paratextual elements such as the preface, the introduction and the afterword can mediate the reading experience for the reader? And should they act as mediators?*

EET: The material that accompanies any novel (or other writing) absolutely shapes the reading experience, and as a reader myself, I often save these pieces until after I have read the primary text. I feel very strongly that a first encounter with a novel is sacred and I want to have as close to a clean slate as possible before I dig into secondary sources, whether they are published alongside the novel or they come along later in the form of book reviews, author interviews, or scholarly essays.

I took the role of mediator very seriously in my work on *Save Me the Waltz.* When writing the introduction, I very consciously tried to provide readers with multiple lines of interpretation without favoring any one of these over another. My goal was to open up the book to a variety of possibilities rather than to tell readers which one was correct. *Save Me the Waltz* in particular, has been reduced to a single understanding—the biographical—for long enough.

ML: *Save Me the Waltz narrates Alabama Begg's journey into womanhood, her marriage to David Knight and her quest to achieve personal success in a creative medium and carve out a new identity for herself that is not confined to the social roles of wife and mother. Even though the novel ends with Alabama and David back in her southern hometown and with the ballet being nothing more than a failed adventure from*

[7] Moore, 2001, p. i

the past, you argue that this should not be understood as an unhappy or failed ending, since Alabama "seems to have achieved a sense of composure that she had been seeking throughout the book and to have cleansed herself of a past that will no longer serve her"[8]*. Could you elaborate on that?*

EET: Yes. My admittedly rose-colored reading of the ending of the novel is grounded in Alabama's sense of self, the growth of which we can track over the course of the novel. The book opens with Alabama's mother Millie, who has completely given herself over to the roles of submissive wife and somewhat reluctant mother. Alabama, the novel tells us, "She wants to be told what she is like, being too young to know that she is like nothing at all and will fill out her skeleton with what she gives off, as a general might reconstruct a battle following the advances and recessions of his forces with bright-colored pins. She does not know that what effort she makes will become herself" (4)[9]. By the end of the novel, Alabama has grown. She has achieved a sense of self that is not dependent on her marriage or her daughter though she reclaims the roles of both wife and mother after her dancing career is prematurely ended by blood poisoning and tendon surgery. This selfhood, to me, represents important progress not only for Alabama as an individual but for women of her generation more broadly.

I also put a lot of weight on the final paragraph of the novel, which closes with an image of twilight comparted to a trout stream. While the twilight certainly signals a kind of symbolic ending, I argue that the trout stream is an image of sustenance and vitality, while this chapter of the Knights' lives is closing, there will be another, and given the growth and progress that we have seen Alabama achieve over her lifetime up to this point, I like to think that she will take the lessons that she has learned and cleansed of those things which no longer serve her, she will continue to grow into her self.

ML: *One of the most poignant moments of the novel comes right after Zelda's depiction of Naples as a disordered and sensorially confusing space. What should become the setting for her artistic debut and personal independence, then, is transformed into an external reflection of her internal struggle to overcome the strict social roles of wife and mother. Even though her dream of succeeding in the ballet is eventually cut short*

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[8] Templeton, 2019, p. xxiv

[9] All of Professor Templeton's quotations from *Save Me the Waltz* are from the Handheld edition. The quote from *Tender* is the from Scribner's Classics edition.

by the end of the novel, Alabama seems to leave behind a legacy of "artistic heritage"[10] for her daughter, who claims to want to become an artist, and above all a legacy of female independence. Do you feel that Alabama's advice for Bonnie not to be a "back-seat driver about life"[11] should – or could – be interpreted not only as a way of empowering her daughter but also as evidence of her maturing into her self, as you mentioned above?

EET: Yes—absolutely. In the original version of my paper for the Fitzgerald Society, I had a bit more about Bonnie, but I ran out of space and time. She's the embodiment of all the changes that Alabama has struggled with and might even be the future of the book. I hedge that last because the novel, as you know, doesn't end with Bonnie. In fact, she's curiously absent in the book's final scene. But she grows up traveling the world with her parents, learning French and English both, and watching her mother pursue her dreams of dance. She spends time in the studio with Madame and also endures the separation of her parents, which as it turns out, is short-lived. As a result, Bonnie is exposed to an extraordinary range of women's lives and experiences: she encounters women from different backgrounds and nationalities, women of different socio-economic classes who have different dreams and ambitions: some of them want a husband while others want a career. Whereas Alabama's struggle throughout the book is to build a self from scratch, Bonnie seems to have already gained a budding sense of autonomy. In the beginning of the novel, Alabama recounts her correspondence with her then-fiancé David Knight: "my dear, you are my princess and I'd like to keep you shut forever in an ivory tower for my private delectation" (45). Alabama, if you'll recall, politely rejects this characterization after multiple exchanges: "The third time he wrote that about the princess, Alabama asked him not to mention the tower again."

David returns to the metaphor much later in the book, this time in a playful exchange with Bonnie: "Then can I be King of the Castle?" called David from the window, "and cut off your head if you make a mistake?" (225). Bonnie rebuffs the attempt at subjugation: "You," said Bonnie, "are a prisoner, and I have pulled out your tongue so you cannot complain—but I am good to you anyway." Whereas it took Alabama three letters to express her unhappiness at this characterization of herself as kept object,

[10] Legletiner, 2014, p. 137
[11] Fitzgerald, 2019, p. 225

isolated from the rest of the world, and even then her response was a docile question, her daughter has no such reservations. Bonnie doesn't ask; Bonnie commands. Recasting herself in the role of King, she wastes no time subjugating her father, and not only seizing the throne, but also foreclosing any possibility of complaint through an act of violence.

I'm not suggesting that we take these passages literally—in both cases there's an important sense of play that we can't overlook. And yet, I'll also insist that the recurrence of the metaphor matters and provides us with a useful metric to think about generational feminist progress.

ML: *Much has been said about Zelda's idiosyncratic use of language and Save Me the Waltz does work as a testament to the vivid, colorful, fantastic and sometimes terrifying images the author conjures. Her works always remind me of a letter she wrote Fitzgerald in the fall of 1930, asking him to send any discs on Prokofiev's Symphony no. 4 because she likes "visual music"*[12]*. To me, her writing seems to be just that: a visual music through which she portrays Alabama's southern home, the countries she visits and her life at the dance studios. Not only that, her descriptions do seem to be extraordinarily visual, especially when we consider the constant mention of famous paintings and painters that appear throughout the novel. What do you make of this visual language of hers?*

EET: I love it even as it can be profoundly disorienting. One of my favorite passages of the novel is the description of Alabama and David's first kiss where she imagines crawling around his cerebral cortex in a way that is both playful and horrifying. I've argued elsewhere that it is a literal meeting of the minds which imagines their intimacy as playful at first but then shifts into something darker and more terrifying—all the while with an undercurrent of martial language: "trenches" and "front lines" (43).

All of this to say that I completely agree with your emphasis on the visual elements of her prose style.

ML: *Even though Save Me the Waltz remains an important literary work to be discussed, some of Zelda's other works, such as her short stories, her play and her*

[12] Bryer & Barks, 2003, p. 93

unpublished novel are usually met with trifling interest. Is it your opinion that this might change giving the new surge of interest that Zelda's life and work has amassed, as you mentioned in your Introduction, ever since the release of Baz Luhrmann's 2013 film adaptation of The Great Gatsby [13]*?*

EET: It's an interesting question. I think part of the problem with the rest of Zelda's *oeuvre* is its lack of accessibility. *Caesar's Things* was never finished, and to my knowledge, never published in draft form. I have not read it, nor do I know anyone who has. The stories are tricky because of their shared bylines. The *Collected Writings* includes them all, and many are reprinted in the collection *Bits of Paradise*, but despite the surge of interest in the Fitzgeralds' lives, there is remarkably little interest in her work, both the writing and her painting, which I know isn't the topic here but is also something I find really interesting. I have no background in the visual arts, so I won't hazard an opinion on her merit as a painter beyond the remark that I really love several of the Paris and New York pieces.

ML: *I would also like to discuss the novel that, together with Save Me the Waltz, makes up "one of the most interesting pairs of novels in American literary history"*[14]*: Scott Fitzgerald's Tender is the Night, published in 1934. Despite the fact that it failed to become the commercial success its author wished it to be*[15]*, the book has been interpreted over the past decades as the "mature and deeply poignant work he believed it was"*[16] *— and one that, inevitably, provokes new readings and interpretations as new critical tendencies emerge. Could you talk about your experience with teaching this book, especially in the wake of the #MeToo movement in the United States?*

EET: I haven't taught *Tender* since #MeToo broke out across the social media feeds of the United States, but I'm rereading it and working on an essay about it for the upcoming reissue of the *Cambridge Companion to F. Scott Fitzgerald* that Michael Nowlin is editing. To me, *Tender* has always been trouble. By that I mean, it's a novel that has always raised a lot of difficult questions and issues: alcoholism and infidelity to incest and what today we would call gay conversion therapy. Part of the difficulty is the

[13] Templeton, 2019, p. xxiii
[14] Bryer & Barks, 2003, p. 147
[15] Brown, 2017, p. 261
[16] Bryer & Barks, 2003, p. 147

numerous substantive revisions and reimaginings that the novel experienced over the decade that Fitzgerald was writing it. Part of the difficulty is one of context, by which I mean that our understanding of things like mental health has changed dramatically over the 80+ years since the book was published. Part of it, too, stems from the nonlinear narrative structure that Fitzgerald settled upon before he published the book in 1934. But most troubling to me is that way that the sexual dynamics of the book, in particular the power relations between men and women, are so often discomforting (at best) have taken on a new valence of creepiness. Encounters that had been normalized—Dr. Dick Diver kissing the daughter of one of his patients "in an idle, almost indulgent way" but rejecting her when she wanted to take things further (192).

So while I am still in the very early stages of thinking through my response to the novel beyond the visceral cringing that I've been doing the whole way through the novel this time around, I'm certain that these topics will be part of my argument.

ML: *You have recently contributed to a cluster of essays entitled "Reading The Waste Land with the #MeToo Generation". How has the #MeToo movement affected your reading and teaching of other literary works?*

EET: It's an interesting and important question. Primarily, #MeToo has made me more sensitive the ways that my generation of readers has so completely internalized and normalized tropes of sexual violence and misogyny. Things that have always made me vaguely uncomfortable, the Tereus and Philomela allusions in *The Waste Land* for example, or the fixation on young girls and daughters in *Tender Is the Night*.

I've become more sensitive to these kinds of details and also more firmly committed than ever to the importance of nuance in our reading practices. The danger of #MeToo is the erasure of distinction. That is, the levelling effect that puts Harvey Weinstein, Jeffrey Epstein, Quentin Tarantino, Donald Trump, Al Franken, Louis CK, Bill Cosby, Jacques Derrida, Woody Allen, and more all together into the same category of sexual predator. I'm not saying that any of them are good men or respectable human beings. But I also don't think that they are all equally terrible. Put another way, the danger of #MeToo is to lump cat calling, an inappropriate sexual comment in the workplace (a joke, for example), rape and bad but consensual sex all together. And while all of these things are terrible, they aren't all terrible in the same way. The power of #MeToo stems

from the way that it can open things up: eyes, ears, and most importantly, mouths. Finding safety in numbers, women became to tell their stories—all of their stories. But, perhaps because of the magnitude of the response to the hashtag, the effect of these stories has often been to close down discussion, to dismiss the stories, to retreat from engagement. To foreclose all possibilities because the subject matter is an emotional and personal and painful and hard. But it's these qualities that make works like *The Waste Land* and *Tender Is the Night* so powerful and so important—not because they are triggering (though they can be) but because they force us to grapple with hard questions: how do we understand consent? What is the appropriate boundary between two individuals? What happens when intimacy fails? What does "failure" even mean in such a context?

For more on #MeToo and Modernism, you might take a look at this cluster of essays:

"Reading *The Waste Land With the #MeToo Generation*"

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