



# Ronald Firbank's notebooks: "... writing books was by no means easy"

## Citation

Davis, Robert Murray. 1977. Ronald Firbank's notebooks: "... writing books was by no means easy". Harvard Library Bulletin XXV (2), April 1977: 172-192.

## Permanent link

<https://nrs.harvard.edu/URN-3:HUL.INSTREPOS:37364326>

## Terms of Use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material, as set forth at <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA>

## Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.  
Please share how this access benefits you. [Submit a story](#).

[Accessibility](#)

Ronald Firbank's Notebooks:  
" . . . writing books was by no means  
easy"<sup>1</sup>

Robert Murray Davis

READERS of Ronald Firbank's juvenilia,<sup>2</sup> heavily derivative from Oscar Wilde, Aubrey Beardsley, and the feebler French decadents, may wonder how he was able to become anything but, in Stephen Dedalus' phrase, a most finished artist. Judging from the sober account of Miriam J. Benkovitz<sup>3</sup> or even from the perfervid imaginings of Brigid Brophy,<sup>4</sup> no event, person, or literary influence in the life he led up to 1912 gave any promise of leading him to self-criticism and artistic discipline. One can only surmise that he disciplined himself out of resources unsuspected, perhaps even by himself. By the time that *Vainglory*, his first mature novel, was near completion in 1914, he commented that "'nobody would guess of the sacrifice behind' [it] and called that the most important thing."<sup>5</sup> The evidence for if not the cause of that sacrifice lies in the notebooks he kept for all of his novels, beginning with *Vainglory*. These notebooks seem to have provided him with the opportunity for self-discipline and self-criticism as well as a place to leave feeble jokes, self-in-

<sup>2</sup> Ronald Firbank, *The Flower Beneath the Foot* in *The Complete Ronald Firbank* (New York: New Directions, 1961), p. 532. Except for the references following n. 16, all citations of Firbank's printed work are to this edition and are given parenthetically. This edition, the most convenient, is far from the most accurate textually. See my "The Text of Firbank's *Vainglory*," *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, LXIII (1969), 36-41.

<sup>3</sup> See Ronald Firbank, *The New Rhythm and Other Pieces* (New York: New Directions, 1963).

<sup>4</sup> Miriam J. Benkovitz, *Ronald Firbank: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969).

<sup>5</sup> Brigid Brophy, *Frauding Novelist: A Defence of Fiction in the Form of a Critical Biography in Praise of Ronald Firbank* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1973). For more extended commentary on this book, see my review in the Annual Review Issue, *Journal of Modern Literature*, IV:2 (1974), 320-321.

<sup>6</sup> Benkovitz, p. 114.

dulgent pursuit of a striking phrase, and the stock characters and situations that naturally if lamentably gather around popular subjects and themes.

Perhaps the most important function of the notebooks was the way in which they allowed Firbank to develop his books slowly and organically. In earlier work, such as *The Artificial Princess*, he seems to have begun with a borrowed plot-line and a borrowed method and then adapted his materials to them. In composing his mature novels, he seems almost to have reversed the process.<sup>6</sup> Sometimes he would work with the skeleton of a fairly conventional plot, but he would modify or discard it as he conceived his material more clearly. The real beginning of his book was a series of disconnected notes for fragments of dialogue and description. Then, gradually, character, incident, and plot began to emerge from rather than to be imposed upon the material. His notebooks and other unpublished papers allow us to witness his first tentative gropings towards ideas about character and situation, his revision and selection of these materials, and his growing awareness of his thematic intention and of his plot.

The notebooks were kept throughout the process of composition, from conception through drafting.<sup>7</sup> A Firbank notebook is a bewildering document. Careful readers of the novels can recognize phrases and sometimes sentences, but most of the material is unfamiliar, and here

<sup>6</sup> Sir Coleridge Kennard has testified to Firbank's collection, during his stay at Cambridge, of striking phrases on several hundred strips of paper which he intended to fit, "mosaicwise," into a play. "Introduction," *The Artificial Princess* (London: Duckworth, 1934), p. viii. Sir Osbert Sitwell has several times mentioned the "blue postcards" containing phrases from which the novels were shaped. See "Introduction," *Five Novels* (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, n.d.), p. xiii. Sitwell's story led to a somewhat acrimonious exchange between Edward M. Potoker, who is a careful student of Firbank's unpublished work, and Neville Braybrooke in "The Mystery of the Blue Cards," *Ramparts*, 1:5 (March 1963), 53-55. No one but Sir Osbert seems to have seen these cards. See Miriam J. Benkovitz, "More Ronald Firbank," *TLS*, 18 August 1961, p. 549. Neither strips of paper nor blue postcards have survived, but the notebooks show that Firbank's process of composition began with some kind of collection of phrases.

<sup>7</sup> Obviously at least one and probably several manuscript versions existed — one or more in holograph; one or more in typescript, possibly containing some revisions. The only surviving manuscripts and typescripts for longer works are atypical: *The New Rhythm*, in holograph rough draft and fair holograph copy, was unfinished; *The Artificial Princess*, in two typescripts with holograph revisions and a typescript fair copy, represents Firbank's revision of a work he had composed some ten years earlier. See Miriam J. Benkovitz, *A Bibliography of Ronald Firbank* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1963), pp. 86, 88-89.

and there a phrase from a much later work will occur.<sup>8</sup> Even those which are familiar seem to have "no particular sort of order."<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, the entries are interlined and written over in a variety of inks and types of pencil, sometimes running up the side of the page and around the top. Some entries are crossed out, and many, though not all, of these are used in the final version of the novel. Some have roman or arabic chapter numerals affixed to them, most often in a different medium from that used for the basic entry. Thus it is difficult to determine not only the order in which the entries were composed but the order in which Firbank wrote the run of notebooks for each novel.

However, it is possible to see organizing principles in the notebooks for a single novel and, more important, to see their role in Firbank's conception of his work. First is the primary entry, typically a word or phrase of dialogue. Frequently that entry will be repeated in some form, often in different combinations. For example, Firbank apparently relished the term "soul-subduing" applied to music and worked through several sentences embodying it before abandoning it altogether [Cap. A 30a]. Elsewhere he would work over structure or word order in an attempt to achieve the right nuance of tone or sound, as in:

/(First,)/ / (Tomorrow)/I' (m going)/ve decided/  
to have (all) /half/my teeth/taken/out!"  
//letter home//<sup>10</sup>

This passage can be normalized, with a good deal of distortion, as:

<sup>8</sup> According to Benkovitz, *Bibliography*, pp. 87-88, fifty-seven of these notebooks survive. Twenty-seven are in private hands, and those I have not seen. The others, from which I draw my illustrations and my conclusions, are located in the Houghton Library at Harvard, the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library, the Fales Collection of New York University, and the Humanities Research Center of the University of Texas.

<sup>9</sup> Norman W. Alford, "Seven Notebooks of Ronald Firbank," *Library Chronicle of the University of Texas*, VIII (Spring 1967), 33.

<sup>10</sup> All quotations from unpublished notebooks reprinted by permission of Collins-Knowlton-Wing. All rights reserved.

Parentheses indicate Firbank's deletions; diagonal marks indicate material added. When more than one stage of revision occurs, later ones are indicated by double diagonals. This and following passages from the *Caprice* notebooks are from those labeled the notebooks A, B, C, and D, in the order in which, I conjecture, they were composed. A is labeled volume 1 by the Houghton; B's first entry, on p. 2, is "XVI 'Her acting is a revelation'"; C's first entry is "Cavendish Morton on Stage get up"; D's first entry is "*Caprice*." Each pair of facing pages has a single number on the lower left-hand corner of the recto page. In references to the notebooks, I use a and b to distinguish verso from recto.

I'm going to have all my teeth out!  
 First I'm going (etc.)  
 Tomorrow I'm going (etc.)  
 I've decided to have half my teeth taken out!  
 (as afterthought) letter home [Cap. A 46a]

The final version, with all of its revisions made in the interests of alliteration and assonance, appears in Sally Siquier's letter to her mother that comprises Chapter XII of *Caprice* (366).

At the same time that he was more or less settling on the word order of a primary entry — though he might repeat and continue the process of altering that same entry in a different notebook — Firbank would be placing his entries into a context. It is not really possible to demarcate the stages by which he did so, but basically he assigns the dialogue to a character and a description to a definite setting; he places the material in a longer passage which is to be its immediate context; and finally he decides where in the novel the whole passage is to occur. Sally's letter home, for example, is assembled from entries in all four of the notebooks for *Caprice*. The one quoted above is the first primary entry which ultimately found its way into the novel, the only one from notebook A to do so, and the decision to make it part of a letter is clearly an afterthought. By the middle of notebook B, Firbank had a clearer conception of the letter, sketching out the postscript with a sentence about a visit to the Oratory and adding brief notes about "teeth" and the "Adam Eve foyer" of the theatre, which he develops in the next entry and links to the first with an arrow [B 61a-b].

By the time he worked on notebook C, Firbank was ready to piece together a preliminary draft of the letter, first in an outline of phrases and words, then in a series of sentences in no particular order. In this passage, he gives far more details about Sally's absconding with the family silver than in the final version, and the sentences are intended merely to be rough drafts [C 26a-b]. Obviously he had a good deal to do before Chapter XII reached the final version. Into that chapter he incorporated material about Mary Mant, Sally's companion, and further details about the theatre, including one apparently casual reference, developed in a revision on B 48b and in a primary entry on D 3a, to the well under the stage from which the Source Theatre derives its name. The well is important, of course, because it leads to Sally's death, but Firbank did not decide on that climax until fairly late in the process of entering material in the notebooks.

As the discussion of Chapter XII indicates, the notebooks show Firbank progressing towards a final version of the novel, and it is possible to place the notebooks in their order of composition by means of several kinds of internal evidence. Entries used in a novel published before the one he is ostensibly writing come early in the process, while entries referring to the next novel come later. For example, an entry in the first of the *Caprice* notebooks reads, "Units, Tens, Hundreds, Thousands, Tens of Thousands, Hundreds of Thousands" [A 8a], a speech given to Mabel Collins Pastorelli in *Inclinations* (294). And the late stages of each run of notebooks tend to include more and more references to a later book. Most striking is the case of the last two *Caprice* notebooks, which contain page after page of specific reference to a projected "Romance," titled "Glencyfury" or "Glennyfurry," which was to become *Valmouth*. Other indications of progression are name changes and changes in the conception of characters. In the eight *Valmouth* notebooks, for example, Tamzine Tooke (who had been "Long Eliza" in the *Caprice* notebooks) becomes *Thetis* in the course of the first notebook; in the fifth, Adah becomes Niri-Esther. Other evidence, based partly on impressions about character and plot development, is useful in ordering the remaining notebooks, for Firbank obviously had a clearer conception of both as notebooks succeeded each other, and though he seemed never to have begun with a plot outline, later notebooks tend to concentrate on later chapters in the novel.

This description of the notebooks understates to a considerable degree their complexity, for all of the chapters are simultaneously undergoing a similar process of growth, through entries mixed and sometimes mingled with each other. Moreover, it is not possible to indicate in this discussion the amount of repetition and variation not only of the material which found its way into the novels but of that which was thoroughly worked over before being rejected. Of the entries on an average page, Firbank selected a few — say two of eight — to shape into the finished product.

It is obvious, however, that the rejected entries are of great importance to the final version of the novel. For one thing, much of Firbank's effect depends upon rhythm and timing in his sentences, and the notebooks allowed him to polish sentences and even phrases independent of character or situation. Thus the incongruity of confessing to a nose-picking priest becomes more and more comic as Firbank works over diction and rhythm:

/How/ Dom Jonquil (he) used to pick his nose! <sup>11</sup>  
 /The sight of/ Dom Jonquil picking his nose!  
 /Dreadful to see/ Dom Jonquil gathering his nose.  
 "Gathering it?" Eh?  
 /Eh?/ "Picking it!"  
 (1) /There was really no pleasure in/ pouring  
 out (my) /ones/ sins (to) /while/ Dom Jonquil was  
 /assiduously/ picking his nose  
 "There was really no pleasure /at all/ in pouring  
 out one's sins, while Dom Jonquil (was)  
 /sat assiduously/ picking his nose!" [Valmouth C 50]

And finally, of Père Ernest, Mr. Thoroughfare says, "There was really no joy in pouring out one's sins while he sat assiduously picking his nose" (430). By association, the gathering of the notebook is transformed into " 'Which reminds me,' Mrs. Hurstpicrpoint serenely said, 'to gather my nectarines . . .'"

Moreover, a good deal of the material in the notebooks confirms Ernest Hemingway's theory that if a writer knows something well enough, he can leave it out. For example, in the notebook for *Caprice* Firbank devoted a great deal of space to the theatrical background and the actors and actresses who people it. Feuds, rehearsals, costumes, parodies of play scripts, fragments of mock biographies are scattered throughout the pages. Most striking, perhaps, is his attention to details about make-up. The endpaper of notebook C bears the phrase "Cavendish Morton on Stage get-up," and later Firbank devoted most of a double-page spread to technical details about the make-up kit [C

<sup>11</sup> Quoted from the notebooks for *Valmouth* contained at the Humanities Research Center of the University of Texas. Texas has seven of these notebooks, described in the Norman Alford article cited above. One other is in the Berg collection of the New York Public Library (cited as "Berg"). In citing the Texas notebooks, I have labeled them A through G in what I judge to be the order of composition and cited them parenthetically. None of the eight has any pagination. I have assigned a number to each page, and these numbers are cited in the text.

My ordering of the Texas notebooks follows; the first entry is used to identify each notebook.

- A. "Momentous to himself, as I to me."
- B. "He has his fingers always. . . ." [My omission.]
- C. "The work of Artsthenees — the Greek."
- D. "I stand on the topmost wave. . . ." [My omission.]
- E. "My flower."
- F. "Signor Faresetti of Scala."
- G. "Valmouth."

The Berg notebook comes late in the series, probably between F and G.

71a-b]. Firbank used only one detail about a character's making a palette of his hand (*Caprice*, 378) — but he knew what was likely to be on that hand. This and numerous other passages in the notebook confirm his statement, perhaps his boast, "I think nothing of filing [sic] fifty pages down to make a brief, crisp paragraph, or even a row of dots!"<sup>12</sup> This arduous process of composition helps to explain how, in very very short novels, he was able to create the effect of a full and busy world.<sup>13</sup>

Firbank was able to proceed in apparently disorganized fashion because he had a very clear conception of the world of his novels before he began and needed only to find the precise medium — word, character, plot — with which to embody it. The existence of this vision helps to explain the overlapping of the notebooks: Sally Siquier of *Caprice* might not fit into the world of *Inclinations*, but Mary Arne, the actress in that novel, would certainly be at home in *Caprice* or in *Vainglory*, and the various writers of sensational biography who recur would find material and audience among the characters of any of his novels. Firbank began his process of composition by trying to create the atmosphere and décor of the world he envisioned, and in a way the notebooks resemble a much magnified version of the device he used in several novels, the "babel of voices" — fragments of dialogue, juxtaposed in order to convey the flavor of the society in which the characters move.

While Firbank was creating this atmosphere, he began to think of characters' names — at first, not much more than that. He did begin *Valmouth* with the Tooke family, but other characters emerge gradually. For example, Lady Parvula de Panzoust, the aging but "charming, persuasive, still beautiful, and *always* licentious woman" (441), is one of his most original characters, with lines and gestures that, one feels, only she could combine. Yet many of the most individual of these anticipate, in the notebooks, any specific conception of the character. Her rendering of the bird's song as "*tiara, tiara, tiara. It wants a tiara*" (454) first occurred in the last notebook for *Inclinations*<sup>14</sup> and the

<sup>12</sup> Ronald Firbank, letter to Stuart Rose, quoted in Miriam J. Benkovitz, "Ronald Firbank in New York," *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, LXIII (May 1959), 258.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, W. H. Auden, "Ronald Firbank and an Amateur World," *Listener*, LXV (8 June 1961), 1004-1005, 1008.

<sup>14</sup> My conjectural order of the ten *Inclinations* notebooks in the Fales Collection of New York University, identifying each by its first entry:



reference to the rooks' "unkydoodleums" (455) comes in the third notebook for *Caprice* [C 21a], while her most memorable gesture, flashing "an oeillade up into the electric-blue dome of her parasol" as she addresses her dead husband (453), was sketched as early as the second *Caprice* notebook [B 27b] and repeated in the Berg notebook. But the name "Panzoust" does not occur until the fourth *Caprice* notebook. Only after several tries is it perfected, and not until the second notebook for *Valmouth* does Firbank begin to sketch a character to go with the name:

Lady Parvula de Panzoust:  
 a shapely figure, an old head  
 (eight-&-ninety) /seven-and-eighty/  
 "bien conservé  
 on the score of impropriety  
 Then she cant go back  
 (Gina) Louison  
 Lady Parvula's maid  
 /"Is he in a coming-on disposition?"/

[The following materials are written side by side and much interlined]

One of your (gardeners) /grooms/ has	in a rakish 'forage-cap'
such an interesting form; such a	with a red camelia (beneath)
'wasped' /figure/ — a freckled, red-	& a white lace veil /thrown
haired, florid man . . . /David Tooke?/	back/ & a tweed costume
	/green gloves/ from the
	lace [undecipherable] a
	/beatskin/ divan, or an opera
	box, was her true setting —

[B 15]

Once Firbank began to work on the character, however, he concentrated upon Lady Parvula for the greater part of that notebook and made her appearance, character, and activities one of the major features of the remaining six.

- 
- A. "Jasper Tristram Clark."
  - B. "consented in the end after frequent refusals."
  - C. "If you please."
  - D. "Let us all cling together."
  - E. "Perhaps we shall see Pan!"
  - F. "Coachmaker's tendre amie — Prudence."
  - G. "I'm not sure that I like it."
  - H. "her little drawers."
  - I. "/Papa is/ very much struck by her charming appearance."
  - J. "Fascinating Fred."

As the example of Lady Parvula indicates, Firbank's characters tend to emerge from the pervading atmosphere and are conceived in order to convey that atmosphere. At the same time, he is conceiving incidents and situations in which to involve the characters, refining his conception of them, and establishing contrasts. Last and perhaps most difficult in his process of composition are the disposition of incidents and the resolution of his plot. Judging from several sets of the notebooks, he had a general idea of his characters' activities, but no clear notion of a climax or resolution. In planning *Inclinations*, he knew that he wanted Mabel Collins to marry, but not at what point and certainly not with what immediate effects on the plot, and while he planned for Sally Siquier to succeed as an actress in *Caprice*, her sudden triumph and abrupt demise occurred to him fairly late in the notebooks for that novel.

After Firbank conceived setting and incidents for his plot, he cast about for means of presenting them as economically and as indirectly as possible. The example of *Caprice* is typical. Even toward the end of the notebooks for *Inclinations*, Firbank was planning a novel about theatrical life, and in all four of the *Caprice* notebooks he sketched details, like those on make-up mentioned earlier, which would provide a realistic setting for his story. Much of this material, in scraps of dialogue typical of Firbank's characters in its languor or querulousness or exclamatory naïveté, presents scenes at rehearsal, with directions for business, conceptions of parts, outbreaks of professional rivalry. Much but by no means all of this material is related to the production of *Romeo and Juliet* that furnishes the continuity for more than half of the novel. Firbank finally rejected most of the entries, and those which found their way into the novel were presented with a good deal more indirection and subtlety than in the notebook state. Firbank creates an atmosphere of the theatre rather than giving information about it. For example, the preparations in the novel for Sarah Siquier's production of *Romeo* are never directly presented. She does talk briefly about finances and she interviews two members of the cast, but other details are given in passing, many of them in retrospective conversations or through her fleeting observations.

Judging from the notebooks, Firbank had planned not only more explicit documentary treatment of the theatre but a much larger number and variety of characters in more complex and diverse relationships than he finally presented in *Caprice*. In the novel, there are hints of

smart Bohemia in the scene at the Café Royal in Chapter VI, in the story of Dore Davis' engagement party ("Nothing but literary-people with their Beatrices . . . My dear, *the scum!* Half-way through supper Dore got her revolver out and began shooting the glass drops off her chandelier") (362) and in the hints about Mrs. Sixsmith's villa in St. John's Wood and Ita Iris' desire to make a profitable marriage. In the notebooks, this raffish world is projected in fragments that are much more explicit and thorough. Painters and writers, as well as actors, receive a good deal of attention; handsome and intriguing men of equivocal intentions pay court to the women with at least some success; and quarrels, love affairs, and estrangements are frequently adumbrated. One striking example of the contrast between notebook and novel is their depiction of the circle surrounding Sir Oliver Dawtry. In *Caprice*, he is "an old banker-friend" of Mrs. Sixsmith who arranges for the sale of Miss Siquier's pearls and silver; he is mentioned several times as lending his prestige to support her enterprise; and finally, he is mentioned in Mrs. Sixsmith's thoughts as she considers that Canon Siquier "may hope to succeed Sir Oliver" in the last line of the novel. At various places in the notebooks, however, Lady Dawtry's character and appearance are sketched, and this couple is set off by another, Sir Sydney and Lady Sexfull. Sir Oliver also has a mistress, whose relations with him are made explicit in passages like:

//All London has// (You've) heard of/ (She ((knows)) guesses) my intimacy with Sir Oliver /excepting Lady Dawtry — !/ [B 32b]

The process of conversion from statement to implication that occurred in the later stages of composition is shown by the contrast between explicit dialogue and the most direct presentation in *Caprice* of relations between Sir Oliver and Mrs. Sixsmith. They are discussing the possibility of his buying Sally's pearls for Lady Dawtry, though she does not care for jewelry:

"How women do vary!" Mrs. Sixsmith covertly smiled.  
 "To be sure."  
 "My poor old friend . . . ?"  
 Sir Oliver turned away. (343)

Some of Firbank's uncertainty about the number of characters and the amount and kind of background seems to have been due to his lack of a clear idea about the plot of his novel. From the amount of space

devoted to them in the notebooks, one can infer that the professional rivalry between Mrs. Starcross of the Canary Theatre and Mr. and Mrs. Mary was to be an important plot element. Mrs. Mary's theatre was to be the setting of many episodes, especially those tracing the apprenticeship of a very important character, possibly Sally Siquier herself. At one point, Firbank may have been planning to let his heroine rise to stardom as an understudy; one conversation deals with Mrs. Mary's chest cold the day before opening, a plot-turn that survives in modified form as an anecdote in Chapter XIII of the novel. Not until the second of four notebooks did Firbank decide on his climax, a triumph in the part of Juliet, and even then he had not decided firmly on the events leading to the climax or on the *dénouement*. Late in the same notebook, he first indicates a solution for the first problem, "Begin as a manageress," a conception that enables him to compress his plot, to avoid a number of irrelevant plot-turns, and to focus almost exclusively upon the heroine. Firbank's sense of direction is much stronger in this notebook than in the first; not only do more of its phrases survive in the finished version of *Caprice*, but situations are beginning to fall into order.

No one who has read *Caprice* will forget the resolution: Sally runs afoul of a mousetrap and falls to her death in a well beneath the stage of her theatre. The reader has no doubt that this is what happened, even though Firbank never explicitly tells him that this is the case. Working out the details of this plot obviously cost him considerable labor. Early in the first notebook he labels "Chapter XVII" (the number of the last chapter in *Caprice*) a passage that contains the merest germ of later developments: "They all thought me dead — /Then/ mother held a mirror to my lips & that made me wonder what I looked like (& brought me to open)/so I sat up and opened/my eyes" (A 8a); a few pages later someone trips on a staircase. In the second notebook, however, it is Mr. Starcross who is killed by falling downstairs, though Firbank has decided to put a well in the foyer of the Source Theatre. As late as the third notebook he wrote "Chapter XVI [The number of the chapter in which Sarah falls]? a Laundry-Ball" [C 19a]. Four leaves later, however, he reveals his solution in an added entry: Sarah has fallen down a trap-hole. Thereafter, the entries of Sarah's death are confined largely to details about the length of her fall and to explanations of its cause, all much more explicit than in the final version.

The example of Firbank's development of his plans for *Valmouth*

provides the most useful if not always the most typical illustration of his methods. Although the characters and theme of that novel do emerge from Firbank's characteristic vision, his plans for the novel had a conscious and clearly defined beginning; his conception of the characters is stated more fully and more overtly than in the other sets of notebooks; and because the initial entries for "Glennyfurry" are compressed, with far more notes than those on the average page of notebooks, even those later in the *Valmouth* set, he seems to have worked more rapidly and perhaps enthusiastically on his new conception than on *Caprice*, which was already well under way. However, the *Valmouth* notebooks are typical in two respects: much of the action is clearly anecdotal, to be recounted in dialogue in an undetermined situation; and many entries merely hint at a situation — someone worries or thinks deeply, but no further indication is given.

Instead of plot or incident, Firbank began to conceive of *Valmouth* as a subject, a mode, and three contrasting groups of characters. In the middle of the third *Caprice* notebook he suddenly turned from entries about Miss Siquier and other inhabitants of the theatrical world to:

#### ROMANCE

The Centenarians of Glencyfury /in Frewshire/  
 in her /one/ hundred and second year //Mrs. Jolly Tooke//  
 [He adds other details, then]  
 Old Mrs. Hurstpierpoint  
 Hon Mrs. Hurstpierpoint 1803  
 She's come to lotus-eat. But I dont know where  
 she'll get them. [C 35b]

Throughout the notebooks, he repeated from time to time the entry "ROMANCE." The epigraph to one notebook was "To preserve Romance we must be inside the *heads* of our people as well as the *hearts*. Meredith" [UT A, endpaper], and the final version of the book is titled *Valmouth: A Romantic Novel*. It would be a mistake to inquire too curiously into his definition of the word at this point, and in any case it is clear from some of the drawings which accompany the term that he may have used it primarily in the popular sense of "love story."

Yet his immediate concern was not for the love story but for the age and social class of his characters. Mrs. Tooke was the first centenarian named, and entries which sketch in the ailments accompanying extreme age and which begin to people Mrs. Tooke's rustic household dominate

the remainder of the third *Caprice* notebook and the beginning of the fourth. Thereafter, Firbank began to shift to the visitors drawn by the balmy climate and the picturesque setting and to aged characters who look and act considerably less than their age — someone, in fact, is “expecting a domestic incident at ninety” [D 39a]. All the while, references to Mrs. Hurstpierpoint and to Hare-Hatch House indicate that Firbank had kept in mind the contrast between three groups: the yeomanry, represented by the Tookes; the gentry at Hare; and the neurasthenic and hypochondriacal visitors. And it gradually becomes clear, as in “I would rather be a primrose in the wilderness than a polyanthus in a (hot-bed)/frame/” [D 47b], that he planned to make relationships between these classes at least one element of conflict in the novel.

Two-thirds of the way through the fourth *Caprice* notebook Firbank added to age and class a third theme that becomes increasingly important in notebooks as well as novel: the theme of religion. In the figure of Father Colley-Mahoney, he indicates that the religious sentiment in this novel is to be unconventional if not unorthodox, for Father Colley-Mahoney is described as “a satyr in a soutane,” seems to prefer a “rush bottom” to a gilt chair [D 50a], locks up his penitents and goes away with the key [D 52a], and, according to Ernest (renamed David) Tooke, is “a bit of a bigot. But he wants me! Bad he wants me . . .” [D 53a]. Although the priest plays a minor part in the finished novel, the aura of sexual perversion and of perverted religion created here permeates the book and serves, increasingly in the notebooks and markedly in the novel, to motivate Mrs. Hurstpierpoint.

At this stage in the notebooks, however, Firbank was still sketching out his characters, and with the advent of Mrs. Babbage's son, the vestige of a plot begins to appear. Like the other characters, he is at first merely a label — “My son is angelic = Mrs. Babbage” [D 51b] — who gradually acquires characteristics and context: Mrs. Hurstpierpoint wishes him to “marry & found a family” [D 52a]; he is described as loving but lacking in self-control [D 53a]; and then, in one of the several character sketches — extended ones, compared to Firbank's usual practice in the notebooks — his character traits, though not his actions, are fixed:

Mrs. Babbage

Son in Navy  
Friend: midshipman — “my friend

Jack Whorwood — "

Letters: descriptions foreign places

"Off the coast of Jamaica (etc) negresses, etc

The girls of Hayti /etc/ —: wrapped up in one of his own  
midshipmen: a look of foreign seaports in his eyes.

[D 53b]

Juxtaposed with several of the entries dealing with young Babbage are details about Long Eliza Tooke, a more than ordinarily raffish member of a raffish family. The whole family was to have been arrested for nude bathing [D 55a]; Long Eliza has in addition created a scandal by dressing in man's clothes to go to a stag party [C 82a]. As Firbank began to conceive of a liaison between Babbage and Eliza, he began to soften and romanticize her character, regularizing her English from a peculiar pidgin and changing her name first to Tamzine and then to Thetis. By the end of the fourth *Caprice* notebook, she is described as standing romantically in the river [77a], well on the way towards the girl who can "stand and droop, and dream and die" (397).

At the beginning of the next notebook, a further element of conflict is added: "John Babbage married to a negress — 'ward' of Yaj — Belle — a most beautiful black girl" [UT A3; further references are to the *Valmouth* notebooks]. Judging from the succession of the entries in this notebook, Firbank was developing the two girls simultaneously. At first Thetis is less romantic than Adah (later Niri-Esther), who swoons in ecstasy upon learning that her husband has returned. Apparently in order to reconcile Mrs. Hurstpierpoint to the marriage, Firbank at first conceived the bride as a "black Madonna" [added on C 131] and even late in the run of notebooks describes her and the child as "Ravishing, radiant, tender" [Berg, 19a]. Furthermore, in the notebooks her relationships with other characters are more complex than those in the novel: Mrs. Yaj, learning in horror of Niri's pregnancy, is on the point of repudiating her [A 102]; she and her husband quarrel [D 25, F 32]; and Mrs. Hurstpierpoint "cant bear Dick to make love to his wife" [G 34]. Moreover, as sketched in the notebooks, the girl is conscious of and quite articulate about her social position, looking down upon Mrs. Yaj [A 71] and defending her lineage to Mrs. Hurstpierpoint [E 58]. Not until the final notebook, by which time he had conceived of Mrs. Hurstpierpoint's attitude towards her as motivated by lust to convert a heathen, does Firbank begin to alter his conception of the girl's character in order to make her a suitably out-

landish convert and inhabitant of Hare and a clear foil to the dreamy, romantic Thetis. In this notebook and in the final version of the novel, Niri-Esther's behavior is bizarre and her words few and couched in pidgin English.

The triangle of Dick, Thetis, and Niri-Esther involved two of the three classes in Firbank's developing plot, and with the emergence of Lady Parvula de Panzoust, lusting for David Tooke, the third group was worked into the action; a love affair between rustic and cosmopolitan was established to serve as a contrast with the Thetis-Dick plot, and Lady Parvula's age and lust enabled her to link two other groups, the old and the young. By the time he finished the second *Valmouth* notebook, Firbank had established all of the major characters and many of the relationships between them. At this point he was ready to begin work on incidents and their disposition. Many of the entries indicate no more than a situation: "Mrs. Yaj's Drawing room — Chapter V —" [C 89] and "Mrs. Tooke at the Ball" [C 88] are the barest notations around which other details will gather; "Library. Evening. Hare," followed by a meaningless conversation about Meredith and Peacock, is another situation which leads to no further action. All three settings, of course, find their way into the novel — the first in Chapter V, the second in Chapter VIII, the third in Chapters IV and VI. And as the first note indicates, Firbank had begun to arrange the incidents. At this point the arrangement was tentative and some incidents were either re-located, like David's refusal to go to Lady Parvula, labeled "Chap. XIII?" and finally located offstage in Chapter IX, or cut altogether, like Father Colley-Mahoney's desire for a tipsy David, labeled "Chap. XV" [C 35].

Judging from this and other evidence, it seems clear that Firbank knew in general what was to happen: Captain Babbage would return, Mrs. Hurstpierpoint would accept his bride, Thetis would kill herself, and David would refuse Lady Parvula. But Firbank did not connect events with specific situations, and he had no idea about the climax or resolution or even the movement of the various plots. The last was not much of a problem, since all of the plots in *Valmouth* are essentially static in that they do not depend upon external action or change in character but upon revelation and reaction. Therefore, once he had conceived of character and motive, the general outcome was more or less determined and he needed only to fit the revelation of the various plot-turns into appropriate situations. A good example is Chapter VIII,



the centenarians' annual party. There was to be a ball for Mrs. Tooke to attend, and Firbank had always used parties as a convenient gathering place where his characters could be introduced and their recent adventures revealed. As he worked back and forth over the notebooks for *Valmouth*, he began, clearly, to assign certain events to the ball. The clearest indication of this is a rare passage of summary:

an old, old song — Lillibulero  
Ball In Percy Reliques (Everyman) [Firbank's parentheses]  
in the midst of which *Dick* appears [D 17]

Two notebooks later he recorded the entry "fell forward with a shattering cry/8?/" [Berg, 7a], which became the final line of Chapter VIII and a major climax in the novel.

Deciding upon resolution for his plots sometimes took him longer. The case of Lady Parvula was easy — he had determined fairly early that her desire for David was to be thwarted and that Mrs. Yaj was to attempt to find a substitute. Only the details of the women's conversation remained to be settled. The case of Thetis was more complex. He knew that she was to kill herself: in the second Texas notebook he wrote "a leap from the cliffs Thetis —" [B 29] and changed it, in the next notebook, to "/Thetis going to the sea — finale/" [C 118], juxtaposed with a letter from Lady Parvula's daughter. Three notebooks later, while working on Thetis' approach to the sea and on a new character, Sister Ecclesia (one of a number of religious who were to fill out a social gathering), he seemed to have been inspired to bring them together, as indicated by "Thetis-Ecclesia 10?" [F 43]. In order to put them on the seashore, he contrived a punishment of silence for Ecclesia and the relief she gets from screaming with the gulls on the shore. Ten pages earlier, Ecclesia was talking [F 34]; a page later, she is seeking "an outlet to Silence" [F 44]. In the final notebook, Firbank makes the situation clearer: "But for Ecclesia the sea would have absorbed her" [G 3] — and Thetis enters the convent instead of the water, perhaps in order to contrast with Niri-Esther's rejection of religion at the very end of the novel.

However, Firbank was not always sure just what would happen at the end. His first thought was to involve Niri-Esther in religious discussion but to leave the situation unresolved: "Glenmouth Finale. Father C.M. & Adah talk of Christianity Catholicism Love. Apsaras /are/ nothing but angels!" [C 129]. Later he decided to extend the

process — “She shall be ‘received’ by some Prince of the Church/12? 11?” [E 5], and not long thereafter Mrs. Hurstpierpoint, fearful that the original marriage ceremony might not be valid, enthusiastically decides that Dick and Niri-Esther shall be married again [E 97]. A few pages later, he sketched the most conclusive ending possible:

an attack /outbreak/ of yellow fever in Glenmouth carrying off (the lad) /the entire population/ among many (others the inhabitants of Hare Hatch House) broke out (De) /a/ day /or two/ after the conversion /of Niri-Esther to Rome/ Hare Hatch House is (now) /today/ to Let. But Mr. Q. Comedy /alas,/ has not the letting of it. Farewell. [E 105]

By the next notebook, however, Firbank had settled on his final conception: Esther’s wedding, her baptism, and the baptism of her child are to take place on the same day in a large and impressive ceremony [F 18].

To this conception Firbank held, and in the last notebook for *Valmouth* he copied from earlier notebooks a great many lines and carefully worked out the order of the incidents for Chapter XI. Early in the notebook he listed after “11. Finale,” the names of priests, Pinpipi and Carmen Colonnade’s duet, the ecstatic dialogue of Mrs. Hurstpierpoint, and “clapping her hands while roaring with laughter/Niri-Esther/” [G 24], events corresponding closely to the events of the last two pages of the novel. Seventy pages later in the notebook, Firbank was ordering incidents for the rest of the chapter:

statue  
Ireland  
Cushion Lieutenant here. closed eyes  
/opens/ Bells  
arrivals — [G 95]

And so on through two more pages, covering, more or less in final order, the events of pp. 467–472. Finally, in a sheet laid into the last notebook, he outlined the events of the final five pages of the novel:

Dialogue Lady Parvula-Laggard  
Cardinal’s passage  
/general/ silence  
Peacock’s on terrace  
Mrs. Hurstpierpoints voice aloud  
projects of travel. ‘Walt’ To M. P.  
Doors thrown open  
/Salve Regina/

Charlie etc . . . appear. Insense  
 /Simultaneously/ Colonnade Pimpipi voices  
 'Grant — etc.'  
 Yield the pas to a negress? Never! Lady Laggard,  
 'Where's Dick? //ah ccs// /les oiseaux amoureux: ccs  
 etc. chers chers oiseaux.'  
 Come Esther  
 Where's Esther?  
 'Esther Esther' — the Bride?  
 But /Niri/ Esther had slipped away to garden etc.  
 (End) [Firbank's parentheses]

In order to flesh out this summary into the finished chapter, Firbank obviously worked on manuscript versions, probably several of them. None of these survive, but some evidence about his methods of working is provided by "Fantasia for Orchestra in F Sharp Minor," an early draft of Chapter VIII — so early that he had not completed the novel<sup>15</sup> — published in *Art and Letters* in the spring of 1919. Between the magazine and the novel versions, Firbank made some thirty substantive changes,<sup>16</sup> and a study of these changes shows him in the final stages of revising his work. Most significant for a consideration of Firbank's technique are his alterations of sentence structure in the interest of rhythm, euphony, and emphasis on nuances of expression. The addition of "dark blue violet" in the sentence "In the heavy blooming air the rolling, moon-lit lawns and great old toppling trees stretched away, interfusing far off into soft deeps of velvet, dark blue violet, void" (A 64.32; B 129.7), makes more complex the interplay of alliteration, assonance, and consonance and builds to a climax at the end of the sentence. The changes can be as simple as the italicizing of *only* in "she is . . . God forgive her . . . the former Favourite of a king; although, as she herself declares, *only* for a few minutes" (A 70.2; B 136.21), yet the new

<sup>15</sup> Sir Osbert Sitwell testifies that Firbank read from this chapter of his unfinished novel at a party in February 1919. "Introduction," *Five Novels*, p. xvi. The notebooks bear out his testimony. "Glenmouth" was the name of the town in most of the notebooks, the *Art and Letters* excerpt, and the announcement of the novel in *Caprice*. However, *Valmouth* is written on the endpaper of the final notebook; it is used once as a primary entry on G 99; and on G 32 it is substituted for "Glenmouth."

<sup>16</sup> The first version, published as "Fantasia for Orchestra in F Sharp Minor," *Art and Letters*, II, n.s. (Spring 1919), 64-79, is referred to parenthetically in the text as A, followed by page and line numbers. The text of the first edition of *Valmouth* (London: Grant Richards, 1919), is referred to parenthetically as B, followed by page and line numbers.

stress makes remarkable a line that had been merely amusing. As these revisions indicate, the effectiveness of Firbank's dialogue relies at least as much on rhythm, the arrangement of words, as on the selection of those words.

Of course, Firbank's awareness of rhythm and structure could be turned to more overt comic effect. When Sir Victor Vatt's parrot appears, repeating fragments from the dialogue of Vatt and his patronesses, Firbank revises in order to contrast the women's cooing blandishments with the artist's outburst of profanity. Originally the passage read:

"Dear Vatt," it cried, "he is splendid; so o-ri-gi-nal and exuberant; like an Italian Decorator. Come Vatt! Paint me in a greenhouse. . . . in a st--oove; a little exotic. . . . ; paint me (my little Victor!) a la Madame Cezanne!" (A 77.10)

Firbank kept most of this paragraph in *Valmouth* — in fact, he also used it in Chapter V — but after "exotic" he concluded the passage with "Where's my bloody Brush?" (B 149.16) to undercut the woman's pretentiousness and reveal Vatt as a gruff vulgarian.

The six major additions to the original chapter make important contributions to Firbank's portraits of two major characters and of the society which they inhabit. Mrs. Yajñavalkya's exuberant directness about sexual matters is made unmistakably emphatic in the expanded versions of two speeches (B 137.7, 138.26), and Mrs. Hurstpierpoint's interest in the young Negress Niri-Esther is made more overtly sexual by the insertion of "leaning forward to inhale the singularly pungent perfume proceeding from the negress's person" into what otherwise, without the rhythmic hesitation and pointed alliteration, was the commonplace "Because you're very loveable" (A 72.24; B 142.16). The quality of Mrs. Hurstpierpoint's religious interests is established more precisely by the long addition in which she ranges from an imperialistic view of the means of propagating her faith to sentimental piety to a discussion of dress and back to her obsession with the snaring of converts to Catholicism:

"Dear Father Notshort, though, forgets my wicker basket! But he was always a favourite of mine; and one hears he has great authority with the Duchess. I hope she will decide to make the plunge from Hare. Her little starveling flower-face almost makes me want to cry. I feel as if I wanted to give her straight to Jesus. She is here somewhere tonight. With her triste far look. I often say she has the instinct for dress. Even a skirt of wool with her feels to shimmer

. . . Lady Violet Logg also is somewhere about: my Poor Heart found her the other day — the day it was of the appalling storm — in *Nuestra Señora*, practically on her knees . . . and with *both* her boys," Mrs. Hurstpierpoint diffusely broke off . . . (B 153.12; my ellipsis)

This speech and the last major revision, the addition to a passage of fragmented conversation of details about pawnbroking and bankruptcy (B 146.22), which he rescued from the fourth *Caprice* notebook [D 22a, 25b], show Firbank's method of suggesting values by implication: as Mrs. Hurstpierpoint's outburst becomes less coherent, her disjointed ramblings become more sinister and more obviously compulsive; the other passage indicates but does not insist upon the insecurity of Valmouth society.

Even though the notebooks and variants among printed versions of the novels cannot reveal everything about Firbank's methods of composition, they do indicate several important features of his style and technique. In the first place, his stylistic effects depend upon achieving greater and greater complexity of structure, particularly elements that interrupt, often irrelevantly, the basic structure of the sentence. His plots and situations are developed in a way analogous to that of the sentences: a number of apparently disparate elements are placed in juxtaposition, qualifying and interrupting each other. Thus Firbank will conceive of a relationship like that of Lady Parvula to her daughter Gilda, who is studying music in Italy, more or less as a single passage. As he refines his plans, he will distribute elements from that passage over several chapters of the novel in order to slow its development and that of other situations and to heighten the contrast between the characters. In this case, he moves in the novel from conversation to a letter from Gilda giving details about her activities and, by means of torn fragments from the letter which Thetis reads as she moves towards the sea and suicide, brings into juxtaposition Thetis' romanticism, Lady Parvula's practiced lust — she has moved seaward in search of a complaisant sea captain and has decided to abandon her concern for family honor, as the torn letter shows — and Gilda's adolescent enthusiasm first for her music teacher and then for a fellow student. In the final version, the details are stretched over Chapters IV, IX and X.

Critics have frequently charged that Firbank's plots and sentences are incoherent. He was aware of such criticism, and judging from a *Valmouth* notebook entry he was aware that the two charges were related: "Why are your books so disjointed?" the primary entry reads;

then he added "Why don't you finish your sentences properly —" [C 149]. In the notebooks, many of his sentences are complete and many of the plot elements depend upon conventional situations and resolutions. Precisely because of the notebooks he was able to give the effect of disjointed plot and sentence structure in his novels.

## CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS ISSUE

DAVID H. BURTON, Professor of History at St. Joseph's College, Philadelphia, is the author of several articles and books, including *Theodore Roosevelt, Confident Imperialist* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1969), *Theodore Roosevelt: A Biography* (Twayne, 1972), and *Theodore Roosevelt and His English Correspondents* (American Philosophical Society, 1973).

ROBERT MURRAY DAVIS, Professor of English at the University of Oklahoma, wrote "The Externalist Method in the Novels of Ronald Firbank" as his dissertation at the University of Wisconsin (1964), is a bibliographer of Evelyn Waugh, and has edited volumes of critical essays on Waugh, Steinbeck, and the modern novel generally.

MARCEL FRANÇON, Associate Professor of French Literature, *Emeritus*, at Harvard, has edited a number of sixteenth-century French texts and is the author of numerous books and articles, including contributions to three previous issues of the HARVARD LIBRARY BULLETIN.

MARY HYDE is the author of *The Impossible Friendship: Boswell and Mrs. Thrale*, which was published by the Harvard University Press in 1972 following its serialization in the HARVARD LIBRARY BULLETIN; her earlier works include *Playwriting for Elizabethans, 1600-1605*, based on her dissertation, which was published by the Columbia University Press in 1949. A collector as well as an author and scholar, she is a member of the Overseers' Committee to Visit the Harvard University Library, and also an active friend of the Columbia, Yale, and Pierpont Morgan Libraries.

EMILY B. LYLE was a Fellow of the Radcliffe Institute for 1974-75; her dissertation at Leeds was "A Study of 'Thomas the Rhymer' and 'Tam Lin' in Literature and Tradition," and in 1975 the Scottish Text Society published volume I of her edition of *Andrew Crawford's Collection of Ballads and Songs*. She is now associated with the School of Scottish Studies of the University of Edinburgh.