Neville Braybrooke

RONALD FIRBANK, 1886–1926

> Claude Harvester was usually considered charming. He had gone about here and there, tinting his personality after the fashion of Venetian glass. Certainly he had wandered . . . He had been to Arcadia, even a place where artificial temperaments so seldom get—their nearest approach being, perhaps, a matinée of *The Winter's Tale*. 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. He had discovered the truth in writing plays. 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 waited for . . . but without impatience.

How PROPHETIC that was in 1915—the year in which Lawrence brought out *The Rainbow* and *The Catholic Anthology* launched Eliot's "Prufrock" poem. For Claude Harvester was none other than Ronald Firbank disguised in "gold trailing skirts". It is a self-portrait hard to beat, and it appears in *Vainglory,* the first of his novels to be published. Today it stands as a key passage, holding all the clues: the wanderlust engendered by early childhood travels; the passion for masqued balls and theatricals; the pleasure taken in dressing-up—tinting the personality as well as the nails; the pursuit of Arcadian no less than Athenian society; the desire to be thought perpetually young, interesting, and charming. To bore was the only sin. Yet coupled with that perpetual ambition to be thought as charming as the top of an apple-tree, went a dual desire both to hide behind the garden wall as well as peep over it. When shyness and boldness go together they frequently lead to scenes of "outrageous" behaviour, such outrages becoming the delight of the gossip-columnist. Friends remember Firbank's peculiar habits in restaurants—hiding under the table, for example, or refusing to eat more than one pea or, perhaps, one grape. Once at the Eiffel Tower in Percy Street, a tough, baseball-playing American found himself put out of countenance by this behaviour. "I guess I'll have something *t'eat*", he said aggressively to the waiter. "What will you have, sir?" asked the

waiter. "A rump-steak". He pored over the menu. "Yes, sir?" "And carrots." "Yes, sir?" "And boiled potatoes." "Yes, sir?" "And—And—Er—Er . . ." "Oh! violets", came Firbank's high-pitched voice from another corner of the room. I do not think that the author would have considered his behaviour outrageous on this occasion. Instead, he would prefer to have called it "orchidaceous". He would probably have been correct.

These and a hundred more anecdotes have become the treasured memories of his friends, who have told and re-told them in their various memoirs. But there are other moments in a writer's own fiction when the outrageous (as opposed to the orchidaceous) can lead to moments of either obscenity or blasphemy—or both; and such instances offend not because they bore but because they are in Bad Taste. Firbank is not without such blots, and early in this essay I make this point as an antidote to some of the wild, untutored eulogies that have recently met the issue of the first complete edition of his works. His voice can be heard from the Milky Way: "How I hate the untutored. They are *so* naked".

Firbank died in 1926 at the age of thirty-nine. When he published *Vainglory* he was twenty-nine. For several years it had been his custom to write his sketches and stories on large blue postcards, and, since his handwriting sprawled so, often he could squeeze no more than ten words to a side. These postcards were filled with phrases and sentences—some descriptive of things ("a mitred napkin"); some descriptive of people ("Miss Dawkins explored a sauce-boat as though it [were] an Orient liner"); and some descriptive of places ("Spain! The most glorious country in God's universe. His admitted masterpiece, His gem . . . ."). Alternatively if he overheard snatches of conversation or *faux pas* that pleased him ("He doesn't tip. He *rewards*"; "the brainy district [of Cuna-Cuna]"), he would set them down and file them away for the right moment. The right moment and *le mot juste* were inseparable in his mind. So out of these postcards he designed and orchestrated his books, piecing them together like mosaics or using a kind of word-music in which there was a continual counterpoint between the romantic and the self-mocking. Hence it is impossible to be dogmatic, in an absolute sense, about the order of his books; some paragraphs of *Cardinal Pirelli* (1924) may quite easily have been written before *Vainglory*. Certainly *The Artificial Princess*, published posthumously in 1934, was completed before 1915. But it was a short book, a third of the length of *Vainglory*, and only famous authors can afford to publish short books. The manuscript was left in a drawer, and the author was still deliberating whether to submit it at the time of his death in Rome. Throughout his work, therefore, the same phrases echo and recur—but often with added artistry: in *The Artificial Princess*

the King is described as "a tired Viking"—a rather feeble pun; in *The Flower Beneath the Foot* (1923) the King is described much more amusingly as "a tired pastry cook". In *The Artificial Princess* the sky above the Wellan hills is "powdered *all over* with poudre de riz"; in *Vainglory* the sky above Vigo Street is "powdered *completely* with poudre de riz" (my italics).

Yet even *The Artificial Princess* is not really Firbank's first book. In 1905, before he went up to Cambridge, he published *Odette d'Antrevernes* together with a sketch called *A Study in Temperament.* Later, he referred to all his novels as "Studies in Temperament", and it is worth glancing at a passage from this first sketch:

> 'I think I shall dye my hair *very* gradually to red,' she said. 'I am so tired of gold; of course those yellow tea-roses match beautifully, but I think that yellow is becoming monotonous!' She got up and went to a little table covered with books, and picked up a small volume bound in grey. 'A touch of grey will improve my dress,' she thought . . .
>
> Lady Agnes opened the book, and found it was one of Maeterlinck's plays. 'It is so delightful to be seen reading Maeterlinck! So decadent! . . .'

This is true Firbaitia—if I may coin the term. It sounds the beginning of that authentic mocking tone which was to strike louder with the years, although at the beginning there was a second more romantic tone whose echo was never to be quite lost. *Valmouth* (originally announced as "Glenmouth") is sub-titled "A Romantic Novel", and there are "cognac-coloured" clouds above Hare Hatch House in it; and in the same blue and pink *cahiers* as those in which *A Study in Temperament* first appeared, there is also included *Odette d'Antrevernes*, which is sub-titled "A Fairy Tale for Weary People".

Odette is "a wee mite" living in a great *château* on the Loire. An aged *curé* tells her the story of Bernadette and the Beautiful Lady whom she saw in the rock, and she decides that she too, like Bernadette, will seek out "the Holy Mary, the Mother of the Lord Seigneur". So one night she steals down from her nursery, creeps through the ancestral hall "with its torn and faded flags that drooped like dead things", slips into the rose garden and there picks an enormous bouquet of the best blooms to offer to the Beautiful Lady. Suddenly the sound of a low groan startles her. She jumps to her feet. "Could it be that the Holy Mother was in pain?" She looks about her but sees no one; instinct compels here to run down the avenue of limes and there, by the river's edge, she discovers a woman with painted cheeks and flaming hair. "What are you doing in your nightgown . . . ? You've begun early, my dear!" "Who are you?" the child insists. "Who are you?" Then far away in the East, with true theatrical tinting, the day begins to dawn; the inno-

cence of the little girl re-awakens the lost innocence of the woman. "I must go . . . I am going to try to find work—honest work". As they part, the child prays: "Take into Thy protection, dear Mother, this poor woman who has need of Thee, and bring her safely to Thy Beautiful Kingdom in Heaven, for the sake of Our Lord Jesus. Amen".

It has become a fashion to decry this fairy tale; to summon up the ghost of Maeterlinck and murmur with Lady Agnes, "So decadent". It is so tempting to smile at the crimson roses that glisten in the morning sun like drops of blood or at the church that loomed like a ripe apricot against the evening sky. It is so easy to dismiss the whole thing as juvenilia. Yet the fact remains that Firbank saw fit to reprint it in the same year as he brought out *Inclinations*—namely, 1916. *A Study in Temperament* was dropped (and has subsequently never been reprinted), but the "Fairy Tale for Weary People" was reprinted, with four Beardsleyesque drawings, under the abbreviated title of *Odette*. As *Odette d'Antrevernes* it had originally appeared under the name of Arthur Firbank. But to the ear, Arthur does not go well with Firbank, whereas Ronald, his third Christian name, strikes the ideal musical counterpoint. "The name Arthur is horrid", he had written to one friend who had wrongly addressed an envelope and knew nothing of his more recent literary activities. To another friend who said "Goodnight, Firbank" as he hailed a cab, he had complained: "I wish you wouldn't call me 'Firbank'—is gives me a sense of goloshes". How well these two incidents recall that if he was a late child of the *mauve époque*, he was also a contemporary of Virginia Woolf, since, biographically no less than stylistically, they mark the difference between an affection for words and an affectation with words.

So, in 1916, Ronald Firbank emerged as the author of three books—*Vainglory, Odette,* and *Inclinations*. But why this sandwiching of *Odette*? why this unexpected enthusiasm for this early pastiche—an enthusiasm which did not last out the war since by the armistice he was declaring that *Vainglory* was his first book? Once, this provided a puzzle for collectors of first editions: now, with the complete edition of his works at hand, it still provides a puzzle for critics. I believe that an explanation can be reached by an indirect clue that lies in his reaction to one of the 1916 reviews which met *Inclinations*: "Mr. Firbank's new book is pleasant, vivacious and stimulating", wrote *The Glasgow Herald*. "Stimulating to what?" retorted the author. Precisely. That remains as challenging a question now as it did then.

"I once met him . . . . He told me writing books was by no means easy", he makes one of his characters say. In fact he wrote because he was compelled to, because like all writers subject to this daemon—romantics, fantasists, or fictionists

(William Plomer's word for Firbank)—he is, though outwardly a comic writer, a much more serious author than it is common to assume. Often friends, even close friends, would notice that he would look shyly away, and similarly there is reflected in his prose a great many sideway glances. A reader must be prepared to heed Polonius's advice and "by indirection find direction out". There are singularly few direct statements and "Beware of a facile Moral", warns another of his characters.

But in *Odette* there is to be found one direct statement—not especially memorably phrased—which provides, I suspect, a key to all his work. It is to be discovered on the final page:

> Then little Odette returned thoughtful to the great grey château . . . [She] felt somehow changed since she last passed the castle gates. She felt older. For suddenly she realized that Life was not a dream; she realized for the first time that Life was cruel, that Life was sad, that beyond the beautiful garden in which she dwelt, many millions of people were struggling to live, and sometimes in the struggle one failed—like the poor woman by the river bank.

Beyond the garden there is Life with a capital L; but behind the garden wall the author is safe in the branches of an apple tree—an ideal position both for disguise and as an observation-post. Or to change the metaphor, perhaps it can be said that at heart Firbank longed to be bold enough to be serious like Maeterlinck, but was forced by the shyness of his nature to play the comedian. And by playing the comedian, which is better than being too shy to play at all, he was able to revel in his love of theatricals and dressing-up, variations of which occur in all his novels. Since boyhood, too, he had nourished the ambition of becoming a successful dramatist. *Odette d'Antrevernes* had been followed by *The Mauve Tower*, the sole typescript of which, it is feared, may have been destroyed in the London *blitzkrieg*. In his 1930 *Memoir of Ronald Firbank*, Ifan Kyrle Fletcher recalls having read it and remembers it showing, only too clearly, both the author's indebtedness to Maeterlinck "and his love of touching in scenes, as though with heavy dabs of pigment". Yet the novels from *Vainglory* to *Cardinal Pirelli* are made up almost entirely of dialogue—like plays; and the prose descriptions, in many instances, no more than set the scenes or introduce the characters. Why, then, did he fail to achieve his ambition as a serious dramatist?

Claude Harvester was a dramatist—and *Vainglory* provides the answer:

> 'Who is . . . talking to that gorgeous thing . . . in the gold trailing skirts?'
>
> 'You mean Claude Harvester. His play the other night was a disaster. Did you see it?'
>
> 'It was delightfully slight, I thought.'
>
> 'A disaster!'

A few pages later comes the explanation for its disaster. There was no plot, "no plot exactly". How revealing that last adverb is, since its plot, when revealed, can be summed up in one line: "It's about two women who live all alone." Similar one-sentence synopses can be provided for all the other novels, beginning with *Vainglory*, in which Mrs. Shamefoot wants to see herself immortalized in stained glass whilst still alive. In *Inclinations* Miss Collins wants to find true love in the shape of an Italian count, whereas her elderly companion Miss O'Brookomore wants to find it in the shape of Miss Collins. In *Caprice* (1917) Miss Sinquier wants to leave her cathedral close and seek fame on the London boards. In *Valmouth* (1918) a group of centenarians want consolation and look for it in Catholicism and exoticism, and sometimes confuse the two. In *The Princess Zoubaroff* (1920), his one published play, the characters of the opposite sex want to have nothing to do with each other. In *Santal* (1921), Cherif wants to leave his village and seek Allah. In *The Flower Beneath the Foot* (1923), Laura de Nazianzi wants to marry Prince Youssef, but has to transmute her love into mysticism and is subsequently canonized; in *Sorrow in Sunlight* Mrs. Mouth wants the glamour of the big city and "a Villa with a watercloset"; in *Cardinal Pirelli*—well, again it is a matter of no plot exactly, but just a series of scenes built round ecclesiastical life. Inevitably the final scene is the Cardinal's death, which occurs after he has chased a choir boy "up and down, in and out, round and round 'the Virgin', over the worn tombed paving, through Saint Joseph . . . and along the raised tribunes of the choiresters and the echoing coro . . ."; and the last sentence of the book reads as he lies dead beneath the great fane: "Above him stirred the windblown banners in the Nave".

It is a reminder of the "torn and faded flags that drooped like dead things" above Odette. It is a long journey back—over seven hundred pages by the printed text, and over twenty years in the author's life; and it is a journey back from sophistication to simplicity, from the self-mockery of Pirelli who, like Harvester, adored disguises but disliked forgoing the military bravura of the skirt, to the romantic portrait of "the wee mite" overshadowed by the great *château* on the Loire. The portraits of Odette and Pirelli are both holy pictures, but the first belongs to the repository art of the Nineties, the other to the age of impressionism. For the chase of the choirboy Chicklet, the hints of lesbian parishioners, and the suggestion of monastic whipping—these, in *Pirelli*, all belong to the tradition of shocking. They appear not so much moral depravities as the essence of Nineties naughtiness. They are stimulating to what? To further giggles about hairshirts, disciplines and . . . . A critic is forced to employ the very dots on which Firbank himself so often fell back. To go further would be bad Bad Taste. For it is a large measure of Firbank's lasting

achievement that he knew the precise boundaries. Could any but the most bigoted take offence at this brief life of hagiography, with its shades of John Aubrey and William Beckford?

> One day St. Automona di Meris seeing a young novice yawning suddenly spat into her mouth and that without malice or thought of mischief. Some ninety hours afterwards, the said younger novice brought into the world the Blessed St. Elizabeth Bathilde, who by dint of skipping changed her sex at the age of forty and became a man.

It has the same delightful tone of innocent fantasy as when a Sister of the Flaming-Hood asks for a copy of *Inclinations* at the local library in Pisuerga and is told that it is out. *"Maladetta"*, she exclaims, and instead of the customary dots there follow four Maltese crosses. Or there is the comedy built out of killing any possible innuendo with the most unexpected and yet direct of statements:

> Perhaps of the many charges brought against the Primate by his traducers, that of making the sign of the cross with his left foot at meals was the most utterly unfounded—looking for a foot-cushion would have been nearer the truth.

As the author once exclaimed, "Oh the charm and the flavour of the religious world! where match it for variety and interest!" Alas, in the perpetual search for variety and interest, there were moments when boredom set in; when the puns about women and Roman bulls became too obvious, when the suggestions about massage and the off-stage screams of "O-o-o-h?" and "Ouch!!" went too far, and when sentences hovered dangerously over the territory of Bad Taste. "Imagine the world, my friends, had Christ been born a girl." That is a case in point; the love of dressing-up has overstepped the bounds of Good Taste. But since Firbank always hovered above the surface of things, he had no sooner touched the ground of Bad Taste than he had flown away. Which may explain why both E. M. Forster and Arthur Waley have suggested that he is as hard to pinion as a butterfly.

In *Sorrow in Sunlight*, when Charlie Mouth is questioned at the frontier, he finds that he has nothing to declare except butterflies. "Exempt of duty. Pass." Later, he sees the big city of Cuna-Cuna entirely in terms of butterflies:

> So many sparkling fans. One a delicate mauve one: 'Shucks! If only you wa' butterflies!' he breathed, contemplating with avidity the nonchalant throng; then perceiving a richer specimen splashed with silver of the same amative tint: 'Oh you lil beauty!' And clutching his itching net to his heart, he regretfully withdrew.

Maybe in the whirr of those wings Charlie Mouth saw in Cuna-Cuna what its author had seen ten years before in the bedroom of Miss Compostella when a

sudden whirr came from "an unconcerned Sèvres shepherdess"—a description re-echoed at Totterdown Junction when there is a similar whirring pause just long enough for an angel, "flying slowly", to pass by. Charlie Mouth is a romantic innocent like Odette, whereas Miss Compostella is a sophisticated actress who mixes with Claude Harvester. The Sèvres shepherdess and the slow-flying angel—they fuse that romanticism and self-mockery, that boldness and shyness to be found in Claude Harvester's *alter ego*—the creator of Mrs. Shamefoot and Miss Compostella no less than Odette and St. Laura de Nazianzi.

Three years after he had written *Odette d'Antrevernes*, Arthur Annesley Ronald Firbank was received into the Catholic Church at Cambridge. He was twenty-two at the time. Scarcely anything is known about his religious life, though it has been rumoured that, like the Hon. "Eddie" Monteith in *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, he wanted to become a Jesuit. His failure to do so—or rather his failure to gain acceptance by the Order (also rumoured)—may account for his later comment to Lord Berners: "The Church of Rome *wouldn't have me and so I laugh at her*". For Firbank was an invert, and such men are often doomed to rigours of loneliness far surpassing the austerities of the cell. To them others beckon—but seldom touch, if Claude Harvester may thus be paraphrased.

Most men begin thinking seriously about matrimony after their middle twenties; Firbank was in his middle thirties when he published *The Flower Beneath the Foot* and many of his friends had married—and in some cases, with their marriages, he had become lost to them. It is noticeable that the last three books, beginning with *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, all end on a more tragic—or should I say? —serious note. From the convent walls Laura de Nazianzi has to witness Prince Youssef's marriage to Princess Elsie; in a footnote the reader is told that she was subsequently canonized, and in the first edition (and inexcusably omitted from *The Complete Ronald Firbank*) there are two maxims attributed to her as a Saint which stand as epigraphs to the book: "Some girls are born organically good: I wasn't", and "It was about my eighteenth year that I conquered my *Ego*". As maxims they are in the same vein as the thumbnail sketch of St. Automona di Meris in *Valmouth,* but they strike a profounder note; the comedy of religious fantasy has grown much nearer to the tragi-comedy of self-autobiography.

In the closing pages of *Sorrow in Sunlight**, Mimi Mouth joins a religious procession. They sing,

*In England *Sorrow in Sunlight* is published under its American title of *Prancing Nigger.* I prefer to keep to its original title. Firbank himself always regretted having permitted the other title to be used.

Time like an ever-rolling stream,
Bears all its sons away;
They fly forgotten, as a dream
Dies at the opening day.

Mimi's betrothed has been destroyed in an earthquake—and her sister could not care less. Edna watches the procession with indifference as she relaxes in the warm, secure arms of her own dandy lover. Yet it is somehow suggested that Edna will meet with a Bad End. *Sorrow in Sunlight* has something of the air of a Caribbean religious fiesta about it, and in Charlie's pursuit of butterflies Firbank may be holding up the carnival masque of Death to his own face. For Charlie feels for Mimi. He too has been made aware of the passing of things by the earthquake.

'Mizzable sinner, Lord. You heah, Sah. You heah me say dat. Oh! Jesus, Jesus, Jesus,' and weeping he threw himself down among a bed of flowers.

As once in Claude Harvester, so now the author finds, in turn, an *alter ego* in Laura de Nazianzi, Charlie Mouth, and His Eminence Cardinal Pirelli. (Perhaps my pen was more accurate when it ran away and wrote *later ego*). In the spring days of *Vainglory* the author could afford to mock himself; and a few years later, with the security of five books behind him, he could continue to be bolder still: "This Ronald Firbank I can't take to at all . . . Was there ever a novel more coarse [than *Valmouth*]?" Even in *Sorrow in Sunlight* he can present himself as "Ronald Firbank (a dingy lilac or rarity untold)". Yet sooner or later there would have to be an end to this self-mocking; the blossom on the lilac, no less than the blossom on the apple-tree, would fall. The nails might still be stained with carmine, but there would be old age to be faced, an increase in loneliness, a drying up of the skin, and a final hardening of the arteries. In the end self-mockery could provide no more than another form of disguise, like dressing-up. The centenarians in *Valmouth* cannot expect to reach the age of two hundred, and Firbank himself, who always had a terror of his youthful looks fading, was mercifully released from that terrifying calamity—"my forty-first year". Cardinal Pirelli might be dressed in all the purpleship and pomp of the Church, but at the most it was a temporal authority of some ten to twenty years. From the beginning there was the realization—even in Odette's rose-garden—that Life was cruel, that Life was sad. In the interim men laughed at life as best they might, knowing that as some had died of exposure on the Loire others had been choked in Renaissance courts by their own wine. There had to be observed a moderation in all things. Hills could not exist without valleys, nor fairy tales without angels. A last fling would be stimulating to what?

In one sense, *Concerning the Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli* was a last fling.

No previous book had been outwardly more profane and no previous book inwardly so serious. In it there are more direct statements than any other, even when the shadows of such statements fall fleetingly across the page—like those of a passing butterfly or angel. "Men . . . the eternal hunters, novelty seekers, insatiable beings"; "Men with their selfishness, fickleness and lies"; "Women with their prettiness, vanity and . . ." The famous dots; the swerving away. The longest direct passage is the most strange in the whole book, indeed in the whole body of his work. The Primate has fled the capital to a deserted monastery:

> The forsaken splendour 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 with intolerance, martyrdom and converts', the Cardinal ruminated, pausing before the ancient fresco depicting the eleven thousand virgins, or as many as there was room for.

Firbank may not have been able to keep a smile from breaking across his face at the idea of "the eleven thousand virgins", but the earlier sentiments are certainly stimulating. But to what? Pirelli is a Renaissance figure and Clemenza is a Renaissance cathedral. Has, then, the Church of Rome a need in every age to return to the catacombs to be cleansed of its pomps? Is this what he is saying? History would seem to endorse it. So there remains the paradox that the last book which in a true Renaissance style was the most bawdy remains in a religious sense the most profound. Had its author lived to see its publication there might have been talk of banning it. As it was, the Home Secretary let it appear unquestioned. The printing was comparatively modest—Grant Richards had reprinted none of the previous novels—, and it seemed unlikely to the Home Office that they would be troubled in this quarter again. In 1926 there were more important matters to be considered; other authors were still alive and kicking. In the same year as that in which *Vainglory* had been published *The Rainbow* had come out, and there had been trouble with the police. A vigilant eye must be kept for *The Plumed Serpent*, already announced on another publisher's list.

In his lifetime Ronald Firbank created a legend, and when he died there were those who would not believe the news. The circumstances of his death seemed so extraordinary. At first buried in the company of Keats and Shelley in the English Cemetery in Rome, he was later exhumed and reinterred in the Catholic Cemetery of San Lorenzo. In September, 1929, Arnold Bennett, in *The Evening Standard*, dismissed Firbank's achievement as that of "an elegant weakling". A month later

Evelyn Waugh replied with a short enthusiastic appreciation in *Life and Letters*. In the following year Ifan Kyrle Fletcher, with postscripts by Vyvian Holland, Augustus John, and Sir Osbert Sitwell, brought out a distinguished full-length *Memoir*. And so the cult grew. The Rainbow Edition that had drawn forth Bennett's disapproval and won Waugh's approval was reprinted in 1940 for a new generation to whom (as Connolly has pointed out) Firbank was one of the most neglected names. In 1949 there appeared two omnibus editions of five and three novels, and in 1952, thirty-two years after it had been originally written, *The Princess Zoubaroff* was given its first production at the Watergate Theatre, London. Subsequently *Valmouth*, borrowing Cardinal Pirelli for its last act, was turned into a successful musical in London and New York. Today some of his novels are issued as paperbacks, and there is now a *Complete Ronald Firbank* in one volume, published by Duckworth.

The complete edition provides an ideal opportunity for flicking through. Addicts will find a new delight every time. "Niggerling" is his word for a little black sambo; it is not in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Claude Harvester's works may be mentioned in the *Encyclopaedia Brittanica,* but Firbank's are not; nor are they mentioned in the *Concise Cambridge History of English Literature*. What did he learn from Shaw? Did Shaw's *The Doctor's Dilemma* inspire in him the courage to use his own name in his own novels: "I don't believe in morality. I'm a disciple of Bernard Shaw"? Did the young Noel Coward read *Inclinations*: "I love Finsbury Circus for its Doves ... I adore the Aspens in Cadogan Square"? When Firbank decided to leave out all that bored him, was he conscious of Congreve's *Incognita*: "When I digress I am at that time writing to please myself; when I continue the thread of my story, I write to please the Reader"? Was it by conscious design that one year he rented the palace at Cintra in which Beckford had once lived? These and a score of other questions come to mind. And every re-reading will bring forth a score of others.

My eye has been caught by an obsession with roses. Not a book did he write in which they are not mentioned. Even in *A Study of Temperament*, there occurs: "I don't know which looked the redder, the women or the roses". In *Odette* there are crimson roses "like drops of crimson blood"; in *The Artificial Princess* there are wild roses, pink roses, tinsel roses, light-green roses, Jericho roses, and stone-rosettes; in *Vainglory* there are Christmas roses, rambler roses, and red roses—a Faun is crowned with roses, and the silver chimes of the cathedral clock are compared to the petals falling from a rose; in *Inclinations* there are black Scotch roses, sugar-crystal roses, and mauve rosettes; in *Caprice* the hedges are alive with roses; in *Valmouth*

Lady Parvula de Panzoust wears a hat of rose-pink feathers, and Lady Lucy's blood is described as "nothing but rose-water"; in *The Flower Beneath the Foot* the ladies of the Court wear skirts ruched with rosebuds, and the clouds above are "like knots of pink roses"; in *Sorrow in Sunlight* Cuna-Cuna is "full of charming roses", Costa-Rica roses, and fresh rosettes—and every evening a rosy dusk glows against the rosy mountains; and in *Cardinal Pirelli* the poetess Diana Beira Baixa clasps "a large bouquet of American Beauty roses" to her bosom, whilst the Primate himself sighs at the sprawling of Oriental literature and wishes that it would "concentrate its roses".

Some readers might seize the opportunity for a word-count, remembering his affection for the colour *mauve* and the *henna* rinse so beloved by so many of his characters. Nothing could be more deadly with such a talent. The roses are their own parable. Life is sad, the blooms must fall; Life is cruel, there are thorns.