

Penelope Fitzgerald and Edward Burne-Jones: The Spirit of Her Work

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i.m. Fr. David Sanders OP, 1939–2020

PENELOPE FITZGERALD wanted her readers to attend to the ‘spiritual’ meaning of her work, but what exactly did that mean? A. S. Byatt recalls Hermione Lee once asking Fitzgerald in an interview ‘if she would say anything about her feminist or political beliefs’. ‘Fitzgerald’, we are told, ‘corrected her; she hoped the readers would be interested in her *spiritual* beliefs’.¹ The exchange, as Byatt recounts it, sounds characteristic of Fitzgerald: high-handed, cagey, and slightly mischievous. But its purpose is serious: to unsettle her much younger interlocutor; to put the audience off balance; and to insist that the fundamental purpose and orientation of her work does not lie where the interviewer is looking for it.

A number of critics have attended to the ‘spirit’ of Fitzgerald’s work in trying to articulate its ‘prevailing or typical quality or mood’ (*OED*).² A. S. Byatt has tried to pin this down in terms of genre (the ‘flicker’ of the ‘sixteenth-century fable’) and philosophical outlook (‘European and metaphysical’).³ For James Wood, Fitzgerald’s last and most admired book, *The Blue Flower*, is simply ‘one of the strangest and freest books ever written’.⁴ Both try to articulate a fundamental identity and orientation – ‘European’, ‘metaphysical’, ‘strange’, ‘free’ – not reducible to any single passage, formal effect, or stylistic habit. But the word ‘spiritual’, especially when used in contradistinction to ‘political’, also suggests a *specific*

¹ A. S. Byatt, ‘Preface’, in *So I Have Thought of You: The Letters of Penelope Fitzgerald*, ed. Terence Dooley (London 2009) pp. ix–xiii; xi (emphasis in original).

² All quotations from the *Oxford English Dictionary* are from the online edition <www.oed.com> (accessed 17 Sept. 2022).

³ A. S. Byatt, ‘A Delicate Form of Genius’, *Threepenny Review*, 73 (Spring 1998) pp. 13–15; 13.

⁴ James Wood, ‘Late Bloom’, *The New Yorker*, 24 Nov. 2014; <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/11/24/late-bloom>> (accessed 4 Aug. 2021).

orientation. Its meanings include: 'relating to the immaterial part or aspect of a person' (*OED* 1); 'concerned with the human spirit or soul' (1.a); 'intellectual as opposed to sensual, material, or practical' (1.b); 'characterized by sensitivity to . . . emotional, philosophical, or mystical matters and lack of concern for material values or pursuits' (2). An idea shared by different definitions is that the word denotes an investment in things which are not material or physical, such as values, virtues, and ideals. In the context of a late twentieth-century literary interview, it would have been an unfashionable word, perhaps carrying a connotation of Victorian piety. To attend to the spiritual aspect of Fitzgerald's work is not simply to look for a religious subtext. Fitzgerald was a practising Anglican, and 'maintained a strong Christian faith', Wood writes, yet, as he says, it would be an error to take Fitzgerald's religious beliefs as explanatory shortcuts.⁵ It is, however, to consider the deeper motivations and orientations of her art, including those aspects of her work which seem strangest to the modern reader: the interference of the immaterial in the material, the ideal in the actual, the eternal in the temporal.

The larger purpose of this essay is to say something about this deep motivation and orientation. Why did Fitzgerald write what she did, in the way she did? What was the larger endeavour and artistic lineage in which she understood herself to participate? Specifically, I argue that her first book, a life of the artist Edward Burne-Jones, is a valuable resource in answering these questions. Fitzgerald's interest in Burne-Jones himself has been largely neglected by critics, and the biography mainly viewed as apprentice work. Yet *Edward Burne-Jones: A Life* (1975) was a major intellectual and creative undertaking for Fitzgerald. It is the book in which she writes in most detail, most explicitly, about her most important artistic and philosophical influences: William Morris and John Ruskin, as well as Burne-Jones himself.⁶ Moreover, it is the book in which she addresses most explicitly what it might mean for an artist's work to have 'spiritual' meaning and purpose. In lectures given at Oxford, Ruskin spoke of Burne-Jones's work as an investigation into 'spiritual truth', contrasting Burne-Jones's belief in the abiding truth of myths and symbols with the 'realistic' and 'materialistic'

⁵ Wood, in 'Late Bloom', writes that in Fitzgerald's work he finds 'no revealing personal statement . . . about the status of [her] faith'. I would phrase this slightly differently: Fitzgerald's writing is rarely confessional or devotional, but does give a window onto the way she saw the world, which was inevitably shaped by her Christian faith.

⁶ On the importance of Morris and Ruskin to Fitzgerald, see Hugh Adlington, *Penelope Fitzgerald* (Liverpool 2018) pp. 22–5; Adlington refers to Ruskin as Fitzgerald's 'touchstone' (p. 23), and Morris and Ruskin, alongside Burne-Jones, as her 'heroes' (p. 25).

world-view of certain contemporaries.⁷ Burne-Jones's rejection of realism and materialism in favour of an idiosyncratic 'Victorian idealism' is fundamental to Fitzgerald's portrait of the artist.⁸ Burne-Jones's beliefs and outlook were not identical to Fitzgerald's, but there was a reason she was drawn to Burne-Jones's art and expounded it in the terms that she did. Her biography, and in particular her detailed meditations on the paintings, present a vision of artistic meaning and purpose which she found profoundly sympathetic, and which would shape the rest of her work.

Fitzgerald, by the consensus of her peers and readers, was one of the truly significant and original English writers of the twentieth century. Yet canonical accounts of developments in English fiction – either in terms of technical developments, or in terms of emerging social and political themes – struggle to accommodate her work.⁹ Even in conversation with her most sympathetic readers, such as Hermione Lee, we see her asking for attention to her own work to be redirected. Looking again at *Edward Burne-Jones* gives a detailed picture of an artistic tradition to which she positioned herself as an inheritor. Crucially, this was neither a realist nor a modernist tradition, sitting outside the familiar dyad on which histories of twentieth-century fiction usually turn. Fitzgerald calls Burne-Jones's work 'late Romantic' (p. xvii). She valued it for its anti-materialist bent and belief in the truth and importance of immaterial things. In the biography, Fitzgerald quotes Burne-Jones: 'I don't want to copy objects, I want to show people something' (p. 25). She was attracted by his conception of art-making as a visionary activity, an attempt to 'show' in symbolic form abiding ideals, desires, or truths (p. 25). Burne-Jones, in Fitzgerald's view, saw the purpose of his art as spiritual rather than explicitly political, and he gave Fitzgerald an important vision of what such a spiritual art might look like.

This essay is in two parts. In the first, I outline Fitzgerald's interest in Burne-Jones and give an account of how she understood his work. I describe four key aspects of his art on which Fitzgerald focuses. These

⁷ John Ruskin, 'The Mythic Schools of Painting: E. Burne-Jones and G. F. Watts', in *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, vol. xxxiii (London 1908) pp. 286–305: 294, 292, 287.

⁸ Penelope Fitzgerald, *Edward Burne-Jones: A Life* (London 2014) p. 27. References to this edition are henceforth given in parentheses in the text.

⁹ For example, neither the realism-after-modernism story told in Andrzej Gasiorek's, *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After* (London 1995) nor Steven Connor's more explicitly socio-historical *The English Novel in History 1950–1995* (Abingdon 1996) makes any reference at all to Fitzgerald's work. At the height of Fitzgerald's career, Jean Sudrann noted that she 'doesn't fit easily into the rubric of contemporary British women writers'. See Sudrann, 'Magic and Miracles: The Fallen World of Penelope Fitzgerald's Novels', in Robert Hosmer Jr. (ed.), *Contemporary British Women Writers: Texts and Strategies* (Basingstoke 1993) pp. 105–27: 105.

are: first, the inner or symbolic meaning of Burne-Jones's paintings; second, their treatment of time; third, the relationship of Burne-Jones's images to verbal emblems or mottos; fourth, the solipsism of Burne-Jones's vision. In each of these ways, Burne-Jones eschews both realism and precursors of modernism (like Aestheticism or Impressionism). By exploring these characteristics, Fitzgerald articulates what she sees to be the nature and purpose of his work. In the second part of the essay, I explore how *Edward Burne-Jones* can help us understand Fitzgerald's later writing, moving from its surface-level bequests to the deeper insight it affords. I describe first how she returned to and reworked subject matter from the book in her later work. I then show how ideas from the book prompted technical experiment in subsequent writing. I conclude by asking how studying the Burne-Jones biography helps us understand the larger orientation and purpose of her writing, and how we might better understand its 'spiritual' meaning.

Fitzgerald worked on *Edward Burne-Jones* for four years, between 1971 and 1975. She did so whilst working at two part-time teaching jobs, and without an agent or – at first – a contract. It was a considerable and speculative labour, which required many archival visits, at a time when money was limited. As it happened, Fitzgerald's biography appeared during a period of renewed interest in Burne-Jones's work, which had fallen into neglect in the mid-century. A 'Victorian revival' in fashion and artistic taste led to exhibitions of a number of major nineteenth-century artists in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and a major retrospective of Burne-Jones's work was held at the Hayward Gallery in London in the same year Fitzgerald's biography was published.¹⁰ But this seems to have been incidental to Fitzgerald's interest, which was anything but voguish. Fitzgerald had been interested in the Burne-Jones circle throughout her life,¹¹ and the upper-middle-class later Victorian world these figures inhabited was familiar to her through her parents and grandparents. Her grandfather had overseen the installation of Burne-Jones's stained-glass windows at St Philip's, Birmingham,¹² and Fitzgerald described the experience of watching the evening light 'stream' through the 'ruby red glass' in Burne-Jones's *Last Judgement* as 'the first time that I'd seen something that I realised was stunningly

¹⁰ Stephen Wildman and John Christian, *Edward Burne-Jones: Victorian Artist Dreamer* (New York 1998) p. 3.

¹¹ Hermione Lee, *Penelope Fitzgerald: A Life* (London 2014) p. 217.

¹² See Penelope Fitzgerald, *The Knox Brothers* (London 2014) p. 40. A further connection was her uncle Ronald Knox's friendship with the daughter of Burne-Jones's muse Frances Horner (see *The Knox Brothers*, p. 257).

beautiful'.¹³ In a letter to a fellow Burne-Jones scholar about the relationship between biographer and subject, she wrote: 'one has to account both for the correspondence, or sympathy, and the reaction against. . . . I've thought so much, as I'm sure you must have done, of this two-way pressure on several generations, including my own.'¹⁴ Fitzgerald did not neglect contemporary Burne-Jones scholarship. Her friend, the Burne-Jones scholar John Christian, checked the manuscript before it went to press, and her bibliography cites the most important Burne-Jones scholars of the mid-century. Yet the key documents on which Fitzgerald draws are themselves from the period: the *Memorials* of Georgiana Burne-Jones; the studio diaries of Burne-Jones's assistant T.M. Rooke; the poems of Morris (and occasionally Yeats); and, consistently, showing deep knowledge, the treatises and lectures of Ruskin.¹⁵

The foreword to *Edward Burne-Jones* offers an entry-point into how Fitzgerald understood the artist. Burne-Jones, she writes:

Regarded with gloomy distaste the prospect of becoming the subject of a biography. Yet he was a late Romantic, whose pictures, on his own admission, are a series of images scarcely to be understood without a knowledge of the life which projected them. (p. xvii)

The 'image' was a fundamental concept for Burne-Jones and his friends, and it is used here as a term of art, in the way Burne-Jones used it. In Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, we are told, Burne-Jones found 'what is of much more importance to the artist, a reflection of personal experience in the fixed world of images' (p. 27). Chaucer's comic tales, by contrast, were disapproved of, 'as the lessening of an image' (p. 22). Elsewhere, Fitzgerald quotes Burne-Jones, in despair, finding that the 'Fortune's Wheel is a true image, we take our turn at it, and are broken' (p. 249). Fitzgerald saw this interest in 'the image' as a Romantic inheritance. In his 1957 book *Romantic Image*, which Fitzgerald admired, Frank Kermode had written of 'the high valuation placed during this period upon the image-making powers of the mind at the expense of its rational powers' ('this period', for Kermode, had begun in the late eighteenth century, and was 'not yet

¹³ Lee, *Penelope Fitzgerald*, pp. 216–17.

¹⁴ Fitzgerald, *So I Have Thought of You*, p. 314.

¹⁵ Fitzgerald's notebooks for the book reveal the mass of research she completed for it, only some of which is visible in the published bibliography. Among her research, we see detailed notes on Ruskin's *Modern Painters* III and V; *The Queen of the Air*; *Elements of Drawing*; *Unto This Last*; and *The Two Paths*. See Penelope Fitzgerald Collection, Main Series, Box 6, Folders 1 and 9 and Box 8, Folders 6 and 9, Harry Ransom Centre, University of Texas at Austin.

finished').¹⁶ Yet in contrast to Kermode – for whom nineteenth-century Romantic image-making was a prelude to Aestheticism – Fitzgerald saw Burne-Jones as a 'transcendent' rather than 'human' image-maker.¹⁷ That is, Burne-Jones's 'images' do not just express a density of feeling that could not be expressed in another way. They are not precursors of the modernist image. Rather, they express ideal forms, states, or ideas, which can only be made manifest imperfectly in the human world. His pictures are neither realist nor autotelic, but symbols of eternal desires, ideas, or archetypes (at one point she alludes to Jung, but doesn't develop the comparison (p. xvii)). This is what she means by the 'fixed world of images', and explains her understanding of Burne-Jones's comment that he painted 'the strange land that is more true than real' (p. 27); it also explains her scorn for the Impressionists, who had turned away from Burne-Jones's task. In his work, 'hand paint[ed] soul'; in theirs, 'hand paint[ed] hand' (p. 274). Fitzgerald's account of Burne-Jones follows Ruskin here. In his Oxford lecture on Burne-Jones, Ruskin had also written about 'Fortune's Wheel', also calling it an 'image'. By this, he explained, he meant 'the imagined symbol, or rather . . . the visiting and visible dream of this law'.¹⁸

Fitzgerald's analyses of Burne-Jones's paintings move inwards, from their visible form to their inner meaning. A good example of this is her account of his *Green Summer* (1864): an early, spectral painting of seven young women in green dresses encircled on a lawn, listening to an eighth, who reads to them (Figure 1). The models for the women were Georgiana, then aged 23, her younger sister Louisa, and Jane Morris. It is clear that the painting registers a 'season of happiness' in the Burne-Joneses' early marriage (p. 75). Yet Fitzgerald calls the painting a '*poesia*': a dream or fantasy, as opposed to an *istoria* or history painting,¹⁹ and says that while it expresses the 'quintessence of summer' (she is quoting Edward Clifford here), it is not a realist portrait, or an indexical record, of any specific moment. Burne-Jones, she reminds us, 'would never be a *plein air* painter' and this scene was composed from the studio (p. 86). Her analysis is structured in four paragraphs: 'First, there is the outward form: the picture strikes the eye as an arrangement of greens in light and shadow'; 'Secondly, there is the personal

¹⁶ Frank Kermode, *Romantic Image* (1957; Abingdon 2002) pp. 52–3. Hermione Lee describes finding on the title page of Fitzgerald's copy of *Romantic Image*, 'for the benefit of whichever student she had lent it to', the words: 'My only copy of this work of culture – please return' (Penelope Fitzgerald, p. 200).

¹⁷ The helpful distinction between 'human' and 'transcendent' symbolism is made in Charles Chadwick, *Symbolism* (London 1971) pp. 2–4.

¹⁸ Ruskin, 'The Mythic Schools of Painting', p. 293.

¹⁹ Patricia Emison, 'Poesia', *Grove Art Online* <doi.org/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.T068247> (accessed 28 July 2021).



Figure 1. Edward Burne-Jones, *Green Summer* (1864). Wikimedia Commons.

reference'; 'Thirdly, there is the name' (an allusion to Malory); 'Lastly, there is the "burden"' (pp. 86–7). Fitzgerald gives most attention to this last and most intriguing category. The 'burden', she explains, 'was Burne-Jones's own term, and the example he gave was of a pavement artist's work, where the burden would be "I am starving"' (p. 87). In her own words, she suggests that "burden" is not far from Hopkins's "instress", the totality of the given thing which is not complete until it has been understood by a sympathetic attention' (p. 87). She herself has two attempts at describing the 'burden' of *Green Summer*. The first fails by trailing off into description: 'The burden of *Green Summer* is a certain surcharged ache in the girls' expression which gives a tension at odds with their tranquil poise.' Her second attempt, correcting herself, pares down the description: 'The burden of *Green Summer* is beauty guilty of its own mortality' (p. 87). Interestingly, Fitzgerald moves here from a more precise, physical description of the girls in the painting ('a surcharged ache in the girls' expression') to an emblem in which 'beauty', an abstraction, is the subject. She has also moved from a description which pertains only to the picture to one that is more generally applicable, something like the *Et in Arcadia ego* motif.

The second key aspect of Burne-Jones's pictures, in Fitzgerald's account, is their treatment of time. Windows onto the eternal, their deferral of chronology, narrative, or movement has frequently been commented on, both by Burne-Jones's contemporaries and in subsequent criticism. In Georgiana Burne-Jones's *Memorials*, she writes that the artist staged his scenes in the studio 'expressly in order to lift them out of any association

with historical time'.²⁰ Writing in *Scribner's Magazine* in 1894, Cosmo Monkhouse described Burne-Jones's pictures as existing in a 'land ... where there is no time', presenting the 'stillness of a visionary world in which the fiercest conflicts happen, as it were, to slow music'.²¹ Just as Burne-Jones was not a realist artist, neither was he a narrative one. Writing about his art, Fitzgerald's attention shifts not just from outer form to inner truth, but away from narrative sequence towards simultaneity. The 'burden' Fitzgerald writes for *Green Summer* – 'beauty guilty of its own mortality' – hints at the narrative that will follow, but generalises it and removes any tense markers. The 'season of happiness' that Burne-Jones glimpses here would indeed soon pass, and the 'guilt' for this might be seen to lie with Burne-Jones himself, rather than with 'beauty'. Within three years of the portrait, he would begin an affair with Maria Zambaco: the first – and most disruptive – of his fixations on women who were not his wife. But Fitzgerald does not indulge cheap prolepsis. Instead her 'burden' echoes the lines from Thomas Malory from which Burne-Jones had taken the picture's title. 'For like as winter rasure doth always erase and deface green summer, so fareth it by unstable love in man and woman' (p. 86). Moving from the specific to the general, the incidental to the eternal, she sees in Burne-Jones's painting a simultaneous complex of feeling, in which the height of beauty and the fact of its passing are both aspects of the same phenomenon.

Fitzgerald's writings on the flower iconography in Burne-Jones tell us more about how she understood, and wrote about, temporality in his paintings. The various codified glossaries of flower symbolism popular through the nineteenth century were a shared passion of Fitzgerald and her subject. In her study of Victorian flower language, Beverly Seaton writes that whilst flower combinations can communicate 'a cluster of feelings', they cannot communicate 'a syntactical statement'.²² One simple way Fitzgerald reads Burne-Jones's flower iconography is as a means of representing different, even paradoxical, feelings in a picture, without having to impose hierarchy or sequence. The tulips and wallflowers in the foreground of Burne-Jones's *Chant d'Amour*, for example, are 'emblems' of 'ardent love and bitterness'. Fitzgerald writes of Burne-Jones that his true passion was not for flowers themselves, but 'flower names', or the codified glossaries they spawned (p. 199). Something similar might be said about Fitzgerald, who also tends

²⁰ Cit. Wildman and Christian, *Edward Burne-Jones*, p. 313.

²¹ Cosmo Monkhouse, 'Edward Burne-Jones', *Scribner's Magazine*, 15/2 (Feb. 1894) pp. 135–53: 136, 146.

²² Beverly Seaton, *The Language of Flowers: A History* (Charlottesville, Va. 1995) p. 145.

to write more about the symbolism attached to flowers than about the flowers themselves. In *Edward Burne-Jones*, she quotes from Kate Greenaway's popular *Language of Flowers*: 'the briar rose means "I wound to heal"' (p. 92). The similarity between these flower mottos and the 'burden' of *Green Summer* is striking. 'Beauty guilty of its own mortality' is a complex noun phrase; 'I wound to heal' is barely more than a complex verb phrase (with the simplest possible subject, 'I'); both present in abstract terms a simultaneity of pleasure and pain. The title of the painting *Chant d'Amour* (a 'triangular structure of three figures[:] blind-folded Love, the open-eyed girl playing the organ, the seated knight') comes from a Breton folksong – *Hélas! Je sais un chant d'amour | Triste ou gai, tour à tour* ('Alas, I know a love song | Sad or happy, turn by turn'), in which these two emotions, happiness and sadness, circle one another 'turn by turn' without resolution (p. 91). Fitzgerald is as fascinated by this circling chorus, another kind of 'burden', as she is by those other fragmentary forms – mottos, emblems – which suspend narrative progression for a moment and hold conflicting feelings, the different movements in a love affair, in a single phrase, as if they are in fact always contained in the germ, or in the archetype, of such relationships. Recalling the picture later in the book, Fitzgerald recalls its 'mysterious suspended emotion', the ambivalence of the painting's mood, and its 'suspension' outside of time or progression (p. 125).²³

For Fitzgerald, as we have seen, Burne-Jones's pictures prioritised inward truth over outward form, and timelessness over historical contingency. A third key characteristic was that they were mysterious. That is, that though we might give names to the ideas or archetypes the pictures represent, these names were themselves, as we have seen, abstractions: concepts like 'beauty', 'happiness', or 'mortality', whose meaning is in the end inexhaustible. One of the attractions of codified languages like flower languages was that, while they were not inarticulate – tulips and wallflowers meant ardent love and bitterness – they did not promise too much. Iconography and verbal emblems (including titles) prompt the viewer's interpretation. They say, 'this is a scene of ardent love and bitterness', but not how, where these feelings sprang from, or in what ways they were felt. In J. S. Mill's words, they

²³ Fitzgerald's discussion of *Chant d'Amour* appears in chapter 8 ('Friends and Enemies: 1865–6') of *Edward Burne-Jones*, and so discusses the 1866 watercolour version of the painting. For rights reasons, we have reproduced the later version in oils painted between 1868 and 1877 as [Figure 2](#). The aspects of composition and iconography that Fitzgerald describes in the earlier version are recreated in the later one. See John Christian's and William Waters's entries for the two paintings in the online Burne-Jones *Catalogue Raisonné*: here <<https://www.eb-j.org/browse-artwork-detail/NjQ4>> and here <<https://www.eb-j.org/browse-artwork-detail/NTY2>> (accessed 17 Jan. 2023).

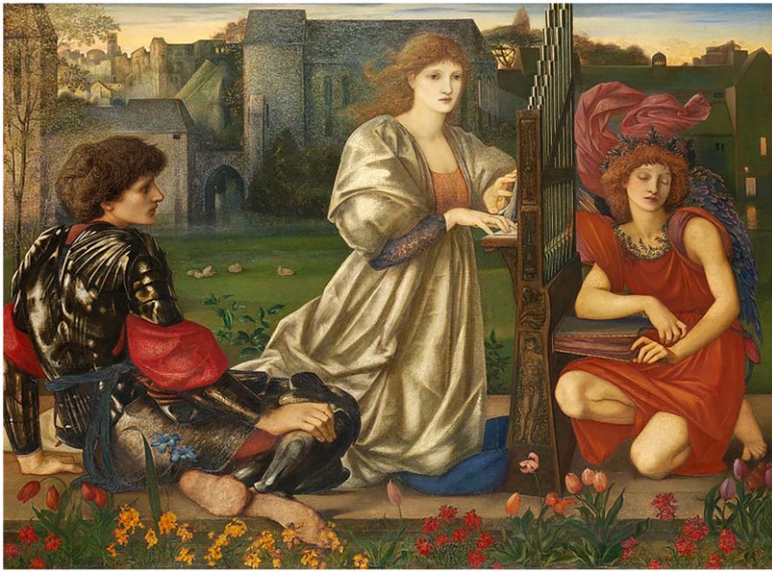


Figure 2. Edward Burne-Jones, *Chant d'Amour* 1869–77. Wikimedia Commons.

‘[answer] the purpose of showing what thing it is we are talking about, but not of telling any thing about it’.²⁴ At times, the relative inarticulacy of iconographic languages can lead to an odd circularity. Writing of the early portraits of Georgiana known as the ‘Rose variations’, signifier and signified, ‘rose’ and ‘happiness’, repetitively circle each other – the ‘Rose’ variations express ‘happiness’; *Fair Rosamund* shows Georgiana in ‘tea-colour rose against roses’ giving the feeling of ‘happiness’, which she referred to as ‘Rosamund time’ – without telling us very much about the happiness itself (pp. 77–8). In more substantial analyses, moving from more detailed description (of outward form, literary influence, biographical context) towards these emblems or mottos (‘beauty guilty of its own mortality’), Fitzgerald avoids mystification while leaving open the mysterious depth of the painting’s meaning. *Chant d'Amour*, Fitzgerald writes, leaves the ‘sensation’ of ‘listening to silences’ (p. 91), while of another painting, writing to her longtime editor Richard Ollard, she wrote ‘it’s a good portrait in my mind because you think, “What are they saying?”’.²⁵

²⁴ John Stuart Mill, *System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive* (London 1843) vol. i, p. 41. Mill is in fact talking about proper nouns in this sentence.

²⁵ Fitzgerald, *So I Have Thought of You*, p. 409.

Fitzgerald's treatment of the mysterious aspects of Burne-Jones's painting helps us see how she understood her own task as a biographer. As we have seen, she believed that 'his pictures . . . are a series of images scarcely to be understood without a knowledge of the life which projected them'. I take this to mean that his life, like his paintings, was a playing out or a drawing forth of his fundamental ideals and obsessions. His paintings do have biographical content, without knowledge of which we might miss their deeper meaning (*Green Summer* is among other things a portrait of Georgiana). But the biographical content is not itself the deeper meaning. Her biography, then, situates the pictures within their biographical contexts, but maintains a reticence about their meaning. In Fitzgerald's view, these deeper meanings can only be accessed through sympathetic imaginative recognition on the part of the reader or viewer. Quoting Ruskin, she writes that the archetypal 'myths' painted by Burne-Jones only come 'alive' for their viewer 'if we have the material in our own minds for an intelligent answering sympathy' (p. 115). A biography can enable such a response by situating the pictures in relation to their biographical and intellectual contexts, but the intelligent answering sympathy – the recognition of the picture's 'myth' as living and meaningful – can only come from the reader. Of the 'Briar Rose' series – which she believed to be about Burne-Jones's daughter Margaret – she wrote, with some hyperbole, that 'only if we are afraid to lose a daughter shall we understand' them (p. 200). Her own biography places great trust in the 'answering sympathy' of the reader. Her pictorial analysis, beginning with wider contexts but condensing onto abstract nouns, mottos, and symbols, creates space for this sympathetic engagement.

The final key aspect of Burne-Jones's art that Fitzgerald's book draws to our attention is its solipsism. Again, this posed challenges for the biographer. Fitzgerald writes that early in his career Burne-Jones came to the realisation 'that his metaphor as a painter must be the human image' (p. 73). This might seem an odd claim about an artist for whom (in Georgiana's words) 'portrait-painting was distasteful'.²⁶ 'I do not easily get portraiture, and the perpetual hunt to find in a face what I like, and leave out what mislikes me, is a bad school for it', Burne-Jones wrote.²⁷ In fact, 'human image' is apposite, as his comments on portraiture confirm. His interest was never in the singularity of particular people, but rather in the ideal image of the human – or more precisely, perhaps, of the woman – which he might find in them. He was wise enough to suggest that this ideal was often imposed

²⁶ Georgiana Burne-Jones, *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones*, 2 vols., vol. i (London 1904) p. 299.

²⁷ Cit. *ibid.*

upon his subjects, 'hunt[ing] to find in a face what I like', and leaving out what he did not. Burne-Jones knew that he painted 'out of his head': 'the place where I think pictures ought to come from'.²⁸ Yet if every scene is staged, every picture the window onto an abstraction, and every figure a 'human image', then the subjects themselves, the actual models for the paintings – the faces Fitzgerald identifies as, variously, Georgiana, Jane Morris, Maria Zambaco, Frances Horner, and so on – were in the end interchangeable. It is in this sense that Burne-Jones's art was solipsistic. The truth of an image was in principle objective and impersonal. But his tendency to see the world in terms of archetypes could lead to a projection of his own perspectives and desires.

Fitzgerald notices Burne-Jones's inconstancy to his wife, and his habit of idealising a succession of different women in the same way. During the years of his affair with Maria Zambaco, she notes that, 'Georgie's gaiety must be taken as evidence of courage, in every kind of domestic difficulty' (p. 114). Of one particularly large-hearted letter, she writes: 'one can only say that not many painters, and not many men, deserve such a wife' ('But even Georgie could not stand the strain indefinitely, and for the time being she left home') (p. 117). Yet Georgiana's perspective is not guessed at: '1869 is the year Georgie does not deal with at all in her *Memorials*' (p. 118). Later, Fitzgerald presents Burne-Jones's infatuations in terms of his own iconography. His *Briar Rose* series, his *Girls with Lanterns*, his *Mirror of Venus* and his *Golden Stairs* 'are all reflections of the same subject, the confrontation of the young girl with time, experience, change, and sex' (p. 142). Nonetheless, throughout the book, Fitzgerald continues to acknowledge the different perspectives of the objects of Burne-Jones attention, or admiration. Of Mary Gaskell she writes, with marked understatement, that 'if not firm, she must have been a tactful woman'; 'she managed a difficult situation extremely well' (p. 242). One reviewer of the biography, writing in the *TLS*, noted 'the fog of exaggerated sympathy and discretion' behind which Fitzgerald 'ducked', and the 'Victorian reticence' that she 'perpetuate[d]' rather than dispelled. In this sense it is not quite logical to say that 'Mrs Fitzgerald has felt a strong emotional pull away from his subject and towards his wife'.²⁹ The admiration for Georgiana is explicit, but this does not involve a revulsion towards her subject. Rather, Burne-Jones's infatuations are presented to us in the terms that he presented them, and accompanied by brief, understated acknowledgements of their impact on the people outside his head. The book inhabits the solipsistic visions of its protagonist whilst also showing that solipsism for what it is, by making brief

²⁸ Cit. Wildman and Christian, *Edward Burne-Jones*, p. 313.

²⁹ Russell Davies, 'Ladies in Retirement', *TLS*, 12 Dec. 1975, p. 1487.

notes of triangulating perspectives, above all Georgiana's. This, again, actively engages the reader's 'intelligent answering sympathy' (p. 115). Fitzgerald quotes Burne-Jones's motto from one his paintings of Maria Zambaco: 'Tell me what I have done, except to love unwisely' (p. 115). The reader might reflect that this motto applies as much to Georgiana as to the artist himself.

Fitzgerald's understanding of the art of Burne-Jones might be summarised by returning to two quotations already cited. The first is Burne-Jones's comment to his studio assistant Thomas Rooke, which Fitzgerald cites at the conclusion of chapter 2: 'I don't want to copy objects; I want to show people something' (p. 25). The second is the passage in which Fitzgerald distinguishes Burne-Jones's art from the art of the Impressionists. By the end of the nineteenth century, she writes, as Burne-Jones became a figure of the past, 'Impressionism seemed [to him] to be all anyone cared about, not hand painting soul, but hand painting hand' (p. 274). These passages define Burne-Jones as neither a realist (copying visible, material objects) nor a modernist or proto-modernist, foregrounding the medium of representation. Nor should his art be seen as self-justifying or autotelic, the hand the subject of the hand, the work of art the purpose of art. In her notes for the book, Fitzgerald copied out a passage from Ruskin's *Two Paths*: 'Wherever art is practised for its own sake, and the delight of the workman is in what he *does* and *produces*, instead of what he *interprets* or *exhibits*' the effect is 'fatal'.³⁰ Instead, Fitzgerald presents Burne-Jones as a visionary artist, whose true subject was finally immaterial, the 'soul': its desires, obsessions, virtues, weaknesses.

One way of connecting Fitzgerald's Burne-Jones to a wider artistic context would be to focus on the term 'Victorian idealism', which (as we have seen) she uses once to define Burne-Jones and Morris's relationship to Arthurian myth (p. 27). Scholars including Naomi Schor, Toril Moi, Sharon Marcus, and Elizabeth Carolyn Miller have discussed idealism as an antonym to both realism and modernism in period 1850–1950.³¹ As they show, this was a term current in literary and art criticism of the period, related to but distinct from the philosophical idealism of the same period. In the view, for example, of Toril Moi,

³⁰ Ruskin, 'The Two Paths', in *The Works of John Ruskin*, eds. Cook and Wedderburne (London 1905) vol. xvi, p. 268. Fitzgerald's notes are preserved in the red notebook in Box 8, Folder 9, Penelope Fitzgerald Collection, Harry Ransom Centre, University of Texas at Austin.

³¹ In addition to the Marcus and Moi texts cited below, see Schor, *George Sand and Idealism* (New York 1993), and Miller, 'Twilight of the Idylls: Wilde, Tennyson, and *Fin-de-Siècle* Anti-Idealism', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 43/1 (2015) pp. 113–30, esp. 114–16.

European modernism emerged as a reaction against idealism, rather than realism.³² In this sense idealism is a neglected third term in literary histories of the long nineteenth century, which have tended to focus on a perceived (though in Moi's view false) opposition of realism and modernism. 'Idealism', according to Marcus, 'referred to the belief that literary representations should not be governed by mimesis and fidelity to reality but by values, by adherence to ideas of the good.'³³ For each of these critics, idealism is a politically reactionary movement, which worked to 'endow' social norms 'with the status of transcendental values'.³⁴ 'Idealism' is not a term Fitzgerald returns to, or defines in detail. But insofar as 'idealism' is a helpful term in understanding her portrait of Burne-Jones, she clearly sees it in more positive terms. She was alive to the dangers of Burne-Jones's idealism, for example in his relationship with women subjects. Nonetheless, she saw the idealism underlying his work as more than the naturalisation of social norms. For her, it enabled a *disturbance* rather than a retrenchment of accepted ideas about reality, value, and personhood. The visionary quality of Burne-Jones's work, its interest in the immaterial, in the human soul, and in notions of truth and value ('the strange land that is more true than real') that were not materially tangible: all these things were deeply attractive to her. These were the aspects of his work which led Ruskin to call it an investigation into 'spiritual truth'. They showed Fitzgerald one way that art might be 'spiritual', and inspired her own future work in ways that will be described in the second part of this essay.

Scholars of Fitzgerald's work, when they pause on *Edward Burne-Jones*, have read the book predominantly as a source of characters, objects, and anecdotes that will reappear in her later fiction. Her interest in Burne-Jones is framed in terms of her interest in the world in which he lived. Hugh Adlington calls *Edward Burne-Jones* the 'seedbed for all of Fitzgerald's subsequent writing', and illustrates this by tracing links from the biography into her later books. 'William Morris may have been the model for Len Coker, the socialist craftsman in *The Golden Child*. William de Morgan's magical ceramics surface in *Offshore*.'³⁵ Hermione Lee notes further connections from *Edward Burne-Jones* to the later work, including the reappearance of

³² See Toril Moi, *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theatre, Philosophy* (Oxford 2006) pp. 2–5 and 67–104 *passim*.

³³ Marcus, 'Comparative Sapphism', in Margaret Cohen and Carolyn Dever (eds.), *The Literary Channel: The Inter-National Invention of the Novel* (Princeton, NJ 2002) pp. 251–85: 268.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 270.

³⁵ Adlington, *Penelope Fitzgerald*, p. 25.

the Ionides family (through whom Burne-Jones had met Maria Zambaco) in her story 'The Likeness' from the late 1980s. Other echoes include the 'Swiss gentian pressed into the pages of Ruskin's *Unto This Last* at the end of *The Bookshop*', and the fleshing out of an anecdote from *Burne-Jones* – two young cyclists crash into one another and wake up in the same bed having been taken for man and wife – as a key plot device in *The Gate of Angels*.³⁶ To these, I would add that understanding Fitzgerald's attachment to Burne-Jones makes sense of both Willis's curiously equivocal defence of Whistler in *Offshore* ('Whistler was a very good painter. You don't want to make any mistake about that. It's only amateurs who think he isn't',³⁷), and Fitzgerald's satire of the Bastien-Lepage-inspired *plein-airistes* in her miraculous late story 'The Red-Haired Girl'.

A broader channel of thematic connections runs from *Edward Burne-Jones* to Fitzgerald's last, and most acclaimed book, *The Blue Flower*. A generic hybrid of novel and biography – Fitzgerald called it a 'not-quite-novel' and a 'novel of sorts',³⁸ – *The Blue Flower*, like *Edward Burne-Jones*, was motivated in large part by Fitzgerald's interest in flower symbolism. Like *Edward Burne-Jones*, *The Blue Flower* is a life narrative of a Romantic artist, which attempts – in the words of the *Burne-Jones* foreword – an account of the 'daily life' which 'projected' Novalis's fundamental and defining symbols. The symbol of the flower, the blue flower or the briar rose, is at the heart of both books, as is their connection with women in the artists' lives.³⁹

However, the afterlife of Fitzgerald's work on Burne-Jones was larger than incident, character, and anecdote, and larger even than the thematic links that join *Edward Burne-Jones* and *The Blue Flower*. Fitzgerald's writings on Burne-Jones also posed technical and stylistic questions to which she would respond in her later work. The plot of misplaced love, the woman whose love goes unrecognised by the solipsistic man – 'tell me what I have done, except to love unwisely' – is an abiding 'image' in Fitzgerald's work. It recurs in *Human Voices* (1980), 'The Means of Escape' (1993), and 'The Red-Haired Girl' (1998), and – in its best-known version – in *The Blue Flower*. In *The Blue Flower*, we see an evolution of the technique of triangulation whereby, in *Edward Burne-Jones*, Fitzgerald had both shown us the

³⁶ Lee, *Penelope Fitzgerald*, pp. 226–7.

³⁷ Fitzgerald, *Offshore* London 2013, p. 60.

³⁸ Fitzgerald, *So I Have Thought of You*, pp. 322, 417.

³⁹ Lee suggests that Fitzgerald's work on Burne-Jones 'led her to her interest in Novalis via his [Burne-Jones's] father in law, George MacDonald'. But this is overstating the case. The 'George Macdonald' to whom Fitzgerald referred, in a letter to Frank Kermode, as 'the person who really understood' Novalis was the novelist George MacDonald (b. 1824). The father of Georgiana Burne-Jones was a different George Macdonald (b. 1805). Lee, *Penelope Fitzgerald* pp. 389–90, and see also p. 226.

artist's visions from within and shown us, by reference to Georgiana's perspective, their solipsism and potential for hurt. The newly graduated Fritz von Hardenberg (Novalis) is sent to the house of a tax collector to learn the trade, where he meets the collector's niece, Karoline Just. Through the book, Karoline's devotion to Fritz shadows Fritz's more famous infatuation with the much younger Sophie von Kühn. On meeting Karoline, Fritz claims that 'everything was illuminated'; he is reproved for calling her beautiful ('You did not mean it, and she is not used to it'); and it is to Karoline, not to Sophie, that he first reads his fragment of a tale about desire, 'The Blue Flower'.⁴⁰ The next time Fritz sees Karoline, he tells her that he is in love, but not with her, and she feels 'as though her body had been hollowed out'.⁴¹ Fitzgerald never tells us if Fritz is thoughtless or cruel in inviting Karoline's love in this way, and like Karoline herself, the narrator never explicitly states how Karoline feels. But when Fritz, grandstanding, says that she does not understand desire, it is 'impossible for her to let this pass': "Not everyone can speak about what they suffer," she said.⁴² The technique of triangulation in *Edward Burne-Jones*, which had accommodated Georgiana's sadness whilst inhabiting her husband's vision, is developed and expanded in *The Blue Flower*, becoming the affective core of the novel, such that the reader's understanding of who the main protagonist is blurs. One ends the book wondering if the impossible and unrealisable desire that Fitzgerald takes as her subject does not in fact belong to Karoline Just rather than Novalis. When a copy of the 'Blue Flower' fragment is listed among the possessions of Sophie von Kühn, it is 'in the handwriting of Karoline Just, who did all Fritz's copying for him'.⁴³

Techniques also emerge in Fitzgerald's later writing which pick up on ideas explored in *Edward Burne-Jones*, but which were not realised in the original biography. In *Edward Burne-Jones* we saw Fitzgerald exploring artworks which refused narrative chronology in favour of simultaneity, yet the biography is not itself a site of narrative experiment in this way, telling a sequential story that runs from the birth to the death of its subject. One of the most important technical changes in Fitzgerald's later books *Innocence* and *The Blue Flower* is her use of very short chapters (seventy-four in *Innocence*, of which the shortest is just four lines long). This allows Fitzgerald to foreground the scene, or even the moment, within the narrative. Of one character in *Innocence*, Maddalena, Fitzgerald writes that 'her mind moved from point to point not rationally but by a series of clear bright pictures,

⁴⁰ Fitzgerald, *The Blue Flower* (London 1996) p. 49.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 74.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

showing what had been and what ought to be'.⁴⁴ Maddalena is a great eccentric, but Fitzgerald identified with eccentrics, and this description could be read as alluding to the narrative structure that Fitzgerald herself was attempting in these late books. They proceed as an album of vivid encounters, scenes, or visions, which occupy a strange generic position between realism and non-realist genres, pastoral, parable, romance, or *poesia*.⁴⁵ The moment in *Innocence* when the two protagonists sleep together (we assume) for the first time is told as a tableau glimpsed by a neighbour: 'shutters had been thrown open and the white summer bedcovers had been flung out to air and they had been laughing, like children at a joke'.⁴⁶ In *The Blue Flower*, Fritz asserts the priority of the 'glimpse' or image in the way he remembers and values his experience:

We think we know the laws that govern our existence. We get glimpses, perhaps once or twice in a lifetime, of a totally different system at work behind them. . . . When I first met Sophie, a quarter of an hour decided me. . . . In the churchyard at Weissenfels I saw a boy, not yet quite grown into a man. . . . These were the truly important moments of my life, even if it ends tomorrow.⁴⁷

This is another passage which reflects on Fitzgerald's own late technique: lives are recounted as a succession of visions which distort linear chronology and allow us to 'glimpse' another way of experiencing time. In Wendy Lesser's words, 'Fitzgerald's greatest novels [have] a skewed relationship to the passage of time'. Comparing these novels to Vermeer's paintings, she writes that they give 'a snapshot of a fleeting moment', and at the same time a sense of 'timelessness': 'as if that one moment – of weighing something in the balance, of playing a single note on a keyboard . . . – were an eternity in its subject's life'.⁴⁸ Her novels 'seem to go on forever even as they are locked in a particular moment'.⁴⁹ We cannot understand this technique without remembering the years Fitzgerald spent trying to forge a life narrative from a series of paintings which, to contemporaries, seemed to

⁴⁴ Penelope Fitzgerald, *Innocence* (London 2013) p. 194.

⁴⁵ I am indebted here to Don Adams's exploration of how features of non-realist genres, particularly parable and allegory, are embedded in Fitzgerald's superficially 'realist' work. See Adams, 'There's a Providence Not So Far Away from Us: Penelope Fitzgerald's Parablistic Realism', in his *Alternative Paradigms of Literary Realism* (Basingstoke 2009) pp. 123–85.

⁴⁶ Fitzgerald, *Innocence*, p. 193.

⁴⁷ Fitzgerald, *The Blue Flower*, pp. 216–17.

⁴⁸ Wendy Lesser, 'Penelope', in Zachary Leader (ed.), *On Modern British Fiction* (Oxford 2002) 107–25: 112.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

exist in a 'land . . . where there is no time' and which were characterised by a 'visionary stillness'.

Fitzgerald used abstract nouns as mottos or emblems with increasing prominence in these late novels. One of her working titles for *Innocence* was *Happiness*. 'Really', Fitzgerald once said, the book is about 'what a great mistake it is to try and make other people happy.'⁵⁰ Relatives of Chiara, the heroine, are defined by their tendency towards 'rash decisions, perhaps always intended to ensure other people's happiness, once and for all'.⁵¹ 'What's all this about happiness?' the hero, Salvatore, asks, disturbed at the way Chiara has overturned his routine and priorities.⁵² Like Salvatore, Fitzgerald's use of the word is exploratory. Both the title(s) of the book and the prominent use of abstract nouns within it place these abstractions next to the series of 'clear bright pictures' as a kind of motto, inviting interrogation. In what way does 'happiness' define what we have just seen? If this scene is understood to show happiness, how does that change our sense of what happiness is? What *is* all this about happiness? Chiara and Salvatore do not find it in a lasting way, or on purpose, but it appears in pockets of time when it least needs to be spoken of. Seeing her father after she has first met Salvatore, Chiara's 'happiness was not discussed, it wasn't necessary, it could be felt and seen and seemed to stir the air . . . between them'.⁵³ Drawing attention to abstract nouns like 'innocence' or 'happiness', and to the limited way they can articulate their subject, Fitzgerald presents these abstractions as mysterious, in the sense defined above. She prompts us to handle them as we would the flower language of Victorian glossaries, and of Burne-Jones's paintings. The clearest example of this is found when we see Karoline Just trying to interpret the meaning of the 'Blue Flower' fragment in precisely these terms. After reading her the story of the dreamer's vision of the Blue Flower, Fritz asks her, 'What is the meaning of the Blue Flower?' She says, 'It cannot be poetry, he knows what that is already. It can't be happiness, he wouldn't need a stranger to tell him what that is'.⁵⁴ It is revealing that 'poetry' and 'happiness' are the interpretations to which her mind is drawn, and that whilst 'poetry' and 'happiness' seem too simple to be the answer, beyond them she can think of nothing, and sits in silence not knowing what to say. To identify the blue flower with 'poetry' or 'happiness' is the beginning, but not the end, of the task of interpretation.

As we have seen, Fitzgerald's work on Burne-Jones bequeathed her a storehouse of characters and plots, and can be seen as her first attempt at a

⁵⁰ Cit. Lee, *Penelope Fitzgerald*, p. 308.

⁵¹ Fitzgerald, *Innocence*, p. 10.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 250.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 188–9.

⁵⁴ Fitzgerald, *The Blue Flower*, p. 63.

biographical challenge which would culminate in *The Blue Flower*. Techniques from her first book evolved and became prominent in her later work, and artistic ideas that she discusses in *Edward Burne-Jones* become technical innovations in her finest novels. These details give a clue to, but do not encompass, what we learn about Fitzgerald's work by looking in detail at *Edward Burne-Jones*. Rather, they suggest a still larger bequest. The largest single window *Edward Burne-Jones* opens onto her career is to give us a glimpse of her wider 'spiritual' outlook, and onto the nature and purpose of her writing. As I have said, when she spoke about the 'spiritual' meaning of her own work, she was echoing Ruskin, who said of Burne-Jones that he was not a 'materialistic' painter, but one concerned with 'spiritual truth'. This contrast, between material and immaterial, is crucial. The 'spiritual' outlook that I believe Burne-Jones and Fitzgerald shared was a rejection of materialism and an investment in the lasting truth of non-material things, such as archetypal stories, virtues, and ideals. These subjects, for Fitzgerald as for Burne-Jones, were inexhaustible, and hence mysterious, but also eternal. Fitzgerald's art, like that of Burne-Jones, is misunderstood if read simply as an instance of social realism. Nor is it autotelic, having a meaning or purpose in its own significant form. Rather, it points beyond itself, searching to articulate the manifestation of these myths, ideals, truths – 'happiness', for example – as they are 'projected' by or upon people's lives in the terrestrial world.

Fitzgerald was a writer whose imaginative and technical innovation grew throughout her writing life, culminating in the great metaphysical novels of her late career. *Edward Burne-Jones* is an elegant and moving book, whose deepest interest lies in the sympathetic care it takes to expound a vision of art which, by the time the biography was published, would have seemed outdated and strange. It took many years, and many books, for Fitzgerald to realise aspects of that aesthetic theory in her own writing. Yet her encounter with Burne-Jones – dating as far back as the evening light glimpsed through the red stained-glass windows in Birmingham – was a key formative influence which stayed with her. At the beginning of *Edward Burne-Jones* she describes the artist as a teenager, reading the Grail romances in his Birmingham bedroom. It was here, she writes, 'in the two-up two-down house on Bristol Road that Burne-Jones confirmed his idea of life as a quest for something too sacred to be found' (p. 26). As in her first book, so in her last: Fritz, in *The Blue Flower*, understands life in the same way. For Fitzgerald these were among the 'truly important' visions of the artist's vocation. At the deepest level, what united Burne-Jones with the Fitzgerald of *Immence* or *The Blue Flower* was that they each saw their own art as pointing beyond itself, as an attempt to suggest or gesture towards immaterial things – values, virtues, ideals, and archetypal stories – whose immutable

truth they affirmed, but which could never be exhaustively fixed or 'found'. This is how I understand one of the most quoted lines in her oeuvre: 'If a story begins with a finding, it must end with a searching.'⁵⁵ It is spoken by Fritz in *The Blue Flower*; but I think Fitzgerald would have claimed it as her own.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 112.