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William Jolliff

George Fox University, wjolliff@georgefox.edu

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The Damnation of Bryan Dalrymple— and Theron Ware: F. Scott Fitzgerald's Debt to Harold Frederic

F. Scott Fitzgerald's debt to the *fin de siècle* American naturalists is well known. Princetonian Amory Blaine gives the most famous suggestion of the influence in *This Side of Paradise* when he finds himself "rather surprised by his discovery through a critic named Mencken of several excellent American novels: 'Vandover and the Brute,' 'The Damnation of Theron Ware,' and 'Jennie Gerhardt'" (209). Henry Dan Piper notes that "Fitzgerald wrote this particular passage during the summer of 1919, when he revised his novel for the last time. It is likely that he had heard about all three books very recently" ("Norris and Fitzgerald" 395). That is not to say, however, that Fitzgerald did not come upon the novels of Norris, Dreiser, and Frederic at an important time in his literary formation. On the contrary, he discovered them just as he was writing—for the third time—*This Side of Paradise* ("Norris and Fitzgerald" 393); and although by then, as Piper suggests, it was too late for them to have much of an influence on the first novel (*Portrait* 88), they did play an important part in the conceptualization of the second novel, *The Beautiful and the Damned*. In fact, Fitzgerald's interest in the American naturalists was so intense and influential that it kept him from getting on with his second novel (84).

While Frank Norris's important influence on Fitzgerald has been carefully observed,¹ the influence of Harold Frederic has been overlooked—an oversight somewhat surprising in light of Fitzgerald's avowed appreciation of the upstate New Yorker's work. His respect for Frederic was reflected in April 1922, when Fitzgerald suggested that Scribners start a reprint series to

¹For a thorough look at Norris's influence see Piper, "Norris and Fitzgerald," and Astro.

compete with Modern Library and Lambskin Library. The outline that Fitzgerald sent to Charles Scribner named 18 novels, among which is *The Damnation of Theron Ware* (Brucoli 154). Likewise, the reading program that Fitzgerald planned for Sheilah Graham, recounted in her *College of One*, includes *Theron Ware* by "Fredericks" (sic) in the "Substitute List of Good Novels" (206). Most significantly, however, in a letter to Sinclair Lewis on 26 January 1921,² Fitzgerald states, "I want to tell you that *Main Street* has displaced *Theron Ware* in my favor as best American novel" (Turnbull 467). Fitzgerald's statement reveals that, despite the novel's displacement, for a time *The Damnation of Theron Ware* held preëminence in his literary imagination. Referring to that letter, Mark Schorer comments, "It is surprising to discover that Fitzgerald, whose own work was so different from that of both Sinclair Lewis and Harold Frederic, should have held such regard for *The Damnation of Theron Ware* . . ." (275). To share Schorer's surprise, however, one must agree that Fitzgerald's work is so different from Frederic's—a judgment that is less than settled.³

Possibly more fully than any other author, Fitzgerald arranged the paradigm for an American Adam disillusioned by the realities of materialism, a type he develops most thoroughly in *The Great Gatsby*. But it is important to note that Jay Gatsby's prototype appears in the early short story "Dalyrimple Goes Wrong"—a story that shows the clear influence, both idiosyncratic and fundamental, of Harold Frederic's *The Damnation of Theron Ware*.

²Fitzgerald dated this letter 26 January 1920, although since *Main Street* was not published until 23 October 1920, he must have intended to date the letter "1921."

³Following a different scholarly trajectory, Piper asserts that

it is easy to understand how Fitzgerald was attracted to *The Damnation of Theron Ware*, not only because it was an outstanding novel but one that dealt sympathetically with the American conflict between Catholic and Protestant that he himself had experienced. (*Critical Portrait* 88).

I would not necessarily call Frederic's treatment of the problem "sympathetic," but I can certainly see how Fitzgerald might. In *This Side of Paradise*, for example, Monsignor Darcy is the sympathetic confidante of Amory Blaine, and their relationship is closely patterned on that of the young Fitzgerald and his friend Monsignor Sigourney Fay. Piper notes that Fitzgerald had a great admiration for Monsignor Fay, "who introduced him to his first glass of wine and to a more sophisticated world than he had ever known" (47). Interestingly, the same claims can be made of Father Forbes and Theron Ware. So if Fitzgerald read Forbes as a positive guide for Ware, as one who attempts to help Ware along a path to intellectual maturity, it is not surprising that Fitzgerald's reading might have imitated his own parallel experience.

In the formal opening paragraph of "Dalyrimple Goes Wrong," Fitzgerald promises the reader the story of a young man's disillusionment—and he fulfills that promise. Bryan Dalyrimple returns from the war a hero, but a month later he is forgotten, and he goes to the local financial magnate, T. G. Macy, for a job. He is given a position in the stock room with a promise of promotion, but he learns from his more worldly colleague, Charley Moore, that his job is in fact a dead end: unless he has "drag" with Macy, he will stock shelves forever. Realizing not only that this observation is true, but also that his meager salary is insufficient to pay his bills, he decides to take advantage of every situation. So motivated, Dalyrimple enters a successful career as a mugger and a burglar. Later in the story he is called to Macy's office, and in fear he nearly bolts. Better judgment prevails, however, and that evening he finds that Mr. Fraser, the biggest political boss in the city, wants to take advantage of Dalyrimple's military record to place the young man in the state senate.

Bryan Dalyrimple's story shares many similarities with Theron Ware's both in theme and detail. Both protagonists are typically adamic. They are innocent and able young men who believe that hard work will lead to success: Ware has determined to escape his father's farm and to develop oratorical abilities that would land him an affluent parish; Dalyrimple intends to overcome his father's low financial status and move up in the world. Both are influenced in their beliefs by the "silly flattery" of "a lot of women" who are drawn to their positions—Ware as a cleric, Dalyrimple as a war hero. Both are eventually informed that the simple sequence of hard work leading to success is not the way of the world. Sister Soulsby tells Theron that he must use "sabe"—common sense—to get ahead; Charley Moore and, later, Alfred J. Fraser inform Dalyrimple of the same. And in both stories, that very American term "common sense" is a code word that sometimes stands for the sacrifice of moral conviction. For example, Sister Soulsby tells Ware that he should not worry about the way she raises money: the tactics that he finds so disillusioning are simply parts of the "machinery" (174). Echoing the same terminology, Fraser tells Dalyrimple that placing him in the senate is simply "mechanical" (172). Finally, Sister Soulsby assures Ware that he will be able to remain a pastor as long as belief does not get in the way, and Fraser tells Dalyrimple that making him a state senator will be no problem as long as he does not have "too many ideas" of his own (172). He must give up his naïve ideas about public service just as Ware must give up traditional notions of the ministry.

Other, more subtle, parallel details accompany the two men's growth toward "enlightenment." Long walks at night precipitate ephiphanic moments that come after long periods of gradual realization—and both men's walks are all the more dark because the town councils in both fictions are too stingy to use streetlights consistently (*Theron Ware* 183;

"Dalyrimple" 166). After the Soulsbys' fundraising meetings end, Ware takes a walk and finds himself in Celia's chambers, where in his broken-down state he experiences the seductive concert that completes his conversion. It is then that he becomes Celia's disciple and perfects his alienation from Alice and his parishioners. Likewise, Dalyrimple, after learning that his boss's nephew has begun with a salary half again greater than his own, goes on an evening walk, "his brain whirring with the frightful jar of discovering a platitude for himself" (163); during this half-crazed walk, he concludes that it is time for him to begin

rejecting the old childhood principles that success came from faithfulness to duty, that evil was necessarily punished and virtue necessarily rewarded—that honest poverty was happier than corrupt riches. (164)

If this statement were itself the intellectual fulfillment of the story, Fitzgerald's tale would be more simply a cynical inversion of the Alger myth. But following the somewhat more didactic philosophical style of Frederic, Fitzgerald spells out the moral importance of the statement. Dalyrimple reflects,

Good and evil aren't any standard to me—and they can be a devil of a bad hindrance when I want something. When I want something bad enough, common sense tells me to go and take it—and not get caught. (164)

Having made this decision, he steals enough to pay his rent, then continues to become a professional thief: "happiness was what he wanted—a slowly rising scale of gratifications of the normal appetites" (166). Ware has the same revelation. From Sister Soulsby, he learns to scrap his traditional ideas of good and evil and to use common sense to attain what he wants. As he tells Celia, "I see now what life is really worth, and I'm going to have my share of it" (251). Thus, after serious moral reflection, both men have consciously made the choice to be guided solely by their desires.

Another ironic parallel is that, having made their decisions, both become better at their legitimate work. Although he is "morally lonely," Dalyrimple becomes a "better" person; his self-concept improves as he appropriates the name that newspapers give him, "Burglar Bill of the Silver District," and he even becomes a more satisfied employee:

His attitude toward Mr. Macy underwent a change. He no longer felt a dim animosity and inferiority in his presence. As his fourth month in the store ended he found himself regarding his employer in a manner that was almost fraternal. He had a vague but very assured conviction that Mr. Macy's innermost soul would have abetted and approved. (170)

Theron Ware experiences a similar shift after he begins his self-consciously amoral approach to parish life. As he tells Celia,

I've learned to be a showman. I can preach now far better than I used to, and I can get through my work in half the time, and keep on the right side of my people, and get along with perfect smoothness. I was too green before. (251)

It is worth noting too that for both Ware and Dalrymple, rhetorical skills would be the key to future success. Ware has imagined a new application for his pulpit prowess, and his plans for a future public life are based upon that ability. As he tells Alice and his mentor, Sister Soulsby, "I *can* speak, you know, if I can't do anything else. Talk is what tells these days." Similarly, concerning why he chooses to befriend Dalrymple, his patron Mr. Fraser tells him,

It was a speech [of yours] I've remembered. It was a brainy speech, straight from the shoulder, and it got to everybody in that crowd. I ought to know. I've watched crowds for years. (171)

With their rhetorical skills at the ready, both protagonists end their stories in trance-like visions of future political greatness. Ware imagines a crowd, "attentive faces all—rapt, eager, credulous to a degree. Their eyes were admiringly bent upon a common object of excited interest. They were looking at him . . ." (344). The crowds are gathered to hear Ware give a campaign speech. "Who knows," he tells Alice and Sister Soulsby, "I may turn up in Washington a full-blown Senator before I'm forty." Likewise, Dalrymple ends his story in a dream: "The world was opening up suddenly—the State Senate, the United States Senate—so life was this after all—cutting corners—cutting corners—common sense, that was the rule" (172–73).

In sum, both idealistic innocents seek fame and fortune virtuously; both are informed of their error; both choose an amoral "common sense" course; and both show some new hope of success—they intend to become senators. Fitzgerald calls Dalrymple "a new psychological rebel of his own century—defying the sentimental a priori forms of his own mind" (166). If so, however, he is a psychological rebel who follows in the footsteps of an older psychological rebel. It is fitting that the younger rebel, in reflecting upon his new amoral way of life, had the "assured conviction that Mr. Macy's innermost soul would have abetted and approved" of him; for in what seems a direct acknowledgment of his source, Fitzgerald named Dalrymple's approving, amoral mentor "*Theron G. Macy*."

Clearly Harold Frederic and Scott Fitzgerald realized that all falls are not happy ones. In Theron Ware and Bryan Dalrymple, they present us with examples of what sometimes happens when the American Adam comes of

age: a thorough disillusionment resulting not in self-knowledge but in moral degeneracy. While most would agree that Fitzgerald's artful, energetic attention to economic and class disparity make him the typical voice of his materialistic age, it is important to remember that he had a tradition, albeit a recent one, to nourish his work—and at least one particular model to guide him. For if Fitzgerald was the voice of a generation, surely Harold Frederic had prophesied its coming.

WILLIAM G. JOLLIFF

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