

# Penelope Fitzgerald and the Field of Consciousness

Larry Lohmann  
The Corner House

E. M. Forster, carried on an early 20<sup>th</sup>-century modernist wave that has yet to recede, once complained of the “tiresome” pressure he felt as a novelist to “pretend to inhabit one person and not all”. Happily, some writers are untroubled by injunctions to do either. Here is a passage from Penelope Fitzgerald’s *Innocence* (1986), in which Count Giancarlo Ridolfi, his nephew Cesare and an unnamed black gun dog, for reasons possibly unclear to any of them, find themselves taking a walk on their old farm outside Florence in the middle of what the Count has hoped will be a conference with Cesare to lay plans for the February 1956 wedding of his daughter Chiara to Dr. Salvatore Rossi, late of the depressed community of Mazzata in the south of Italy:

The *fattore*, who must have been following them, now came up in absolute silence and joined Cesare between two lean old trees. Cesare bent down and picked up a handful of stones or earth or both, sorted them out in his palm and showed them to the *fattore*, who nodded, apparently satisfied. Then, noticing the Count, he wished everyone in general good-morning, and retreated down the slope. At the bottom he got onto his bicycle, adjusting a sheet of corrugated iron which he had been carrying on the handlebars, and pedaled slowly away. The wind caught the flapping edge of the iron with a metallic note, repeated again and again, fainter and fainter. The dog, crouching, followed the sound with sharp attention, hoping that the sound might become a shot. And yet when I was a boy and lived here I was impatient for every morning, the Count thought. And Chiara was always clamoring to come out here, ever since she could totter about after Cesare (29-30).

I count at least eight consciousnesses simultaneously at work in this typical Fitzgerald paragraph. The *fattore joins* and *notices*. Cesare *shows* him something. The dog (of whom more later) *hopes*. The old Count, possibly Cesare also, *realize* belatedly that the *fattore* must have been walking up unseen from behind. In remote pasts, the young Count *is impatient*, and the little Chiara *clamors*. From a figurative distance, the lightly-ironic narrator notes that the *fattore* may be only *apparently* satisfied with the contents of Cesare’s hand, whose significance she – and probably the Count as well – are aware that they cannot make out very clearly. Meanwhile, the narrator’s silent partners – the novel’s conspiratorial readers – *recognize* her intention to convey to them her playful, teasing attitude not only to the story’s other characters, but to herself as well.

It would be obtuse to describe this paragraph, a tiny mosaic vibrating with complexity and connected by numerous threads to other parts of the novel, as if it were a serial “inhabiting” of discrete, bounded individuals, who each enjoy privileged access to perfectly-edited scripts unrolling in their own minds, by an even more privileged “omniscient narrator” who presumes to be able to bounce us from one private observation post to another. If Fitzgerald “inhabits” anything, it is the same public field of human and extra-human interplay that almost everyone else inhabits in the course of routinely attributing fleeting, complex mental states to others. The modest multitudes her novels contain are not a skein of autonomous narrated consciousnesses, but rather a field of changing nodes coming into being as they unpredictably interact with one another. Or perhaps “*intra-act*” would be a better word, in recognition of Karen Barad’s (2006: 33) insight that “distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action,” being distinct only “in relation to their mutual entanglement.” Cutting straight through the predicament imagined by Forster, Fitzgerald’s narrators shy away from contriving either single or multiple perspectives to be

“inhabited.” As if following Donald Davidson (2004: 18), they recognize knowledge of other minds in a shared world as “basic to all thought”, not something that can ever be in serious doubt. They allow themselves neither to pretend to be invisible (Venuti 1998, Sakai 2006, Liu 2019, Robinson 2017) nor to occupy more than the space of a minor character who is there largely to help constitute those more prominent (Woloch 2003). Their presence as contemporary observers on the margins of stories set in the past (*Offshore* [1979], *Human Voices* [1980]), and as English observers in those set outside England (*Innocence*, *The Beginning of Spring* [1988]), highlights the otherness of Fitzgerald’s subjects, simply because it broadens and dapples the landscape in which they are situated. Arguably, it is precisely by declining to isolate or fetishize particular interior voices – which, in some of her most intensely-aware characters, particularly women, are often strikingly quiet – that Fitzgerald most notably enriches the capacity of the novel to present and augment consciousness. It is because of her intense concentration on evolving collectives that are “more than one, less than many” (de la Cadena 2010) that her individuals become so individual.

In the brief appreciation of Fitzgerald’s work that follows, I try to extend this point by calling attention to the ways that she brings animals and other nonhumans into her novels’ flickering fields of action. Here, too, I propose, her success derives not from trying to get closer and closer to what it might “be like” to be this or that individual nonhuman (Nagel 1974) – nor from treating nonhumans as wholly Other on the ground that they cannot be so inhabited – but rather in keeping her alert gaze on the public give and take between them and their human counterparts, some of which will as a matter of course wind up being described using intentional idioms most commonly used with human beings (Dennett 1978). The same sensibility is at work, I suggest, in Fitzgerald’s proclivity for describing moments in a story from points of view located both in the present in which it is unfolding and in its future, or even outside linear time, thickening the texture of events by giving them a dual aspect of flow and stasis. On the one hand, events are narrated in the characters’ “real time”, at a point at which a future experienced as indeterminate is becoming a past felt to be determinate. On the other, they are often also seen from a perspective located beyond the end of the story – a perspective that fleetingly subsumes them into a rounded-off whole similar to a game, work of art or ritual that can be “finished” yet “replayable” (Huizinga 1949). In such cases, an event in the linear passage of time can become also a “timeless” exemplar, an eternally-returning occurrence or a fixed point in the four-dimensional “block universe” of physics (Ismael 2016). Senses of time, like nodes of consciousness, define and play off against one another while kept unsynthesized and heterogeneous.

It is through the “partial connections” (Strathern 2004) woven through these living composites and multiplicities, this article proposes, that Fitzgerald’s deceptively unadorned style achieves the extraordinary density or “bandwidth” that has so often dazed her readers. But before developing this theme, let me throw out one more introductory example of Fitzgerald’s craft – again from *Innocence* – in which a short passage dominated by straightforward dialogue incorporates, toward its end, something closer to what Mikhail Bakhtin called polyphony – in this case a polyphony of time as well as of character. At the wedding ceremony that finally takes place on the Ridolfi farm outside Florence, Chiara’s Aunt Maddalena urges taciturn Cesare, who “never says anything unless the situation absolutely require[s] it” (17), to offer a few complimentary words about the groom:

“But I don’t speak,” said Cesare. “You know that, aunt.”

“You could say something pleasant about Salvatore, a kind of introduction.”

“I don’t know anything about him,” said Cesare mildly.

“I certainly don’t want to be described,” said Salvatore. “That’s one thing I hope to be spared, to know exactly what kind of a man I am.”

“Well, I should be glad to know what kind of man you are,” said Aunt Mad.

“The kind that loves your niece Chiara, and would give his life for her.”

In the atmosphere of wine and winter sunshine, it sounded not at all absurd, in fact it was not absurd and no-one thought it was. Aunt Mad seemed moved, others sitting nearby also seemed moved and began to clap their hands in frank admiration. Mad looked up again at Cesare, who said calmly, “You see how much better he speaks than I do” (147).

Here a misleadingly plain calligraphic stroke of seventeen words – “it sounded not at all absurd, in fact it was not absurd and no-one thought it was” – contributes a quick intra-play of five distinct consciousnesses, spread over decades, to the action of interpretation. There is a justifiable “baseline” judgment that Salvatore has said something over the top – which, the narrator implies, might well be the commonsense response of readers who were not present. There is a more indulgent passing impression among unspecified participants marinated in the “wine and winter sunshine” of the occasion. A perhaps more lasting verdict immediately intervenes in the form of the clause, attributable to an anonymous narrator who has made clear that she is looking at a photo album of the wedding 30 years afterwards (146), that “in fact it was not absurd.” The phrase “no one thought it was” meanwhile takes a figurative snap poll of everyone within earshot in February 1956. Collectively, these perspectives – which, as Bakhtin would emphasize, remain “unmerged” – intra-act with the awareness of the reader who recognizes and works almost unconsciously to navigate among them in a way that gives instant shape, heft and distinction to Salvatore’s untypically conventional declaration. That could never have been accomplished via dialogue alone, still less by strenuous attempts at sequential immersions in purported, individual “streams of consciousness” fabricated out of community experience over time. Something of what Henry James called “intensity” is accomplished precisely by avoiding the favored Jamesian procedure of privileging the real-time understandings of what are supposed to be especially sensitive and intelligent, if usually bemused, single “reflectors” to mediate the meaning of events. Instead we get something closer to what the distinguished Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2004), writing of Amazonian approaches to interpretation, calls a “process of controlled equivocation” – controlled “in the sense that walking may be said to be a controlled way of falling”. The recognition of what might be absurd or not, how and to whom, is shown to take shape holistically over time – together, it is implied, with a great number of other beliefs and desires – in a way that allows relationships to dwell within an expanding space of enduring differences.

## **Beyond Economy**

Like most novelists, Penelope Fitzgerald helps herself to techniques developed by her predecessors for bringing what became, sometime around the 12<sup>th</sup> century, silent, individualized habits of writing, reading and rereading into intra-action with the older oral skills of consciousness. In addition to having her narrators report individuals’ thoughts and spoken words in “real time,” Fitzgerald makes full use of the compressed free indirect discourse that Jane Austen and James Joyce did so much to pioneer. Like Dickens and Joyce before her, she poaches and juxtaposes selected morsels from the buffet of public discourses – advertising, adventure stories – that her characters channel. Like George Eliot, she regularly sneaks what David Lodge calls “the voice of Middlemarch” into her narrative sentences – weatherbeaten fragments of received opinion, gossip, idioms of identifiable classes, consensus views however idiosyncratically-expressed. Comfortable with the device of placing narratives inside one another, she is also constantly filtering the consciousness of others’ consciousnesses through extra interpreters who are also characters, often women the narration of whose own consciousness is seldom as center-stage as that of their male counterparts. Liberally

deploying irony and satire, her narrators play numerous affectionate jokes on her characters. And she constantly combines such procedures.

Thus two mothers at Chiara's wedding, "old and middle-aged," are introduced to each other only to embark immediately on a mutual recitation of "their trials and sorrows" in a way that enables the narrator to use free indirect discourse to tease not only these "voices of Middlemarch" but also Salvatore, who has always furiously opposed himself to them:

Sons were so much more trouble to bring up than daughters, yet the reward was greater. Strange to think that there were so many human beings born into the world, millions every day, and yet no two were alike. A mother would always know her own. The more suffering he caused her, the more she would recognize and welcome him. A man has only to look honestly at his mother and he knows himself a child again.

Fortunately Salvatore was unable to hear these remarks ... (149).

Similarly, Fitzgerald chooses Chiara as the innocent narrator of a comic story starring Salvatore's erstwhile mistress Marta, a seamstress, who pragmatically turns to advantage Salvatore's news that he is going to abandon her for Chiara by showing up anonymously at Chiara's doorstep to offer her services in making a wedding dress. Chiara's narration is in turn framed by Salvatore's fury at hearing it, motivated partly by his characteristic frustration that Marta, like so many others, has flouted his preconceptions about how she will act (169-70). Such nested packages maximize the number of (as it were) revealing chemical reactions among not only Chiara, Salvatore and Marta, but also Fitzgerald and her readers. The novel's audience must register not only what various characters' words mean and what responses those characters intend (and do not intend) to induce in their listeners, but also what responses Fitzgerald herself is intending to induce in her readers when they read her characters' utterances and responses (Grice 1991).

Thus, earlier on, the Count fields a question from his relative Monsignor Gondi, a status-obsessed Vatican bureaucrat, about whether Chiara's visiting British schoolmate Barney, who is prone to brash, apodictic pronouncements on a variety of subjects, has "mentioned" whether she belongs to the distinguished Barnes family back in England. "She's mentioned a number of things," replies the Count dryly, "but not that, as far as I remember" (112). The Count doesn't expect or want Gondi to register the understatement, but readers of the novel are supposed to, and to grasp Fitzgerald's own intention of getting them to appreciate the way the Count privately amuses and defends himself. Here four separate perspectives jostle to enrich the texture of the word "mention": Gondi's (and everyone else's) literal understanding of the term; the Count's detached enjoyment of his own predicament when faced with the voluble Barney; Fitzgerald's consciousness of these intra-actions among the three; and readers' awareness of Fitzgerald's intention to convey that consciousness. The latter can be achieved, moreover, only when readers immediately mix their own work into the novelistic process. This becomes obvious when the work is not done, as when some of Fitzgerald's admirers post on the internet various half-baked or lunatic utterances floated by one or another of her characters – "the body, then, has a mind of its own. It must follow, then, that the Mind has a body of its own" (*The Gate of Angels*, 47) – as if they were mottoes that Fitzgerald wished to offer to the reading public in her own person.

All this points to one of Fitzgerald's most obvious habits: to pack her mixtures of customary devices into uncustomarily small spaces. If she switches among different characters' perspectives, for example, it is generally paragraph by paragraph or, more often, sentence by sentence or phrase by phrase, as in the first passage quoted in this article, rather than chapter by chapter in the manner

of, say, Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* or innumerable detective and adventure stories. When a single character shifts shape under the pressure of events, even that may happen within a paragraph or two, as when, in *The Beginning of Spring*, the exuberant businessman Kuriatin, reacting to other personalities, immediately spreads out his own to include that of a prankster, an indulgent uncle, a lying schemer, a seeker after culture, a brusque peasant, or a repentant sentimentalist trying to be true to his childhood self, without any appearance of insincerity either to himself or to anyone else. Similarly, Fitzgerald's samplings of diverse popular and professional discourses and idioms are almost always truncated to allow other voices into each scene, avoiding the extended satirical riffs that Dickens and Joyce liked to indulge in. In *Offshore*, six-year-old Tilda loves to narrate her own life in heroic mode in real time, but never gets further than a sentence or two before being interrupted by numerous other consciousnesses and discourses. In *At Freddie's* (1982), direct quotation, free indirect discourse and a "voice of Middlemarch" are at one point squeezed into a single paragraph in quotation marks that is attributed to two commentators at once (124). The Northern Irish accents of Hannah and Pierce are meanwhile revealed only indirectly, when they are briefly, experimentally lampooned by their precocious child actor students. In *Innocence*, Fitzgerald abruptly cuts away from a close narration of Salvatore's parting interview with Marta to a sympathetically humorous commentary on the scene by an older friend of his during a conversation whose location is left out of the narrative entirely (150).

In Fitzgerald's case, this discipline of compression is not well described as "economy." Her pruning in fact has the effect, however paradoxical, of adding to and deepening her narratives insofar as it allows different reagents to come into closer contact with one another and reveal themselves in chemical reactions that could not occur in lengthier treatments. Her procedures depicting interiority, for instance, are not pared-down versions of Joyce's, Woolf's, Proust's or Faulkner's any more than the latter are stretched-out versions of Fitzgerald's. They are qualitatively different in virtue of being enlisted in the richer cause of an almost carnivalistic intra-action. Instead of privileging a solitary "Cartesian theater" of consciousness where "it all comes together" for the perusal of what Daniel Dennett calls a univocal "Central Meaner" or "Boss" (Dennett 1991, 2016; see also Rouse 2002; Davidson 2001: 52), they draw attention – at the sentence or paragraph scale – to underlying collective, public, dispersed and extended structures of awareness, repeatedly undermining the assumption that one should always "be able to say what one *oneself* means" (Sakai 1997). If Fitzgerald miniaturizes, it is to help trace consciousness in the form of what the historian Richard White (2010) calls a "middle ground," where meaning is constantly created from the intra-action of incommensurable interpretations that need never issue in a unified stream.

Similarly, something more than simple "economy" is achieved by pressing together different time perspectives on top of one another in the same passage. Every novel adds a "block universe" aspect to its events when it comes to an end or initiates a flashback, adding different kinds of interest and pleasure to successive readings (Cone 1977). Such universes are openly invoked in modernist novels that flirt with obliterating "distinctions between past and present" (Frank 1991: 63) even as their narration depends on them. But in Fitzgerald, "endings" are quietly scattered internally in a way that makes the intimate counterpoint among irreconcilable, senses of time particularly closely tied to the page-by-page unfolding of consciousness itself. The next section explores this temporal richness further.

### **Temporal Thickening**

Almost by definition, storytellers include future perspectives in their narratives. Sometimes these perspectives are leisurely elaborated: for example, Conrad's weaving of Marlow's retrospective meditations and stories into the main events of *Lord Jim*, or those of the unnamed narrators in the

revealingly-subtitled “Karain: A Memory” and “Falk: A Reminiscence”. But they are also often compressed: for example Henry James in “The Lesson of the Master”, F. Scott Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby*, or Paul Scott in his Raj trilogy when an account of a sexual encounter between Sargeant Perrow and Sarah Layton in an isolated colonial lodge in India is accompanied by a lone sentence describing Perrow’s unearthing many years later in England of the uniform he had been wearing at the time, still infused with its lingering smells of grass.

Penelope Fitzgerald’s own use of the device characteristically carries compression to extremes. In *At Freddie’s*, the child actor Mattie Stewart suddenly walks into the narrative as his adult self – a well-known hack actor known as “Stuart Matthew” – to offer a quick, self-serving version of his failure at a London theatre 20 years previously, before disappearing from the story forever (133). In *Innocence*, an older Chiara pops up for the space of a single sentence to reconsider an event in 1956 from the vantage point of “the later stages of her life, at times when things were not going well for her” (195). Similarly, in *Human Voices*, Fitzgerald’s comedy about BBC employees during the Second World War, no sooner does the teenaged Annie Asra get a moment of interiority than her feelings are instantly historicized by an unnamed narrator. Sam, the work-obsessed 46-year-old Director of Recorded Programmes, has been entertaining his young staff at a London restaurant; noticing Annie’s detachment, he tries to draw her out by playfully putting a ring on her finger that he has dextrously fashioned out of a red currant and the gold wire off a champagne bottle:

“Something inside her seemed to move and uncloset. . . . At that precise moment, . . . Annie fell in love with RPD absolutely, and hers must have been the last generation to fall in love without hope in such an unproductive way. After the war the species no longer found it biologically useful, and indeed it was not useful to Annie” (96-7).

Later on, Willie, one of Annie’s co-workers, lies on his back on Hampstead Heath pondering Annie’s predicament while looking at a sky that is “limpid blue from one horizon to the other, with no condensation trails” (124) – another future consciousness “inside” an unfolding scene.

Julian Barnes, who, like many of Fitzgerald’s comrades in the fellowship of the novelistic craft, holds her abilities in a sort of bewildered awe, refers to such passages as flash-forwards (2013: 12-13). But this is inexact, since their purpose appears instead to loft readers away from back/forward, past/present sequences entirely. They are not unfulfilled promises to tell stories about Chiara’s or Annie’s or Willie’s future lives or engage in Marlowean meditations. Rather they are devices, complete in themselves, for seeing those lives *sub specie aeternitatis*. For the reader, it is as if they layer an experience of standing before a painting depicting a story’s action on top of a moment-to-moment experience of hearing what the storyteller says next.

For the same reason, Fitzgerald’s insertions of glimpses of a narrative’s past don’t always fall comfortably into the category of “backstory”. They are often both less and more than that, functioning not to fill in a storyline but to suggest a circular or spiral time overlying it. In *Human Voices*, for example, a soldier on leave from the Second World War climbs through a window into his girlfriend Vi’s London bedroom before dawn and then shows up for breakfast with her mother downstairs, who makes “no comment, and it struck Vi that this too might have been much the same in 1914” (p. 99). Here the adverb “too” refers to a passage 90 pages previously when Vi imagines her mother saying, in the voice of Middlemarch, that if the telegram announcing Vi’s boyfriend’s death someday falls through the letter box, it will be “just the same as last time but worse because in those days people seemed more human somehow and the postman was a real friend and knew everyone on his round” (p. 9). For other Fitzgerald characters, too, the past often becomes present in unanticipated ways. When Chiara’s impatient visitor Barney demands from her a literal account of

her first sexual experience with Salvatore, what ensue instead are Chiara's memories of the *limonaia* of her childhood home, its smells and gardening paraphernalia, and her descriptions of the quality of darkness in the house where she and Salvatore finally come together. In response to Barney's sarcastic accusation, "And then I suppose you thought, what can I do to make him really happy?", Chiara, looking "composed and peaceful", says only, "I didn't think of anything at all ... It was very good of you to come" (109). Subsequently, when in the middle of a tiresome visit with his family in the South, Salvatore allows himself to think for a few moments of Chiara, what his mind supplies is an image of her naked, dragging an "unmanageable white duvet" to the windows of an upstairs room and "almost helpless with laughter." Curiously, the image brings with it a "sensation of purity and calm. This was not what he had expected" (113).

In *The Blue Flower*, Fitzgerald's most thoroughly historical novel, voices outside the 18th-century narrative line are pared pretty much down to a postscript, perhaps because some knowledge of what happened to its hero, the very young man who became Novalis, can be assumed already to be in some readers' minds. That knowledge forms one part of the ecology of the novel as it would of any biography – a genre in which, not coincidentally, Fitzgerald specialized in her pre-novelist career. But that only reflects again the way the pastness or "finishedness" of her narratives is intermittently before the eye even as they are being read, counterpointing the indeterminacy or unpredictability of the events that she also portrays with such unique insistence. Before concluding this section, I would like to highlight a smaller example in which her readers are allowed into such consciousnesses of time even without being explicitly directed away from the line of the developing narrative.

This is the curious but pivotal scene in *Innocence* in which Salvatore is closing his modest upstairs surgery after a long day's work on a lightly rainy Florentine evening in September 1955 (65-70). Since April, when he was introduced to Chiara during the intermission of a forgettable concert (31-32), he has engaged in all sorts of ludicrous displacement activities aimed at allowing him to overcome, negate or deny the impact this tiny event has had on his life and self-image as a thoroughly modern self-made postwar professional. He has repeatedly bewildered friends, acquaintances and strangers with shouted outbursts and unacceptable behavior unusual even for him. He has waded recklessly into a public controversy to defend the right of a grieving widow to defy the Catholic authorities by placing a statue of herself of appallingly bad taste lying on her husband's grave and beating the ground with her marble fists. (A replica is promptly ordered by Fellini, who stashes it in his *Cinecittà* warehouse for possible inclusion in a future movie.) He has thrown himself into overtime work with his patients, succeeding somehow in projecting a serene patience absent from every other part of his life. By 20 September, Salvatore is assuring himself that he is now in control of his obsession. The ordinary sights and sounds of the early autumn evening fill his, the narrator's, and the reader's consciousness. Outside his office window, the upper boughs of a plane tree strung with lights move in the breeze, the rest of its fading greenery "trapped motionless in the street below". The receptionist leaves for the day. Salvatore shows his last patient out the street door and watches him walk away down the street. On the trunk of the plane tree a red and white advertisement for a racing pool gleams quietly in the shadows. In the basement, a hand printing press begins to clatter away, as it always does after hours. Back in his office, Salvatore hears a young electricity bill collector get off his bicycle and pound up the stairs in a continuous movement, "probably to conform with his own idea of himself as an athlete." Seeing that the boy is anxious to get a commission for being able to collect payment on the spot, Salvatore dips into petty cash to settle the account. A minute later, he stands outside his office door, dangling his keys in preparation for locking up, trying to decide whether to go back to the hospital where he works during the day to check that everything has been done according to his instructions. At that slow-breathing moment, at the end of a sentence in the middle of a paragraph, Chiara comes up the stairs.

She has been finishing school abroad, and this is the first opportunity she has had in five months to seek him out. Salvatore, furious at the intrusion – which is “totally inappropriate to his state of mind, to the time of the evening, to everything imaginable” (69) – drives her away after a confused confrontation, painful to both, that ends downstairs in the street next to the plane tree. This sets in motion the comedy of errors in which Chiara enlists the counsel of her domineering friend Barney in order to give it another try, which is predictably botched even worse by all parties involved but does somehow result in Salvatore’s and Chiara’s marriage five months later.

The question here is what place the description of so many ordinary events in the Vicolo dei Semplice on the evening of 20 September 1955 has in such a slim novel. If the passage advances the plot, it is only by providing a thick frame for “Chiara came up the stairs,” a clause exemplifying one of the most elementary structures of declarative English and depicting nothing more than one person moving toward another. If the passage conveys a surfeit of consciousness, it is without much that could be called interiority: only around eight percent of its clauses even deploy verbs denoting anyone’s thoughts or emotions, and none mention Chiara’s and Salvatore’s feelings for each other. That suggests that a different way of representing and enhancing awareness is at work: the endowment of Chiara’s action with a double aspect of fitting but also not fitting into the linear time of the narrative. How the passage does that is hard to put a finger on, the difficulty itself being part of Fitzgerald’s art. There is a hint, transmitted by all the carefully-recorded detail that surrounds it, that Chiara’s coming up the stairs, while it is happening, is also being remembered years hence, perhaps repeatedly, like the wedding later in the book. Her coming up the stairs also merges somehow with Salvatore’s five months of agonized anticipation of just such an event, refracted through Fitzgerald’s many devices of indirection, during which he has found himself re-enacting the repeating cycles of sexual love in spite of his lifelong project of never doing anything that he might be expected to do. The “draught on our experience” (Isenberg 1951) that the passage makes also includes experience of previous literary works that have likewise layered, one on top of another, linear and circular time, or events considered in the flow of time and those considered *sub specie aeternitatis* (Spinoza 2002) or *in illo tempore* (Eliade 1971). There is the juxtaposition in Shakespeare’s sonnets, for example, of a temporal lady with black wires for hair and an “eternal summer” that “shall not fade,” not to mention the tumbling, incandescent imagery used by Florizel in *The Winter’s Tale*, who, electrified by his love for Perdida, insists on imagining her everyday trips to the local market as ever-repeating waves of the sea, that she “might ever do nothing but that,” putting a figurative *in illo tempore* “crown” on every move she makes in a way that makes it also a “queen.” Both are relevant references for the union of Dr. Rossi, the bearer of the “commonest name in Italy” (92) with Chiara Ridolfi, the undistinguished alumna of Holy Innocents school in Champerdown – a marriage destined to survive no longer than many others (Lee 2014, Fitzgerald 2019). What the passage highlights especially sharply is that crowded, multiple experiences of time need not be the result of injections of “exotic” mythology, religion, physics or cosmogony into a supposedly neutral substrate of the “here and now”, but are a texture of the field of consciousness wherever it is found. Fitzgerald’s careful attention to Gregorian dates that pass in the flow of time is not just a way of providing convincing period detail, but also a necessary counterpoint to her delineation of the equally social choreographies in which nonflowing time is enacted.

## **Animals and Water**

The quiet participation of the plane tree in the comedy on the Florence street, and of the dog on the walk at the farm outside the city, points to another aspect of the swarming, multivocal density of Fitzgerald’s novels: the presence everywhere of more-than-human agendas. Fitzgerald’s animals, plants, things, machines and ghosts are there neither as passive backdrop nor as entities whose

agency is revealed only when they are “inhabited” by a narrator assigned to depict what it is like to be them. Her animals in particular intra-act with humans, and humans with them, across what John Berger (2001) calls a “narrow abyss of non-comprehension” and surprise, projecting a force parallel to and “comparable with human power but never coinciding with it.” Neither household pets nor zoo inhabitants nor machines nor cartoon stand-ins for humans, they are subjected to human society yet continue to arrive, in Berger’s words, “from over the horizon” to join, unspeaking and more or less unthinking (Davidson 2001: 128; Shanker 1998: 8-9, 146-248), in the work of navigating existence. They are part of the field of consciousness not by virtue of being “inhabited” but quite the contrary.

Thus the black gun dog on the working farm of Valsassina outside Florence, who lives through most of the year in anticipation of hunting season, barks for the first and only time in her life when Salvatore is about to kill himself at the novel’s end. In *The Beginning of Spring*, a bewildered, delicately-described bear cub from the forest, shipped to Moscow as a present for Kuriatin’s oldest son, ineffectually struggles against horrifying cruelty from children at a party before being set on fire by a servant. In *The Bookshop* (1978), a Suffolk Punch horse in the East Anglian countryside chooses not to understand that a local amateur veterinarian is employing low trickery to sneak up on it in order to file its teeth to improve its mastication. As the veterinarian’s helper uses both hands to hold the beast’s struggling tongue out of the way, the horse’s ears twitch “to signal a protest at what life had allowed to happen to it”. The operation complete, the horse sighs and stares at the humans “as though utterly disillusioned. From the depths of its noble belly came a brazen note, more like a trumpet than a horn, dying away to a snicker” (9-12).

No one who appreciates such descriptive skills is likely to fault Penelope Fitzgerald for being “anthropomorphic” here any more than they will object to her narrators for being “omniscient.” Framed as an accusation, the term “anthropomorphic” is founded on the Cartesian assumption that beings that can plausibly be denied a private, coherent “stream of consciousness” can also justifiably be subjected to enclosure, exploitation and abuse without limit. The point has been to slot assorted commoners, pagans and anticapitalists into the category of, roughly speaking, Disney sentimentalists who, imagining thought bubbles above the head of every fawn or kitten, engage in flights of fantasy that can only cloud the underlying “objective” approach of scientists and captains of industrializing agriculture (Hribal 2012; Shanker 1998: 157-158). Fitzgerald’s procedures, however, are designed in a way that leaves little opportunity for this kind of modernist constitution of society-vs.-nature (Latour 1993, Viveiros de Castro 2004) to get off the ground in the first place. Her vocabulary of mental states, ricocheting between human and beast, only reinforces a sense of their comic otherness from each other in the physical intimacy of their common work. What Berger calls the essentially “metaphoric” relations between humans and animals in the types of mutual negotiation in which Fitzgerald takes an interest involve an unavoidable interdependence of similarity and irresolvable difference. These relations do not flourish when humans discover secret inner monologues in animals commensurable with their own any more than they fail when humans supposedly lose them in translation. Instead, they are a function of what the Ecuadorian anthropologist Eduardo Kohn, writing of an Amazonian society, calls a “shared trans-species *habitus* that does not observe the distinctions we might otherwise make between nature and culture” (2013: 132) yet also supplies means for resisting totalizing pressures to inhabit or represent animal subalterns in fixed ways. In the Amazonian context, what Kohn calls “soul-blindness” is not a problem of individual humans; “it is a cosmic one” insofar as having an individual self involves recognizing the “soul-stuff of the other souled selves that inhabit the cosmos” (117). For English readers, the word “soul” as Kohn uses it here can only be one of Viveiros de Castro’s “equivocations” insofar as it may at first suggest Christian or Cartesian human/animal divides. As such, it is likely to cue further dead-end modernist polemics against “anthropomorphism” that can

only be staved off by fresh equivocations confronting the lack of established vocabularies for describing what lies between the mental and the mindless (Davidson 2001: 128; Astington 1993). But, like the terms “mind” and “body”, “soul” is a word that Fitzgerald herself used, in ways that invite many open-ended series of such equivocations. If it poses what at first might seem to be an underlying identity, over time it might be supplanted with better ways of grasping the differences grounding human-animal relations.

What goes for animals also goes for the rest of the nonhuman world. Near the close of *The Beginning of Spring*, the mutely eloquent activities of a birch forest through the seasons connect to a nocturnal rendezvous among political revolutionaries, as well as recapitulating the story’s other birchy themes. Back at Frank Reid’s Moscow printing house, the religion inside the relations among tools, machines, labor and capital – as in much of capitalist India (Chakrabaty 2000: 77-83) – cannot without equivocation be assumed to be just a local aura surrounding a secular, universal essence. In *Offshore*, the river Thames, together with its boats, is more agent than stage, as are the innumerable nonhumans intervening in the action of *Innocence*, from the heavy art book whose enamelled pages close with a “voluptuous slap” (141), to the water draining out of an antiquated bathtub in Florence, whose “heartbreaking sobs and bass growls” (87) almost drown out Chiara’s and Barney’s bathroom conversation about how to approach Salvatore, to a car on a road rutted “first by ox-carts and then by small tractors”, which as a result bounds from one side to the other “as though in pain” (106). In *Human Voices*, even the Birmingham dialect has a living personality and carefully considers the feeling of each syllable before leaving it behind, “lingering over the final one so that it is given the opportunity to start the next word also” (101). In this world, it is only a short step to the cranky poltergeist inhabiting *The Bookshop* or the Cambridge college door of *The Gate of Angels* that unlocks itself, after having been sealed since 1869, precipitating a fortunate delay that allows the estranged young cross-class lovers at the center of the book a last chance at reunion. Here too, Fitzgerald resists arranging humans and nonhumans as figure and ground. Her humans work “from within the world, not upon it” (Ingold 2000: 68), and her prose style is one that would avoid erasing either mountains (de la Cadena 2010) or mosquitoes (Mitchell 2002) from the story of politics. Her nonhumans neither swamp human struggle nor stand back from it as local color; instead, they are part of what make it what it is.

### **Conclusion: Mind and Politics**

Penelope Fitzgerald made no secret of her sympathetic interest in what she called ‘exterminatees’: the lost, the defeated, the outsiders (Lee 2013; Bostridge 2013). But this interest is already implicit in her portrayal of awareness itself. Her insistence on the multiple voices of consciousness is an openness to the weak as well as the strong. This openness is evident in her implicit dissent from numerous hierarchies of perspective, whether it be the privileging of blowhard interior monologues narrated by “reified selves” (Hayles 2017: 45); the performance of “god tricks” (Haraway 1988) by narrators; the exaltation of linear time; the premise that characters must know the contents of their own minds better than they know what is in front of them; or the assumption that their own mental contents are given whereas an “empathy map” (Hochschild 2015) is needed to relate to others.

Internal multiplicity in fields of consciousness is bound up with power relations. The “double consciousness” of black people in the US identified by W. E. B. Du Bois (1903) is wrapped up with the need to contend with subordination. “Double-voiced discourses” are used more by women than by men because of patriarchy, not chromosomes (Baxter 2014; see also Graeber 2006). The encounters among plural understandings of time and nation that loom large in Indigenous political organizing (Estes 2019, Lenkersdorf 2008) are both constrained and necessitated by settler colonialism. In European history, polyphony and the leveling moments of carnival were linked for

centuries (Bakhtin 1984a, 1984b). In the Great Lakes backcountry between 1650 and 1815, similarly, it was only because of a rough Algonquin/European parity in fighting power that Europeans learned a “heterolingual address” (Sakai 1997) that enabled an awareness, however historically temporary, of multiple, irreconcilable meanings and beliefs implicated in personhood, manitou, animals, tools, debt, leadership and many other entities. Forced to recast “their own rules in terms of what they perceived to be the practices of the other” (White 2011 [1991]: 81), Europeans continually had to try, to borrow the words Lydia H. Liu (2006: 109) uses in the context of 19th-century China, to speak in each other’s “political discourse for the first time”.

In Fitzgerald, as I’ve noted, power relations are prominently reflected in the gender of interiority and privacy. On the page, her women have less mental life than her men, and what there is of it is less central to the stories. In *Innocence*, for example, the Count’s silent thoughts hold the stage at much greater length than Chiara’s in spite of the fact that she is more of a major character. In *The Beginning of Spring*, Frank Reid silently turns over ideas and feelings in well-turned paragraphs; Lisa Ivanovna, a figure of comparable importance and creativity, never thinks to herself at all. Nor does Daisy Saunders, the carefully-drawn 1912 working-class heroine of *The Gate of Angels*, possess anything approaching the stream of consciousness of her Cambridge lecturer suitor. Yet throughout the series of interviews she endures in the book, all of them freighted with unrelenting patriarchy and many with sexual insult, she never stops thinking and reacting to other people’s thoughts with her distinctive combination of democratic tenderness, curiosity and South London sharpness. Of course this generalization has to be qualified. Karoline Just’s extended unspoken thoughts in *The Blue Flower* and Hannah Pierce’s in *At Freddie’s* are essential to the narratives; Cesare’s in *Innocence* much less so. But the contrast is there, and not just as a representation of a world in which public and silent monologues alike, usually carried on in a single idiom, are generally a male prerogative. Given the obvious agency, in Fitzgerald, of female characters with less interiority, it is also a prefiguration or recollection of worlds of more ambiguous power gradients, where it can become both a necessity and a privilege – a “condition of sociality” (Morris 1997) – for human beings of whatever gender to be able to adopt in more equal part what literary scholar Naoki Sakai calls the “heterolingual address” – a stance that neither assumes audiences to be aggregated into unified groups with privileged access to their own meanings nor, by the same token, allows any speaker to confront them as a “unified and coherent personality” (Sakai 2006: 75). These are also worlds where it becomes harder to take seriously the unstable, simplified modern hierarchies of thought/action, representation/reality, and scheme/implementation, which strive to isolate (some) human agency – typically associated precisely with self-narration in fortified locations – on a plane above what happens (Mitchell 2002); or harder to respect the power relations formatted by post-18<sup>th</sup> century state modernisms, with their countable “languages” and their presumption of unitary national ‘we’s among whom translation is supposedly unnecessary (Sakai 1997). Gently undermining such conventional frameworks, the priority that Fitzgerald gives to complexly intra-acting combinations of uncommensurated voices over the “homolingual address” of streams of consciousness also underlines the unpredictability in events that she cherished, which always registers as anathema to those who adhere rigorously to ideals of planning, control or historical inevitability. “Less mental life” may be a prejudicial formulation insofar as it leaves out the “more” of certain kinds of agency and voice, in all their positive and negative possibilities, that can be hidden behind that “less”. Gayatri Spivak’s (2010) old question of whether the subaltern woman can speak, and if so how, when and in what accents and to whom, turns out to be alive and well even within the genteel precincts of the white European novel of manners.

Of course, Fitzgerald never ignored politics as conventionally defined. In her later novels, canonical events and currents in world history are always on, or just over, the horizon of the story’s action. Gramsci and his doctrine of the organic intellectual, together with the formation of the European

Community, play a part in the events of *Innocence*; the French Revolution participates in the life of Weissenfels in *The Blue Flower*; the coming Russian Revolution colors the story of *The Beginning of Spring* and the revolution in physics, the suffragist movement and the coming First World War that of *The Gate of Angels*. But as the epigraph from Novalis in *The Blue Flower* has it, it is the “shortcomings” of history out of which novels arise. And it is in hard-won novelistic techniques of exploring consciousness through the construction of paragraphs more than in choice of subject matter or setting that Fitzgerald’s brief, light, amusing and very English novels of middle- and upper-class manners reveal the richer fruits of her political thinking, and offer their surprising accompaniment to ostensibly ‘heavier’ challenges to modern foundationalisms and authoritarianisms from other fields. As this article has repeatedly suggested, these challenges may in turn provide useful fresh vocabularies for understanding what Fitzgerald does and how she does it, whether they come from literary theory, colonial studies, philosophy of mind, feminist psychology, anthropology, linguistics or even political ecology. Fitzgerald’s quiet decentering of autonomous heroes’ streams of consciousness, for example, chimes with the understanding, common to Hegel, Wilfred Sellars (1963), Daniel Dennett (1991) and Richard Rorty (1991: 5), that “consciousness, like language, is a product of social relations, and has an intensity proportional to the complexity of those relations”. This decentering complements the holism of philosophers who aim at a “total revision” of the still-influential Cartesian view that founds knowledge of others and of the world on individual humans’ reified sensations and thoughts (Davidson 2004: 18), and who view language “not as the externalization of thoughts, but as discursive practices that articulate understanding within the material world we inhabit” (Rouse 2002: 69). In a way, it even echoes Daniel Dennett’s proposal that the seemingly singular “observer’s point of view” referenced in the modern paradigm of subjectivity is actually spatiotemporally “smeared” all over the brain in a kind of barely-restrained Bakhtinian carnival of multifarious human and animal evolutionary elements (1992; see also Dennett 1991, 2017).

Occasionally, such sensibilities leak out into Fitzgerald’s characters themselves. The nine-year-old genius Jonathan Kemp in *At Freddie’s*, for example,

“... was born to be one of those actors who work from the outside inwards. To them, the surface is not superficial. He didn’t want to know what it felt like to be desperate enough to jump from a wall; he wanted to know what someone looked like when they did. From a walk, from a hesitation, from a nervous gesture, from breathing and silence, actors of Jonathan’s sort understand the human predicament. ... Since he was not old enough to explain the process to himself he did not attempt to defend it to others.”

In Fitzgerald’s later masterpieces, the orientations of the stories’ own personalities with respect to consciousness and agency tend to be more subtle and shifting, and distributed across the stories’ entire “character-spaces” (Woloch 2003). In *Innocence*, for example, Salvatore, traumatized as a child when he accompanies his working-class father on a prison visit to a crippled, ailing Gramsci, embarks on an attempt to escape politics altogether. For him, that means constituting himself as an invulnerable modern agent with the capacity to act unpredictably against a predictable ground that in impatient moments he identifies with mindless tradition. Needless to say, the blooming, buzzing world around him effortlessly defeats such attempts to define either himself or others. To his everlasting rage, other people and their innocently carnivalistic interactions turn out to be far more unpredictable than he could ever engineer himself to be. When, at the novel’s end, having failed even in his boneheaded plan to commit suicide, he throws up his hands at the continued humiliating intrusions of the uncontrollable and exclaims, “What’s to become of us? We can’t go on like this,” he has no comeback to Cesare’s calm response: “Yes, we can go on like this. We can go on exactly like this for the rest of our lives” (222).

Toward the other end of the class scale, the Ridolfi family, beneficiaries of centuries of hierarchy and high-handedness, nevertheless find themselves intermittently attuned to voices that are other. Chiara has a “tendency to fragment, often against her will, into other existences ... other points of view, the point of view of every living creature, all defensible” (67-68) that is tempered only when she meets Salvatore – although privilege has limited her experience to the point that she cannot understand how he can be jealous, or even how to quarrel with him. While Chiara’s various personal knowhows – sensitivity and loyalty to her friends, learned feeling for art and music, not to mention her skill at rollerskating – are as vast and unchronicled as anyone else’s, she finds it hard to explain or justify them, least of all to herself. Yet she is best friends forever with Barney, who, in a paradoxically touching way, affects an ability to deliver unimpeachable judgements about everyone’s lives on the ground of her claimed knowledge that “it’s like that everywhere” (67). Chiara’s father, the Count, despite his landholdings and comfortable existence, meanwhile carries a portfolio of failures – marrying a North American yet not getting rich is one of them – that apparently also qualifies him as one of Fitzgerald’s losers. While he retains a large mental space for inner narration and planning, his renunciation of his class responsibility to impose his understandings on others leaves him relatively open to their own. Thus, when the outwardly savvy and successful Monsignor Gondi (the Count’s version of Chiara’s friend Barney) invites several well-known novelists to a literary soiree organized for his benefit, the Count immediately grasps – with an unspoken sense of embarrassment “so strong that it resembled fear” (113) – what Gondi cannot, namely that the gathering is a “disastrous idea” bound to degenerate into a chaos of colliding, belligerent male egos. The Count also carefully refrains from interrogating Chiara about the inevitable rumors circulating about a sexual rendezvous with an unknown male for fear she will explain honestly what is going on; his sister Maddalena meanwhile does her best to keep the Count himself in the dark, imagining that he has no inkling of the potential scandal.

Nor is the Count alone among Fitzgerald’s males in having the good fortune to be compelled to tilt slightly away from masculinist conceptions of consciousness. Frank Reid, the levelheaded British businessman of *The Beginning of Spring*, accepts calmly that in Moscow in 1913, even the most intimate events of his personal life are going to be “played out, as upon a stage” (6), following an evolving script under collaborative authorship to which he will never be allowed to make more than limited contributions, and requiring great responsiveness on his part to the demands of numerous onlookers of various classes. Equally bilingual, Jeff Haggard of *Human Voices*, a head of department and “by nature” selfish (23), likewise lives in and benefits from a hierarchy. Yet he is also a willing participant in the ongoing carnival that, in “contradictory unity” (Harvey 2014) with the patriarchal bureaucracy of Fitzgerald’s fictionalized wartime BBC, turns out to be required for it to function – a contradictory unity encapsulated in the narrator’s whimsy of referring to characters by their functions – “DPP”, “RPD” – even at their most unbureaucratic moments. There is never a moment when, with amused curiosity, Jeff is not expecting to enjoy having to deal with the unexpected, right up until the second that he is blown up outside Broadcasting House when he tries to get into a German parachute bomb that he has apparently mistaken for a taxi. In that respect he resembles Freddie Wentworth in *At Freddie’s*, who, despite her massive girth and enormous age, takes huge relish in surfing agilely on the multivocal, combinatorily intense social waves whose negotiation is necessary to keep her impossible, marginal school for child actors going in the face of the continued consternation of her sober, “realistic” and single-minded antagonists. Unlike that of Salvatore, Freddie’s reaction to unforeseen contradiction tends to be one of pure joy. Then there is *Offshore’s* Richard Blake, an ex-Royal Navy Reservist who is uncomfortable with metaphor and one of Fitzgerald’s true believers in order and a “rational explanation for everything” (4). Yet here he is living among the anarchic, barge-dwelling “tideline creatures” of Battersea reach, looked to for leadership by female and male residents alike partly because of his ability to sense intangible

currents of human uneasiness even through the solid wood partitions dividing his boat's compartments (7).

Confronting her cascades of near-microscopic subtleties of style and construction, reviewers of Penelope Fitzgerald's books have always resorted to a recognizable type of phrase – “distillation”, “economy”, “tamped-down force”, “magical”, “muted power”, “the unsaid speaks” and “how is it done?”. But the brimming sense of life she shares in her brief pages reflects not magic so much as a lifetime of hard thought about power, representation and recognition. In trying to figure out how she does it, her more obsessive readers, of whom I am one, are likely to continue to need to call on as many intellectual resources as they can lay hands on. Vindicating once again the good-natured caution against “undervaluing the labor of the novelist” voiced by her great predecessor Jane Austen (2006 [1818]: 31), Fitzgerald reminds us that what is funny, entertaining, and quick to read may also constitute an exercise of the “greatest powers of the mind”, the “most thorough knowledge of human nature” and the “happiest delineation of its varieties”.

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