



November 13, 1988

The Rich Are Different

To the Editor:

In his review of "The Triarchic Mind" by Robert J. Sternberg (Sept. 25), Philip N. Johnson-Laird remarks (of a fact about childhood learning that is unimportant here) that "It is like hearing, courtesy of Hemingway and Fitzgerald's celebrated exchange, that the difference between the rich and rest [sic] of us is . . . money."

The exchange is celebrated all right; it is in fact to American literature what the story of Betsy Ross and the flag is to American history. But it never occurred, and even though in the present instance it provides only a parenthetical simile, one sees it everywhere, so an attempt to debunk it is worth making, and The Book Review would seem to be the very place to make it.

This is one of those cases in which the truth is much more interesting, not to mention instructive, than the legend.

In 1926 Fitzgerald published one of his finest stories, "The Rich Boy," whose narrator begins it with the words "Let me tell you about the very rich. They are different from you and me."

Ten years later, at lunch with his and Fitzgerald's editor, Max Perkins, and the critic Mary Colum, Hemingway said, "I am getting to know the rich." To this Colum replied, "The only difference between the rich and other people is that the rich have more money." (A. Scott Berg reports this in "Max Perkins, Editor of Genius.") Hemingway, who knew a good put-down when he heard one and also the fictional uses to which it could be put, promptly recycled Colum's remark in one of his best stories, with a revealing alteration: he replaced himself with Fitzgerald as the one put down. The central character in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" remembers "poor Scott Fitzgerald and his romantic awe of [the rich] and how he had started a story once that began, 'The very rich are different from you and me.' And how someone had said to Scott, yes, they have more money."

Fitzgerald was naturally offended by this patronizing use of his name by a person he had thought of as his friend, and he wrote Hemingway, asking him to "lay off me in print," adding that "Riches have never fascinated me, unless combined with the greatest charm or distinction."

He wrote Perkins as well, asking that his name be deleted when the story was reprinted, and Perkins saw to it that it was.

But Fitzgerald also made a very unfortunately worded entry in his notebook: "They have more money. (Ernest's wisecrack.)" When Fitzgerald's friend Edmund Wilson came to put together "The Crack-Up," the volume of Fitzgerald miscellany that appeared in 1945, five years after Fitzgerald's death, he included this entry, explaining in a footnote that "Fitzgerald had said, 'The rich are different from us.' Hemingway had replied, 'Yes, they have more money.'" The legend is not complete: Fitzgerald has been put down by Hemingway in an exchange that

actually occurred.

Lionel Trilling repeated the "famous exchange" which "everyone knows" in his review of "The Crack-Up," and when Harry Levin also included it in "Observations on the Style of Ernest Hemingway" it became virtually canonical.

It is a history that says much about these two writers, their saddening relationship to each other, and the ways they transmuted their lives into fiction. It also shows how even the best critics may be led to confuse literature with biography, fiction with fact, art with life, for the sake of a good story, especially when the story corroborates the received view of the writers who figure in it.

Now about Thoreau and Emerson at the Concord jail. . . . EDDY DOW Philadelphia

*cited in Hawkins v. Franchise Tax Board of California
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