

# The Music of Tempera: An Appreciation of the Art of Barnaby Fitzgerald

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*In my experience, the art of description with drawing is the highest achievement. There is an analogy between melody and description. Their poise stands firm through all the distortions of copying, transcribing, fading and dirtying that time and wear can reasonably send against them, as does the indestructible architecture of verse.*

*To test this principle my students and I taped a little Rembrandt facsimile to the floor and the whole class walked over it for a semester. It didn't lose a thing - so much for technique... or at least we understood the WHY of the technique, and how Art is the extraction of a technique's full potential to the point where the technique falls off like a spent cocoon. Once extracted the art stands on its own, only then miraculously independent of its means, having entered our memory; its measure of being new only being the amount of its power of renewal. In the case of melodies, I know everyone has been overwhelmed by a Bach prelude even when it is winding down to an almost nonsensical speed in the short-lived torque of a carillon.*

--Barnaby Fitzgerald, excerpt from *Melody and Description*, 2012

To enter Barnaby Fitzgerald's Dallas studio is to enter a world of astonishing beauty. We all, rather ashamedly, have a secret sweet tooth for beauty even when we are told by all the authorities that it is bad for us—that it is kitsch, or the domination of the male gaze, or the habituation to a regime of power and knowledge, or a sign of cultural hegemony, or an exploitation of Nature. We know it is not these things, though if we are starved for long enough of the work of the great artists, poets and composers, we can begin to find the critics of beauty persuasive.

Much of what we are supposed to admire in the arts is like eating flavorless food that is not properly seasoned. We sit through endless musical pieces in the second half of the concert, appreciating the interestingness of it, desperately hungry for a melody, a tune. We try to wait out the novelist, hoping that we are finally going to get some real plot, and a character admirable enough to want to get to know. We try to like some poem that wanders flaccidly across the page without even the sinew and bone of grammar, let alone the music of meter and rhyme. We figure out the crude slogan-like allegory of a gallery installation, without pleasure.

By contrast Fitzgerald's outrageously gorgeous paintings are a guilty pleasure—yet the guilt

is unnecessary, for they do not cloy or fatten us.<sup>1</sup> They are as intellectually challenging and stimulating as they are sensually seductive. His work is astonishingly various in style, ranging from the sacred purity of a Piero or a Giotto to the delicious perverse obsession of a Balthus (whom Fitzgerald met as a stage-struck teenager).



He can modulate from the classical serene calm of a studio-and-model scene to the tragic ominousness of a painting commemorating the

death in the Haitian earthquake of a beautiful and dynamic art teacher he knew. This latter work includes references to the myth of Ariadne abandoned on the island of Naxos, lost to Hades by suicide, but here half-buried in storm-surge sand, and blocking the passage of Dionysus' wagon, drawn by a leopard and an ass. Can Dionysus bring her back to life?

Fitzgerald's background is closely bound up with perhaps the most distinguished group of classicizing poets and translators in modern America, what I think of as the Arion group, including his father Robert Fitzgerald the great translator of Homer, David Carne-Ross, Christopher Ricks, William Arrowsmith, Anne Carson, and Tony Harrison. Part of their genius was to render the classical poets of Greece and Rome into a fresh and vital idiom that showed how very modern, how very apposite they are in our own times. For Fitzgerald, both father and son, the classical poets, architects and sculptors had already discovered that ideal of the existentialists, the full experience of life and its inherent joy even under the sign of transience, contingency, and mortality. That world, of *luxe, calme, et volupté*,<sup>2</sup> with its Mediterranean light and its incorporation of all the great human myths and stories, is portrayed again and again in the works of artists as diverse as Henri Matisse and David Ligare. For me, Fitzgerald's summation of that tradition is as satisfactory as the best of the genre.

Many of Fitzgerald's paintings are themselves meditations on the living presence of classical form. Even when that presence is in the guise of fragments of colossal sculpture, the fragments are lit with an ageless vital light and provide the context of a living nude whose breathing awareness and charming figure are no less elegant than the



ancient gestalts she re-embodies. In one painting she sits not very patiently while the artist traces again and again the outline of her profile's shadow on the wall, cast by the rising sun. In some of the earlier silhouettes in the painting she is holding up a mirror to her face, but by now she has tired of it and set it down as he paints in the last unavailing outline. In another painting she is simply seated pensively beside the enormous marble head of a goddess, whose face has cracked off to form a mask.



Fitzgerald's nudes are as captivating as Balthus's, but in a very different way. His ladies' faces are, as the French say, "jolie-laide"—"pretty/ugly"—the way Lady Gaga is, or Virginia Woolf was, or Cranach's Eve, or Greta Garbo, or Anais Nin (with whom I once had dinner—even in her eighties she totally charmed me). His women are philosophers, so that one would as well consult them for their intelligence as ogle their poignantly elegant (if not always conventionally proportioned) bodies. It is we who are the victims, not they.

Beauty is plainly Fitzgerald's aim. But unlike many painters and critics, he is prepared to explore the meaning of that word, and not just take it for granted. So many of his works deal with the mystery of perception—why do we perceive something as beautiful and why is that perception pleasurable? His paintings are full of gentle visual paradoxes: of disparate scales, of odd perspectives (in an almost Escher way), of willful variation between dense painterly detail and almost blank white ground, of deliberately unlikely shadows, and of oscillations between the realist and the iconic.

The strange thing is that these peculiarities are not annoying, as they often are in the work of younger, self-consciously clever gallery artists who like to ram their rather obvious challenge down the viewer's throat. Somehow his blend of the expected and the unexpected feels quite natural. If it is not natural in the sense of photographic, it is natural in the sense of truly replicating our extraordinary human capacity, wired into the visual cortex by our continuing neural self-editing and perceptual activism, to imbue meaning, intention, dynamic potential into the optical world. Our brain neurons extend right down into the retina and the muscles that drive focus and saccade, converting the raw material of electromagnetic waves into a human world of expectations and surprises. Fitzgerald's beloved Dante shared that fascination about the sheer mechanism of perception.

Like many artists, Fitzgerald is interested in the Fibonacci numbers, the golden section ratio, and the spirals they imply. These numbers—1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21... are the fundamental ratio of ordered growth: nothing can be bigger at the end of one growth cycle than the sum of its two previous sizes. Fitzgerald's still-lives of shells—and more subtly, his extraordinary charcoal drawings of trees and bushes and animals—are meditations on the richness of the potential of this growth mechanism. In *Moment*, a philosophical painting of great depth, the painting is organized by a set of overlapping rectangles, all of them related to each other in various versions of the golden section. Analysis and measurement of the painting—which I have done, and which at the time Barnaby himself had not—show that the ratios imply two Fibonacci spirals, one centered on the eye of the lady in the center, one on the pen or paintbrush that stands on the upper left.



In its first, crudest approximation beauty is merely ordered growth. But the Fibonacci spiral is only the simplest fractal form; if the principle of feedback that it embodies is elaborated only a little we get the astonishing cornucopia of infinitely deep natural forms that we have begun to name as the Mandelbrot Set, the Lorenz ("butterfly") Attractor, the logistical map, and so on. Beauty in its second iteration is perhaps the integration of all such forms into specific biological forms (such as, at their simplest, the seashell, the fern-leaf, the palm) shaped by the feedback constraints of survival and reproduction. Sex with its petals, rituals, and mating plumage is perhaps the third iteration, and human conscious reflection and meditation perhaps the fourth.

At its highest iteration, the Spirit enters, or emerges. In many of Fitzgerald's paintings some kind of djinn or kami or angel bursts into the painting, with an alien scale or color palette or density of detail frequency. In his new collection, there is a beautiful small picture of the inside of a cathedral that seems to have been re-commissioned to some kind of cultural or touristic secular purpose, in this case a table set for dinner. But a blazing red and yellow angel, unobserved by the strolling inhabitants, has burst like a comet into the scene, bearing a tray of liqueurs. The restaurant has turned into an agape, a spiritual love-feast, and the folk in the cathedral have come from different cultures across the Earth and different times and places. Fitzgerald's work is what



I have called "visionary realism." Alfonso d'Este chose the Renaissance versions of this genre for his glorious Camerino—in it there is a painting by Titian, surely known to Fitzgerald, in which Dionysus/Bacchus leaps from his leopard-drawn chariot into a pastoral scene, to save Ariadne (the witch-princess who solved the riddle of the Labyrinth). Bacchus' leap, with its weird three-dimensional perspective, is echoed in Fitzgerald's angelic entries.

Fitzgerald's spiritual vision is not one of alienation between spirit and flesh. He is thoroughly an incarnationalist: for him the spirit is to be found especially, and most richly and fully, in the flesh. His cultural embedding in medieval Italy and West



Africa, and his love of the art and people of Haiti, move him toward an almost pagan sacramentality. Even his most favored medium, tempera, of which he is an acknowledged modern master, is based upon the living slimy vitality of the egg-yolk.

The great Italian masters were aware of the virtues of tempera (one of which we know from unsuccessfully trying to clean a breakfast dish that has experienced a couple of eggs "looking at you"): its astonishing adhesive qualities, its endurance against oil and water, its brilliant luminous and partly translucent character. Fitzgerald loves to layer tempera glazes in different shades to get his three-dimensional richness of color. Is it mere coincidence that the medium includes the reproductive germ-cell of a bird? Or that the Italian word tempera is cognate with "tempus" (time), temporal (this-worldly), and tempering, in the sense of mixing and steel forging? Somehow tempera, despite its yellow color, makes the most brilliant whites, and Fitzgerald knows this.

The epigraph of this essay comes from a draft of the artist's diary. Fitzgerald is familiar with music, as with other arts such as cuisine and poetry. When he says that description is to painting as melody is to music, there is a puzzle, whose investigation may help us understand his perspective. A critic might say "But isn't melody something that is purely invented by the composer, an expression of his creativity, an abstract structure of notes embodied in sound—while description is merely an imitation of something that is already there? Wouldn't the proper analogy for melody be harmonious spatial composition, or pleasing color combinations?"

For Fitzgerald, both these characterizations are flawed. For him melody in music is itself a discovery, not a mere fabrication—as he says,

*If melody is the representation of intelligence, to paraphrase Schopenhauer, it stands to reason that the kind of wit required to invent a tune is not unlike that enlivened by the art of description in drawing. The caveat being that one describes its own experience while the other probes memory of subject matter.*

Fitzgerald is struggling here to express a profound concept in a verbal medium that is not as suited to it as is painting. Perhaps we can paraphrase it in this way: first of all, a melody is itself a sort of representation of something, a "witty" embodiment of an experiential movement, an archetypal pattern of temporal motion, a "strange attractor"

that was always waiting to be realized. Likewise, the work of drawing is not mere copying of the outward display of a subject, but a profound meditation on it that reveals its inner shape and expression—the incarnation of its meaning in another form. The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins called this shape the "inscape;" Goethe called the capacity to perceive it "Einfühlung." True description and melody are always pleasurable, because our brains are exquisitely tuned to detect anything that grows and flourishes, and that thus expresses the fractal creativity of the world. True description is ever-refreshed by memory, as is a tune one can't get out of one's head. Like the grass and flowers that grow through the concrete, beauty can be trodden on for a whole semester and still keep its vital form—from which the technique that created it has fallen away like a spent cocoon.

<sup>1</sup> Fitzgerald loves to paint food—better than eye candy, it nourishes as well as pleases.

<sup>2</sup> From Baudelaire's "Invitation to the Voyage," a poem that could be the extended caption of many of Fitzgerald's works:

"Gleaming furniture,  
Polished by the years,  
Will ornament our bedroom;  
The rarest flowers  
Mingling their fragrance  
With the faint scent of amber,  
The ornate ceilings,  
The limpid mirrors,  
The oriental splendor,  
All would whisper there  
Secretly to the soul  
In its soft, native language.  
There all is order and beauty,  
Luxury, peace, and pleasure."



Images:

- p.1 *The Rescue of Ariadne*, 2012  
oil on canvas, 42 x 50 inches
- p.2 *Profile*, 2012  
oil on canvas, 50 1/8 x 60 1/4 inches
- p.2 *Cloud Break*, 2012  
oil on canvas, 55 1/4 x 65 1/4 inches
- p.3 *Moment*, 2012  
oil on canvas, 68 1/8 x 83 inches
- p.3 *Parable*, 2012  
egg tempera on panel, 18 x 25 inches
- p.4 *Converses*, 2011-2012  
egg tempera on panel, 25 x 18 inches