



Zelda Fitzgerald with a painting, 1925.

“God is the Perfect Comprehension:”
Faith, Form, and Feeling in Zelda Fitzgerald’s *Deposition*

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Introduction

Aspirations lie heavenward on Golgotha – even the centurions look up. Against a gray-blue sky, a heavy-lidded Christ tumbles down from the cross. Swaths of beige and orange drape limp-fingered onlookers descending onto a bed of poppies. At once lifeless yet vibrant, these figures, neither male nor female, belong to Zelda Fitzgerald's 1945 near-forgotten painting *The Deposition* (Figure 1). Their purpose is the depiction of divine suffering, speaking to Fitzgerald's reconnection with Christianity in the final years of her life and the fervent apocalyptic worldview grounded in notions of sacrifice and damnation she adopted as a result. Personal tragedy, through the form of circumstance and mental illness, prompted her to pursue a faith-driven life and her new priorities find their way onto her canvases beginning in the late 1930s. Compelled to play the role of prophet and share the word of God with others, she completed artworks like *The Deposition* as ultimately evangelistic documents conducive to her vision of the world: a fallen place, prone to destruction, in desperate need of redemption. Her obsession with judgment, as well as her determination to save her peers from it, informs the aesthetic of apocalypticism that she adopts in her religious works: twisted bodies and unconventional color palettes serve as unsettling and violent reminders of viewers' mortality. However, *The Deposition* also reflects her sophisticated understanding of her own work, as its unusual iconography combines her European modernist sensibilities with evangelist notions of the New Testament Gospels and speaks to her own writings on aesthetics and form. Fitzgerald utilizes her abstracted figural forms to express divine truths.

Though often denigrated to the shadows of her husband F. Scott's literary fame, Fitzgerald found some success as an artist herself: she wrote essays and short stories, painted, and sketched, while her talent for dance prompted one of her teachers to offer her a position with

a professional ballet company.¹ An astute observer and creative mind, she also developed her own system of aesthetics based in notions of spirituality and dance, as well as color “rhythms,” that reflect a deliberate emotionality of line present in her paintings.² The combination of her deteriorating mental health and her husband’s ego, however, prevented her from pursuing a career in the arts, though she did turn to painting as a recovery mechanism after her 1930 diagnosis of schizophrenia.³ Because she painted *The Deposition* during this period, the work speaks to the tumultuousness of Fitzgerald’s later life and emerges as a framework through which a better understanding of the artist herself can be reached.

Little scholarship has been published regarding Fitzgerald’s paintings, especially those completed after her husband’s death in 1940, when her artistic work – both visual and literary – took a turn for the spiritual. Her psychological instability defined her reputation. At the time, few took what they saw as the “fallen” idea of Zelda Fitzgerald seriously, and even with the boom in Fitzgerald studies as a feminist reclamation project from the 1970s onward the stigma associated with her later life still persists. In fact, so little serious inquiry has been attempted on Fitzgerald’s behalf that historians and literary critics risk trapping her within romantic misconceptions, popularized since her death in books, television shows, and movies, of her glamorous life and whirlwind marriage. An examination of *The Deposition* within the arc of her own work, as well as her understanding of aesthetics as found in her correspondences and other personal documents, provides a useful and needed contribution to Fitzgerald’s often neglected and outright misunderstood final years. Most significantly, Fitzgerald’s composition directly reflects her unpublished essay “Choreography of an Idea: Resumé,” which sheds light on the placement

¹ Linda Wagner-Martin, *Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald: An American Woman’s Life* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 125.

² “Choreography of an Idea, Resumé;” Zelda Fitzgerald Papers, Box 3, Folder 7; Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library. The pages of this document are unnumbered.

³ Wagner-Martin, 130.

of figures in *The Deposition* and underscores the didactic message of tragedy and redemption, central to the Christian story, the painting is meant to convey. As these primary sources reveal, Fitzgerald's *Deposition* echoes themes significant to her own life and writing: martyrdom, the intersections between spirituality and sexuality, and the beauty inherent to tragedy, for example.

This paper examines Fitzgerald's *Deposition* from angles biographical as well as formal and iconographical, relating the piece to her personal system of aesthetics as well as her prior work in order to examine the impact of physicality on the work. To begin, I will establish the work's biographical context: Fitzgerald's return to Montgomery, Alabama, after her institutionalization at Highland Hospital in North Carolina. Here, I will link the work to others she painted at approximately the same time, and provide commentary regarding the intensity of Fitzgerald's religious beliefs as reflected in *The Deposition*; though the work reflects her knowledge of Biblical texts, her own apocalyptic perspective on the state of the world emerges as its primary inspiration. Then, I will move into an analysis of the image itself, situating its treatment of figural forms within the iconographic tradition of Deposition narratives more generally as well as twentieth century avant-garde movements both European and American. I will conclude this second section with an analysis of Gothic corporeality and a warped notion of Christianity in *The Deposition*, utilizing the research of cultural critic Jack Morgan as well as calling upon Fitzgerald's earlier works in order to elucidate these ideas. Lastly, I will move toward a formalist interpretation of the painting, drawing from Fitzgerald's own ideas of color and line as argued in "Choreography of an Idea: Resumé." My argument will conclude with a reiteration of the image's didactic purposes as underscored by the iconographic and formal elements within it, both as a spiritual lesson of Christ's sacrifice as well as an artistic examination of the martyrdom Fitzgerald experienced in her own life. Ultimately, *The*

Deposition serves as a product of carefully crafted emotionality, as “Choreography of an Idea: Resumé” illustrates Fitzgerald’s own connection between feeling, faith, and form and enlightens the work’s purpose as a communication of affect through line.

I. The Montgomery Years

Because Fitzgerald took to art as a form of self-prescribed therapy during tough times, autobiographical themes appear in her work with great frequency. The cathartic emotionality of *The Deposition*, as well as its more personal subject matter, both find their way into projects she painted over the arc of her artistic life. Her paper doll series, for example, which she revisited several times from the 1920s onward, often depicts various incarnations of herself, Scott, and their daughter Scottie, playing different roles in historical periods or fictional worlds.⁴ After her husband's death, she took to depicting cityscapes of the places they had lived together as a cathartic coming-to-terms with the vagaries of their relationship.⁵ Her declining mental health serves as the autobiographical backdrop for the religious artwork she began in her mid-thirties. She spent the last twelve years of her life in and out of Asheville, North Carolina's Highland Hospital, where she first sought admittance in April of 1936 at the age of thirty-five.⁶ In between stays at Highland she came home to Montgomery, living with her mother in a small house on Sayre Street called "Rabbit Run."⁷ Fitzgerald's many returns to Montgomery helped inspire her religious artistry, and as "Choreography of an Idea: Resumé" will elucidate in Section III, the complicated feelings that her hometown garnered for her – varying degrees of comfort, yet often tinged with persecution – make their way onto her canvases. Because she painted *The Deposition* during this tumultuous late period in her life, Fitzgerald's devotion to Christianity as well as

⁴ Edward Patillo, *Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald Retrospective* (Montgomery: Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, 1974), "Introduction." As a child, Fitzgerald made paper dolls for her friends and did the same for Scottie and her grandchildren. She also took inspiration from outside her family, creating one series of figures at King Arthur's court, one of King Louis XIV and Versailles, and another of the Three Musketeers, for example. In doing so, she appropriates "women's work" into a sophisticated form, intending them to educate those who interacted with the dolls.

⁵ Jane Livingston, "On the Art of Zelda Fitzgerald," in *Zelda: An Illustrated Life*, ed. Eleanor Lanahan (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996), 81.

⁶ Wagner-Martin, 185.

⁷ Nancy Milford, *Zelda: A Biography* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 368. Though she originally requested to live independently after her release, after months of correspondence between her mother, her doctor at Highland, and her husband, it was decided that due to her unbalanced mental state she needed the care another person could provide for her.

other personal themes reflected in the image, such as martyrdom, render her biography a fruitful angle of image analysis.

Fitzgerald biographer Nancy Milford refers to these final, intermittent Montgomery years as the “cul-de-sac of her life,” as Fitzgerald’s time at home proved far from the rejuvenating experience she and her family and medical team had hoped it might be.⁸ The Sayres’ neighborhood itself, a once fashionable portion of Montgomery in decline since the spread of boarding houses after the breakout of the Second World War, contrasted the childhood home Fitzgerald once knew. Though her family lacked vast wealth, Fitzgerald had grown up as an important figure in Montgomery society, reveling in the spotlight she found as a reputable flirt. After her release from Highland, returning to the town she had once called home, or “making the social adjustment,” as she writes in a letter to Scott, proved “more difficult tha[n] [she] had supposed.”⁹ Now, experiencing several homecomings throughout her mid-thirties and early forties, Fitzgerald struggled to reconcile her past with her present. She found the small house confining and her mother Minnie Machen Sayre’s caretaking fussy as the stress of maintaining her mental health began to weigh on her. On the subject of Fitzgerald’s disposition, her daughter Scottie Lanahan writes:

She would start out her old self, charming, gay, and witty, but after we had gone shopping and had lunch and perhaps gone swimming in the afternoon..., she would start to slide visibly out of the exterior world into her own interior one and this was very upsetting.¹⁰

Fitzgerald’s often unpredictable behavior made apparent the conflict between her “interior” and “exterior” worlds, to use her daughter’s words, and as a result the assimilation to home life became a difficult one.

⁸ Ibid., 342.

⁹ Cline, 377.

¹⁰ Wagner-Martin, 200.

Though Fitzgerald found adapting to a quieter life in Montgomery challenging, frequent visits from Scottie, her husband Jack, and their young children, as well as her surviving sisters Clotilde and Rosalind, made Rabbit Run more palatable. Still, Fitzgerald herself was aware of the odds she faced: “I am conversant with the difficulties which probably confront me,” she writes in 1940 at age thirty-nine, “middle aged, untrained, and the graduate of a half-dozen mental Institutes.”¹¹ The side effects of electroshock and insulin therapies, popular early twentieth-century treatments for diagnosed schizophrenics, only increased the hardship of her transition. Despite the high odds mounted against her personal life, the mythos associated with her final years often begins with the one of the biggest changes she underwent during this period: her newfound religious devotion.¹²

Upon her return home, Fitzgerald, raised Episcopalian, spent her Sundays at Montgomery’s Church of the Holy Comforter with her family. During services, she could often be found taking notes for her novel *Caesar’s Things*, which she told a friend in 1941 had “the thematic intent of inducting the Biblical pattern of life into its everyday manifestations.”¹³ Most weekdays, too, Fitzgerald sat “in peace and serenity” at St. John’s Episcopal Church because she felt there was “no place else to go and think unless [she took] a streetcar and r[o]de to the end of the line and back.”¹⁴ In Montgomery as in other Southern cities in the early twentieth century, church life functioned as a social sphere firmly embedded within the operations of the community. Each Christian denomination found its place in the given social structure, and

¹¹ Cline, 377.

¹² Some scholars attribute her devotion to her mental illness, though I argue that this idea belittles her firm beliefs and diverts an unfairly sensationalist focus to her life story rather than what she has to say. Instead, I believe her newly invigorated religious fervor came partly as a response to tragedy – her institutionalization and the death of her husband – though that point lies outside the parameters of this paper.

¹³ “The blazoned skies . . .” Zelda Fitzgerald Papers, Box 5, Folder 13; c. 1941; Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library. Fitzgerald named the novel *Caesar’s Things* because she claimed she had learned to separate Caesar’s things from God’s (Milford 380).

¹⁴ Cline, 378.

believers adjusted their behaviors accordingly, both inside and out of the sanctuary. However, extremes in religious expression could spell social ostracism, and Fitzgerald's behavior placed her on the fringes of the spectrum of acceptability.¹⁵

Fitzgerald began to see herself as a prophet, nurturing the role she embraced through acts of evangelism. Beginning in 1936, resulting in her admittance to Highland, she reported experiencing religious visions and claimed she could talk to God.¹⁶ She broke from strictly Episcopalian understandings imparted in her youth, embracing a more radical worldview based in a universe that called for redemption: "The world had need to know the Christian faith again as the pattern of its ultimate organization and its only refuge," she wrote in the late 1930s.¹⁷ Her beliefs follow a modified version of an apocalyptic understanding of the universe popular in some Judeo-Christian sects, stressing the evils of a present age that awaits a Messiah's eventual coming when it can be made perfectible by his redemption.¹⁸ In her correspondences, Fitzgerald often contrasts the dire situation of worldly existence with the fortunes awaiting it in the future: "better worlds are soon to come," she writes to John Biggs, her husband's estate executor as well as her longtime confidante, in 1947.¹⁹ Other letters to Biggs illuminate "the ghastly cruelty"²⁰ of

¹⁵ Carol Crown and Charles Russell, eds., introduction to *Sacred and Profane: Voice and Vision in Southern Self-Taught Art* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), xiii. Crown and Russell write: "Because in the South religion is woven through the very fabric of society, interlacing social beliefs, customs, practices, and behaviors, the distinctions between the sacred and the profane are often blurred."

¹⁶ Milford, 307. In a 1947 letter, Fitzgerald also claimed she had been raised from the dead and could communicate with the deceased with God's aid.

¹⁷ "Choreography of an Idea," dates not examined; Zelda Fitzgerald Papers, Box 3, Folder 6; Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

¹⁸ The doom and gloom she associates with contemporary life, contrasting with her more optimistic words looking toward the future, supports the classification of her beliefs as generally apocalyptic. However, the modification to an apocalyptic understanding results from her romanticization of her youth. Fitzgerald feels the 1930s and '40s, her conception of "the present," contrasts from the Jazz Age that preceded it: in her mind, an era of artistry and redemption in which God was present. True apocalypticism, reliant on a Messianic figure, would not allow for such rosy retrospection. Regardless, her religious beliefs as they emerged in her late thirties and early forties signaled a break with the more moderate Episcopalianism she came to know in her youth.

¹⁹ "Correspondence: Fitzgerald, Zelda;" 1947; John Biggs Collection of F. Scott Fitzgerald Estate Papers, Box 2, Folder 17; Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

the present, which Fitzgerald firmly believed remained “so drained of spiritual significances of a spiritual nature.”²¹ To an extent, Fitzgerald even felt the world deserved its fate, as she believed it had “slipped into an attitude of negligent and un-obligated acceptance of the Grace of God.”²² However, she also offered a solution – the incorporation of spiritual values into everyday life – as she felt the Christian faith formed the backbone of worldly society and her contemporaries had ignored the increasing relevance of a return to a reverent culture. This was no simple, personal need; instead, it was in the world’s best interest to embrace a faithful existence: “It behooves the world to acknowledge the forms of its composition by means of which there is no hope of survival,” Fitzgerald writes in her unpublished essay “Choreography of an Idea,” a criticism of the wartime age.²³ Fitzgerald took to proselytizing often, urging those she to whom she spoke or wrote to turn to Christ for the sake of their own futures.

However well-intentioned, her newfound fire-and-brimstone apocalypticism alienated her from her friends and family and she garnered an unfavorable reputation in Montgomery as a result. She tried to save the souls of her friends, whom she viewed as hellbound, through art and writing – even Gertrude Stein reportedly received one of the tracts she composed admonishing repentance.²⁴ Fitzgerald typed these tracts out and signed them, hand-delivering them to figures of choice. One such publication given to William Wallace Hill, the probate judge of Montgomery County, begins: “The world angered God with its vanities and its indulgences and the world existed in its time-steeped, blood-saturated, glory-worn obedience of His Grace.”²⁵ The diction Fitzgerald utilizes in this pamphlet exhibits a religious epistemology driven by fear and

²¹ Ibid.

²² “Correspondence: Fitzgerald, Zelda,” 1942; John Biggs Collection of F. Scott Fitzgerald Estate Papers, Box 2, Folder 12; Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

²³ Fitzgerald, “Choreography of an Idea.” Not to be confused with “Choreography of an Idea: Resumé,” a different essay entirely.

²⁴ Milford, 372.

²⁵ Courtesy of the F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald Museum, Montgomery, Alabama. See Figure 2 for the entire pamphlet.

judgment not uncharacteristic of twentieth century Southern evangelism, reflected visually in the grotesque nature of *The Deposition* as well as her other religious paintings.

In addition to her pamphleteering, she also wrote directly to various acquaintances; one of her husband's editors Edmund Wilson received a letter urging him to "redeem [him]self; pray and repent." He was much too "respected and handsome" to burn in hell, Fitzgerald wrote, and he should "look to [his] salvation" to prevent such from happening.²⁶ As a result of her convictions, based in an understanding of rule-following with the looming potential for punishment, she gave other forms of unsolicited advice quite often. When she received visitors at home, many of whom were young men fulfilling a polite obligation, she urged them never to smoke or drink alcohol.²⁷ Fitzgerald's correspondences also reflect her newfound religious zeal. Another exchange between herself and her husband's estate executor, John Biggs, advocates for what she felt was her "spiritual mission in Russia" because, as she writes, "the world isn't going on much longer."²⁸ Her heavy investment in an end-of-days worldview makes salvation quite literally a matter of life and death, speaking to the urgency with which she felt she must impart her message of divine grace to those she loved.

As its ultimate purpose serves as an attempt to spread the news of the Gospels to others, *The Deposition* can be understood as yet another document similar to her pamphlets or tracts. Bolstering *The Deposition*'s claims to didacticism is the religious series she painted at the same time, referred to as her "Biblical Tableaux."²⁹ Titles in this collection, all referring to Biblical

²⁶ Milford, 372.

²⁷ Ibid, 355. After one such male visitor asked her about revelations, she replied: "I've had them! I have been dead and seen another world and come back alive to this one!"

²⁸ Cline, 399. In this letter, dating from 1947, Fitzgerald also confesses her love for a Russian officer. "For five years I have been desperately in love with a Russian General," she writes: "Our love is sent by God and hallowed of Him and means more to me than marriage."

²⁹ Wagner-Martin, 179. Dating is difficult in terms of Fitzgerald's work, whether artistic or literary. She rarely dated anything herself, and her husband stopped keeping his ledger, detailing the couple's activities, moves, and

lessons, include *Do Not Commit Adultery* (Exodus 20:14), *Let Him Who is Without Sin Cast the First Stone* (John 8:7), *The Parable of the Vineyard* (Matthew 20:1-16), *Honor Thy Father and Mother* (Exodus 20:12), and *Do Not Steal* (Exodus 20:15).³⁰ Fitzgerald biographer Sally Cline posits Fitzgerald created this body of work for moralizing purposes: teaching the ethics portrayed in Bible stories to her grandson Tim Lanahan, born in April 1946. Fitzgerald's devout Christianity and evangelizing behaviors strengthen Cline's theory. Her titles-as-lessons approach, supplementing the already instructive images with titles that tell both the Biblical story to which she refers and the lesson it teaches, speaks to her fixation with morality during this time of her personal religious revival. Furthermore, Fitzgerald's incorporation of imagery as a learning device recalls traditional roles of devotional painting, allowing her to teach as well as play the role of prophet during a time in her life when she felt she spoke as a mouthpiece of God.

Even though *The Deposition* does not belong to the Biblical Tableaux series, it reflects the interest in religious imagery Fitzgerald displays in the 1940s. It is not the only standalone image she painted during the time; similar works also dating from the Biblical Tableaux years, though not considered a part of the collection, include paintings such as *Adam and Eve*, *The Nativity*, and *The Marriage at Cana*, which also depict important Christian stories.³¹ These works portray scenes without an obvious takeaway rather than illustrating the moralizing messages of parables. *The Nativity*, for example, contains no human figures, and *The Marriage at Cana* demonstrates Christ's power rather than alluding to his teachings specifically. Even *Adam and Eve* serves more as an imaginative representation of the Garden of Eden rather than

expenditures, in 1936. Even her stays in and out of medical centers remain difficult to track, as lost or otherwise confidential hospital records provide an incomplete picture of her life.

³⁰ Sally Cline, *Zelda Fitzgerald: Her Voice in Paradise* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2002), 397, 458. The rest of the information in this paragraph comes from this source.

³¹ None of these works can be dated with much certainty, but letters between Fitzgerald and Biggs allow for a post-1945 estimate (around the time of Tim Lanahan's birth).

foreshadow the fall of man, though the apple Fitzgerald includes adds more weight to the image's interpretive potential. The titles of these images may render them less perceptibly didactic than the paintings belonging to the Biblical Tableaux collection, but this does not necessarily mean that Fitzgerald did not intend them as teaching devices. Because she envisioned the Biblical Tableaux as contributing to the moral edification of her infant grandson, perhaps these other paintings could be seen as more "advanced" spiritual material for an older audience. In this view, by looking at and engaging with these later paintings, viewers can come to a different spiritual understanding dependent on new interpretations of their prior knowledge. According to this theory, *The Deposition* could prompt viewers already familiar with the story of the crucifixion to consider it from a new angle, perhaps tinging its conventional message redemption with the reminders of the macabre. Fitzgerald's investment in others' spiritual well-being, as well as her claims to her own interpretive authority, imbued her with the power of a teacher and mentor to those she encountered, and her standalone religious paintings can serve as thought exercises intended to nurture devotion in others.

Specificities of *The Deposition* aside, biography – personal tragedy most specifically – forms an important part of Fitzgerald's story as an individual and as an artist, and informs her cathartic work imbued with personal themes. It is no coincidence that her own experiences mirror her religious conception of the state of the world, reliant upon a state of suffering in need of deliverance. Her somewhat idiosyncratic belief system, reminiscent of the apocalyptic tradition, can be thought to result from the needs that she felt in her personal life. In a 1930 letter to Dr. Oscar Forel, for example, Fitzgerald bemoans the "sickness and suffering" in which she so often she found herself, calling upon language she often uses to discuss the state of the spiritual

world.³² Along a similar vein, her reliance on faith during her final years in Asheville and Montgomery can be said to emulate the aspirational qualities of Christ's redemption, looking ever forward to a future free from strife.

³² "Forel, Dr. Oscar," dates not examined; Zelda Fitzgerald Papers, Box 5, Folder 3; Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

II. Iconography and Physicality

Due to her daughter's increased evangelist fervor, Minnie Machen Sayre once remarked that she felt Fitzgerald had "gone off the deep end about religion."³³ Though Sayre's comment dismisses Fitzgerald's burgeoning interests to a certain extent, she has a point: Fitzgerald's art and writing from this period do change in order to reflect an apocalyptic understanding grounded in her studious interest in the Book of Revelation. At this juncture in her life her style, though always expressionistic and colorful, changes in order to accommodate the visionary nature of the work.³⁴ Even in depicting a scene like *The Deposition*, with iconographic precedent dating back centuries, her religious paintings turn a relatively standard composition on its head. Abstracting the bodies on *The Deposition*'s picture plane allows Fitzgerald an emotive manipulation of form reminiscent of visions that calls upon her own perceived scriptural authority and presents salvation, the alternative to damnation, as a viewer's imperative.

Though her religious interests can be considered an emerging phenomenon, and she did paint scenes like *The Deposition* unconventionally, Fitzgerald called upon more traditional artistic forms for inspiration. In depicting her own interpretation of the Deposition from the Gospel of John, in which Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus take Christ down from the cross to prepare him for burial, Fitzgerald draws upon what Cline calls her "trademark manneristic figures."³⁵ Exaggerated figural forms with enhanced musculature, highlighted and shadowed bone structures, and elongated limbs, all techniques used by sixteenth-century Mannerist painters, serve as Fitzgerald's hallmarks. Moreover, Fitzgerald herself calls her figures "[her]

³³ Cline, 390.

³⁴ As does the formal quality of her handwriting – upon observing her correspondences from the 1920s onward, her tight, curly script transforms into something almost illegible by the 1940s.

³⁵ This story can be found in John 19:38-42. Other important figures such as John the Evangelist, the Virgin Mary, and Mary Magdalene can be found in other artistic renderings of the scene.

fanciful people,” referring to a significant degree of self-awareness in their creation.³⁶ In another nod to the Mannerists, she utilizes the triangular, balanced structure that marks many similar sixteenth- and seventeenth-century pieces, such as Jacopo Pontormo’s 1528 *Deposition* (Figure 3) as well as his contemporary Rosso Fiorentino’s from 1521 (Figure 4). As Mannerists, both painters exaggerate the human form in ways that Renaissance purists reliant on proportional representations of the body do not. As a result, their compositions are violent and sensuous, not unlike Fitzgerald’s twentieth-century rendition. Critical commentary regarding Pontormo and Fiorentino’s *Deposition* scenes retains its relevance in the discussion of Fitzgerald’s own, as the two shed light into Fitzgerald’s incorporation of formal qualities as well as themes important to the Crucifixion narrative.

Comparing these two artists’ *Depositions* with Fitzgerald’s demonstrates her interest in embracing artistic choices that contribute to a disconcerting quality of affect in her audience. Pontormo’s and Fitzgerald’s *Depositions*, for instance, share similarly fleshy color palettes and stacked compositions, with disobedient, angled forms leaning over each other, fighting for viewership. “The colors are those seen by the mind experiencing a vision of God,” writes Salvatore S. Nigro in reference to Pontormo, revealing the similarity between the two works in doing so.³⁷ The visionary quality of Fitzgerald’s *Deposition* mirrors that of Pontormo’s, adding a notion of dreamlike decenteredness despite its perceptible weight. In discussing Fiorentino’s *Deposition*, art historian Elisabetta Marchetti Letta mentions the contrast between the rigid geometry of the composition itself and the softer, curved details of the figures within it as well as

³⁶ “The flowers are...;” summer 1941 or 1942; Zelda Fitzgerald Papers, Box 4, number 42; Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

³⁷ Salvatore S. Nigro, *Pontormo: Paintings and Frescoes*, trans. Karin H. Ford (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1993), Plate IX.

the draping of the fabrics they wear.³⁸ Fitzgerald's work echoes this sense of softened structure; though her figures feel deliberately positioned, they exhibit a certain floating looseness enhanced by the swaths of fabric that serve as their clothing. Fiorentino also utilizes a twilight sky, alluding to the darkness that descended over the earth at the time of Christ's crucifixion, in his composition to better create the sense of Christ's despair. His *Deposition* appears darker than Pontormo's both formally and thematically, as does Fitzgerald's. This darkness contributes to the ideas of the grotesque that both Fitzgerald and Fiorentino's works recall, as Fiorentino does in depicting the dead Christ's flesh as green, evoking the more morbid themes associated with the crucifixion story that Fitzgerald continues.³⁹ The color palettes that these artists choose have important ramifications for the emotional reactions garnered by their viewers, as their visionary vibrancy feels less straightforward and reinforces the murkiness of the Christian narrative: only the immense tragedy of the crucifixion, marked by physical brutality, can lead to joy and redemption.

Fitzgerald departs from the tradition set by Pontormo and Fiorentino, however, in the ambiguity of the bodies in her composition – the ease of figural identification that her predecessors provided dissolves due to the sweeping androgyny of her figures. Fitzgerald imposes a certain agendered sameness over the image, as all of the figures in her composition have a similar look about them – a fleshy sickliness, as well as a contradictory sense of vitality – which refuses to sort itself into any sort of biologically sexed type. *The Deposition's* central character, possibly that of Fitzgerald herself, is the only figure who can be described as “sexed;” her bare breast reveals that she is female.

³⁸ Elisabetta Marchetti Letta, *Pontormo and Rosso Fiorentino* (Florence: Scala, Istituto Fotografico Editoriale, 1994), 60.

³⁹ Letta, 60-62. This scene can be found in Matthew 27:45-54, and the moment comes before Jesus' famous cry of “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (NRSV)

Due to this overwhelming sense of androgyny and lack of visual identifiers, as well as the dearth of primary sources referring to the image, the figures in *The Deposition* may remain consigned to ambiguity. Only the block of centurions found on the left of the composition, as indicated by their gray suits of armor, breastplates, and helmets, follow iconographic precedent. Even the identity of Christ has been debated. No figure occupies the cross in a physical sense, and no character takes a hypothetical Christ figure down from his execution site. Robert Henkes, for example, writes that Christ falls in multiple iterations from the top of the composition, and Fitzgerald Museum director Will Thompson believes the Christ figure can be found at the top of the *Deposition* “reaching right through [the figure presumed to be Fitzgerald’s] chest, right where her heart is located.”⁴⁰ Henkes, however, cedes that “to identify the entire body of Christ is impossible because of the impenetration of the several mourners and spectators.”⁴¹ The body he believes is Christ’s becomes so entangled with the other forms in the composition that it leaves the viewer unclear as to who Christ is in the first place.

Fitzgerald’s departure from traditional Deposition narratives reveals a multitude of artistic influences apart from the Mannerists, as her loose, expressive style recalls her own associations with modernist art circles both in the United States and abroad.⁴² As a product of the twentieth century cultural milieu, firmly situated in artistic circles with the likes of Miró, Gris, Matisse, Picasso, Brancusi, and Legér, Fitzgerald’s painting, with its unconventional, dreamlike coloration and reliance on the aesthetics of emotion, shows much inspiration derived from

⁴⁰ Willie Thompson, e-mail to the author, November 2, 2016.

⁴¹ Robert Henkes, “Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald,” in *The Crucifixion in American Art* (Jefferson: MacFarland and Company, 2003), 77.

⁴² According to Cline, strands of European modernism should not be seen as the extent of Fitzgerald’s influences: “An undue emphasis has been placed on [Fitzgerald]’s art of the Parisian Modernists she knew personally, mainly because she *did* know them personally. In fact, the more she painted the fewer links there are between her work and hers” (162). Livingston agrees with Cline regarding the unfair prominence of the Parisian avant-garde on Fitzgerald’s style, going so far as to label Fitzgerald an “anti-modernist” and situating her work within a framework of French illustrational art of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (79).

European modernism.⁴³ Picasso's influence especially can be seen in Fitzgerald's unconventional representation of anatomy, integral to the emotional effects her paintings impart. Here, her artistic interests converge; Fitzgerald's passion for ballet, reinvigorated by her life in Paris in the 1920s, served as one method of exposure to Picasso's style. As a frequenter of the Ballets Russes, where he worked as a set designer, she would have seen the ways in which he used "energy and colors," in addition to sweeping gesture, which she then utilized in her own painting.⁴⁴ Though his work with the ballet company was predominantly cubist, he did design costumes similar to many of the paper dolls Fitzgerald produced (Figure 5).⁴⁵ One of his sketches depicting dancers in a scene from *La Boutique Fantastique* exhibits the groundedness of form seen in Fitzgerald's own imagery (Figure 6). Most specifically, this solidity and weight derives from the manner in which Picasso renders arms and legs. He does not shy away from representing musculature similar to the way Fitzgerald herself does, never sacrificing expression to shallow notions of slender femininity.⁴⁶ The dancers in Figure 6 also possess large, limp hands as Fitzgerald later paints in her *Deposition*. In all, the female dancers seen in this drawing echo the visceral, movement-oriented musculature Fitzgerald employs in her own work, reliant upon similar notions of expression through anatomy that bring movement to still forms on a two-dimensional page.

The bodies Fitzgerald depicts in her earlier works, along with her affect-driven reasons for painting them as established in her personal papers, also provide a helpful interpretive framework for her *Deposition*. The warped physicality her figures embody here harkens back to her paintings of ballerinas, a subject she began depicting in the mid-1920s. These images, much

⁴³ Cline, 146.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁴⁵ Fitzgerald created paper dolls of her family as well as historical and literary figures. Figure 7 depicts a set of paper dolls based on the tale of Little Red Riding Hood.

⁴⁶ More on Fitzgerald's own dancer-inspired bodies will be discussed later in this section.

like *The Deposition*, depict elongated figures rendered in neutral colors amidst an equally neutral background. When asked why she painted these ballerinas the way she did, in an essentially unbecoming manner as opposed to one depicting their grace and delicacy, Fitzgerald reportedly replied, “Because that’s how a ballet dancer feels after dancing.”⁴⁷ Her own exploration of color values in her unpublished essay on aesthetics, “Choreography of a Resumé,” supports her claim, as here she writes that “muted color or hushed color value,” seen in her ballet paintings, merits a “cerebral message” of “suffering.”⁴⁸ The “absolute psychological response to color” she seeks to depict in her ballerina paintings, one with overarching negative associations, matches both her claims regarding her work as well as the meanings that can be derived from it.

The exaggerated musculature and pastel color palette, hallmarks of much of her work including her ballerina series and her religious imagery, results from her preference for emotionality over naturalism. Of this body of work, Cline writes: “[Fitzgerald’s] aim was to blast the viewer into an appreciation of the ballerina’s physical-emotional reality, irrespective of its ugliness.”⁴⁹ In her images of ballerinas, she rejected traditionally feminine shapes because she “believed strongly the depiction of the swollen physical flesh had to reveal psychological emotions,” and she refused to depict dancers as sexual embodiments of the female form because she saw dance as work, not as an exploitation of feminine sexuality.⁵⁰ The details of her own career or lack thereof add to the exhaustion and, in her own words, “suffering,” she imparts.⁵¹ Fitzgerald returned to dance after a long respite spanning from the end of her teenage years until the age of twenty-seven, when she became obsessed with rehearsing in hopes of a professional

⁴⁷ Cline, 221.

⁴⁸ Zelda Fitzgerald Papers, Box 3, Folder 7; dates not examined; Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

⁴⁹ Cline, 220, 227.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 220.

⁵¹ Zelda Fitzgerald Papers, Box 3, Folder 7.

ballet career. Though one of her teachers offered her a solo in the San Carlo Opera Ballet Company in the fall of 1929, Fitzgerald never took the position. Why she rejected the offer is unclear, but most likely had to do with the gendered pressures associated with homemaking as opposed to pursuing a career.⁵² The emotional baggage Fitzgerald associated with dance, including the stigmatization on behalf of her family's social circle of her choice to return to the studio despite her age, manifested itself physically as well; she experienced colitis, ovarian pain, and appendicitis around the same time she began pursuing dance seriously, and her husband's "impatien[ce]" with her near-constant rehearsals added to her exhaustion.⁵³ Many members of her friends and family believed dance contributed to her final breakdowns and subsequent years of institutionalization.

Compositionally, *The Deposition* resembles these earlier paintings in many ways. Works like *Ballerinas Dressing* (Figure 8) or *Ballerinas* (Figure 9) reveal the beginnings of the understanding of the human form that Fitzgerald continues to represent in her religious works. As a painter reliant on emotionality, too, the bodies present in *The Deposition* exist for a reason; if her ballerinas contort themselves the way they do because they are in pain, the same can be said for her religious figures. Certainly, her crucified Christ experiences physical pain, and her other figures, deep in mourning, appear to experience emotional distress as well. The deep sense of fear and tragedy that marks *The Deposition* informs the more painful truth of Christianity, sometimes overlooked in pursuit of its more optimistic ultimate message, of the unbearable pain Christ endured for the advancement of the Kingdom of God.

An analysis of the physical forms Fitzgerald presents in *The Deposition* would be incomplete without an investigation of their grotesque nature. Their arresting quality, often the

⁵² Wagner-Martin, 120.

⁵³ Wagner-Martin, 107.

first aspect of the painting a viewer notices, speaks to literary critic Jack Morgan's ideas of the corporeality of the Gothic, tropes of which Fitzgerald's work manifests visually. Morgan uses the term in a literary sense, referring to the body of work harkening back to an eighteenth century tradition containing the likes of Ann Radcliffe to Edgar Allan Poe and William Faulkner. In Gothic terms, especially concerning its stronghold in the American South, Peggy Dunn Bailey asserts that these texts "encode obsessive preoccupations with blood and inheritance, religion, sexuality, and sacred place," and they typically serve as "meditations on trauma" by those "compelled to return to it – to...experience it again."⁵⁴ As Fitzgerald's romantic attitude toward reconciling the seemingly opposing categories tragedy and beauty demonstrates, she held her own life's traumatic events in high regard despite the physical and emotional toll they imparted over her. The resulting Gothic sensibility in her paintings serves as a merging of the two ideas.⁵⁵ Moreover, Bailey believes a Gothic reality such as the one Fitzgerald imparts is "one marked by a complex and frightening relationship between religious intensity and violence," especially family violence.⁵⁶ This idea speaks to yet another autobiographical aspect of Fitzgerald's work, not only the abuses she suffered in her marriage, but her family's history of mental illness and suicide as well as the cold relationship she had with her father. In somewhat of a psychoanalytic move, according to Morgan's theories, these traumas play themselves out onto the canvas through the representation of the figures themselves precisely because of their prominence in Fitzgerald's own life.

In imbuing her figures with a sense of heaviness and elongation that deprives them of a sense of true humanity, as well as situating their bodies in nearly impossible positions, she

⁵⁴ Peggy Dunn Bailey, "Coming Home to Scrabble Creek: Saving Grace, Serpent Handling, and the Realistic Southern Gothic," *Appalachian Journal* 38.4 (July 1, 2011), 424-439, accessed June 3, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41320271>, 425.

⁵⁵ This idea will be communicated in detail in Section III.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 425-6.

participates in the timeworn Gothic tradition of disrupting readers' or viewers' notions of the ordinary. Upon first glance, the grotesque nature of Fitzgerald's figures can be nothing short of horrific to a viewer, which explains the difficulty she found in selling her work; Dorothy Parker once bought two paintings out of pity at an exhibit held to cheer Fitzgerald up after one of her emotional breakdowns, citing their "painful, miserable quality of emotion" in her distaste for them.⁵⁷ Fitzgerald's mother reputedly held her artwork in such disdain that she burned most of the canvases that remained after her daughter's death.⁵⁸ These reactions reflect the unsettling quality found in Fitzgerald's work, revealing its place within a Gothic understanding. In the Gothic as well as in Fitzgerald's *Deposition*, then, all is not as it should be.

Morgan advances the theory that the conception of horror, firmly embedded within the Gothic tradition, is a bodily one because our ideas of the grotesque derive from one source: notions of physical peril. Any depictions of corporeal forms that deviate from the norm, or what Morgan dubs a "healthy, energetic biology," unsettle viewers and can even create fear.⁵⁹ Upon applying his reasoning to *The Deposition*, I would argue that the reason Fitzgerald's grotesque forms make viewers uncomfortable is precisely because they warp common expectations regarding the human body. These Gothic bodies, which using Morgan's words impart "a preoccupation with vitality depleted" and a "dread occasioned by images of enervation, malaise, and retrogression," speak counter to any notions of physical normality viewers may hold.⁶⁰ The lifelessness and elongation – "vitality depleted," to Morgan's point – exhibited by figures in *The Deposition* create a sense of unease and persuade viewers to interpret what they see as not quite human.

⁵⁷ Cline, 344-5.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 459.

⁵⁹ Jack Morgan, *The Biology of Horror* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), 79.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 79 and 82. Morgan's scholarship on Gothic corporeality echoes many of Sigmund Freud's ideas of the uncanny.

Religion, too, forms an important cornerstone of Morgan's argument, furthering the parallels between his notions of the bodily foundations of a Gothic sensibility and that present in *The Deposition*. Morgan emphasizes the "religious terror" inherent to Christianity, alluding to ideas of "drama of bodily torture and blood atonement" present in its most important event – the crucifixion and subsequent resurrection of Christ – and calls it "unique in the literature of religions."⁶¹ In fact, he claims, bodily decomposition and corruption of physical forms are used to qualify Christianity's very existence through Christ's death as well as the multiplicity of martyrdoms saints. He cites the work of Pieter Breughel the Elder and Hieronymous Bosch as artistic examples of the more grotesque aspects of Christianity and the "appetite for repulsion" they cater toward.⁶² After all, the Mass serves not only as a religious service, but in some denominational contexts it represents a ritualistic sacrifice of the literal body and blood of Christ. Morgan's ideas highlight the visceral nature underpinning Christian imagery, which Fitzgerald presents through the grotesque figures featured in her *Deposition*. Her bodies evoke associations of death and decay – notions central to the Christian tradition, but also unpleasant ones of which audiences generally do not wish to be reminded. In supplying insight regarding the darker yet necessary aspects of Christianity, these ideas as visualized in Fitzgerald's *Deposition* speak to the importance of suffering in our own salvation, reminding viewers of the tragedy in a religious tradition that often focuses on the positive.

⁶¹ Morgan, 48.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 48 and 50.

III. Fitzgerald's Formalism: "Choreography of an Idea: Resumé"

Fitzgerald's paintings are inherently personal. As Livingston writes: "Most of these paintings' labored atmosphere resides in their maker's transparent attempts to persuade others, or herself, of some ineffable truth." Livingston does not deny their didactic nature in alluding their purposes of "persua[sion]," but highlights their ability to reveal the inner psychology of the artist as well. Through what Livingston calls "their quality of futilely attempted communication," Fitzgerald's religious paintings remain "tempered by inadvertent twists of self-revelation."⁶³ Because she found art so cathartic, Fitzgerald's own ideas and emotions – often rooted in trauma – always find their way onto her canvases. Fitzgerald's own writings on the subject of her work's purpose speak to Livingston's claim, as the exploration of her ideas of *The Deposition's* communicative aspects cater to its grounding in the personal. Here, the aesthetics of spirituality that Fitzgerald cultivated herself in a personal journal, as well as an unpublished essay entitled "Choreography of an Idea: Resumé," both housed in the Princeton University Department of Special Collections, prove fruitful in an interpretation of the painting grounded in her formal intentions.

In "Choreography of an Idea: Resumé," Fitzgerald reinforces the importance of line in the communicative nature of her work. Though the essay primarily describes the role of color within her artistic conception of form, Fitzgerald includes commentary regarding force of line and the purpose behind employing certain ideologically loaded angles in her work as well. She links the "definite" and "absolute" qualities of line to the equally "absolute" values of color, all employed toward her ultimate goal of "the direct evocation of direct emotional appeal."⁶⁴ She uses formal elements in order to garner a specific reaction in a viewer of her work. In

⁶³ Livingston, 81.

⁶⁴ Zelda Fitzgerald Papers, Box 3, Folder 7. All of the quotations within this paragraph come from this source, the pages of which are unnumbered.

Fitzgerald's words, this "absolute value" of a given aspect of art, results in the "universality of emotional response evoked by a given manifestation of the milieu," or its subsequent resonant emotion. Ideally, Fitzgerald intends her work to communicate a specific message through these "absolute values" as generated by color and line. Whether she attributes these qualities to color or line, her "ultimate goal" in creating artwork, "the rendition of abstract beauty," depends on the emotions she feels a given aesthetic component imparts.

A page from Fitzgerald's journal adds specificity to the values of line to which she alludes in her essay. With philosophical and religious musings of all types written in its pages, dating approximately from the years when she would have painted *The Deposition*, Fitzgerald's notebook provides insight into the "communication" Livingston feels is so crucial to the work itself, though she does not discuss the journal in her book. As seen in a leaf of notebook paper taken from her journal (Figure 10), Fitzgerald draws a series of angled lines in order to communicate the quality that a similar quality of line might in one of her paintings.⁶⁵ Of note include one vertical line descending from the top of the page, labeled "God's judgement," one rising from the bottom to the right labeled "Glory," and one horizontal line toward the top of the page labeled "tragedy." "Frustration" lies nearly horizontally across the bottom of the page. An additional angle labeled "possibility" grows from the right of the page toward the left, sitting between "Glory" and "tragedy." "Intellect" rises slightly to the right out of "actuality," slanted at a higher angle in between "God's judgement" and "Glory." Two additional lines, unnamed, ascend from the left side of the page and meet at a point slightly above the line labeled "intellect." Reading all of these lines according to their assigned metaphorical resonances, as

⁶⁵ Zelda Fitzgerald Papers, Box 6, Folder 4A; dates not examined; Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library. Photo courtesy of Princeton University Department of Rare Books and Special Collections.

they appear on the picture plane of Fitzgerald's artworks, allows a lens of interpretation that enlightens Fitzgerald's intended message.

Interpreting *The Deposition*, an ultimately didactic work, through the lens of Fitzgerald's own cultivated aesthetic gives a fruitful reading of the conclusion she intends for the viewer to draw from it. As Fitzgerald writes in her notebook, "God is the perfect comprehension" – spirituality provides a mechanism of clarification for a given audience, a framework for interpretation, whether the object in question be literary or artistic.⁶⁶ The aesthetic she cultivates in Figure 10, then, quite literally constructed around the representation of divine judgment, necessitates an interpretation of *The Deposition* based on her linear structure.

A few lines taken from *The Deposition* allude to those found in Figure 10. Most obviously, the two forming the backbone of the composition, one vertical line descending down the middle of the composition as well as a horizontal one found approximately a quarter down the page, form a cross. Two smaller crosses sit on either side of the larger cross from which Christ descends, in direct reference to the two thieves crucified at the same time as Jesus.⁶⁷ The vertical line divides *The Deposition* neatly in half, and rests along the line of "God's judgement" depicted in Figure 10. Though Christians see the cross as a redeeming symbol, as without Christ's sacrifice the solace found in Christianity would not exist, its alignment with the judgment of God renders it a more ominous one as well. The ever-presence of God's judgment depicted through a harsh vertical line, despite the redemption the cross provides, paints a fire-and-brimstone picture of religious activity dependent on rule-following and, to a certain extent, fear. Through utilizing this line in *The Deposition*, Fitzgerald may reference the judgment of God

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ This detail appears in three gospels' accounts of the crucifixion: Matthew 27, Mark 15, and Luke 23.

upon the human subjects in her painting, who obscure the line by nature of their own positioning around the cross.

Another line of note when examining *The Deposition* is the earthbound “frustration.” Though few lines in this work follow a horizontal path, save for the beams of the crosses found at the top of the composition, Fitzgerald could incorporate it through the implication of the literal horizon line. Integral to this understanding of the emotion evoked by the line is the traditional artistic association between objects depicted at “high” or “low” points on a picture plane, common to medieval and Renaissance art. Artists reserved the top portions of these compositions for more important, spiritual figures or concepts, like Christ, the Virgin Mary, angels, or the heavenly realm, maintaining those at the bottom for more plebeian subjects. Fitzgerald positions herself into this traditional dynamic by depicting Christ at the top of the composition and earthly subjects tumbling down from that high point. The aesthetic Fitzgerald develops her diagram fits into the high-low framework well – by depicting more aspirational values with lines slanting upward, such as “glory” or “intellect,” she implies a trajectory for them beyond the scope of any composition. With Christ at the top, Fitzgerald’s triangular composition leads the eye on “glory”’s upward path straight to the glory associated with the crucifixion. As a straight line more static than a slanted one, “frustration” also implies a sense of stasis with no promise of improvement, as imparted by slanted lines with loftier aspirations. Thus, the poppies found at the bottom of the *Deposition* and the grass in which they grow, organic matter synonymous with the earth, could symbolize the frustration Fitzgerald associated with the earthly as opposed to the heavenly.

Interestingly, Fitzgerald chooses to depict “tragedy” at the top of Figure 10 as well, at an angle perpendicular to that of “God’s judgement.” Again, recalling the associations of higher

planes with lofty ideals, a final lens of interpretation comes through the form of this line. Though she saw the negatives associated with tragedy in her own life with great frequency, in her notebook she equates beauty with tragedy several times, placing it in an aesthetic realm similar to that in which she holds spirituality. Her notes illustrate other patterns she gave to her own experiences, two of which she named “Apollo,” or “sense of beauty, and sense of tragedy,” and “Devil,” “sense of tragedy and sense of beauty.”⁶⁸ On a nearby page, she writes a similar notion, “1. beauty of tragedy/2. tragedy of beauty,” using the two values nearly interchangeably. In another section of her notebook containing a list of principles, including “grace,” “harmony,” and “blessedness of the fulfilled,” Fitzgerald also includes “adaptability,” alluding to the importance of tragedy, without which adaptability would not be necessary.⁶⁹ She applies these interlocking notions of tragedy in another note, in which she writes of the “perfect[ion]” inherent in the “spiritually splendid” lilies she had recently grown, which had “just plain died.” Here, she muses over “paint[ing] the memory of white desirable of so much beauty,” reflecting on the lofty values inherent in the death of a living thing she once held dear. Though specific, this example illustrates that for Fitzgerald, the lost is often more beautiful – and therefore more spiritually significant – than that which still exists.⁷⁰

Fitzgerald’s notebooks, then, leave it as no surprise that in Figure 10, the relative height of the line labeled “tragedy” places it around the same region of a horizontal cross beam in *The Deposition*’s composition. Because in much religious painting the artist intends one painted

⁶⁸ Zelda Fitzgerald Papers, Box 6, Folder 4A; Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library. All of the quotations in this paragraph come from this source, the pages of which are unnumbered.

⁶⁹ “The soul is sacred and the soul is immortal,” she writes later, underneath an inscription that reads equates the soul with earthly “struggle and effort.” For Fitzgerald, struggle became a spiritual quality worth striving for, with adaptability as its hopeful result.

⁷⁰ A conversation held with the director of the F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald Museum in Montgomery, Will Thompson, confirms the romantic obsession with tragedy that Fitzgerald held. She was not alone; her husband was guilty of the same inclination, and their relationship was built on such notions.

scene to evoke a story that extends past that narrative moment, it is important to note that in telling the Christian story – an ultimately triumphant one with a positive message – Fitzgerald chooses to capture the moment of Christ’s deposition from the cross, wracked with violence, rather than a relatively more cheerful scenes of his return from the dead. Considering tragedy’s high esteem in Fitzgerald’s own life, along with the beauty she found in it despite the difficulties she faced, an interpretation of her line attribution renders tragedy an integral part of her own spirituality.⁷¹ As she concerns herself with ideas of beauty quite often in her notebook, and tragedy exists in a symbiotic relationship with beauty in her personal universe, it is evident she held both in high regard. This connection reinforces the ultimately positive message of the crucifixion story – the resurrection of Christ and the religion that results – despite the doom and gloom of Deposition pieces, but it also echoes the more somber notes present in Fitzgerald’s own life. When considering *The Deposition* as a combination of the lines present in Figure 10, the painting becomes an amalgamation of the relationship between tragedy and beauty that Fitzgerald herself sought to understand: how an event as appalling as a crucifixion could lead to the faith in which she found so much solace.

⁷¹ As she writes in her notebook, “grief is loyalty to God.”

Conclusion

In assembling an interpretation of Fitzgerald's *Deposition*, for which no academic precedent exists, it is useful to arrive at a conclusion from a variety of sources and explanations. Firstly, Fitzgerald's biography provides a backdrop of tragic circumstances for her religious painting series, integral to understanding her reasons for undertaking the project in the first place. Because she took to artistic expression as a therapeutic activity, to a certain extent her paintings can be seen as visual manifestations of her emotional states, and arriving at the root of a few of the feelings expressed through *The Deposition* can better inform a viewer of what she attempts to portray. As Fitzgerald herself writes, "the induction of art forms into life would help to solve the lack of commensurate spiritual 'daily bread'" – because she lived according to highly spiritual, artistic principles herself, she dedicated many of her paintings to bring that same awareness she felt to others.⁷² To use her words, art became her "daily bread" in a time when she needed it the most.

Fitzgerald's iconographic deviations from traditional Mannerist Deposition pieces also add insight to her methodology, as the overall ambiguity she imparts by warping the nature of the narrative itself as well as the bodies it contains calls into question the simplicity of the crucifixion narrative. The deviance of the figures she renders, whether from artistic tradition or from biological norms, also plays a role in the affect they portray to an audience. Precisely because they do not conform to viewers' expectations of the human form, they prove better able to shock those who see them and encourage deeper engagement with *The Deposition's* more provocative themes as a result. Its unconventional nature assists its purpose as a devotional image, as its Gothic corporeality may prompt its viewers to ponder the Christian story from a different angle.

⁷² Fitzgerald, "Choreography of an Idea."

Elements of Fitzgerald's own sense of formal qualities, too, speak to the complexity of the message she seeks to impart, despite its singular evangelist goal of encouraging spirituality and devotion. Her own investment in the seemingly contradictory elements of beauty and tragedy inform the compositional structure of the image as well as the "concrete value of the evokative [sic] power of lines"⁷³ she employs in relaying the story of the Deposition. She never loses sight of feeling, even when developing a system of aesthetics built upon "objective" principles.⁷⁴

Ultimately, Fitzgerald's artistic purpose is an altruistic one informed by this reverence for emotion. As she writes in another unpublished essay:

"The purpose of the artist is to increase the horizons of the soul. The emotional stature of the beholder shall grow in the understanding of the artist's creation; and that the artist shall in rendering his capacity have increased and deepened the range of his soul is the function of art; and the artist's motivation is to communicate."⁷⁵

Though Christianity became one of the most important aspects of Fitzgerald's later life, which codifies to a certain extent the spirituality that seeps into the arc of her work as a whole, her fervent evangelism served as only one manifestation of the connections she felt with those around her. Art helped Fitzgerald herself, but more importantly, art helped others. Her religious paintings contributed to her desire for improvement, and she used her abilities for what she saw as the spiritual betterment of all she encountered. *The Deposition*, then, presents Fitzgerald's vision, communicated through form and feeling, of soul food for a troubled world.

⁷³ Fitzgerald, "Choreography of an Idea: Resumé."

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Fitzgerald, "Choreography of an Idea."



Figure 1. Zelda Fitzgerald, *The Deposition*. c. 1945.

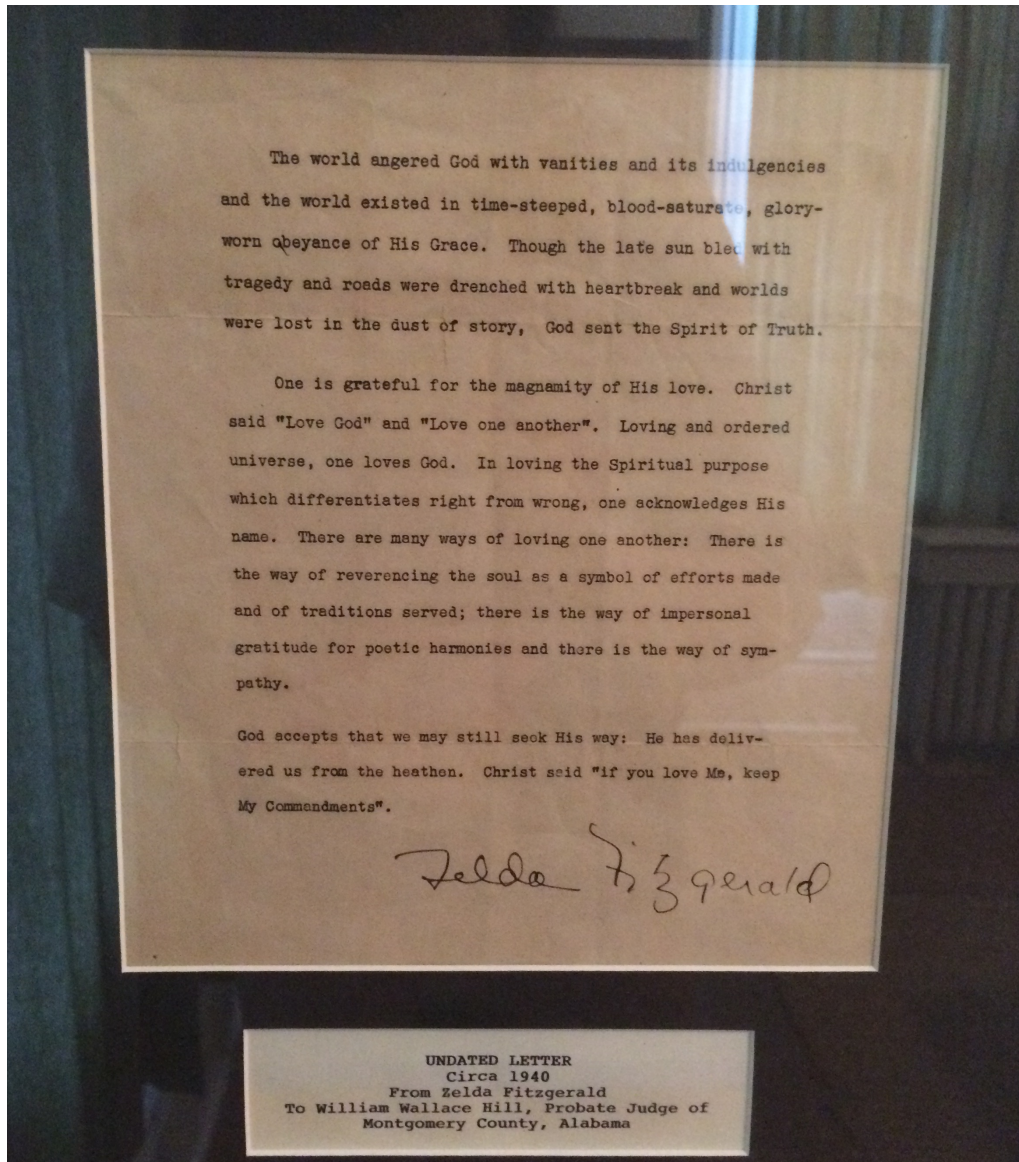


Figure 2. One of Fitzgerald's religious tracts, given to William Wallace Hill c. 1940.
Photo courtesy of the F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald Museum.



Figure 3. Jacopo Pontormo, *Deposition*, 1526.



Figure 4. Rosso Fiorentino, *The Deposition*, 1521.



Figure 5. Picasso's costume design for *La Trincorne*, 1919.



Figure 6. Pablo Picasso, scene from "La Boutique Fantastique," 1919.



Figure 7. Zelda Fitzgerald, *Little Red Riding Hood*.

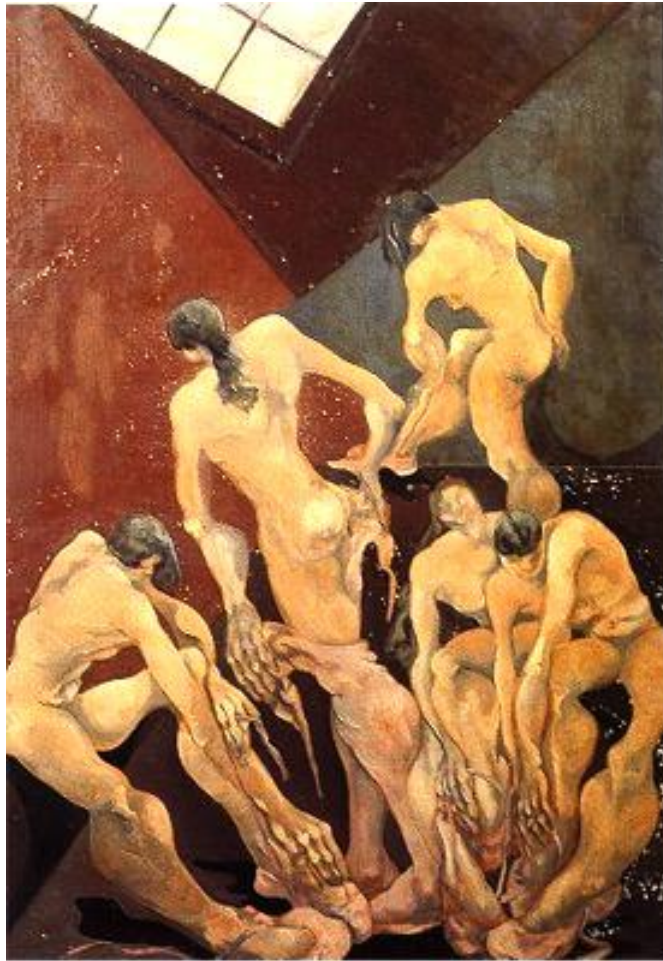


Figure 8. Zelda Fitzgerald, *Ballerinas Dressing*. c. 1941.



Figure 9. Zelda Fitzgerald, *Ballerinas*, ca. 1933, Oil on canvas, 92.08 cm x 66.68 cm.
Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts.

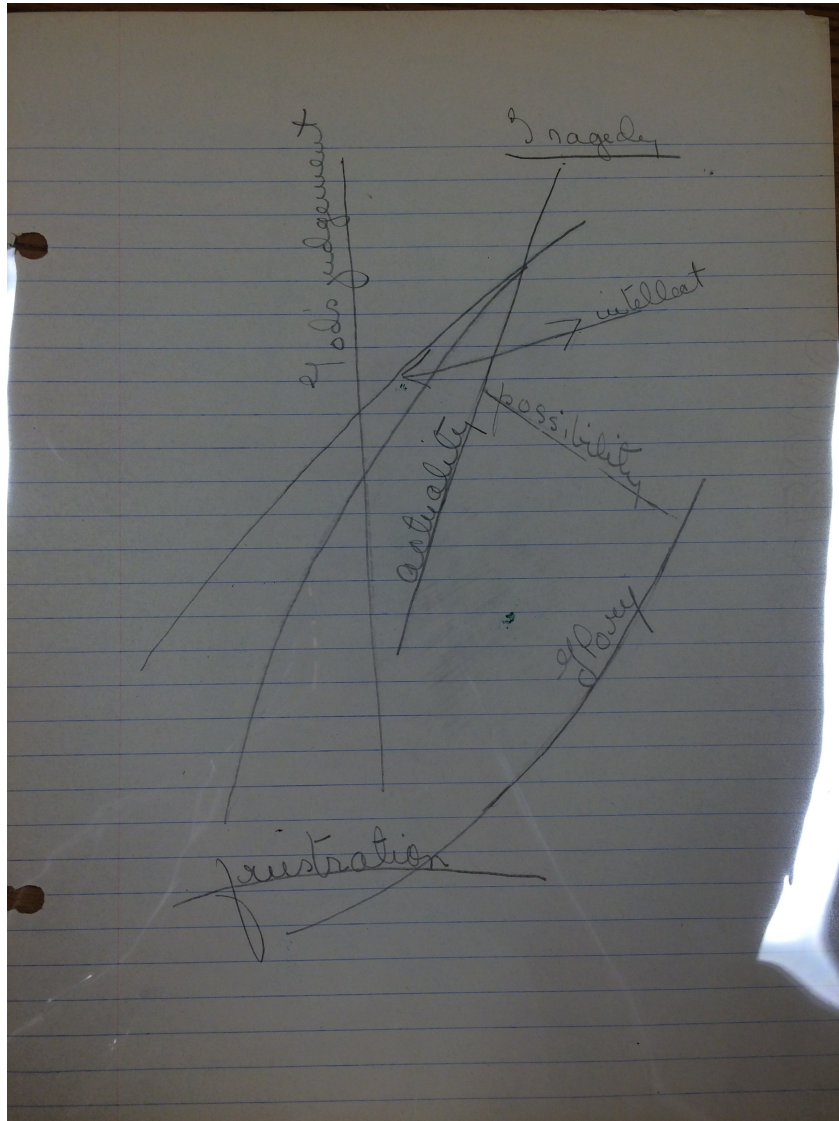


Figure 10. Sheet from Fitzgerald's notebook.
Photo courtesy of Princeton University Rare Books and Special Collections at Firestone Library.

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