

I often laugh when I'm alone – the novels of Ronald Firbank

by
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As both Wyndham Lewis and Augustus John discovered when they tried to draw him, Ronald Firbank (1886–1926) would never sit still. Lewis's likeness is hawkish and angular, while John's various drawings attempt to capture an altogether more fluid and evasive presence in a range of different styles. But between them they convey something of their subject's unsettling complexity, his ability to beguile and disconcert, the challenge half-hidden in the luxurious frivolity of his manner. Firbank has been revered and reviled, but he has never quite been "caught."

Each of his novels is a daring experiment in style and form. He threw away almost everything he inherited from the Victorian novel, and what he retained he treated in bizarre and unpredictable ways. He owed something to earlier comic writers – Restoration comedy, Alexander Pope's satires, *Tristram Shandy* – and a great deal to writers of the 1890s. His first book, published in 1905, pays homage in two short tales to two sides of Oscar Wilde: "Odette d'Antrevernes" is a religious fairy story, "A Study in Temperament" an unresolved fragment of social comedy. Wilde was to remain a presence in all his work, and Firbank was to become best known for a kind of social camp, in which the certainties of Wildean epigram are suggestively unpinned and unpicked; but the element of fairy story also survives until the end in a vein of fable and fantasy. By the time Firbank published his first novel, *Vainglory*, in 1915, however, he had achieved a revolution in technique; over the next four years he went on to refine it in three more startlingly original novels, *Inclinations*, *Caprice*, and *Valmouth*: books that constitute an aesthete's witty defiance of the war and of the depression into which it had plunged him.

The main features of Firbank's stylistic revolution were the suppression, or at least concealment, of plot; a texture made up of elliptical-seeming fragments; and an extraordinary brevity. After *Vainglory*, his longest novel, he settled on what was to be his natural length for a book, about twenty thousand words. Unlike his great contemporary Marcel Proust, who expanded the novel to unprecedented length to do justice to the complexity of his narrator's consciousness and world, Firbank, who shared many of Proust's preoccupations, arrived early on at an aesthetic that required almost everything to be left out. "I am all design – once I get going," he wrote. "I think nothing of filing fifty pages down to make a brief, crisp paragraph, or even a row of dots." Firbank is described by several contemporaries as writing his novels on postcards; none of these

manuscripts survives, but the notebooks for each novel, in which he amassed descriptive phrases, lines of dialogue, sketches of dresses and hats, can still be read, and suggest something of his mosaic-like practice. One of the most commented-on procedures in the earlier novels is a kind of verbal collage, by which he conveys the atmosphere of a party as if with a roving microphone, picking up and juxtaposing random snippets of talk:

“Heroin.”

“Adorable simplicity.”

“What could anyone find to admire in such a shelving profile?”

“We reckon a duck here of two or three and twenty not so old. And a spring chicken anything to fourteen.”

“My husband had no amorous energy whatsoever; which just suited me, of course.”

“I suppose when there’s no more room for another crow’s-foot, one attains a sort of peace?”

“Cruelly lonely.”

“Leery . . .”

“Vulpine.”

“Calumny.” [. . .]

“If she pays her creditors sixpence in the pound it’s the utmost they can expect.” [. . .]

“It’s a little pain-racked face – not that she really suffers.”

At its best the result is convincingly nonsensical: as V. S. Pritchett said, “Firbank must have been the first disinterested, clinical listener to the lunacy of conversation.” But the effect is also an analogue of his wider technique, which brings things into unexpected proximity by simply leaving out the narrative padding that would normally keep them apart. Firbank combines rich, sharp observation with the dictates of a genuinely modernist sensibility. His urge to refine a modern aesthetic out of the murky legacy of the 1890s, his cutting-out of superfluities, his amassing of fragments, are processes we see at the same time in the work of T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and W. B. Yeats; and there are ways in which Firbank seems as close to the most innovative poets of his time as he does to the novelists, such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, who always crowd him out of histories of modernism in English.

Certainly Firbank’s early books challenged the priorities of the novel and the assumptions that traditionally underpinned it. His narratives, if you try to sum them up, are slight: *Vainglory* is “about” the determination of Mrs. Shamefoot, the neglected wife of a clever husband, to have a window to herself installed in an English cathedral, while she is still alive; in *Inclinations* a lesbian biographer travels to Greece with a fifteen-year-old girl and loses her to an Italian count, to whom she becomes happily married; in *Caprice* a stagestruck country girl escapes to London to follow an acting career and is killed by falling into a well beneath the stage of the theater where she is playing Juliet; in the benign climate of Valmouth, the characters survive to an immense age, and are helped in the pursuit of their amorous inclinations by Mrs. Yajñavalkya, a mysterious black masseuse. As plots these may sound whimsical or merely anecdotal; but as with Henry James, who often turned small “shocking” plots into complex extended fictions, the treatment is all. Firbank must have learned

much from James's mastery of obliquity, before passing on to his own more extreme and absurdist position; *Inclinations*, in particular, which is written almost entirely in dialogue, shows a Jamesian preference for presenting events not as they happen but as they are refracted and analyzed in conversation that touches on them. Thus, much of the book is a kind of conversational fantasia, counterpointing the tomboyish bluntness of young Mabel Collins with the disillusion of her refined but vampiric admirer Geraldine O'Brookomore. (Miss O'Brookomore's heartbreak, when it comes, is conveyed in a chapter that consists simply of the word "Mabel!" repeated eight times.) From the start Firbank's novels, so witty in tone and confidently languid in tempo, nonetheless required total concentration from their readers; in the earlier novels in particular there are passages of heady difficulty, and unannounced transitions that require a kind of intuitive alertness to be properly followed. Ordinary fictional expectations are largely disregarded. Rather, as we tease out the aspirations of the characters from their talk – by turns extravagant and commonplace, obscurely meaningful and boldly irrelevant – it is as if we were witnessing some strange hybrid of a Symbolist drama and a play by William Congreve: both highly artificial forms, but each contributing its peculiar kind of truth.

Vainglory is an astonishingly achieved first novel, and part of its audacity lies in Firbank's unfaltering adherence to his entirely new way of doing things. The story of Mrs. Shamefoot and her window is a strand in the whole, but much of the novel's activity happens quite independently of it. Mrs. Henedge, widow of the Bishop of Ashringford, is going over to Rome. The early chapters take place in London, and the longest episode is a party at Mrs. Henedge's house for the recitation (significantly enough) of a newly discovered fragment by Sappho. Then the scene moves to Ashringford, the small cathedral town on which Mrs. Shamefoot has fixed her hopes. Figures from London move in and out of a quaintly old-fashioned provincial milieu that is treated with mischievous fondness by Firbank. An adulterous affair takes place; an actress recovers from a role and prepares for another; the bishop's wife and sister-in-law discuss the new curate; but the various elements are prevented from coalescing into a Trollopean whole. Design, juxtaposition, omission and selection of detail assert their priority over plot. And the effect is both liberating and disquieting. The massive prosecution of a system of cause and effect, so characteristic of the Victorian novel, is overturned by Firbank in favor of a different model, where characters move in response to whim, desire, ambition, under the fluctuating magnetism of class and religion, but without the security of any clear social or moral system. As Mrs. Shamefoot remarks, "The world is disgracefully managed, one hardly knows to whom to complain." And the novel in which she finds herself has a superficial air of mismanagement, too. The subsidiary elements, ostensibly subplots, are never resolvingly tied in. Indeed, there is no certainty as to what is plot and what subplot, what matters and how much. In *Inclinations* Miss O'Brookomore will disappear entirely in the second part of the novel. There is often a sense that the major characters in Firbank's novels are perhaps only minor characters in them: an adjustment that discomfortingly illuminates a bleak truth about life as well as a time-honored presupposition of fiction.

Firbank the man has tended to be known through a distorting haze of miscellaneous anecdote. He appears as a somehow fabulous figure, dandyish, exquisite, made up, an habitué of the opera and ballet and later of black jazz bands; pathologically shy, but with the boldness and determination that sometimes accompany shyness; a drinker rather than an eater; an admirer but not a lover of young men; an incessant traveler; a giggler and writher and toward the end of his life a cougher; a man who often laughed when he was alone. But even the kindest and most marveling stories, by those who counted themselves his friends, convey a sense of distance from their exotic and unknowable subject. In the years before the war, whenever Firbank was in London, he was a figure in the bohemian world of the Café Royal and the Eiffel Tower restaurant. But during the war, when he lived for four years in isolation in Oxford, he recedes further from view and in effect disappears into his work. There is something movingly exemplary about his dedication to his writing during this period of deep depression and separation from the reality that culture and travel represented for him – the more so since the often wildly funny books he wrote then were greeted with incomprehension and distaste, and he was obliged to pay for their publication himself. When the war was over, he resumed his traveling, and apart from brief summer visits to London he was abroad for the rest of his life, in hotels and rented apartments, and in climates better suited to his tastes and appetites and his always frail health. His intense solitariness and nervous restlessness were embraced and transcended in the lonely experiment of his art. He never settled down, never bought a place of his own. The datelines of his later novels – “Versailles, Montreux, Florence,” “Havana, Bordighera” – emphasize the fact that he shaped his own life into an itinerary of occasions and opportunities to write books. If he ever receives the biography he deserves it will be one especially sensitive to the fact that his art was what mattered most to him.

Of course there is much in the life to suggest why Firbank took the view he did of the instability of society and the likelihood of disappointment. To take just a few possible topics: he was himself the exotic third-generation bloom of a typically Victorian social success story. His paternal grandfather was a Durham miner who had made a fortune as a railway contractor; his father, who served as Unionist M.P. for East Hull from 1895 to 1906, was knighted in Edward VII’s coronation honors. But when Sir Thomas died in 1910 and Ronald assumed control of the family’s finances he discovered that the fortune had largely gone; property had to be sold, his mother and sister accommodated, and the wherewithal for his single but not exactly austere way of life to be secured. The desire for quasi-aristocratic independence was shadowed by the fear of penury, just as his whole life was shadowed by his own weak health and the fear of the early death that had been the fate of his two brothers, Joey (1884–1904) and Bertie (1887–1913).

Ronald spent his childhood, up to the age of eleven, in Chislehurst, a small town to the south of London, which had also been the adopted home of the Empress Eugénie, widow of Napoléon III, whose tomb was for some years in a chapel of the Catholic church near the firbanks’ house. Later the little court in exile moved to Farnborough, but it seems unquestionable that its presence in Chislehurst colored Firbank’s

imagination and fed his fascination with royalty (and especially royalty seen in its homely and off-guard moments) and with Catholicism.

The very feminine world in which Ronald spent his childhood must account in some way for the feminine nature of his fictional world. With his father often away in London or in his constituency Firbank grew up in a mutually adoring relationship with his mother, for whom he wrote poems and stories and to whom he would later dedicate (“In all the world to the dearest of mothers”) the 1916 reissue of his mawkish early tale *Odette*: a gesture of reassurance perhaps as his considerably more outré mature work began to appear. (Lady Firbank, however, remained an ardent admirer of her son’s books until her death in 1924; one can only speculate as to how much she understood or screened out their provocativeness and sexual unorthodoxy.) Firbank’s fictional world seems to replicate the female world of his childhood home, of his mother and her friends. It was not until his final and very personal masterpiece *Concerning the Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli* that he wrote a book “about” a man. The mood of passivity and frustration in his work stems in part from the fact that he chose to write about a female world, shut off, like that of Jane Austen’s women, from power and action. His dramatis personae are spinsters, widows, or grass widows, who refer with pity or disdain or horror, but very rarely with regret, to the absence of men: the counterpart to their powerlessness is a paradoxical sense of freedom and of relief from the stupefaction, disquiet, and physical exactions of the opposite sex. The model of society divided into separate male and female realms had become deeply institutionalized in Victorian upper-class life, and it is one that continued to fascinate Firbank in more personal ways. His play *The Princess Zoubaroff* is an unconventional marriage comedy in which, under the aegis of an idealized Oscar Wilde, the men very happily go off with the men and the women with the women. And in his later books the female viewpoint becomes more obviously a sly means of expressing his own homosexuality. The spinsters and widows of the English colony in *The Flower Beneath the Foot* debate the merits of being alone and take out from the circulating library’s high-camp catalogue such volumes as *Man, and All About Him*, *Men – My Delight* by Cora Velasquez, *The Beard Throughout the Ages*, and *Men Are Animals* by the Hon. Mrs. Victor Smythe. Along with this goes a sort of emotional transvestism. No male novelist and few female ones have shown such an absorbed delight in women’s clothing as Firbank does, and it is surely no coincidence, in terms of family psychology, that his sister Heather collected a remarkable wardrobe of contemporary fashion (it is now in the Victoria and Albert Museum). Firbank’s collection, equally fashion-conscious, is in the pages of his novels.

The Flower Beneath the Foot is the book in which Firbank turned his back on England, and the tone of parts of it has a satirical asperity not heard before in his writing. In earlier books he’d sometimes sought to settle a private score, though sometimes he also changed his mind at proof stage. But in *The Flower* the invigorating vein of malice noted by some of his acquaintances gives a complex personal shading to the story of youthful heartbreak and retreat from the world. “Vulgar cynical & ‘horrid,’” Firbank described the book, “but of course beautiful here & there for those that can see.” For the first time he introduced thinly disguised real people, and

always with the purpose of mockery. In a letter to his mother saying how “dangerous” the book was he offered a key:

‘Princess Elsie’ = Princess Mary. ‘Mrs Chilleywater’ = Mrs Harold Nicolson. ‘Eddy’ = Evan Morgan – and of course ‘King Geo’ & ‘Queen Glory’ are the king & queen. The English Ambassadors is founded on Mrs Roscoe & Lady Nicolson. . . . The lady journalist must be ‘Eve’ of the Tatler or any other of the prattling busy-bodies that write for the magazines.

Mrs. Harold Nicolson was of course better known as Vita Sackville-West, here rather wildly satirized as a representative of all that Firbank had set himself against in the English novel. “Who among us today,” she asks rhetorically, “is carrying on the tradition of fielding? Who really cares? I know I do what I can . . . and there’s Madam Adrian Bloater, of course. But I can think of no one else; – we two.” Evan Morgan (1893–1949) was more central to the novel, a fact attested to by his more ruthless marginalization. Morgan was the only son of the third Viscount Tredegar. Firbank had first seen him in 1914 in the British Museum, where he was struck by his resemblance to the mummy of Ramses II and dragged him off to show him the “original.” They became friends of a sort, Morgan enjoyed Firbank’s “dubious and speculative” conversation, while it seems clear that Firbank fell somewhat in love with Morgan. In 1920 he offered him the dedication of *The Princess Zoubaroff*; but machinations by Morgan’s family, who objected to the association in general and to moral and religious aspects of the play in particular, and who felt the dedication would compromise his chances of an expected diplomatic posting, led to its rejection at a late stage in the book’s production. The Hon. “Eddy” Monteith is Firbank’s revenge for this rejection and, like the best satirical portraits, a wonderful comic creation in its own right. Like Firbank, Morgan was a Catholic convert, and Firbank’s own camp ambivalence about Rome is here focused on his victim. Morgan was also a prolific and extremely bad poet, and the glimpse we get of “Eddy”’s poems perfectly captures their derivativeness and infantilism. “Eddy”’s death, in a footnote, is a masterstroke of controlled malice: “the shock received by meeting a jackal while composing a sonnet had been too much for him. His tomb is in the Vale of Akko, beside the river Dis. Alas, for the triste obscurity of his end!”

Alongside the satirical rejection of English culture (“the very apotheosis of worn-out *cliché*”), the disdain for British royalty (“more at home in the stables than in a drawing-room”), and the willful disregard for English grammar (exemplified by the novel’s very first sentence), runs a new boldness about homosexuality, itself so fiercely repudiated in Firbank’s homeland. It is clearly a subject that becomes more approachable in the Ruritanian ambience of Kairoulla, an “imaginary Vienna” as Firbank describes it in the short preface, as arch as it is startlingly candid, that he wrote for the American edition of the novel after his mother’s death. Of course there is much about Kairoulla that is not Viennese; it is a typical firbankian hybrid, a traveler’s montage of longed-for and remembered places, and with its palm trees and Arab flowersellers “half-way to the East already.” (Firbank uses the term “the East” in the old Orientalist sense to mean North Africa and the Middle East, not the Orient itself.) A significant

part of its charm, evidently, and of the novel's genesis, is the "*wonderful boys*" that are to be found there.

The Flower comes at a suggestive juncture in the literature of homosexuality; and again there are connections with Proust that might bear further investigation. The first volume of Proust's *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, with its account of the overheard sexual encounter between the Baron de Charlus and the tailor Jupien, and its extended metaphor of floral pollination for human sexual activity, was published on 2 May 1921. Firbank arrived in Paris on 22 May, left after a week for a short visit to London, and returned on 3 July, when he moved into an apartment at Versailles and began writing *The Flower Beneath the Foot*. There are no direct references to Proust in his books, but it seems at least likely that Firbank, who read widely in French fiction and poetry, would have looked at this much-discussed and arrestingly named new installment of Proust's novel. When he reveals in the first chapter of *The Flower* that it is a pet project of the Queen of Pisuerga to "form a party to excavate (for objects of art) among the ruins of Chedorlahomor, a faubourg of Sodom," the use of the biblical motif is as striking as his choice of the word faubourg, which means a suburb but in society parlance meant particularly the faubourg Saint Germain, the Parisian milieu of Proust's upper-class characters. As for the floral conceit, it is a preoccupation of both writers, and one that Firbank takes to a daring extreme in this book by realizing the metaphor of the "language of flowers" and actually having a shopful of flowers speak. ("Life's bound to be uncertain when you haven't got your roots!") When the Queen of Dateland wants to convey the sexual freedom of her "Eastern" homeland, it is with the metaphor of "the little amorous jessamine-flower . . . that twines itself sometimes to the right hand, at others to the left, just according to its caprices!"

Coincidence or not, it is fascinating that the two novelists should be propounding visions of counterbalanced male and female homosexualities at the same time. Usually Firbank's homosexuals are lesbian, but in the lulled "soul-trip" chapter of *The Flower* he suspends both males and females for a moment in their private spheres outside the world of the court, Count Cabinet and Peter Passer on their island in the lake, Olga Blumenghast and the Countess of Tolga, on their way to visit them with a volume of Uranian verse, becalmed in their boat into a rapturous discovery of each other. In his last two novels, and particularly in *Cardinal Pirelli*, Firbank would boldly obtrude his own unignorable gay presence as observer and commentator. Proust disguised his own sexuality in his largely autobiographical novel, converting his male lovers into female ones and treating the subject with an affected objectivity that André Gide, among others, found timid and hypocritical. Firbank, in his oblique and fantastically way, is characteristically more reckless. And the shocking last page of *The Flower*, in which the story of trampled and disregarded Laura reaches a temporary close, throws a painfully personal shadow back across the whole novel.

It seems probable that despite his famous postcard to Osbert Sitwell, "Tomorrow I go to Haiti. They say the President is a *Perfect Dear*," Firbank did not in fact visit that country (which was then under U.S. military occupation). He did, however, go to Cuba and Jamaica in the

summer of 1922, and it was in Cuba that he “found” his new book; as he traveled between Santiago de Cuba in the east and Havana in the west he would have experienced the contrast between the simplicity and remoteness of the sugar-growing countryside and the intense excitement and glamour of the capital – a contrast and a journey that form the template of *Sorrow in Sunlight*. Of course he reinvented the place, turning Havana into Cuna-Cuna, “Little city of cocktails,” and borrowing features from elsewhere (the May Day Mountains, for instance, from southern Jamaica); the name of the island itself, Tacarigua, he took from a lagoon on the Caribbean coast of Venezuela. As in the cosmopolitan fantasy of *The Flower*, the sources are less important than the habit of mind that absorbs and synthesizes them and that reacts so keenly to the euphony and suggestiveness of proper names. Both things had been demonstrated by Mrs. Yajñavalkya in *Valmouth*, who claims abstrusely to come from “Taihaiti.” That exotic compound says a lot about Firbank’s love of what we would call the multicultural, his attraction to the racially hybrid culture of Egypt or Cuba, and his fascination with figures (maids, flowersellers, jazz musicians, kings and queens) adrift from their ethnic moorings. His reactions are partly aesthetic and voyeuristic, no doubt, but they are also underpinned by a poignant sense of identification. The nomad in him is full of sympathetic intuitions about the nomads he describes, and in a way Firbank’s blacks carry the burden of expressing his own sense of difference, of having come, emotionally, from somewhere distant and misunderstood. (They carry also, therefore, a sense of mystery, glamour, and secret supremacy.)

It is this that makes the Mouth family so touching as well as so funny. They are his most objectively seen characters, the most solid, and in a sense the most conventional. Like everything in the novel they are presented with miraculous economy, yet they have an almost Dickensian presence, achieved largely through their speech and the way Firbank notates it. There is, untypically for Firbank, nothing oblique about the Mouths, who all say exactly what they mean and what they want; like characters in a play they seem to be fully present in their speech, and we grasp their hopes, fears, and misunderstandings without the author’s further intervention. Unlike some phonetic procedures Firbank’s is always audible and persuasive, though of course in a British West Indian idiom cheerfully at odds with the Hispanic setting. The acuteness with which it is heard accommodates effects not far from Sam Weller or Mrs. Gamp – “s’poge,” “kimpoged,” “ticklers” (for particulars) – alongside the long Jamaican *as* of “Ah cyan pramas”; and it is subtly adjusted to the speakers. Little Edna comes out with “gemplum” for gentleman and childish “bokkles” and “buckler” for bottles and butler, while her mother veers closer to Mrs. Malaprop (“bombax” for bombast) and favors elaborate locutions and French phrases: “We go to Cuna-Cuna for de finishing ob *mes filles!*” Sometimes the registers overlap significantly: “Dis an event to take exvantage ob,” declares the socially aspiring Mrs. Mouth, while Edna blithely recalls the necklace she was given “de time he take exvantage ob my innocence” – one phrase whose two contradictory meanings sum up the tragic misapprehensions of the novel. For the Mouths, like many of Firbank’s creations, are comic characters with tragic destinies.

As always Firbank had a very clear sense of the book’s aesthetic and its expressive significance. On the day he finished it he wrote to his

mother: “As a bit of colour & atmosphere it is the best of all my others & some of the figures negroes and Spanish South American are as wonderful as their setting! It is an amazing affair altogether & some no doubt will be horrified by it while others will be carried away by its vivid unusualness & the crude touches left purposely unshaded.” Later he described it as “purposely a little ‘primitive,’ rather like a Gauguin in painting – extremely gay.” The novel’s destiny, however, lay in a slightly different cultural perspective.

In March 1922 the American novelist and critic Carl Van Vechten had written to Firbank: “I am very sorry to be obliged to inform you that I think there is some danger of your becoming the rage in America.” Van Vechten had already published a magazine article on Firbank, and his letter was effectively the next step in creating the “rage” he was predicting. He clearly responded to the scandalous “subterranean” element in Firbank: thirty years later he wrote that “almost all of Firbank is quaint reading and enough to make your hair, even pubic hair, stand on end when you understand it”; he also had an eye to publicity that was far from unwelcome to a writer starved of recognition, who had literally never earned a penny from his work. Van Vechten took up the Firbank case, and when he received the manuscript of *Sorrow in Sunlight* convinced Brentano’s to publish it in the United States; he also flung together an introduction to the novel, emphasizing its lightness and fashionableness (“The whole book hovers delightfully between a Freudian dream and a drawing by Alastair, set to music by George Gershwin”), and proposed a change of title, to *Prancing Nigger*. Firbank professed himself to be delighted with this, moved, too, perhaps by Van Vechten’s assurance that “beyond a doubt the new title would sell at least a thousand more copies”; he had never visited the United States, but he learned that Van Vechten was an active promoter of black writers and relied on his sense of the apt and the topical. *Prancing Nigger* was published in New York in March 1924.

As a title it has the benefit of gaiety and animation, as against the melancholy abstraction of *Sorrow in Sunlight*, and doubtless it helped Firbank’s case by appearing to align him with the emerging spirit of the Harlem Renaissance. But it is also, strictly speaking, misleading, in a way that none of Firbank’s other titles is: *Prancing Nigger* is Mrs. Mouth’s affectionately ironic nickname for her morose hymn-droning husband, a memorable character, but not the protagonist of the book. To call the novel *Prancing Nigger* is a bit as if *Pride and Prejudice* were to be called *Mr. Bennet*. Still, whatever its emblematic value, when Brentano’s brought out an English edition eight months later Firbank insisted on reverting to his earlier title. Presumably it reflected more clearly his own sense of the book’s emotional chiaroscuro, as well as being more appropriate to a readership remote from black culture, to whom *Prancing Nigger* might have seemed inexcusably (or rather, perhaps, excusably) offensive. When Duckworth and Brentano’s together brought out a five-volume Works of Firbank three years after his death, they stuck with *Prancing Nigger*, which evidently had the wider currency; and it has always been published under that title since. But a strong case could be made for reverting to *Sorrow in Sunlight*. It would have the authority of Firbank’s first and last thoughts; and the book, in which the word “nigger” is never used pejoratively, would be saved from seeming, to a casual modern eye, to misadvertise itself. While even readers who see the use of the word “nigger” in its particular

historical context (Van Vechten's novel *Nigger Heaven*, for instance, was published two years later) would be saved from an apologetic reflex that necessarily focuses attention on a period aspect of the book's publishing history.

"Ah, the East . . .," Firbank wrote in the preface to the American *Flower*, "I propose to return there, some day, when I write about New York." It was a little joke that summed up his sense of elsewhere, his belief that absence from a place was an essential condition of writing about it; and it was also a promise that he would reciprocate the attention that New York had accorded him. Duly, in Cairo, in October 1925, he started work on his New York novel, *The New Rythum*. He had finished six chapters of it when he died the following spring.

So *Concerning the Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli* turned out to be his last book, and if it seems in retrospect to have been designed as a farewell then that is in part because Firbank himself, clear-sighted as well as morbidly superstitious, anticipated the end. In each of his previous two books, death capriciously seizes a minor character: the Archduchess Elizabeth dies of a chill caught while paddling, Bamboo is eaten by a shark; but in *Cardinal Pirelli* death comes for the archbishop himself.

Of all Firbank's novels, with their various cryptic personal elements, it is in this one that a portrait seems most clearly to have been painted over a self-portrait; and it is surely significant that he chose a prominent churchman as its subject. Like many aspects of his inner life, Firbank's religious feelings and beliefs are always hard to assess. He had been received into the Catholic Church in 1907, while he was at Cambridge; and two years later he tried but failed to enter the Guardia Nobile at the Vatican. He later told Lord Berners that "the Church of Rome wouldn't have me and so I laugh at her." But spiteful though Firbank could be, the laughter he directs at the Catholic Church seems of a kind with his general amused observation of human attitudes and institutions; and he often takes a mischievous pleasure in the "otherness" of Catholic ritual in an English context. (In *Cardinal Pirelli* the old Pope recalls his dealings with Queen Victoria, "who for so many years had corresponded with the Holy See under the signature of *the Countess of Lostwaters*.") Firbank also claimed to be very moved by the mystical element in religion, and in the lonely months between his mother's death and his own often went to pray in the crypt of St. Peters, with Evan Morgan, to whom he had become reconciled. Spanish Catholicism, of course, had a further dimension of syncretic ritual and display that clearly fascinated Firbank. He had spent six months in Madrid in 1905 and visited Seville, where he "found" his city of Clemenza and his Cardinal Archbishop, in the summer of 1923. The scandalous baptism of a police dog that opens the novel may well have been suggested by the feast of San Antón on 17 January (also Firbank's birthday), when animals are blessed in Madrid. The six dancing choirboys of Clemenza Cathedral are clearly a version of the Sevillian *seises*, choristers who dance a slow minuet before the high altar of the cathedral on certain festivals. Firbank's typical sensitivity to this supposedly Mozarabic survival is reflected, too, in his vignette of the "Moorish" maid who cannot forget that "the great basilica of Clemenza was a Mosque profaned," and in the legend of the ghostly

black dervish who still “walks” the *coro*. Before *The Flower* he had written a short novel *Santal*, which he saw as recasting *Odette* in an Arab setting, the story not of a girl seeking the Virgin but of a boy seeking Allah. To Pirelli himself the Bible and the Koran are old Eastern cousins, “hardy old perennials, no less equivocal and extravagant, often, than the ever-adorable *Arabian Nights!*”

The beautiful sequence set in the decaying monastery of the Desierto epitomizes the particular sweetness and humor of this novel and reveals much about Firbank’s method and voice. The Cardinal is in retreat, preparing his defense, looking out from the remoteness of the monastery at the appealing lights of Clemenza on the plain below: “Dear beckoning lamps, dear calling lamps; lamps of theatres, cinemas, cabarets, bars and dancings; lamps of railway-termini, and excessively lit hotels, *olé* to you, enchantress lights!” It is a classic firbankian motif, the longing for tranquillity and contemplation weighed against the allure of the world of pleasure; it is the underlying tension of *The Flower*, where in a similar passage Laura and Prince Yousef identify the lights of Kairoulla from the Palace gardens and where, in the culminating scene, Laura gazes out from the convent walls at Yousef’s wedding procession in the streets below. *Sorrow in Sunlight* contains Firbank’s most insistent celebration of the world of bars and streetlife in the “feverish sadness” of the tropical evening, and the end of the novel reverses the emotional perspective of its predecessor, with Edna and Vittorio looking down from their balcony at the procession of penitents and planning an evening of pleasure: “Dair’s a new dancer at de Apollo tonight. Suppose we go?” Pirelli is himself a sensualist and adventurer, prone to nostalgic enumeration of his old conquests, and we have already learnt of his habit of going into “the dear street. . . . The adorable Avenidas” in disguise, sometimes as a woman. The little apostrophe to the city’s lights carries a melancholy sexual charge (it seems indeed, for all Pirelli’s heterosexual leanings, like a catalogue of gay cruising spots).

For now, however, he has fled from the world and from the “malice and vindictiveness of men,” and in the ambience of the old monastery, where St. Theresa of Avila is said to have written a part of *The Way of Perfection*, he gives himself up to the semirandom reflections that Firbank so excels at. Firbank never labored in any systematic way at the evocation of a stream of consciousness, but a significant part of all his books is made up of the tracing of his characters’ thoughts as they uncurl in droll or wistful arabesques. The musings of the Hon. “Eddy” Monteith on the language of bees are a wonderfully funny nonsense of false consequences: Firbank seems always to have had a sense of the shape of thoughts, the frail chains of ideas, the easy distractions of the suggestible mind. He is a poet of solitariness who understands how huge a part of our conscious lives is given over to idle speculation, reminiscence, and the purely fragmentary associations evoked by what we see and hear. His own habit as a writer is often to chase a thought into a surprising decorative epiphany, or to slide, like the half-focused mind, between different tones, humming a line of a hymn or a popular song or echoing the quaintly poetic formulas of fairy tales and works of piety. So the Cardinal wanders in the garden and in the “forsaken splendour of the vast closed cloisters,” talks with the old priest from the village church nearby and with the young acolyte who waits on him; and his memories, plans, and reflections, ranging from former

mistresses to points of theology, are woven into Firbank's rich but sparing evocations of place, color, and light. We see the things Pirelli shares with his creator: personal vanity (should he have a henna shampoo?) and feminized dandyism (in "a creation of dull scarlet crêpe, a cobweb dubbed 'summer-exile'"); a relish for the taboo, and a not-unrelated sense of persecution. And at this point, too, Pirelli's sensual yearnings seem to merge with Firbank's to envelop young Chicklet, the boy who will lead him, in the book's last pages, to the literal defrocking of his naked death. The mood of mortality ("Ahi; this death . . .") intensifies the isolation; and after dusk, as Pirelli gets progressively drunker, Firbank seems to be drawing on a deeply personal register of experience: "It's queer, dears, how I'm lonely," the Cardinal exclaims to the old Zurbarans on the wall. "The evenings are suicide." And then comes the drunken delusion, absurd but touching in the longing for consolation it reveals, that St. Theresa herself, "sublime in laughter, exquisite in tenderness," has visited him.

The relative success of *Prancing Nigger* in the United States had encouraged Firbank in the candor with which he depicted Pirelli's unorthodoxy and the relish with which he evoked the choirboys of the cathedral. In the spring of 1924 he told his sister that the book in progress was under offer in America, "where people seem less hypocritical and narrow than in England." Sadly this proved an illusion. A year later he learned that "Brentano is shocked with *The Cardinal*," and the novel was indeed rejected on "moral and religious grounds." So Firbank returned for his last book to Grant Richards, and to paying for its publication out of his own pocket. However, the General Strike, and Richards's bankruptcy proceedings, repeatedly delayed the novel's appearance. It was finally published on 29 June 1926, five weeks after Firbank's death.

It would be nice to think that Firbank (in whom a certain saving vanity coexisted with a fatalistic recognition of his own obscurity) was aware that it would take time for his experiments to be absorbed, and for the lonely glamour of the avant-garde to mutate into the steadier radiance of the classic. And perhaps that time hasn't come, even now. In 1929, Evelyn Waugh wrote the first serious critical appreciation of Firbank's novels – and the influence of Firbank is certainly felt in the work of that generation he died too young to know: Waugh himself, Anthony Powell, Ivy Compton-Burnett, W. H. Auden. But there has never been a school of Firbank. He was too intensely himself for that.