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The Subversive Art of Zelda Fitzgerald by Deborah Pike
(review)

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THE SUBVERSIVE ART OF ZELDA FITZGERALD, by Deborah Pike.
Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2017. 316 pp. \$45.00 cloth.

After reading Zelda Fitzgerald's *Save Me the Waltz* (1932), Malcolm Cowley wrote in a letter to Zelda's husband dated 22 May 1933 expressing his feeling that she had "a different story to tell" than her contemporaries; "she has something there that nobody got into words before."¹ Zelda's one-of-a-kind narratives are the focus of Deborah Pike's *The Subversive Art of Zelda Fitzgerald*. Taking Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's theory of minor literature as her through line and psychoanalytical theorists for the critical framing of her position, Pike offers a biocritical reading of Zelda's art—in the many forms it took—to establish her place in literary modernism. In this first book-length study of Zelda's *oeuvre*, the first to critically evaluate "Caesar's Things" and her spiritual diary, Pike analyzes an impressive array of her work—most of which is still obscure, understudied, or tucked away in the Princeton archives—and points the way to further research.

As Pike states, "Zelda's own words literally lie within the heart of the established literature of F. Scott Fitzgerald"—in other words, at the heart of canonical literature (p. 56). Yet the context of these words has gone unexamined for too long and its author relegated to the status of mad muse. Some have recently attempted to recuperate Zelda's perspective; in the last five years, at least four fictional accounts were printed, including Therese Anne Fowler's *Z: A Novel of Zelda Fitzgerald* (2013) and Erika Robuck's *Call Me Zelda* (2013). Published on the heels of these books, Pike's contribution provides a more authentic portrait of Zelda through its insightful analysis of the ways in which her writings constitute minor literature—that is, how Zelda exploits the major language of her literary tradition in order to subvert it. Because the problem of marginality is still a concern for literary critics, this lens is apt.

Throughout her five-chapter book, which includes a lengthy introduction, a section on Zelda's artwork, and twenty-two illustrations, Pike makes brilliant observations about Zelda's unique and revolutionary writing style. Because she authored over six hundred letters during the course of her life and epistles have often been dismissed as a lesser form of literature, it is appropriate that this study opens by treating her correspondence. Pike comments on Zelda's experimental syntax; even her earliest notes take spontaneous turns, display a lyrical style, and frequently use the dash to convey sharp changes in tone. The letters often chart the stream-of-consciousness of a coming-of-age Zelda, who attempted to straddle conventional Southern femininity and the changing landscape of gender equality. In her examination of unpublished letters from the 1930s when Zelda was institutionalized, Pike illustrates how extraordinary her persistence to communicate and self-express was even amidst the misogynistic

psychiatrists, who often forbade her to write, and in so doing, acknowledged the power of constructing narratives.

Pike's exploration of Zelda's journalistic articles and first publications—also in the beginning chapters—would have benefitted from a reading of “The Iceberg,” written when Zelda was seventeen or eighteen years old and published in the *Sidney Lanier High School Literary Journal* in 1918. With the December 2013 republication of “The Iceberg” in *The New Yorker*, we know that Zelda began writing before Scott entered her life, which suggests that she tried her hand at crafting fiction and that certain themes were introduced in her writing even before September 1919, the date Pike identifies as Zelda's first foray into creative writing.

Even when Pike travels familiar terrain, she sheds new light on her subject. In revisiting the pairing of Zelda's *Save Me the Waltz* and Scott's *Tender Is the Night* (1934), she reads these novels through an analysis of a transcript from one of Zelda's therapy sessions for which Scott was present. Pike hones in on the couple's use of economic language in their correspondence concerning their novels and in their discussion with one of Zelda's doctors, Thomas A. C. Rennie. This exchange reveals an even bleaker portrait of the fight for material than indicated in earlier scholarship. Weighing in on the merit of Scott's novel, Pike deems *Tender Is the Night* a failure because of Scott's relentless plagiarism of Zelda's most private letters and diagnoses.

The second half of the study contains the most innovative—and some of the best—parts of Pike's book. Because the only published criticism on “Caesar's Things” is confined to small sections in biographies, Pike's reading is especially valuable for the remarkable job it does of starting a sustained analytical discussion and opening up further scholarship on Zelda's unpublished second novel. In this rich chapter, she shows how Zelda's work shares similarities with the writings of Leonora Carrington and Unica Zürn, two non-canonical surrealists.

Continuing her comparisons of Zelda and her contemporaries, Pike interposes between two chapters a section reproducing seventeen pieces of Zelda's artwork and discussing how they share traits with those by the German expressionists of the 1930s. Much like the expressionists, Zelda's body paintings capture internal sensations instead of external appearances. Arguing against Cowley, who criticized Zelda's work for being “flawed . . . by the lack of proportion and craftsmanship,” Pike responds that Zelda's signature figures—androgynous, muscular, and bulbous—reveal an attempt to rewrite the prevalent eroticized female form produced for male consumption.² Because Pike comments on Zelda's color choices, it would have been helpful to have the images in color instead of black and white.

At the end of the “Zelda Fitzgerald's Artworks” section, a beautiful transition is provided to what most readers—at least this reader—will find as

the most compelling chapter of the study. The section ends with a discussion of paintings created in the midst of Zelda's religious fervor. In one of these works, her disoriented subjects gaze upward, perhaps toward heaven. This image provides a nice segue into the final chapter, which persuasively reads parts of Zelda's 170-page spiritual diary not as a symptom of insanity but as a self-reflective journey toward enlightenment. Suggesting that Zelda's religious musings can be read as a comparison piece to "Caesar's Things," Pike examines instances in the journal of what Deleuze and Guattari call "deterritorialized expressions," in which language is no longer representational but detached from common human expression (p. 212). Interrupted and isolated sentences with spatial gaps between ideas fill Zelda's journal, which is void of the first-person "I." Instead of interpreting this omission as a loss of identity, Pike views it as Zelda's communion with something otherworldly.

The Subversive Art of Zelda Fitzgerald offers a refreshing perspective on the title figure and provides an important, welcome, and long overdue addition to Zelda scholarship. Pike's monograph suggests that Zelda's writing is ripe for further exploration—including a comparison of her work and life to those of Lucia Joyce, an examination of the sixty-six letters she wrote to her daughter that remain unpublished and archived, and a reading of Zelda's identification with Vaslav Nijinsky, which led her to begin a novel based on his life. Pike's book will likely become a seminal study for future Fitzgerald scholars as it lays the groundwork for celebrating Zelda's complex lifework and original contributions to modernism.

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NOTES

¹ Quoted in Nancy Milford, *Zelda: A Biography* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 264.

² Malcolm Cowley, "A Ghost Story of the Jazz Age: Reminiscences of Twenty-Four Hours with F. Scott Fitzgerald," *Saturday Review*, 25 January 1964, 20.

LOVE AND NARRATIVE FORM IN TONI MORRISON'S LATER NOVELS, by Jean Wyatt. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2017. 248 pp. \$74.95 cloth; \$29.95 paper; \$29.95 ebook.

Jean Wyatt's new book, *Love and Narrative Form in Toni Morrison's Later Novels*, is that rare combination of nuanced textual analysis and cutting-edge critical theory. In her meticulous readings of Morrison's novels from *Beloved* (1987) to *God Help the Child* (2015), Wyatt weaves multiple areas of theory—psychoanalysis, rhetoric, and call-and-response—to tease out