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Visser, Irene

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RECKLESS INNOCENCE, NON-ANGER AND FORGIVENESS: MORAL KNOWLEDGE IN PENELOPE FITZGERALD'S FICTION

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IRENE VISSER

Abstract

This essay contributes to the currently limited academic scholarship on Penelope Fitzgerald's fiction by exploring affective interpersonal relationships as central themes in her novels *Innocence* (1986) and *The Beginning of Spring* (1988). I draw on Martha C. Nussbaum's philosophical work, in particular her recent publication *Anger and Forgiveness* (2016), to shed light on the arresting and unconventional ways in which Fitzgerald's fiction dramatizes and often subverts commonly held notions of innocence, anger, guilt and forgiveness. This essay argues that Fitzgerald's art as a novelist is particularly evident in the subtle and ironic manner in which she presents arresting moral insights. Nussbaum's philosophical explorations of moral knowledge provide the theoretical framework that clarifies these innovative and thought-provoking aspects of Fitzgerald's work.

Key words

Penelope Fitzgerald; affect; Martha Nussbaum; moral philosophy; contemporary literature

The British author Penelope Fitzgerald (1916–2000) is an outstanding but little-known novelist. In the first part of her career she wrote a number of highly acclaimed biographies and achieved a substantial production of reviews and essays, earning the reputation of an astute literary critic with an extensive knowledge of art. In fiction, she was a late starter. Her first novel, *The Golden Child*, appeared in 1977, when she was sixty. Her prose fiction was well received by literary critics and authors, who recognized the unique quality of her novels. Among the authors who have lauded her work are Teju Cole, Julian Barnes, Penelope Lively, Frank Kermode, Alan Hollinghurst, Simon Callow, Andrew Miller and Anita Brookner. Perhaps most generous in praising Fitzgerald's achievement has been A.S. Byatt, who deems her novels "works of art, in excellent prose ... funny and terrible" and assigns the word "genius" to her, which, as she adds, "isn't a word I much use" (2008: ix, x). Fitzgerald received many literary prizes, among which the Booker Prize for *Offshore* in 1979, and the American Book Critics' Award in 1998 for *The Blue Flower*, when fellow competitors were Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* and Don DeLillo's *Underworld*. In 1996 she was awarded Britain's Heywood Hall Prize for a lifetime's achievement in literature.

Despite the high regard of prominent writers and literary juries that has come Fitzgerald's way, and notwithstanding the literary, cultural and philosophical complexity of Fitzgerald's fiction, academic interest in her work has been surprisingly

limited. Fitzgerald is not generally included in overview works on contemporary writers in English.¹ The fact that Fitzgerald does get a place in *Contemporary British Women Writers* (1993) rather confirms the point, because the purpose of this collection of essays is precisely to bring to the fore lesser-known female authors who deserve to gain a wider readership. There are very few in-depth discussions of Fitzgerald's work. The first book-length publication, Peter Wolfe's *Understanding Penelope Fitzgerald* (2004) is primarily introductory, presenting an overview of her novels that is targeted at students and non-specialist readers. Since 2007 only one more monograph has arrived on the scene, Christopher J. Knight's *Penelope Fitzgerald and the Consolation of Fiction* (2017). Knight regretfully notes the fact that serious scholarly attention to Fitzgerald's work has been inexplicably scarce despite its positive reception, and states that that it deserves better.² In short, then, not only the paucity but also the disappointing quality of academic interest in Fitzgerald's work is in evidence.

While it is difficult to account for the academic neglect of Fitzgerald's work, it is also difficult to define the nature of her art as a novelist. A.S. Byatt's summation of her authorship is perhaps most astute in this respect: "She writes very English versions of European metaphysical fables, embodying them in idiosyncratic reality"; she is "an austere, original talent, unlike anyone else writing in this country at this time" (2008: x, xiii). It is indeed no exaggeration to say that Fitzgerald's fiction inhabits a category of its own. Replete with much accurate factual historical detail, her work belongs firmly in the tradition of realism, but it also evokes a sense of mystery, calling into play the unseen forces in human life. Fitzgerald "describes experience that eludes intellectual systems," as Wolfe states (2004: 7). Critics have made several attempts to classify Fitzgerald, comparing her to Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf and Muriel Spark, but such attempted categorization inevitably falls short of the mark; as Byatt observes, "Fitzgerald was Jane Austen's nearest heir, for precision and invention. But she has other qualities, qualities I think of as European and metaphysical. She has what Henry James called 'the imagination of disaster'" (1998: n.p.). If Fitzgerald's novels do not belong to novels of class or English manners, neither do they belong to the genre of historical fiction, despite their historical and cultural accuracy. The two novels discussed in this essay, *Innocence* (1986) and *The Beginning of Spring* (1988) offer a richness of historical details, but without drawing attention to Fitzgerald's substantial background research, and creating a realistic setting in which extraordinary interpersonal relationships develop. The term "historical novel" does not fit either novel; in his Preface to *Innocence*, Julian Barnes rejects the term as "misleading, diminishing" (2013: xii). Critics agree that Fitzgerald's thorough research and her extensive knowledge are subservient to the more elusive dimensions of her art. Knight notes that this novel is amazing in its "an empathic reach and imaginative richness" (2017: 182). Each of her novels "takes a whole world of history, knowledge, politics and literature and turns it into something at once suggestive and complete" (Byatt 2008: x). This transformative process, in which moral issues take a central place, is at the heart of the two novels selected for this essay.

Innocence and *The Beginning of Spring* are generally counted among Fitzgerald's best works and both were favorably received (Lee 2013: 323). Displaying

a plethora of historical details, both novels are set in times of political and social change. *Innocence* takes us to the Florence of 1955–1956, a time of emancipation, modernization and the onset of cultural change in Italy. *The Beginning of Spring* (hereafter cited as *Spring*) unfolds in 1913 Moscow before the outbreak of World War I and the Russian revolution; a year of social, political and familial upheavals. Both novels, then, are infused with the sense of impending change, and of a spirit of hope and optimism. While the historical and national circumstances of the narratives make fascinating reading, the central themes of the novels are not social and cultural changes, but human emotions and interactions, in particularly those related to innocence, anger, guilt, blame and forgiveness.

To understand these central themes of Fitzgerald's novelistic worlds it is useful to turn to insights that philosophy offers on affective and moral interpersonal relationships, as explained lucidly by philosopher and essayist Martha C. Nussbaum. Well known for her work on the relation between literature and moral philosophy, in particular since her collection of essays *Love's Knowledge* (1990), Nussbaum's fascination with the moral function of literature has often come to the fore in her publications and interviews. Her philosophical work often relies on literary examples, and she is interested in philosophically exploring fictional affective relationships taken from the works of Charles Dickens, Henry James, E. M. Forster and Richard Wright. Nussbaum's *Anger and Forgiveness* (2016) aids my discussion of anger and its related themes of revenge, guilt and forgiveness. In setting up this dialogue between Fitzgerald's novels and Nussbaum's philosophical monograph my aim is to demonstrate not only the usefulness of the rational conceptualizations of moral philosophy to literary analysis, but in equal measure, the benefit that literary analysis of affective aspects, in all their diversity and specificity, may offer to philosophical conceptualization. This is in alignment with Nussbaum's view that the answer to the profound question of "how one should live in the world" cannot be "fully and adequately stated in the language of conventional philosophical prose" but only in language and forms "more complex, more allusive, more attentive to particulars" such as provided by major literary works (1990: 3). Literature may be philosophically important, Nussbaum states, in exploring "significant aspects of human moral experience" (1990: 138). Nussbaum is not alone in stating this importance. Moral philosopher Hilary Putnam likewise argues that literature aids us in the imaginative re-creation of moral complexities by presenting alternative views of ethical problems, aiding "the sensitive appreciation in the imagination of predicaments and perplexities...essential to sensitive moral reasoning"; his view is that novels "frequently do something for us that must be done for us if we are to gain moral knowledge" (1978: 87, 86–87).³ In *Innocence* and *Spring* Fitzgerald's fictional explorations of moral knowledge ultimately address the time-honoured philosophical questions: What is innocence? Are anger and retribution necessary to justice? What is the good life?

Innocence

Fitzgerald's novels *Innocence* and *Spring*, while very different in setting and plot, are similar in their subtle but profound explorations of vital human emotions and values. Major themes in both novels, already anticipated in their titles, are innocence and its fragility in human relationships; and renewal and forgiveness. The opening scenes in both novels already display the unconventional manner in which these themes are dramatized. *The Beginning of Spring* opens with an ending: Frank Reid, the English owner of a printing press in Moscow, arrives home to find that his marriage is over: his wife Nellie has left him, taking their three young children with her to an unknown destination. Frank is confused and hurt but feels no anger, neither on first learning about his wife's betrayal nor at any later stage—not even when he learns about her affair with his best friend. We never see Frank angry, indignant or harbouring vindictive thoughts towards Nellie, although such emotions may well be considered the predictable or normal responses. Similarly, the very first pages of *Innocence* subvert conventional notions of innocence in presenting the family legend of the Ridolfis, an aristocratic family of midgets in Florence, 1568. Their daughter grows up surrounded by small people, "confident that the world consisted of people less than 1.3 metres high" (5). This Contessina, eight years old, has a "compassionate heart," and when her playmate Gemma, who is a dwarf, has a sudden spurt of growth she suggests kindly that Gemma's legs be amputated at the knee and that her eyes be put out, to safeguard her continuing happiness as a little person and to keep her from knowing how different, indeed monstrous, she is.⁴ In the narrative present, some 400 years later, the Ridolfis are of ordinary size, but their special brand of well-intentioned yet dangerous innocence has remained. It seems odd that this characteristic has survived for so many years, the narrator's voice drily comments, adding however that changes are at hand: "Perhaps it won't do so for much longer" (10). When the later narrative shows that the trait remains unchanged, this comment, too, in retrospect may make us review our conventional responses; in this case, our responses to novelistic devices like this narrator's commentary. Finding that "*Innocence* is her most complicated narrative," Fitzgerald's biographer Hermione Lee remarks that it continuously calls into question our expectations and thus "requires the reader's close attention, as life should" (2013: 316, 317). In similar, yet different ways, *Spring* also invites us to ponder our habitual responses to narrative conventions as well as to received knowledge of affect and ethics in personal relationships.

The absence of the common reactions of hurt pride, anger, or revenge thoughts in Frank's response to Nellie's cruel act of abandonment may be understood as a form of innocence which does not focus on wrong-doing at all. In this sense innocence is aligned with goodness, the moral quality that primarily seeks and sees the good for all beings. This quality defines Frank's character. His innocence is such that he sees only the good in others; he fails to notice Nellie's lack of interest in her children, her dissatisfaction and her restless nature, and, tellingly, that her favorite expression is "to get rid of" (161). Deeply attached to his family, Frank's goodness evidently stands in the way of his understanding of Nellie's lack of it;

“How could Nellie be safe and well without them, the four of them? He wrote to her by every morning post” (62). If Frank is the innocent victim of marital infidelity, it is precisely his innocence that has made him unaware of the impending break-up of his marriage. His friend and employee Selwyn Crane tells him that he lacks imagination: “Now, you’re not an imaginative man, Frank. If you have a fault, it’s that you don’t grasp the importance of what is beyond sense or reason. And yet that is a world in itself” (202). Innocence, as Fitzgerald’s narrative here suggests, may be a protection against the negative emotions of anger, revenge and resentment, but it may also be equivalent to a lack of insight, empathy, or imagination.

In *Innocence*, the Ridolfi’s hereditary innocence may also be understood in this negative light, as lacking insight or empathy. While in the novel’s young protagonist Chiara Ridolfi that innocence is depicted as a positive feature, characterized by the absence of limiting and self-centred factors such as vanity, self-consciousness and sexual inhibitions, it is at the same time also negatively portrayed, as lacking restraint. ‘Reckless’ is the word used to describe Chiara’s dealings with the world, whether in traffic, where she drives recklessly, or in her relationship with Salvatore Rossi, with whom she quarrels recklessly, despite her genuine love for him. As Byatt comments, “both Chiara and her Salvatore are dangerous to themselves and others in their innocence; both are also hopeful and lovable” (1998: n.p.). Fitzgerald suggests that innocence is not *per se* beneficial or felicitous in its effects. Chiara’s lack of restraint is part of her innocence, as much as are her open-mindedness and other-directedness. The precariousness of this fragile but reckless innocence and its potential to hurt function as central motifs in the novel, similar to the motif of Frank Reid’s lack of (justifiable) anger in the face of injustice, which is a sign of his inner goodness as much as a sign of his blindness to discord and disaffectedness.

The notion of innocence as formulated by Nussbaum in *Love’s Knowledge* conforms to the notion of innocence as deriving from a lack, a negative: as *not* having “any knowledge of evil, either for doing or for seeing” (1990: 127). This is the innocence generally associated with childhood, and thus it is a temporary condition, as in Nussbaum’s reference to “the lost innocence of childhood” (1990: 149). Fitzgerald’s *Innocence* makes no reference, explicit or implicit, to innocence as the purity of unsullied childhood, nor is innocence dramatized as a temporary deficiency, in Nussbaum’s sense of the quality of not yet having knowledge or insight. Nonetheless the novel is imbued with innocence; we find it in verbal exchanges, descriptions of family relationships and quarrels, and even in the name of Chiara’s English convent school, Holy Innocents. This girls’ school intends “to provide for life a fixed basis of judgement” (82), that is to say, to cure its pupils of open-mindedness. Chiara’s open-mindedness, as part of her characteristic innocence, is such that even the convent, we are told, failed to rob her of it since she persists in finding “defensible” many other perspectives, “the point of view of every living creature” (82). Innocence is here presented as deriving not from a lack of insight or knowledge, but from a sensitivity to human equality and unity; this sensitivity evidently is the affect that the convent school seeks to erase. Its name, derived from the biblical Massacre of the Innocents (Matthew 2: 16–18) invites an ironic reflection on its own erasure of innocence.

Irony, I would argue, is a defining characteristic of Fitzgerald's art as a novelist, and it functions to accentuate the peculiar nature of innocence and anger in the two novels. Her irony is light-hearted; the closest it gets to satire or caricature is when she portrays the innocent chauvinism of English characters, revealed in unintentionally discriminatory remarks. For example, Chiara's school friend Barney regards Chiara with what Fitzgerald presents as a typically English mixture of superiority and sympathy, as being "unlucky enough to be a foreigner" (80). While Chiara is open-minded and unprejudiced (honouring the point of view of "every living creature") Barney displays a narrowmindedness that may be deemed innocent, too, in its lack of knowledge of interpersonal affective relations. When Chiara is pregnant Barney reassures her that the birth won't be any problem because "Italian women produce them just like rabbits" (283). This insulting remark exemplifies what the novel presents as the dark side of innocence: well-intentioned but unreflecting or "reckless" acts or words that are potentially hurtful. Throughout, Fitzgerald's light irony undercuts the negativity of this insensitivity, creating sympathy and understanding for Chiara's rashness as well as for Barney's bumbling insults. Ironic wit, as an important aspect of Fitzgerald's work, enables us, as readers, "to suspend judgment," as Jean Sudrann remarks, and even, "simultaneously to applaud and to censure" (1993: 113). Indeed irony is a vital and pervasive feature of Fitzgerald's style. As Barnes observes, despite the profundity of Fitzgerald's themes, as readers we are not overburdened since "the real heart and purpose of her fiction are often camouflaged" (2013: viii). Much of this camouflage, I would suggest, derives from Fitzgerald's use of irony, which invites our sympathetic understanding of her characters and their misguided but often well-intentioned, innocent thoughts and actions.

Nussbaum's discussion of innocence in her reading of Maggie's character in Henry James' *The Golden Bowl* is rather more limited than Fitzgerald's fictional representation in *Innocence*. Nussbaum primarily draws on the conventional notion of innocence as belonging to immaturity and inexperience, as for instance in the freshness and purity of children or young women. This innocence rests on a moral purity that is due to a lack of life experiences, and therefore only temporary; what follows inevitably is maturity, and guilt (1990: 357). In posing this, Nussbaum draws into play the archetypal fall from grace and the notion of Edenic, hence universal, loss of innocence. In that discourse, innocence is spoken of as the condition of not (yet) having eaten from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In her literary analysis of James' character, Nussbaum acknowledges that Maggie, while innocent and pure, may be aware of evil, stating however also that she refuses "knowledge of some truth," which implies that Maggie deliberately chooses to be ignorant. Maggie's innocence, as a deliberate blindness to her own capacity to work evil, allows the interpretation that she is too self-involved, too prone to self-justification to be entirely innocent, but Nussbaum does not draw that conclusion. She sees Maggie's innocence, expressed in her "intention of never doing a wrong, never breaking a rule, never hurting" as a sign of her superior moral conscience, which "shrinks from the guilt of rendered pain" (1990: 126). While Nussbaum does not question Maggie's youthful innocence, she notes also that we cannot ascribe an Edenic innocence to Maggie since "Adam's *daughter*

was not born in Eden” and thus, that in all later people (including Maggie) there must be “some connection with original sin” (1990: 127, italics in the original). This comment nevertheless leaves unchanged Nussbaum’s affirmation of conventional notions of innocence as moral purity. By contrast, Fitzgerald depicts an innocence that is of an entirely different nature, and perhaps not even morally outstanding. She suggests that the truly innocent, such as the Ridolfis, are not troubled by “the guilt of rendered pain” (as Maggie is) because guilt is not part of their mentality. While Chiara’s innocence resembles Maggie’s conventional innocence in its fresh and expectant openness to life’s experiences, Chiara truly sees no evil, and while she is reckless and passionate, arguing vehemently with Salvatore, she has no thought about guilt or blame. In the Ridolfi mindset, then, there is none of Maggie’s self-justification that is so close to hypocrisy.⁵ The moral knowledge offered by Fitzgerald in this novel is arresting; it asks us as readers to examine our own convictions against the narrative’s guiding notions: the truly blameless do not blame, and the truly innocent do not envisage evil.

What we may conclude at this point is that Nussbaum’s literary reading of innocence in *Love’s Knowledge* proceeds from conventional conceptions whereas in Fitzgerald’s *Innocence* those conceptions are subtly interrogated and often subverted. Barnes observes that while the word “innocent” is normally paired with “victim,” in *Innocence* it is not passive, nor is it a noble virtue, but a “way of dealing with the world” (2013: ix). Innocence, in the Ridolfi’s dealing with the world, is indeed not passive, as I have shown, nor is it Edenic, doomed to be corrupted. Its strength is its blindness to wrongdoing; its inability to envisage guilt and blame. Innocence thus precludes impulses related to destructive affective states such as anger, hatred and revenge. The instances inviting our understanding of this moral knowledge are the main moments in *Innocence*, I would suggest, rather than, for instance, the comedic plot moments of young characters finding romantic love, although certainly the novel has much to offer along these lines. However, the several weddings that take place are not the crucial or final episodes of the novel; more significant are the scenes that invite us to ponder the novel’s alternatives to conventional notions of interpersonal affect and moral behaviour.

Anger

While Fitzgerald’s arresting portrayal of innocence complements Nussbaum’s more conventional discussion of innocence, Fitzgerald’s fictional rendering of anger is illuminated and complemented by Nussbaum’s detailed study of anger in *Anger and Forgiveness*. Nussbaum’s central observation in this study is that in contemporary culture anger is generally accepted as morally justified and necessary, whereas the pursuit of non-anger, which she personally advocates, is not regarded with as much goodwill. In fact, the contemporary consensus is that anger is more acceptable than non-anger: anger is believed to be hardwired in human nature and to pursue non-anger would entail “an unhuman, extreme, and unloving type of detachment”; the prevalent view, then, is that “anger is good, powerful, and manly,” and thus it is indulged or even encouraged in children, especially boys

(2016: 249). In *Spring*, the contemporary consensus that anger is “good, powerful and manly” is refuted, for Frank, while deeply hurt by his wife’s abandonment, exhibits no desire to blame, no resentment, and no anger or revenge thoughts. We may wonder whether Frank is emotionally deficient, weak, or unmanly, since he fails to exhibit any of the categorical models of human responses to wrongdoing that we have internalized and that literature so often dramatizes. Presented to us as “quiet by nature, and undemonstrative” (2), Frank is never idiosyncratically detached or unemotional; on the contrary, he experiences profound emotions of pain and confusion and his love for his children is beyond question; we read that the thought that the children were gone “suffocated him” (4). In his business affairs and in dealing with the police, Frank is decisive, intelligent and strong; as such, he is a fictional refutation of the notion that anger is an attribute of the domain of the powerful and manly.

The notion of retributive anger as “good” and “manly,” entrenched in contemporary culture, is not very different from the prevalent notions about anger in philosophical literature, as Nussbaum explains, which include the following: anger at being wronged is necessary for the preservation of self-respect and dignity; anger at wrongdoing against others is essential as a sign that the wrong is a serious matter; and anger is thus essential to combatting injustice (2016: 6). To these dominant notions Fitzgerald presents oppositions and contrastive nuances. *Innocence* deliberately directs our attention to Frank’s non-anger by augmenting the incitements to anger that confront him. The day after the break-up of his family, Frank gets news that Nelly boarded the train alone, leaving their three young children unattended at the railway station. This abandonment is surely cruel and outrageous, raising further expectations of anger and revenge in response, but Frank’s reaction is again to refrain from anger: finding that Nellie did not even leave a message to him by the children, “not a word”, he “saw that it would be best not to think about this, or he might not be able to stand it” (21). Dissociation from anger characterizes Frank’s attitude; we see no hint of any of the conventional notions of justified anger as categorized by Nussbaum, such as anger to maintain self-respect or to reveal the injustice of wrongdoing. What comes to the fore then is the moral insight that anger is not needed to call attention to injustice, since the unjust act itself is sufficient evidence of wrong-doing. This significant humane and moral knowledge is suggested rather than put in so many words. Fitzgerald’s art as a novelist is to enable an engagement with central emotional and moral issues reaching beyond the concrete and the actual without hammering the message home.⁶

Nussbaum’s personal view is distinct from the conventional view of anger, and it is firmly supportive of Frank’s resignation and non-anger as dramatized in *Spring*. She points out that in personal relations anger is not a respectable assertion of self-esteem but in fact deeply threatens the values “distinctive to personal intimacy” (2016: 7). However, Nussbaum also grants some positive side to anger: “Anger may still have some limited usefulness as a *signal* to self and / or others that wrongdoing has taken place, as a source of *motivations* to address it, and as a *deterrent* to others, discouraging their aggression” (2016: 6, italics in the original). This limited usefulness, she adds, is however still no justification of anger; it

does not remove or detract from anger's normative ugliness. Even with the reservations made for anger's deterrent or signaling effect, then, Nussbaum's personal position remains oppositional to the notion of justifiable anger, in alignment with Frank Reid's position in Fitzgerald's novel.⁷

Nussbaum reserves a special place for what she terms Transition-Anger, which is anger on behalf of others, "whose entire content is: 'How outrageous. Something should be done about that'" (2016: 6). This concept of Transition-Anger aids our understanding of Frank Reid in *Spring*. Fitzgerald in fact dramatizes this other-directed anger in the scene in which Selwyn Crane finally admits to Frank that he and Nellie were to run away to England together, but that at the station he had had second thoughts, also because of the presence of the three children, and had merely watched Nellie leave from a distance. It is revealed here that the saintly Selwyn, Frank's friend, is a cheat, a coward, and a miser (since financial considerations also played a part). Surprisingly, Frank does not get angry on his own account as a cuckolded husband and distraught father, but displays strong feelings only on Nellie's behalf: "Poor little Nellie, ditched...and you flaming well never turned up...I've put up with a lot this Easter, but I'm damned if I see why Nellie should have to" (238). As Nussbaum observes, Transition-Anger is uncommon in its pure form since usually it is tainted with the wish for payback. This wish is entirely lacking in Frank's emotional outburst, which thus is a pure form of transition-anger, commended by Nussbaum as morally superior behaviour: it is "promising" if anger "goes away in the Transition," she states, because "one stops thinking about one's own inner states and starts thinking about how to do something useful, and perhaps even generous, for others" (2016: 136). Clearly, here fiction illuminates what philosophy holds out as an ideal: Frank's self-respect does not depend on retributive anger but on carrying out the tasks of a single father well; his energy is spent on managing his printing business responsibly, and on making sure that his children get proper care.

What we have seen so far is that in Fitzgerald's novel *Spring* the conventional expectations of innocence and anger as categorized by Nussbaum are evoked, and then subverted in ways that are surprising yet plausible, inviting our understanding of alternatives to entrenched notions. In *Innocence*, too, anger is presented to us in a shape that does not fit the mould of the commonly held conceptions of anger and revenge. Here Fitzgerald depicts an unlikely, yet convincing combination of anger and innocence in the character of Salvatore Rossi, the thirty-year old neurologist who marries Chiara Ridolfi. While Frank Reid is slow to anger, Salvatore is his complete opposite: he is a living volcano about to erupt at any time over trivial matters – "the least important incidents troubled him most" (90) – and while Frank has a just cause for anger and revenge, Salvatore has none, all his agitation being caused by his own thinking. His mind conjures up frustrations and irritations, even when things are going well. Thus, on first meeting Chiara, Salvatore soon loses his composure—not by anything that happens or is being said, but due to his own fairly insignificant thoughts (on elegant clothing) which confuse and then irritate him: "He felt deeply irritated. He had an intimation that he was lost" (42). Salvatore's anger, then, does not conform to the conventional notion of justified anger as a signal of wrongdoing, nor is it an

affirmation or protection of self-respect in response to injustice. Here Fitzgerald presents a person who is both profoundly innocent and constitutionally irate in a combination that is most unusual. Nussbaum's concept of "status anger" sheds light on this apparently unlikely or implausible combination.

Status anger, Nussbaum explains, typically belongs to adolescence, the period of liberation from dependence on parental guidance and control. This anger is benign because it is temporary; it is also inevitable, its purpose and function being to help the adolescent effectuate separation and independence "because the child, trying to be independent, naturally resents the very existence and competence of the parent" (2016: 106). Salvatore's innocence is akin to the lack of insight of the immature, who do not yet understand their own emotions and drives, let alone other people's motivations, yet seek to be independent. By the same token, his anger is the resisting status anger of the adolescent: even at thirty years old, Salvatore still feels that his mother "had cut him off, by a kind of instinctive encircling movement, from his independence" (249). A flashback section in the novel aids our understanding of Salvatore's status anger. When his father takes him along on a visit to the old and terminally ill Antonio Gramsci in prison, Salvatore, at ten years old, realizes that his father's hero-worship of the great socialist thinker is misplaced. Feeling "older than his parent" the boy then vows to have no such political or ideological allegiances and resolves to distance himself from his family and become a doctor. As an adult, having made his way successfully into the world of academia and medical science, Salvatore keeps himself to himself, avoiding contact with this family and feeling disconnected from his Southern background, although never entirely liberated from it. Juvenile insecurity underlies his constant sense of frustration and irritation, debarring him from a more mature perspective. Like many an adolescent, Salvatore likes to construct an unrealistic, ideal image of himself: "Dr Rossi pure and simple, self-created, self-determined, forewarned and unclassifiable" (66), whilst at other times keenly exhibiting his basic insecurity and immaturity, as when he implores his friend and colleague Gentilini to help him despite his irascibility: "Think of me as a cripple, if you like, don't turn away from me, take my hand" (74). After one of Salvatore's outbursts Giulia, Gentilini's wife, pinpoints the cause of his anger: he is "so unsure of himself, the poor man" (74). This compassionate response, as well as the flashback section help foster a sense of understanding. Similar to what we might feel for young people seeking to navigate the torrential time of adolescence, Salvatore's mental turmoil invites sympathy; for instance, as when he shouts after Chiara, "Come back! I'm saying what I don't mean!" (102).

It seems a contradiction in his characterization that Salvatore is never angry or irritated in his professional capacity. To his patients he is predictably reliable and kind, deemed by many a brilliant consultant (77); and credited with "serene will-power" (95). This apparent contradiction is elucidated by Nussbaum's concept of the middle realm, "the realm of the multitude of daily transactions we have with people that are not our close friends" (2016: 7). In his professional realm, where Salvatore is respected and confident, there is no interference of status anger. In this realm, Nussbaum states, anger is never beneficial, and in this sense it is different from the other realms in Nussbaum's theorizing, in which she does

identify some positive aspects, such as the signaling or self-protective aspects of anger. Nussbaum's middle realm sheds light on what seems a contradiction in Salvatore's character, showing us the plausibility of Salvatore's equanimity and even serenity in his daily dealings with his patients.

Guilt and Blame

What the dialogic conversation between the work of Fitzgerald and Nussbaum set up in this essay has shown so far is that fiction may expand philosophical notions in surprising ways, while philosophy aids literary interpretation by providing illuminating theoretical concepts of affective states. In the exploration of guilt and blame in Fitzgerald's novels, this dialogue is similarly fruitful. In *Innocence*, as previously stated, the Ridolfis have no feelings of guilt despite the havoc they wreak in their altruistic innocence, and assigning blame is foreign to them. This is as unusual as, for instance, Salvatore's particular combination of innocence and anger. Reviewers and critics have commented on the unconventional, even unsettling reading experience that *Innocence* offers. Jan Morris, for instance, has stated: "For the life of me I can't decide how properly to respond to this book," whilst also proclaiming it "one of the most skillful and utterly fascinating novels I have read for years" (Morris qtd. in Knight 2017: 199, 203); and C.K. Stead, in the *London Review of Books*, has remarked that *Innocence* "is a book that never seems to settle back ... into a conventional exercise" (Stead qtd. in Lee 2013: 323). Fitzgerald's representations of guilt and blame are similarly unconventional, bespeaking a dimension of human affective relationships in which compassion and friendship override the more antagonistic human emotions.

While very few characters in Fitzgerald's novels exhibit even the slightest awareness of guilt or blame, Salvatore invites our scrutiny, since guilt dominates his thinking. His sense of wrong-doing has no concrete cause or justification, but it is deep-seated and crippling. For instance, he immediately feels guilty when Sannazarro, his father's friend, tells him that as an intellectual he has a duty to return to the countryside, as Gramsci taught (176–177). Reproached, Salvatore "saw himself being driven into a corner, without hope of defence, as a good son...found guilty again, before a court he had never been asked to recognize" (176–177).⁸ Evidently, Salvatore's guilt is closely related to his childhood, and what is alluded to here is his decision in the episode in the prison, at age ten, to go his own way rather than follow his father's example. If we understand guilt as the acknowledgement of one's actual wrong-doing, Salvatore's feelings of guilt are clearly ill-founded, and may seem excessive and destructive. Nussbaum's discussion of guilt as a notion in moral philosophy, however, sheds a fresh light on guilt. Guilt may be defined as a self-directed emotion, deriving from an awareness of one's inadequacy or shortcomings, but without actual or concrete wrong-doing involved, exactly as shown by Salvatore. Seen in this light, guilt is not a negative quality, as Nussbaum explains, but in fact can be an important part of the moral life since an "auspicious" or "promising aspect of guilt" is that it typically focuses on damage to relationships with others, which is a remediable aspect of our

conduct (2016: 128). Guilt becomes destructive, Nussbaum adds, when the wish for payback ensues, because this leads to further self-incriminating: “A lot of anger at self, however, is accompanied by self-inflicted pain, which is a type of payback” (2016: 128). This remark illuminates Salvatore’s irrational behaviour and near-suicide in the climactic final episode of *Innocence*.

It is another instance of Fitzgerald’s use of irony that Salvatore’s deep despair is caused by a characteristically innocent act by one of the Ridolfis. Maddalena Ridolfi, wanting to do good, has bought Salvatore’s family land and has donated him the deeds anonymously, unaware that this kindness might be misconstrued, which is exactly what happens. In fact, it fuels Salvatore’s guilt and undermines his self-esteem as a lover and a husband, for he immediately assumes that Chiara is behind the scheme, and that she wants him to return to his family land and give up his life in Florence. Salvatore’s composure is entirely shattered; unable to wrestle sense out of his obsessive mixture of guilt, self-anger, and love, he is driven to envisage suicide, insisting that “she would be better off without me” (334). This phrase is reminiscent of the phrase used in the narrative of the Ridolfi family legend, in which Gemma is deemed “better off” if blinded and crippled. The legend is indeed a constant undertow in the dramatic unfolding of the novel, here linking Salvatore’s reckless impulse to shoot himself to the rash and dangerous innocence that is the hereditary Ridolfi trait.⁹ Nussbaum’s views on guilt are very apposite to the interpretation of Salvatore’s suicidal notions in this scene. Guilt may be attended by the thought that “things will be made right if I inflict suffering (on myself)”, she states, even though this “is highly irrational and unproductive” (2016: 131). Clearly Salvatore is highly irrational in this scene (his frantic behaviour only accentuated by the calm composure of the overly rational Cesare), and his wish to end his life, due to his ever-present, obsessive sense of guilt and status anger, is surely unproductive. However, both Fitzgerald and Nussbaum, in their respective domains, represent guilt also as a possibly constructive, temporary state that may lead to a restored self-esteem and to renewed affective connections. Nussbaum’s view is that “guilt, although it may be excessive or misplaced ... is on balance a strongly positive force” (2016: 129). In *Innocence*, Salvatore’s turmoil is ended by a timely telephone call from Chiara which ends the misunderstanding and re-establishes their loving relationship. Salvatore’s guilt, now assuaged, makes him receptive to Chiara’s forgiveness, and in fact enables him to move forward.

A parallel between Fitzgerald and Nussbaum in this respect is that both present the desire to express love and forgiveness in response to guilt as a most desirable human motivation. Nussbaum states unequivocally that “guilt is the wrong motive and positive love and compassion the right motives” (2016: 131). Fitzgerald’s novels fictionally express the same notion: Frank Reid’s house is open to Nellie on her return (which happens at the beginning of spring); Chiara’s love and forgiveness calm the storm of Salvatore’s guilt and self-anger; relationships are healed and rejuvenated through forgiveness and love.

Forgiveness

Forgiveness is an important yet relatively unexplored phenomenon in philosophical studies as well in literary scholarship. In her discussion of forgiveness, Nussbaum begins by stating that theorizing on forgiveness is underrepresented in the field of moral philosophy; moreover, “the concept of forgiveness is strikingly absent ... (I would say) from all of ancient Greek ethics” (2016: 9). The same can be said about literary studies: Marian Eide’s study on forgiveness in the literary field reports only one pioneering monograph, authored by Julie McGonegal and published in 2009 (2010: 10).¹⁰ Author Jeanette Winterson has emphasized the importance of forgiveness in literature in several of her books. In *The Gap of Time*, which is her novelistic rendition of Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*, she observes that aside from the “happy ever after ending” there are only three possible endings to a story: revenge, tragedy and forgiveness (2015: 285). Shakespeare “who knew all about revenge and tragedy,” as she remarks, became interested in forgiveness late in his working life. He then dramatized the deeper truth that forgiveness signifies that the past can be redeemed (2015: 288). Forgiveness is liberating, Winterson argues. It offers “a chance of freedom from limits” as a sign that the past does not conclusively mortgage the future, and as such it is not only a crucially important aspect of literature but also of our personal lives (2015: 288). In her autobiographical *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* Winterson again states that there are only three kinds of what she terms “big endings” in literature: “Revenge, Tragedy, Forgiveness. Revenge and Tragedy often happen together. Forgiveness redeems the past. Forgiveness unblocks the future” (2011: 225). In both of Fitzgerald’s novels discussed here forgiveness is a strong undertow in the narrative plot movements, infusing dramatic moments, but rarely foregrounded. In *Spring* forgiveness comes to the fore explicitly only once, in the context of the Russian Easter rituals. On the eve of Palm Sunday Frank’s servants prepare for the Easter confession by going round the house and the neighborhood asking forgiveness for sins committed knowingly or unknowingly (203). When Lisa asks Frank for forgiveness “for actions, for words and for unspoken thoughts,” Frank at first does not accept the idea of her wrongdoing until she adds, “who can go through a single day without doing wrong?” Realizing that the ritual is meaningful, Frank then tells Lisa that he forgives her (203). What Fitzgerald here foregrounds is the function of ritual, which, as Alexander states, is to attach people to each other, to increase identification, and to intensify the social connections between participants (2004: 25). Eide, in her study on forgiveness, observes that forgiveness needs ritual, “predictable rites,” to be meaningful (2010: 1). Fitzgerald’s exchange between Frank and Lisa further suggests that an open-minded receptiveness on the side of both participants is necessary for the ritual to be meaningful. This is an insight that Frank acquires, and as such also a further instance of the moral knowledge offered in this novel.

In the area of forgiveness, Nussbaum claims, religion has more to offer than philosophy, since “both Jewish and Christian texts contain alternatives to transactional forgiveness, in which generosity, love and even humor replace the grim drama of penance and exacted contrition” (2016: 11). While there are references

to religion in all of Fitzgerald's novels, and while in the novel *Spring* the connection between forgiveness and Easter is evident, there is no overt message to the effect that religious dogma might make us more forgiving.¹¹ Frank is not a churchgoing believer and on the one occasion when he thinks about religion it is in a vague way, concluding that "Perhaps I have faith even if I have no beliefs" (155). This characterization suggests that religious instruction may not be necessary for leading a good life. Frank forgives unconditionally, showing no urge to demand apologies from others, not even from Selwyn or Kuriatin (who endangered the lives of Frank's children). This desire to extract apologies Nussbaum views as a form of humiliation, warning us that "we should beware of it" (2016: 13). Humiliation, in whatever guise, undermines reconciliation. Nussbaum argues that "the whole drama of anger and forgiveness" can be left behind by forging attitudes that support reconciliation and trust; those attitudes are "generosity, justice, and truth" (2016: 13). Frank is the fictional embodiment of these moral qualities in an ordinary person's life; as such, we may take him as an invitation to ponder the benign, everyday effects of the attitudes that support connectedness and trust.

The most commonly held concept of forgiveness as described by Nussbaum is "transactional forgiveness": a state of mind reached after initial anger, followed by confrontation, apology, and/or confession until the wronged person "emerges triumphant, unburdened from angry emotion, her claims fully acknowledged, ready to bestow the grace of her non-anger" (2016: 10). Although it is the prevalent notion in Western culture, transactional forgiveness, as Nussbaum emphasizes, is not a moral virtue, nor is it an antidote to anger; it is akin to "the score-keeping mentality of anger's payback wish" (2016: 11). In both *Innocence* and *Spring*, forgiveness is of an entirely different nature than the prevalent view as formulated by Nussbaum, since no confessions or apologies are exacted; on the contrary, in these novels forgiveness is extended unconditionally. In the final pages, the narrative movement of both novels is towards togetherness and reconciliation, without any hint of retributive demands. Fitzgerald's forgiveness, then, is very unlike the transactional forgiveness that Nussbaum ironically calls the "canonical form of forgiveness in today's world" (2016: 10).

In her meditation on forgiveness Winterson suggests that in fiction we are used to reading about hurt, revenge, and all sorts of passive or active acts of aggression, and that forgiveness usually appears in "highly dramatic moments of forgiveness and reconciliation" (2015: 285-288). In Fitzgerald's fiction forgiveness is enacted with subtlety and restraint rather than in highly dramatic moments, but her novels are nevertheless conducive to stimulating our thinking about forgiveness; as for instance, when Salvatore's moral sensitivity is revealed in his thought about Chiara that "[h]owever much they disagreed there would surely never be anything to forgive" (250). The Ridolfis, harbouring no thoughts of guilt or blame, convey the moral knowledge that innocence has no need of forgiveness. In their respective modes, then, both Nussbaum and Fitzgerald convey similar notions of the importance of non-retributive forgiveness: it is the voluntary relinquishment of payback thoughts; the generous offering of acquittal from debts, and thus, in Winterson's phrase, the release of the burden of the past from the present.

Concluding remarks

This essay has attempted to demonstrate that philosophy may offer a fruitful conceptual basis for literary analysis while literature offers details of relational and interpersonal dynamics that may expand or even subvert philosophical concepts.

In the dialogue between Nussbaum's philosophical concepts and Fitzgerald's novels, it becomes clear that Fitzgerald's work upends our internalized categorical models of the affective states relating to innocence, anger, guilt and forgiveness. Her novels break our conceptual moulds; they offer an invitation to ponder moral knowledge and open up ways of seeing that may help us make our conceptualizing less narrowly conventional and more spacious and inclusive. Considering Fitzgerald's art as a novelist, Barnes remarks that "writers, over the long run, are judged by the truths they detect about the human condition, and the artistry with which they represent those truths" (2013: xv). It is indeed Fitzgerald's accomplishment as an author to combine elegance of style, detailed and authentic historic settings and realistic human relationships with a strong yet unobtrusive presence of what she herself formulated, in her 1997 review of Muriel Spark's *Reality and Dreams*, as "the vast unseen presences on which our lives are dependent or contingent" (Fitzgerald qtd. in Wolfe 2004: 46). It may be this latter quality that makes her fiction difficult to categorize generically, and which makes it less accessible to superficial reading. As such, it may well account for the discrepancy between her work's high critical esteem and its lack of popularity among a wider audience. What can be accounted for conclusively, however, is that Fitzgerald's dramatization of interpersonal affective states are central to her art as a novelist, as is her unostentatious but arresting method of undermining conventional notions of moral categories such as innocence and forgiveness, as I have argued in this essay. In this sense, Fitzgerald's work is both academically and philosophically interesting. This essay then hopes not only to stimulate further academic work on Fitzgerald's oeuvre, but also to contribute to the area in which literature and philosophy meet in mutually enriching ways.

Notes

- ¹ A random sampling of titles published since 2000 supports this. The survey included: *Cambridge Companion to the Contemporary Short Story* (2016); *Postmodern Literature* (2016); *British Fiction Since 1945* (2015); *The Contemporary British Novel Since 2000* (2005); *Contemporary British Fiction* (2008 and 2017 editions); *The Value of the Novel* (2015); and *Imagination and the Contemporary Novel* (2011). None include Penelope Fitzgerald.
- ² Knight is particularly dismissive of Wolfe's monograph, stating that it is "too impressionistic" and that "Wolfe is especially fond of large, unevidenced generalizations of pseudo-psychological or biographical character" (2017: 34).
- ³ I refer to Putnam's *Meaning and the Moral Sciences*, published in 1978, which has since been reissued in 2013 as part of the Routledge Revival series.
- ⁴ This legend dates from 1560 Florence. In Fitzgerald's *So I Have Thought of You*, Terence Dooley states that she was told this "cruel legend or parable" by a friend whilst she was staying in Italy (2008: xxxiii).

- ⁵ This is demonstrated also when the legend of the maiming of the dwarf Gemma is eventually changed by the Tourist Authority to end in Gemma's escape, making it more palatable to the public. This change is deemed unnecessary by the Ridolfis.
- ⁶ Lee recounts that in a radio interview Fitzgerald told her "that her books were so short because she didn't like to tell her readers too much: she felt it insulted them to overexplain" (2005: 158).
- ⁷ In Nussbaum's Conclusion, she addresses her readers directly, hoping to get them to see clearly "the irrationality and stupidity of anger"; "the stupidity of the retributive spirit"; and "irrational retributivism" as "childish and undisciplined behavior" (2016: 249).
- ⁸ In Sannazzaro Fitzgerald depicts idealism bordering on fanaticism. Sannazzaro, presented as "one of those not born to succeed, with the short-sighted mildness of a certain kind of violent revolutionary" resembles Selwyn Crane in *Spring*, another revolutionary, even in the way in which the police (Italian and Russian respectively) regard both of them as harmless idealists (*Innocence* 171; *Spring* 46). Fitzgerald knew and admired the works of both Gramsci and Tolstoy (Dooley 2008: xxxv), but her admiration did not translate into intellectually and morally outstanding fictional characters, for Sannazzaro and Selwyn, followers of Gramsci and Tolstoy respectively, hurt and manipulate others.
- ⁹ The felicitous ending to Salvatore's suicidal thoughts prompts the notion that Gemma's eyes and legs, too, may have been spared. The legend itself leaves Gemma's fate undecided.
- ¹⁰ Eide refers to McGonegal's book *Imagining Justice: The Politics of Postcolonial Forgiveness and Reconciliation*. McGill-Queen's UP, 2009.
- ¹¹ Although Fitzgerald was a church-going person all her life, her religiosity is not evident from her fiction. It seems necessary to point this out, since religion was a formative factor in her life and career. Both Fitzgerald's grandfathers were bishops (of Lincoln and Manchester), and her extensive personal knowledge of religious and clerical matters is evident from her non-fiction, in particular from her biography *The Knox Brothers* (1977). In chronicling the lives of her father and his three brothers, this biography is equally sympathetic in describing the deep-felt religious convictions of her uncles Wilfred and Ronald Knox and the equally deep-felt atheism of her uncle Alfred Dillwyn Knox. Fitzgerald never discloses her personal views in this biography, and in fact refers to herself only a few times as "the niece." In interviews, when almost inevitably the topic of her personal beliefs was raised, Fitzgerald would evade the question, or say that she was unable to express just what faith meant to her as a person and as an author. Her biographer Hermione Lee states that Fitzgerald's "reticence was ingrained" (2013: 427). While it is relevant to know Fitzgerald's family background, described by A. S. Byatt as a family "of bishops, saints, dons, idealists, intellects" (2008: xi), her novels are not religious in any didactic or moralistic sense. They do however invite our engagement with the Christian notions of forgiveness and non-anger, as I have shown.

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IRENE VISSER is a Senior Lecturer in Modern English Literature and Culture at the University of Groningen, The Netherlands. Her areas of concentration are contemporary literature, cultural theory, and postcolonial theory. Recent publications include “What Counts: Social Drama and Connectedness in Flannery O’Connor’s ‘The River’ and ‘Revelation’” (2016) published in *Mosaic: A journal for the interdisciplinary study of literature* 49 (3), 143–159; “Unresolved Tensions: William Faulkner’s *The Unvanquished* as a Short-Story Cycle” (2018) published in *English Studies* 99 (8), 972–986; and “Trauma in Non-Western Contexts” (2018) published in J.R. Kurtz (ed.) *Trauma and Literature*, Cambridge University Press, 124–139.

Address: Dr Irene Visser, Dept. of English Language and Culture, Arts Faculty, University of Groningen, Oude Kijk in ‘t Jatstraat 26, 9712 EK Groningen, The Netherlands. [email: i.visser@rug.nl]



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