

### **The Blue Flower – New York Times Review by Michael Hoffman**

Good as the other books are, "The Blue Flower" is better. It is a quite astonishing book, a masterpiece, as a number of British critics have already said -- from its epigraph from Novalis, "Novels arise out of the shortcomings of history," to the list of dates and deaths in its harshly affecting afterword. Set in provincial Saxony in the 1790's, this is, on the face of it, Ms. Fitzgerald's most recondite and challenging book. It is also her greatest triumph, as luminous and authentic a piece of imaginative writing about a writer, in this case a seminal German writer, as Georg Buchner's "Lenz," Hugo von Hofmannsthal's "Letter of Lord Chandos" or Thomas Mann's tiny story about Schiller, "Weary Hour" -- three of the great glories of German literature.

Her subject is Novalis, a German Romantic poet and man of wider genius, who lived from 1772 to 1801 and combined, roughly, the intense flaring life of a Keats with the intellectual breadth of a Coleridge. Or rather it is Novalis before he became Novalis and was merely Friedrich von Hardenberg, or Fritz, as in the passage quoted above. The novel covers the years from 1790 to 1797, years when he was a student of history, philosophy and law at the universities of Jena, Leipzig and Wittenberg, before he set out on his early professional life, first indentured to the regional administrator Coelestin Just and then assigned to a job in the Salt Mine Directorate, where his father also worked. The book evokes his homelife as the oldest son in a large, vivacious and affectionate family in a ramshackle house in a small town in Saxony, his meeting with the 12-year-old Sophie von Kuhn in 1794, his unofficial engagement with her the following year, and her death two years later from tuberculosis. The afterword, as I intimated, is a list of further deaths, those of Fritz's siblings, in their teens and 20's, mainly also from tuberculosis.

It is hard to know where to begin to praise the book. First off, I can think of no better introduction to the Romantic era: its intellectual exaltation, its political ferment, its brilliant amateur self-scrutiny, its propensity for intense friendships and sibling relationships, its uncertain morals, its rumors and reputations and meetings, its innocence and its refusal of limits. Also, "The Blue Flower" is a wholly convincing account of that very difficult subject, genius. It is something Penelope Fitzgerald is interested in and has written about in earlier books -- Jonathan in "At Freddie's," Dolly in "The Beginning of Spring." But here it is present in the whole younger generation of Hardenbergs, in their curiosity and abruptness and the way they imitate and learn from one another. Fritz's dissident understanding, his odd mixture of intellectual calm and excited curiosity ("Why not? Nonsense is only another language") is latent, made clear in the exchanges with his brothers and sisters in a way that is beyond what any biographer could achieve. Things written by the historical Novalis arise here naturally and seamlessly from the character of Fritz -- for instance, "We could not feel love for God Himself if He did not need our help."

Similarly, Fritz's love for Sophie, a crux and a conundrum for the biographer, emerges

beautifully in the novel, as in this little exchange: "Fritz persevered. 'I did not quite mean that. But Schlegel, too, is interested in transmigration. Should you like to be born again?'

"Sophie considered a little. 'Yes, if I could have fair hair.' " Inequality of age and intellect, yes, but compatibility!

The quiddity of life in a remote place, at a remote time, is managed with characteristic brilliance by Ms. Fitzgerald: "Even Tennstedt had its fair, specializing in Kesselfleisch -- the ears, snout and strips of fat from the pig's neck boiled with peppermint schnapps." Further, she uses tiny doses of German ("the Gaul," "the Amtsrichter") and of literally translated German expressions ("own-ness" and, very tellingly, for Fritz's little brother, "the Bernhard"). That and a barely detectable abruptness in some phrasings are enough to move the reader back 200 years to the various Romes and Athenses of Saxony. Hundreds of pages of gothic type wouldn't have been able to do it.

And, of course, like the masterpiece it is, "The Blue Flower" ranges far beyond itself. It is an interrogation of life, love, purpose, experience and horizons, which has found its perfect vehicle in a few years from the pitifully short life of a German youth about to become a great poet -- one living in a period of intellectual and political upheaval, when even the prevailing medical orthodoxy "held that to be alive was not a natural state