'Babylon Revisited': A Story of the Exile's Return

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F. Scott Fitzgerald's **“Babylon Revisited,”** although widely reprinted, has not produced many commentaries. James Frake and Isadore Traschen give a brief explication in their text on short fiction [*Short Fiction*, 1959], Arthur Mizener refers to the story a number of times in his biography [*The Far Side of Paradise*, 1949], and Seymour Gross has recently offered a full-length analysis [in “Fitzgerald's 'Babylon Revisited',” *College English*, Vol. XXV, November 1963]. But compared to, say, “Rappaccini's Daughter,” or “The Turn of the Screw,” or “The Bear,” Fitzgerald's story seems to have provoked almost no concern—mainly, I suppose, because its meaning is clear. It has some symbols, but they are not mysterious; some ambiguity, but it is not hidden; considerable irony, but it is readily discernible. It strikes us, in short, as an example of the really excellent story that is widely read and reread, usually with considerable appreciation and understanding. This paper asks, in effect, whether it is possible to write profitably about a story that everybody already understands, or nearly understands.

My basic assumption is not particularly startling, but it does run counter to that of the extreme formalists (now perhaps nearly extinct), who used to maintain that criticism and teaching of a short story should be rigorously limited to an examination of the text. “Stay inside the story,” they said, as if one story is of no help in understanding another, as if the time spirit supplies nothing to shape an author's fiction, as if his life tells us nothing about his art. No, I would maintain that we should place a story in as many contexts as possible. I limit myself here to the three just mentioned: generic, historical, and biographical, paying particular attention to the first because it is the least familiar.

What kind of story is **“Babylon Revisited”**? To this deliberately broad and blunt question the answers, whether from students, English teachers, or writers, would be something short of unanimous. Here are some typical student replies: “It's a good story.” “It's realistic.” “No, it's impressionistic.” “It's a story about life in the twenties.” “It's a short story.” These students were not stupid; their chaotic response simply reflects the relatively primitive state of the generic criticism of fiction. Having jettisoned the whole idea of genres somewhere in the nineteenth century, we lack descriptive terms to define fictions in any fundamental and illuminating way. The major exceptions to this generalization are terms like picaresque novel, *Bildungsroman, Künstlerroman*, and Lionel Trilling's description of the story of the Young Man from the Provinces. These terms define stories either according to the situation of the hero or according to the action imitated; they have the great advantage of being easily recognizable; and I think that their defining principle can be extended. It is not that every story can or should be classified in this way; but if we do find a group of stories imitating the same basic action, we are being critically and pedagogically provincial if we ignore their interrelationship.

From this point of view **“Babylon Revisited”** belongs with a number of stories in which the protagonist returns after a prolonged absence, either to his home or to some substitute for it. This category we may call the story of the Exile's Return, and in American fiction it would include (among others) Washington Irving's “Rip Van Winkle,” Nathaniel Hawthorne's “Ethan Brand,” Hamlin Garland's “The Return of a Private,” Henry James's “The Jolly Corner,” Ernest Hemingway's “Soldier's Home,” Theodore Dreiser's “The Old Neighborhood,” Lionel Trilling's *The Middle of the Journey*, and Frederick Buechner's “The Tiger.” Behind these American stories, of course, are such prototypes as Ulysses returning to Penelope, Plato's myth of the cave, the Biblical account of the return of the prodigal son, and Dante's return from his vision of hell, purgatory, and paradise.

The advantages of placing stories together in this way are obvious: first, certain conventions and common themes emerge clearly, aiding explication of each individual story; and second, once the similarities are established, differences in execution or technique are more clearly discernible. As Henry James said, in a somewhat different connection, “our aim is to get the correspondences and equivalents that make differences mean something.”

Certain themes are inherent in the basic situation of a man returning after a long absence. In fiction as in life, the most obvious and the most poignant is the mutability theme or, more specifically, the sense of permanence and change. Although some aspects of the setting seem unchanged, their apparent permanence simply emphasizes the fundamental law of life, that all things pass. Thus we have in these stories something like the *ubi sunt* formula in poetry. Rip Van Winkle asks, “Where's Nicholas Vedder? Where's Brom Dutcher? Where's Van Bummel, the schoolmaster?” Gone, all of them gone. Even Vedder's wooden tombstone, Rip learns, is “rotten and gone.” This, of course, is where Fitzgerald's story begins. “Where's Mr. Campbell?” “And George Hardt?” “And where is the Snow Bird?” “What's become of Claude Fessenden?” All gone, some of them “rotten and gone.” In the Babylonian Ritz Bar only the “strident queens” remain; “they go on forever.”

The hero may ask about the men, his former friends, but the essential motivation for his return is always a reunion with some form of the feminine principle. She may be a person: the faithful wife as in “The Return of a Private,” the daughter as in “Rip Van Winkle” and **“Babylon Revisited,”** the stable and intimate friend Alice Staverton in “The Jolly Corner.” Or it may be more abstract and symbolic: the “mother earth” invoked and then rejected by Ethan Brand, the “girls” that bother Krebs in “Soldier's Home,” or the alma mater as in “The Tiger.” Thomas Wolfe, whose fiction flowed forth from the archetypal pattern of departure and return, described the impulse this way: “By the 'earth again' I mean simply the everlasting earth, a home, a place for the heart to come to, and earthly mortal love, the love of a woman, who, it seems to me, belongs to the earth and is a force opposed to that other great force that makes men wander, that makes them search, that makes them lonely, and that makes them both hate and love their loneliness.”

As anyone who has returned home after a long absence will testify, the experience often has a dreamlike quality, a curious mixture of pain and pleasure as one feels his identity dissolving into two selves, past and present, private and public. The threatened loss of identity is explicit in “Rip Van Winkle” when he is confronted by a double, unaware, of course, that he is his son:

Rip Hooked and beheld a precise counterpart of himself as he went up the mountain: apparently as lazy and certainly as ragged. The poor fellow was now completely dumfounded. He doubted his own identity, and whether he was himself or another man. In the midst of his bewilderment, the man in the cocked hat demanded who he was and what was his name?

“God knows,” [says Rip] “I'm not myself—I'm somebody else—that's me yonder—no—that's somebody else got into my shoes—I was myself last night, but I fell asleep on the mountain and they've changed my gun and everything's changed and I can't tell what's my name or who I am.”

As Philip Young remarks in his acute, if somewhat over-elaborate interpretation of “Rip,” the character has a universal quality. “If we mock him for whatever he has missed, we do it tenderly— partly because it is something hidden in ourselves we mock. It is all our own lost lives and roles, the lives and roles that once seemed possible and are possible no more” [“Fallen from Time: The Mythic Rip Van Winkle,” *Kenyon Review*, Vol. XXII, Autumn 1960]. This aspect of the exile's return is central, of course, in “The Jolly Corner,” where Spencer Brydon hunts down his alter ego, the self he missed becoming when he left America, “'the American fate' with which he never has come to terms.” And this theme of split identity recurs, as we shall see, in **“Babylon Revisited,”** where the basic question about Charlie is whether he is indeed “the old Wales,” as his former friends call him, or the new.

A final theme given in the situation of the returning exile is that of freedom and responsibility. The mere fact that he has been gone suggests the possibility of egotism and escapism. Rip, we recall, was dodging not merely his wife “but all the obligations of maturity: occupation, domestic and financial responsibility, a political position, duty to his country in time of war.” This is the major issue in Trilling's short novel, *The Middle of the Journey*. The protagonist, John Laskell, has returned midway in the journey of life from an inferno of pain, a nearly fatal illness. His image on the cover of the Anchor paperback might stand for all the modern exiles, returning not “home”— Laskell's hot bachelor apartment in New York—but to friends in the country. He is “the stranger, the outlander, the foreigner from New York,” and in his weakened condition he is overwhelmed by irrational terror when no one meets the train. One is reminded of Randall Jarrell's poem “On the Railway Platform” and its lines: “What we leave we leave forever: / Time has no travellers. And journeys end in / No destinations we meant.” That no one met the train, it turns out, was the fault of his friends' handy man, Duck Caldwell. Later, while conversing with his friends, Laskell quickly decides to “drop the whole matter of fault and blame,” but this, of course, is precisely what Trilling does not do. The book's complex though somewhat abstract plot, culminating in the death of Caldwell's daughter (who has heart trouble), turns on the question of involvement, responsibility, and guilt. So, too, in **“Babylon Revisited,”** we find Charlie Wales maintaining that he is now a responsible person but denying responsibility for his wife's death. “Helen died of heart trouble,'” he says. “'Yes, heart trouble,'” Marion retorts, “as if the phrase had another meaning for her.”

So much for the important themes these stories have in common. They are equally notable, of course, for their differences of technique. In a full-length study one might profitably observe in some detail what we will here summarize in a paragraph: the movement toward dramatization, immediacy, and restricted point of view in the modern stories as contrasted with the pictorialism, detachment, and omniscient point of view in “Rip Van Winkle,” “Ethan Brand,” and “The Return of a Private”; Fitzgerald's skillful transitions in this story, particularly the way he whisks Charlie out of the Ritz Bar in the first scene, as compared with Dreiser's lumbering shifts of scene in “The Old Neighborhood”; and the way in which Fitzgerald's dialogue is both realistic in tone and radiant with meaning, compared with the gritty, often trivial speech of Garland's story or the rather melodramatic rhetoric of “Ethan Brand.”

To grasp some of the reasons why Fitzgerald's story came off so well, we need to see it as a product of his life and times. William Rose Benét, reviewing Fitzgerald's best novel in *The Saturday Review of Literature* (May 9, 1925), wrote, “*The Great Gatsby* reveals thoroughly matured craftsmanship. It has high occasions of felicitous, almost magic phrase. And most of all, it is out of the mirage. For the first time Fitzgerald surveys the Babylonian captivity of this era unblinded by the bright lights.” In this review, which Fitzgerald quite probably read, we have important clues to the success of **“Babylon Revisited,”** written five years later. It suggests, in the first place, why he gave the story its title, avoiding the more obvious “Paris Revisited,” with its narrowing of connotation. Fitzgerald was writing about the end of an era, not just some changes in a corner of tourist France.

We do not need the description of Charlie Wales—“He was good to look at. The Irish mobility of his face was sobered by a deep wrinkle between his eyes”—to know that he is close to Scott Fitzgerald. In 1930 his wife was not in a grave in Vermont, but she was in a sanitarium; his daughter, though not living with his sister-in-law, was attending school in Paris. But even though the story clearly flows from emotional autobiography, it also has the perspective that Malcolm Cowley summed up in his memorable remark about Fitzgerald's work: “It was as if all of his novels described a big dance to which he had taken ... the prettiest girl ... and as if at the same time he stood outside the ballroom, a little Midwestern boy with his nose to the glass, wondering how much the tickets cost and who paid for the music.” This double vision of actor and spectator, with the mature spectator no longer a gawky outsider but a judge, informs all of Fitzgerald's best work, and in this story it allows him to view Charlie Wales with both sympathy and ironic detachment.

Benét's remark about Fitzgerald's “almost magic” phrasing also provides a clue to the all-important relation between art, spending, and morality in this story. When Charlie says of the old times, “We were a sort of royalty, almost infallible, with a sort of magic around us,” we see the precise appeal of the rich, or at least of the spenders, for Fitzgerald. He not only wrote about how he lived; he also saw life in the high style as allied to, though not identical with, writing. It was a spending of one's resources to gain release from the rigid grip of time, space, and circumstance. “The snow of twenty-nine wasn't real snow. If you didn't want it to be snow, you just paid some money.” The spenders juggled time and space as the novelist does, making “months into days,” shrinking and magnifying dimensions at will. “In the little hours of the night, every move from place to place was an enormous human jump, an increase of paying for the privilege of slower and slower motion.” The squandering of unearned money called forth “effort and ingenuity” and imagination; it permitted or demanded the playing of roles, wearing the old derby rim and carrying the wire cane.

The basic conflict of the story, then, is not just between Charlie and Marion; it is between Charlie Wales (who presumably takes his last name from the prince who was the epitome of the good-time Charlies in the twenties) and “Mr. Charles J. Wales of Prague,” sound businessman and moralist, between the regally imaginative but destructive past and the dull, bourgeois but solid present. As Charlie now sees it, the old time spent did bring about transformations, but they were all morally destructive. To “dissipate” was to perform a magic disappearing act, “to make nothing out of something.” It was all, he now realizes, on an “utterly childish scale,” like the pedalling of Lorraine on a tricycle all over Paris between the small hours and dawn.

With our natural sympathy for the Charlie who at the end sees that he lost everything he wanted in the boom, we are likely to think that he wants only the honorable part of the past, that he would like to disengage himself from the rest of it, that, as he tells Marion, he *has* radically changed. But Fitzgerald is not at all sentimental on this point; he insists upon the reader's seeing more clearly than Charlie does. For the trouble with Charlie is that he *still* wants both worlds. The harsh fact is that if he had not stopped in the Ritz Bar in the first place, had not tried to get in touch with Duncan Schaefer, he would have won back his daughter. Fitzgerald has him commit this fatal act in the very beginning of the story; it comes back to haunt him inexorably in the “ghosts” of Dunc and Lorraine.

The two sides of Charlie are clearly revealed, of course, in the luncheon scene with Honoria. “'Now, how about vegetables?'” he asks. “'Oughtn't you to have some vegetables?'” This is Charlie trying to prove to himself and Honoria that he is the ordinary or garden variety of father. But he gently mocks this role by formally introducing himself as Charles J. Wales of Prague and is delighted when she quickly responds, imaginatively accepting the role of an adult woman. The game is short, however, because it rapidly evokes too many parallels with the destructive aspects of playing at life:

“Married or single?”

“No, not married. Single.”

He indicated the doll. “But I see you have a child, madame.”

Unwilling to disinherit it, she took it to her heart and thought quickly.

“Yes, I've been married, but I'm not married now. My husband is dead.”

He went on quickly, “And the child's name?”

“Simone. That's after my best friend at school.”

It is probably significant that it is Honoria who brings the conversation back to reality with this reference to school, because in this whole scene she is educating her father. She approves his suggestion that they go to the vaudeville but frowns on his approval of unlimited spending at the toy store. She is polite but cool to Lorraine, who makes clear the link between the tarnished magic of the old times and the world of childhood. “'There,'” she says, “'That's what I want to do ... I want to see some clowns and acrobats and jugglers.'”

The acrobats, the imagery of the vaudeville, remind us, finally, that this is a story of suspension between two worlds. Charlie's dream of his wife concludes with this vision: “she was in a swing in a white dress, and swinging faster all the time, so that at the end he could not hear clearly all that she said.” Fitzgerald continues this image in the climactic scene when the drunken Lorraine and Dunc invade the Peters' apartment. After they leave, Lincoln is “still swinging Honoria back and forth like a pendulum from side to side.” Up to this point Charlie has virtually convinced even Marion that his feet are “planted on the earth now,” but actually, as we have seen, he is caught between two worlds. Fitzgerald has arranged their representatives with a symmetry reminiscent of James. On the one hand is the pale blonde, Lorraine, with her escort Duncan Schaeffer; on the other, Marion clothed in a “black dress that just faintly suggested mourning,” with her husband, Lincoln, who appropriately works in a bank. Charlie is indebted to both of the women: to Marion for taking care of Honoria; to Lorraine, as she unpleasantly reminds him, for playing the game. “'I remember once,'” she says, “'when you hammered on my door at four A.M. I was enough of a good sport to give you a drink.'” Fitzgerald does not need to force the association, for the reader, along with Marion, silently balances the equation: Lorraine let him in at four A.M.; he locked his wife out in the snowstorm.

And so here is Charlie at the end, back at the Ritz Bar, the place where his old friend Claude Fessenden had run up a bill of thirty thousand francs, until Paul finally told him he “had to pay.” Half-heartedly thinking he will send Honoria some things, lots of things, tomorrow, asking the waiter how much he owes him, Charlie is left with his remembrances of time spent and his determination to “come back some day; they couldn't make him pay forever.” But he knows and we know that they can and he will. The prodigal has returned, but his effort to “conciliate something,” to redress the balance, has failed, and he remains an exile.

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