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point of view

Don Adams on Ronald Firbank

January 1, 2010

Ronald Firbank: Aggressive, Witty, and Unrelenting

by [Don Adams](#)

Gay British novelist Ronald Firbank (1886-1926) wrote novels unlike any others in English. In a review article a few years after the novelist's early death at the age of 39, British critic Cuthbert Wright concluded succinctly that "Firbank was superlatively himself, and no one has resembled him."



Ronald Firbank.

Novelist and photographer Carl Van Vechten elaborated upon Firbank's special case status in his 1924 introduction to the first American edition of a Firbank novel: "When you compare him with other authors, logically you can go no further than the binding. . . . He is unique, a glittering dragon-fly skimming over the sunlit literary garden, where almost all the other creatures crawl."

Although Firbank has had would-be imitators, none have been successful, as Firbank's manner is so conspicuous that it cannot be borrowed. For an example of a failed borrowing, one may look at the channel crossing scenes at the beginning of Evelyn Waugh's *Vile Bodies*. (Alternatively, an example of a successful internalization and transformation of Firbank's manner may be witnessed in the final two novels, *Nothing* and *Doting*, of mid-century British author Henry Green, as well as in the late pastoral romance, *Garments the Living Wear*, by the recently-deceased American gay master James Purdy.)

His Background

Firbank was the grandson of an uneducated railways laborer who rose by career's end to be a tycoon of British industry. Firbank's father was ennobled and was for a time a Member of Parliament as well as, together with his wife, a noted art collector.

In his introduction to the 1961 *The Complete Ronald Firbank*, novelist Anthony Powell—upon whom Firbank exerted a recognizable stylistic influence—considered Firbank's unlikely patrimony: "Like everything else about him, the family background is unusual. He is the classic, the ultimate, example of the 'third generation type,' that trio of descending individuals in which the grandfather makes the money, the son consolidates the social position, the grandson practices the arts (or sometimes merely patronizes them), in some 'decadent' manner, thus expressing the still existent, yet by now failing and feverish, energy that suddenly, unexpectedly, welled up in the race."

Although Firbank had self-published his early fiction before entering Cambridge, he took a relatively long while to develop thereafter his strikingly original manner and to get down to the actual business of novel writing.

In his affectionate and instructive 1950 introductory essay to New Direction's *Five Novels* of Ronald Firbank (still in print), friend and fellow author Osbert Sitwell noted that it was World War I that finally forced Firbank to embark upon the writing career for which he, in hindsight, seemed destined: "He felt himself totally out of place in a khaki-clad, war-mad world, where there was no music, no gaiety, and in which one could no longer travel except about the business of death."

Self-portrait

In *Vainglory* (1916), the first of the three novels that Firbank wrote and self-published during the war years, he provided a telling self-portrait in the minor character of Claud Harvester, the author of "Vaindreams," who—like his creator—took an indirect route in arriving at his vocation:

Claud Harvester was usually considered charming. He had gone about here and there, tinting his personality after the fashion of a Venetian glass. Certainly he had wandered. . . . He had been into Arcadia even, a place where artificial temperaments so seldom

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get—their nearest approach being, perhaps, a matinee of *The Winter's Tale*. Many thought him "interesting." . . . In the end, he began to suspect that what he had been seeking for all along was the theater. He had discovered truth in writing plays. In style—he was often called obscure, although, in reality, he was as charming as an apple-tree above a wall.

Unlike the playwright Claud Harvester, Firbank found his truth in writing novels, but ones that adopted several key conventions of the drama, particularly the convention of quick-patter dialogue in the absence of a narrator as director, as in this scene with Claud Harvester further on in the novel:

"Tell me . . . who is the Victorian man talking to that gorgeous thing—in the gold trailing skirts?"

"You mean Claud Harvester? His play the other night was a disaster. Did you see it?"

"It was delightfully slight, I thought."

"A disaster."

"Never mind, Mr. Harvester," Lady Georgia was saying to him. "I'm sure your play was exquisite or it would have had a longer run."

In this intriguingly prophetic passage, Firbank both anticipates and defends himself against the critical reception the book under creation actually received.

In the prior self-portrait passage, the author seeks to tutor his apprentice reader by providing several clues toward a successful appreciation of his work. One is the reference to Arcadia, the home of the pastoral genre, to which his novels belong and significantly contribute. Another is the portrayal of himself as a wanderer and a groper after truth.

Firbank's Wildean Wisdom

Indeed, one of the most surprising aspects of Firbank's surprising fiction is its metaphysical and spiritual profundity, which increases as his novels progress. That Firbank was a novelistic innovator and a humorous social commentator is a critical commonplace, but that his novels are wise as well as witty has not been generally recognized—a failure that may be attributed to the fact that Firbank's wisdom is Wildean in nature.

Literary and cultural criticism only recently has begun to appreciate the degree to which Oscar Wilde was a major prophet of our age. Firbank, however, had early fixed upon Wilde as his guiding inspiration and patron saint in both life and art.

The gist of the Wildean wisdom that Firbank internalized and expressed in and through his fiction is implied obliquely in the portrayal of Claud Harvester's ultimate discovery of his vocation: "He had discovered truth in writing plays. In style—." With minor manipulation, we might say that what Claud Harvester had discovered is the playful truth of style itself, in accordance with the Wildean dictum that "truth is entirely and absolutely a matter of style."

Wilde's repeated argument in his crucial essays is that truth is more fundamentally an aesthetic rather than an ethical matter. Taking to heart the truism that there is no accounting for taste, Wilde contended that taste is at the heart of human nature, and indeed, of Nature itself.

"Nature," he argued, "is our creation." That is not to say that Nature may be made into anything we want or will it to be; rather, it is to affirm that what we instinctively consider to be *natural* is according to our *taste*—for which there is no accounting.

Through his internalization of this Wildean wisdom, Firbank in effect joined his individual search for truth—his restless wandering and spiritual groping (he converted to Catholicism while at Cambridge but later seemed to have abandoned it)—to his exploration, expression, and refinement of style; so that his fiction became for him a conjoined aesthetic and existential effort at self-realization.

It was an effort to which he devoted himself with the ardency and sincerity of the aspiring saint—a figure that is variously and hilariously travestied throughout his work. On the other hand, the self and style that is embodied in Firbank's work is anything but earnest. On the contrary, it is wayward, capricious, eccentric, artificial, and fantastical—in other words, a veritable compendium of the more playful and ornamental aspects of human temperament.

Firbank's Style

In his successful effort to capture and display such wayward and elusive flights of temperament, Firbank developed a style that he himself acutely described as "aggressive, witty, and unrelenting."

His remarkable miniature and quick-sketch character portraits exhibit the effectiveness of this style as the author nets and pins a cast of flighty and flaky, but entirely willful and self-absorbed characters:

With the deftness of a virtuoso, the Countess seized, and crushed with her muff, a pale-winged passing gnat.

"Before life," she murmured, "that saddest thing of all, was thrust upon us, I believe I was an angel"

(The Flower Beneath the Foot)

"Tell me truthfully," Julia queried, "how am I looking?"

"Beautifully weary, miss."

Miss Compostella sank back.

Like some indignant Europa she saw herself being carried away by the years.

(Vainglory)

"And there was the wind bellowing and we witches wailing: and no Macbeth!" a young man with a voice like cheap scent was saying to a sympathetic journalist for whatever it might be worth

(Caprice)

"Temperament will out, Dona Consolacion, it cannot be hid."

The laundress beamed.

"Mine's the French."

"It's God's will *whatever* it is."

"It's the French," she lisped, considering the silver rings on her honey-brown hands. Of distinguished presence, with dark matted curls at either ear, she was the apotheosis of flesh triumphant.

(Concerning the Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli)

One could quote almost endlessly in this vein merely by flipping through the pages of Firbank's vigorously condensed novels. Van Vechten remarked that Firbank was the "only one authentic master of the light touch" in modern literature, and he went on to expound upon the remarkable unegoistic clarity of Firbank's creative envisioning: "He is, perhaps, the only purely Greek writer that we possess today. There is no sentimentality or irony in his work; hardly even cynicism. There is, indeed, a baffling quality about Firbank's very lucidity, his gay, firm grasp of the trivial peccancies."

Other early and less well-disposed commentators accused Firbank, on the contrary, of extreme self-indulgence, as did Powell when remarking that Firbank's novels are a "cavalcade of wish-fulfillment myths," and as did E. M. Forster when he contended that "Firbank is completely absorbed in his own nonsense."

Likewise when Evelyn Waugh was asked in a late-life interview whether he continued to read Firbank, who was an admitted influence on his early work, Waugh responded, "I think there would be something wrong with an elderly man who could enjoy Firbank."

To all such condemnations, one might well respond in the manner of Van Vechten when faced with similar disapprobations of Firbank: "I meet ladies in the street who batter me with their parasols because they have been led to read his books through reading encomiastic articles of mine. I quite appreciate the depth of their feeling, but when these ladies assure me that they do not like Firbank, I am learning more about the ladies themselves than I am about the object of their abomination."

Aesthetics versus Ethics

A great deal of the historical misreading and continual undervaluing of Firbank's fiction is the result of the confusion between his entirely earnest and serious effort at the fictive realization of the truth of both self and style, and the eccentric and temperamental nature of the self and style that his novels fictively realize.

Forster was, sadly, all too typical in assuming that Firbank's "frivolous" subject matter connoted the frivolous motive and intent of the author, going so far as to contend that all of Firbank's novels are

characterized by "the *absence of a soul*... there is nothing to be saved or damned" in them, for they have "no relation to philosophic truth." Forster concluded that, because Firbank's novels fail to "introduce the soul [and] its attendant scenery of Right and Wrong," they are "fundamentally unserious."

Certainly Firbank's novels fail to include the *conventional* novelistic "scenery of Right and Wrong," the entire absence of which is one of their chief virtues and a remarkable ethical and aesthetic achievement in its own right. Cuthbert Wright noted of Firbank as novelist that "it was not so much that he defied certain social and moral conventions; it was as if he had never heard of them."

In any case, Forster's criticism is valid only if one grants him the assumption that "Right and Wrong" are characteristics of the "soul," but this is not an assumption that Firbank's fiction grants. Rather, Firbank's novels creatively embody and express the Wildean assertion that the truth of the soul is more fully realized by aesthetic rather than ethical means.

"Aesthetics are higher than ethics," Wilde wrote, "They belong to a more spiritual sphere. To discern the beauty of the thing is the finest point to which we can arrive. Even a color sense is more important, in the development of the individual, than a sense of right and wrong."

Wilde follows up this provocative pronouncement near the conclusion of "The Critic as Artist" with the acute and far-reaching observation that the difference between ethics and aesthetics in the "sphere of conscious civilization" may be compared to the difference between natural and sexual selection in the realm of the material world:

Ethics, like natural selection, make existence possible. Aesthetics, like sexual selection, make life lovely and wonderful, fill it with new forms, and give it progress, and variety and change. And when we reach the true culture that is our aim, we attain to that perfection of which the saints have dreamed, the perfection of those to whom sin is impossible, not because they make the renunciation of the ascetic, but because they can do everything they wish without hurt to the soul.

This state of "true culture" in which "sin is impossible" is the world that Firbank strived to envision throughout his mature fiction. It also is the world that W. H. Auden referred to when he claimed that Firbank was one of his favorite modern writers because his novels are concerned "with Eden," and that Firbank himself referred to in a letter to his American publisher when admonishing him not to worry that he had never visited New York City before beginning work on his new novel to be set there (*The New Rythum*, unfinished at his death), as New York was certain to be transformed into "the New Jerusalem before I have done with it."

Firbank's Pastoral World

Like all pure pastoral writers, Firbank banned from the realm of his work the ethical concerns that are related to the attaining and maintaining of social well-being and political stability—concerns regarding the ideals of justice, fairness, equality, duty, obligation, and responsibility. Drawing upon Wilde's paradigm, we might consider these inevitable and characteristic communal concerns to be the evolutionary collective taste of the species, that which has allowed our species to thrive without exterminating one another or competing ourselves to death.

Firbank's novels are concerned, on the contrary, with the individual tastes that are related to the beauty of being, which is in the subjective eye of the individual beholder. In the self-limited and idealized pastoral world of Firbank's fiction, in which no one is starving or competing for political, social, or material rights, the ethical distinctions of "right and wrong" are replaced by the aesthetic categories of good and bad taste, while society-based moral judgments are replaced by individual predilections and inclinations.

Firbank's pastoral fantasies are devoted to the idealized world of innocent pleasures in which sin is impossible—although they are acutely aware of the fact that such is not the world in which we actually live, which is precisely why they remain behind the pastoral boundary, from the safe haven of which they gesture to the actual ethical world by implication.

In order to read the argument of Firbank's pastoral fantasies successfully, we must make explicit their implications, which requires that we take seriously the persistent attitudinizing in and through which the argument is implied. When such attitudinizing is taken as a frivolous and self-indulgent end in itself, as Powell and Forster assumed in their condemning remarks, the implicit argument is missed and the conventional ethical status quo is affirmed and endorsed.

Although the frivolous attitude of Firbank's fiction may *seem* to claim immunity from all political and social concerns, when we make explicit their attitudinal implications, we find that they are actually quite actively engaged in opposing what they imply to be

unnecessary and oppressive socio-political strictures against individual identities and inclinations.

In particular, Firbank's novels work to combat sexual, racial, and religious discrimination, and they do so by treating sex, race, and religion as matters of individual and cultural taste, rather than as issues of ethical right and wrong.

Using Wilde's analogy comparing the difference between ethics and aesthetics to the difference between natural and sexual selection, we could say that Firbank's novels implicitly contend that matters of race, sex, and religion have been miscategorized historically as issues of ethical right and wrong necessarily related to the survival of the species, whereas they rightly should be approached as matters of relative and subjective individual and cultural taste—that is, as matters of aesthetics rather than ethics.

Sexuality

When Firbank wrote and self-published his novels, discussion of homosexuality and other socially stigmatized and criminalized sexual behaviors was liable to censorship by British authorities. Firbank evaded such censorship by treating sexuality—together with all other "serious" matters—as a joke.

The attitude of his novels that they are merely "playing around" was a successful defense against censorship, but their vigilantly self-protective posturings ("aggressive, witty, and unrelenting") include by implication the intolerance, ignorance, hatred, and oppression that they explicitly exclude.

In order to appreciate the intensity of political argument of Firbank's work, we must keep in mind the implied intolerance and oppression that is being kept at bay, just beyond the work's pastoral boundary. When we read Firbank's novels as works of implied political argument, what Powell called their "cavalcade of wish-fulfillment" may be seen as a sustained barrage against the conventional and self-satisfied façade of ethical right and wrong that all too often serves as shield and cover for hatred and bigotry.

Throughout his novels, Firbank's characters focus upon the pursuit and fulfillment of their amorous desires, largely ignoring the conventional world's sexual-ethical status quo. When the status quo *is* alluded to, it is with a playfully supercilious attitude, as in this fictive meditation on marriage in *Prancing Nigger* (an unfortunate title that American publishers gave to a novel that Firbank had christened *Sorrow in Sunlight*):

In the convivial ground-floor dining-room, "First-Greek-Empire" style, it was hard, at times, to endure such second-rate company, as that of a querulous husband.

Yes, marriage had its dull side, and its drawbacks, still, where would society be, (and where morality!) without the married women?

Mrs. Mouth fetched a sigh.

Just at her husband's back, above the ebony sideboard, hung a Biblical engraving after Rembrandt, *Woman Taken in Adultery*, the conception of which seemed to her exaggerated and overdone, knowing full well, from previous experience, that there need not, really, be much fuss. . . . Indeed, there need not be any: but to be *Taken* like that! A couple of idiots.

The pastoral traditionally is no supporter of wedded bliss, and true to form, Firbank's characters tend to treat marriage as a personal misfortune and social trap:

"I can't quite forgive Nils for getting married," Mrs. Shamefoot murmured, twirling in the air a pale rose with almost crimson leaves. "I used to like to talk nonsense with him. He talked agreeable nonsense better than anyone I ever knew."

"I'm more concerned for Isolde," Mrs. Henedge said. "I pity her, poor child, married to a charming little vain fickle thing like that!"

"Oh, what does it matter?" Mrs. Shamefoot queried. "When I took Soco I married him for certain qualities which now, alas! I see he can have never had."

"That's just what's so sad! I mean, I'm afraid you did something commonplace after all."

Mrs. Shamefoot became discomposed.

"Oh well," she said, "when I got engaged, I was unconscious, or very nearly. I had fallen sound asleep, I remember, off an iron chair in the park. The next day he had it put in the paper; and we none of us could raise the guinea to contradict"

(*Valmouth*)

Spurred by the disappointment of her marriage, and of life itself, Mrs. Shamefoot draws upon her exalted social position, and her successful husband's deep pockets, in arranging for the placement of a stained-glass window enshrining her saint-like image in the walls of a compliant rural cathedral.

In humble lodgings in the shadow of her own radiant memorial, overlooking the graveyard, she intends to await the end of her days. As she tells a visiting society friend from London:

"I like to sit in the window and watch the moon rise until the brass weather-cock on the belfry turns slowly silver above the trees . . . or, in the early dawn, perhaps, when it rains, and the whole world seems so melancholy and desolate and personal and quite intensely sad—and life an utter hoax"—

Lady Georgia rubbed away a tear.

"I don't know!" she said.

"A hoax! You wonder I can isolate myself so completely. Dear Georgia, just because I want so much, it's extraordinary how little I require."

(*Valmouth*)

Love and death are the twin pastoral preoccupations, the result of the mannered genre's reduction of life to its bare essentials.

Not infrequently in Firbank's fiction, the two are conjoined, as when the Andalusian Cardinal Pirelli, whose sexual tastes are polymorphous, drops dead while on a drunken midnight romp through the cathedral in pursuit of an elusive altar boy who is driving a hard bargain in return for his affections:

"You'd do the handsome by me, sir; you'd not be mean?"

"Eh?..."

"The Fathers only give us texts; you'd be surprised, your Greatness, of the stinginess of some!"

"...?"

"You'd run to something better, sir; you'd give me something more substantial?"

"I'll give you my slipper, child, if you don't come here!" his Eminence warned him....

"Olé, your Purpleship!

(*Concerning the Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli*)

It is typical of Firbank's placidly scandalous fiction that, when there is an instance of what normally would be labeled pedophilia or sexual abuse, it is the conventionally aggrieved party who has the upper hand, for desire puts one at a decided disadvantage.

In the same novel, an aristocratic grandmother accounts for her affair with a handsome young footman by explaining that

"he keeps me from thinking (ah perhaps more than I should) of my little grandson. Imagine, Luiza . . . Fifteen, white and vivid rose, and ink-black hair. . . ." And the Marchioness cast a long, penciled eye towards the world-famous Pieta above her head. "Queen of Heaven, defend a weak woman from *that!*" she besought.

Likewise an aging society belle in *Valmouth* desires the amorous society of a teenage shepherd boy, but she finds herself repeatedly put off, "I fear he must be cold, or else he's decadent? . . . Oh . . . I want to spank the white-walls of his cottage!" Finding herself rebuffed in her person, she resorts to the consolation of her superior class status.

In its playful and humorous fashion, Firbank's fiction reminds us of the fact that not everyone everywhere, and indeed not all societies historically and contemporaneously, have considered sexual relations between adults and pubescents to be immoral. Of course we all must live in the society in which we live, with its attendant mores and values, but Firbank's fiction reminds us of the relativity of such societies and judgments, and of the fact that what we consider to be ethically necessary and natural is innately neither.

Race

Firbank's treatment of the conventional racial divide of his time and place is another instance of his challenging of social values and mores.

The plot of *Valmouth*, for example, centers upon the betrothal of the world-traveling seaman and heir to Hare-Hatch House, Captain Thoroughfare, to a beautiful young "negress," Niri-Esther, whom he met on a tropical voyage—although the handsome young Captain

seems not entirely devoted to the fairer sex, as he indicates when boasting of his "middy-chum, Jack Whorwood" (Firbank's characters' names are often amusingly telling) "who was not much over fifteen and the youngest lad on board":

"That little lad," he had said, with a peculiar smile that revealed his regular pointed teeth, "that little lad, on a cruise, is, to me, what Patroclus was to Achilles, and even more."

Almost everyone in this perhaps most fanciful of Firbank's books, subtitled "A Romantic Novel," suffers from what an immigrant black masseuse, Mrs. Yaj, perceptively diagnoses as "erot-o-maniah." Far from being romantic hindrances, differences of race, culture, age, and class serve only to enhance these characters' attractiveness to one another, as Mrs. Yaj admits when telling of her own erotomaniac obsession:

"I have known what love is, I!" the negress heaved. "Dair are often days ven I can neither eat, nor drink, nor sleep, ven my fingers hab no strength at all (massage den is quite impossible)—and I am able only to groan and groan and groan—ah, my darling!"

"A nigger?"

"A nigger! No. He was a little blond Londoner—all buttoned-and-braided, one ob de *chasseurs* at your hotel."

"Thank you." Lady Parvula looked detached.

Mrs. Yaj's seeming annoyance at the implication that she would be obsessed with "a nigger" is—in Firbank's world—not so much an indication of class aspirations or racial prejudice as it is the natural snobbery that one has in regards to one's individual taste.

Lady Parvula may seem to evince her own distaste in her "detached" response to Mrs. Yaj's romantic choice, but she is herself all too vulnerable in her admitted and ardent obsession with a young shepherd boy, considering which she muses, "I know I should despise myself, but I don't."

By highlighting the arbitrary nature of culture, race, and sex, Firbank emphasizes the natural and innate artifice of all such identity differences, which he vigorously travesties:

"A negress never powders."

"Why not?"

"Because she *knows* it's useless," the lieutenant lucidly explained."

The lieutenant knows whereof he speaks, as he is himself devoted to cosmetic self-enhancement:

Bending over a charming little mirror of composite precious woods, Mrs. Thoroughfare detected Lieutenant Whorwood grooming assiduously his romantic curls.

Embarrassed at being taken thus unawares, the young man blushed up to the *rose-mauve* of his lips.

"I realize," said he, "I'm one of those who, at the last Trump, would run their hand across their hair."

The Lieutenant needn't feel embarrassed, however, as his inclinations are in perfect harmony with Mrs. Thoroughfare's taste:

"Some men are ultra-womanly, and they're the kind I love!" Mrs. Thoroughfare chirruped.

"I suppose that none but those whose courage is unquestionable can venture to be effeminate?" Lady Parvula said, plunging a two-pronged fork into a "made" dish of sugared-violets served in aspic.

The Lieutenant's aesthetic criticism of Captain Thoroughfare's black-skinned fiancée is far from being disinterested, as she has put a social claim on his own "middy-chum." By novel's end, however, the social set in Valmouth seems more or less prepared to accept the couple's unconventional pairing, although not without complaining about the difficulty of competing erotically with one who has Niri-Esther's exotic complexion and appeal: "All the fair men—the blondes, she will take from us But I don't really mind! So long as I get the gypsies"

Death

In the romantic world, as in life in general, we play the cards we are dealt by fate, and none of us can discard the joker in the deck that is our wholly individual and inevitable death. No one in Firbank's fiction is immune from the recurrent ache of love or the ever-present awareness of death.

In the face of these two great "givens," his fiction implicitly demands, what is the significance of a difference of skin color, or of sexual

preference—or even of a religious doctrine or practice? For spiritual contemplation vies with carnal delights as the central preoccupation of Firbank's pastoral figures. As would be expected, they are far from conventional in their approaches to the eternal.

Mrs. Thoroughfare of *Valmouth*, for instance, who is a widow and the reigning mistress of Hare-Hatch House, and her bosom friend and house-mate Mrs. Hurstpierpoint, are both devoted Catholics, who, in their ardency, have focused upon the opposing devotional tendencies of a mortification of the flesh and an indulgence of their ultra-ornamental aesthetic proclivities.

When an unplanned visitor arrives at the house, she is shown into an exquisitely ornate drawing room:

"The mistress, I presume, is with the scourge," the butler announced, peering impassively around.

Lady Parvula placed her fan to her train.

"Let her lash it!" she said. "In this glorious room one is quite content to wait."

Later in the novel, Mrs. Hurstpierpoint asks of her friend,

"May a woman know, dear... when she may receive her drubbing?"

"Oh I've no strength left in me today, I fear, for anything," Mrs. Thoroughfare answered.

"Positively?"

Both women are devotees of the fictive feminine Saint Automona Meris, whose "life" is depicted in a set of "mystic windows" in the house's private chapel:

Automona by way of prelude lolling at a mirror. . . . Automona with a purple heartsease pursuing a nail-pink youth. . . . Automona with four male rakes (like the little brown men of Egypt). . . . Automona, in marvelous mourning and with Nile-green hair, seated like a mummy bolt upright. Automona meeting Queen Maud of Cassiopia: "You look like some rare plant, dear!" Her growing mysticism. She meets Mother Maia: "I'm not the woman I was." Her moods. Her austerities. Her increasing dowdiness. Her indifference to dress. She repulses her couturier: "Send her away!" Her founding of Sodbury. Her end.

"Dear ardent soul!" Mrs. Thoroughfare commented, her spirit rejoicing in the soft neurotic light.

There is a great deal of rejoicing in Firbank's fiction, much of it prompted by ardent appreciations of both art and nature—between which, in these novels' pastoral havens, there is no essential distinction.

Human nature itself is approached by Firbank with the scrupulousness of a connoisseur, and the elements in our nature that are precious—such as our instinct and capacity for friendship, romance, devotion, art, and pleasure—are placed in gorgeous settings that flatter them, while the unattractive and distasteful elements—such as hatred, envy, fear, bitterness, and strife—are banished from the picture, pushed beyond the pastoral boundary that both frames and shields Firbank's fictive world.

Firbank's narrative eulogy of Cardinal Pirelli—his last completed and most resonant character—is an apt commentary on the affectionate and appealing fictive figure of his work as a whole:

Now that the ache of life, with its fevers, passions, doubts, its routine, vulgarity, and boredom, was over, his serene, unclouded face was a marvel to behold. Very great distinction and sweetness was visible there, together with much nobility, and love, all magnified and commingled. . . .

Through the triple windows of the chancel the sky was clear and blue—a blue like the blue of lupins. Above him stirred the wind-blown banners in the Nave.

It is fitting that this last of Firbank's completed works before his early death ends *not* with the focus on the egoistic human individual, however loving and noble, but on the lifeless corpse in its living environment—thus emphasizing the brevity of our life and time on earth.

Toward a New Age

It is not only ourselves that are mutable, but also our fictions and forms of belief. Cardinal Pirelli, who dies the night before he is to depart for the Vatican to defend his "eccentricities"—such as baptizing an aristocrat's prized pup in crème de menthe and going out for nights on the town, disguised in drag—muses one lonely night in his monastery retreat (where he has gone to prepare his Vatican defense) on the inevitable mortality of the Church itself.

The forsaken splendor of the vast closed cloisters seemed almost to augur the waning of a cult. Likewise the decline of Apollo, Diana, Isis, with the gradual downfall of their temples, had been heralded, in past times, by the dispersal of their priests. It looked as though Mother Church, like Venus or Diana, was making way in due turn for the beliefs that should follow: "and we shall begin again with intolerance, martyrdom, and converts," the Cardinal ruminated, passing before an ancient fresco depicting the eleven thousand virgins, or as many as there was room for.

Firbank, who all his life was fascinated by various forms of religious faith—in particular of Catholicism and Islam—knew from his own failed religious effort that he was living near the end of an age of belief, and this passage, in which his Cardinal recalls earlier ages that have passed, and looks forward towards a new age to come (and that will as assuredly pass), seems almost a parody of Nietzsche's eternal return.

Nietzsche, of course, famously predicted the end of the Christian era (at least in its modern form) and its inevitable replacement by a new age with new values. In advance of that new age, Nietzsche, at the conclusion of *The Gay Science*, foretold the arrival on the world stage of a playful "spirit" who will prepare the way for a truly "*great seriousness*" by making mockery of the cynical and self-righteous ethics of a worn-out world.

This will be, Nietzsche wrote, a spirit "who plays. . . with all that was hitherto called holy, good, untouchable, divine . . . when it confronts all earthly seriousness so far, all solemnity in gesture, word, tone, eye, morality, and task so far, as if it were their most incarnate and involuntary parody."

Such a spirit was Ronald Firbank, a radically parodic creator far ahead of his time in his revolutionary effort to replace the conventional novel's focus upon societal ethics (which, by their nature, are frustrating and inhibiting) with a liberating and enabling expression of individualist aesthetics. The question remains of whether we have approached close enough to Wilde's "true culture that is our aim" to begin to appreciate, as a culture, the fundamental seriousness of Firbank's "aggressive, witty, and unrelenting" play.

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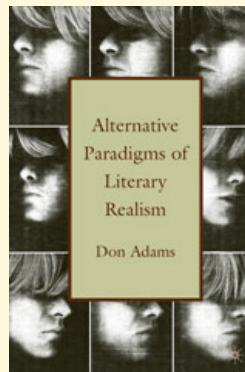
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About Don Adams

Don Adams is an Associate Professor of English at Florida Atlantic University. He is author of two books of literary criticism, *Alternative Paradigms of Literary Realism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) and *James Merrill's Poetic Quest* (Praeger, 1997), as well as a number of articles on modern and contemporary British and American authors. His creative work has appeared in *The Harrington Gay Men's Literary Quarterly* and in *Lodestar Quarterly*.



Adams' most recent book, *Alternative Paradigms of Literary Realism*, was published on December 22, 2009. According to Professor Naomi Leibowitz, the text "leads us to a new appreciation of the under-read and under-valued authors: Jane Bowles, James Purdy, Ronald Firbank, Henry Green, and Penelope Fitzgerald." The book was published by [Palgrave Macmillan](#) and is available from [Amazon.com](#).



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