

John Grube

TENDER IS THE NIGHT: KEATS AND SCOTT FITZGERALD

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD was deeply influenced by poetry during his entire life. In a letter to his daughter (August 3, 1940) he says:

The Grecian Urn is unbearably beautiful, with every syllable as inevitable as the notes of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*, or it's just something you don't understand. It is what it is because an extraordinary genius past at that point in history and touched it. I suppose I've read it a hundred times. About the tenth time I began to know what it was about, and caught the chime in it, and the exquisite inner mechanics. Likewise with the *Nightingale*, which I can never read through without tears in my eyes.

In the same letter he says, "For awhile after you quit Keats all other poetry seems to be only whistling or humming." It was from Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale* that he chose the title of his fourth novel, *Tender Is the Night*.

The heroine of *Tender Is the Night* is Nicole Warren, a beautiful young girl from an extremely wealthy Chicago family who has had sexual intercourse with her father and has been placed in a Swiss sanatorium to recover from the shock and consequent mental breakdown. Here she meets the handsome American psychiatrist, Dick Diver, full of enthusiasm and the first flush of youthful contact with the great men of European psychoanalysis. After a series of letters and meetings, they fall in love. Much against the advice of his European colleagues, Dick marries Nicole. They settle on the Riviera, where she builds a magnificent villa and begins to entertain, gradually collecting about her a glittering circle of friends. But as she gets better, Dick gets "worse". He becomes more and more dependent on her and the protection of her money. Finally they are divorced, she remarries happily, and he disappears into a small and unsuccessful medical practice in upstate New York.

Fitzgerald not only took the title of his novel from Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale", but places a quotation from the poem at the beginning of the book. Let us look for a moment at this section of the poem:

Already with thee! Tender is the night,
 And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,
 Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays;
 But here there is no light,
 Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown
 Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways.

That is the part of the poem he chose to quote and emphasize. Curiously enough he omits these two lines:

And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,
 Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays;

We shall see that he had a reason for drawing attention to these two lines; he chose to make the moon, in her many aspects—queen, goddess, suggestive of madness—an important symbol in the book.

The novel, too even in its structure is full of echoes of Keats' famous poem. Enwrapped in Nicole's money and beauty, Dr. Diver leaves the world of science and the intellect for the world of sense ("... a drowsy numbness pains/My sense"), abandons his medical practice, and even forgets the promising research of his youth ("... Lethe-wards had sunk"). The poem's word "opiate" has a medical touch, just as the parallel "hemlock", with its overtones of the death of Socrates, suggests the end of his rational life.

At this point Nicole's family buy him a half-interest in a private mental hospital, partly to restore his professional self-confidence and feelings of manliness. She names the house for incurable male patients The Eglantine ("... the pastoral eglantine") and the corresponding house for female patients The Beeches: ("In some melodious plot/Of beechen green, and shadows numberless"). The "shadows numberless" of the poem become in the novel "those sunk in eternal darkness".¹

Dr. Diver often contrasts Nicole's innocence of human suffering with his own experience as a psychiatrist:

What thou among the leaves hast never known,
 The weariness, the fever, and the fret
 Here, where men sit and hear each other groan.

Further, we are shown Dick on his daily medical rounds. There are the hopelessly old and senile ("Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs"); the young, usually schizophrenic, who always touch his heart ("Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies"); the formidably intelligent whose grief is that they can now think only in circles ("Where but to think is to be full of sorrow"); finally there are those who were once beautiful, twisted by despair until they become objects of pro-

found pity and regret ("Where beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes").

Soon Dick and Nicole tire of the Swiss mental home and again resume their search for the "hot, sweet south" (p. 91) where they had first found so much happiness ("Dance and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth"). Settling in their villa, they become the glass of fashion and mould of form as Nicole increasingly attracts the admiration and attention of a large coterie. The men respond to her beauty, and in the process somewhat lose their manliness and cue for action ("The Queen-Moon is on her throne/Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays"). At this point in the novel they are at the supposed peak of human happiness, surrounded by friends, good food, and particularly good wine ("With beaded bubbles winking at the brim/And purple-stained mouth"). But the wink turns into a leer as Dick goes on a serious drinking spree in Rome. His personality begins to crack, and he pursues a self-destructive course, sometimes violent as on the Roman holiday where he is seriously beaten up, sometimes simply alienating friends. But the death wish is there ("Darkling I listen; and for many a time/I have been half in love with easeful death"). He is more and more adrift on the "perilous" seas of "fancy", while Nicole is daily growing in health and vitality ("While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad/In such an ecstasy").

Finally Nicole falls in love with Tommy Barban, a soldier of fortune; Dick and Nicole are divorced, and as Dr. Diver disappears to America at the end of the story, he is left only the haunting memory of her beauty. The corresponding lines of Keats' poem have a similar haunting quality and a theme of separation:

Adieu! Adieu! the plaintive anthem fades
Past the near meadows, over the still stream,
Up the hillside; now 'tis buried deep

In the next valley-glades:
Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music:—do I wake or sleep?

Fitzgerald worked for nine years on *Tender Is the Night*, and made many revisions both of the structure and the text. Malcolm Cowley, his most recent editor, speaks of an entry in Fitzgerald's notebook "outlining the changed order and dividing the novel into five books instead of three. The entry reads:

Analysis of *Tender*

- I Case History 151-212 61 pps. (change moon) p. 212
- II Rosemary's Angle 3-104 101 pps. P. 3
- III Casualties 104-148, 213-224 55 pps. (—2) (120 & 121)
- IV Escape 225-306 82 pps.
- V The Way Home 306-408 103 pps. (—8) (332-341)

Cowley remarks, "I haven't been able to find the 'moon' that was to be changed in Book 1; perhaps Fitzgerald gave some special meaning to the word, and in any case it doesn't occur on 212."² I think Cowley is right, that Fitzgerald did give a special meaning to the word, and that its importance as a symbol in the book is definitely indicated by the fact that Fitzgerald, in this outline prepared for his own use, chose to mention specifically only this one object—the moon.

What, then, is the special meaning? The moon first appears in a context of madness. After a brief meeting, the only contact between Nicole and Dr. Diver is in the form of letters that she sends to him, encouraged by the doctors who feel it would be good for her to develop a healthy interest in the outside world. The letters indicate, of course, a high degree of schizophrenia. For example:

However you seem quieter than the others, all soft like a big cat. I have only gotten to like boys who are rather sissies. Are you a sissy? There were some somewhere.

Excuse all this, it is the third letter I have written to you and will send immediately or never send. I've thought a lot about moonlight too, and there are many witnesses I could find if only I could be out of here (p. 10).

Not only is the moon introduced here as associated with madness, but also another and related theme: Dick's later disintegration as a man. Under the pressure of caring for her, of dealing with her recurrent "lunacy", he cracks up, becomes a "sissy", or becomes, to use Keats' imagery, a "Fay" at the court of the "Queen-Moon".

Shortly afterwards we see the Divers through the eyes of Rosemary Hoyt, a young Hollywood actress who has just made her first film, *Daddy's Girl*. She is very much impressed with Nicole, thinking of the setting in which she met her in terms of: "Gause's hotel through the darkening banks of trees . . . the moon already hovered over the ruins of the aqueduct" (p. 71). The imagery not only gives us historical perspective, taking us back in time to the antique world, but also foreshadows the ruin that is hovering over the Diver household, torn apart as it is soon to be by a recurrence of Nicole's schizophrenia. For it is at a fabulous party on the terrace of the Divers' villa that the book reaches its climax. Nicole has her first relapse; Dick first loses control of the situation; the family secret is out in the open. And the incident leaves a trail of destruction and ruin in its wake. Long-standing friendships break up. Even a duel ensues as a direct result of the mad scene.

But the moon is not only a symbol of lunacy. The name of the Divers' house on the Riviera is the Villa Diana, and in many ways Nicole is depicted as that virginal goddess. Early in the book Dick sees her under this aspect:

Her hair, drawn back of her ears, brushed her shoulders in such a way that the face seemed to have just emerged from it, as if this were the exact moment when she was coming from a wood into clear moonlight. The unknown yielded her up; Dick wished she had no background, that she was just a girl lost with no address save the night from which she had come (p. 25).

To the other women in the book, such as Rosemary, she also appears to have the hard ruthless quality of the huntress: "Her face was hard, lovely, pitiful . . ." (p. 61). or: "Her face was hard, almost stern . . . save for the soft gleam that looked from her green eyes" (p. 82). Many also notice the innocence and beauty that Dick first perceived.

But the moon's other and more sinister side is also hinted at by Abe North, the Divers' closest friend, who is both jester and chorus throughout the novel:

Abe North was talking to her about his moral code: "Of course I've got one", he insisted—"a man can't live without a moral code. Mine is that I'm against the burning of witches. Whenever they burn a witch I get all hot under the collar" (p. 90).

It is Abe North, too, who explains to Rosemary Hoyt why the charmed circle of the Divers' friends is breaking up—why a duel is fought over Nicole's honour. He can only say, in his capacity of chorus: "'Plagued by the nightingale,' Abe suggested, and repeated, 'probably plagued by the nightingale'" (p. 100). This enigmatic comment, carrying us back to Keats' Ode, to the title of the book, and to the verses that stand at its head, reminds us that the nightingale traditionally has two aspects. Not only is it a bird whose beautiful notes have been celebrated by poets throughout the entire history of literature, but it also has a long mythological association with blood and violence, as in the story of Philomela. And Nicole creates both beauty and violence wherever she goes. Later in the novel this aspect is underlined when the Divers are staying at a Paris hotel. A murder occurs in the room across the way; Nicole has another seizure, and even her ravings are full of images of blood:

Nicole knelt beside the tub swaying sidewise and sidewise. "It's you!" she cried,— "it's you come to intrude on the only privacy I have in the world—with your spread with red blood on it" (p. 174).

Though Nicole as "Queen-Moon" presides over her court of "starry Fays", we are never allowed to forget entirely the other image borrowed from Keats' poem, the nightingale, or its two-fold character.

There is another incident of great interest in this regard. As a prelude to the

famous party on the terrace of the Villa Diana, the Divers have their two children sing "Au Clair de la Lune":

"Hello, Lanier, how about a song? Will you and Topsy sing me a song?"

"What shall we sing?" agreed the little boy, with the odd charming accent of American children brought up in France.

"That song about "Mon Ami Pierrot".

Brother and sister stood side by side without self-consciousness and their voices soared sweet and shrill upon the evening air.

Au clair de la lune,
 Mon ami Pierrot,
 Prête-moi ta plume
 Pour écrire un mot.
 Ma chandelle est morte,
 Je n'ai plus de feu,
 Ouvre-moi ta porte,
 Pour l'amour de Dieu.

The singing ceased and the children, their faces aglow with the late sunshine, stood smiling calmly at their success (p. 85).

Not only is this incident a treble variation, so to speak, on the darker variations of the lunar theme that run throughout the book. It also recapitulates the story. Diver gradually turns into Pierrot, actor, clown, and finally puppet. "Prête-moi ta plume/Pour écrire un mot" recalls the touching letters Nicole wrote from the asylum when her "chandelle" was truly "morte", when the light of her mind was eclipsed. Finally the last two lines of the stanza, "Ouvre-moi ta porte/Pour l'amour de Dieu", suggest her desperate appeals to Dr. Diver to open to her the gates of sanity, the door of the asylum, and there is a religious aspect to the work Diver did for mental patients and for his friends—he makes a papal cross as he retires from the beach at the end of the book.

There are four stanzas to this charming song, which is both known to every schoolchild and also deeply imbued with the wit and grace of *la vieille France*. It is the story of Pierrot, traditionally "habillé en blanc . . . c'est la candeur, la naïveté, l'enthousiasme, la jeunesse." What better description of the young Dr. Diver could there be? His opponent is Harlequin, who traditionally "porte le masque noir et le costume bigarré; et représente la malice, l'adresse, l'insouciance".³ The character who comes to fill this latter role in the novel is Tommy Barban. In fact the last part of the book is a contest between Dick Diver and Tommy Barban for the love of Nicole, a contest between Pierrot and Harlequin. But Nicole has changed during the course of the book until she is completely freed of psychosis. She is no longer

praying for help; she is ready for the spontaneity of love. There is the same ironic twist in "Au Clair de la Lune". The lines in the first stanza,

Ourve-moi ta porte,
Pour l'amour de Dieu,

become at the end of stanza three

Ouvrez votre porte,
Pour le dieu d'amour

and to this approach of Harlequin, in his guise of Tommy Barban, she responds.

Fitzgerald often reinforces his main story-line with subplots or incidents that echo the main plot. For example, the striking opening chord of the novel—Nicole's seduction by her father—is repeated when Rosemary Hoyt, the Hollywood actress, shows her friends, including Nicole, her latest film *Daddy's Girl*. The Shirley Temple aspect of the story contains a similar though unrealized emotional situation, sugared over though it is by the sentimental clichés of the film. Given this method of Fitzgerald, I think the introduction of "Au Clair de la Lune", the selection of this particular piece of music, deserves the close attention given it above in analysing the essential structure of the novel.

But there is another aspect to the incident. Just as the showing of *Daddy's Girl* gives Fitzgerald the opportunity to denounce the arrested emotional states that are induced in young Americans by Hollywood, and the subsequent difficulties they experience while maturing emotionally, I think that the Pierrot scene is meant to indicate the large gap that separates the expatriate American from the country he "escapes" to—in Fitzgerald's time almost always France. The expatriate never succeeds in establishing real contact with the people. They remain, whether Marseilles dockhands or duchesses, picturesque, literary. How little, after all, do the Divers and their friends understand "Au Clair de la Lune", which is a witty and urbane poem, a poem they have reduced to a child's recitative? They can only see by reflected light—*au clair de la lune*. The last stanza, for example, is typically French in feeling:

Au clair de la lune,
On n'y voit que peu.
On chercha la plume,
On chercha le feu.
Cherchant de la sorte
Ne sais ce qu'on trouva,
Mais je sais qu'la porte
Sur eux se ferma.

It illustrates, perhaps, the light touch that a Frenchman can lend to his affairs of the heart, as opposed to the gloom and complexity that an Anglo-Saxon introduces into his—at least in novels.

Fitzgerald spent the nine years prescribed by Horace revising this book before sending it out into the world. It received a cool reception. Since then it has been both attacked and defended, slowly attaining a wider circulation and popularity. Part of the difficulty readers experience with the book is due, I think, to a failure to realize its essential *genre*. It is in part an allegory, structurally close in many ways to such allegorical works of the past as, say, Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*.

It is well known that Spenser used the fictional characters of his poem to represent his ideas about religious questions, morality, contemporary politics, and the relation of England to her past. In like manner *Tender Is the Night* appears to be a tragic love story, but the characters are used by Fitzgerald quite frequently to convey his own ideas. For example, he uses Nicole as a peg on which to hang his poetic version of *The Communist Manifesto*:

Nicole was the product of much ingenuity and toil. For her sake trains began their run at Chicago and traversed the round belly of the continent to California; chicle factories fumed and link belts grew link by link in factories; men mixed toothpaste in vats and drew mouthwash out of copper hogsheads; girls canned tomatoes quickly in August or worked rudely at the Five-and-Tens on Christmas Eve; half-breed Indians toiled on Brazilian coffee plantations and dreamers were muscled out of patent rights in new tractors—these were some of the people who gave a tithe to Nicole and, as the whole system swayed and thundered onward, it lent a feverish bloom to such processes of hers as wholesale buying, like the flush of a fireman's face holding his post before a spreading blaze. She illustrated very simple principles, containing in herself her own doom, but illustrated them so accurately that there was grace in the procedure . . . (p. 113).

In this passage he is using Nicole much in the way Spenser uses Duessa, or, to take a modern example, the way Sinclair Lewis uses Babbitt. As Fitzgerald says, "She illustrated certain principles, containing in herself her own doom". But *Tender Is the Night* is not just a *roman à thèse* like *Babbitt*, any more than it is a simple love story, or even a "psychological novel". It is all of these and more. Fitzgerald had a deep moral and religious "concern"; he also had a profound interest in the relation of the American past to the modern United States (General Grant is a key figure in the novel from this point of view, as is the girl in the American military cemetery in France, unable to find the grave of her brother); he intended further to present in a wide panorama the life of his times.

It is with this in mind that we should approach the novel, its characters, and its symbolic structure, not looking for exact and mathematical equivalences, for the symbols take on different meanings at different times during the story. We have seen the cluster of imagery that surrounds the figure of Nicole, based in part on the nightingale and the moon, shift in meaning or emphasis. *Tender Is the Night* is an enchanting and disturbing work of art, but it can be fully understood and enjoyed only by those who approach it with the same respect as that with which they approach the court of Gloriana, as did Keats, through whom Fitzgerald caught a fleeting glimpse of "the Queen-Moon", her kingdom, and its strange and confusing landscape.

NOTES

1. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Tender Is the Night*, ed. Malcolm Cowley (New York: Scribners, 1956), p. 91. All references are to this edition of the novel.
2. *Ibid.*, p. xii, Introduction.
3. R. P. Jameson et A. E. Heacox, eds., *Chants de France* (Boston: D. C. Heath & Co., 1922), p. 46.

PRODIGALS

Lawrence P. Spingarn

We who have asked why summer went
 To rack and riot, why our garments caught
 Their golden hems on thorn or nettle, fly
 Down paths that riddle at the maze of time,
 And from declension keep as substitute
 The empty summer house, a rustic doom
 For children banished there before we came.

The stricken leaf has told us what is meant
 By fall: the culprit wind; the lamp we sought
 Blown out in sudden darkness; all things dry,
 Dead like the stubble on the slopes we climb.
 Living, we patch the season's tattered suit
 And share with poverty this smaller room,
 The bench where lovers carved love's ghostly name.