5'4" × 2": Zelda Fitzgerald, Anorexia Nervosa, and *Save Me the Waltz*

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It would have starved a Gnat—  
To live so small as I—  

—Emily Dickinson

Everything we have done is [mine] . . . I am the professional novelist, and I am supporting you. That is all my material. None of it is your material . . . [S]he [Zelda] has nothing essentially to say.

—F. Scott Fitzgerald

In 1933, when Scott Fitzgerald declared ownership and ultimate control over the “text” of his and Zelda’s life during a conversation with Zelda and her psychiatrist, he was merely asserting for posterity what he had exercised since around 1919—his right to exploit in his fiction not just his own experiences and emotional anguishes, but also those of the women he knew, particularly Zelda. Many critics have noted the extent to which Scott’s female characters are based on Zelda, but it has only been during the last twenty years that feminist critics have begun to question the gender politics involved in such appropriation.

One of the more disturbing ways Scott “enshrined” Zelda in his fiction was using her letters, sometimes lifting whole lines, in delineating a character. But in using the sometimes intimate and emotionally wrenching texts of a living, breathing “character,” Scott rather violently molded the identity of his wife for his own personal and literary purposes. To use the language of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Scott created in his fiction a reflection of Zelda, a looking-glass in which, as a woman and as an aspiring
writer, she gazed at herself, “killed into a ‘perfect’ image,” and saw “an enraged prisoner.” While this image perhaps misleadingly implies that Zelda is a “stable reality” and does not account for the historical discourses of power that have produced Zelda’s “images,” it seems an appropriate metaphor for the Fitzgeralds because they apparently struggled over who could construct and control the “reflection” of themselves in language. My thoughts about the rather particular drama of their relationship have been focused by Michel Foucault’s analysis of the more fragmentary, elusive struggles over the cultural production of meaning articulated in Discipline and Punish.

The Fitzgeralds were certainly “masters of invention,” creating and recreating themselves in their everyday lives and in their fiction, blurring the boundaries traditionally assumed between authors and texts. Zelda in particular lived daily with Scott’s rendition of her “double,” an assertive, flamboyant femme fatale, and she was as committed to upholding that image as she was resentful of it. This conflict between her complicity with and her rage at the image inscribed on Scott’s literary mirror permeated her culturally inscribed female body and somewhat unexpectedly resulted, I will risk arguing, in anorexia nervosa. Her body became a trope in her own life for a larger conflict within the cultural “texts” of femininity. In interpreting the text of Zelda’s body and of her novel Save Me the Waltz, I use feminist psychoanalytic theories of anorexia as well as a Foucauldian analysis of the discipline of “femininity” to reread Zelda’s story and go beyond the usual interpretation of Zelda as primarily a victim of madness.

During the Fitzgeralds’ courtship in 1919, Zelda wrote Scott in New York that she wanted to be “5 ft. 4” × 2”” (Z, 46). She was thinner than she had ever been before, and her concern with her weight would be a recurring theme in her life. The published pictures of Zelda from the early 1910s to the 1940s do not reveal a boyishly slender body of Twiggy or today’s models, nor the kind of emaciated, skeletal body now associated with anorexia. She is definitely thin, but her photos alone would not be convincing evidence Zelda suffered from anorexia. Only in turning to Zelda’s written “photos” can we see how dangerously underweight she became at various points in her life.

Having been thinner as a nineteen-year-old in 1919 than ever before, Zelda became very sensitive in 1922 about the weight she gained during her pregnancy that left her looking “matronly and rather fat” according to Edmund Wilson. She “carefully shaded her nose, cheeks, and chin with a pencil in an effort to slim her
face” (Z, 87). Within a year she was slender again, but by 1929, after a couple of years studying ballet in Philadelphia and Paris, Zelda was fifteen pounds under her normal weight and would enter Malmaison Hospital in Paris within eight months, suffering her first breakdown (Z, 156–58). It is at this point, I would suggest, that Zelda began to suffer from anorexia. Her weight loss, hours and hours of dancing in front of a mirror, and her own admission that she went for days without eating suggest an intense focus on her body, a disciplining of it uncharacteristic of her prior to this period. In her lifestyle with Scott, the notorious, continual parties and alcohol consumption could hardly be said to suggest a desire to tightly control her body, even if Zelda did swim regularly and “strenuously” during this same period (Z, 136, 141, 184, 107).

It wasn’t until the 1930s, the same time Zelda was being treated by psychiatrists for schizophrenia, that the then rare disorder, anorexia nervosa, was recognized not as a physiological but as a psychogenic “disease.” Not until the 1950s did Dr. Hilde Bruch, later a leading researcher on eating disorders, encounter female anorexic patients in large numbers; since the 1960s, anorexia has been recognized in epidemic proportions. The cultural conditions many psychiatrists believe have precipitated this current epidemic differ only slightly from those of Zelda’s time. In the 1920s they were beginning: changing cultural beliefs about beauty and thinness, and the use of women’s bodies in consumerism.

Psychoanalysts and feminist theorists alike have argued that anorexia in its current form is not simply a physiological or psychological “disease,” but the consequence of how femininity is constructed in our culture. In her feminist revision of Foucault, Sandra Bartky in particular argues that anorexia is the result of the more subtle and detailed disciplinary practices demanded of women in our culture: dieting, exercising, restricting body movement, and ornamenting the body are “part of the process by which the ideal body of femininity—and hence the feminine body-subject—is constructed,” producing a “body on which an inferior status has been inscribed.” According to Foucault, the human body has become the target for a new kind of discipline, a “microphysics of power” which operates by breaking down and regulating the body’s gestures, space, and time, producing “docile bodies.” However, Bartky notes that women’s bodies are made to be more “docile” than men’s and thus demand a different analysis of the forces that discipline them. Foucault “is blind to those disciplines that produce a modality of embodiment that is peculiarly feminine,” those ritualized practices that induce women to de-
prive, restrict, or punish their bodies in an effort to attain a more perfected image of femininity. Such practices suggest a woman's body is deficient and in need of constant self-surveillance. The result is that women's identities are produced around not only a "panoptical male connoisseur," but "an oppressive and inequalitarian system of sexual subordination." As an expression of severe and violent punishment of the body, anorexia nervosa, Bartky says, "is to women of the late twentieth century what hysteria was to women of an earlier day: the crystallization in a pathological mode of a widespread cultural obsession."

Feminist psychoanalytic work during this century has generated theories about anorexia remarkably parallel to Bartky's argument. As Bartky says, constructions of femininity demand certain behaviors and appearances, yet those very activities "partake of the general depreciation of everything female." Feminine gestures, rituals, and dress are seen as trivial, just as the bodies women are trying to make more beautiful are seen as already (and always) deficient.\(^{11}\) This cultural depreciation of everything feminine is what many psychoanalysts argue anorexic women are both participating in and fighting against. Psychoanalysts like Hilde Bruch and Susie Orbach argue that anorexics are "in a desperate fight against feeling enslaved and exploited, not competent to lead a life of their own." They are terrified to choose "wrongly" from the bewildering number of opportunities available to women, including the prospect of sexual freedom.\(^{12}\) The rigid and rather violent control anorexics exert over their bodies represents an "effort to ward off panic about being completely powerless."\(^{13}\) Feeling needy and wanting to be safe and protected, anorexics have, nevertheless, internalized and come to fear the "mythology/ideology of the devouring, insatiable female."\(^{14}\)

When a woman suffers from anorexia, then, her body becomes more than a spectacle of the state's exercise of power, of disciplinary practices gone haywire. An anorexic's body manifests both a cultural devaluation of femininity and a woman's desperate attempt to overcome that devaluation. In psychological terms, anorexia becomes an active attempt at "self-cure,"\(^{15}\) a form of resistance to the very codes that discipline a woman to choose such self-denial and bodily violence: the "pathologies of female 'protest'" seem to operate "as if in collusion with the cultural conditions that produced them."\(^{16}\)

Why would women choose to resist their sense of deficiency by using the very means that reinforce those feelings? According to Bartky, the disciplinary practices of femininity become part of a
woman's "know how," what she feels skilled to do and therefore that from which she gains a sense of power. Her sense of identity is connected to her sense of mastery of these skills. The better she is able to execute those skills, to exert some control over her seemingly unwilling and rebellious body, the better she may feel about herself. In this way her sense of self can become conflated with her body. At the same time, because she has been taught to deny herself food, to prepare food for others as a form of emotional sustenance and yet refuse herself that nurturance, a woman learns to separate her body from her sense of self. Hunger needs become synonymous with a revolt against the discipline she believes she needs to maintain in order to function—her hungry body turns against itself. A young woman may thus begin to see her body as both divorced from her and yet "reflective of the very essence of herself":

Her body is a statement about her, the world, and her position in the world. Since women live within prescribed boundaries, women's bodies become the vehicle for a whole range of expressions that have no other medium. The body, offered as a woman's ticket into society (i.e., through it she meets a mate, and thus her sexuality and her role are legitimized), becomes her mouthpiece. In her attempts to conform or reject contemporary ideals of femininity, she uses the weapon so often used against her. She speaks with her body.

I quote Orbach at length here because it is important to understand how an anorexic both conflates her body with her "self" (her emotional needs are linked to her body), and yet feels that self alienated from her body (her hunger cues are resisted). Bodily hunger may then become conflated with emotional hunger, with needs and desires that the anorexic has been encouraged to stifle. "Femininity is hunger," Maud Ellmann says in *The Hunger Artists*, and self-starvation is an effort to "release the body from all contexts, even from the context of embodiment itself."19

It is quite possible that the state of semi- or complete starvation Zelda imposed on herself between 1927 and 1929 precipitated the anxiety and even the hallucinations that characterized her first breakdown. Having left the Malmaison Hospital within ten days of her first admittance, Zelda entered Valmont, a clinic in Switzerland, twenty days later; during those twenty days she had returned to her ballet lessons with even more drive, and in two weeks she "heard voices that terrified her, and her dreams, both waking and sleeping, were peopled with phantoms of indescribable horror.
She had fainting fits and the menacing nature of her hallucinations drove her into an attempted suicide" (Z, 159). Studies of men on starvation diets have demonstrated that, regardless of one's emotional stability beforehand, "semi-starvation [results] in significant increases in depression, hysteria, and hypochondrias," including binging and purging, "violent emotional outbursts with flights of ideas . . . talks [and threats] of suicide," disorientation, and increased anxiety. In addition, the subjects of a 1950 study became increasingly more isolated and withdrawn, and their interest in sexual activity or sexual fantasy gradually diminished.20 Biographer James Mellow argues that just prior to Zelda's first breakdown the couple was having sexual problems, due in part to Scott's drinking,21 but also, I would suggest, due to the rigorous Zelda was inflicting on her body, a physical representation of her rejection of hunger and desire. Zelda had also been "easily distracted" and often unable to engage in conversation; she "took refuge in an impenetrable and unnerving silence" (Z, 152).

Zelda's weight stayed seriously below normal from 1929 until at least the late thirties (I have found no references to her weight in the biographies after 1935). In 1933, after Zelda's second breakdown the previous year, Scott's secretary remembers Zelda as "skinny," and in 1934 Malcolm Cowley remarked that her face was "emaciated" (Z, 269, 281). By February of 1934 Zelda was again fifteen pounds underweight when she suffered her third breakdown and reentered the Phipps Clinic in Baltimore, following the appearance of the serialized version of Tender (Z, 284); by the fall of 1935 when she was staying at the Sheppard-Pratt Hospital in Baltimore, one of Zelda's family members came to visit and found her weighing less than a hundred pounds (Z, 307).

At the time, though, Zelda's behavior wasn't viewed as the result of semi-starvation and overexercise. She was diagnosed as schizophrenic, a diagnosis that could explain Zelda's weight loss and "obsessive" dancing as a consequence of a schizoid personality and thus a result of psychological, not cultural/sociological, "pathology." However, the parallels between schizophrenic and anorexic personalities are striking enough that distinctions between the two seem too amorphous to be helpful. Bruch notes that "psychiatrically, the condition appears to be more akin to borderline states—narcissism or schizophrenia—than to neurosis."23 Schizophrenics and anorexic women often seem asocial and indifferent, introverted, detached from their bodies and the environment, and exhibit contradictory behaviors and feelings (e.g., sometimes they appear docile and submissive, other times rebellious and arro-
Phyllis Chesler has noted that female schizophrenics are "morbidly concerned with their 'appearance'" but are actually removed from their bodies "in terms of . . . 'satisfaction,' 'confidence,' or 'activity.'" Like anorexics, then, their bodies are both conflated with and separated from their "selves." Given these similarities, the diagnosis of Zelda as a schizophrenic rather than an anorexic may be historical accident. To focus on Zelda's body now in the stories of her writing and her "madness" is to interpret a woman's body culturally constituted and "written on," a docile, disciplined product of the operations of power and language. It is to understand how she experienced her "docile body" as a kind of self-perpetuating prison.

During their courtship, Scott made this link between femininity and imprisonment when he repeatedly said to Zelda that he "used to wonder why they keep princesses in towers" (Z, 50). Alice Hall Petry has argued that Scott kept Zelda in a series of towers throughout her life: he maintained a strict control over what she could and couldn't do, he tried repeatedly to minimize her accomplishments in ballet and writing, and he had the right to have her committed to the various mental institutions she frequented the last twenty years of her life. After her first breakdown, Zelda was given a "somewhat mysterious 're-education' . . . in terms of her role as wife to Scott" that resulted in an increasing dependence on Scott as well as an unwillingness to show him the incredible amount of writing she was doing at this time (Z, 199, 201). Both Scott and her doctors had determined that her ambitions were "self-deceptions" that had contributed to her mental instability (Z, 191). Within Scott's tower, Zelda's desires for autonomy and art made her "mad."

One of the equally significant ways Scott imprisoned Zelda within a "fairy tale" of femininity was using her as a source for his heroines and using her diaries and letters, as well. Beginning with his first novel, This Side of Paradise, Scott used Zelda as a model for his female characters, often integrating modified or verbatim chunks of her letters and diaries, prompting Zelda's now famous line from her review of The Beautiful and the Damned that Scott must believe "plagiarism begins at home" (Z, 89). This plagiarism extended even to the stories Zelda wrote that were published under Scott's name. When "A Millionaire's Girl" was published in 1930, Scott's name alone appeared in the magazine—in spite of the fact that Zelda had been solely responsible for writing it (Z, 150). Given that this occurred close to her first breakdown and a few months after she turned down her ballet
debut in San Carlo, we need to reconsider, as Petry and Dale Spender in particular point out, the possible cause/effect relationships between Scott's appropriation of Zelda's writing and her breakdowns.28

Scott himself expressed the emotional impact of their competition over autobiographical materials when he became angry over Zelda using material in *Save Me the Waltz* that he planned to use in *Tender Is the Night*: "Zelda had used him, [Fitzgerald] insisted—his writing, his life, his material—to her own advantage"; he accused her of building "this dubitable career of hers with morsels of living matter chipped out of my mind, my belly, my nervous system and my loins" (*Z*, 222).29 He was terrified that the portrait of him in the guise of David Knight would destroy his reputation, indicating the extent to which he understood how damaging it could be to have someone else molding him as a character. Scott's and Zelda's struggle over who controlled the production of meaning within their own relationship particularizes what Foucault argues is a larger cultural operation of and contention for discursive power.30 Scott believed that he had exclusive literary right to the material of their mutual lives because of his literary superiority. He demanded that Zelda write nothing about their life or her psychiatric experience until after his book was finished and that she then submit all her writing to him first.31 He wanted, it appears, sole control over himself as a text, but was unwilling to grant the same to Zelda. In arguing that Zelda was effectively consuming him ("morsels of living matter") through her writing, Scott evoked a kind of cannibalism, the death of the artist's model through the use of words: "her single intention in this somewhat thin portrait," Scott said, "is to make me a non-entity."32

It may be that Zelda had begun to believe that Scott's use of her was making her a nonentity, or that she had to become one in order to fulfill her fictional roles. Elizabeth Kasper Aldrich calls Scott's fictional treatment of real women, Zelda in particular, vampirish, connecting it to Poe's theory that "the most poetical topic in the world is, unquestionably, the death of a beautiful woman." Taking the corollary to Poe's theory that "the dying of the woman is a prerequisite to the art of which she is subject," Aldrich suggests that for Scott in his complex relationship with Zelda, the fictional representation

takes a kind of ontological precedence over the model, drains it of its own being. Art does not simply copy the life of its subject, it draws on
that life, or draws it out and into its own. Entity is, like blood, a limited quantity and Art, vampirish.

From this perspective, Zelda as model is “not wife; in so far as she is the subject of art, she is not beloved of the artist, she is cannibalized.” Anorexia is one way for Zelda to fulfill her part as model, to drain her body of the substance that feeds Scott's texts, carving up the “beautiful woman” and hence the feminine who is the exploitable/edible substance/flesh of Scott's art.35 Certainly her anorexia is symbolic of the gradual eating away that occurred of Zelda's emotional and artistic desires. Simultaneously, Zelda's anorexia is her attempt to escape Scott's art, his control over the production of meaning, to produce what she believes is a stronger, impenetrable person who is trying to purge what her culture and seemingly her author-husband have force-fed her—her marginalized status as a female.

Because her body is both written on by her culture and interpreted by it, Zelda's body is analogous to her own writing: out of both she has tried to create an alternative “self,” separate from Scott and not subjected to the discourses of femininity. Within Foucauldian analysis, such an alternative is not possible—a person's identity is always already constituted by power, never outside of it.34 However, as Bartky has noted, this identity is produced from both power and mastery, being subjected to and yet a master of that discipline. In crafting her body as well as her text, Zelda is subjecting herself to and yet mastering the discourses of power that shape her, potentially speaking with the anorexic body/text about her resistance to those discourses. Creating an autobiographical character who turns to and on her body “to bring surcease from [her] tortured mind”35 and whose sense of identity is always already fragmented and divided, Zelda dramatizes how gender and subjectivity are produced, and potentially resisted, through language.

In 1932 Zelda explained to her husband that Save Me the Waltz was her attempt to write the “story of myself versus myself” (Z, 221), and in writing the novel, she creates, through the autobiographical Alabama, “a show to join ... somewhere to enact the story of her life” (SMTW, 20) beyond the scripts her husband created. While the novel renders Zelda's reading of her own life and her life with Scott, it also presents a fictional “New Woman” and her struggle for identity amid the conflicting “shows” she might join. Zelda came of age when privileged white women, in
particular, had achieved the right to vote, were getting college
educations, pursuing careers, marrying later if at all, and having
fewer children than their mothers. Elizabeth Ammons contends
the women writing during this period wanted to claim a right to
the Western, male tradition of art but found that being a woman
and an artist seemed incompatible: feeling “emotionally stranded
between worlds,” they felt comfortable with neither their mother’s
world nor the world of white male artists. With her husband a
part of the male community actively defining the American liter-
ary culture in the twenties and thirties, Zelda struggled with these
issues quite intimately, and quite tragically.

Recent critics have viewed Save Me the Waltz primarily in terms
of what it says about women, work, and marriage in the 1920s:
Alabama, a “pampered southern Belle,” tries to find a sense of
identity and fulfillment first through marriage and motherhood,
then secondly, after she is disillusioned, through “meaningful
work” as an artist in a man’s world. Most critics focus, as well,
on the gender issues that help structure the narrative and create
the central tensions in the plot: the traditional gender role divi-
sions within the Beggs household and their parallels in Alabama’s
and David’s expectations of each other; beliefs that men’s work
and art are more significant than women’s; and the ways Ala-
bama’s experiences reflect being “stranded between the old ideal
of feminine subservience to men and the new ideal of equality.”
For all these reasons, Save Me the Waltz is becoming recognized as
a novel significant not only for its context in the author’s relation-
ship to F. Scott Fitzgerald, but as a modernist novel portraying a
woman artist fragmented by her culture’s fairy tales.

The ballet section, in fact, has received much critical attention
as “one of the finest—and earliest—fictional representations of
woman’s capacity for wholehearted devotion to work.” However,
whether it represents a woman finding purpose and a sense of
self through that work or realizing the failure of even art to fulfill
a woman’s life is still in dispute. Is ballet, like marriage, just
another fairy tale for Alabama? While Fryer suggests that Ala-
bama’s “failure” is “pure chance,” Petry suggests that Alabama
comes to realize that her ballet, and success, is no longer purpose-
ful but “unfocused” and “obsessive,” an activity that demands she
subsume her identity to the dance as she did to her husband.
While I agree with Petry that Alabama’s discipline of her body
may have begun as something purposeful and even “beautiful”
and that it later becomes obsessive, it is important to explore why
this shift occurs, why Alabama is “defeated by the very body that was to be her means into the world of art.”

Alabama “fails” to continue her ballet because she neglects to attend the bleeding blisters on her heels and finds herself in a hospital bed with blood poisoning, her hands looking like “bird claws,” “long and frail and blue over the knuckles like an unfeathered bird” (SMTW, 240). She does not abandon ballet because of “lack of ability or dedication to her efforts;” instead Zelda links Alabama’s career end to what seems a passive action on her body but is at the same time an active, self-inflicted abuse. I am arguing, of course, that Alabama has become anorexic, struggling to reconcile and/or resist competing desires. In this novel, ballet becomes a trope for anorexia—torturous, ascetic, bodily rituals concealed by and yet enabling the graceful, seemingly delicate performance of the ballet/body. Alabama’s body becomes the “stage” on which she acts out the (culturally inscribed) story of herself versus herself.

Alabama’s fragmentary, divided identity is powerfully evoked during her parents’ visit to New York after her marriage. In the face of their disappointment, Alabama realizes that “no individual can force other people forever to sustain their own versions of that individual’s character—that sooner or later they will stumble across the person’s own conception of themselves” (SMTW, 55). Wanting her parents’ approval as well as the right to live as she pleases, Alabama is torn: “it’s very difficult to be two simple people at once,” she tells David, “one who wants to have a law to itself and the other who wants to keep all the nice old things and be loved and safe and protected” (SMTW, 56). Throughout the novel Alabama feels these fragmented parts of herself competing for supremacy:

Why am I this way, why am I that?
Why do myself and I constantly spat?
Which is the reasonable, logical me?
Which is the one who must will it to be?

(SMTW, 69)

As I have argued earlier, this apparent division between wanting to be a law unto oneself and yet wanting to be protected is particularly characteristic of anorexic women. It is this tension that is developed within the story’s larger metaphor of performance and woven throughout the novel.

Images of performances and acting are used to describe much
of the action in the novel as well as the character of Alabama. She is both actively creating herself, describing herself as a "fiction" (SMTW, 70), as someone who loves to "give a damned good show" (SMTW, 29), as well as passively waiting for herself to be made, to be given "a show to join... somewhere to enact the story of her life" (SMTW, 20). As a child, she does not know that "what effort she makes will become herself" (SMTW, 6); she has "been filled with no interpretation of herself" (SMTW, 5) and so believes she is her best self only "when I'm somebody else whom I have endowed with these wonderful qualities from my imagination" (SMTW, 70). A "marauder of vagrant enthusiasm," she is trying to create a sense of who she is from the borrowed parts of others, piling "the loot on whatever was at hand, her sisters and their sweethearts, performances and panoplies" (SMTW, 12).

Underneath this creative "improvisation," however, is "a strong sense of her own insignificance" (SMTW, 31) and ineffectiveness. If Alabama felt insignificant as a child, her relationship with David further compounds it: before they are married, David carves their names on a doorpost, flaunting not only his desire to be "famous" but his discursive power over her when he writes "David... David David Knight Knight Knight and Miss Alabama Nobody" (SMTW, 37). A princess rescued by a "Knight" from her conservative family, Alabama finds herself fulfilling David's desire to "keep [her] shut forever in an ivory tower for [his] private delectation" (SMTW, 40, emphasis added). As a result, after playing out the script of wife and mother and ceasing to fulfill David's needs (as well as her own), Alabama finds herself emotionally neglected, her artistic desires openly discouraged. For David, Alabama is significant when she is either his plaything or his domestic servant.

It is important, then, that Alabama decides to become a ballerina at a point when she feels a gulf widening between David and herself and a growing desire for something separate to do. Having been a law unto herself through childhood and early marriage, Alabama begins to "half [hate] the unrest of David, hating that of herself that she found in him" (SMTW, 129). She longs for the security and "bed of sureness" (SMTW, 120) her father represented to her, and not finding it in David, she turns to her body. During the scene when she decides to become a ballerina, Alabama's reactions to Gabrielle Gibbs and David illustrate the tension she feels between wanting to be safe and protected emotionally within her marriage and wanting to be a law unto herself within her own separate artistic career. At the party she finds herself unusually clumsy and uncomfortable, pitted against the
actress/dancer Gabrielle for David’s affection, feeling threatened by her, but also wanting to escape her own “neediness”: if she did not feel so dependent on David’s affection, she would not feel the hurt that confirms her feeling of nothingness. When she tells David she is “going to be as famous a dancer as there are blue veins over the white marble of Miss Gibbs” (SMTW, 118), Alabama is reframing David’s earlier assertion of future notoriety that cast her as a nobody; her own fame will result from disciplining her body into a performance that purges the needy, devalued self of their courtship and early marriage.

Because ballet is an art form expressed primarily with the body, it is not surprising that through Alabama’s eyes the ballet she later attends is “spare, immaculate legs and a consciousness of rib, the vibrant suspension of lean bodies precipitated on the jolt of reiterant rhythmic shock.” But what begins for Alabama as sexual attraction to the dance and the dancers’ bodies is simultaneously undermined by “the violins’ hysteria” and an image of the dancers in “a tortured abstraction of sex.” Something is both attractive and self-annihilating to her in “the poignancy of a human body subject to its physical will to the point of evangelism” (SMTW, 112). Believing that mastery over her body will provide the stability and emotional nurturance she desires, Alabama chooses an art form which magnifies the processes that have constructed her sense of identity and her desires.

“[Y]ield[ing] herself to the slow dignity of the selfless ritual, to the voluptuous flagellation of the Russian minors” (SMTW, 150), Alabama strives to become part of Diaghilev’s company. He works his dancers from eight in the morning till the wee hours of one, demanding they weigh less than fifty kilos (SMTW, 144), “insist[ing] they live at so much nervous tension that movement, which meant dancing to them, became a necessity, like a drug” (SMTW, 143). Alabama is attracted to, indeed “obsesse[d]” (SMTW, 154) with the feelings of mastery this discipline gives her. This pleasure induces her to seek to “get rid of some of [her]-self” (SMTW, 141) through her ballet, believing Diaghilev’s dancers stand out because of “their obliteration of self to the integral pose of his ballet” (SMTW, 144). Then her body grows “so full of static from the constant whip of work that she [can] get no clear communication with herself” (SMTW, 173). In a passage that could be an anorexic’s credo, Alabama explains why she “drove herself mercilessly”:

she would drive the devils that had driven her—... in proving herself, she would achieve that peace which she imagined went only in surety
of one's self—... she would be able, through the medium of the
dance, to command her emotions, to summon love or pity or happi-
ness at will, having provided a channel through which they might flow.
(SMTW, 124)

The discipline of the ballet brings Alabama “a sense of order
and purpose akin to a religious experience,”
47 a self-affirming
“pleasure” in her ability to subdue her unruly, voracious flesh. In
the ballet scenes we see Alabama “flagellating” and “whipping”
herself, working “till she felt like a gored horse in the bull ring,
dragging its entrails” (SMTW, 154), taking “herself for an awful
beating” (SMTW, 125). As Petry asserts, “the anguish of physical
exertion is purposeful and, in its way, beautiful, like the fasting
and even the self-flagellation of the devout.”
48 However, this exer-
tion also resembles self-inflicted violence and indicates a tyranny
of state power. For an anorexic, it is a means of authoring herself,
mastering those skills which have come to define her identity
and now promise to provide a sense of control and, to a degree,
autonomy.

A static model of identity, one that assumes a unitary and often
externally oppressed self, would suggest that Alabama’s self-
flagellation is a product of repressive, patriarchal forces, forces
she needs to cast off to free her “true” self. Poststructuralist the-
ory, however, has rendered this model less tenable, arguing that
identity is “constituted by the myriad of social relationships and
practices in which the individual is engaged,” processes that are
often “contradictory and unstable.” The result is a fragmentary,
always fluid identity.
49 Thus Alabama’s contradictory identity is
not necessarily pathological, though it is, indeed, a social product.
As an anorexic, Alabama, like Zelda, performs the disciplinary
practices made necessary to maintain sexual inequality and subor-
dination; at the same time, both women are lured by the pleasures
achieved in crafting themselves simultaneously into extremely
feminized and ultimately masculinized female bodies.

Because anorexic bodies are so dissimilar to “normalized” body
images, they demand attention, focusing their audience on the
conflicting, violent discourses/scripts/stories that produce gender
and power relations. The images they create, in fact, reveal the
subjected body and the body as subject, a theme echoed in Save
Me the Waltz in the final scene. Back within the walls of her rented
home, Alabama is once again presiding over dinner parties and
trying to raise her daughter, having given up her desires for art.
David has succeeded in enclosing his princess in his ivory tower and keeping her there, not only in the tower of domestic life but in the “text” of his painting where he has captured the movements of ballerinas for everyone to admire. Her abortive attempt at independent expression enveloped in his canvas, Alabama and her art are frozen in David’s artistic looking-glass. David asserts, in fact, that “the waltz picture would actually give you, by leading the eye in pictorial choreography, the same sensation as following the measure with your feet” (SMTW, 209). For David, the image is as important as the experience and pleasure of the body’s disciplinary performance.

However, after gazing into her husband’s mirror, Alabama demonstrates neither pleasure nor disgust. Instead, she goes about emptying ashtrays, while guests are still there, telling David, “It’s very expressive of myself. I just lump everything in a great heap which I have labelled ‘the past,’ and having thus emptied this deep reservoir that was once myself, I am ready to continue” (SMTW, 212). This final image, like others in the novel, is paradoxical. Just as she sought selflessness in the ballet and her anorexic body, Alabama is actively purging the ashes of the exploitable/edible self memorialized in David’s painting, a self subjected to/structured by the canvas of power relations. Yet, in dumping those ashes of her past, she is also acting as a subject, asserting some control over her identity, her past and her future. Alabama wants to start anew, but she believes she must do so by burning her past, severing herself from the various discourses/stories that have constructed her.

Zelda, on the other hand, does not burn her past but actively revises it in writing Save Me the Waltz, crafting a counterreflection of herself to Scott’s literary mirrors. She revises, in fact, her own discarded opportunity to dance in Naples when Alabama accepts the position and leaves David and Bonnie in Paris. She does not allow Alabama to have a sustained career in ballet, however, possibly suggesting a fear of her own creativity, as Gilbert and Gubar might suggest, as well as the seductive power of femininity to discipline her into a more docile, more “edible” model for Scott and the androcentric canvases of her culture. It is difficult, indeed, not to see this novel as a failed-artist story, despite the many revisions Zelda made of her own choices, but it is also important to remember that symbolically dumping the ashes of her past is an act of renewal for Alabama, an act of mastery over herself.

Unlike Alabama in the novel’s final scene, Zelda did not abandon her desire to be an artist when she was forced to give up
ballet, nor did she empty out the "deep reservoir that was once [her]self" by dumping the ashes of her past. During the next several years after *Save Me the Waltz* was published, Zelda continued to write and paint in the midst of being institutionalized, continuing her dream of being an artist distinct from Scott. In addition, while *Save Me the Waltz* gathers Zelda's past together, it is not a past that is burned or purged, but one that is reshaped and preserved, part of the fluid, social process of developing an always fragmentary identity. Written on her anorexic body and the pages of her novel is the story of herself versus herself, testimony to her rage and her resistance to the cultural and quite personal disciplinary discourses which permeated her body and her texts, which shaped and molded her.

**Notes**

5. Ibid., 145.
6. In 1941 Dr. Bruch was a resident at the Phipps Clinic in Baltimore, working under Dr. Adolf Meyer, the psychiatrist who treated Zelda after her second breakdown and who was a leading authority on the diagnosis and treatment of schizophrenia. See Hilde Bruch, *Conversations with Anorexics* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), ix. Dr. Bruch was assigned an anorexic young woman while there (she had seen her first case during her internship in the 1930s) and began her research into a disease that actually had been described a hundred years earlier, but had not been seen often enough to warrant further research. See Hilde Bruch, "Four Decades of Eating Disorders," in *Handbook of Psychotherapy for Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia*, ed. David M. Garner and Paul E. Garfinkel (New York: Guilford Press, 1985), 8–9.
interpellated into contradictory discourses and often "retreat" into becoming "sick" as a solution.


10. This and the following quotes and information refer to Bartky, "Foucault, Femininity," 64, 72, 75, and 65.

11. Ibid., 73.


18. This argument and the following quotes are from Orbach, "Accepting the Symptom," 85–87, and 90.


22. Bruch asserts that primary anorexia nervosa is different from its secondary forms, the weight loss often consequent to other psychiatric illnesses like depression, hysteria, or schizophrenia; see "Four Decades," 9–10.

23. Ibid., 10.


27. See Milford, *Zelda*, and Mellow, *Invented Lives*, for a more detailed treatment of this issue. See also Dale Spender’s argument about this appropriation in *The Writing or the Sex? or, Why You Don’t Have to Read Women’s Writing to Know It’s No Good* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1989), 175–92.


33. I thank Patrocinio Schewickart for helping me clarify and elaborate this point.


forms of bodily discipline have peaked in those periods when women were becoming more independent and politically active ("Anorexia Nervosa," 106).


40. Wagner, "Save Me the Waltz," 203. See Wagner also for a more detailed discussion of the novel's elliptical and often fragmentary structure and style.

41. Quotes here and in the next paragraph refer to Fryer, "Women on the Threshold," 70, 67, and 70.

42. Fryer asserts the former; Petry and Wagner suggest the latter.

43. Quotes here and in the following line refer to Petry, "Women's Work," 77, 76.

44. Wagner, "Save Me the Waltz," 206.

45. Alabama is evocative of the anorexic characters Gilbert and Gubar discuss, a character whose red shoes (bleeding heels) have been figuratively cut off because she wanted to dance (Madwoman in the Attic, 78 and 42).


47. Petry, "Women's Work," 76.

48. Ibid.