

# Event, Crack-up and Line of Flight – Deleuze Reading Fitzgerald

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Through a sequence of influential works on philosophy, cinema, art, and literature from the early 1960s to the 1990s, Gilles Deleuze contributed to the rethinking of, among other things, time and different temporalities. This is true in particular of how he develops the concept of the event, *l'événement*. In this article, I will explore two variations of the event – as "crack" (*fêlure*) and as "line of flight" (*ligne de fuite*) – through the particular lens of Deleuze's interpretations of F. Scott Fitzgerald, in order to establish their close but qualitatively different values and implications. In both processes, the event signals change and becoming, thus involving a loss of ground and of identity. But where the crack inevitably implies a disintegration of sense, the line of flight opens toward a possible, albeit not necessary, becoming-other. At stake, therefore, is our understanding of the differential element that allows the line of flight to become a value of life.

At the core of Deleuze's philosophy of the event, there is his beautiful reading of F. Scott Fitzgerald. It is not difficult to understand what appeals to Deleuze in Fitzgerald's work: the rapidity and the elegance, the nomadism and the perpetual high-speed immobility, but also, first and foremost, the way Fitzgerald always dwells in the heart of the paradox joining strength and fragility, vitality and decline, lightness and gravity, creation and destruction. In Fitzgerald, Deleuze finds both an affirmation of the tragic and the absolute absence of resentment, and loss as the non-negotiable condition of all that pretends to be life. All these particularities characterize an art of writing that is more preoccupied with painting than with telling a story. Reading Fitzgerald, Deleuze could not help but find the themes on which he himself feeds: the exploration of surfaces, deviating trajectories, dis-

junctive becomings and infinite conjunctions, leakages and transformations, alienation as principle of life and death, and, always, the battle of a body embracing the Great health at the cost of its own. In *The Logic of Sense*, Deleuze develops the question of the event, its temporality and, most of all, its quality: its value, but also its charge. In the junction with Fitzgerald, the event finds its fatal characteristic against the backdrop of the creative but destructive abuse constituted by alcoholism, or as Deleuze would express it: the event as drama, war, plague, death. When Deleuze, together with Guattari, again writes on Fitzgerald in *A Thousand Plateaus*, this very charge or value of the event makes possible a turning-point, a leaving of itself, something that is also explored as “deterritorialization” or “counter-effectuation”. Thus it is rendered not only less fatal in the deadly sense, but also, and above all, as constitutive of all real creation, of an opening in becoming toward the infinite. In the tension between these two versions of the Deleuzian event, mediated through Fitzgerald, we thus find a profound ambiguity underlying each ingredient that goes into it: surface and its depth, loss of identity and the becoming-other/multiple, the twofold relation between crack and perfection, between break-up and continuation.

### *The event as a crack-up*

In *The Logic of Sense*, in the 22<sup>nd</sup> series, “Porcelain and Volcano”, Deleuze pursues his development of the notion of the event by referring to Fitzgerald’s autobiographical essay *The Crack-Up*, in which the author tries to understand how he lost himself. What initially captures Deleuze’s interest is precisely the very first sentence of the essay in question, where Fitzgerald states that all life is a process of breaking down, *of course*. This *of course* is not to be taken in a defeatist or resigned sense, but rather as a statement of fact. What is at stake here is not, as one might think, the inevitable relation between life and death in general, but rather, a process inscribed into the very activity of living. The great events of our life, the blows and the hazards that strike us – war, crisis, the loss of loved ones, etc – constitute but one side of a process, of which the other is far more insidious. Coming from the inside, things happen, so discreetly that they might not even be no-

ticed, and thanks to their invisibility and impalpability, they are entirely free to pursue their destroying activity, the breaking down. When one finally perceives what is going on, it is only through the effects of the traces that these events have left behind, in other words, when it is always already too late. Echoing Fitzgerald, Deleuze states that what shatters us in the end are never the great accidents that strike us: “all these noisy accidents already have their outright effects; and they would not be sufficient in themselves had they not dug their way down to something of a wholly different nature which, on the contrary, they reveal only at a distance and when it’s too late, – the silent crack.”<sup>1</sup> Hence, the crack becomes that in us which constitutes the failure, loss and decay, the open yet hidden wound where the work of destruction is pursued without our knowing it. Yet the crack is not internal, as if in contrast to that which comes from the outside, being rather that which dwells and operates on the surface: it is “it is imperceptible, incorporeal, and ideational”.<sup>2</sup> Situated at the frontier, constituting it even, the crack is the backdrop against which the great events play out, and through which they effectuate themselves. All the while it constitutes and hollows out the interstices through which the internal events effectuate and propagate themselves towards the exterior. The crack, thus understood, is at the same time that on which things occur, and that which allows them to make sense. Moreover, it is that which, under the three-fold pressure of interior, exterior and of the surface, will eventually crack up once and for all: “in the shattering and bursting of the end [...] the entire play of the crack has become incarnated in the depth of the body, at the same time that the labor of the inside and the outside has widened the edges.”<sup>3</sup>

In Fitzgerald’s viewpoint, it is not death that is at stake. Death, on the contrary, would only constitute the most banal and final aspect of the process of breaking down in which all life is *of course* engaged. More delicately, and more dramatically in a sense, what is at stake is a transformation – subtle but from which no return is possible – through which one becomes other, without landmarks or reference points, void of the past as well as of any future. The desolation has a Biblical resonance, hence Fitzgerald quotes Matthew: “Ye are the salt of the earth. But if the salt hath lost its savor, wherewith shall it be salted?” (ch 5 v 13).<sup>4</sup> The earth is without salt and all savor is gone; one is alive

but without any of the qualifications that so far defined life. Fitzgerald, realizing that he is cracked, can only diagnose himself as no longer being a man, only a writer: neither a subject nor a person, but at best a dog, correct, but devoid of any vitality or enthusiasm. “Life will never be very pleasant again, and the sign Cave Canem is hung permanently just above my door. I will try to be a correct animal though, and if you throw me a bone with enough meat on it I may even try to lick your hand.”<sup>5</sup>

This fate is not only Fitzgerald’s own, retraced in this text as in many others – *Early success*, *Echoes of the Jazz Age* and *My Lost City* – but most of all that of all his characters. The same point of no return is reached, irretrievably, by the beautiful Southern Belle, who one day realizes that the promise of love held out by life will never have been kept (*The Last of the Belles*); by the rich and infinitely promising young man who realizes that nothing has been accomplished, nor ever will be (*The Rich Boy*); in the inevitable relapse of the converted drinker, cancelling suddenly the conversion for ever (*Babylon Revisited*); and of course the complete demolition of *The Great Gatsby*.<sup>6</sup> All are seized, caught up by their crack, and it dawns upon them as if they had just woken up after a bad drinking binge: the moment is gone and will never come back – and through the decline of the past one is also dispossessed of the future. Indeed, all Fitzgerald’s work explores the nuances of this theme, depicting decline that is at the same time its realization, always three steps behind by the one who is subjected to it. In the novels this theme is first outlined as the subtle and hallucinatory advent of the little man in *This Side of Paradise*, with the nightmarish vision of his curling toes, anticipating the slow curve of going down. This is marvelously perfected later in the tragic destiny of Dick Diver, dissolving before disappearing in *Tender is the Night*. And, like all his characters, the genius of Fitzgerald drinks, literally, at the source of that which constitutes also his failure; drinks his brilliance until it has been consumed, dried out, run dry.

Deleuze’s concern is not just to state that Fitzgerald appears to be struck by the same affliction as that of his characters, alter egos transformed into pure and luminous art, falling stars which cannot be rescued, caught or salvaged. As Deleuze carefully underlines the distinction in nature between internal or external accidents, on the one hand,

and, on the other hand, those that really make sense in the end, he also notes that this distinction is, in fact, impossible to maintain. No matter how justified, it is always made by the observer, the theoretician, the “abstract thinker” whose concern is precisely to keep the two phenomena at a distance.<sup>7</sup> It seeks not to have the crack coincide with the blows, not to be subjected to the irretrievable falling-apart, the irreparable loss of the self and the world, to be shattered and suddenly find oneself having become a dog. If it is true, as Deleuze argues, that the one condition for the creation of a work of art or of a thought is absolute risk, if a thought can be conceived only at the limit of what is thinkable, then how could it be possible for the crack at a certain moment *not* to incarnate itself in the depths of a body, thereby shattering it? Indeed, he says, “if there is a crack at the surface, how can we prevent deep life from becoming a demolition job and prevent it from becoming it as a matter ‘of course?’”<sup>8</sup>. This ‘of course’, pronounced with all the elegance and the nonchalance of a Fitzgerald who in his own view has already gone down, is what attracts Deleuze, whose entire thought affirms its necessity all while insisting, relentlessly, also on the fact that the value of “of course” always has to be subjected to yet another throw of dice making it possible to go beyond the breaking up. It is necessary that the breaking up is transfigured into something else, since “the crack is nothing if it does not compromise the body, but it does not cease being and having a value when it intertwines its line with the other line, inside the body.”<sup>9</sup>

How, then, are we to think the crack in order for it to become something else than destruction; how are we to think the event in order for it to not be necessarily fatal, and to transform instead into life? The term employed by Deleuze for this transformation is “counter-effectuation”, allowing the event to break loose from itself as it is incarnated. Perhaps this is the movement suggested by Fitzgerald when he writes of himself in *The Crack-Up*, of his becoming-writer, becoming-dog, as in fact signifying a radical becoming-other?

### *From crack to line of flight*

In the short text concerned with Fitzgerald in *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari return to the question by introducing some new

distinctions. The event, here understood as the impalpable form of “what happened?”, must be understood and valued, no longer in relation to the interacting trinity of interior/exterior/surface, but as what is at play in the intertwining of three kinds of lines, lines recalled by Fitzgerald himself in the same short story, according to Deleuze, “traversing us and composing ‘a life’.”<sup>10</sup> There is the line of hard or molar segments, composed of binary, institutional and identitarian distinctions, working as instruments of control, segmenting the world into men or women, rich or poor, working or idle, but also, from an identity-shaping point of view, as being part of a couple (or not), being successful (or not), being young (or no longer). Life as a process of breaking down *of course*, say Deleuze and Guattari, consists in the inevitable hardening of this segmentarity, as we grow older, rendering each segment more and more terse and clear-cut. Hence the blows and fates that we are stricken by.

The second line, molecular and supple, is now where micro-cracks take place, far from the noisy events. Rather than concerning intimate structures contrasted to those more public or even relating to states and institutions, this line is traced as slight changes of perspective, subtle variations of colors and light, as the gradual event of sunset, resulting in dark night even before one has wholly realized its process. Here, all of a sudden, nothing has necessarily changed, and yet the value of the whole has changed, and the game is no longer the same as before: “In truth, nothing assignable or perceptible: molecular changes, redistributions of desire such that when something occurs, the self that awaited it is already dead, or the one that would await it has not yet arrived.”<sup>11</sup> Yet this crack, fatal as it might seem, no longer necessarily implies the final break-up as was the case previously. As Fitzgerald remarks, it can probably still be about another possible redistribution: although irreparable and absolute as a loss of self and of the world, the crack still makes possible an existing in the world. Alive, but as *another* life – this is the formula of the micro-crack.

It is however the third line that makes all the difference. It marks an absolute break-up, a mad tangent, and a cancellation of the hard as well as of the supple segments, but without substituting them with something else. It is a line of flight through which all structure and

identity have been transformed into an unknown. For Deleuze this final line is definitely the most decisive. If the first operates by the brutality of an either-or, the second, through shifts and minor displacements, the third is the only one that allows for sense to be constituted at the cost of previous sense. It marks a line of creation and of sense, of radical loss in the sense that what is lost does no longer even exist as memory or past. At the same time Deleuze underlines repeatedly that nothing predestines it to produce sense *necessarily*, at least not in a “constructive” sense. To evaluate it, we need to know from what it is breaking loose, from what it deterritorializes itself and to what it gives birth, and thus reterritorializes itself. When understood in this way it is clear why it cannot be considered apart from the two others, and why all three lines co-determine each other’s value. Or perhaps the question would rather be how is value, or that which has value, conceived? Once again, it appears that we are walking a very thin line. On the one hand, the line of flight *makes* sense, no matter whether this sense is constructive or not, precisely because it sweeps away any precedent sense. On the other hand, as Deleuze repeatedly remarks, its value is much more measured in relation to what it is yet capable of generating, continuing, transforming or transfiguring: a blown-up brain or body no longer makes sense; nor does a life destroyed by alcohol. The line of flight must, and this should come as no surprise, be weighed on a Nietzschean scale, capable of determining the nature of the forces at play.

What, then, are the elements pertaining to Fitzgerald’s line of flight? In *The Crack-Up*, there are, indeed, three movements, distinct yet linked together. If the first one consisted in how he deals with vitality and hope in relation to the accidents that do occur, the second is expressed in depression and burn-out, as void, solitude, cracks and fragility. The third, departing as a tangent from the two others, accomplishes the break and the deterritorialization. Fitzgerald is no longer neither empty nor alone, since he has obliterated the very subject that could be subjected to void and solitude. Dressed in the costume of Everybody, wearing Everybody’s smile and even his vocal tonality, shattered (but alive), he is but Nobody. Yet, emptied of affection, he is still full of affectivity whenever his state is that of “qualified unhappiness”. One might think that the line of flight didn’t

lead anywhere and that it has been arrested, if it wasn't for the fact that he continues to write, at least for a while.

*Line of flight, deterritorialisation,  
reterritorialisation*

To conclude, let me indicate how the tension between the crack and the line of flight operates in one of Fitzgerald's major novels, *Tender is the Night*. The story, like most of those of Fitzgerald's, is easily summarized. Narrated in the present tense, but nourished by a past that is equally present, it concerns the ongoing history of gilded couple Nicole and Dick Diver. He is a non-practicing psychiatrist, she a very rich heiress, the couple drifting between the French Riviera, Paris, and the Swiss Alps. Together, they adopt people, subjecting them to the magical talents of Dick, who "works them over" in order to make them, at least for a moment, as golden, lustrous and sparkling as their creator. In these transformations, the subjects-objects find themselves transfigured, enveloped by a process whose *acmé* comes about as the blossoming of a flower in which all that can be perceived is a change of quality that has already occurred. At one of the famous dinners at the Divers, it is in this way that the world suddenly gains more relief: "[...] The two Divers began suddenly to warm and glow and expand, as if to make up to their guests, already so subtly assured of their importance, so flattered with politeness, for anything they might still miss from that country well left behind. Just for a moment they seemed to speak to every one at the table, singly and together, assuring them of their friendliness, their affection. And for a moment the faces turned up toward them were like the faces of poor children at a Christmas tree. Then abruptly the table broke up – the moment when the guests had been daringly lifted above conviviality into the rarer atmosphere of sentiment was over before it could be irreverently breathed, before they had half realized it was there."<sup>12</sup> Discreet but definitive, this movement is undoubtedly that of supple segmentarity. But when the decline becomes noticeable, it was in fact always already there. Behind Nicole's beauty, there is her psychiatric condition; behind Dick's human genius the lack of all anchorage and foundation. Co-dependent, the one determining the other, the couple starts to sink, and in their sinking, they bring down a whole world.



Two lines are traced here, different and clear-cut, co-determining each other, no doubt, but deviating from each other in the end. In this couple, it is the strong element that will effectuate the radical fall. Dick, whose qualities suddenly start to escape and leak away from him, thereby causing him not only to lose the power to define Nicole but also his own power of transfiguration, can do nothing but flee in the literal sense. Losing his vitality, even his process of breaking down ceases to be spectacular. As he disappears, he does so without leaving any trace. If ever there was a line of flight, it has ended up turning on itself. As Deleuze says, it's time to die. But Nicole, the weak element – wearing her condition as her secret, fighting against all the ways in which her condition, over and over again, manages to seep out, leaking through the cracks and fissures – takes off in another direction. Leaving Dick even before he has disappeared (yet, however, he already had), she literally loses her identity, loses her face, but also her secret. Alone, dead to her past, but radically new: a line of flight of which the reterritorialisation creates a sense hard as a diamond, but bereft of all devastation. By all its micro-political shifts – in the relationship of love, in the displacement of the elements of dependency and autonomy, in the definition of beauty and the understanding of health, this line responds to all the criteria of the real line of flight, reterritorializing itself on nothing but the deterritorialisation itself.

### Notes

1. Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense* (hereafter, LS), (transl. M. Lester), London/New York: Continuum 2004, 176.
2. LS, 177.
3. LS, 177.
4. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Crack-Up, with other pieces and stories*, (hereafter, CU) London: Penguin Books 1988, 45.
5. CU, 56.
6. LS, 178.
7. LS, 178.
8. LS, 182.
9. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (hereafter, TP), (transl. B. Massumi), Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press 2005, 200.
10. TP, 198–199.
11. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Tender is the Night*, London: Penguin Books 1986, 44.