

# Imagination, Irreality, and the Constitution of Knowledge in Penelope Fitzgerald's *The Blue Flower*

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While it is hardly surprising that Penelope Fitzgerald's novel about Novalis should be critically considered primarily in terms of historical fiction,<sup>[1]</sup> my examination of *The Blue Flower* relies on two main assumptions about fiction which means approaching the novel from a slightly different perspective. The first of these assumptions is that all artists, to a certain extent, are phenomenologists in that they perform reductions, that is, they ask us to suspend our belief in "the world" (what Edmund Husserl termed the natural attitude) and open ourselves to life's irreality, that is, its fictive possibilities, that which could happen and could have happened but never was actualised. Here I draw on Maurice Natanson's suggestion that "the fictive does not replace the real but strikes the anvil of possibility in such a way that 'pieces' of fire illuminate reality" (Natanson, 146).<sup>[2]</sup> This claim relates to my other assumption, drawn from the first one, namely that fiction, because of its irreality, constitutes an epistemological mode that has the capacity to account for knowledge and knowing not readily available in any other way. Fiction, in that particular sense, is to be considered a form of knowledge.

As Natanson points out, "[p]hilosophy cannot survive without significant metaphors" and literature provides such a metaphor (146). Fitzgerald's choice of epigraph for the novel, "Novels arise out of the shortcomings of history" from Novalis' *Fragmente und Studien* tells us some important things about how to or, perhaps, how *not* to read the novel. We are warned against regarding *The Blue Flower* as biography, we are called to distrust history, and we are encouraged to be intrigued

by witnessing the coming-to-givenness of fiction as we, with a sense of discovery, see it “arise out of” what we are told are “short-comings.” Clearly, such shortcomings can be of different kinds; I am, however, here primarily interested in history’s shortcomings in terms of experience and epistemic justice. While the choice of epigraph to some extent aligns the author with Novalis (the unreal, rather than actual subject of the novel), it also places at centre stage questions about fiction when it comes to knowledge—in varying degrees of reliability. With this focus in mind, Fitzgerald quite decisively shifts our attention away from the natural attitude and the chimera of the personal history of Novalis. We should then not mistake Fitzgerald’s meticulous research into late 18<sup>th</sup> century Germany and into the life and fragmentary writing of Novalis for an attempt to tell us the history of Novalis in novel form. Indeed, in a significantly “unreal” move, Fitzgerald, by using that particular quote, takes her cue from Novalis himself. The implication of these assumptions for my reading of Penelope Fitzgerald’s novel *The Blue Flower* is that I do not appeal to history as a corrective account of what (really) happened in the actual life of Novalis, but to Fitzgerald’s fiction as non-actualised possibility, and in doing so I explore what the fictive can and does do as an unrealisation of history,<sup>[3]</sup> one of the consequences of which is that the fictional lives of the forgotten are redeemed.

This redemptive quality is precisely what Ricoeur’s philosophy of the possible highlights. He suggests that we owe “the forgotten ones of history” to respond with “our poetical and ethical powers” in order to “recover their occluded voices from the past” (Kearney 54), in fact, a notion similar to the concept of epistemic injustice Miranda Fricker speaks of. According to Fricker “any epistemic injustice wrongs someone in their capacity as a subject of knowledge, and thus in a capacity essential to human value” (5). In other words, what a person feels, experiences, believes, or *is* (in terms of identity) is dismissed or disregarded. From the perspective of Fitzgerald’s mode of fiction, then, human value is not necessarily granted in historical/biographical accounts and is part of the shortcomings of history, those same shortcomings prefaced in the epigraph to the novel. Epistemic injustice, as Fricker points out, can lead to the ultimate injustice, that is, preventing someone “from becoming who they are” (5). What I suggest then is that Fitzgerald’s novel, by way of the unreal, makes that epistemic recovery in Ricoeur’s sense, allowing the fictionality of her characters to “arise out of the shortcomings of history” and thus “becoming who they are.” Ricoeur’s philosophy helps us see the ethos of this position:

It may be said that every event, by the fact that it has been realized, has usurped the place of impeded possibilities. It is fiction that can save these impeded possibilities and, at the same time, turn them back on history; this reverse-face of history, which has not taken place, but which had been able

to take place, in a certain way *has been*, only however in a potential mode  
(*On Paul Ricoeur*, 187)

In *The Blue Flower* we are quite explicitly asked not to trust history as a source of epistemically just knowledge but to consider “its cut-off possibilities of actualization rather than its successes” and the exploration of the “potential mode” (Kearney, 54). In phenomenological terms, we are encouraged to suspend our belief in history’s account of the past altogether. As Kearney points out, Ricoeur’s way of looking at (non-actualised) possibilities of history has political, poetical, as well as ontological implications (55). In addition, I would argue that it has clear epistemological implications, particularly as we bring the notion of epistemic injustice to bear on the issue.

This brings us to why reading *The Blue Flower* as an historical novel limits our perspective. While Laura Savu quite successfully stresses the idea of the author in respect to the novel and the alignment/convergence between her and her subject, I suggest that to reduce *The Blue Flower* to “historiographic metafiction” (Savu, 77) fails to account for imagination as knowledge within the novel’s life-world and it consequently fails to account for the fictive possibilities of epistemically just knowledge in fiction as such. Savu’s post-structuralist approach sees Fitzgerald’s novel as a meta-reflection on creativity, authorship and biography and suggests that Fitzgerald, metaphorically speaking, writes “in the margins” of Novalis’ incomplete novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, that her novel is a “pseudobiographical replica” of that “endless” novel (77). Although Savu’s use of Novalis’ own work as a point of comparison tends to lend credibility to *The Blue Flower* as pseudo-biography, it simultaneously, if inadvertently, takes away its imaginative autonomy and, curiously, reduces it to something close to tautology. An epistemologically and ontologically more viable approach, I suggest, is to look less at what connects Fitzgerald with Novalis (and indisputably, as Savu shows, there are connections) in order to legitimise her “method” and, instead, focus on how Fitzgerald’s novel constitutes knowledge by way of imagination in the first place.

For this reason, my reading will start at the opposite end to that of Laura Savu and others who read *The Blue Flower* as an example of historical (meta-) fiction. I will bracket Novalis and focus on the irreality of the novel; I will suspend belief in the existence of Novalis in order to focus on the fictive rather than on historical connectivity. In other words, it is precisely *The Blue Flower*’s suspended belief in “Novalis” (the irrealisation of Novalis) that makes it an entrance into reality proper in Natanson’s sense; the irreal of the imaginary illuminating reality. Here I would like to suggest that what is signified epistemologically by “fictive possibilities” is precisely its refusal to take for granted the priority of historical knowledge and biography over fiction as a source of knowledge as well as a method to produce

epistemically and ethically viable knowledge. Significantly, through the fictive's conscious irrealisation of Novalis, that is, by making him an obviously and explicitly fictive character, we can no longer take for granted his actual existence but would have to rely on the possibility of Fritz.

From this perspective then, "the short-comings of history" become the very condition of possibility for imagination and knowledge. Here I would like to do a foray into how knowledge can be said to connect to imagination as it is presented to us as fiction. Rita Felski's discussion of the complex relation between knowledge and fiction offers some insights in this respect:

The worldly insights we glean from literary texts are not derivative or tautological, not stale second-hand scraps of history or anthropology, but depend on a distinctive repertoire of techniques, conventions, and aesthetic possibilities. Through their rendering of the subtleties of social interaction, their mimicry of linguistic idioms and cultural grammars, their unblinking attention to the materiality of things, texts draw us into imagined yet referentially salient worlds. They do not just represent, but make newly present, significant shapes of social meaning; they crystallize, not just in what they show but in their address to the reader, what Merleau-Ponty calls the essential interwovenness of our being in the world. Their fictional and aesthetic dimensions, far from testifying to a failure of knowing, should be hailed as the source of their cognitive strength. (Felski, 104)

In terms of my claim regarding fiction as knowledge, Felski's point about "the fictional and aesthetic" as literature's "cognitive strength" is precisely how the fictive allows for the unreal to take precedence over the actual and to suspend our reliance on preconceived notions about reality. Felski also points out that "reading fuses cognitive and affective impulses" (132) and in doing so, I suggest, hints at the constitution of fiction's epistemological ethos. To put it slightly differently, fiction makes available to us a space *of* as well as *for* imagination, for fiction to engage with the "shortcomings of history" that *The Blue Flower* explores, and to show recognition of what is lost. Indeed, "the shortcomings of history" condition our imagination as a scene of representation and are generative of our ability to construct meaning. From this also follows that fiction by way of imagination is key to the construction of epistemically just knowledge about the world, that is, knowledge that takes into account subjects' status as knowers (in Fricker's terms). Novels contribute fiction to our sense-making of the world, not as appealing gap fillers but as explorations into the irreality that illuminates imagination and human consciousness. Clearly, from this point of view, Fitzgerald does more than to simply borrow the identities of Fritz von Hardenburg (using the diminutive Fritz rather than Friedrich to separate his identity even further from the actuality of Novalis), his

family, and (sometimes fictive) contemporaries in order to irrealise them; the novel consistently calls attention to fictive possibilities, and the metaphors of loss through its small failures, forgotten regrets, in fact, mixing the small failures with the larger ones.

One significant aspect of *The Blue Flower* in its “potential mode” is its thematisation of this overarching current of loss, and as such it serves to highlight loss in all its different aspects. This “loss” is thematised in different ways: as the anticipated series of loss of young lives to illness, to death, but also the theme of loss as the never actualised or even verbalised possibility of Karoline Just’s love for Fritz and the Freifrau Hardenburg’s flash of realisation that “she was forty-five, and she did not see how she was going to get through the rest of her life” (*TBF*, 201).

This current of loss functions as a metaphor for the attempt at recovering lost possibilities as a larger philosophical project for the novel. Fictive possibilities, in *The Blue Flower*, are important for imagination and consequently for knowledge. When Fritz towards the very end of the novel—and the end of Sophie’s life—fails to turn back to her room as he has done before, the novel implicates him in her suffering: “Sometimes he would be on the point of leaving and then dismount and run back again across the hall, up the two staircases which were nothing to him, into her room to say to her once again, ‘Sophie, you are my heart’s heart.’ This evening that was not the case, and he did not come back” (*TBF*, 280). In a way, the entire novel perpetuates the moment of loss in its potential mode as it at so many junctures predicates the possible that did not happen either through failure to act (as in this last instance, or failure of understanding, as in Fritz’s failure to realise Karoline is in love with him) or simply the failure of things to work out as hoped or expected, as in the Freifrau’s whole life or the romance between Fritz and Sophie.

The failed painting Fritz has commissioned is a case in point: He engages an artist to draw a picture of Sophie in what seems like an attempt to recover something from impending loss, not necessarily of life, but of youth, of innocence. The (imagined) picture becomes a fictive possibility, an intended irrealisation of Sophie, something, as Fritz puts it, he needs because he does not “altogether understand” her (*TBF*, 153). However, the artist, despite several attempts, in the end literally *cannot* paint Sophie. He gives this explanation of his failure to do so: “‘I could not hear her question, so I could not paint her’” (*TBF*, 154), an explanation based on the notion that there is in every entity a question, and that it is this question that gives it substance, a notion derived from German early Romanticism but which, in phenomenological terms, can be read as a metaphor for that current of loss that is illuminated through the irreal. Significantly, when Fritz’ relates his conversation with the painter to his sister, explaining that there are only a few sketches, this irreal aspect of the project is highlighted: “they are a kind of notation only—a few lines. A cloud of hair. He declares she is undrawable” (157). These “few lines” then, and the

“cloud of hair” both speak to incompleteness and, precisely because of this, to its numerous but elusive possibilities. Indeed, to be undrawable is to be granted subjectivity.

Irrealisation serves yet another purpose in the recovery of loss signified by the “potential mode,” namely insofar as it both highlights the transient aspect of life and defamiliarises it. When Maurice Natanson said that “literature is an entrance to reality” (19), he meant that if we are able to see “the fictive possibilities,” the strangeness that appears to defamiliarise the everyday, we will have, from a phenomenological perspective, a more illuminated sense of reality. This I consider a key aspect of *The Blue Flower’s* commitment to the strangeness of the everyday, the strange being, as Natanson puts it, “a hiddenness uncovered by the familiar. Not ‘set off against,’ then, but hidden within” (Natanson, 16). *The Blue Flower’s* imaginary world arises immediately out of everyday experience while consistently making the everyday appear both strange and fantastic. One passage which demonstrates this quite clearly is when Fritz enters for the first time the home of the tax collector Coelestin Just to whom he has been apprenticed and with whom he is to board: “he looked around him as though at a revelation. ‘It is beautiful, beautiful’” (*TBF*, 62). This observation, however, is dismissed by Just’s wife, but Fritz goes on to exclaim that Karoline, Just’s niece, is also beautiful and at Just’s wife’s renewed denial he goes on to reassert his point:

‘But I did mean it,’ said Fritz. ‘When I came into your home, everything, the wine-decanter, the tea, the sugar, the chairs, the dark green tablecloth with its abundant fringe, everything was illuminated.’

‘They are as usual. I did not buy this furniture myself, but-’

Fritz tried to explain that he had seen not their everyday, but their spiritual selves. He could not tell when these transfigurations would come to him. When the moment came it was as if the whole world would be when body at last became subservient to soul. (*TBF*, 63)

What is significant here are the “transfigurations” of the everyday presence of household items perceived by Fritz. For some reason, he does not take them for granted. He enters the world of the Just’s in a state of anticipation. Suddenly “transfigurations” appear. This passage, in all its brevity, accomplishes a phenomenological move, insofar as it demonstrates a certain cognisance with the unreal as a proper field of examination. More specifically, Fritz lives the suspended belief in “the world” at the heart of Husserl’s phenomenology. This state of affairs is perhaps made even clearer later on in the novel when Fritz expresses a sense of awe in the strangeness hidden in the familiar, in a distinctly phenomenological

manner:

We think we know the laws that govern our existence. We get glimpses, perhaps only once or twice in a lifetime, of a totally different system at work behind them. One day when I was reading between Rippach and Lützen, I felt the certainty of immortality, like the touch of a hand.—When I first went to the Justs' house in Tennstadt, the house seemed radiant to me, even the green tablecloth, yes, even the bowl of sugar.—When I first met Sophie, a quarter of an hour decided me.—Rahel reproved me, Erasmus reproached me, but they were wrong, both of them wrong.—In the churchyard at Weissenfels I saw a boy, not quite grown into a man, standing with his head bowed in meditation on a green space not yet dug up, a consoling sight in the half darkness. These were the truly important moments of my life, even though it ends tomorrow. (*TBF*, 272)

The assertion Fritz makes here is phenomenologically meaningful in several respects. First, the suggestion that meaning and “truly important moments” do exist “in spite of everything” and are meaningful “even though it ends tomorrow” is significant. Indeed, the anticipation of ultimate loss is in itself constitutive of this particular sense of meaning. Secondly, speaking in terms of “glimpses” that undermine what we take for granted about “the laws that govern existence,” Fritz effectively challenges the natural attitude. Fitzgerald in yet another irreal move is placing Fritz in the position of the artist-phenomenologist, giving him the epistemic authority to speak as a subject, a “knower” who ultimately extends “history.” I think this should be read as a metaphor for the emergence of fictive possibilities as an illumination of reality, its equivalent to the “cloud of hair” metaphor of the failed painting of Sophie.

What follows from this assumption is that a person's lived experience in itself is a form of knowledge, and that epistemic injustice stems from a failure on the part of others to recognise the validity of this experience, that one be recognised (in Fricker's terms) as a knower. Read from this perspective, the epigraph of the novel (“Novels arise out of the shortcomings of history”) foregrounds how imagination by way of the fictive not only adds to but also alters the very premise of human knowledge, by appropriating or taking advantage of the space constituted by assumed as well as imaginary “shortcomings.” We should then consider the term “shortcomings” as a metaphor elucidating literary fiction's ultimate condition of possibility, and, indeed, its generative impetus.

The final chapter of *The Blue Flower* is called “Afterword,” and despite its formal nod to non-fiction, its half poetic, half-prosaic catalogue of the fates of the principals of the novel is of course part of the fiction. Facts, in that particular sense (and in

line with Savu's argument), appear to converge with fiction. As James Wood points out, "[w]hen characters in historical novels die, they die as fictional characters, not as historical personages" (Wood, 2013). More important, however, is that they not only die as fictional characters, they *live* as fictional characters as well, and, in fact, *only* live as fictional characters in the irreal world of the novel. The structure of fiction allows characters (to borrow another phrase from James Wood) "to float away from [their] factual underpinnings" (Wood, 2014). However, what the novel puts into question by its fragmentary structure as well as through its magnifying lens on the everyday is the disproportionate arbitrariness of what is deemed "factual" in the first place. Fitzgerald's attention to peculiar details (how laundry was done, what food 18<sup>th</sup>-century Germans of the lower nobility were likely to eat, what Christmas gifts they would make) shifts focus not necessarily away from "big" events but from the idea that big events holds priority over the mundane. What Fitzgerald's method suggests is that a novel has redemptive qualities insofar as it has the capacity to epistemically shift this balance. The function of fiction (and those novels called, however misleadingly, historical novels in particular) is not, as was pointed out above, primarily a question of filling in the blanks (it is often quite the contrary) but rather about an epistemic practice that to a larger extent than any other practice can account for lived experience and acknowledge its fictional subjects as knowers.

This peculiar state of affairs also has implications for the understanding of knowledge and how true, accurate or fair knowledge relies on experience and imagination "arising out of it" or generated from it. Art's capacity to expand existence as remarked by Robert Lowell in the poem "Epilogue" points to an equally prominent factor in Fitzgerald's exploration of the anticipation of loss. Lowell's insistence at the beginning of the poem that "I want to make/ something imagined, not recalled" and the final lines' statement "We are poor passing facts,/ warned by that to give/ each figure in the photograph/ his living name" both serve to reiterate imagination's role in a transient world when it comes to affording justice to "each figure in the photograph" regardless of their historical insignificance. Fitzgerald's brief, mock "factual" summary of the short lives and deaths of the young von Hardenburgs speaks most clearly to this notion, and in doing so grants an emblematic epistemic justice through the potential mode of the fictive. The "living name," in this context, I take to mean not Novalis, but the fictive possibilities of the "imagined, not recalled."

Hence, imagination takes priority over memory as well as over history. *The Blue Flower* foregrounds this position on history in the chapter aptly named "What is the Meaning?," a chapter which highlights how imagination works *with* as well as *as* history in the novel: When Colestin Just complains that the French Revolution has not produced what it was meant to, Fritz responds: "But the spirit of the



Revolution, as we first heard of it, as it first came to us, could be preserved here in Germany. It could be transferred to the world of the imagination, and administered by poets" (*TBF*, 76). Fritz is quite clearly not really considering the historical events of the Revolution (or its after-effects; indeed, it could be inferred that he was critical of them). Rather, our attention is directed towards the "spirit" or idea of Revolution as such. The phrase "as we first heard of it" is key here, insofar as it predicates how the idea as it is received constitutes an assimilation of the sublimated idea of Revolution "transferred to the imagination," ultimately to be "administered" by "poets." In the context of *The Blue Flower*, this "Romantic" notion takes on epistemological significance. What the novel, through Fritz, appears to be saying is that the generative aspects of the event of the Revolution (or any historical event) can *only* be assimilated (or even grasped), and consequently *operate* as a phenomenon transferred to the world of the imagination and conveyed through the aesthetic. In other words, its (truly) transformative effects can only take place through an aesthetic appropriately adapted to its purpose. But an epistemically fair history, as Fitzgerald's novel shows with such distinctness, cannot be reduced to the interpretation of famed men's thoughts and the key events of their lives—however revolutionary. What *The Blue Flower* does is to account not for the feelings and longings of Novalis, the romantic poet/philosopher, but for the irrealisation of Novalis, the (fictive) young man Friedrich (Fritz) von Hardenburg before and beyond his existence as Romantic poet and influential philosopher.

But this is not what the novel primarily tells us about knowledge and imagination as it relates to epistemic injustice. What it does highlight and gives weight to is the recovery of "the occluded voices" of Fritz's circle of family and friends, allowing them to become "who they are."

For Fritz, Sophie von Kuhn is the incarnation of the sacred of the blue flower, and we are as readers only momentarily tempted to accept her as such. However, the narrative appears to be at pains to stress her ordinariness and, in a way, her failure to appear as sacred is what grants her status as a proper subject, as a knower in Fricker's sense. Fritz sees Sophie as inscrutable and even "cold through and through" but the novel uses the epistemic authority of the narrative perspective to show her to be an ordinary girl:

'Now tell me what you think about poetry?

'I don't think about it at all,' said Sophie.

'But you would not want to hurt a poet's feelings.'

'I would not want to hurt anyone's feelings.'

‘Let us speak of something else. What do you like best to eat?’

‘Cabbage soup,’ Sophie told him, ‘and a nice smoked eel.’ (*TBF*, 103)

The humour in this passage is not all on Fritz’s side: Indeed, the narrative here foregrounds Fritz’s obvious lack of the understanding or imagination to allow Sophie her subjectivity. Sophie is far from accepting being assigned the sacred figure role given to her by Fritz. In the fictive world of the novel, a remote correlate of the symbolic blue flower, she is a subject, to use Fricker’s word, a “knower” in her own right. The way then in which the fictive contributes to knowledge where history fails counteracts the epistemic injustice inherent in historical practice. The aesthetic or fictive then offers a way to reconsider “our epistemic practices,” that is, in its capacity to account for “the failings of history” where someone like Sophie becomes a minor figure and thereby to recover, in Ricoeur’s terms, a voice “occluded by history.” In this, fiction’s inventive power manages something more than mere history. The significance of Sophie then, in the end, is something both less and more than the blue flower; stressing her very ordinariness constitutes a way to grant her epistemic justice: she is not a merely a symbol, but a human being, slowly dying of an enormously painful disease, something to which Fritz appears, in the end, incapable to respond. The “potential mode” of Fitzgerald’s fiction, however, does respond. Sophie von Kuhn becomes, in such a response, not merely the elusive object of Fritz’s desire but a subject with her own life-world and her own epistemic authority within the world of the novel.

There is however also some symbolic value at stake here. Turning to the blue flower of the title provides a different kind of challenge, a resistance which also extends to efforts to impose preconceived notions of meaning. The emblematic force of the blue flower is put into play as Fitzgerald has Fritz telling Karoline Just a story and then asking her “What is the meaning of the blue flower?” The story is about a young man who lies alone in his room remembering “the stranger and his stories”:

I have no craving to be rich, but I long to see the blue flower. It lies incessantly at my heart, and I can imagine and think about nothing else. Never did I feel like this before. It is as if until now I had been dreaming, or as if sleep had carried me into another world. For in the world I used to live in, who would have troubled himself about flowers? (*TBF*, 78).

In Fritz’s telling of this story, there are several points to be made about knowledge and imagination and imagination and meaning: Fritz clearly constructs the story as a scene of representation, whereby to ask, as in the title of the chapter where it first appears: “What is the meaning?” Significantly, however, it is a fragment that he never appears to be able to contextualise and give closure to; the fragment is

equally mysterious to him, its author, as it is to his interlocutors. Indeed, the blue flower and its fragmentary narrative irrealises the inner workings of fiction as fiction as it predicates fiction's eidos (and indeed ethos): its capacity to explore the possibilities of human consciousness and through imagery express the longing for what is essentially impossible to grasp but which, all the same, constitutes a form of knowledge.

In the "Afterword" we are told that at his death-bed Novalis told Schlegel "that he had entirely changed his plan for the story of the Blue Flower" (*TBF*, 282). In this laconic note, the narrator is not merely turning on its head the notion of meaning but is also pointing to the ultimate triumph of imagination. In other words, it is not only that, ultimately, we are not given the key to the mystery of the blue flower, but rather that pointing to the final withholding of "facts," the fictive, imaginary possibilities of narrative are stressing the figurative over the literal and the literary over "facts." Literature then is not only employed as a metaphor to explain philosophy but as a metaphor to illuminate history. As in the story fragment, the blue flower of the title constitutes not so much a deferral of meaning in a Derridean sense as (by way of its elusive significance) a correlate of the fragmentary, glimpse-like structure of the novel and, by extension, of the process of the constitution of meaningful knowledge by way of imagination. Consequently, the blue flower becomes emblematic of both imagination as knowledge and the consistent dependence on imagination for the potential recovery of any true or fair knowledge.

As has been argued in the above, Fritz's experience and imagination does not become the privileged mode of knowledge about him as a precursor to a future (famed) author figure. What is created as to "arise out of the [one might add, epistemic] shortcomings of history" is something quite different. A passage from the novel where this becomes quite clear is when Fritz comes home and wants to speak to his mother in the garden to inquire about his father's response to his proposal to Sophie:

An extraordinary notion came to the Freifrau Auguste, that she might take advantage of this moment, which in its half-darkness and fragrance seemed to her almost sacred, to talk to her eldest son about herself. All that she had to say could be put quite shortly: she was forty-five, and she did not see how she was going to get through the rest of her life. Abruptly Fritz leaned towards her and said, 'You know that I have only one thing to ask. Has he read my letter?' (*TBF*, 201).

Fritz is here portrayed not as the perceptive Romantic poet and philosopher but as a flawed, self-centred adolescent who is, to a large extent, failing in a deeper understanding of who his mother is. Being the nominal subject of a fictional

biography has not given him the epistemic authority of “his” story-world. Indeed, in only one sentence, his mother’s whole life and world is unrealised, illuminated and, to some extent, also recovered. Like Sophie, the Freifrau is a subject and is, by virtue of her lived experience, a knower. The novel’s conflation of experience, knowledge and imagination makes for an epistemically more just understanding of such subjects.

The unrealisation of numerous aspects of the everyday that *The Blue Flower* suggests to us is intimately connected to the recovery of loss in the “potential mode” that characterises the fictive. This is what simultaneously stresses the inevitability of loss and the illumination of possibilities prompted by that very inevitability. Richard Kearney, with reference to Ricoeur’s explorations on the subject of the possible, speaks of a middle-road between “extreme presence and extreme absence,” what he calls “an itinerary guided by a wager to render human existence, in all its frailty and finitude, *capable of meaningful being in spite of everything*” (Kearney, 50; original emphasis). It can be said that *The Blue Flower* navigates this middle-road as it, like Ricoeur, engages with the fictive as “a concrete description of the living human being as it acts and suffers in the everyday world” (50). *The Blue Flower*, forever in the experience of not yet loss, not yet death, aesthetically illuminates the notion of “meaningful being in spite of everything” that Kearney speaks of.

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### Notes

[1] E.g. Sudrann, 1993; Gitzen, 1997; Knapp, 1998; Ottenmer, 1998; Stonebridge, 2005; Savu, 2009; Wood, 2013, 2014.

[2] Natanson describes the distinction between the "real" and the "irreal" using the following example: "'Irreal' does not mean 'unreal'; 'irreal' signifies a turn away from the given fact or event in a situation of any kind to, instead, the possibility of that fact or event. But the point goes further. In the 'fact-world' of daily life, the 'reality' of a sign in the window of a restaurant, announcing 'LUNCH BEING SERVED,' is unrealized if it be noted that the restaurant is closed-closed for good. Indeed, there is still the fictive possibility there for lunch being served (and it may, at any time become real again)" (Natanson, 26-27).

[3] There are obviously several ways of dealing with novels about historical figures but common to all, regardless of whether we call them fictional biographies or historical fiction, is still that the fictional world takes priority over any historical fact, and it is this fictional aspect that I wish to highlight.