From a Swimmer to a Diver: Reading F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Swimmers" as a Prologue to Tender Is the Night

Michiko Takahashi*

Introduction

"The Swimmers" first appeared in the October 19, 1929 issue of The Saturday Evening Post. Upon completing the story, Fitzgerald wrote to his agent Harold Ober that "this is the hardest story I ever wrote, too big for its space + not even now satisfactory" (Bruccoli, As Ever 142). As his own words indicate, the story has too many themes for its length, which is less than 20 pages: the comparison of Europe and America, expatriation, marriage, and money, to name but some. As a consequence, the story leaves the impression that none of these themes is fully cultivated, and that it lacks focus and unity. Critics such as Matthew J. Bruccoli and Robert Roulston express their dissatisfaction with the story, saying "it is flawed by a trick plot and... has too much material for its form" (Bruccoli, Grandeur 279), and "the story itself is a kind of equivalent of inebriation, combining the incompatible and harmonizing the discordant" (Roulston 151-2).

* Lecturer, Faculty of Humanities, Fukuoka University
Despite its shortcomings, however, "The Swimmers" has certain charms that are common to more successful stories and novels by Fitzgerald; indeed, when he wrote back to Fitzgerald, Ober praised it as "the ablest and most thoughtful story you have ever done" (Bruccoli, As Ever 142). Robert Sklar points out the importance of this story, saying that "[f]or the significance of its themes and the nature of its imagery 'The Swimmers,' among all the stories Fitzgerald wrote from 1927 to 1932, is the most important precursor to Tender Is the Night" (239). Though Fitzgerald spent another five years to complete TITN after writing "The Swimmers," the story already embraces a set of interesting ideas and imageries that later develop into TITN.

Though "The Swimmers" has not been paid much attention, it is an important milestone in the composition of TITN. This paper explores how this rather neglected story can be read as a precursor to TITN by focusing on the water imagery in "The Swimmers" and TITN.

1. Money as a Fin: A Hidden Link between TITN and "The Swimmers"

"The Swimmers" and TITN both open with a scene on the French coast, and abundant water imagery is one of their common traits. Before going on to examine such imagery, let us first pay attention to a more literal link between the two stories.

It is now well-known that Fitzgerald recycled many of his stories when writing a novel; he removed and polished lines from a story and inserted them into a novel. When he was writing TITN, he recycled, or "stripped," heavily from the stories he had written for magazines. George Anderson's
analysis confirms that among the stories Fitzgerald wrote in the period of 1922 to 1933, 37 were woven into the novel.\(^1\)

Anderson's study indicates that Fitzgerald stripped three sections, or approximately 150 words, from "The Swimmers" for *TITN*, which are considerably less than some other stories such as "Jacobs Ladder" (1927) or "One Trip Abroad" (1930); hence on a superficial level, "The Swimmers" is not a story that made crucial contribution to *TITN*. However, what makes "The Swimmers" a prologue to *TITN* lies in the subtler level. For example, other than the "stripped" sections, we can find an intriguing metaphor that appears both in "The Swimmers" and *TITN*: a metaphor that associates money with a fin.

Towards the end of "The Swimmers," the main protagonist, Henry Marston, solely visits the Virginia coast. Having learned how to swim three years ago at St. Jean de Luz in France where he visited to recover mentally and physically from the blow of his wife's infidelity, Henry became a lover of swimming, and it is now "a sort of refuge" to him (505). He needs swimming now because he has discovered that his French wife, Choupette, is again having an affair. He comes to the Virginia coast "to wash his mind in the water" (505), and there, an imposing idea is introduced: "Americans, he liked to say, should be born with fins, and perhaps they were—perhaps, money was a form of fin" (506).

Money and the comparison of Europe and America, which are the key ideas in the quoted sentence, are among the important themes Fitzgerald incorporated into *TITN* as well as "The Swimmers." Curiously enough, the association of fin and money recurs in *TITN*. The deterioration of the novel's main character, Dick Diver, is triggered by his meeting with Nicole
Warren, a rich American woman in Switzerland. In Book Three, Chapter Seven of the novel, Nicole is waiting for "the moment of the leap" from her weakened husband: "For what might occur thereafter she had no anxiety—she suspected that that would be the lifting of a burden, an unblinding of eyes. Nicole had been designed for change, for flight, with money as fins and wings" (279-80). It is suggested in the novel that Dick gives up his promising career as a psychiatrist by marrying Nicole, a mental patient, or by becoming her personal doctor and caretaker. Ten years after their marriage, she is almost ready to leave him for her long-time worshipper, Tommy Barban, a young, masculine, proud mercenary and investor. The Warrens are one of "the great feudal families" in the U.S." (TITN 136) and was able to "buy a doctor" for Nicole (TITN 163). After a decade of their marriage, Nicole feels she is recovered and hopes to leave Dick; she does not fear to start over her life again because she knows that the money she has will protect her.

We can see that the image of money being a fin functions quite differently in TITN from that in "The Swimmers." While in "The Swimmers," the image is associated with Americans in general, in TITN, it is chiefly associated with Nicole, or the Warrens. Obviously, Nicole is a figure that embodies Fitzgerald's famous dictum: "Let me tell you about the very rich. They are different from you and me" ("The Rich Boy" 318), just like Anson Hunter or Tom and Daisy Buchanans. In other words, they are the protagonists that embody or symbolize the corrupt side of the rich. In the sentences in "The Swimmers" quoted earlier, however, money seems to represent a positive power which enables Americans to advance. Fitzgerald was constantly aware of these two sides of money since the very early stage
of his authorship. Although he used exactly the same simile in "The Swimmers" and TITN, the effects are quite different. Such similarities/dissimilarities can be found in many more aspects in the two stories, some of which will be discussed in the following sections in this paper.

2. Water Images in TITN and "The Swimmers"

The image of money being a fin invites us to find many more resemblances between the two stories. For example, the word "fin" leads us to the image of fish, and not surprisingly, these two stories share rich water and sea images, some of which will be discussed in this section.

A careful reading reveals that in TITN, both Dick's deterioration and Nicole's recovery are depicted against oceanic backdrops. Some of the significant scenes that portray Dick's decline occur on T.F. Golding's motor yacht at the Nicean Bay, on the aquaplane with Rosemary's friends, and on the Riviera Beach just before his departure for the U.S. close to the end of the novel. It is also not a random chance that the family name of Dick is Diver—the name that strikingly insinuates his life's gradual decline in the waterfront settings.

One of the memorable scenes of Nicole's emotional independence comes after her quarrel with Dick on Golding's boat. Nicole is sitting "upon the low wall and look[s] down upon the sea" and starts to contemplate becoming independent from her debilitating husband (TITN 276). Soon after the scene she realizes that she is ready to leave, that she has "been designed for change, for flight, with money as fins and wings." The word "wings" is associated with preceding "flight," but "fins" is in association with the water images that fill the entire description of Nicole's inner
transformation.

"The Swimmers" is as imbued with water-related images as *TITN*. To begin with, as the title indicates, swimming is a very symbolic act in this story, and naturally, most of the scenes take place either by or on the ocean. Henry, for example, learns how to swim from an eighteen-year-old American girl at St. Jean, while he is trying to patch himself up from the shock of his wife's infidelity. After becoming able to swim, Henry asks the girl, who constantly travels around looking for a good place to swim, why she swims. She answers: "To get clean." Then she continues: "I don't know why I said that. But it feels clean in the sea." Perplexed, Henry looks into her eyes and realizes that she is a representation of "his ever-new, ever-changing country" (501). This mystic experience triggers important changes in his life; the next day, Henry declares to his wife that he is going back to Richmond because he has "got to make more money. American men are incomplete without money" (501).

Just before his visit to St. Jean, Henry declined an offer to "come back to Richmond at about double" wages because he thought "the questions which [his] life propounded could be answered only in France" (496). As if his encounter with the girl has opened up "a new gate to life" (501), he changes his mind to take the offer to retrieve "the masculine self he had handed over to the keeping of a wise little Provença1 girl" (502).

Three years after his return to Richmond, Henry again discovers Choupette is having an affair, this time with Charles Wiese, "one of the richest men in Virginia" (507). Unlike three years ago, Henry offers an immediate divorce in exchange for their sons' custody. Their talk breaks down, and Henry decides to take a leave to visit the Virginia Beach. Before
he leaves, he tells his boss, Judge Waterbury, his desire to return to France. Waterbury first displays surprise because the return means Henry will lose two-thirds of his salary; Henry tells him his savings and stocks will cover the reduction.

Henry probably wants to go back to France to get away from his intolerable married life. Choupette’s first affair seriously shattered Henry’s pride, but since their return to Richmond, he has been able to retain his “masculine self” because in Richmond he makes more money than in Paris. He has believed in the idea of money being ”a form of fin” for the Americans. His wife’s affair with Wiese, however, again endangers his self-esteem as Wiese is far more affluent than him, and so in Henry’s logic, more masculine and complete. Indeed, Wiese repeatedly proclaims that ”money is power” as if to emasculate Henry.

Greatly troubled, Henry comes to the Virginia Beach to seek a refuge; there, he reencounters his sibyl, the unnamed girl who taught him how to swim.2 On the night of their reunion, a pivotal incident occurs—an incident that makes him fully understand the power the girl has bestowed on him, the power to swim, is not merely a refuge but the very key to ”open up a new gate to life” (501). That night, Henry boards Wiese’s motor boat to have a conversation with Choupette and him. True to his byword that money is power, Wiese tells Henry he has bribed a psychiatrist to fabricate a letter stating Henry’s mental inability to hold his sons’ custody. At a crucial moment, however, his motorboat engine comes down, and Henry, in exchange for his offer to swim to a distant lighthouse to call for a rescue, successfully talks the couple into giving up the custody and invalidating the letter. In the ocean Henry feels the water is ”warm and friendly, and the
small murmur of the waves ... an encouragement" (511). Embraced by the friendly ocean, he strokes away from the snobbish and corrupted world that Choupette and Wiese represent. He thus reclaims his self-esteem through swimming again.

Earlier on the boat, Marston tells Henry: "Money made this country.... It's money that harnesses the forces of Nature, creates the machine and makes it go when money says go, and stop when money says stop" (508). Henry has also believed in the power of money for three years, relying on it as the source of his self-assurance. However, Henry realizes, as his own words "money is a form of fin" suggests, money is merely a tool for him to proceed more efficiently, and though Wiese has more money than him, he has another power that Wiese does not have; the power to swim. For Wiese, who excessively believes in the power of money, nature is a subject to conquer, but Henry knows how to go along with nature through swimming.

Nature and money represents the two sides of America. The rich nature or the wilderness has always been the symbol of the infinite potentials that America embraces, but at the same time, America has conquered Nature and industrialized its land under the flag of capitalism, just as Wiese tells Henry. Henry balances the two sides, and through swimming also becomes awakened to an accurate perception of himself as an American, as is revealed in the closing of "The Swimmers."

As we have seen above, water images play significant roles in both "The Swimmers" and TITN. In "The Swimmers" the waterfront is where Henry retrieves self-respect and national identity; in TITN, however, water images convey more complex meanings as they are placed as the settings both for
Nicole's recovery and Dick's deterioration.

3. Henry the Swimmer and Dick the Diver—from "The Swimmers" to *TITN*

Although "The Swimmers" and *TITN* share common imageries and themes, each story reaches a quite different ending, as we have seen. This section compares the two endings, and explores what invites the metamorphosis from Henry as a swimmer to Dick as a diver between the years of 1929 to 1934.

Henry leaves for France shortly after the incident on the boat. Looking at the fading shore of America from the Majestic, he has "a sense of overwhelming gratitude and of gladness that America [is] there," and reconfirms his love for the country: "The best of America was the best of the world" (512). There on the Majestic, he meets the girl for the third time and recalls the question he posed three years ago: "Why do you swim?" He then realizes that he has found the answer to the question himself—because America, the country she represents, is "having about it still that quality of the idea," or "a willingness of the heart" (512). Beyond the graves at Shiloh and the tragedies in the Argonne, America has kept moving forward. Swimming symbolizes the spirit which has kept America proceeding beyond many hardships in its history. Henry then goes on to ponder that through meeting the girl, or the representation of his country, he has "been profusely given more than he asked"—not only "money, release from an intolerable situation, and the fresh strength to fight for his own" (511-2), but also self-esteem and the love for his own country, both of which he was about to lose in his years of expatriation. Swimming gives Henry strength
to move forward, and through it, he has also reclaimed self-respect and national identity.

Two of the many themes of "The Swimmers," the loss of man's self-esteem in marriage and the comparison between Europe and the United States, recur as the main themes in \textit{TITN}, though Dick never has a chance to retrieve his self-esteem. Although the two stories have common themes, we find a clear contrast between the ending of "The Swimmers" and that of \textit{TITN}. In the former, Henry goes back to Europe filled with energy and pride for himself and his own country; in the latter, Dick goes back to America without money or confidence, and he gradually disappears into unknown small towns in the state of New York.

If we place "The Swimmers" in its historical context, however, the endings of the two works become similarly disturbing. The uneasiness the reader may feel at the closing of "The Swimmers" comes from Henry's words to Waterbury earlier in the story: he admits that he has "made something in the market" (503). When we consider the Black Thursday market crash immediately after the publication of "The Swimmers" and the worldwide economic depression that followed, we cannot help anticipating the dark clouds over Henry's future—he is destined to lose the money he made in stocks in the near future. Then he will again be thrown into life's rough current, and whether his power to swim is strong enough to buoy him up even in the maelstrom of the Great Depression, we never know.

Significantly, the dark clouds we see over Henry's future were also present in Fitzgerald's future in 1929, when he was struggling to write his fourth novel. The clouds are aesthetic as well as financial. Bruccoli writes about the author: "By 1929 Fitzgerald knew he had lost something. Not his
Fitzgerald had been striving to make himself what he called a serious writer, but his effort to put himself together and keep going on as a novelist—not a short story writer—often failed. It is possible to say that such struggles and his realization that life was not "something you dominate if you were any good" largely contributed to the making of *TITN* and its main protagonist, Dick Diver.

By 1932, Fitzgerald knew that the main protagonist of his upcoming novel is not a swimmer but a diver; that year, Fitzgerald wrote about his novel-in-progress that it would "be a novel of our time showing the break up [sic] of a fine personality" (Bruccoli and Baughman 10). Robert Sklar says in his discussion of "The Swimmers" that "so soon as Fitzgerald could conceive a tragic ending for 'a willingness of the heart,' his material for *TITN* would be complete" (239). When he found the right personality for its main character, Fitzgerald finally became able to tackle the "too big" themes crammed in "The Swimmers" and expand them into a full novel.

In *TITN*, Fitzgerald chose to portray not a swimmer who neatly escapes from an intolerable situation but a diver who is caught in it and gradually sinks into deeper darkness. In this novel, he depicts a crude reality in which all swimmers can turn into divers whether they like it or not, and explores the difficult proposition of how one can live in such a slow, inescapable descent—the proposition which he himself had been facing through his struggle to be a serious writer.

Fitzgerald later called *TITN* "a confession of faith"; what he meant by faith may be interpreted in many ways, but one interpretation is his
determination to confront his own tangled life and to remain an author however tragic his life may become. When he makes the confession that "I had been mortgaging myself physically and spiritually up to the hilt" in "The Crack-Up" (72), many readers perceived it as pitiful, but Fitzgerald was only true to his faith. Numerous authors in history experienced rises and falls, but only a few had the ability to record their own falls while keeping serene observer's eyes and artistic beauty as Fitzgerald did.

*TITN* is the story in which Fitzgerald's aestheticism blossomed in a different way from *The Great Gatsby*, and "The Swimmers" should not be undervalued in the study of the composition of *TITN*. Many of the themes he deals with in *TITN* already exist in "The Swimmers" along with some important imagery, but the contrasting endings indicate that he was still in the process of finding a true focus for his novel-in-progress, though we can still regard "The Swimmers" as an important piece en route to *TITN*.

### Works Cited

Anderson, George. "F. Scot Fitzgerald's Use of Story Strippings in *Tender Is the Night.*" Bruccoli and Baughman, 213-261.

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1 For a detailed study of Fitzgerald's use of story strippings in *TITN*, see the appendix by Anderson in Bruccoli's *Reader's Companion to F. Scott Fitzgerald's Tender Is the Night.*

2 The girl remains unnamed to the end despite her repeated appearances in the story. She is depicted more as a symbolic figure than a real person. We can also regard her as Henry's alter-ego, the device Fitzgerald successfully used in "One Trip Abroad" (1930).

3 Fitzgerald wrote in 1929—the year when "The Swimmers" was written—that "the *Post* now pay the old whore $4000 a screw" to Hemingway. This bitter and self-deprecating comment illustrates his irritation about spending his time and energy on short stories when he was supposed to be concentrating on his next novel.