

## Ronald Firbank

by

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When Oscar Wilde's younger son Vyvyan reached the age of 21, in 1907, no one in his family seemed inclined to organise a celebration. As he wrote later, with gloomy realism, "*I suppose they thought that nothing in any way connected with my birth was a matter for rejoicing.*" So his father's loyal friend and supporter Robbie Ross took it upon himself to give a dinner-party. There were 12 people present, all men, including the artists William Rothenstein, Charles Shannon and Charles Ricketts, and also, more surprisingly, Henry James, who wasn't a part of Oscar's world or of his son's. Indeed James had always kept his distance from the writer whose rise in the theatre had coincided with his own failure there, and whose spectacular fall he had watched with a sickened fascination, describing it in a shocking phrase as "*beyond any utterance of irony or any pang of compassion*" From Vyvyan's own generation of friends only two were present, one of them being Arthur Firbank, not yet known as Ronald and still an undergraduate at Cambridge.

If any of the participants in this evening were aware of its likely interest to someone giving a lecture ninety-nine years later, they show no sign of it in their writings. None of them seems to have made any record of what was said, and we will probably never know if anything at all passed between the author of *The Golden Bowl* and the future author of a series of novels even more innovative and disconcerting than the Master's own. One would really need the delicate parodic invention of Max Beerbohm to imagine an exchange between the 64-year-old James, whose conversational performance was so dominant and so exploratory, so rich in metaphor and portent, and the 21-year-old Firbank, who was generally too shy to say anything at all. Dominant though he was, James liked the company of other talkers;

as his typist Theodora Bosanquet later said, “*To be ‘inarticulate’ was for him the cardinal social sin*”. Firbank was inarticulacy personified; almost all the records of his speech are of mere gasps or short blurted phrases, many of them emboldened only by alcohol. He had too an instinctive and witty horror of solemnity, which unimaginative minds interpreted as mere triviality. Some years later, when Siegfried Sassoon pressed him for his views on literature and art, the only thing “*the insuperably shy*” Firbank could find to say was, “*I adore italics, don’t you?*” It sounds a frivolous, almost pointless remark, though Firbank certainly meant it, and meant a good deal by it, as I shall suggest later on.

James was undoubtedly a presence to Firbank, who as a boy had bought his autograph for his collection, and as an adult was to develop Jamesian techniques of mannered and oblique dialogue to further extremes; but no friendship was to develop between them. Young Firbank was not to become one of the crushes of the Master’s late years, and no letters would be addressed from Lamb House in the small hours to “*Belovedest Arthur*” or “*Darling, darling little Artie!*” So I won’t press this unyielding occasion of their one meeting any harder, except to note the interest of its taking place in such an explicitly Wildean ambience, and in those fascinating years after Wilde’s death when gay life, identified and stigmatised by his trial and imprisonment, seems to have been regaining confidence; at least in the literary and intellectual sphere, the Cambridge generation of which Firbank was a very detached part, and which would come to form one of the dominant cultural constellations soon after the war as the Bloomsbury group, was significantly gay: gayness was an integral part of its newness and its dissent. The Wilde trials had been an emphatic naming and specifying, which was perhaps what appalled James above all, with his preference for the “*merciful indirection*” and the sexual mystery. But for the new generation indirection was to seem more and more of an imposition. Even James, in his profusely private way, seemed to “come out”, to let down his guard, to explore emotional possibilities he had denied himself before, and to do so more and more freely as the 20<sup>th</sup> century lengthened. Firbank was, in his own aesthetic but involuntary fashion, out from the start: an exotic, an exception, a man who crammed his college rooms with pictures, furniture, figurines, cushions, flowers -- flowers that one friend likened, in their overwhelming effect, to the wreaths heaped in the courtyards at Windsor after the death of Queen Victoria (an image with aptness beneath its extravagance). He was the quintessence of the aesthete at a time when aestheticism was widely identified with homosexuality in the public imagination, who yet, in the extra-hearty world of Trinity Hall, was never ragged, never had his beautiful rooms smashed up. Perhaps the hearties sensed that he wasn’t a poseur, that the aesthetic realm was his genuine habitat; maybe they were in awe of him. He was

also, in his aesthetic way, religious: a month after the Ross dinner-party he would be received into the Catholic church. And he made his own insouciantly vague gestures towards the hearty world; there are photos of him taking part in college sports, and Wilde's son himself remembered meeting him in sweater and shorts, and asking in astonishment what he'd been doing. "Oh, football", said Firbank. "Rugger or soccer?" Vyvyan asked. "Oh, I don't remember", was Firbank's reply.

Firbank had already published his first book, *Odette d'Antrevernes*, before he went up to Cambridge, a book made up of two short tales which pay homage to two sides of Wilde's work, one a religious fairy-story, the other a brittle social comedy. At Cambridge the friendship of Vyvyan Holland, not widely known, in these years after his father's disgrace, to be Wilde's son, was a part of Firbank's absorption in the manner and legend of Wilde himself. It was through Vyvyan that he gained an introduction to the novelist Ada Leverson, another loyal friend of Wilde's, who had called her *The Sphinx*. At this time in his life, while James's feelings about Wilde were so edgily unresolved, Firbank was actively collecting Wilde, in the widest sense. As an addict of the Nineties, he would have been thrilled by Robbie Ross's guest-list. His mature work would unpick the clever certainties of the Wildean epigram, and sour the sentimental sweetness of Wilde's tales, but Wilde was even so a lasting presence in his work. Firbank's wit was odder, more personal and more disconcertingly modern than Wilde's, but when Firbank himself came to write a three-act play, *The Princess Zoubaroff*, very much his smartest and most up-to-date work, Wilde himself appeared in it, thinly disguised, saved from death, and enjoying a robust Indian summer as an avuncular patron saint of 1920s gay life.

Firbank was never easy to know. He had friends, probably fell in love at least once, but seems temperamentally to have found intimacy very difficult. Because he was so eccentric and so conspicuous, people tended to remember him, his tall slender, immaculately dressed figure, his extraordinary undulating walk, his use, at various times in his life, of not necessarily discreet make-up. Even his friends, as the composer Lord Berners, who was one of them, admitted, could feel embarrassed by him. The Charing Cross Road bookseller C. W. Beaumont gave this account of his appearance:

His hands were white and very well kept, the nails long and polished, and what was unusual in a man is that they were stained a deep carmine. I might mention that before my wife and I learned his name we always spoke of him as "the man with the red nails".

[ . . . ] All his joints seemed to be loosely attached, like those of a marionette, and his movements in fact closely resembled those of a marionette, the

controlling threads of which had been slackened. In short he was a decidedly limp specimen of mankind.

[ . . . ] His tastes in literature were rather “ninetyish” . . . His stock question on entering [the shop] was: “Have you anything in my line today; you know, something vague, something dreamy, something restful?” . . . all the books he liked he termed “restful”. Even a study in the baroque such as Beardsley’s *Venus and Tannhäuser* he would term “restful”, although the normal male would doubtless consider such a work, on the contrary, disturbing.

I quote this description at some length not only for its informational value but because of the scarcely suppressed note of unease, bordering on contempt, beneath its thin humour, the asserted heterosexual normality against which Firbank is measured and found wanting, the tone veering between the sergeant-majorish (“*he was a decidedly limp specimen*”) and the psycho-clinical (“*although the normal male would doubtless consider such a work, on the contrary, disturbing*”). Beaumont considered himself well disposed to Firbank, and even Firbank’s first biographer, the subtle Ifan Kyrle Fletcher, calls this “*a charming description*”; but it seems to me to encapsulate the ambivalence that even the admirers of Firbank have often been prey to: the sense that a distance has to be kept from his queenery, from the intensity of a self that is not merely undisguised but insisted on, languidly and nervously.

The kept distance, the perhaps unbridgeable distance, is the recurrent note in the memoirs of those friends who wrote about Firbank for the volume that Ifan Kyrle Fletcher compiled 4 years after his death. “*I lost sight of him*”, “*I didn’t see him again for several years*”, “*I was never to see him again.*” The deepening and somehow inevitable solitude of Firbank cannot be over-stressed. He has tended to be seen through a haze of miscellaneous anecdote, stressing his eccentricity, his curious *bons mots*, his writhing shyness and his occasional steely boldness; anecdote is an insufficient material, which expands and distorts to fill the space left by the lack of more reliable evidence; it tends to feel its own thinness through the wear of retelling and to thicken and embroider itself against such inadequacy. But Firbank was never going to be an easy subject for biographers, and though a life is now being written which should at last do justice to his largely hidden existence, he has been poorly served so far, the standard life of 36 years ago being too bad even to be, in some hysterical Firbankian way, laughable. The principal interpreter of his life was looking at it from across the distance which could only be bridged by the quick imaginative sympathy the life itself was so starved of.

Firbank was the exotic third-generation instalment of a striking, almost

quintessential, Victorian success-story. His paternal grandfather Joseph Firbank had been a coal-miner in County Durham, who got in on the railway boom and made his fortune as a contractor, constructing, as Firbank later insisted with complex pride and shame, “*the most beautiful railways*”. Joseph established himself socially by buying an ancient and ruinous manor-house in South Wales and rebuilding it; it was on the rents from this property that his grandson was to depend in later life, when he was writing the novels whose publication he had to pay for himself, and from which he earned very nearly nothing. Firbank’s father Thomas continued as a railway contractor, and entered public life as Unionist MP for East Hull, from 1895 to 1906; he was knighted in Edward VII’s Coronation honours. Arthur Annesley Ronald Firbank was born at their Mayfair house in 1886; but the family moved to Chislehurst the following year, and the large house and garden there formed the nurturing background for the intense bond with his mother and his younger sister Heather, which would be the only continuous relationships through much of his later life. Firbank was not to have the great sustained principled correspondences with other sympathetic and creative figures that animated and fortified the lives of the other two writers I’ve been looking at, Hopkins and James. The people he wrote to most, when he got away from home, were his mother, always addressed as “*Darling Baba*”, and his sister, addressed as “*Darling Baby*”; he always signed himself to them, Your loving son, or Your loving brother, Artie. His letters to these two women contain much of interest and are the main source of biographical information for his post-war life, but they are always constrained by the domestic and subtly infantilised terms of the Baba/Baby/Artie nexus.

There was clearly something further in the family dynamic that spelt trouble for the third generation. Joey, Ronald’s elder brother, drank himself to death at the age of 20; Bertie, his younger brother, after living for some years in Canada, died of cirrhosis of the liver at the age of twenty-five. Heather, much the longest lived, stayed with their mother till she died in 1924, and thereafter led an existence both reclusive and compulsive, a hoarder of trivia and buyer of fashionable clothes in multiples -- many of which, in pristine unworn state, are now in the Victoria and Albert Museum. Home, and surely the adored Baba herself, were forces to be escaped from if one was to survive, and Ronald’s escape was into the symbiotic pursuits of travel and writing; he drank heavily himself, but he outlived Baba by two years and died at the age of forty having written some of the most brilliantly original fiction of the twentieth century. One can’t help being moved by the peculiar certainty and tenacity with which he saved himself through art. When Sir Thomas died in 1910, and Ronald took control of the family’s finances, it emerged that much of their wealth had been squandered. Baba and Baby had to leave Chislehurst, and after

sojourns in various rented flats, settled in a cottage (so-called -- there were at least three indoor servants) in Richmond, in a state of compromised dignity. The awareness of the fragility of status, the rueful comedy of grandees down on their luck, informs much of Firbank's writing, which in a surprising and exquisitely specialised way redeems the family's name for industry, if not for commerce. Instead of beautiful railways, Ronald made glittering and durable books.

Travel and writing are both activities into which people disappear. In the years before the Great War, when he was in London, Firbank was a wavering but recurrent figure in the bohemian world of the Café Royal and the Eiffel Tower restaurant, an habitué of the opera, of the Ballets Russes, of the first black jazz-bands. But his health was always frail, and he travelled widely in southern Europe, and made his first visit to Jamaica as early as 1907. At this time he was working on a short novel *The Artificial Princess*, not published until after his death, but which, had it come out in 1910, might have broken the ground for his first published novel *Vainglory*, which emerged with an effect of abrupt and inexplicable originality in 1915, and under his new name, Ronald rather than A. A. R. Firbank. When war broke out he was in Venice. Somehow he got back to London, where he tried to live for a while, but soon moved to Oxford, where he was to spend 4 years in oppressive but productive isolation, writing 3 more novels, *Inclinations*, *Caprice* and *Valmouth*. These were years when Firbank was more or less lost to the world, to which he in turn paid no attention. He was certainly very depressed, and found his own isolation hard to break. And at the same time he discovered the private economy of his life, which was to be saved by work. When the war was over he was able to resume the international nomadism that he sustained for the remaining seven years of his life, coming back only rarely to "*the squalid London that I hate*" for business reasons. His wartime novels, in which the war itself is emphatically unmentioned, all have their foundations in English life, but after the war he turned his back on England as a subject and as a possible home; he developed the practice of making brief visits to a place, as it might be Seville or Havana, staying in hotels and getting the idea for a book, and then going to another country altogether to write it, generally in rented apartments. Further distances, of memory and longing and fantastical re-imagining, were thus built into the process. *The Flower beneath the Foot*, he said, was set in "*some imaginary Vienna*", though he first had the idea for it in Algiers and wrote it in Versailles, Montreux and Florence. He died, alone, in a hotel in Rome, writing a novel about New York.

One of the first fellow-novelists to write intelligently and gratefully about Firbank after his death was Evelyn Waugh. For Waugh Firbank was a liberator, the person who had seen how to take the novel forward as a form through a radical

reconsideration of technique. This was very different from the Jamesian experiment I glanced at in the previous lecture, the ever-deepening interiorisation of the novel through the elaboration of individual consciousness. Firbank achieved his highly complex originality not by expansion but by a drastic compression: instead of putting more and more in, he left almost everything out. The comparison might more tellingly be made with Proust, an artist with whom Firbank has closer affinities of temperament and point-of-view: where Proust, at just the same time, but in middle age, was expanding the novel to unprecedented length to do justice to his narrator's complex world and his complex consciousness of it, Firbank, in his early twenties, had arrived at an aesthetic which required almost everything to be omitted. Where Proust, a fellow observer of upper-class society and sexual ambivalence, worked by the endlessly exploratory and comprehensive sentence, the immense paragraph, the ceaselessly dilated book, Firbank laboured to reduce -- not merely to condense but to design by elimination. "*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*". He constructed in fragments, juxtaposed without any cushioning or explanatory narrative tissue. Both Proust and Firbank loved describing parties, but where Proust's parties are occasions for infinitely fine analysis and profound digression, Firbank's are an abstract mosaic of impressions, in which human intercourse is enacted as a kind of coruscating nonsense. One of his most striking inventions was the depiction of a party as a montage of unrelated fragments, picked up as if by a roving microphone:

"Her dull white face seems to have no connection with her chestnut hair!"

". . . with *him* to Palestine last spring. Oh, dear me, I thought I should have died in Joppa!"

"You mix them with olives and a drop of cognac." [ . . . ]

"The only genuine one was Jane."

". . . poison."

". . . fuss . . ."

"My husband was always shy. He is shy of everybody. He even runs away from me!"

This was written just before the Great War, some years before Eliot would publish those poems whose texture was largely determined by the juxtaposition of fragments of talk. And it shows too the serious allure of nonsense to the writer who floats outside the odd self-confident self-involvement of social normality; as V. S. Pritchett

later wrote, "*Firbank must have been the first disinterested, clinical listener to the lunacy of conversation.*"

Firbank was, as it was perhaps too soon for Waugh to see, a Modernist, for whom the fragment had not only its intense aesthetic excitement and novelty but its necessity, as the proper medium for a picture of destabilised contemporary life. For Waugh, the daring of Firbank was seen as part of the huge, almost light-headed reaction against the Victorians so characteristic of the post-War years; he saw Firbank's quirky independence as a repudiation of the Victorian novel, with its ramifying narrative compulsions and its massive prosecution of a system of cause and effect. Firbank's books are defined by an extraordinary economy: *The Complete Firbank*, containing eight novels and a play, is about a hundred pages shorter than *Bleak House*. They have nothing so definite as plots; his technique is compositional rather than narrative: "*his compositions*", Waugh said, being "*built up, intricately and with a balanced alternation of the wildest extravagance and the most austere economy, with conversational **nuances***". At the same time, Firbank does not write the "novel of conversation", since there is rarely any significant exchange of views: "*From the fashionable chatter of his period, vapid and interminable, he has plucked, like tiny brilliant feathers from the breast of a bird, the particles of his design.*"

Firbank worked in fragments all the way through, amassing phrases in notebooks, and supposedly compiling his early novels on narrow horizontal strips of paper, which could be shuffled and rearranged in a way that sounds prophetic of much later experiments with the cut-up and the chance-determined. Everything depended on the instinct for selection and juxtaposition. The Jamesian challenge of "*free selection -- which is the beautiful, terrible whole of art*" has not been abandoned, but the terms that govern that selection have been radically revised. There is a paradoxical feeling, especially in his earlier and more experimental novels, that almost everything on the page is irrelevant and yet that nothing could be omitted. The exclamatory inconsequence of social conversation is deployed as a kind of screen, through which the attentive reader will discern hinted patterns, the intermittent unfolding of an anecdote or a joke. As a means of depicting social life in which any contact is transient and any shared understanding unlikely, the technique is wittily appropriate. Had James read *Vainglory*, when it came out on his 72<sup>nd</sup> birthday, he would have found it to infringe almost every canon of Jamesian law: no centre of consciousness, no unity of effect, no "action"; though he might have hesitated to call it loose and baggy when it was so agile, so indirect, so evidently if so mysteriously "designed".

In so far as *Vainglory* has a plot it concerns the attempts of a widow, Mrs Shamefoot, to have a memorial window erected to herself in an English cathedral

while she is still alive. The idea is absurd, feverish, poignant, vainglorious: she wants to become colour and light, a supreme aesthetic transfiguration, and her wish is a first announcement of the Firbankian theme that human behaviour is governed and given meaning by caprice, impulse and yearning, whether erotic, aesthetic or mystical. The bulk of the book, which is by far Firbank's longest, takes place in the cathedral town of Ashringford, evoked with a witty eye for English quaintness. It as if fragments of the world of Trollope or even of Mrs Gaskell's *Cranford* had been reassembled in collage, retaining their original charm but assuming new piquancy through arrangement and omission. But the opening chapters unfold in London, where Mrs Henedge, widow of the previous bishop of Ashringford, is arranging a soirée for the recitation of a newly discovered poetical fragment by Sappho. It is an early and elegant announcement of Firbank's own preoccupations, both formal and sexual, and it reminds one again of the poetic nature of his own experiments; after dinner the dryly unglamorous Professor Inglepin is about to present his momentous find to the assembled guests:

“You have heard, of course, how, while surveying the ruins of Crocodileopolis Arsinoë, my donkey having --”

And then, after what may have become an anguishing obbligato, the Professor declaimed impressively the imperishable lines.

“Oh, delicious!” Lady Listless exclaimed, looking quite perplexed. “Very charming indeed!”

“Will anyone tell me what it means”, Mrs Thumbler queried, “in plain English? Unfortunately, my Greek --”

“In plain English”, the Professor said, with some reluctance, “it means: ‘Could not’ [he wagged a finger] ‘Could not, for the fury of her feet!’”

“Do you mean she ran away?”

“Apparently!”

“O-h!” Mrs Thumbler seemed inclined to faint.

The Professor riveted her with his curious nut-coloured eyes.

“Could not . . .”, she murmured helplessly, as though clinging to an alpenstock, and not quite sure of her guide. Below her, so to speak, were the rooftops, pots and pans: Chamonix twinkling in the snow.

“But no doubt there is a *sous-entendu*?” Monsignor Parr

suspiciously enquired.

“Indeed, no!” the Professor answered. “. . . Here is an adventurous line, separated (alas!) from its full context. Decorative, useless, as you will: a water-colour on silk!”

“I don’t know why”, Lady Georgia confessed, “it thrills me, but it does!”

“Do you suppose she refers to --”

“Nothing of the kind!” the Professor interrupted. “. . . we have, at most, a broken piece, a rarity of phrase . . . as the poet’s *With Golden Ankles*, for instance, or *Vines trailed on lofty poles*, or *With water dripped the napkin*, or *Scythian Wood* . . .or the (I fear me spurious) *Carrying long rods, capped with the Pods of Poppies*.”

“And isn’t there just one little tiny wee word of hers which says: *A tortoise-shell?*” Mrs Calvally murmured, fingering the huge winged pin in the back of her hair.

In the play-like run of dialogue, the identity of the speakers is hardly important. What matters is the exclamatory social texture. It was an effect of the notebook-and-fragment method of construction that words, stray lines, impressions might be allocated predominantly by whim among the cast. Good lines might be saved and given to a quite different character in a later book; occasionally, a remark or one of the lightly fantastic descriptive phrases, exemplified by that vivid extended alpine metaphor above, might appear in more than one book, through negligence or indulgence. The writer’s hoarding, treasuring phrase-making is always evident. And it is a suitable technique for someone far more interested in mood and sensation than in psychology. The main thing was the animated surface, and the pervasive sense of things not quite said beneath it, often of a sexual kind. In his earlier books in particular lesbianism was Firbank’s way of talking about homosexuality, made safer and more amenable to comedy by distance and the Victorian supposition that it didn’t exist. His next novel, *Inclinations*, written almost wholly in dialogue, and in tiny one-sentence, even phrase-long, paragraphs, is in effect a tissue of bizarre, amusing and semi-opaque social interaction, underneath which, entirely unspoken, the love of a middle-aged biographer for the robust English girl she has taken on a research-trip to Greece with her, grows, unfolds and bursts out at last in the chapter which describes her heartbreak in the simple, hilarious and somehow terrifying exclamation, “Mabel!” repeated 8 times. The guests at Mrs Henedge’s Sappho evening are keen for some subtext, which is not allowed to be voiced; but the

Firbankian point is the enigma, the latency of meaning, in the random fragment of verse or speech, or in the random life, the rootless, unknowable gay life in particular, “*an adventurous line separated (alas!) from its full context. Decorative, useless, as you will: a water-colour on silk!*”

The newly lightened and aerated form as a vehicle for a view of social life as absurd and inconsequential was what Waugh and other writers of his generation loved in Firbank, whose mark is also clearly seen in the droll futility of Anthony Powell’s early novels and, more deeply, in those of Henry Green, who combines Firbank’s ear for the oddity and inconsequence of speech with his imagistic eye for detail and oblique application to plot. Writing to Green to congratulate him on his new novel *Living*, Waugh wrote, “*The thing I envied most was the way you managed the plot which is oddly enough almost exactly the way Firbank managed his.*” Firbank, such a marginal figure in his lifetime, was soon being celebrated as a writer whose innovations could be used. His books were utterly and abstrusely personal, but he had made an important breakthrough in technique. His impact was perhaps more lasting and more useful than that of those other writers whose large presences have almost obliterated him in the history of the Modernist novel, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf; neither of whom gives any indication of having so much as heard of Firbank, though Firbank, in Paris in 1922, was keen to buy a copy of *Ulysses*, which wouldn’t be published in England till 1936: “*the book*”, he explained in a letter to his mother, “*is by James Joyce who is supposed to be almost as corrupting to good morals as me!*” In the event he decided £15 was far too much to spend.

In *Vainglory* Firbank included a self-portrait, in the form of a writer called Claud Harvester. He is, like almost everyone in the book, a minor character, making one appearance, but referred to from time to time by other people. This is very characteristic of Firbank’s social view in his early novels, in which one might say there was no plot but a profusion of appearing and vanishing subplots, the unnerving effect being that neither the reader nor the characters seem to know who or what is important or trivial, or how you would tell the difference; the Firbank artist figure is a marginal one in his own book, more talked about than known, a figure usually elsewhere, doing something that smart people might occasionally chatter about. It is said of Claud Harvester: “*He had gone about here and there, tinting his personality after the fashion of a Venetian glass. . . . Many, indeed, thought him interesting. He had groped so . . . . In the end he began to suspect that what he had been seeking for all along was the theatre. . . . In style -- he was often called obscure, although, in reality, he was as charming as the top of an apple-tree above a wall. As a novelist he was almost successful. His books were watched for . . . but without impatience.*” In an early scene, there is some disagreement about his latest play -- “*Delightfully*

*slight, I thought*”, enthuses one party guest, “*A disaster!*” claims another. Later we learn, “*Of course, Claud’s considered a cult, but everyone reads him!*”; and towards the end of *Vainglory* Harvester’s *Vaindreams* is discussed:

“He has such a strange, peculiar style. His work calls to mind a frieze with figures of varying heights trotting all the same way. If one should by chance turn about it’s usually merely to stare or to sneer or to make a grimace. Only occasionally his figures care to beckon. And they seldom really touch.”

“He’s too cold. Too classic, I suppose.”

“Classic! In the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* his style is described as *odd spelling, brilliant and vicious.*”

Firbank would intrude himself by name in some of his later novels, playing with what was thought to be scandalous about his books. In *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, a lady in a circulating library has her say: “*I suppose I’m getting squeamish! But this Ronald Firbank I can’t take to at all. Valmouth! Was there ever a novel more coarse. I assure you I hadn’t gone very far when I had to put it down.*” To which a warily sympathetic other lady replies, “*I once met him. . . . He told me writing books was by no means easy!*” Here the uncomprehending and offended criticism which greeted all Firbank’s work is absorbed, mocked, even worn as a perverse kind of honour. In a letter to his mother he described *The Flower Beneath the Foot* itself as “*vulgar, cynical and ‘horrid’*”, in a complex anticipation of critical reactions to it. But what is remarkable about his earlier appearance as Claud Harvester is that he had as yet no public, no profile as a writer, no experience of the critical reaction to his mature work. He depicts himself with a mixture of innocent wish-fulfilment and canny self-knowledge. He gives a sense of himself as difficult -- “*he was often called obscure, although in reality he was as charming as the top of an apple-tree above a wall*”, a typically imagistic Firbankian way of saying something complicated: an apple-tree is in some respects the opposite of obscure, indeed old-fashioned and homely, and it nicely makes the point that the writer is simultaneously natural and cultivated; but this isn’t the whole apple-tree, just the top of it seen over a wall. The garden or orchard in which it grows is hidden and private; what is seen is merely the blossoming or fruiting display of the top of the tree. The effect of the display will be “*charming*” -- seductive or merely, in the devalued social usage of the word, nice but ignorable. And if you get it, it won’t necessarily be “*obscure*”; but even so “*obscure*” and “*charming*” are not antonyms, and Ronald’s early books will be both things indissolubly. At this stage, of course, he can play, with lightly defensive irony, on the idea of his own success: “*As a novelist he was almost successful. His books were*

*watched for . . . but without impatience.*” This modesty of expectation is dropped in the declaration that “*Claud’s considered a cult, but everyone reads him!*” -- an interesting sentence about the perception of the writer who is obscure in another sense: ie, unknown. It was not to be the case that everyone read Firbank, almost no one did. But the idea of being a cult, the preserve of fewer but far keener readers, is one that unsuccessful writers are often grateful for. Claud has it both ways, he is considered a cult but that claim is itself a kind of modesty: really everyone reads him!

Again, since this is a knowingly prophetic passage in a debut novel, one can look forward 7 years to the time when Firbank *did* just about about meet the conditions for being a cult -- his books sold only a few hundred copies, and had a reputation, which he did little to discourage, for naughtiness if not outright immorality. He was dissatisfied with his unscrupulous publisher Grant Richards, and beginning to feel that cult status was a meagre consolation, when the American novelist, photographer and cultural impresario Carl Van Vechten wrote to him in 1922, “*I am very sorry to be obliged to inform you that I think there is some danger of your becoming the rage in America*”. Firbank was wary of Van Vechten’s claim that he was “the talk of the town” in New York (“*by ‘the town’ I imagine him to mean a dozen clever people*”) But he sensed too the presence of a genius for publicity and caught Van Vechten’s responsiveness to the so-called “subterranean” or gay aspects of his work; more than thirty years later, Van Vechten would write, with another period euphemism, “*Almost all of Firbank is quaint reading and enough to make your hair, even pubic hair, stand on end when you understand it*”. Firbank found the occasion for another self-portrait, and wrote back, with more than usual archness: “*Dear Sir, You ask for personal details -- Well, I usually write with purple ink . . . I am older than this, but only admit to nineteen . . . My books in England are a cult, which explains of course why J. C. Squire has never heard of them!*” J. C. Squire, the editor of the *London Mercury*, was a cultural impresario of a different stripe, dedicated to attacking what he called the “*anarchical cleverness*” of modernism. Firbank’s coyness here, his camp proffering of the apparently trivial, masks the real pain of the lack of recognition his work had attained. Critical praise when it came was often qualified or missed the point entirely, and critical hostility was robust. Another pillar of the Establishment Sir Bruce Richmond, editor of the *TLS*, himself reviewed *The Flower Beneath the Foot*:

Mr Firbank continues to deny us the solid nourishment which our national character demands in its fiction as well as on the dinner-table . . . Really it is superfluous to follow the plot, which is purposely disjointed, . . . a style based too simply on grammatical, as the satire on sexual,

inversions, very quickly becomes monotonous.

In a way Richmond was spot on: it was just that he found deplorable all those things which made Firbank's art alive, original and of course subversive. The chauvinistic disparagement of Firbank's sexuality is found again in a bibliography of his work published a year after his death, and making a very clear distinction between bibliographic and other values:

The French "pastry" which he created and called stories and plays cannot claim a great place in contemporary English literature, but its individuality, its exotic esotericism, and its very perversity are characteristic of the man himself. Untrue as it would be in the ordinary accepted sense of the term, his work is in this very strict and literal interpretation, a human document.

Firbank himself, who by publishing *Vainglory* became the most original English novelist since Sterne, never produced a manifesto or any public statement of intent, never wrote an essay or reviewed a book or joined in any public discussion of other writers. In an age of declarations and realignments he steered his own inscrutable course. So the little account given of his *alter ego* Claud Harvester's *Vaindreams*, which is to say the book we are actually reading, is the more interesting: the image of the frieze of figures all trotting the same way, busily absorbed in their own concerns, and, when they do turn to look at those behind, doing so with a stare or a sneer or a grimace. Here is the Firbankian social vision at its most austere, the endless parade of strikingly posed but uncommunicating individuals, amongst whom the intimacy of understanding appears almost an impossibility. "Too cold. Too classic, I suppose", hazards the other speaker, meaning partly "too classical", in the manner of an ancient marble frieze, though the ambiguity of the term is taken up in the scornful but doubtful rejoinder: "Classic! In the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* his style is described as **odd spelling, brilliant and vicious.**" Not only is Claud the paradoxical minority cult bestseller, he is also in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, where he is described as the opposite of classic, though classic status is what might be expected to get him into the encyclopaedia in the first place.

Well, it's true that notable outsiders may move from cult to classic status; Firbank still hovers between those worlds; I myself edited a volume of his three last novels for Penguin Classics in 2000: here was the accolade at last. A year later it was taken out of print and has not been available since. It was shockingly quick: a sort of deposition, or defrocking, such as happens to Cardinal Pirelli in the third of those great books. Was there something inevitable to it? If we had our own Pléiade, a British equivalent to the Library of America, Firbank might attain the quiet

permanency of classic status. As it is, his work keeps slipping, as he did in life, out of view. It's interesting to note the reasons he himself advances against his classic status: "*Odd spelling, brilliant and vicious*": it is true that Firbank couldn't spell, was ostentatiously brilliant and enjoyed being vicious -- this more in the sense of being naughty, and thus supposedly corrupting to morals, than of being spiteful, though in his more paranoid moments he felt himself to be living in a world of spite, to which he could respond with his own viciousness. All these attributes are personal, quirky, unsettling.

Firbank's books all appeared in uniform format and binding, with off-white jackets, a little co-ordinated library, so that they made up as they appeared a collected edition of the kind most writers gain only in old age, like Henry James, or posthumously. Here was a "Works", with the air at least of a classic. But the actual texts of these exiguous but elegant first editions are full of quirks -- not only what one early reviewer called "adventures in spelling" but, since the novels consist largely of conversation, the quirks of speech. The page has the aeration of a play-text (Claud Harvester again, "*He began to suspect that what he had been seeking for all along was the theatre*"), of dialogue interspersed with brief imagistic description of setting and action. Punctuation is deployed on a very personal footing, for rhythm and emphasis rather than in accordance with any strict modern system. Grammar is equally subjective, defiantly improper, as in the opening words of *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, "*Neither her Gaudiness the Mistress of the Robes, or her Dreaminess the Queen were feeling quite themselves.*" And the text is thick with capital letters, italics ("I adore italics, don't you?") and exclamation-marks, of which Firbank was far fonder than a good writer is supposed to be (in Fowler's *English Usage* any but the most sparing use is said to betray the ignorant or inexperienced writer: for Firbank the screamer, as printers used to call it, is an indispensable expressive aid: he uses them in each book in their multiple hundreds, and sometimes makes up unspoken, or unspeakable dialogue entirely out of ellipses, question-marks and exclamation-marks, almost prefiguring the speech-bubbles of cartoons or those exclamation-marks that jump off the startled Tintin's forehead like drops of sweat).

The mannered typographical emphasis of the texts, so integral to Firbank's view of character and relations, relates to his taste for the camp declarative nature of Restoration comedy and the highly stylised forms of the early eighteenth century: the texts of *Tom Jones* or Pope's *Satires* are alive with italics, italics used for proper names, which appealed to Firbank, I suspect, because they seemed also to emphasise them, and to him the name of a character often was emphatic, in an eighteenth-century way: Mrs Asp, Lady Listless, Mrs Thoroughfare. But as so often with Firbank manner, wit, alertness of cultural reference, seem to fuse with a kind of

artlessness. It's true his early education was private and patchy, so that the dense cultural web of his novels, the talk of theatre, music, ballet, books, is clearly and very welcomingly the expression of something instinctive and enthusiastic, not academic or learnt. He got the point of things; he was in the world of art, but an amateur, not an expert. He was in a way untutored. In his eight terms at Cambridge he never even sat for an exam. When his letters to his mother were published a few years ago, they showed, not of course the polish of the novels, but a certain distinct continuity of manner when it came to evoking people and places. Here was the same uneducated dash, zany spelling and heavy use of the screamer; but here proving capable of many shades of implication: not just comedy and shock, but the confirming of a certain grimness. In some letters almost every sentence, however factual or even glum, ends with an exclamation mark. "*I suppose one must bear with the monotony!*" is a nice example, which could be cheerful, stoical or despairing, read in different ways. Lady Firbank's own letters seem not to survive, but from Ronald's own underlined, exclamatory and waveringly grammatical side of the correspondence you get a sense of what she wanted to hear, and of the pitch of the peculiar understanding between a homosexual son and a mother who must of course have known the unstated thing which, as in a Firbank novel, was going on underneath. The letters seemed subtly to throw a light on the unusually feminised nature of his own books, both their manner and their content. No other male novelist has so immersed himself in the world of female society, conversation, dress, a world of spinsters, widows, grass widows, the world defined in Jane Austen's famous diagnosis, "*We live at home, quiet, confined, and our feelings prey on us. You are forced upon action.*" It as if Firbank's Chislehurst childhood with the wife of a busy and often absent man of affairs has furnished him with the form and medium he needed for his novels, in which masculinity, and its expression in action, are remarkably absent.

But what I want to stress here is all those wilful unclassic things that Firbank insists on, and which seem the proper stylistic expression of his personality. He wrote, paid for and designed his books, and why shouldn't he leave on them his personalising artist's marks, the individuating anomalies? Like other marginalised writers he has fallen prey to a normalising urge in later editors. When Duckworth published his complete works, in a sequence of different editions, after his death, they set about regularising his grammar, spelling and punctuation, stripping out the capital letters and italics, even rewriting passages in ways that changed their meaning and spoilt their music or their wit, and inevitably introducing new errors of their own. To give a tiny example, when someone in *Caprice* says of an actor, "*I love his lazzarone-ness, his Riva-Schiavone-ness . . . He's very, very handsome. But, of course, it cannot last!*" Firbank is smuggling what might be a verse from a musical, a

bit of Cole Porter *avant la lettre*, into his text, one of his habitual little riffs, where speech itself is tempted into caprice, and rises into expressive shapes. The pedantic Duckworth editor has corrected this to “Riva-degli-Schiavoneness”, sabotaging the rhythm and mis-spelling *lazzarone* in the process. When Firbank’s letters to his mother were published, their editor adopted a brand-new textual principle of his own, preserving the eccentric spelling for the first two sections of the book, but correcting it thereafter, except for proper names; it was as if a small dose of unadulterated Firbank was amusing enough, but after a while he needed bringing in line. The dashes which lend character and animation in the letters were all replaced by full stops and commas; new paragraphs were introduced. The tops and tails of the letters were docked, making them into bulletins rather than loving and respectful addresses. And at the same time, in the editorial matter, numerous words were misspelt in ways even Firbank would have wondered at. In all these cases Firbank’s own fruitful amateurism was submitted to the sterile amateurism of people who thought they knew better. With the novels, there is admittedly some ambiguity, since Firbank was clearly a useless proof-reader, and the pages he passed for the press contain errors that are the result of mere ignorance or oversight; the nice task for the editor is to know where error ceases and the proper wilfulness of the Firbankian text begins. These are other hazards of the non-classic.

At the time of his death Firbank had completed the first seven chapters of his New York novel, *The New Rythum*, and left brief notes for the rest; and these were published, along with some early stories, in 1962. The editor of *The Spectator* had the bright idea of asking Evelyn Waugh to review it, and got the following postcard in reply: “*I am sorry to say that your kind invitation to review The New Rhythm reaches me 30 years late. In youth I was fascinated by Firbank. Now I can’t abide him. E. W.*” Interviewed at around the same time by Julian Jebb for the *Paris Review*, Waugh was asked about influences on his own style, and named in first place P. G. Wodehouse, though also acknowledging a debt to Hemingway, and “*the way he made drunk people talk*” in *The Sun Also Rises*. Pressed about Firbank, Waugh acknowledges nothing, and again says, “*I can’t read him now*”; asked why not, he says, “*I think there would be something wrong with an elderly man who could enjoy Firbank.*”

This casting of a taste for Firbank as a slightly shameful youthful indulgence of course says much about Waugh, and his own late persona (the “elderly man” was in fact 59 at the time). Waugh liked his own rudeness, and increasingly favoured assertion over argument or self-explanation. His beliefs had changed and then hardened. The year after he wrote his article on Firbank he converted to Catholicism, which Firbank had done 23 years previously, though with less lasting

effect. The Catholic church formed a rich and continuing focus for Firbank's study of human frailty and delusion, and he writes of it with a characteristic blend of satire and sweetness; in the last two years of his life, after the death of his mother, he seems to have found consolation in prayer, and professed himself moved by the mystical element in religion. But consulting a psychoanalyst in 1921, he found, besides the relief of being "*understood from top to toe without prejudice*" that "*my chief regret at present is that I have no Religion*". Waugh, asked in that same interview if the Catholicism of *Brideshead* expressed a reverence for established institutions, replied, "*No, certainly not. I reverence the Catholic Church because it is true, not because it is established or an institution.*" Firbank several times repeated to his friend Lord Berners the line, "*The Church of Rome would not have me and so I laugh at her*", referring, with a typically Firbankian lack of explanation, to his having been rejected in 1909 in his whimsical attempt to join the Guardia Nobile in the Vatican. Berners had never had any reason to suppose Firbank a Catholic and, as his only friend in Rome at the time of his death, had him buried in the Protestant cemetery, from which he had in due course to be exhumed and reburied elsewhere. What Berners would have picked up on was Firbank's deep scepticism about the truth of any established institution.

Fundamentally, Waugh seems to have relished Firbank's subversion of form and technique, but soon repudiated those other subversions which were inseparably related to it, and which made Firbank's style, like that of the other writers I've been looking at, the intimate and inevitable outcome of his peculiar and dissident personality. By making the novel a structure of bright fragments, Firbank had aestheticised it, and in the aesthetic realm the normative claims of morality are relaxed. This is something that James too, though always wary of pure aestheticism, had explored in the later novels, where the bold accommodations with adultery, betrayal, extramarital sex are approached through the elastic and semi-opaque processes of a highly personal style. Firbank is more extreme than this: his difficult inconsequential manner is part of a bigger subversion of the novel, and what is in many ways a homosexualisation of the novel. Characteristically, he didn't do this by writing a "gay novel" of the kind that E. M. Forster had struggled with in *Maurice*, or of the kind that James Baldwin or Gore Vidal would later write in *Giovanni's Room* and *The City and the Pillar* -- novels in which the homosexual condition is itself the subject, with an unusual dominance of maleness. For Forster the crisis, which led him to abandon the novel form altogether, was the impossibility of writing about the one thing which most determined his view of life; it wasn't only or exactly that the novel was an inveterately heterosexual form, since a novel could in theory be about anything you liked. It was just that a forthright novel on homosexual themes was a

legal impossibility, something that couldn't happen "*until my death and England's*", as he put it. Firbank's dodge, especially in his earlier English novels, was simply not to write about relations between the sexes at all -- and instead of making his books all about men, to write almost entirely about women. In the post-war books that he wrote and set abroad, things are rather different. In them the death of England, the imaginative liberation from English custom, indifference, cliché and hypocrisy, is engineered and celebrated in a very personal and defiant fashion. His own gay presence, as observer and admirer of young men, is unignorably strong.

One of the concomitants of this change of setting and view is a change in manner, a more conventional handling of narrative, a clearing of texture. He becomes much less difficult. The books are still extraordinary: *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, of 1923, a hauntingly funny fantasy of court intrigue in which the jilting and heartbreak of a young woman culminates in a harrowing tragic ending; *Sorrow in Sunlight*, the following year, Firbank's shortest, quickest and most brilliant novel, set on an imaginary Caribbean island, and his first to be published in the US, just as it was the first he was actually paid for; and *Concerning the Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli*, his most involved approach to a self-portrait, rejected by his enterprising new American publishers "on moral grounds", and published, by Grant Richards again, six weeks after Firbank's death. These books are all masterpieces, and each of them deserves a lecture in itself. Each of them more importantly deserves to be available and to be read. In any full celebration of Firbank they would be the crown. But I have chosen in this lecture to concentrate on that earlier mysterious period when Arthur Firbank emerged as Ronald Firbank, in his unprecedented novelty and complexity.

"*I once met him*", said the fictional Miss Hopkins of the real Ronald Firbank. "*He told me writing books was by no means easy!*" I have to admit I feel much the same about writing lectures, something I have never in my life felt any spontaneous desire to do. But I am grateful, and especially now that it's done, to have been given the invitation to write these Lord Northcliffe Lectures, and aware of the honour too, as someone not an academic, whose insights, even on technical matters, will be a question of sympathy rather than criticism. And there has been the pleasure of course of looking again and more closely at writers I have taken my bearings from for thirty years, and finding them in each case more wonderful than ever. In seven years' time I shall be, by Waugh's reckoning, elderly I'm happy to think I shall be reading Firbank's startling, funny and poignant books, and grateful for whatever it is that is wrong with me that makes me love them.