Literary Fiction as Psychobiography:

F. Scott Fitzgerald and James McKeen Cattell

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Abstract: In response to William McKinley Runyan, this article suggests that literary fiction can present an alternative approach to psychologically informed life histories. It does so by examining episodes in the life of psychologist James McKeen Cattell (1860-1944) from a point of view provided by F. Scott Fitzgerald's portrayal of Anson Hunter, the fictional protagonist of his 1926 short story, "The Rich Boy."

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As his autobiography makes clear, Mac Runyan's initial interest in psychobiography stems from his overarching concern for life histories and particularly from his fascination with the intense study of individual lives. This interest led him in 1969 to begin his graduate study in the Harvard Program in Clinical Psychology and Public Practice and, over the years, to a series of rich intellectual relationships with many in the university's Department of Social Relations. Mac's scholarship profited from his years in New England, and it exhibits a breadth and depth of interest that reflects the richness of his graduate education. Indeed, one notable characteristic of Mac's approach to psychobiography is its openness to alternatives to psychoanalytic psychobiography. Mac has been disappointed that he has "not found as many as [he] expected" (Runyan, 2021, p. 140). Perhaps this essay might begin to hint at the possibility, at least, of one of these alternatives.

As I consider my relationship with Mac, I'm led to think of him as one of the kindest and most gentle man I know. His scholarly interest in the lives of individuals finds itself reflected in his general interest and personal concern for the lives of those around him. Over the years of our friendship, my own life has involved a series of (what I think of as) adventures that have shaped the course of my and my family's existence in not-always pleasant or admirable ways. That Mac has remained a friend throughout these years has been a real personal source of support, which I am glad to acknowledge here.

Mac and I first met each other through the informal Wellesley College Colloquium in the History of Psychology sometime in (I think) the 1980s, and the insights he brought to the group's discussions shed light on whatever topic we considered. More personally, I remember very well one visit he paid me in Worcester, Massachusetts, where I've lived (and taught at Worcester Polytechnic Institute) since 1970. Most psychologists probably think of Worcester as the site of Clark University, and readers of *Clio's Psyche* undoubtedly know that in 1909, Sigmund Freud paid his only visit to the United States to speak at Clark. The university's president, G. Stanley Hall, had invited him to Worcester to participate in a conference planned to celebrate the university's 20th anniversary, and other Europeans in the psychoanalytic orbit—including Carl G. Jung, Ernest Jones, and Sandor Ferenczi—also attended. Freud's series of lectures were a

highlight of the conference, though Hall also invited notables in other sciences, including two physicists who had already won Nobel Prizes: Ernest Rutherford and A. A. Michelson.

One artifact left by the Clark Conference is a group photo of many (almost all?) of the psychologists (and those in closely related fields, such as psychiatry and neurology) attending the event, and over the years, observers have debated just where on the Clark campus this eminent cohort posed for this group portrait. Indeed, Mac took the opportunity of this visit to try to identify the spot on the Clark campus where this famous photo was taken. If I remember correctly, he concluded that the group posed in front of a large window of what is now the Jefferson Academic Center facing Worcester's Main Street. But others have suggested other sites for this photo, so Mac's identification remains unconfirmed, at least as far as I know.

After suggesting something of Mac's admirable character, it's a serious comedown to present a psychobiographical essay focusing on a much-less-likable individual, James McKeen Cattell. It's not that Cattell was not a significant character in early 20th century American scientific life. After all, he was one of the psychologists who attended the 1909 Clark Conference, and he appears in the well-known group photo, standing in the second row and facing to his left. (He's number 13 in the tracing of the photo published in Dorothy Ross's 1972 biography *G. Stanley Hall: The Psychologist as Prophet*. All others in the photo directly face the photographer.) His importance for the history of American psychology—and even more for American science writ large—extends far beyond his attendance at the Clark Conference. That's why, indeed, Hall invited him to attend. In 1909, he was in his 18th year as Professor of Psychology at Columbia University. From 1891 Cattell had there established a major center for the training of experimentalists and other psychologists and had created and implemented an ambitious (though ultimately unsuccessful) program of mental tests, a term he himself had apparently coined.

Some personal details will help put his life, career, and character into appropriate context. He was born in 1860, the son of a professor (and later president) of Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania, and the grandson (whose name he was given) of one of the richest men in Easton. He thus grew up as the scion of one of the city's leading families, and when the time came, he attended Lafayette. There he worked hard and thrived academically; his professors always held his performance to their high standards. But they taught most of their classes in McKeen Hall, and they always knew he was their president's son. He later studied (as will become clear) at Johns Hopkins, and in 1886, he earned his PhD from the University of Leipzig after working with Wilhelm Wundt, the purported founder of what became known as the "new psychology." He then spent two years, intermittently, at St. John's College, Cambridge.

While in England, he spent much time in London, where he met and became enamored of the ideas of Francis Galton. Galton's interest in the differences between people helped shape Cattell's own program of mental testing. But in many ways, Galton's promotion of eugenics had its strongest impact on Cattell. Importantly, Cattell always played down the negative implications of eugenics as it developed in the United States, and he never supported such programs as eugenic sterilization and immigration restriction. Instead, he promoted positive eugenical programs that called for the "fittest" individuals to marry each other and have large families. With his strong sense of self-regard, which will soon emerge clearly, Cattell and his wife Josephine had seven children. In 1889, Cattell became Professor of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, and as noted, in 1891 he doubled his salary with a move to Columbia University, where he remained until he was dismissed in 1917.

But why then are Cattell's life and career of particular interest in an essay offering an alternative approach to psychobiography? The immediate answer emerges as one considers just how he was presented in Louis Menand's well-respected history, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (2001). This thoughtful account characterizes Cattell as "obnoxious."

Needless to say, "obnoxious" is a strong descriptor, and it is one that really must be justified. Much recent and not-so-recent scholarship on Cattell's life and career provides all-too-many examples of Cattell's unpleasant and, yes, truly obnoxious behavior. Not all of Cattell's attitudes and actions over his life merit this harsh adjective; few individuals were or are purely obnoxious. Unfortunately, however, it can be applied appropriately at various times and during various incidents in Cattell's life, and it being even sporadically apt presents a psychobiographer with a series of interesting tasks; that is, to illustrate instances of Cattell's obnoxiousness (and milder versions of such behavior) and to explain (or begin to explain) just how and why Cattell developed this trait. Space limitations force this essay to focus on two particular incidents in Cattell's life for which this adjective is especially fitting. They occurred in 1884, soon after his 24th birthday, and in 1929, at age 69.

In 1883, at age 23, Cattell won a fellowship at Johns Hopkins and spent the following academic year at the university. At Lafayette, he had unavoidably been a focus of his professors' attention. In Baltimore, however, he was not, and he arrogantly and egotistically complained that Daniel Coit Gilman, the university's president, "has not taken as much interest in me, as he might have" (Sokal, 1981, p. 74). In 1884, professors at Johns Hopkins did not renew Cattell's fellowship for a second year and awarded it instead to fellow student John Dewey. (Another candidate for the fellowship was Thorstein Veblen!) Cattell responded by throwing a fit and attacking his professors (including a younger G. Stanley Hall) for what he saw as a purposeful personal insult: "I was scarcely treated fairly" (Sokal, 1981, p. 80). He later threatened President Gilman that, if he discovered "that personal considerations had influenced the withholding of the fellowship," he would "bring suit against the authorities of the university" (Sokal, 1981, p. 208). Cattell also called personally on Hall at his summer home, and as Hall reported the meeting to Gilman, "He came all smiles and amiability... [but] suddenly begun to talk with most insulting way and almost charged me with lying when on the spot without even a shadow of either basis or occasion. I do not know that I have ever in my life been so angry at a human being" (Sokal, 1981, p. 111). As Ross's biography makes clear, Hall had apparently misled (perhaps even knowingly) Cattell about the renewal of his fellowship, and similar acts of perhaps purposeful dishonesty occurred throughout his career. In addition, Cattell's actions might be seen as a young man simply standing up for what he perceived to be his rights. But these incidents clearly exhibit the self-righteous narcissistic arrogance to which the term "obnoxious" may be appropriately applied.

But what led Cattell to act as he did? He hinted at his motivation in 1903, as he explicitly expressed his self-righteous egotism in just about so many words. As he told Edward B. Titchener, a professional colleague at Cornell, he never "object[ed] to a fight in a good cause" and he narcissistically always "regard[ed] any cause for which [he] did fight as good" (Cattell, 1903). Instances of such fights peppered his career.

In 1917, Columbia dismissed Cattell from the professorship he had held since 1891, and the aftermath of this dismissal has often been portrayed as an egregious violation of his academic freedom, brought about by his opposition to U.S. participation in World War I. But as a recent analysis of his dismissal and its aftermath (Sokal, 2009) argues, Cattell's response to U.S.

involvement in the war served only as the clichéd last straw in his dealings with his Columbia colleagues and the university's actions were much more a response to Cattell's longstanding unpleasant (indeed often obnoxious) statements and actions throughout the years of his professorship.

Nonetheless, even after he lost his professorship, his colleagues in psychology still identified him as one of their science's founders in America, and they even began honoring Cattell as one of psychology's grand old men. Through the 1920s and 1930s, he continued to attend annual meetings of the American Psychological Association. In 1929, he served as President of the 9th International Congress of Psychology—the first to be held in the United States—convened that September at Yale. Since I began my studies of Cattell and his life in the late 1960s, my first years of research overlapped the final years of many psychologists whose own careers began before World War II, and I was able to interview several of them about my subject.

Several of them described Cattell as a gruff old man who shook his head ostentatiously in response to less-than-first-rate papers presented by younger scholars. Almost all of them—in all, perhaps seven or eight—remembered "clearly" an episode involving Cattell at the International Congress, and all claimed (at times in so many words) they'd never forget what he said. The specific incident involved Cattell's response to a presentation by Scottish (but English-educated) psychologist William McDougall, then a professor at Duke University. Through the 1920s, McDougall involved himself and his students in a series of experiments trying to demonstrate the Lamarckian inheritance of learned characteristics. Cattell was not the only auditor who heard McDougall's presentation of these studies. But all who reported to me on Cattell's response stressed its passion. One remembered that Cattell simply hissed loudly when McDougall finished his remarks. Another reported that Cattell commented that he wouldn't believe anything McDougall said, no matter what his data supposedly showed. Interestingly, after the Congress, several younger psychologists who had heard Cattell respond to McDougall exchanged letters, and they all reported how shocked they were that Cattell acted as he did. Unfortunately, none reported precisely what Cattell said.

Fortunately for this historian, psychologist Walter R. Miles (then at Stanford University) was an obsessive notetaker and he kept a diary record (noting what was said almost word for word) of much that went on during the Congress. His report concerning Cattell's response to McDougall's presentation—recently recovered for me by Lizette Barton, Reference Archivist at the Cummings Center for the History of Psychology at the University of Akron, where Miles's diary has been deposited—is exceptionally detailed. The page itself is headed (with double underlining) "The Cattell Rejoinder," and opens with the words "Cattell. Unfortunately, Sharp Rejoinder. Made friends for McDougall." As Miles quotes Cattell's comments, they began with some criticism of McDougall's technical assumptions and went on, "these experiments are interesting but of course they are wrong... I must be permitted to say that your methods are not modern" (Cattell, 1929). Cattell continued with some further technical comments. And finally, Miles recorded the following exchange: "Dr. McD do you know why they were a failure (No) I do (and will tell you later)" (Cattell, 1929). Reading this account leads me to wonder if the loud hissing reported came not from Cattell but was, instead, another auditor's response to Cattell's comments.

This account of Cattell's obnoxiousness—or perhaps more kindly, his self-righteous narcissistic arrogance—presents to any psychobiographer an interesting problem: that is, just

how and why did Cattell develop this character trait? One possibility emerges when the scholar remembers that James McKeen Cattell bore the name of one of the richest men in the small city in which he was born and spent his earlier years. His family was certainly well off, and they could readily afford to support his eight years of study and international travel after he graduated from Lafayette (See Sokal, 1981, p. 245). Others were not so fortunate. For example, before he was awarded the Johns Hopkins fellowship (worth $500) that had been Cattell's, John Dewey had needed to rely on a loan from an aunt and his earnings from teaching school for several years to pay for his tuition and living expenses during his first year in Baltimore.

Specifically, by drawing on investments initially made by James McKeen, in 1886 the Cattell family had an income of $12,000. In that year, the average annual income of an American nonfarm worker (as calculated by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS]) was $453.00, and the BLS's Consumer Price Index (CPI; taking the year 1967 as 100) was 27. In late 2022, it was 298.35. Hence, the Cattell family's $12,000 income in 1886 had the CPI purchasing power equal to that of about $44,000.00 in 1967 and over $132,000.00 at the end of 2022.

By the standard set by late-19th-century robber barons, these figures suggest that the Cattells were not really that rich. But as Ray Fancher suggests, a more telling comparison derives from figures presented in the authoritative website Worlddata.info, which reports the average American family income in 2021 was $70,930, or ca. 156.6 times the previously noted 1886 average income/ ($453.00). Using this figure, these data suggest that the Cattell family's 1886 income ($12,000) was, in 2021 dollars, ca. $1.88 million.

Even accepting the lesser estimate, by the standard of many of those with whom Cattell associated, he certainly could live a more comfortable life. In any event, when viewed through the lens provided by these observations and an analysis from American author F. Scott Fitzgerald, Cattell's riches (either relative or truly significant) begin to at least suggest some of the roots of his character. In particular, I believe that one can learn much about Cattell—and perhaps even begin to develop a non-psychoanalytic psychobiography of him—by comparing him with Anson Hunter, the protagonist of Fitzgerald's well-regarded 1926 short story, "The Rich Boy."

An early pair of sentences in "The Rich Boy" comprise Fitzgerald's (January & February 1926) probably most often quoted remark and they are certainly well known to readers and critics of American literary fiction: "Let me tell you about the very rich. They are different from you and me." Ernest Hemingway even had the dying protagonist of his equally well-regarded 1936 short story, "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," mockingly remember "poor Scott Fitzgerald... who had started a story that once began, 'The very rich are different from you and me.'" And as Hemingway's character sarcastically continued, "Yes they have more money."

But Hemingway's throw-away dismissal of Fitzgerald's introduction to his portrayal of Anson Hunter misses the depth of the portrait he paints. That is, as Fitzgerald (January & February 1926) continues, "They [the very rich] possess and enjoy early, and it does something to them.... They think, deep in their hearts, that they are better than we are because we had to discover the compensations and refuges of life for ourselves. Even when they enter deep into our world or sink below us, they still think that they are better than we are."

Again, Cattell may not have been extremely rich. But if one, perhaps, accepts Fitzgerald's rather harsh characterization of the wealthy, one can see traces of the kind of self-righteous narcissistic egotism that Cattell clearly exhibited throughout his life and career. The story offers no hint that Hunter held eugenical views, but further similarities appear in Fitzgerald's description of Anson Hunter's boyhood. For example, Hunter found that his friends' parents "were vaguely excited when their own children were asked to [his] house," and even as a child he noticed "the half-grudging American deference that was paid to him" (Sokal, 2009, p. 90). Cattell experienced much the same attention—both within his family and from his friends' parents—and like any child raised within a given setting, he took it for granted. Instead, he grew to expect this deference as his due. Like Anson Hunter, Cattell "accepted this as the natural state of affairs" and thus developed "sort of impatience with all groups of which he was not the center... which remained with him for the rest of his life" (Sokal, 2009, p. 90). With these words, Fitzgerald could very well have been writing about Cattell.

"The Rich Boy" follows Anson Hunter into his 30th year and shows him in several family, social, romantic, and business settings and situations. Through them all, Fitzgerald unsurprisingly has him remain the focus of the story. Hunter is not always "successful" in all of his endeavors. But whether he's seducing a Debutante, being forced to apologize (though never in so many words) for his actions while drunk, or dealing with a family crisis, he always remains fully confident (as Cattell was) of his personal stature and self-ensured in his ability to deal with the circumstances. Perhaps he never had (as Cattell did) "to a fight in a good cause" (Cattell, 1903). But perhaps that's a benefit of being really (or at least fictionally) "very rich."

Here then is a portrait of a literary protagonist that meshes just about precisely with the characterization that emerges from a detailed review of Cattell's attitudes and actions. Indeed, Fitzgerald's words and insights convey, I believe, a vivid psychobiographical portrait of at least two individuals—that is, both Hunter and Cattell—from which a reader can learn much. It thus offers, I think, an effective alternative approach to psychobiography beyond the psychoanalytic that Mac Runyan seeks.

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