The
Hudson
Review
Volume LXI, Number 1 (Spring 2008). Copyright © 2008 by Dean Flower and Linda Henchey.

DEAN FLOWER AND LINDA HENCHEY

Penelope Fitzgerald's Unknown Fiction

She is carried away by the
mere beauty of words.
—E. V. Knox

At a Penelope Fitzgerald conference held in London in 2003, one of her former editors quipped that her first novel, *The Golden Child*, was remarkable "for being the only piece of juvenilia I know by a sixty-one year old."[1] That of course reflected how Fitzgerald has been portrayed ever since she won the Booker Prize in 1979 for *Offshore*, her third novel. After years of raising a family and teaching school, the story went, she suddenly, out of the blue, wrote *The Golden Child* "to entertain her husband," who was dying of cancer. Eight more novels followed rapidly, five written in her sixties and three more—possibly her three best—in her seventies, culminating with *The Blue Flower*, which won the 1997 National Book Critics Circle Award and sold well over 100,000 copies. She was then seventy-nine. Who can blame the publishers for calling attention to this stunning achievement? "Her writing career," they claimed, "began at the age of sixty," and she won the Booker—Britain's highest award for fiction—only two years later.

Yet could it all have happened so miraculously as that? *The Golden Child* was indeed her first novel, and had its flaws, but it was not juvenilia. In fact Fitzgerald's writing career did not begin then. Nor did her novels come out of the blue. Her mastery of narrative, evoking eras and places and characters, was already evident in two fine biographies, *Edward Burne-Jones* (begun in the 1960s, published in 1975) and *The Knox Brothers*, the biography of her father and uncles (begun before 1970 and widely praised when it appeared in 1977). What's more, she had begun writing

[1] Stuart Profitt, at the Somerville London Literary Group, on October 1, 2003.

fiction, stories if not novels, in the 1950s and earlier—in fact, by one account, since 1922. She kept quiet about this early fiction in interviews, and most of it remains unknown—unrecognized as hers, unrecognized as fiction, lost or misplaced, or simply left unpublished. These stories deserve to be brought to light, if only to show that Fitzgerald's later achievements—her unfailing comedy and wit, her artful concision, her compassion, moral rigor and narrative subtlety—have their origins in fiction written long before *The Golden Child.*

1

When Fitzgerald signed a contract with HarperCollins for a collection of her stories, which would become *The Means of Escape* in 2000, she composed the following list in her notebook,[2] under the heading "Short Stories 1997":

1922	The Victoria Line	everyones thoughts	possible
1926	Matilda, Matilda	locksmith & door	possible
1955	The Find	tramp, Beckett	possible
1958	The Mooi	possible, good ending	

Keep in mind that Penelope Knox was born in December 1916. She was barely six years old when she wrote (or remembered writing) "The Victoria Line" and ten when she wrote "Matilda, Matilda." Even if she thought both stories "possible" for *The Means of Escape,* they would be juvenilia by anyone's definition. Unhappily, the whereabouts of these manuscripts is unknown. Of the later stories, no manuscript of "The Find" has yet been found, but its ingredients—"tramp, Beckett"—also appear in "The Mooi," which does survive not in manuscript but in an undated typescript, apparently done in the late 1990s. But it was never published.[3] Why it was not included in *The Means of Escape* is anybody's guess, but Fitzgerald's note to herself about its "good ending" is quite true: "The Mooi" has a complex and profound ending, as careful reading will show. For now the point is simply that by 1958 Fitzgerald was well beyond juvenilia. She had

[2] Used by permission. Fitzgerald's manuscripts are located in the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin.
[3] The story is published here for the first time, pp. 71–77.

learned her craft early, far earlier than most of her readers have ever imagined.

She lightly crossed out "The Victoria Line" entry in her notebook, suggesting second thoughts about including it. We will probably never know what story she wrote about "everyones thoughts." But what does still exist are glimpses of its author in 1921, written by her father, Edmund Valpy Knox, who in the early 1920s was writing humor, parody, and light verse for *Punch*. Several of his sketches portray her as "Priscilla," a child passionate about the minutest details of flowers (she *demanded* to know their names) and so intense about reading that "She grips the book furiously and her eyes blaze with excitement."[4] One of these sketches depicts her favorite retreat, a place she called "Campion bear's house":

> Nobody except Priscilla knows what a Campion bear is; but the Campion bear's house I built myself. It is a small hole between two weigela bushes, roofed-in about the height of four feet with ivy and fir boughs. It is not really very easy for anybody but Priscilla to get inside it. It contains a small bench and a small chair, and on the bench there is usually a heap of what you would ignorantly suppose to be red rose-petals, but Priscilla says are slices of bread-and-butter covered with plum-jam.
>
> "'Now, boys,' cried the little Campion bear" (so says Priscilla), "'we'll all go to the house and have a fine treat.'"[5]

Later in the sketch, when Priscilla plays cricket according to her own aesthetic perceptions, ignoring rules ("she knows the spectacular points of the game—swift motion, flying bails"), and when she helps him pick cherries, her father is enchanted, especially by her way of counting the cherries:

> Priscilla's way of counting is not quite so accurate [as her older brother's], because she is carried away by the mere beauty of words and skips from thirty to ninety without a blush.

[4] "Autumn and Priscilla," *Punch* (November 9, 1921). See also "A Priscilla Dialogue" (June 16, 1920), "Priscilla Paints" (July 7, 1920), and "Priscilla Plays Fairies" (December 8, 1920). Fitzgerald used some of her father's sketches in *Punch* as biographical sources in writing *The Knox Brothers*.

[5] "Drought," *Punch* (July 6, 1921). Fitzgerald recalls the same place differently in her memoir of 1989 (see *The Afterlife*), emphasizing isolation and loss. She remembers collecting the rose petals in heaps, giving names to each of these "regular inhabitants" of her dark hideaway, and when the petal-characters died burying each with prayers and a hymn.

These are not just the feelings of a doting father. Even at this tender age she was recognized as a fellow writer, carried away by the mere beauty of words.

2

Penelope Knox's first publications appeared in *Punch* when she was still an undergraduate at Somerville College, Oxford, but they were reviews, not fiction. The year after she graduated and began working in London, "Wicked Words" appeared in Oxford's student weekly, *The Cherwell*, on June 10, 1939. It was her first publication to reveal storytelling gifts, a sketch about learning to use profanity, which she treated lightly, in the *Punch* manner—yet it was clearly her own. It begins, "I am now twenty-two, and I don't know how to swear. . . . When my heart is broken I say 'Cripes.'" Her speaker's complaint is that novels provide no help at all for one in her predicament. She offers this example from a novel of the 1870s:

> Lord Findlay's complexion clouded; his brow darkened, and there broke from him a few oaths of such violence that Belle, unable to contain her agitation, ran out of the parlour in a fit of tears.

But what *were* the violent oaths? she asks. Novels set in Edwardian drawing rooms are no help either:

> "I shall see you tonight at the Contessa's reception, of course. The dear dreadful woman! And I shall take Bertie, so that he can swear at everyone, and be so delightful."

The reader may not notice, as Fitzgerald spins off more "examples," that they are all her own inventions—quick, funny, instantly recognizable parodies. Like her father and her uncle Ronald Knox, she had an excellent ear for it. Here is her example of cursing in the modern manner:

> "So you're leaving me?" he jerked out, roughly.
>
> She nodded, mute and fascinated by his altered face.
>
> With an uncontrolled movement he upset first one, then the other suitcase, took a cigarette, slumped into a chair; then, quietly, he called her every filthy name he knew.

All these inventions reveal a basic storyteller's motive—to try out different voices and manners behind the mask of parody.

Fitzgerald understood enough about the *Punch*-style sketch to know that its speaker always ties together his observations, however loosely, with narrative. "Wicked Words" does that with apparent ease. Its speaker turns from novels to more practical research—a purported trip to Billingsgate to pick up some filthy language, then other visits to Oxford's all-male social clubs—Vincent's, the Bullingdon, the Union, the O.U.D.S. Smoker—always coming up short. She and her Somerville friends all want to swear and "be thought vicious" but are prevented when a performance of *Pygmalion* takes the "savor of wickedness" from the word *bloody*. Next she laments learning only "Dash!" and "Drat!" in her public school days in "the lower forms," and she ends by trying to send an angry telegram, using her most vivid curse, "DRAT YOU." When the post office refuses to send it, ruling it "an abusive communication," her closing words are "I felt proud and happy." Pure fiction of course, with everything kept light and witty.

Just beneath the surface, however, a different story emerges. Falling in love, a tempestuous quarrel, and heartbreak are all mentioned in the first paragraph. In fact, throughout the sketch love seems to be synonymous with anger and argument: "when I am in love and wish to end a dramatic quarrel," she says, omitting any notion of pleasure or happiness from the equation. Her parody of a scene in modern fiction tells of a woman's staring "mute and fascinated" at her departing lover while he calls her filthy names. Men curse, but she cannot, even though she is "rather common," like one of her male friends who was taught to swear "by a hedger and ditcher." Her lame attempts at profanity have only "exposed me to a good deal of misunderstanding," she says—faulting her own misunderstanding as much as others'. At the end her desire to send the angry telegram, which she has signed "WOMAN SCORNED," is denied. When you go back to the beginning of the sketch, Belle's parodic "fit of tears" is not quite so funny, and you realize how much unhappiness and frustration lie behind the whole narrative. Her tonally perfect introductory sentence contains it all: "When my heart is broken I say 'Cripes.'"

"Wicked Words" succeeds, at its deeper level, because Fitzgerald understands comedy. She had this to say about the genre in a 1940 review, where she protests "in the name of comedy" against the film version of *Pride and Prejudice*:

> All this is merely another illustration of the familiar Hollywood theory that comedy is uproariously good-natured. It is nothing of the sort. Comedy, and especially eighteenth-century comedy, is a matter of contrasts, and if Jane is sweet and good, and Elizabeth nearly perfect, Lady Catherine's pride and Mr. Collins' tediousness are more than faults—they are vices.[6]

Contrast is everything: the moral sense of comedy depends on it. Penelope Knox was almost twenty-four when she wrote this. Fifty years later, in her autobiographical essay of 1989, she made a similar point, describing her own fiction as "the tragedy of misunderstandings and missed opportunities which I have done my best to treat as a comedy, for otherwise how can we manage to bear it?"[7]

3

Fitzgerald's next ventures into fiction did not occur until the early 1950s. During World War II she worked for the BBC as a writer and editor in the Features Department, and she continued as a reviewer for *Punch*. In 1940 she wrote movie reviews that show an eidetic's eye for precise visual detail, discussing works by (for instance) Alfred Hitchcock, Carol Reed, and John Ford. After 1942 she wrote short book reviews, concentrating on poetry and fiction. These convey, despite their brevity, a decisive critical intelligence and breadth of knowledge, whether the work be Russian short stories, Eliot's "Little Gidding," or *Macbeth*. Her opportunities expanded and changed when she began writing for *World Review*, the monthly journal of politics, literature, and the arts that she edited with her husband, Desmond, from 1950 to 1953. He had graduated from Oxford in 1939 with a degree in history and was a captain in the Irish Guards when they married in 1942. He saw action in North Africa and Italy, received the Military Cross, and shortly after the war was admitted to the Temple Bar. Perhaps because he wrote *A History of the Irish Guards in the Second World War* (1949), Desmond was named editor of *World Review*, wrote its monthly column on world politics, and signed its first editorials. Very soon Penelope was editing and

[6] "At the Pictures," *Punch* (November 13, 1940).
[7] "Curriculum Vitae," *The Afterlife: Essays and Criticism* (New York, 2003).

writing as much as if not more than he was—articles on sculpture, painting, illustration, and folk art, biographical essays, literary book reviews, occasional poems. After the first four months most of the editorials were signed "P. M. & D. J. Fitzgerald," whether they were about politics or the arts, making it difficult to know with certainty who wrote what. They also liked to use an editorial "I" instead of "we," as if to suggest a single intermingled identity.

For many years *World Review*, founded in 1936, had specialized in international politics, including reports from some of the lesser known nations of Africa and the Middle East, so it was not surprising to see "A Letter from Tisshara" in the editorial column for March, 1951. Few readers would have heard of Tisshara, so it begins with an editor's note, explaining that he (Desmond, it seems) has been offered a job as tutor to His Highness, the heir apparent of Tisshara, and he has tentatively accepted. What follows is a letter from the Chamberlain, who signs himself Mirza Abdul Cossim, explaining the details of the new post and a bit about the country, its culture and politics. It all sounds just barely plausible until you reach the letter's third paragraph, which explains that "Prince Tissy" is now eight years of age, very delicate, and "living on a diet composed of wild rose jam and sour milk," making him "a trifle melancholy" and subject to nightmares. Can there be any doubt that all this is pure fiction? What comes next makes it certain: the Prince reports a dream of seeing "his maternal aunt, of whom he is very fond," walking down a corridor of the palace, smiling broadly, with her throat cut from ear to ear—a favorite ghost story motif (particularly in Le Fanu and L. P. Hartley) that would appear again in Fitzgerald's 1975 story, "The Axe." The letter goes on to characterize Tisshara's politics as systematic deprivation of the needy and to describe its traditional National Theater, which features ceremonial puppets or *bourzakis* (this "authentic" term is invented). The "curiously wrought" left-wing puppet has a ghastly face ("hunger accentuated by green ochre painted thickly beneath the eyes") and empty pockets, menaced by the right-wing puppet with full pockets and an expression "wonderfully life-like" of contempt and ingratitude.

A second letter, "The Feast of the Writers in Tisshara," appeared in July 1951, and it is equally satirical. Poking fun at the

pretensions of the British Council, the P.E.N. Club, writers' festivals of all kinds, and literary critics who dig up the bones of dead writers, the second letter (Cossim now spells his name "Merza" instead of "Mirza") offers some Dantean, almost Boschian scenes on a dusty plain, with crippled figures swarming over the graves, and an omnipresent moaning of wind, "the screaming and sighing of the grasses." Both Tisshara stories anticipate by twenty-five years the invention in *The Golden Child* of Garamantia, another purely fictive nation (complete with folklore, relics, dolls, and pictographs) used to parody and mock the contemporary world. Garamantian speech is characterized by strange, high-pitched bat-like twittering, but the Tissharan winds sound even stranger, and lead to more lurid reactions:

> the singing of the grass mingled in strange cadence with the ritual song of the writers which, fluctuating up and down, reached, at its highest note, almost to a scream; some of the lights thrown down and trampled underfoot caught fire to the grass and blazed into a smoky light which strongly illumined the writers, smeared with ink and a red juice that simulates blood, and leaping and mumbling their chops in a trance-like fury of abandon.

One can imagine Penelope and Desmond Fitzgerald inventing the features of Tisshara together, and enjoying their deception. Many of their jokes suggest a shared exuberance meant to be laugh-aloud funny—like the head of the Right-wing puppet carved from "a block of very dense wood" or the discovery that Coca-Cola paid for the grave excavations. It is harder to imagine Prince Tissy as being anything but Penelope's invention, perhaps because he anticipates—in his melancholy, his detachment, his violent dreams, his loneliness—so many of her later children. Tragicomically, Tissy fears he is growing smaller and smaller because he measures himself against the trunk of a plum tree that grows faster than he does. In the second letter, the Prince has fallen ill and Cossim is struck by how frail the boy is, confined and lying immobile in a darkened room, "with his fixed bright eyes on me." In its cryptic morbidity and ambiguity the scene prefigures the catatonic boy portrayed in "Desideratus," Fitzgerald's 1997 story. Both stories include a sardonic tutor, with nothing to do except occasionally—and irritatingly—quiz others. "The Feast of the Writers in Tisshara" ends with an unobtrusive but stunning plot device. Cossim's letter mentions that the

Prince's mother, the selfish and greedy Queen Safia, who ran off to the French Riviera when her husband died, plans to return. Later Cossim mentions a small tin box, with something rattling inside it, that the Prince keeps under his pillow "in case of emergencies." Cossim also reports the Prince's assertion "that if you drop quite a small thing from a high window on to someone's head, it would kill them dead." In the closing moments of the story the tutor reminds Cossim of the mysterious object in the tin box, Cossim hears "a noise within the palace," and he rushes toward it, knowing he is too late. The story's last line is, "Her Royal Highness, the Queen, had arrived in Tisshara." Here, as in so many of Fitzgerald's fictions—*At Freddie's*, *Offshore*, and "The Red-Haired Girl," for example—the death occurs offstage, entirely in the reader's imagination, exactly as Fitzgerald intended.

No further letters from Tisshara ever appeared in *World Review*, and Fitzgerald herself never referred to them later—either as stories or as sources for stories, even though details like the tutor in "Desideratus" and the dregs of Coca-Cola found in supposedly ancient Garamantian vessels in *The Golden Child* might well have had their origins in Tisshara. Similarly, Merza Abdul Cossim's letters may have inspired Fitzgerald's later stories set in Turkey—"The Prescription" in 1982 and "The Likeness" in 1989—with their quasi-fabulous, *Arabian Nights*–like atmosphere. Perhaps the Tisshara letters were never mentioned again because she regarded them as *jeux d'esprit*, mere lighthearted games played by two neophyte editors in moments of impish fun.

4

In the course of searching for Penelope Fitzgerald's early writings, we discovered a story called "The Soldier in My Throat," published in *Lilliput Magazine* in 1957 and signed Desmond Fitzgerald.[8] We know of no fiction, apart from the Tisshara letters, written by him either before or after 1957. While it may be entirely his, it is also conceivable that it was some sort of collaboration—his experiences, told to her in rueful anecdotes, with comic exaggerations—and her ghostwriting, putting it all skillfully together. Desmond was well known at the time for his enter-

[8] *Lilliput*, Vol. 41, No. 5 (November 1957). Reprinted below, pp. 66–70.

taining storytelling, as acquaintances have attested. There is also a possible precedent. Penelope might have had a hand in writing Desmond's *A History of the Irish Guards in the Second World War* in 1949. Nothing he wrote under his own name in *World Review* could have deserved the kind of praise that a reviewer, Vincent Cavanagh, gave to the Irish Guards book.[9] "What is remarkable in this history," Cavanagh said, "is that [the author's] eye for detail is the eye of the artist, and is combined with such a rare degree of literary skill." He went on to praise its "authentic atmosphere," its "expert and scholarly selection of documents," its "subtle use of dialogue and description," and the way Desmond's "seemly and soldierly reticence makes his impressions the more effective." Eye of the artist? Subtlety of dialogue? It all sounds uncannily like a review of a Penelope Fitzgerald novel.

If Fitzgerald herself wrote "The Soldier in My Throat," she might have used Desmond's name simply to get the story published in *Lilliput.* She probably did that in 1951, signing Desmond's name to a letter to *TLS*, requesting information about A. B. Houghton, "the greatest of all the great black-and-white illustrators of the sixties." We know this is her interest, more than his, from the nearly identical language she used in her *World Review* essay on Richard Doyle, written two months earlier.[10] Far more than the probability of name-borrowing, the story's style leads to the irresistible conjecture that she wrote every word of "The Soldier in My Throat" herself. It harks back to the humorous sketch she learned to write from the pages of *Punch.* Its one-sentence first paragraph launches the story with a charming efficiency and wit:

> The extent to which the average person doesn't look where he's drinking, or drink where he's looking, was strikingly illustrated last week when I swallowed half an inch of orange juice out of the baby's mug and was immediately asphyxiated by a prickly, ill defined but solid object which lodged a quarter way down my throat.

Note the elegant chiasmus (*look/drinking, drink/looking*), the precision of "half an inch of orange juice," and the mixture of offhand comedy and pain. Desmond's political columns in *World*

[9] Vincent Cavanagh, "The Irish Guards at War," *The Tablet* (January 7, 1950).

[10] The letter to *TLS* (February 16, 1951) gives Desmond's address at *World Review.* Penelope's interesting biographical essay on Doyle, "Notes on the Fairy Pictures of Richard Doyle," appeared in the December 1950 issue.

Review never had such syntactic flair as this, nor any metaphors as entertaining as those in the story's next paragraph; the prickly obstruction is "hedgehog-like," and the pain makes him dance "like an old man in an amateur dramatical performance." The story's first-person voice recalls, in its comfort with narrative conventions, the editor's voice at the start of "A Letter from Tisshara." But its ironic detachment is greater. Note how this narrator, in his painful misery, characterizes his son who has "come round to study the processes of death by choking and was in a position to lend me eightpence in exchange for a signed credit note." Readers of Fitzgerald's 1983 story, "Worlds Apart," will want to compare Hester's deceptively "hardened" daughter Tilly with this narrator's son.[11] In both cases their factuality seems utterly compassionless, yet it's their skill in lying that leverages both plots and ironically brings relief at the end. They are typical of Fitzgerald's children—precocious, unnervingly detached, literal, untroubled by adult suffering, and shamelessly deceptive.

Behind the beleaguered father of "The Soldier in My Throat," who narrates his own inconclusive ordeal, never quite sure what to make of it, one detects another presence, an implied narrator who orchestrates it all, offering him more than he quite realizes by way of consolation and relief—including comic relief. He is after all the soldier whose war experiences still stick in his throat, whose suffering is real even though—as in a ghost story—medical science sees nothing. But this is left unspoken, seemingly belittled by the toy soldier metaphor. The heart of the story lies in the relief the man finds in the hospital, even though almost nobody there understands or believes him:

> But I sank back on to the high bed on its glassy sea of oilcloth with an exquisite sensation—the glorious relief of a struggling family man able to abandon all his cares, just for a while, on the broad bosom of National Health. The scene was so dear to me—the middle-aged, coffee-coloured West Indian sister in charge, the Dominican nun coming on to night duty, the lockers full of uneaten fruit and betting slips, the cretonne screens, the gentle hawking and snoring, the sense that all responsibility was laid on other shoulders, peace.

He does not just happen to find this peace. It's the hidden narrator behind who gives it to him.

[11] Reprinted for the first time below, pp. 78–86.

5

No records survive to prove that Desmond did not write "The Soldier in My Throat." That she wrote every word of it must remain a conjecture, however plausible or even probable it may seem. What does survive, and is unambiguously hers, is "The Mooi," the story she dated 1958 in her notebook. In first impression it seems to be a parody of Beckett, more clever than successful, perhaps an experiment that misfired. The speaker obsesses over the same few facts—a drunken tramp sitting motionless in the sun who forgets his lost bicycle—in a seemingly infinite regress, using a highly self-referential style that mixes colloquial plainness ("his scrawny buttocks") with lofty abstraction ("volitional renouncement of sensory awareness"). But the voice is not like those of Beckett's various bicyclists and tramps (Belacqua, Mercier and Camier, Vladimir and Estragon) or madly articulate defeatists (Murphy, Watt, Molloy, Malone) who can't go on and go on. It is rather the voice of a foreigner, a West Indian perhaps, one whose pidgin English inflects almost every sentence:

> Not only the Mooi forget he have a bicycle. Not only that. He forget he ever have one. He forget he buy it. Or get give it. And he forget the many happy times he have with his scrawny buttocks cradled by it cushy seat. He forget the feeling good of bony hand on rubber handgrip. Good feeling. But he forget it.

Whence comes this odd dialect, with its stylized solecisms and syntax askew? It seems to be indirect discourse, the voice of the Mooi man himself, since he is clearly some sort of stranger to English, yet it comes from a distinctly separate speaker, an outside observer whose diction is not inept at all but knowing, witty and ironic:

> The Mooi a fugitive from this world. He swim in a booze and a glue and a chemical sea. He have an inhaler but no asthma. He a margin man. He a skulking shadow man.

Although the voice seems to come from both inside and outside the Mooi, the speaker issues a disclaimer on this very point: "No way we the Mooi, man. Too much self-respect. The Mooi, *Moi*?" Playing with the word, the speaker insists on his difference: he is *not* a margin man or a fugitive from this world, not this stranger identified only as "the Mooi." Nowhere in the story does Fitz-

gerald explain this word, although her narrator toys endlessly with it. He tries out various acronyms, like "Man. Orlways. Out of. It." and "Most Out Of It." and "Mostly Out Of It." He changes it from a noun to an adjective and back (the "Mooi" or the "Mooi man," or "the Mooi, Man"), and it sometimes acquires an epithet along the way ("Flamenco Mooi," "Mendax Mooi," "tipster Mooi"). As the narrator spins this web of words around his subject, it becomes clear that the Mooi is indeed Moi, the narrator, one identity spun out of another or contained within it, despite his disclaimers. He may be only imitating the Mooi, but somehow they both tell the story.

Fitzgerald makes this reflexivity clear from the start, as a sardonic commentary on the nature of all storytelling. How can a writer claim to know what goes on in the head of another human being? Where does such information come from if not from the writer himself? If he actually has some "outside" information, how can anyone know that *that* source is reliable? In short, how can a reader *ever* know what is true and what isn't? As "The Mooi"'s narrator puts it,

> have we crystal ball or have we inside information? Have we spies? How research? . . . Indeed are we the Mooi? And if not how know everything that we do? How know the Mooi's inside trouser? And if we not the Mooi, who the hell the Mooi?

The rest of the story explores who the hell the Mooi is, and what he is. But it's clear from the start that nothing prevents either the Mooi himself or his narrator from lying:

> How know anyone the Mooi tell true when he say what he say? And when he tell what he tell? And how know we say true, when we tell what we tell? Even if the Mooi have told true. For we may alter it. And no-one know. For all anyone know the Mooi lie like a liar born. Mendax Mooi. And we too.

These questions reflect not just Fitzgerald's Oscar Wildean attitude toward lying as the basis of all fiction, but—more uncannily—the very questions that would concern her many years later when she began writing biography, *Edward Burne-Jones* and *The Knox Brothers.* Can a biographer claim to know her subject's inside trouser? When Fitzgerald turned from biography to fiction and published *The Golden Child* in 1977, the shifty boundaries between fact and fiction, authentic detail and pure invention, interested

her greatly. Might fiction and history be dovetailed? She researched all her novels carefully and placed each of them in precise historical contexts, always trying for maximum authenticity. She used Baedeker and Murray's guidebooks, maps, paintings, her own experience, published records, poems, and other novels. She liked to use walk-ons by famous figures like Gramsci in *Innocence*, Noel Coward in *At Freddie's*, and the whole Hardenberg family (plus Fichte and Goethe) in *The Blue Flower*. Or else she based her characters on recognizable figures, like M. R. James (Dr. Matthews in *The Gate of Angels*), or Lilian Bayliss (Freddie in *At Freddie's*) or Stephen Graham (Selwyn Crane in *The Beginning of Spring*). When she fudged a little here and there, who the hell know?

At the end of her 1992 short story "The Means of Escape," Fitzgerald reproduced a letter "in the National Library of Tasmania, in Hobart," on which the story was based—written by a convict who, aided by a rector's daughter, donned women's clothing and escaped aboard the *Constancy* bound for England in 1852. Anyone curious about that letter "in its complete form" (as she puts it) will discover by consulting the National Library that the letter is indeed complete—a complete fiction. So are all the purportedly historical characters in the story.[12] Yet much of it was factual; Fitzgerald went to Hobart in 1991, saw St. George's church where the story begins, learned about its seraphine and the man who invented it, visited the convict cells at Battery Point, and took notes on everything. If she lied about the letter, who the hell know? She lie like a liar born. In her 1989 essay "Why I Write," she confessed to great delight in persuading people to believe something actually happened which was pure fiction. Whether she was "a magician or a fraud," she said, "it is comforting to be considered, even wrongly, a crafty so-and-so."[13] All this is anticipated in "The Mooi," as if her fundamental approach to fiction—long before she wrote her novels—had already been worked out.

The plot of "The Mooi" emerges from the puzzle of identity it begins with. Nothing seems to happen, or nothing much. The Mooi sits in the sun with a smile on his face, murmuring or mumbling sometimes in his sleep. What changes—and changes

[12] Letter to the authors from Robyn Eastley, Archives Office of Tasmania, May 14, 2004.
[13] "Why I Write," *The Afterlife*.

dramatically—is the way the narrator watches, listens, and tries to explain the Mooi, to himself as well as to us. What seemed ludicrous at first—the spectacle of a drunken man utterly "out of it" and laughably different from the narrator—begins to trouble him. "Quite frankly," he admits, the Mooi's predicament "terrify us."

> That he in such bad way but he don't know. And he don't know that he don't know. That spookiest of all. And he don't care that he don't know. Cos he don't know. And he don't know that he don't care. . . . It exponential and endless. And yet he ignorant bliss. But he near destroy us mind.

So whose predicament is whose? The situation calls to mind Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener," where the cryptic Bartleby, a margin man if there ever was one, renounces the pointlessly busy world—to the deepening consternation of his narrator. Fitzgerald drew on Melville's story even more directly in her ghost story, "The Axe" (1975), where again the narrator's identity succumbs to that of a renunciatory victim and becomes his virtual double.[14]

In the next stages of "The Mooi," the tone changes. A new poetry and sympathy can be heard, modulating the speaker's ironic humor. While outwardly the Mooi remains in complete "dipsoblilvion," inwardly something else goes on in his head, moments "when come drifting up feelings like bubbles in the soup of his brain," which are somehow instinctual, "like almost memories of the muscle and the flesh." Is the Mooi reaching out for the handlebars of his lost bicycle or for a deeper, more spiritual support? The story acquires a ghostly dimension, with the Mooi—or is it his narrator?—feeling "for something" in the dark:

> Something dark, perhaps. Dark in the darkness. And visible through being darker than the darkness. Inanimate and yet it seem to have a soul and a true identity and a sympathy. Something like a horse but not a horse.

The idea of a horse perhaps? The narrator lets his mind wander, recalling or inventing every conception of a horse the Mooi might have had, ranging from painted or photographic or TV

[14] Fitzgerald's first published comments on Melville appeared in an essay co-written with Desmond, "*Billy Budd*: The Novel by Herman Melville," in *World Review* (January 1952).

images and racing forms all the way up to Platonic forms—an apparent joke, but Plato's ghostly paradigm of things (as Yeats put it) may be at play here. Other memories of a time before losing the bicycle emerge, including a day when the solitary Mooi ranted and raved at a tree, until the narrator moved ("parallax effect") and saw he had "a drunky pal." Another memory comes of a time when he tried to speak "Spanish Espagnol" and "cut a dash" before his drunken friends. But his "Flamenco Mooi" performance fails when he topples over backward, "near break his head," and the narrator swears "some bees fly out his ears and out his mouth."

The story swerves again when the narrator changes his mind about the Mooi acronym. "Maybe the Mooi no way stand for what we said," he declares. Rather than "the Man *Orlways* Out of It," he tries out qualifiers like "Most Often" and "Mostly." For the first time he's moved to pity the Mooi who is so "despised by the civilized such is we." He discovers too that in one "galling" way the Mooi is superior to him. It is a shock the narrator tries hard to fend off:

> But somewhere where he steal a march on us and take the lead is death. And it strange to one to have a march stolen on one by one such as the Mooi. . . . But there it is. The Mooi not fear death. Whereas we so scared of the last full stop we just keep on wording in a frenzy. The Mooi past caring. He say he no way fear it. Least that what we take it he say. It hard to make out what he say some time. Once it sound like he say: A dime Toby Bourne. A dime today. That just nonsensical Mooi phooey.

It's a typical Fitzgerald tactic of concealed revelation. The Mooi speaks for the first and only time in the story, but the narrator dismisses what he says, unable or unwilling to repeat the famous words from Ecclesiastes 3:2, "a time to be born and a time to die." Yet the allusion is important, even central, to the story. Fitzgerald pretends to deny its seriousness so that her reader will do the opposite.

What the narrator calls "Mooi phooey" is in fact its crux. The Mooi has no fear of death because, like Ecclesiastes, he knows and accepts the futility of all human endeavor.[15] Forget the

[15] Biblical commentators struggle with the inconsistencies and contradictions of Ecclesiastes but agree about its pervasive skepticism—that all human endeavor is futile. See E. T. Ryder, "Ecclesiastes," in *Peak's Commentary on the Bible*, ed. by Matthew Black and H. H. Rowley (London and New York, 1962).

consolatory folk song, “Turn, Turn, Turn”: what Ecclesiastes really argues is that there is nothing new under the sun, and all things are full of weariness. Wisdom yields vexation and knowledge increases sorrow. All is vanity—a striving after wind. There is a season for everything, cyclic and repetitive, predetermined by God, which man is powerless to change. The Mooi has imperturbably accepted all this, while the fearful narrator turns out to be the more Beckett-like character, so terrified of “the last full stop” that he must “keep on wording in a frenzy.” Fitzgerald also echoes Ecclesiastes in her multiple references to the Mooi’s sitting in the sun, climaxed by her final image of him as a heliotrope. The short book of Ecclesiastes contains no less than thirty-six references to the sun, thirty of which take the form “under the sun”—a phrase that occurs nowhere else in the Bible. In effect Fitzgerald has found the *helio* trope in Ecclesiastes and woven it into her story. It too emphasizes the changelessness of the human condition. As the narrator says at the start and repeats at the end, the Mooi sits in the sun, and there is “really nothing more to say.”

But again that is not the whole story. While Fitzgerald derives the bare and anonymous landscape of “The Mooi” from Ecclesiastes and from Beckett (a tramp and a tree), her story is actually a revision of works like *Waiting for Godot* and *Malone Dies*, or of what might be called Beckett’s modern equivalent of Ecclesiastes. Her anxious narrator’s “wording in a frenzy” is set against the Mooi man’s serenity and strength. When the narrator tries to shrug off as more “Mooi phooey” the idea that he is some sort of prophet, and to say there are bees in his bonnet, he again unwittingly suggests the opposite.

> Once someone describe the Mooi as a crazy hermit. Like he a kind of prophet figure. Well he sure crazy. Head full a bees. But a prophet need to prophesy. And he don’t do nothing but mumble.

Fitzgerald’s ironic strategy is, again, very clear. The Mooi’s serene acceptance of death, seen through the narrator’s skepticism, grows increasingly attractive; he is a prophet and not crazy; even his shabby marginality acquires an unexpected value. Snug in a bar with friends, the narrator watches “the loony fellow” walking by in the rain, hardly aware of the pathos and compassion of his own words:

> He will be draggled by the rain. His ratty hair. His thin jacket drenched and stretched on his skinny shoulders. And he striding unsteady and mumbling all the while. Other street passers look at him like he a moon man. But he a Mooi.

You feel the tug of respect in that last line. He is not a mere loony, but in a class by himself. Indeed, the Mooi is the first in a long line of Fitzgerald characters who seem to be failures in life—powerless, insulted, victimized, and shabby—but whose moral authority and spiritual strength shine forth in moments of epiphany. This is what happens at the end of "The Mooi." The man sits in the sun exactly as he did from the start, but Fitzgerald asks us to listen to him again, and to the music of the words used about him:

> Still he sit. Hear him? If you strain you can. He sit eyes closed and face up to the sun the heliotrope. And he hum and mumble low. And it sound like the sound far off of humming bees all about their fruitful summer work.

Earlier the image of his "head full of bees"—repeated on four separate occasions—may have suggested craziness, but this final image is far more mysterious, evocative, and celebratory. Why "fruitful," after all, if not to suggest some much more constructive power? And why this climactic fifth reference to the bees, if not to suggest some carefully-designed revelation? "Hear it? If you strain you can." What one hears clearly in that elegant last line is its poetry. And through that Fitzgerald seems to be hinting at something more.

In fact the Mooi's humming bees come from Plato. In the *Ion,* Socrates famously quizzes the rhapsode Ion of Ephesus, who is full of himself for having recited Homer better than any other performer at a recent (380 B.C.) festival. In the course of amusingly demolishing Ion's ego, Socrates explains the true origin of poetic beauty:

> For all good poets, epic as well as lyric, compose their beautiful poems not by art, but because they are inspired and possessed. And as the Corybantian revelers when they dance are not in their right mind, so the lyric poets are not in their right mind when they are composing their beautiful strains: but when falling under the power of music and metre they are inspired and possessed; like Bacchic maidens who draw milk and honey from the rivers when they are under the influence of Dionysus but not when they are in their right

> mind. And the soul of the lyric poet does the same, as they themselves say; for they tell us that they bring songs from honeyed fountains, culling them out of the gardens and dells of the Muses; they, like the bees, winging their way from flower to flower. And this is true. For the poet is a light and winged and holy thing, and there is no invention in him until he has been inspired and is out of his senses, and the mind is no longer in him: when he has not attained this state, he is powerless and is unable to utter his oracles.[16]

The origin of the Mooi man's dipsoblivion lies here, in Plato's conception of poets as Bacchic revelers who are "under the influence," not in their right minds, inspired and possessed like drunken bees, whose power is both mysterious—"a light and winged and holy thing"—and oracular. Note that Socrates does not mock or disparage such poetry, but is rather offering a sublime conception of where "beautiful poems" and "beautiful strains" of music come from. He continues:

> God takes away the minds of poets, and uses them as his ministers, as he also uses diviners and holy prophets, in order that we who hear them may know them to be speaking not of themselves who utter these priceless words in a state of unconsciousness, but that God himself is the speaker, and that through them he is conversing with us.

It seems likely, given the spiritual substratum of her later fiction, that Fitzgerald was stirred by this passage, and might have wanted to use it—or to draw the reader into discovering it—as a response to the bleakness of Ecclesiastes and Beckett. She insists on those bees, and on the Mooi's drunken humming and mumbling. Only at the end do we realize how the Platonic conception has been woven into the story from the start, masked in a foreign language and twisted into distracting acronyms. Mooi is a Dutch word meaning "handsome" or "beautiful." So, while we may begin by scorning the seemingly unbeautiful man, we end by seeing not a drunkard but an idea of The Beautiful. This vision of beauty will become even more spiritual in Fitzgerald's later fiction. For her it is always hidden where we least expect to find it and in a language disconcertingly foreign.

[16] Benjamin Jowett translation, lines 533e–534b.