

Rebirth of Expatriate: On F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Swimmers"

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I

Most critical disputes about F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Swimmers" have concerned one basic issue: whether the story should be highly evaluated or ignored as poor quality. While some admire its plot and subject matter, others object to the piece regarding the quality of it as contrived and overdone.¹ The interpretation of its theme, however, seems to be tacitly agreed upon by both camps and has rarely been questioned: a contrast between two continents and praise for America. I admit this reading to be proper on the whole but cannot overlook an inconsistency with the theme at the conclusion of the story.

"The Swimmers" begins with an episode that an American banker Henry Marston collapses at the discovery of his wife, a French female Choupette, being with another man. He married to her and has lived in Paris for eight years. After that, on the beach where he stays with his family, he sees a "perfect type of American girl" (499), is taught swimming by her and somehow regains confidence in America. He returns to his country and lives there for three years only to discover his wife's new unfaithfulness, upon which he determines to divorce her. After quarrelling and bargaining with his wife and her lover, he gains custody of their children and leaves for Europe with firm assurance that "[t]he best of America was the best of the world." (512) The plot apparently describes the process through which an expatriate from the United States recovers his confidence in his country. But if so, why should he expatriate again at the end despite the recovery of his confidence? Why does he not stay in his country?

Expatriatism is a significant theme Fitzgerald scholars cannot avoid tackling, for it is an essential attribute of the Lost Generation, one of the main members of which Fitzgerald has been considered. Malcolm Cowley, another mouthpiece of the generation, reduces how they left the country in the 1920s, saying, "Feeling like aliens in the commercial world[of 1920s' America], they [the young writers] sailed for Europe as soon as they had money enough to pay for their steamer tickets" (Cowley 6). In the process of the great emigration, Europe, especially France, turned into a Mecca for the generation. Fitzgerald himself visited Europe as many as four times and produced a masterpiece of his and the generation's as well, *The Great Gatsby*, during the second visit.

But whatever reasons they had, the young writers did not always stay there long and came back home one by one. Cowley explains this back-and-forth as follows:

At last hundreds and thousands of them became veritable exiles, living in Paris or the South of France and adhering to a theory of art which held that the creative artist is absolutely independent of all localities, nations or classes. But

most of them didn't remain exiled forever. One by one they came lingering back to New York, even though they came there as aliens, many of them holding ideas that would cause them a difficult period of readjustment. (206)

The peak of this backward flow was brought about by the Great Depression, which was triggered by the Great Stock Market Crash of October 29th, 1929. Seeming as if swimming against the tide of the American youth, Fitzgerald paid his fourth and last visit to Europe in March, 1929 and stayed there until 1931. It was the stay in the States rather than the one in Europe, however, that was temporary, since he had been in Europe from April in 1928. Nevertheless why did he even write the story about leaving for Europe despite the attachment to America?

II

In order to examine the contradiction of the combinations of the achievement of Americanism and the departure from America at the conclusion of the piece, as mentioned above, we will see how it is brought about as the story develops.

The entry of this back-and-forth situation of Marston is the first departure from the United States eleven years before the conclusion, which is looked back on three years before when he tries to persuade his wife to go back to the States with him.

For eight years, by a process of ceaseless adaptation, he had lived her life, substituting for the moral confusion of his own country, the tradition, the wisdom, the sophistication of France. (502)

What leads him to change his values from this expatriatism to homesickness? In his persuasion he attempts to explain the reason why he will go back to America. But when he mentions in the first place the education of their children as the reason for his decision and his wife effectively refutes it by reminding him of his long time disparagement of American education, he simply withdraws without comment. Then he claims that he has found himself not to be an expatriate in spirit any more and asks for her decision saying, "It's up to you. We'll make a new start" (502). Although Choupette hesitantly gives her consent with a guilty conscience of her infidelity, his account is persuasive but practically an ultimatum. In the conversation between the couple, one cannot find an explanation.

If his words do not sufficiently explain his determination, readers must read the content and infer his real motive. The declaration of his intention to depart for the United States is preceded by the episode of the American girl and her swimming lessons. In terms of the sequence of the story development, therefore, it is natural to look for the reason of the decision in this episode. At this time, however, Marston does not think of America much even when Choupette refers to the country, only except in the last scene when he and the girl talk about swimming. He asks for the reason why she swims.

"Why do you swim?"

"To get clean," she answered surprisingly.

"Clean from what?"

She frowned. "I don't know why I said that. But it feels clean in the sea."

"Americans are too particular about that," he commented. (501)

After this conversation, "he realized how much he was going to miss these mornings [of swimming lessons with her], without knowing whether it was the girl who interested him or what she represented of his ever-new, ever-changing country" (501). Considering that this very sentence is followed by his announcement of departure, "'All right,' he told Choupette that night. 'We'll leave tomorrow'" (501), it is reasonable to consider that the country which she represents is what interests him. Even after he is back in his country, he continues to swim and the purpose of the exercise is the same as the girl's, "to wash his mind in the water" (505). He experiences himself what she has gone through. This America, which intrigues him through the girl, must differ from the one he left eight years before. Then why does he discard this new America he discovers at the end of the story?

III

As cited above, the marriage to Choupette is critical for Marston to cover the loss produced in his spirit as morality is thrown into confusion in his own country. If so, even if the America in his mind should have changed, why does he have to divorce his wife after they stay there for three years? If her fidelity were the sole cause of his decision, he could have left her when he discovers her first extramarital affair before they depart France for America. The answer must be found during the three-year stay in the States, when Choupette changed: "she might have passed for an American" (504). Marston cannot endure the change she undergoes: "Divorced from her own country, Choupette had picked the things out of American life that pandered best to her own self-indulgence" (511). It is the America she acquires as her new country that he cannot endure.

This America is also found out in Judge Waterbury who headhunts in Paris and brings back to the United States Marston, to whom Judge has "open kindness" (496) which he respects. But the Judge's values are different from his. When Marston discovers his wife's second infidelity and tells the judge his intention to leave the country, he confirms.

"Then why [do you choose as cheap as] a seven-thousand-dollar job? Is Choupette homesick?"

"No, I think Choupette likes it over here. She's adapted herself amazingly."

What the judge thinks Marston knows is of course Choupette's adultery and thinking of it he confesses that he also knows it. If so, why did he not prevent it or warn him of it? Choupette's second lover is Charles Wiese, whom the judge introduces to Marston in Paris. Marston "recognized and detested the type—the prosperous sweater, presumably evolved from a cross between carpetbagger and poor white" (496). Noticing his hatred, "the judge said apologetically: 'He's one of the richest men in the South, Henry'" (496). This apology explains his values and the reason why he cannot but turn a blind eye to the affair by Wiese. The judge's values are based on money, that is, the things out of American

life that pandered best to his own self-indulgence as cited above in the case of Choupette.

What Choupette and the judge represent of America is totally different from what the wimming American girl does. This is the America where Marston discovers moral confusion. What he has found out seeing the American girl is that there are two Americas.

IV

The concept of two Americas is confirmed by Marston as the story is concluded. When he is aboard a liner beyond for Europe, he thinks of that as the land of his own country becomes distant.

Watching the fading city, the fading shore, from the deck of the Majestic, he had a sense of overwhelming gratitude and of gladness that America was there, that under the ugly debris of industry the rich land still pushed up. Incorrigibly lavish and fertile . . . (512)

Having read the story so far, readers would conceive that while "ugly debris of industry" is what he used to consider America, and the new Choupette and the judge represent the "rich land," what he discovers now is also America, and the swimming girl represents the America. He must leave "ugly debris of industry" for "rich land." That is the reason he leaves the land of the United States for wherever he goes. Then where is the "rich land" of America? Does he mean he has found it in Europe?

After meditating on America while watching its land, Marston encounters the American girl for the third time. Small talk with her brings him back to reflect on his own country again after he left her.

France was a land, England was a people, but America, having about it still that quality of the idea, was harder to utter—it was the grave at Shiloh and the tired, drawn, nervous faces of its great men, and the country boys dying in the Argonne for a phrase that was empty before their bodies withered. (512)

"That quality of the idea" that America has, though it is hard to express the clear concept of it, is indicated by the sentence which follows the above meditation on two Americas: "in the heart of the leaderless people the old generousities and devotions fought on, breaking out sometimes in fanaticism and excess, but indomitable and undefeated" (512). Marston claims he finds this excessive but self-sacrificing quality in the dead of the Civil War and the First World War and the pains of great men. By those words he expresses the common spirit of those people and the whole story is concluded: "It was a willingness of the heart" (512). The America as the "rich land" is considered here as this volunteer spirit. But where can readers find this America, in the United States or Europe? The reason why he leaves his own land for Europe is still to be answered.

V

Where Marston finds America as the "rich land" is in a willingness of the heart as in the action of swimming. His jumping into the water without any ability to swim in order to try to rescue the girl apparently evidences the willingness of the American mind-set. The object of the action is a swimmer who seems to him to represent America, and he learns swimming from her. He continues to swim after he returns to his homeland, a concept of America emerging in his mind: "Americans, he likes to say, should be born with fins, and perhaps they were—perhaps money was a form of fin Americans, restless and with shallow roots, needed fins and wings"(506). This series of experiences of swimming with the American girl is an epiphany for him to know America, which he has not realized is the "rich land."

At the end of the story his recognition of that part of America is reinforced by his thinking of swimming when he comes across the girl again. His contemplation of America in comparison with France and England is brought about by the conversation with the American girl:

"Why do you like to swim?" he demanded.

"You always ask me that." She laughed.

"Perhaps you'd tell me if we had dinner together tonight."

But when, in a moment, he left her he knew that she could never tell him—she or another. (512)

"America . . . was harder to utter," the sentence which follows this conversation, evidently responds to the phrase, "she could never tell him." What one could not express in a word is the action of swimming and America at the same time. Then, what does it mean that America is found in the action of swimming?

VI

To know what the America Marston has newly found is, readers must be more mindful of how it is expressed. The concept of "industry" against the "rich land" as the new America represented in the story reminds readers of the northern industrialism which has dominated the United States since the Civil War. Also, the people with "willingness of heart" include the war dead not only from World War I but also the Civil War. The America he would discard is not limited to the contemporary one in the 1920s. He leaves American capitalism rooted in the Northern industrialism established after the Civil War. Although Marston is not among timeserver radicals, his criticism against his own country at the time is deeply radical.

Marston's pursuit of America as the "rich land" goes beyond the industrial America after the Civil War and reaches Virginia. He is a proud Virginian and returns there after seeing the swimming girl, in whom he gladly finds another Virginian when he meets her again there. But Virginia also harbors judge Waterbury who represents the "ugly debris

of industry" and Marston finally departs with the discovery of the new America. Is the Virginia he comes back to and works for three years the same as the "rich land" he comes to consider the real America?

Virginia was one of the two original British colonies in America, and colonials of Virginia did not have an intention to found an ideal nation as the northern counterpart did, but were only enterprising spirits ready to explore the new world. Although they established their society based on an agricultural economy compared to the northern colony based on industry, they did not have an attachment to the land as their own nation. The "rich land" does not mean concrete land or agriculture but free and industrious minds of the people who came over to Virginia in the early 17th century. They are certain to have "fins and wings" (506) in their minds, that is, "willingness of the heart" (512). America as rich land is not the land but a mind-set of willingness to move found in the First Virginians in American history and in the actions of swimming in this story. To Marston the mind-set of the First Virginians is the America found in the action of swimming.

VII

When roughly read, the eulogy for America at the end of the story was apparently sought for in the acceptance by the conservative magazine *Saturday Evening Post*. But the setting of leaving the country at the same time shows a deeper idea of the author. Malcolm Cowley explains the reason why the contemporary writers in his generation returned from Europe to America at the end of the 1920s:

Things had changed everywhere. The lost generation had ceased to deserve its name; the members of it had either gone under . . . or else had fond their places in the world. The postwar era had definitely ended and people were saying that it had given way to another prewar era. . . . The exiles and refugees of art were all of them home again. (284)

What should be focused on here is that whatever the reason was the end of the postwar era is assumed to lead to the generation and its expatriates. In other words, it is premised that the generation originates in World War I. His criticism is against the whole industrial society and expatiratism is the essence of America. The contradictory conclusion of the story represents the author's objection to the simple criticism against the postwar era and his declaration of independence from his generation is explicit in the following sentences in the story:

There was a lost generation in the saddle at the moment, but it seemed to him that the men coming on, the men of the war, were better; and all his old feeling that America was a bizarre accident, a sort of historical sport, had gone forever. The best of America was the best of the world. (512)

The 1920s America, which jumps to the center stage of the world affairs because of the war, the economy and the culture, tries to identify itself. It writes its histories, takes up themes of itself in arts and literature, and looks for its place in the world. F. Scott

Fitzgerald seems to claim that America is uniquely an expatriate from its origin.

Notes

¹ Recent critics show how exclusively "The Swimmers" has been discussed regarding its quality. See Friedman, Roulston, Prigozy.

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正 誤 表

北星学園大学文学研究科大学院論集第1号

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