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Ronald Firbank and the Legacy of Camp Modernism

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PhD thesis

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2021

Declaration

I, Richard 'Dickon' Edwards, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

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Date: 29 SEPTEMBER 2021

Minor corrections made as requested by the examiners: 18 December 2021

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to produce the first full-length history of camp modernism as a literary style. It draws upon a broad and inclusive scope of materials, covering the field of British and American prose fiction from the early twentieth century to the present day. The investigation argues that the strongest example of camp modernism within this field is the work of the neglected British novelist Ronald Firbank (1886-1926). When exploring this concept in the work of other writers, a familiarity with Firbank is shown to be an asset.

Chapter One mines a wealth of rare archival materials to trace an intersecting history of the terms ‘camp’ and ‘modernism’, from the slang uses of ‘camp’ during the Victorian age to the first serious discussions of ‘camp modernism’ in 2016. In the process, Firbank is revealed to have been labelled with both terms from as early as the 1920s. Chapter Two engages with Firbank’s works, life, and reputation to show how he built on his influences, particularly late Victorian decadence. The chapter shows how Firbank fused a Wildean camp style of exaggerated and satirical humour with a Joycean modernist spirit of difficulty, fragmentation, and ellipsis.

The remaining three chapters locate the Firbankian aesthetic within works by a diverse range of writers. Chapter Three’s examples are recognized modernists: Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Djuna Barnes. Chapter Four covers twentieth-century authors beyond the modernist canon: Norman Douglas, Aldous Huxley, Richard Bruce Nugent, Evelyn Waugh, Charles Henri Ford and Parker Tyler, Ivy Compton-Burnett, Brigid Brophy, and Angela Carter. Finally, Chapter Five examines the legacy of Firbank in four contemporary writers, contrasting the established and popular Alan Hollinghurst with three radical and emerging non-binary authors: Lauren John Joseph, Isabel Waidner, and Shola von Reinhold.

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Introduction

‘Do you read our Ron?’ he asked.
 ‘From time to time,’ I said.
 ‘Personally I never read anything else,’ he said. ‘As far as I am concerned he said the last word. When I’ve read him all through, I begin again at the beginning and read him through again. I don’t see that there’s any point in anyone ever writing another word after Firbank.’

– Doris Lessing, ‘The Day Stalin Died’ (1957)¹

‘Mabel! Mabel! Mabel! Mabel!
 Mabel! Mabel! Mabel! Mabel!’

– Ronald Firbank, *Inclinations* (1916), Part 1,
 entire text of Chapter XX²

1) Contexts and Aims

In 2016, the academic journal *Modernism/modernity* dedicated a special issue to a forum on ‘Camp Modernism’. At the time, the concept was new, or at least rarely discussed. According to the forum’s editors Marsha Bryant and Douglas Mao, ‘extant scholarship touching on camp and modernism [...] so rarely focuses explicitly on their intersection’.³ Given the long-standing association of camp with homosexuality and queer identities, Bryant and Mao wondered if it was time for scholars of modernism to pay more attention to camp in the same way that they now attended to queer modernism.⁴ The essays in the forum duly suggested works which could be considered as both camp and modernist: Edith Sitwell’s 1950 stage performance as Lady Macbeth, Virginia Woolf’s novel *Orlando* (1928), Samuel Steward’s customized homoerotic objects, Charles Henri Ford and Parker Tyler’s novel *The Young and Evil* (1933), and Christopher Isherwood’s Berlin stories. In this way, the editors added, the forum represented ‘a start on inquiries we hope more scholars will pursue’.⁵ This thesis responds to that hope.

Through new research, including unpublished archival materials and rare articles in newspapers and journals, this investigation makes connections across modernist literary studies

¹ Doris Lessing, ‘The Day Stalin Died’ (1957), in Doris Lessing, *To Room Nineteen: Collected Stories Volume One* (1979; repr. London: Flamingo, 2002, pp. 65-77 (p. 73).

² Ronald Firbank, *Inclinations* (1916), in Firbank, ‘Vainglory’ with ‘Inclinations’ and ‘Caprice’, ed. by Richard Canning (London: Penguin, 2012), pp. 179-293 (p. 256).

³ Marsha Bryant and Douglas Mao, ‘Camp Modernism Introduction’, *Modernism/modernity*, 23.1 (January 2016), 1-4 (p. 1).

⁴ Bryant and Mao, p. 4.

⁵ Bryant and Mao, p. 4.

and queer literary studies. The aim is to show how an informed knowledge of camp in literary fiction can benefit modernist scholars, while queer studies in turn can be enriched from understanding camp modernism as a creative strategy of queer affinity. The focus of this investigation is a writer who has been increasingly marginalized in recent years, whom Bryant and Mao only acknowledge in a footnote as one of several ‘modernist figures whose camp aspects have received notice’: the British novelist Ronald Firbank (1896-1926).⁶

Ronald Firbank was born in London in 1896 into a wealthy, white, upper-middle class English family. His father, Sir Thomas Firbank (1850-1910), was an MP and heir to the self-made fortune built up by Firbank’s grandfather Joseph Firbank (1819-1886), a Durham coal miner turned Newport railway builder and landowner. Ronald had a close relationship with his Irish mother, Harriette Jane Garrett (1851-1924), who became Lady Firbank after her husband’s knighthood in 1902. Ronald’s letters to his mother were voluminous enough to warrant publication in 2001. As the letters’ editor, Anthony Hobson, remarks, Lady Firbank was ‘the greatest attachment, indeed the only great attachment, of Firbank’s life’.⁷ Alan Hollinghurst neatly summarizes Firbank’s juvenile work as ‘pieces written for her [his mother] and those written about her’.⁸ The former were sentimental, religious tales such as ‘Odette d’Antrevernes’ (first published in 1905; revised and republished as *Odette* in 1916); the latter were social satires based on observing his mother’s aspirational female friends, a style which shaped his more ambitious mature style. His younger sister, Heather Firbank (1888-1954), became known posthumously for preserving a large wardrobe of women’s clothes from the early twentieth century; the clothes are now part of the Victoria and Albert Museum’s fashion collection.

Privately educated by tutors in England, France, and Spain, the young Firbank studied at Cambridge University between 1906 and 1909, although he left without completing his degree. Financially independent and homosexual, he cultivated a dandyish personal style in the mode of Oscar Wilde, who as Joseph Bristow points out, had by that time come ‘to emblemize a specific style of effeminate identity that represented a distinctly late nineteenth-century apprehension of the male homosexual’.⁹ Yet while Wilde was known for his sociability and public speaking, both in lectures and in table talk, Firbank was hampered by an extreme shyness that manifested itself as aloofness to the point of reclusion. He spent his life travelling the world alone and living in hotel suites and rented apartments, while dedicating himself to writing novels, the publication of which he mostly paid for himself. These were influenced in tone by

⁶ Bryant and Mao, notes to ‘Camp Modernism Introduction’, appended to Allan Pero, ‘A Fugue on Camp’, *Modernism/modernity*, 23.1 (January 2016), 28-36 (pp. 32-34), p. 32, n. 3.

⁷ Anthony Hobson, ‘Introduction’, in Ronald Firbank, *Letters to his Mother: 1920-1924*, ed. by Anthony Hobson (Verona: Anthony Hobson, 2001), pp. 1-5 (p. 4).

⁸ Alan Hollinghurst, ‘Introduction’, in Ronald Firbank, *The Early Firbank*, ed. by Steven Moore (London: Quartet, 1991), pp. vii-xi (p. ix).

⁹ Joseph Bristow, *Effeminate England: Homoerotic Writing after 1885* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1995), p. 2.

the late nineteenth-century decadent styles of Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley but rendered in a fragmentary, elliptical and concentrated form. The latter was more typical of literary modernism, the innovative and experimental movement of the early twentieth century associated with works like James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922). The term 'camp modernist' is, as this thesis seeks to demonstrate, a more accurate and useful label for Firbank's prose style than just 'camp' or 'eccentric'. His major novels are *Vainglory* (1915), *Inclinations* (1916), *Caprice* (1917), *Valmouth* (1919), *The Flower Beneath the Foot* (1923), *Sorrow in Sunlight* (1924; titled in the US as *Prancing Nigger*) and *Concerning the Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli* (1926). Several of his writings were published posthumously, such as *The Artificial Princess*, a novel begun prior to 1915, revised in 1925, then published in 1934. Since his death in 1926, Firbank's work has undergone two distinct revivals. The first was in 1929, as the result of the publication of his five-volume collected *Works* (1929). A more substantial revival took place in 1949, following the popularity of the single-volume collection *Five Novels* (1949).

As the above epigraph from Doris Lessing's 1957 story 'The Day Stalin Died' illustrates, this second revival meant that in the 1950s Firbank was a name familiar to the average reader of English literary fiction. Set in London in 1953, Lessing's story features a young left-wing woman's visit to the apartment of a portrait photographer. The photographer turns out to live with another young man and is depicted listening to Stravinsky's modernist ballet *The Rite of Spring*. He also claims to read Firbank – and *only* Firbank.¹⁰ A love of Firbank had therefore become a wry and implicit signifier for homosexuality, during a time when homosexuality itself was still criminalized. Furthermore, the photographer's claim that Firbank 'said the last word', is an exaggerated and camp remark that indicates an affinity between camp tastes and modernist ambition, something hinted at by the reference to Stravinsky.

The 1960s and early 1970s saw interest in Firbank hit its peak, with new editions, biographies, and monographs, including Brigid Brophy's voluminous if idiosyncratic *Prancing Novelist* (1973). Most significantly for this thesis, Firbank was named twice in Susan Sontag's essay 'Notes on "Camp"' (1964), the first, and still most cited, serious discussion of the term. He appears once in the essay's 'canon of Camp' with his novels, then again as one of her two 'conscious ideologists' of camp, the other being Oscar Wilde.¹¹ In recent decades however, despite the continuing usage of Sontag's essay to define 'camp', Firbank's cultural visibility has waned. In the 1990s, he was barely mentioned in academic surveys of camp that emerged alongside the rise of queer theory, such as Moe Meyer's *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*

¹⁰ Lessing, pp. 72-73.

¹¹ Susan Sontag, 'Notes on "Camp"' (1964), in *Against Interpretation: and Other Essays* (1966; repr. London: Penguin, 2009), pp. 275-92 (pp. 278, 281).

(1994) and Fabio Cleto's *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject* (1999).¹² In 2019 the critic Ellis Hanson regretted that to read 'all the new scholarship' on Firbank published since 1998 took him less than 'an afternoon'.¹³

Yet Firbank's importance to discussions of camp modernism is clear when considering the earliest known usage of the term 'camp' in a piece of serious criticism. As this thesis highlights, this usage is in a 1922 essay on Firbank by the American writer and photographer Carl Van Vechten.¹⁴ Furthermore, the essay was aimed at the readers of the New Orleans literary journal *The Double Dealer* (1921-9), recognized today as one of America's modernist magazines.¹⁵ Like Sontag's essay forty years later, the piece was written in an aphoristic style which plays – campily – on the shared qualities between Wildean camp and the language of modernist manifestos. Firbank was also labelled as a 'modernist' in the same decade by at least one other critic, Ifan Kyrle Fletcher.¹⁶ If, as *Modernism/modernity* suggests, 'camp modernism' must be acknowledged as a distinct concept of its own, Firbank needs to be recognized as the strongest example.

The purpose of this thesis is therefore to make a sustained and specific intervention in studies of English literature from the early twentieth century to the present day. It aims to transform previous assumptions of the role of camp in literature, to restore the legacy of Firbank's style, and to demonstrate how Firbank can be used as an exemplar of camp modernism. On one level, Firbank's campness was a defiant sign of his homosexuality, due to its clear debt to Wilde's style of mannered humour. As Heike Bauer argues, Wilde's trials and subsequent imprisonment produced 'a stereotypical image of the (male) homosexual that would retain its cultural currency well into the twentieth century'.¹⁷ What Firbank did was to fuse two seemingly incompatible ideas: a Wildean camp style of exaggerated and satirical humour, with a Joycean modernist spirit of formal innovation. The resulting style, camp modernism, is not just a sensibility but, to use Esther Newton's description of homosexual camp, 'a strategy for a situation'.¹⁸ Specifically, it has been a recurring strategy in literature since the 1910s for: (a)

¹² Moe Meyer, ed., *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* (London: Routledge, 1994). Fabio Cleto, ed., *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject – A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999).

¹³ Ellis Hanson, 'The Queer Drift of Firbank', in *Decadence in the Age of Modernism*, ed. by Kate Hext and Alex Murray (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), pp. 118-134 (p. 119).

¹⁴ Carl Van Vechten, 'Ronald Firbank', *The Double Dealer*, 3.16 (April 1922), 185-6.

¹⁵ Craig Monk, 'Negotiating the Margins of the American South: *The Double Dealer* (1921-9)', in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines, Vol II: North America 1894-1960*, ed. by Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 523-37.

¹⁶ Ifan Kyrle Fletcher, 'Ronald Firbank: Newport Associations of a Modernist', *South Wales News*, 20 August 1927, p. 6.

¹⁷ Heike Bauer, *The Hirschfeld Archives: Violence, Death and Modern Queer Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2017), p. 52.

¹⁸ Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (1972), rev. edn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 105.

articulating queer identities while evading obscenity laws; (b) interrogating the artificiality of social categories such as sexuality and gender; and (c) questioning the limits of the traditional realist novel. Without this investigation, scholarship is in danger of denying itself a valuable critical tool: a historically informed awareness of camp's relation to modernism.

2) Scope and Definitions

The main scope of this thesis is English literature, as in Western Anglophone literature, published between 1914 and 2020. More specifically, the focus is on prose fiction produced within that era in England, Ireland and the United States. The concept of camp *modernism* suggests a limitation to the years up to 1945, being the period associated with canonical modernist works such as *Ulysses* and T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922). However, the significance of Firbank's work can be more fully demonstrated by tracing his legacy from the 1910s, with the publication of his first full length novel *Vainglory* (1915), until the 2010s. This range necessitates careful selection to include not only the writers who are regularly associated with the influence of Firbank, such as Evelyn Waugh, but also a number of less obvious names, such as Richard Bruce Nugent, one of the first openly gay black writers in America. Furthermore, to properly understand the influences in turn on Firbank, and the origins of the term 'camp', a degree of research is needed into nineteenth-century queer history. 'Modernism' similarly requires an understanding of its changing meaning as a critical term, to contextualize why it was used to describe a writer like Firbank in the 1920s, some time before the academic field of modernist studies gained momentum.

The thesis particularly builds on Fabio Cleto's anthology *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject – A Reader* (1999), which collects many of the key critical texts on the subject of camp. Cleto's book includes Sontag's 'Notes on "Camp"' (1964) alongside essays on Woolf's *Orlando*, excerpts from Mark Booth's *Camp* (1983) and Philip Core's *Camp: The Lie that Tells the Truth* (1984), as well as selections from the 1990s queer theory writings of Judith Butler and Eve Sedgwick. The significance of the Sontag essay is marked by Cleto's chronological bibliography of secondary materials on camp, 'Digging the Scene', which provides an extensive list from 1869 to 1997.¹⁹ Cleto's list expands significantly from 1964 onwards, showing how the proliferation in writings on camp date from the year of the Sontag essay. This may be an effect of the essay directly, or a symptom of the general cultural explosion in the mid-1960s, which coincided with more permissive attitudes and more tolerant legislation towards homosexuality. By 2019 Sontag's essay had become synonymous with

¹⁹ Fabio Cleto, 'Digging the Scene: A Bibliography of Secondary Materials, 1869-1997', in Cleto ed., *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject – A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), pp. 458-512.

serious attempts to define the term ‘camp’, as demonstrated by the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art’s major exhibition that year, *Camp: Notes on Fashion*. The exhibition was themed not just as an illustration of camp, but an illustration of Sontag’s essay. In the exhibition catalogue, Cleto contributed a new introductory essay which acknowledged that, by 2019, Oscar Wilde and Susan Sontag had ‘forged camp as we know it’.²⁰ If Wilde had given camp ‘its body and language, fashioning them in the semiotics of effeminacy’, then Sontag ‘defined its grammar and made it available for mass appropriation, as well as subcultural reappropriation’.²¹

Admittedly, camp remains difficult to define. According to Cleto, the range of critical attempts to explain the term is frustratingly ‘babel-like’, with ‘disagreement reigning’.²² Nevertheless some synonyms recur. Esther Newton (1972) discerns the three ‘most recurrent and characteristic’ themes of camp as ‘incongruity’, ‘theatricality’, and ‘humour’.²³ David Halperin (1995) lists the criteria of camp as ‘parody, exaggeration, amplification, theatricalization, and the literalization of normal codes of conduct’.²⁴ Gary McMahon (2006), meanwhile, argues for three ‘aesthetic principles’ of camp: a preference for ‘transparent *artifice* (exhibitionism) over discreet guile’, for ‘*flippancy* over seriousness (or *style* over content)’, and for ‘*excess* (exaggeration) over minimalism’.²⁵ Beyond that, one of Sontag’s most convincing theories is of camp falling into two types: ‘deliberate camp’ and ‘naïve camp’, something that becomes especially important when considering an author’s intention.²⁶ Accordingly, this project glosses ‘camp’, unless otherwise indicated, as a strategy of *deliberate* exaggeration, often with satirical, humorous, and queer overtones, as related to choices made by an author. Sontag’s more subjective ‘naïve camp’ will be labelled as such, being a text which can be read for the pleasure of a camp effect, but which the author may not have intended *as* camp. This version of camp is often conflated with ‘kitsch’, a term which has similar interrogations of the categories of ‘good’ taste, but which lacks the distinctly queer connotations of ‘camp’.

As Joseph Brooker suggests, the use of Firbank as a gay literary icon in Alan Hollinghurst’s novel *The Swimming-Pool Library* (1988) has already shown how Firbank can engender, for queer writers, ‘a canon alternatively conceived, a cultural history parallel to the norm’.²⁷ Camp modernism might therefore be usefully conceived as a *parallel* rather than

²⁰ Fabio Cleto, ‘Introduction: The Spectacles of Camp’, in *Camp: Notes on Fashion*, ed. by Andrew Bolton with Karen Van Godtsenhoven and Amanda Garfinkel (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2019), I, pp. 9-59 (p. 57).

²¹ Cleto, ‘Introduction: The Spectacles of Camp’, p. 57.

²² Cleto, ‘Introduction: Queering the Camp’, in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject – A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), ed. by Cleto, pp. 1-42 (p. 4).

²³ Esther Newton, *Mother Camp*, p. 106.

²⁴ David Halperin, *Saint Foucault* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 29.

²⁵ Gary McMahon, *Camp in Literature* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006), p. 14.

²⁶ Sontag, ‘Notes on “Camp”’, p. 282.

²⁷ Joseph Brooker, *Literature of the 1980s: After the Watershed* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p. 207.

supplementary canon, following on from Peter Nicholls's concept of 'other modernisms'. Nicholls admits that the canonical modernism of Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and Wyndham Lewis is formulated from an 'absolute fixing of sexual difference' as part of a masculine-associated privileging of objectivity and clarity.²⁸ Although Nicholls does not mention Firbank, he does argue for a separate grouping of works like Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* and Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* (1936), 'effecting as they do a fundamental break with the gendered aesthetics of the various avant-gardes'.²⁹ These 'other' modernisms use the spirit of modernist stylistic innovation to perform 'a release from the ideological "truths" of gender', most notably in *Orlando*, with its gender-changing protagonist.³⁰ Camp modernism can therefore be regarded as an 'other modernism' in this sense, transcending as it does an essentialist understanding of gender and literary style.

In terms of recognizing the queer aspects of camp, this thesis follows the work of queer theorists and activists who reclaimed the term 'queer' in the early 1990s from its previous slang usage during most of the twentieth century, when it was a slur for 'homosexual'. 'Queer' in this newer context is the positive and progressive umbrella term for the troubling of monolithic definitions of identity, specifically for identities relating to gender and sexuality. One recurring quotation in such discussions is Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's definition of 'queer' as 'the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically'.³¹ It is Sedgwick's 'excesses of meaning' that especially applies to the connection between queerness and camp. The camp sense of excess can articulate the location of a queer identity as a space separate to normative categories of behaviour. To exaggerate a normative trait is to reveal its nature as artificial and performative and to relocate at a distance away from it. In doing so, camp creates a sense of a separate space, one which queer subjects have often claimed as a form of defence and sanctuary.

3) Theoretical Framework

One reason for the prolonged avoidance of 'camp' in modernist studies, and in other cultural fields, may be due to a tendency to explore the gender and sexual implications of camp while avoiding the term itself. Judith Butler's theories of drag and gender performativity are one example, despite her use of *Mother Camp* (1972), Esther Newton's anthropological study of

²⁸ Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide*, 2nd edn (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 190.

²⁹ Nicholls, p. 218.

³⁰ Nicholls, p. 218.

³¹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), p.8.

drag queens.³² Butler's book *Gender Trouble* (1990) partly takes its title from the cult film *Female Trouble* (1974), directed by John Waters and starring the drag actor Divine.³³ In acknowledging the inspiration of *Female Trouble*, Butler remarks that Divine's 'impersonation of women implicitly suggests that gender is a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real'.³⁴ But Divine's performances are more than gender impersonation – they are gender *exaggeration* to the point of incongruity, which makes them a form of camp. There is little that is 'real' about them. Nevertheless, as Butler's work indicates, camp preserves and consolidates as much as it mocks and subverts. Indeed, Sontag illustrates this concept in her statement 'Camp sees everything in quotation marks': a mode of simultaneous detachment yet preservation.³⁵ Camp *modernism*, however, is a more experimental and difficult version of this practice, in the same way that literary modernism was formulated as a new and challenging approach to the practice of literature.

Eve Sedgwick uses the word 'camp' more explicitly than Butler, particularly in her concept of the 'gay male rehabilitation of the sentimental', as in a sense of spontaneously excessive affect. By the 1990s, she argues, this aesthetic had been 'in progress for close to a century under different names, including that of "camp"'.³⁶ One key example of naïve camp which gestures to a space of sanctuary is the song 'Over the Rainbow', as performed by Judy Garland in the film *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). Sedgwick suggests the image of a gay, isolated 'kid in Ohio' who might recognize in 'Over the Rainbow' the 'national anthem of a native country, his own' which he did not realize he belonged to.³⁷ In this way, camp can provide a "'private" realm' for gay and queer people who have experienced a 'specific history of secrecy, threat, and escape'.³⁸ Here, Sedgwick distinguishes queer camp from kitsch (and from Sontag's 'naïve camp') by pointing out the sense of codified identity and queer recognition that camp produces: 'camp [...] seems to involve a gayer and more spacious angle of view'.³⁹ For all its humour, Firbank's work equally includes moments of sentimentality as part of its totalizing camp effect, such as the ending of *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, where the heroine beats her hands against a wall, despairing at her unrequited love.⁴⁰

³² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), 2nd edn (1999; repr. New York: Routledge, 2007) p. xi.

³³ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. xxx.

³⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. xxxi.

³⁵ Sontag, 'Notes on "Camp"', p. 280.

³⁶ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), updated edn (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), p. 144.

³⁷ Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, p. 144. Sedgwick makes the common error of thinking the song is titled 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow'.

³⁸ Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, p. 144.

³⁹ Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, p. 156.

⁴⁰ Ronald Firbank, *The Flower Beneath the Foot* (1923), ed. by Alan Hollinghurst (London: Picador, 2018), p. 156.

The subcultural codification of camp is essential to recognizing its value in the history of queer identities. When discussing Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), Sedgwick defines the 'open secret' of camp as an example of the 'glass closet', being 'the swirls of totalizing knowledge-power that circulate so violently around any but the most openly acknowledged gay male identity.'⁴¹ As an illustration, Sedgwick uses Philip Core's declaration that camp 'is in the eyes of the beholder, especially if the beholder is camp'.⁴² In other words, camp can expose a lack of open acknowledgement of homosexual identity, but this exposure is contingent on the reader. With camp, the 'open secret' can still retain a quality of secrecy, thus allowing for a writer like Firbank to express his homosexuality through a camp literary style, while escaping the obscenity laws of the time. This 'open secret' aspect of camp, as a strategy of identity, is also one reason why the term had to wait until the 1960s to be more openly discussed.

The avoidance of camp in modernist studies, meanwhile, reflects what Sedgwick identifies as the 'modernist self-reflexive abstraction', which refuses the 'open secret' of camp in favour of an 'empty secret' abjection of kitsch and sentimentality as forms of representation, a strategy fuelled by an abjection of the eroticized male body.⁴³ Sedgwick attributes this to the homo/heterosexual 'definitional panic' of the early 1900s, as amplified by the Wilde trials and by new discourses on sexology.⁴⁴ Ann Ardis, disagreeing slightly with Sedgwick, argues that this 'modernist drive to formalist abstraction [...] is powered as much by anxiety about the increasing authority of science and the feminization and massification of culture as it is by an interest in abjecting homosocial desire'.⁴⁵ While camp may not relate directly to science, it certainly does relate to cultural 'feminization and massification'. In this way camp modernism can be read as a direct response to, and engagement with, the modernist *avoidance* of the queer subject through abstraction, however unconscious, while speaking back to the underlying and unspoken homosexual panic of the era.

The result of this anxiety, Ardis argues, is the spirit of modernism producing certain 'exclusionary moves' and 'outright erasures of other readings of modernity' one of which is an 'aggressively hostile denunciation of all things "effeminate"'.⁴⁶ Ardis notes this in Ezra Pound's critical essays on Joyce, where Pound praises Joyce's 'clear hard prose' and avoidance of 'softness', in favour of a more 'virile' artist role; Joyce does not 'flop about'.⁴⁷ In fact, as Chapter Three of this thesis will show, Joyce addresses this exclusion by creating his own kind

⁴¹ Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, p. 164.

⁴² Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, p. 156, n. 27. Philip Core, *Camp: The Lie that Tells the Truth* (London: Plexus, 1984), p. 7.

⁴³ Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, pp. 165, 167.

⁴⁴ Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, p. 167.

⁴⁵ Ann L. Ardis, *Modernism and Cultural Conflict, 1880-1922* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 77, n. 60.

⁴⁶ Ardis, pp. 175 & 47.

⁴⁷ Ezra Pound, 'Dubliners and Mr James Joyce' (1914), in Ezra Pound, *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. by T. S. Eliot (London: Faber, 1954) pp. 399-402 (p. 400).

of male, heterosexually-informed camp in the ‘Circe’ section of *Ulysses* (1922). Another example indicated by Ardis is the claim that one modernist, Virginia Woolf, deliberately avoided any mention of Wilde in her writings before 1930, despite his trials being ‘the most momentous literary and social scandal of her adolescence’.⁴⁸ As Chapter Four will show, Woolf in fact alluded explicitly to Wilde in her praise for a novel that uses camp modernism: Norman Douglas’s *South Wind* (1917). Although Ardis’s theory is persuasive, it risks the overlooking of isolated moments of camp appreciation by modernist writers; something this thesis serves to correct.

One reason for Firbank’s omission from wider discussions of modernism may be due to an association of camp with postmodernism. Fredric Jameson stigmatizes this association in his analysis of camp moments in Baudelaire:

Camp, better than anything else, underscores one of the most fateful differences between high modernism and postmodernism [...] namely what I will call the disappearance of *affect*, the utter extinction of that pathos or even tragic spirit with which the high moderns lived their torn and divided condition, the repression even of anxiety itself – supreme psychic experience of high modernism – and its unaccountable reversal and replacement by a new dominant feeling tone.⁴⁹

By ‘affect’, Jameson is universalizing the experience of the male, heterosexual, white subject – the ‘high moderns’ like Eliot and Joyce – without considering the way camp relates to the different type of affect found in more disenfranchised human subjects. Indeed, Jameson revealingly associates camp with ‘the phony, the garish [...] all the way from religious emblems and the Opéra of Paris, to [...] the junk adornments and heavy makeup of drag queens’, without considering the value of these ‘phony’ items to the authentic identity of certain subjects.⁵⁰ Jameson’s ‘unaccountable reversal’ of modernist anxiety becomes more accountable when considering the way ‘reversal’ maps onto the binary otherness of non-heterosexual, non-male, non-white experience. With camp, affect is only made to disappear from the interior; it instead relocates to an exaggerated surface. While it is possible to read the camp modernism of Firbank as an anticipation of postmodernism, as Jameson does with the camp of Baudelaire, it is more convincing to read it as the manifestation of a *parallel* anxiety about the suppression of homosexuality during the modernist age. Camp modernism need not be a contradiction in terms but an engagement *with* this apparent contradiction.

⁴⁸ Ardis, p. 46.

⁴⁹ Fredric Jameson, ‘Baudelaire as Modernist and Postmodernist: The Dissolution of the Referent and the Artificial “Sublime”’ (1985), in Fredric Jameson, *The Modernist Papers* (London: Verso, 2007), pp. 223-37 (pp. 234-35).

⁵⁰ Jameson, ‘Baudelaire as Modernist and Postmodernist’, p. 234.

4) Methodology

This thesis combines new archival research and close textual analysis to develop a literary history of camp modernism. It undertakes close comparative readings of primary sources, using Firbank's work as an exemplar of camp modernism in literature, in order to identify the influence of Firbankian style on a broad range of twentieth-century and twenty-first-century writers. This style combines elements of fragmentation, ellipsis, and concision, with exaggerated linguistic mannerisms, faux-aristocratic gestures, passages of unattributed dialogue, and incongruous and anachronistic juxtapositions. The Firbank style also tends to make humorous allusions to social categories such as gender, sexuality, religion (especially Catholicism), and race. My method is developed from my own reading alongside my research into Firbank's critical reception, both during his lifetime and posthumously. One of the strategies used is to trace and analyse the use of the critical term 'Firbankian' in reviews of other authors. As Chapter Four investigates, this starts to happen after the posthumous publication of Firbank's collected *Works* in 1929.

Whilst this project is primarily rooted in literary fiction, it also discusses a range of related sources, published and unpublished, including memoirs, biographies, bibliographies, university theses, articles in newspapers and magazines, courtroom records, private correspondence, dictionaries, advertisements, drafts for radio plays, films, a Netflix TV series for young adults, website interviews, and studies of the history of slang. The critical scholarship cited is principally from the field of literature studies, but I also draw on general studies of camp, modernist studies, lexicography, lesbian and gay studies, and theoretical work on gender, sexuality, and culture. As discussed above, the theories of Susan Sontag, Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick, Ann Ardis, and Fabio Cleto inform much of my theoretical framework. Brigid Brophy's *Prancing Novelist* (1973) remains an essential text for Firbank discussions. Brophy's own novel *In Transit* (1969) is analysed in Chapter Four of this thesis, as it contributes to Firbank's legacy in the sense that it uses camp to experiment and innovate. The project is also indebted to Kate Hext's recent research on the unpublished correspondence of Firbank and Carl Van Vechten, which reveals that Van Vechten taught Firbank the meaning of the term 'camp' in 1922 – by using Firbank's own fiction as an example.⁵¹ In terms of dates, the project's sources range from William Beckford's *Vathek* (1786), an early example of a camp literary novel, to a 2021 article by Nonia Williams on the relevance of Brophy's campness to the present day.⁵² In this way the thesis produces a historically grounded reading of the emergence and influence of camp modernism, while indicating its possible future.

⁵¹ Kate Hext, 'Rethinking the Origins of Camp: The Queer Correspondence of Carl Van Vechten and Ronald Firbank', *Modernism/modernity*, 27.1 (January 2020), 165-183.

⁵² Nonia Williams, 'Sensuous, Shameless', *Times Literary Supplement*, 6153 (5 March 2021), p. 8.

5) Chapter Summaries

This thesis comprises five chapters. The first, ‘Vile Bodies That Matter: Tracing the History of Camp Modernism’, is an up-to-date exploration of the historical trajectories of the terms ‘camp’ and ‘modernism’ in print, with a focus on the roots of ‘camp’ as a homosexual slang term from the Victorian age. In this way, the use of camp is shown to originally be a defensive strategy during times of anti-homosexual legislation. The chapter especially highlights the remapping of the word ‘camp’ into the field of serious arts criticism during the height of the modernist age, thanks to Van Vechten’s 1922 essay on Firbank. Finally, the investigation asks why ‘camp’ was not widely discussed until the 1960s, and why ‘camp modernism’ is only beginning to be discussed today. Chapter Two, ‘Ronald Firbank, Camp Modernist’, then argues in depth for the reading of Firbank’s work as a defining source of camp modernism. The chapter combines a close reading of the novels with archival research into his influences, his life, and his changing literary reputation.

The three subsequent chapters show how a familiarity with Firbank can uncover camp modernist elements in other literary works. Undervalued connections are revealed between major and lesser-known writers, transforming previous assumptions of the role of camp in literature. Chapter Three, ‘Streams of Externalities: Camp in Modernist Fiction’, discloses the camp in four canonical modernist works: Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons* (1914), James Joyce’s ‘Circe’ chapter in *Ulysses* (1922), Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* (1928), and Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood* (1936). These texts are chosen either due to their touching on queer expression during the modernist era, or, as in the case of ‘Circe’, a use of camp externalization to explore Joyce’s thoughts on gender and (hetero) sexuality. Chapter Four, ‘Camp Fire Cameos: Twentieth-Century Legacies, 1917-1984’, shows how Firbank’s legacy manifests in a diverse selection of twentieth-century literature. The writers chosen are Norman Douglas, Aldous Huxley, Richard Bruce Nugent, Charles Henri Ford and Parker Tyler, Evelyn Waugh, Ivy Compton-Burnett, Brigid Brophy, and Angela Carter. Carter’s radio play about Firbank, *A Self-Made Man* (1984), has been especially underrated by scholars of both Firbank and Carter. By way of an intervention against this tendency, the chapter includes unpublished material by Carter relating to the play, as held at the British Library.

In Chapter Five, ‘Hypercamp: Contemporary Legacies, 1988-2021’, Firbank’s relevance to contemporary literature is examined in the context of a culture increasingly fascinated by the role of exaggeration in gender and sexual identities. Four authors from this period are considered, from Alan Hollinghurst, a writer with a long and respected mainstream career, to three emerging non-binary writers who are working at the more radical end of the literary scene: Lauren John Joseph, Isabel Waidner, and Shola von Reinhold. This contemporary

aspect of the thesis hopes to make its research particularly relevant to audiences beyond the academy. To discuss camp now, it contends, one needs to know why the conversation began with Firbank in 1922, rather than Sontag in 1964.

Finally, 'Conclusion: The Future of Firbank' affirms that Firbank is worthy of continued attention due to his influence as a pioneer of camp modernism in literature, even if the influence is often indirect or unconscious. The future of Firbank studies is indicated with the acknowledgment of not only new work on Firbank, but new interest in his disciple Brigid Brophy, whose fictions are now labelled as 'camp' in a positive sense rather than a pejorative one. In this way, the thesis aims to leave the reader with the conviction that, despite Firbank's own obscurity, there is a distinctly Firbankian line of literary practice which continues to thrive.

1 Vile Bodies That Matter: Tracing the History of Camp Modernism

To answer why camp modernism has remained an unexplored idea until recently, and why Ronald Firbank's work is the most useful example for such an exploration, it is necessary to examine some of the historical trajectories taken by the terms 'camp' and 'modernism'. In terms of cultural power and respectability, they have occupied vastly different positions. While the term 'modernism' derived from the field of serious cultural criticism during the early twentieth century, the term 'camp' has trodden a murkier path, emerging from slang used by criminalized homosexual subcultures during the Victorian age. The history of 'camp' is accordingly one of prejudice and suppression, with the result that the term was not properly discussed until the more sexually permissive 1960s. The term has had a recurring relevance and necessity to marginalized individuals, in the face of enduring attempts by systems of knowledge to prove otherwise. Its story is the story of speaking to power, while simultaneously perpetuating that power in order to claim a separate position. As a result, camp has been thought subversive and reactive in some contexts, while conservative and reactionary in others. 'Modernism' in turn equally entered a state of consolidation as a concept in the 1960s, but for subsequent decades it has been thought incompatible with aspects of Wildean style like camp. Accordingly, 'camp modernism' as a named concept was not considered in depth until the 2010s, when the field of modernism studies finally became more open to the idea.

This chapter begins with the term 'camp's first dictionary appearance in 1909, when it was categorized as a Victorian slang term. The discussion then travels back in time to examine the Victorian usages that led to the 1909 definition, before moving ahead into the 1920s to show how 'camp' was used variously in *Variety* magazine, in short stories championed by James Joyce, and in an essay on Firbank in a New Orleans modernist journal. Through the examination of Firbank's unpublished letters during this time, the word 'camp' is revealed to have a now-forgotten relationship to the word 'chichi'. The chapter then examines the way 'camp' has been used in discussions since Susan Sontag's landmark essay 'Notes on "Camp"' (1964), exploring its relation to literary style and racial identity. The parallel trajectory taken by the term 'modernism' is traced in literary criticism, including its rare early usage in a 1927 article on Firbank. Finally, recent discussions of 'camp modernism' are examined to show how Firbank's tendency to be glossed as a writer steeped in the signs of the 1890s is still leaving him undervalued in such discussions, thus necessitating the present investigation.

1.1 Camp Etymologies: Ware, Pavia, and ‘*se camper*’

The use of camp to codify homosexuality during a time when homosexual acts were illegal can be seen in the word’s first appearance in an English dictionary. The entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary* for the slang adjective ‘camp’, updated in December 2020, now gives three different definitions: (1) denoting a person’s mannerisms as ‘flamboyant, arch, or theatrical, esp. in a way stereotypically associated with an effeminate gay man’; (2) an archaic meaning, denoting anything ‘relating to, or popular with, gay people’ more generally; and (3) denoting an ‘exaggerated, affected, over the top’ aesthetic, as ‘popularized by Susan Sontag’s account’.⁵³ The *OED*’s earliest citation is for the first definition, although the quoted source skirts intriguingly around any homosexual connotation. The source is a 1909 dictionary of Victorian slang, *Passing English of the Victorian Era: A Dictionary of Heterodox English, Slang, and Phrase*, by James Redding Ware. Ware’s book was marketed as a companion volume to Farmer and Henley’s *Dictionary of Slang and Colloquial English* (1905), which was in turn an abridgement of their earlier seven-volume work *Slang and Its Analogues* (1890-1904), in which ‘camp’ does not appear.⁵⁴ The entry for ‘camp’ in Ware is as follows:

Camp (street). Actions and gestures of exaggerated emphasis. Probably from the French. Used chiefly by persons of exceptional want of character. ‘How very camp he is’.⁵⁵

It should be noted, however, that Ware’s preface to the same book reveals an arch and unserious tone behind his dictionary: ‘It is to be hoped that there are errors on every page, and also that no entry is “quite too dull”’.⁵⁶ Accordingly, Ware’s phrase in the entry for ‘camp’, ‘persons of exceptional want of character’, can be read as a piece of knowing innuendo, hinting at homosexuality and male effeminacy.

The *OED*’s second adjectival definition of ‘camp’, being an archaic synonym for ‘homosexual’ *per se*, is supported by a 1910 reference to the sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld’s journal, *Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen (Yearbook of Sexual Intermediaries)*. The *OED*’s quotation is ‘*Camp-Party*, wieder ein Ausdruck für ein h.-s. [i.e. homosexuell] Privatgesellschaft’ (‘another expression for a private homosexual party’).⁵⁷ This source is, in fact, from an early glossary of English homosexual slang, as discussed in depth in 2005 by the

⁵³ ‘camp, adj. and n.5.’, *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, June 2021. [accessed 23 July 2021].

⁵⁴ James Redding Ware, *Passing English of the Victorian Era: A Dictionary of Heterodox English, Slang, and Phrase* (London: George Routledge, 1909), p. iv. John S. Farmer and W. E. Henley, *A Dictionary of Slang and Colloquial English* (London: George Routledge, 1905), p. 85. Farmer and Henley, *Slang and its Analogues*, II (London: subscribers only, 1891), p. 23.

⁵⁵ Ware, p.61.

⁵⁶ Ware, p. v.

⁵⁷ ‘camp, adj. and n.5.’, *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, June 2021. [accessed 23 July 2021].

Australian academic Gary Simes.⁵⁸ Simes identifies the glossary's writer as I. L. Pavia, who featured it as part of a study for the *Jahrbuch* titled 'Male Homosexuality in England with Special Consideration of London'. Pavia's section on slang is, Simes claims, 'probably the first English gay glossary'.⁵⁹ The adjective 'camp' itself is defined by Pavia as 'homosexuell im Sinne des typisch-weibischen, exzentrischen Homosexuellen' (translated by Simes as 'homosexual in the sense of a typically effeminate, exaggerated Homosexual'), while the verb 'to camp' is 'sich homosexuell-weibische gebärden' ('to behave in a homosexually-effeminate manner').⁶⁰ Ware's and Pavia's separate definitions thus prove that the term 'camp' was in circulation as British homosexual slang by 1910, and that the key synonym for 'camp' at this time, given it appears in both definitions, was 'exaggerated'.

The etymological origins of 'camp' are, as the *OED* admits, 'uncertain'.⁶¹ Pavia adds a footnote to his 1910 glossary to admit this: 'I cannot explain etymologically the origin of this expression. Camp usually means tent or to sleep in tents'.⁶² Some scholars of gay subcultures, such as Gordon Westwood and Matt Houlbrook, have favoured the theory that the term has its origins in the Italian word *campeggiare* – 'to stand out from a background'.⁶³ Other critics, however, have followed Ware's suspicion in 1909 that the term is 'probably from the French'. The seventeenth-century French phrase *se camper* is usually cited, which Dennis Denisoff interprets as not just standing out from one's surroundings, but 'displaying oneself through military finery and posturing'.⁶⁴ Susan Sontag favours this argument, taking *camper* to mean 'to posture boldly'.⁶⁵ Mark Booth goes one further in locating *se camper* in the French novel *Le Capitaine Fracasse* (1863) by Théophile Gautier, in which the character Matamore puts on a pose which he thinks will impress a woman: 'Matamore se campait dans une pose extravagamment anguleuse, dont sa maigreur excessive faisait encore ressortir le ridicule'.⁶⁶ Booth translates this as 'Matamore camped it up in an extravagantly angular pose which his great thinness served to make even more ridiculous'.⁶⁷ He also traces a much earlier use in

⁵⁸ Gary Simes, 'Gay Slang Lexicography: A Brief History and a Commentary on the First Two Gay Glossaries', *Dictionaries: Journal of the Dictionary Society of North America*, 26 (2005) 1-159 (p. 14).

⁵⁹ Simes, p. 1.

⁶⁰ I. L. (Leo) Pavia, 'Die männliche Homosexualität in England mit besonderer Berücksichtigung Londons', *Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen*, 11 (1910), 18-51 (p. 40). Simes, p. 14.

⁶¹ 'camp, adj. and n.5.', *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, June 2021. [accessed 23 July 2021].

⁶² Pavia, p. 40. Simes, p. 14.

⁶³ Gordon Westwood (pseudonym of Michael Schofield), *A Minority: A Report on the Life of the Male Homosexual in Great Britain* (London: Longmans, 1960), p. 207. Matt Houlbrook, *Queer London: Peril and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957* (2005; repr. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 149.

⁶⁴ Dennis Denisoff, *Aestheticism and Sexual Parody, 1840-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 100.

⁶⁵ Susan Sontag, 'The "Salmagundi" Interview (1975)', first published in *Salmagundi*, 31/32 (Fall 1975/Winter 1976), abridged and repr. in *A Susan Sontag Reader* (1982; repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), pp. 329-46 (p. 340).

⁶⁶ Théophile Gautier, *Le Capitaine Fracasse* (Paris: Charpentier, 1863), I, p. 176.

⁶⁷ Mark Booth, *Camp* (London: Quartet, 1983), p. 33.

Molière's play *Les Fourberies de Scapin* (1671), in which a character is taught how to perform as a braggart soldier: 'campe-toi sur un pied!' ['camp it up on one leg!'].⁶⁸ Although Booth's theory is not conclusive, his Molière reference is now cited by the *OED*, which regards the French origin as 'probable'.⁶⁹ It certainly supports Ware's 1909 definition of 'camp' as having both a French etymological origin and the sense of an exaggerated performance.

1.2 'An Emanation From Hell': 'Camp' as Victorian Homosexual Slang

The circulation of 'camp' as part of Victorian homosexual slang can be seen in the papers of British court cases concerning homosexual offences, usually involving communities of cross-dressing men. The earliest known of these emerged during the 1871 London case *The Queen v. Boulton and Others*, also known as the case of 'Boulton and Park' or 'Fanny and Stella'. The charge – 'conspiracy to commit a felony' – referred to the theatrical performers Ernest 'Stella' Boulton and Frederick 'Fanny' Park's habit of dressing in women's clothes in public.⁷⁰ Among the letters read out during their hearings at Bow Street Magistrates' Court in May 1870, after their arrest, and then again in the trial a year later, was one written by Park to Boulton's lover, Lord Arthur Clinton. The copy of the letter archived at the Kew National Archive has no year, but recent studies of Park's life date it to 1868.⁷¹ In the letter, Park bemoans the occasions when he fails to pass as a woman in the street:

I should like to live to a green old age. Green did I say? Oh, *ciel!* ['Oh, heavens!'] The amount of paint that will be required to hide that very unbecoming tint. My campish undertakings are not at present meeting with the success they deserve.⁷²

For today's readers the meaning of 'campish undertakings' is clear, not only from the context of wearing drag, but also from the letter's camp style of language, which Morris Kaplan defines as its 'self-parodying overstatement'.⁷³ Denisoff points out further camp criteria: the juxtaposition of English with French phrases (which supports the *se camper* theory of the term's origin), the sudden emotionalism ('Oh, *ciel!*'), and the references to artifice, surfaces, and gender

⁶⁸ Booth, p. 39.

⁶⁹ 'camp, adj. and n.5.', *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, June 2021. [accessed 23 July 2021].

⁷⁰ Denisoff, p. 100. Neil Bartlett, *Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde* (1988; repr. London: Serpent's Tail, 1989), p. 136.

⁷¹ Neil McKenna, *Fanny and Stella: The Young Men Who Shocked Victorian England* (London: Faber, 2013), p. 165. Morris B. Kaplan, *Sodom on the Thames: Sex, Love, and Scandal in Wilde Times* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), p. 54.

⁷² Manuscripts: Frederick Park, letter to Lord Arthur Clinton, 21 November [probably 1868], handwritten copy, archived at London, Kew National Archives, in *Depositions and Other Documents, 1865-1874*, ref. KB 6/3 part I, folder labelled *Boulton & Park, May 1870*. McKenna, p. 165.

⁷³ Kaplan, p. 54.

performance.⁷⁴ At the time, however, the word ‘campish’ was baffling to outsiders. The trial’s judge Lord Cockburn let the word remain undefined, dismissing the language of the letter ‘as of a very peculiar character’.⁷⁵ Some newspapers, such as *Reynolds’*, were confused enough to print the word as ‘crawfish’ in their accounts of the case.⁷⁶ In other newspapers, though, ‘campish’ was preserved, thus dating the earliest published appearance of ‘camp’, or rather a variant of ‘camp’, to the Boulton and Park case.⁷⁷

Despite its rarity during the 1870s, the term was not confined to private letters, or indeed to London. In 1874, the press reported on a police raid of an all-male cross-dressing ‘ball’ in Salford, the printed tickets to which referred to the host as ‘Her Majesty, Queen of Camp’.⁷⁸ The magistrate at Salford Police Court, Sir J. I. Mantell, expected the arrested men to be aware of the Boulton and Park case three years earlier. ‘They must have heard’, he told them, ‘of the young men who were indicted at London for an offence somewhat akin to that which the police had tried to bring home to themselves’.⁷⁹ The ‘Her Majesty’ aspect of the usage is evidence of an early association between ‘camp’ and a performance of aristocratic femininity: ‘queen’ as an exaggerated category of woman. But, as with Boulton and Park, ‘camp’ was dismissed as private slang, and not explained in court.

A third court case in 1884 along the same lines provides the earliest known recorded explanation of ‘camp’. The ‘Dublin Castle’ trial concerned a group of high-ranking Dublin men accused of homosexual offences, including Gustavus Cornwall, the Secretary to the General Post Office in Dublin. Malcolm Johnston, a young sex worker, gave evidence for the prosecution. During the trial, he read aloud a letter he had written to one of his Dublin clients, James Pillar, whom he called his ‘Pa’, describing his bribing of police officers with sexual acts:

My dear “Pa”, I have been in the hands of the police (don’t be frightened) or rather the other way, the police have been in my hands so many times lately that my lilly [sic] white hands have been trembling, and I am utterly fucked out. Such camp.⁸⁰

⁷⁴ Denisoff, p. 100.

⁷⁵ Manuscripts: *The Queen v. Boulton and Others*, 9 May 1871, Westminster Hall, handwritten transcript of trial, archived at London, Kew National Archives, under *Boulton and Others Offence: Unnatural Offences*, 1871, ref. DPP 4/6, bound volume labelled *Regina v Boulton and Others*, 1871, day 6, pp. 206 & 208.

⁷⁶ Kaplan, p. 54.

⁷⁷ ‘The “Gentlemen Women” Case’, *Sheffield & Rotherham Independent*, 5279 (4 June 1870), p. 10. ‘The Charge of Personating Women’, *Morning Post* (London), 30101 (30 May 1870), p. 3.

⁷⁸ ‘Masquerading in Female Attire in Salford’, *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 24 October 1874, p. 3. Rictor Norton, ‘Queen of Camp, 1874’, blog post, 4 December 2018, *Homosexuality in Nineteenth-Century England: A Sourcebook* <<http://rictornorton.co.uk/eighteen/1874camp.htm>> [accessed 17 February 2019].

⁷⁹ ‘Masquerading in Female Attire in Salford’, p. 3.

⁸⁰ Manuscripts: Malcolm Johnston, letter to James Pillar, February 1884, in *The Queen v. Cornwall and Others: Unnatural Offences, August 1884*, Dublin Commission Court, copy archived at London, The

The explicit content of the letter was enough for the judge, Baron Dowse, to call it ‘an emanation from hell’.⁸¹ Crucially, in his pre-trial deposition, Johnston explained to the police what he meant by ‘camp’: ‘Camp means amusement. It might mean proper amusement or it might mean improper amusement’.⁸² It is this doubling aspect that reveals the original codification purpose of camp, using exaggerated gestures and performances as a strategy of shifting between the ‘proper’ mainstream to the ‘improper’ margins and back again. As Matt Houlbrook puts it, in his study of homosexual men in London during the early twentieth century, camp was a means of crossing boundaries ‘between visibility and invisibility, spectacle and concealment, public and private’.⁸³ This sense of having a foot in each territory meant, as Houlbrook puts it, that ‘camp held display and concealment in persistent tension’.⁸⁴

Moreover, ‘camp’ entered the language as a homosexual slang term during a time when the concept of a homosexual as a subcultural identity was beginning to take shape and be recognized, only to be criminalized. Michel Foucault dates the idea of the homosexual as a ‘species’ on the periphery of society to the late nineteenth century’s proliferation of medical studies on sexuality: specifically Carl Westphal’s 1870 article on ‘contrary sexual sensations’.⁸⁵ At this point, says Foucault, ‘homosexuality began to speak [on] its own behalf’.⁸⁶ As the first appearances of ‘camp’ in private letters and messages also appeared around this time, it is reasonable to argue that the term was one of the ways in which this burgeoning homosexual ‘speaking’ manifested.

Postal Museum, Royal Mail Archive, Calthorpe House, under *Prosecution of Gustavus C Cornwall, Secretary to the General Post Office, Dublin*, ref. POST 120/62, ‘Brief on Behalf of the Crown’, p. 45, letter no. 65 (‘E’). McKenna, p. 109.

⁸¹ Manuscripts: *The Queen v. Cornwall and Others: Unnatural Offences*, August 1884, Dublin Commission Court, trial transcript, copy archived at London, Postal Museum, Royal Mail Archive, Calthorpe House, under *Prosecution of Gustavus C Cornwall, Secretary to the General Post Office, Dublin*, ref. POST 120/62, p. 50.

⁸² Manuscripts: Malcolm Johnston, deposition at Inns-Quay Police Court, Dublin, 28 July 1884, in *The Queen v. Cornwall and Others: Unnatural Offences, August 1884*, Dublin Commission Court, copy archived at London, Postal Museum, Royal Mail Archive, Calthorpe House, under *Prosecution of Gustavus C Cornwall, Secretary to the General Post Office, Dublin*, ref. POST 120/62, ‘Brief on Behalf of the Crown’, pp. 38-42 (p. 42). McKenna, p. 110.

⁸³ Houlbrook, p. 151.

⁸⁴ Houlbrook, p. 152.

⁸⁵ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* (1976), trans. by Robert Hurley (1978; repr. London: Penguin, 1990), p. 43.

⁸⁶ Foucault, p. 101.

1.3 'Camp' in the 1920s and 1930s: Mainstream Osmosis

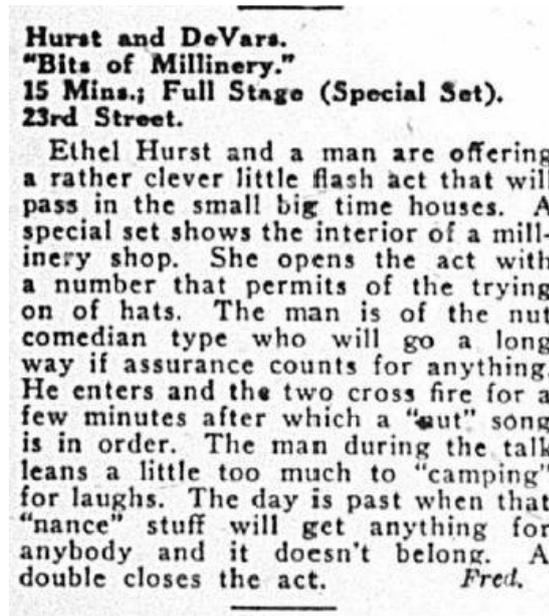


Figure 1. A vaudeville critic's use of 'camping', *Variety*, 26 March 1920

In contrast to the positive uses of 'camp' amongst Victorian homosexual men, by the early twentieth century the term took on a more pejorative usage. One rare example from 1920, which the *OED* does not include, appears in *Variety*, the American entertainment magazine. In a review of a vaudeville act, 'Bits of Millinery' by the performers Hurst and DeVars, the critic 'Fred' condemns the act's use of effeminate mannerisms:

The man during the talk leans a little too much to "camping" for laughs. The day is past when that "nance" stuff will get anything for anybody and it doesn't belong.⁸⁷

This usage in *Variety*, despite the inverted commas, demonstrates how in 1920 the term was starting to circulate in the American mainstream, at least for those interested in vaudeville. As implied by the title of the 1909 dictionary in which 'camp' first appeared, *Passing English*, this review suggests that the concept of camp was already an anachronism in 1920 ('the day is past'). With the contemptuous addition of 'that nance stuff' (as in 'nancy boy'), 'camp' was thus being defined in this period as a form of negative stereotyping, even minstrelization, of a homosexual identity. This indicates the enduring problems behind taking the practice of camp seriously, and taking literary practitioners of camp like Firbank seriously.

⁸⁷ 'Fred', 'Hurst and DeVars: "Bits of Millinery"' (review), *Variety*, 58.5 (26 March 1920), p. 24. See Figure 1.

One early connection between the word ‘camp’ and literary modernism can be found in the 1920s fiction of Robert McAlmon, the American writer and publisher. While living in Paris, McAlmon worked as an assistant to his friend James Joyce, typing the last fifty pages of the manuscript of *Ulysses* (1922), and setting up Contact Editions, which issued works by Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams, and Ford Madox Ford.⁸⁸ He also used Contact to publish limited editions of his own short stories, such as *A Companion Volume* (1923) and *Distinguished Air: Grim Fairy Tales* (1925). One of the stories in the former, ‘One More to Set Her Up’ (1923), and all three stories in the latter, use ‘camp’ in the context of homosexual slang, as spoken by bohemian Americans living in Berlin after the First World War. Although the tales may not be innovative enough to count as camp modernism, their content makes them camp *for* modernists, given that their limited readership included Joyce and Ezra Pound. In ‘One More To Set Her Up’, the noun ‘camp’ is used in a now obsolete meaning, to denote a person who exhibits camp mannerisms. McAlmon uses it for a heavy-drinking heterosexual woman whose homosexual friends affectionately refer to her as an ‘old camp’.⁸⁹ The narrator also remarks that ‘when she was in a good mood [while drinking at a bar], she would camp cynically, and reminisce’.⁹⁰ The lack of quotation marks around the word ‘camp’ demonstrates the immersive perspective of McAlmon’s narration. Here, then, is evidence that in the 1920s ‘camp’ was something that heterosexuals could do too – albeit still in the context of a homosexual subculture.

Only 115 copies of McAlmon’s story collection *Distinguished Air* (1925) were printed (Sussex University’s copy appears to be the only one held in a British archive). As its punning subtitle ‘Grim Fairy Tales’ suggests, *Distinguished Air* comprises a trio of narratives in which homosexual characters are framed as outcasts. In the title story, the character Foster Graham is described as a homosexual man who dresses in male clothing and ‘camps’ on the Berlin streets, making exaggerated and effeminate gestures: ‘We had not spoken fifteen sentences to each other before Foster was camping, hands on hips, with a quick eye to notice every man who passed by’.⁹¹ The narrator comments on the shortcomings of the practice: ‘You are difficult when you camp around people who don’t understand’, he tells Graham.⁹² ‘The manner is a damned cheap and flippant one anyway’, he adds, echoing the sentiments of the *Variety* critic of 1920.⁹³ Richard E. Zeikowitz argues that in McAlmon’s stories, camp actions like those of Foster are ‘cheap’ because they are ‘*normatively queer* [...] the characters seem unwilling or

⁸⁸ Robert McAlmon, *Being Geniuses Together: An Autobiography* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1938), pp. 90, 271.

⁸⁹ McAlmon, ‘One More to Set Her Up’, in McAlmon, *A Companion Volume* (Paris: Contact, 1923), pp. 211-20 (p. 214).

⁹⁰ McAlmon, ‘One More to Set Her Up’, p. 217.

⁹¹ McAlmon, ‘Distinguished Air’, in McAlmon, *Distinguished Air: Grim Fairy Tales* (Paris: Contact Editions, 1925), pp. 9-69 (p. 10).

⁹² McAlmon, ‘Distinguished Air’, pp. 12.

⁹³ McAlmon, ‘Distinguished Air’, pp. 12-13.

unable to invent a non-normative queer identity'.⁹⁴ In the 1920s, 'camp' thus already denotes a type of queerness that, for some, draws on normative ideas of gender. This may be one reason why camp has sometimes been thought too conservative for modernism, and accordingly deemed incompatible.

The story 'Miss Knight' (1925), also included in *Distinguished Air*, was thought by Ezra Pound to be one of McAlmon's best.⁹⁵ 'Miss Knight' is a portrait of Charlie Knight, a male Berlin bar regular who dresses in men's clothing, but likes to be referred to with female pronouns. This is on account of his 'instincts' being 'all womanly', despite being 'so built that she could have passed as a real man'.⁹⁶ McAlmon suggests one useful function of performative camp: 'Properly she believed herself appointed as a camping comedian, ready to earn a right to her presence by keeping undue seriousness from making dullness exist through an overlong period'.⁹⁷ Indeed, the narrator states that Miss Knight found her niche in the period immediately following the First World War: 'A number of Americans [...] liked her professional gaiety as a relief from after-war Berlin atmosphere'.⁹⁸ In fact, Charlie Knight and Foster Graham can both be said to be early examples of a camp archetype that Mark Booth labels as the 'Manic Poseur', where neurosis is transformed into an exaggerated form of effeminate glamour.⁹⁹

One further piece of evidence that the term 'camp' was used in the early 1920s among writers associated with modernism is an anecdote told by Djuna Barnes, as recorded by Edmund Wilson in his notebooks for 1921. The story concerns Carl Van Vechten:

He [Van Vechten] had gone into a bookstore in some provincial city and put on a name-spending [name-dropping] act: 'I read this book of Cabell's in manuscript'; 'Conrad told me that he wasn't really satisfied with this novel,' etc. At last, the bedazzled bookseller said: 'May I ask who you are, sir?' 'Oh, I,' said Van Vechten in a camping manner, 'am Edna St Vincent Millay!'¹⁰⁰

These early 1920s texts demonstrate that the homosexual slang terms 'camp' and 'camping' were now circulating among the literary, bohemian, and theatrical circles of New York, Paris, and Berlin. Despite Ware's labelling of 'camp' in 1909 as 'passing English' from the Victorian

⁹⁴ Richard E. Zeikowitz, 'Constrained in Liberation: Performative Queerness in Robert McAlmon's Berlin Stories', *College Literature*, 31.3 (Summer 2004), 27-42 (p. 40).

⁹⁵ Robert E. Knoll, *Robert McAlmon: Expatriate Publisher and Writer*, University of Nebraska Studies, new series, 18 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1957), p. 54.

⁹⁶ McAlmon, 'Miss Knight', in McAlmon, *Distinguished Air: Grim Fairy Tales* (Paris: Contact Editions, 1925), pp. 73-105 (p. 77).

⁹⁷ McAlmon, 'Miss Knight', pp. 73-74.

⁹⁸ McAlmon, 'Miss Knight', pp. 84-85.

⁹⁹ Booth, p. 137.

¹⁰⁰ Edmund Wilson, *The Twenties: From Notebooks and Diaries of the Period*, ed. by Leon Edel (London: Macmillan, 1975), p. 80. Simes, pp. 38-9.

age, the word had persisted into the 1920s. It was now widespread enough to be set down in fiction, reportage, and memoir, albeit often with overtones of condescension and unseriousness.

1.4 ‘Camp’ enters literary criticism: Van Vechten on Firbank; ‘chichi’

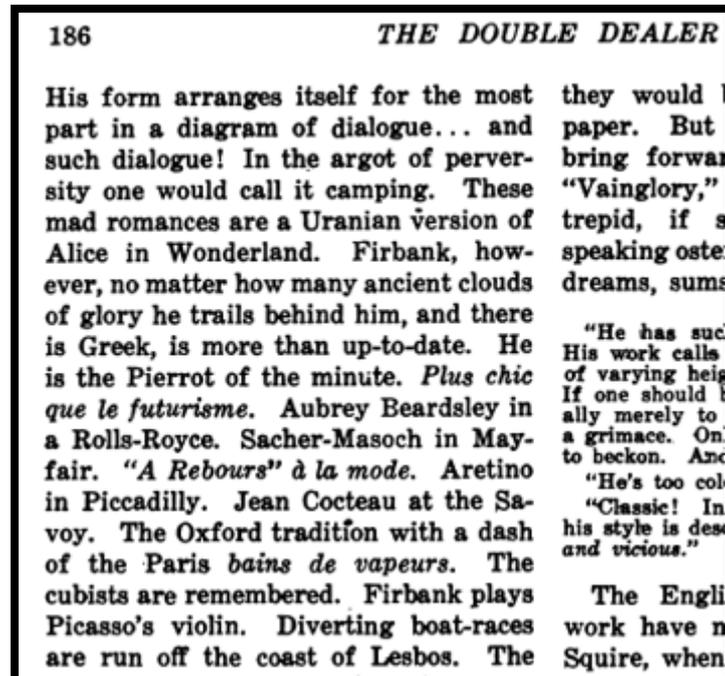


Figure 2. Carl Van Vechten uses ‘camping’ to describe Firbank’s prose style
The Double Dealer, April 1922.

Some critics have referred to Carl Van Vechten as a pioneer of camp without realizing that he was a quiet pioneer of the word ‘camp’ itself. Kirsten MacLeod, for example, calls Van Vechten’s style of ‘new decadence’ ‘a kind of camp *avant la lettre*’.¹⁰¹ Despite this, MacLeod thinks Van Vechten may have been aware of the word when it was ‘part of subcultural discourses in this period, before becoming mainstreamed’ because of the name ‘Campaspe’ in his novel *The Blind Bow-Boy* (1923).¹⁰² Edward White’s biography of Van Vechten similarly calls *The Blind Bow-Boy* ‘a masterpiece of camp’, and adds that the novel was ‘written decades before the term and concept [of camp] came into existence’.¹⁰³ In fact, by 1923 Van Vechten had already been responsible for a direct and unambiguous usage of the term ‘camp’ in serious

¹⁰¹ Kirsten MacLeod, ‘The Queerness of Being 1890 in 1922: Carl Van Vechten and the New Decadence’, in *Decadence in the Age of Modernism*, ed. by Kate Hext and Alex Murray (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), pp. 229-250 (p. 231).

¹⁰² MacLeod, p. 241.

¹⁰³ Edward White, *The Tastemaker: Carl Van Vechten and the Birth of Modern America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), p. 151.

arts criticism, some forty years before Sontag. In the April 1922 issue of *The Double Dealer*, which also published contributions from Ezra Pound, Sherwood Anderson, William Faulkner, and Djuna Barnes, Van Vechten published the following words on Ronald Firbank:

‘...and such dialogue [in the novels of Firbank]! In the argot of perversity, one would call it camping’.¹⁰⁴

Van Vechten not only alludes to ‘camp’s usage in homosexual slang with the phrase ‘the argot of perversity’, he is also confident enough to use ‘camping’ without quotation marks. Tellingly, however, when Van Vechten revised the essay for his collection *Excavations* (1926), he excised the ‘camping’ remark, along with a likening of Firbank’s work to ‘a Uranian version of *Alice in Wonderland*’, ‘Uranian’ being a nineteenth-century term for homosexuality.¹⁰⁵ Nevertheless, the *Double Dealer* article proves that not only was the term ‘camp’ in existence in 1922, Van Vechten himself used it in print, and was prompted to do so when describing the prose of Firbank. Firbank’s novels were so overt in their campness, they added the word ‘camp’ to the field of criticism in 1922. Furthermore, Van Vechten can be credited with teaching the word ‘camp’ to Ronald Firbank himself.

¹⁰⁴ Carl Van Vechten, ‘Ronald Firbank’, *The Double Dealer*, 3.16 (April 1922), 185-6 (p.186). See Figure 2.

¹⁰⁵ Bruce Kellner, *A Bibliography of the Work of Carl Van Vechten* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980), pp. 33-4. Carl Van Vechten, ‘Ronald Firbank’, in *Excavations: A Book of Advocacies* (New York: Knopf, 1926), pp. 170-76.

Villa I Lecci
 Florence - 4. 5. 22.

It is ^{too} delightful of you.. and I
 have quite lost my heart to Pleasant
 Place! I write in great haste... I am
 going to Venice & am all in the
 throes of packing & of finishing a
 book. I shall be in London about
 the first week in June. I have asked
 Grant Richards to keep any letters, etc.
 What does 'camping' mean? I seem

Figure 3. Ronald Firbank's letter to Carl Van Vechten, 4 May 1922, page 1 of 2.
 New York Public Library, Berg Collection

to get it in the air, though not quite... I fancy the French word 'chichi'; (how does one spell it?) owes it, I help to (but quite vaguely), explain:—

"Oh, mon cher, ne fais pas du chichi!"

"Non, mais —"

"Soyons?"

"Mais..."

"C'est bon, hein!?"

I But this is only a mild guess —

Again a thousand thanks, & my deep gratitude,

Ronald Firbank

* Carl Van Vechten 12 June 1922

Figure 4. Ronald Firbank's letter to Carl Van Vechten, 4 May 1922, page 2 of 2.
New York Public Library, Berg Collection

As revealed by Kate Hext's recent essay for *Modernism/modernity* on the archive of Firbank and Van Vechten's unpublished correspondence held at the New York Public Library, Firbank himself learned the term 'camping' in 1922 from reading the Van Vechten piece.¹⁰⁶ One letter contains Firbank's query to Van Vechten about the term. Firbank suggests a French

¹⁰⁶ Kate Hext, 'Rethinking the Origins of Camp: The Queer Correspondence of Carl Van Vechten and Ronald Firbank', *Modernism/modernity*, 27.1 (January 2020), 165-183.

synonym, ‘chichi’ (sometimes spelt as ‘chi-chi’), and supplies a dialogue in which a speaker teaches the other to be less ‘chichi’:

What does ‘camping’ mean? I seem to get it in the air, though not quite... I fancy the French word ‘chichi’ (*how* does one spell it?) does it, & helps (but quite vaguely) explain: –

“Oh, mon cher, ne fais pas du chichi!”

“Non, mais-”

“*Voyons?*”

“Mais-”

“C’est *bon*, hein??”

But this is only a mild guess.¹⁰⁷

‘Chichi’ does not quite have the same meaning as camp today, although the definitions are close: ‘affected and over-elaborate refinement; an affectation, esp. of behaviour or manner’.¹⁰⁸ Hext wonders if ‘perhaps Firbank’s affected phrase “chichi” was calculated to evoke longstanding associations between France and effeminacy in the British press’.¹⁰⁹

In fact, Firbank’s use of ‘chichi’ is a revelation of his own knowledge of homosexual slang. In the 1920s, ‘chichi’ was a slang synonym for homosexual effeminacy. The evidence is in McAlmon’s aforementioned story ‘Distinguished Air’ (1925), when the ‘camping’ character Foster Graham ensures that his fashionable male clothes have ‘a *chichi* touch’ in their shape, the better to give his figure an effeminate ‘hour-glass appearance’.¹¹⁰ Jocelyn Brooke’s 1951 biography of Firbank uses the word to describe the novelist himself: ‘In his movements, [Firbank] affected a more-than-feminine *chichi*, walking with a willowy undulation which made him easily (and sometimes embarrassingly) recognizable at a considerable distance’.¹¹¹ By 1960, Gordon Westwood’s survey of homosexual men in Britain recorded that ‘chi-chi’ was a popular word in ‘the homosexual vernacular’.¹¹²

One explicit demonstration of the connection between ‘chichi’ and ‘camp’ in the 1920s appears in the first English translation of Proust. In *A la recherche du temps perdu* (1922-1930), Proust describes the character of Charlus with the phrase ‘ce “chichi” voulu’.¹¹³ This was

¹⁰⁷ Manuscripts: Ronald Firbank, letter to Carl Van Vechten, 4 May 1922, New York, New York Public Library, Berg Collection, BERG COLL MSS FIRBANK. I slightly disagree with Hext’s transcription of Firbank’s handwriting. Hext reads ‘get it in the air’ as ‘set it in the air’. Yet the ‘g’ on page 1 of the letter, in ‘great haste’, matches the first letter in ‘get it in the air’ on page 2. See Figures 3 & 4.

¹⁰⁸ ‘chichi, n.1 and adj.’, *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, June 2021 [accessed 26 July 2021].

¹⁰⁹ Hext, ‘Rethinking the Origins of Camp’, p. 169.

¹¹⁰ McAlmon, ‘Distinguished Air’, p. 10. Zeikowitz, p. 28.

¹¹¹ Jocelyn Brooke, *Ronald Firbank* (London: Arthur Barker, 1951), p. 34.

¹¹² Westwood, p. 207.

¹¹³ Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu* (1922-1930, repr. Paris: Gallimard, 4 vols, 1987-1989), Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, III (1988), *La Prisonnière* (1923), p. 717.

translated by C. K. Scott Moncrieff in 1929 as ‘this deliberate “camping”’.¹¹⁴ In 1981, Terence Kilmartin regarded this usage as ‘perhaps the earliest appearance of this word [‘camp’] in print’, suggesting that Scott Moncrieff ‘had a very exact ear for homosexual slang’.¹¹⁵ Although Kilmartin was, as this thesis shows, inaccurate about the history of ‘camp’, the translation indicates that Firbank’s guess at a synonym for ‘camping’ revealed that he too had something of an ‘ear for homosexual slang’.

Regrettably, if Van Vechten did write back to Firbank to explain the meaning of ‘camping’, that particular letter has yet to come to light. As Hext reports: ‘certain letters are missing from the Berg Collection holdings on Firbank and Van Vechten. I can find no evidence that these letters are held elsewhere and so think it likely that they are lost’.¹¹⁶ But another letter from Firbank to Van Vechten later in 1922 reveals a second instance of Firbank using the term. When Firbank quotes from a proposed ‘divine libretto’ for a musical comedy, he adds that ‘you [Van Vechten] would probably accuse the juvenile lead of “camping”, if not the leading lady as well’.¹¹⁷ Firbank now appears to be defensive, even resentful, over Van Vechten labelling his work as ‘camp’, suggesting that he was anxious about his work not being taken seriously. Regardless, the letters are evidence that ‘camp’ was in burgeoning circulation in 1922 as a term for discussing art and literature. They prove that there is a link between the remapping of the term from street slang, and the early 1920s spirit of modernism, given the readership of the *Double Dealer*. One can now read Firbank’s work written from late 1922 onwards, such as *Sorrow in Sunlight* (aka *Prancing Nigger*, 1924), *Concerning the Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli* (1926), his 1925 revisions to his earlier works *Vainglory* (1915), *Inclinations* (1916) and *The Artificial Princess* (1934), and his unfinished novel *The New Rhythm* (written 1926, published 1962), with the confidence that these are camp works produced by an author who was definitely aware of the term.

1.5 Beginnings of Camp Theory: Wilson, Isherwood, Sontag

By the 1950s, ‘camp’ was appearing in British novels featuring sympathetic homosexual characters, such as Angus Wilson’s *Hemlock and After* (1952). Although Wilson’s story was innovative for its time, given the criminal status of homosexual acts, the concept of camp was now perceived to be old-fashioned. A homosexual character, Sherman Winter, is introduced in a chapter with the punning title of ‘Camp Fire Cameos’. He is said to have ‘fallen into a

¹¹⁴ Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. by C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Stephen Hudson, 3 vols (1922-1931; repr. London: Penguin Classics, 2016), III, *The Captive* (1929), p. 216.

¹¹⁵ Terence Kilmartin, ‘Translating Proust’, *Grand Street*, 1.1 (Autumn 1981), 134-46 (p. 144).

¹¹⁶ Hext, p. 180 (n.3). My own consulting of Van Vechten’s replies to Firbank found no references to ‘camp’. Manuscripts: Carl Van Vechten, letters to Ronald Firbank 1922-1925, New York, New York Public Library, Berg Collection, BERG COLL MSS VAN VECHTEN.

¹¹⁷ Manuscripts: Firbank, letter to Van Vechten, 2 December 1922, New York Public Library.

conventional, caricatured pansy manner when he was quite young, and, finding it convenient, had never bothered to get out of it'.¹¹⁸ His style of speaking is accordingly described as "'camp" chatter'.¹¹⁹ The American critic Leslie Fiedler, writing in 1957, described Wilson's fiction as "'camp" of the sort to which British literature has accommodated itself for decades now'.¹²⁰ By this he meant 'a native English tradition of nervous, over-bred, effete malice, which goes back to early Huxley and Waugh, and beyond them to Ronald Firbank and Oscar Wilde'.¹²¹ When Wilson wrote about his influences in 1963, he mentioned how his older effeminate brother had given 'the texture of my free imagination [...] an unusual quality of severely moral chi-chi and camp'.¹²² Once again, the use of 'chichi' / 'chi-chi' as a close synonym for 'camp' can be seen right up until Sontag's essay in 1964 – which significantly does *not* mention 'chichi', and which therefore contributed to its omission in subsequent discussions until the present one.

The earliest discussion in literature of the meaning of 'camp', as acknowledged by Sontag, is a scene in Christopher Isherwood's 1954 novel *The World in the Evening*. An openly homosexual doctor, Charles, explains the word to the protagonist, Stephen:

'Did you ever run across the word "camp"?'

'I've heard people use it in bars. But I thought –'

'You thought it meant a swishy little boy with peroxidized hair, dressed in a picture hat and a feather boa, pretending to be Marlene Dietrich? Yes, in queer circles, they call *that* camping. It's all very well in its place, but it's an utterly debased form – [...] What I mean by camp is something much more fundamental. You can call the other Low Camp, if you like; then what I'm talking about is High Camp. High Camp is the whole emotional basis of the Ballet, for example, and of course of Baroque art. You see, true High Camp always has an underlying seriousness. You can't camp about something you don't take seriously. You're not making fun of it; you're making fun out of it. You're expressing what's basically serious to you in terms of fun and artifice and elegance.'¹²³

Despite its innovation, the Isherwood discussion is often cited as unsatisfactory in its vagueness, even by gay writers. Angus Wilson, for example, reviewing *The World in the Evening* two years after his own usage of 'camp' in *Hemlock and After*, called the discussion 'an awful passage'

¹¹⁸ Angus Wilson, *Hemlock and After* (1952; repr. London: Penguin, 1992), p. 89.

¹¹⁹ Angus Wilson, *Hemlock and After*, p. 148.

¹²⁰ Leslie Fiedler, 'Angus Wilson: Anglo-Saxon Attitudes' (review), *Commentary*, 24 (1 January 1957), 294-98 (p. 296).

¹²¹ Fiedler, p. 296.

¹²² Angus Wilson, *The Wild Garden: Or, Speaking of Writing* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1963), p. 140.

¹²³ Christopher Isherwood, *The World in the Evening* (London: Methuen, 1954), p. 125.

and ‘arrant nonsense’ which ‘should never be treated seriously’.¹²⁴ In ‘Notes on “Camp”’, Sontag regards Isherwood as ‘lazy’, and part of the reason why she was moved to write a full essay herself.¹²⁵ Nevertheless, when Isherwood defines camp as ‘serious to you’, he continues the essence of its Victorian origins. It is the same essence suggested by Malcolm Johnston’s 1884 courtroom explanation of camp as a form of ‘proper’ or ‘improper’ amusement. It is an apparent frivolity that has a serious function – it can empower a homosexual identity.

Homosexuality is, however, played down in Sontag’s 1964 essay for *Partisan Review*, ‘Notes on “Camp”’, which pushed the term, which she capitalizes as ‘Camp’, into mainstream discourse so successfully that the essay remains the most referenced discussion of the term. Among the examples in her brief ‘canon of Camp’ are Max Beerbohm’s novel *Zuleika Dobson* (1911), Aubrey Beardsley’s drawings, ‘women’s clothes of the twenties’, and ‘the novels of Ronald Firbank and Ivy Compton-Burnett’.¹²⁶ One of the reasons why ‘Notes on “Camp”’ remains so quotable is that Sontag draws on the aphoristic style of Oscar Wilde, who is the essay’s dedicatee as well as one of its two defining camp ‘ideologists’, along with Firbank.¹²⁷ Yet despite her acknowledgement of the term’s association with two homosexual writers, and with the previous discussion on ‘camp’ being made by a homosexual character in the Isherwood novel, Sontag only mentions homosexuality itself towards the end of her discussion, almost as an afterthought. She calls homosexual people ‘the vanguard – and the most articulate audience – of Camp’.¹²⁸ The pre-1960s origins of camp are elided entirely. It is not until the early 1990s, with the rise of queer theory, that discussions on camp attempt to reclaim its historical relation to ‘the production of queer social visibility’.¹²⁹ In Moe Meyer’s view there is simply only one kind of camp, ‘and it is queer’.¹³⁰ Pamela Robertson, meanwhile, raises the most ironic aspect of Sontag’s essay: despite Sontag’s known relationships with women, ‘Notes on “Camp”’ has no engagement whatsoever with lesbian camp.¹³¹ Perhaps it is useful to consider Wayne Koestenbaum’s remark in the documentary *Regarding Susan Sontag* (2014): ‘Does the author of “Notes on “Camp”” need to come out?’¹³² In that reading, the entire essay is a piece of camp innuendo.

¹²⁴ Angus Wilson, ‘Christopher Isherwood’ (1954), in *Diversity and Depth in Fiction: Selected Critical Writings of Angus Wilson*, ed. by Kerry McSweeney (London: Secker & Warburg, 1983), pp. 219-26 (p. 223).

¹²⁵ Sontag, ‘Notes on “Camp”’, p. 275.

¹²⁶ Sontag, ‘Notes on “Camp”’, p. 278.

¹²⁷ Sontag, ‘Notes on “Camp”’ (1964), p. 281.

¹²⁸ Sontag, ‘Notes on “Camp”’, p. 290

¹²⁹ Moe Meyer, ‘Introduction: Reclaiming the discourse of Camp’, in *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, ed. by Moe Meyer (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 1-22 (p. 5).

¹³⁰ Meyer, ‘Introduction: Reclaiming the Discourse of Camp’, p. 5.

¹³¹ Pamela Robertson, *Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp from Mae West to Madonna* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1996), p. 3.

¹³² *Regarding Susan Sontag*, dir. by Nancy D. Kates (HBO, 2014).

One of the problems caused by the Sontag essay is the conflation between homosexual ‘camp’ and asexual ‘kitsch’; for Sontag, ‘camp’ is mainly a label for objects and abstract ideas, rather than human bodies.¹³³ Echoing Ware’s 1909 use of exaggeration as a defining characteristic, Sontag calls camp ‘the love of the exaggerated, the “off”, of things-being-what-they-are-not’.¹³⁴ She also evokes Malcolm Johnston’s 1884 explanation of camp as both ‘proper’ and ‘improper’, with her description of a camp sensibility as ‘one that is alive to a double sense in which things can be taken’.¹³⁵ But when Sontag discusses the idea of naïve camp, her focus is on objects that include ‘either bad art or kitsch’, in the process evincing ‘a seriousness that fails’.¹³⁶ It is this asexual, naïve, and kitsch sense of camp that is one persistent legacy of Sontag’s essay.

One of Sontag’s claims, that camp is ‘apolitical’, was revised by the writer in later years.¹³⁷ By 1975 Sontag had changed her mind, reflecting that the ‘diffusion’ of camp taste in the early 1960s ‘should probably be credited with a considerable if inadvertent role in the upsurge of feminist consciousness in the late 1960s’.¹³⁸ Anticipating the theories of Judith Butler, Sontag accepted that camp’s ‘ironizing’ of gender roles was ‘one small step toward depolarizing them’.¹³⁹ She now thought of feminist camp as getting ‘underway’ in the 1920s, being a deconstruction of stereotypes of femininity that was used as ‘a mocking challenge to sexism’.¹⁴⁰ Mae West could be seen as a practitioner of camp from this era, in that she always performed as ‘a sort of parody’.¹⁴¹ It is not clear whether Sontag knew that Mae West was an early user of the word ‘camp’ in print herself, in her 1928 play about female impersonators, *The Pleasure Man*.¹⁴² Regardless, these later and often overlooked 1970s remarks on camp by Sontag anticipate the topic of feminist camp, which receives a fuller discussion in Pamela Robertson’s book *Guilty Pleasures* (1996).

In 1981, Sontag published a further ‘note’ on camp. When celebrating Roland Barthes’s ‘dandy attitude’, with its ‘character of an exaggeration’, Sontag explained how this related to her conception of camp as a sensibility informed by a pre-1960s aesthetic:

The version of the aesthete sensibility I once tried to include under the name “camp” can be regarded as a technique of taste for making the aesthete taste less exclusionary (a way of liking more than one really wants to like) and as part of the democratizing of dandy attitudes. Camp taste, however, still

¹³³ Sontag, ‘Notes on “Camp”’, pp. 282, 279.

¹³⁴ Sontag, ‘Notes on “Camp”’, pp. 279.

¹³⁵ Sontag, ‘Notes on “Camp”’, p. 281.

¹³⁶ Sontag, ‘Notes on “Camp”’, pp. 278, 283.

¹³⁷ Sontag, ‘Notes on “Camp”’, p. 277.

¹³⁸ Sontag, ‘The “Salmagundi” Interview’, p. 339.

¹³⁹ Sontag, ‘The “Salmagundi” Interview’, p. 339.

¹⁴⁰ Sontag, ‘The “Salmagundi” Interview’, p. 340.

¹⁴¹ Sontag, ‘The “Salmagundi” Interview’, p. 339.

¹⁴² Robertson, *Guilty Pleasures*, p. 31.

presupposes the older, high standards of discrimination – in contrast to the taste incarnated by, say, Andy Warhol, the franchiser and mass marketer of the dandyism of levelling.¹⁴³

For Sontag in 1981, camp was now a ‘technique of taste’ – and still not a particularly homosexual one – that gestured to the modern and the mainstream, yet still had an element of aristocratic and anachronistic exclusionary intentions. Accordingly, she argues that when Barthes is ‘constantly making an argument against depth’, he uses both ‘directions’ of dandy taste: the ‘high exclusivist taste’ (which the Sontag of 1981 affirms as her definition of camp) and a ‘modern, democratizing form’ of being ‘pleased with virtually everything’, as with Andy Warhol and the nature of kitsch.¹⁴⁴ Thus even Sontag herself was sensitive to her 1964 essay’s contribution to the misconception that camp was something entirely of the 1960s.

1.6 ‘Camp’ After Sontag

Despite the impact of Sontag’s essay, it would be another two decades before the subject of camp warranted full-length books. Mark Booth’s *Camp* (1983) connected Sontag’s ‘Notes on “Camp”’ to the 1909 Ware dictionary definition and the theory of the term’s origins in *se camper*. Booth consolidated Sontag’s examples of Wilde, Firbank, Beardsley, and Mae West, but regretted Sontag’s conflation of kitsch and camp, which he called ‘casting the net too wide’.¹⁴⁵ Kitsch, according to Booth, can appeal to a camp sensibility but it lacks camp’s refusal of ‘honourable intentions’.¹⁴⁶ This implication that camp is a form of accusation of wider society is suggested by the subtitle of the other key 1980s book on the subject: Philip Core’s gazetteer *Camp: The Lie That Tells The Truth* (1984). Core, who gives Firbank a substantial entry, takes his subtitle from an aphorism by Jean Cocteau, although his claim that the source is a 1922 *Vanity Fair* article (which Core does not cite) turns out to be a misattribution.¹⁴⁷ While Cocteau did not use the word ‘camp’ himself, he used language suggestive of camp when explaining his theatre work; he believed in ‘magnifying reality, *by putting it on stilts*’ [his italics].¹⁴⁸ As Mary E. Davis observes, Cocteau’s 1917 ballet *Parade* had been an attempt to

¹⁴³ Sontag, ‘Writing Itself: On Roland Barthes’ (1981), in Roland Barthes, *A Barthes Reader*, ed. by Susan Sontag (London: Jonathan Cape, 1982), pp. vii-xxxvi (p. xxvii, note).

¹⁴⁴ Sontag, ‘Writing Itself’, pp. xxviii, xxvii.

¹⁴⁵ Booth, p. 14.

¹⁴⁶ Booth, p. 23.

¹⁴⁷ Core, p. 9. Cocteau’s aphorism first appears in his 1927 poem ‘Le paquet rouge’, published in Cocteau’s collection *Opéra: œuvres poétiques 1925-1927* (Paris: Stock, 1927), pp. 67-8 (p. 68). See Claude Arnaud, *Jean Cocteau: A Life*, trans. by Lauren Elkin and Charlotte Mandell (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), p. 464.

¹⁴⁸ Jean Cocteau, ‘The Comic Spirit in Modern Art’, *Vanity Fair* (September 1922), pp. 66, 102, p. 66.

demonstrate that ‘modernist art could be entertaining, fashionable, and fun’.¹⁴⁹ Although the ballet inadvertently inspired another term, ‘surrealism’, thanks to an essay by Guillaume Apollinaire, Cocteau was adamant that his work was something else, and that ‘some day this type will be named’.¹⁵⁰ While Davis labels *Parade* ‘modernist chic’, the term ‘camp’, or better still, ‘camp modernism’ now seems appropriate.¹⁵¹

In his book-length study of camp novels, *Frivolity Unbound* (1990), Robert Kiernan regards the practice of literary camp as more liberated than other forms of comic writing, such as parody. Camp differs from parody as, according to Fredric Jameson, parody has the conviction that ‘some healthy linguistic normality still exists’.¹⁵² While other humorous works are encumbered or defined by ‘a covert morality’, camp is ‘frivolity unbound’.¹⁵³ As Kiernan argues, camp literature adds the distinct presence of a narrative mode that is ‘hagiographical, aesthetical, and irrepressibly amoral’.¹⁵⁴ Although his book discusses what he regards as six ‘masters’ of the camp novel, namely Thomas Love Peacock, Max Beerbohm, E.F. Benson, P. G. Wodehouse, and Ivy Compton-Burnett, it is Firbank whose novels are ‘so purely camp’ that ‘all subsequent works of literary camp seem to defer to them’.¹⁵⁵ Whereas other writers’ campness might be inadvertent, Firbank’s effects are deliberate; he always ‘knew he was camping’.¹⁵⁶ From reading the letters between Firbank and Van Vechten (see section 1.4), this argument by Kiernan is proven to be literally true, in terms of Firbank’s awareness of the term ‘camp’.

The concept of literary camp as a genre is developed further in Gary McMahon’s *Camp in Literature* (2006), which devotes a whole chapter to Firbank, along with chapters on Wilde, Saki, Quentin Crisp, Edward D. Wood Jr., Juan Goytisolo, and the poet Chloe Poems. For McMahon, however, ‘the most camp writing in the canon’ is Aubrey Beardsley’s unfinished prose work *Under the Hill* (1896; also known as *Venus and Tannhäuser*).¹⁵⁷ Brigid Brophy’s 1968 book on Beardsley had, in passing, already labelled one sentence in *Under the Hill* as particularly ‘camp and Firbankian’, hinting at just how aware of camp, and indeed aware of Firbank, readers in the late 1960s were expected to be. The sentence in question describes the story of Saint Rose of Lima, a hagiographic sketch:

¹⁴⁹ Mary E. Davis, *Classic Chic: Music, Fashion and Modernism* (2006; repr. Berkeley: University of California, 2008), p. 117.

¹⁵⁰ Davis, p. 128. Cocteau, ‘A New Dramatic Form’, *Vanity Fair* (December 1922), pp. 66, 98 (p. 98).

¹⁵¹ Davis, p. 117.

¹⁵² Fredric Jameson, ‘Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism’, *New Left Review*, 146 (July-August 1984), 53-92 (p. 65).

¹⁵³ Robert Kiernan, *Frivolity Unbound: Six Masters of the Camp Novel – Thomas Love Peacock, Max Beerbohm, Ronald Firbank, E. F. Benson, P. G. Wodehouse, Ivy Compton-Burnett* (New York: Continuum, 1990), p. 17.

¹⁵⁴ Kiernan, p. 50.

¹⁵⁵ Kiernan, p. 65.

¹⁵⁶ Kiernan, p. 149.

¹⁵⁷ McMahon, p. 9.

[He thought] Of Saint Rose, the well-known Peruvian virgin; [...] how she was beloved by Mary, who, from the pale fresco in the Church of Saint Dominic, would stretch out her arms to embrace her; [...] how she promised to marry Ferdinand de Flores, and on the bridal morning perfumed herself and painted her lips, and put on her wedding frock, and decked her hair with roses, and went up to a little hill not far without the walls of Lima; how she knelt there some moments calling tenderly upon Our Lady's name, and how Saint Mary descended and kissed Rose upon the forehead and carried her swiftly into heaven.¹⁵⁸

In terms of criteria for literary camp, one can note Beardsley's knowingly exaggerated tone of Catholic awe, combined with a sense of ennui, gender performance, and sexual – in this case lesbian – innuendo.

McMahon, meanwhile, indicates a further aspect of Beardsley's prose campness in his descriptions of women's clothes that are 'sumptuously scented and decorated and garmented, flagrantly fetishistic':

She wore a gown of white watered silk with gold lace trimmings and a velvet necklet of false vermilion. Her hair hung in bandeaux over her ears, passing into a huge chignon at the back of her head, and the hat, wide-brimmed and hung with a valance of pink muslin, was floral with red roses.¹⁵⁹

The intense, excessive delight Beardsley takes with French-derived words like 'bandeaux', 'chignon' and 'valance', echoing the 1868 'campish' letter of Boulton and Park, is an example of the way this type of literary camp risks exhausting itself on the page. It is unsurprising that *Under the Hill* was left unfinished; such is its sense of languid stasis.

In terms of more recent camp literature (as opposed to camp modernist literature), McMahon nominates Alan Bennett's comic novellas, such as *The Laying On Of Hands* (2001), although he regards Bennett as lacking the 'extrovert incongruities of camper writers'.¹⁶⁰ However, McMahon's book pre-dates Bennett's *The Uncommon Reader* (2006), which certainly has 'extrovert incongruities': it depicts Queen Elizabeth II acquiring an obsession with literary fiction, which eventually triggers her abdication.¹⁶¹ If, as Sontag argues, 'the whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious', then Bennett's dethroning of the real-life Elizabeth II,

¹⁵⁸ Aubrey Beardsley, *Under the Hill* (1896), in Aubrey Beardsley, *In Black and White: The Literary Remains of Aubrey Beardsley*, ed. by Stephen Calloway and David Colvin (London: Cypher, 1998), pp. 1-114 (pp. 72-76), authorized pdf version <<https://www.cypherpress.com/content/beardsley>> [accessed 26 April 2021].

¹⁵⁹ Beardsley, *Under the Hill*, p. 29. McMahon, p. 42.

¹⁶⁰ McMahon, pp. 80-81.

¹⁶¹ Alan Bennett, *The Uncommon Reader* (2006; repr. London: Faber, 2012).

so she has time to read more Anita Brookner novels, reads as a sublime twenty-first-century moment of literary camp.¹⁶²

Today, Firbank has a low visibility as an example of camp, with occasional exceptions. In 2019 a quotation from a Firbank novel was used in the catalogue for the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art's high-profile exhibition, *Camp: Notes on Fashion*. As the title suggests, Sontag's essay 'Notes on "Camp"' is now better known than many of the examples she gives in the essay, such as the works of Firbank. However, Fabio Cleto's introductory essay for the catalogue, 'The Spectacles of Camp', uses *Vainglory* for its epigraph to frame the idea of camp as a critical tool:

“But Mrs Cresswell,” she inquired, “who was she – exactly?”
 “Primarily,” the Bishop replied, “she was a governess. And with some excellent people too. Apart from which, no doubt, she would have been canonised, but for an unfortunate remark. It comes in *The Red Rose of Martyrdom*. ‘If we are all a part of God,’ she says, ‘then God must indeed be horrible.’”¹⁶³

Literary camp, then, can be defined as not so much a genre but a strategy. It is a style or moment or characterization in a text, where the criteria of camp are used to question societal or cultural categories. Such texts produce a range of subversive effects, such as a sense of pleasurable disorientation, of self-aware surfaces at play, of unanchored mockery, of exaggeration, theatricality, and exhibitionism, of excess (such as knowingly florid prose), of incongruity, and of parodies of acceptable behaviour, especially gender roles. Today, in a culture where, as Gary McMahon argues, ‘politics and commerce sell the façade as reality’, literary camp’s ability to ‘expose seriousness and the cult of meaning as a sham’ can be read with renewed value.¹⁶⁴

1.7 Decolonizing Literary Camp

A side-effect of the tendency in discussions of camp to cite *only* Sontag is the misconception that camp is predominantly a racially white concept. Obvious examples of black performers using forms of camp certainly pre-date Sontag, not least in the case of the dancer Josephine Baker, yet Sontag’s essay omits Baker entirely. The omission is briefly addressed by Mark Booth’s book *Camp*, which includes Baker as camp, describing her as ‘a self-parodying black

¹⁶² Sontag, ‘Notes on “Camp”’, p. 288.

¹⁶³ Cleto, ‘Introduction: The Spectacles of Camp’, p. 11. Ronald Firbank, *Vainglory* (1915), in Firbank, *Vainglory with ‘Inclinations’ and ‘Caprice’*, ed. by Richard Canning (London: Penguin, 2012), pp. 1-177 (p. 82).

¹⁶⁴ McMahon, p. 140.

sex-symbol'.¹⁶⁵ Booth and Core both include the 1980s black pop star Grace Jones as an example of a camp performer, with Booth comparing Jones to a character from Firbank.¹⁶⁶ In David Bergman's 1993 anthology *Camp Grounds*, however, the subject is properly broached by William Lane Clark. Firbank's use in *Sorrow in Sunlight* (1924) of mainly black characters within an indeterminate fantasy island setting, based on his visits to Jamaica and Cuba, is his solution to the risk of 'a moral agenda', argues Clark.¹⁶⁷ Firbank's camp, pastoral ambience enables an avoidance of wider racial and colonial commentary, just as it enables commentary on implied homosexuality.

In fact, an affinity between camp and some subcultural racial modes of expression is suggested in the positive reception of *Sorrow in Sunlight / Prancing Nigger* by several black American writers at the time, particularly those associated with the Harlem Renaissance. Langston Hughes rated Firbank's novel for decades; in 1958 he told Carl Van Vechten that it was a book 'I still love'.¹⁶⁸ When W.E.B. Du Bois reviewed Firbank's novel in 1924 for *The Crisis*, the magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), he called it 'delicious' and 'delightful'.¹⁶⁹ Two years later, when castigating Van Vechten's use of 'nigger' in his novel *Nigger Heaven* (1926), Du Bois named Firbank as one of the white writers whose use of the word he accepted: when 'employed by Conrad, Sheldon, Allen and even Firbanks [sic], its use was justifiable'.¹⁷⁰ Gwendolyn Bennett, writing in *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life*, was impressed that Firbank 'knows the delirious, shrill laughter of the Negro and he knows how to put it on paper'.¹⁷¹ In the same journal the Barbadian writer Eric D. Walrond praised Firbank for using characters who were 'folks you cannot help but experience in any of the isles of the West Indies.'¹⁷² Most intriguing is Walrond's implication that a version of camp existed as a style of humour among Afro-Caribbean people, and that it had been appropriated by white writers, Firbank excepted:

There is, in us colored people, a certain humour that is inescapable but which

¹⁶⁵ Booth, p. 143.

¹⁶⁶ Booth, p. 173.

¹⁶⁷ William Lane Clark, 'Degenerate Personality: Deviant Sexuality and Race in Ronald Firbank's Novels', in *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality*, ed. by David Bergman (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), pp. 134-55 (p. 153).

¹⁶⁸ Langston Hughes, letter to Carl Van Vechten, 18 September 1958, quoted in Langston Hughes, *Remember Me to Harlem: The Letters of Langston Hughes and Carl Van Vechten, 1925-1964*, ed. by Emily Bernard (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001), p. 301.

¹⁶⁹ W.E.B. Du Bois, review of Firbank's *Prancing Nigger* (1924), in 'An Array of Books: Semi-Annual Book Review', *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races*, 28.5, no. 167 (September 1924), 218-20 (p. 219).

¹⁷⁰ Du Bois, 'Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven*', *The Crisis*, December 1926, repr. in W.E.B. Du Bois, *Writings*, edited by Nathan Huggins, Library of America, 34 (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1986), pp. 1216-18 (p. 1216).

¹⁷¹ Gwendolyn Bennett, 'Sorrow in Sunlight – Ronald Firbank', review, *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life*, 4.42 (June 1926), 195-96 (p. 196).

¹⁷² Eric D. Walrond, 'Prancing Nigger by Roland Firbank' [sic], review, 'Our Book Shelf', *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life*, 2.19 (July 1924), 219-21 (p. 219).

heretofore has been abused by those writers whose *raison d'être* lies largely in their vision and commercialism in exploiting the golden life-lore [...] It is native to us but we do not always allow it to come into its literary birthright. It is a delicate, subtle, sophisticated, almost Rabelaisian touch with which *Prancing Nigger* is consistently shot through.¹⁷³

Walrond does not name this 'certain humour' that has a 'Rabelaisian touch'. However, the argument that a form of camp already existed by the 1920s as a black style, if rarely named as such, has since been touched on more explicitly.

One example is the use of camp in black slave dances. Chuck Kleinhans notes how the cakewalk contained an element of 'subversive ridicule', which exposed the strategic aspect of camp: 'everyone laughed, but one side laughed differently from the other'.¹⁷⁴ Similarly, Zadie Smith has argued that the shim-sham dance is a mocking 'dance of a walk', and is 'as camp as any movement on earth'.¹⁷⁵ For Smith, camp is nothing less than 'the nuclear option of the disenfranchised', whether the oppression concerns race or sexuality.¹⁷⁶ It is 'doing more than is necessary with less than you need'.¹⁷⁷ This echoes the very first dictionary definition of 'camp'. As Moe Meyer observes, Ware's 1909 definition uses the phrase 'want of character' to encode the subject 'based on excess/lack'.¹⁷⁸ In this sense, camp is not just about exaggeration, but the exaggeration of a norm projected from a *lack* of a norm. Smith further relates this defiant aspect of camp to anti-racist movements such as Black Lives Matter. In this context, camp becomes 'the political urgency of street-level grace' – 'being seen in all your glory, and within the terms of your own self-conception'.¹⁷⁹

As Eric Walrond's 1924 review of Firbank suggests, one problem with white practitioners of camp – Firbank is Walrond's exception – is a history of appropriating black bodies as part of its love of parodying categories, but without granting black characters any sense of agency. Pamela Robertson argues that the 'use of blackness as an authenticating discourse is a trope that runs through white camp in general and needs to be taken into account to fully understand camp'.¹⁸⁰ By 'authenticating discourse', Robertson indicates the use of racial difference as a stable object with which to position and validate a white 'porous and mobile

¹⁷³ Walrond, p. 219.

¹⁷⁴ Chuck Kleinhans, 'Taking Out the Trash', in *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, ed. by Moe Meyer (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 182-201 (p. 198).

¹⁷⁵ Zadie Smith, 'Mark Bradford's *Niagara*' (2017), in Zadie Smith, *Feel Free: Essays* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2018), pp. 181-86 (p. 181).

¹⁷⁶ Smith, p. 181.

¹⁷⁷ Smith, p. 181.

¹⁷⁸ Moe Meyer, 'Under the Sign of Wilde', in *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, ed. by Moe Meyer (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 75-109 (p. 76).

¹⁷⁹ Smith, p. 186.

¹⁸⁰ Pamela Robertson, 'Mae West's Maids: Race, "Authenticity", and the Discourse of Camp', in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject – A Reader*, ed. by Fabio Cleto (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), pp. 393-408 (p. 395).

queer identity'.¹⁸¹ Robertson's examples include the pop singer Madonna's camp videos for 'Like a Prayer', 'where images of black religion authenticate her passion' and 'Vogue', based on the dance that originated from New York's black, queer ballroom scene, where Madonna sings 'it doesn't matter if you're black or white, if you're a boy or a girl', while 'obscuring', Robertson argues, 'voguing's racial and homosexual specificity'.¹⁸²

In her essay for *Music & Camp* (2018), Francesca T. Royster equally argues that black bodies have often been objectified and used as 'authenticizing' objects for white camp creators' own sense of 'realness', rather than as agents.¹⁸³ Royster points out how the first usage in the *OED* of the black slang term 'booty', for the human posterior, is in fact cited to Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven*. Given Van Vechten's pioneering usage of 'camping' in his 1922 Firbank article, his fondness for street slang clearly included the language of black subcultures as much as homosexual ones. Accordingly, Royster points out how more discussions of camp should acknowledge this tendency to overlook black camp practitioners; her example is the contemporary pop singer Janelle Monáe. Taking this cue, Chapter Four of this thesis recognizes Richard Bruce Nugent as a camp modernist, while Chapter Five highlights *LOTE* (2020) by Shola von Reinhold, a recent novel by a black British writer which touches not only on the decolonization of camp, but the decolonization of literary modernism.

1.8 Defining 'Modernism': With and without Firbank

To define 'modernism' for the purposes of this thesis, it is worth considering a little of the term's mutating history, not least to contextualize a rare 1927 usage of the word to describe Ronald Firbank. Sean Latham and Gayle Rogers's mapping of the term's 'evolution' concludes that there is ultimately 'no right way to define modernism': it has been used to name any set of 'uniquely innovative works in literature, film, art, drama, and architecture that have broken with the canons of classicism and realism to remake a fundamentally new world.'¹⁸⁴ Despite this, they acknowledge that in terms of literary modernism, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, and T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (both 1922), 'run steadily' through the 'core' of such discussions.¹⁸⁵

Firbank's own work contains evidence of how the term 'modernism' first went from relative obscurity to 'vastly greater circulation' in 1907, when it was associated with rebellions

¹⁸¹ Robertson, 'Mae West's Maids', p. 398.

¹⁸² Robertson, 'Mae West's Maids', p. 402.

¹⁸³ Francesca T. Royster, 'Camp in the Performances of Janelle Monáe', in *Music & Camp*, ed. by Christopher Moore and Philip Purvis (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2018), pp. 137-156 (p. 141).

¹⁸⁴ Sean Latham and Gayle Rogers, *Modernism: Evolution of an Idea* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 207.

¹⁸⁵ Latham and Rogers, p. 7.

within the Catholic church.¹⁸⁶ Pope Pius X's encyclical to his bishops, *Pascendi Dominici Gregis: On the Doctrine of the Modernists* (1907) was followed with a 1910 mandate for them to swear an 'Oath Against Modernism'.¹⁸⁷ Firbank uses 'modernism' in this sense in *Valmouth* (1919), when referring to the clothing of a priest:

'How incomparable their livery is!' Lady Parvula commented.
'It has a seminary touch about it,' Mrs. Hurstpeirpont conceded, 'though at headquarters it's regarded (I fear!) as inclining toward modernism, somewhat.'
'Pray, what's that?'
'Modernism? Ask any bishop.'¹⁸⁸

This religious association of 'modernism', as Firbank's joke testifies, was a dominant usage in 1919, and would continue to be so for much of the 1920s. Despite occasional attempts to use the term to describe a canon of new literature, which date from 1908 with T. E. Hulme's 'Lecture on Modern Poetry', any truly effective attempt to do so was, as John Harwood puts it, 'rare to vanishing-point before 1927'.¹⁸⁹ That year saw the publication of Laura Riding and Robert Graves's *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, a book that uses the term for the work of E. E. Cummings, T. S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein, and James Joyce, among others.¹⁹⁰ Until then 'modernism' was used sporadically to describe any new art which had 'an anti-traditional, rebellious mind-set'.¹⁹¹ In 1917, for example, *Vanity Fair* published an article by Jean Cocteau about his ballet *Parade*, on which Picasso, Satie and Diaghileff had also worked. The article's title, probably written by an editor, was 'Parade: Ballet Réaliste – In Which Four Modernist Artists Had a Hand'.¹⁹² Cocteau himself considered the label condescending. In a 1922 article about his poetry, he stated: 'I wanted to express myself with a strict avoidance of "modernism" and all its grimaces, which the naïfs take for novelty.'¹⁹³

¹⁸⁶ Latham and Rogers, p. 22.

¹⁸⁷ Latham and Rogers, pp. 21-22.

¹⁸⁸ Ronald Firbank, *Valmouth: A Romantic Novel* (1919), in Ronald Firbank, *Valmouth & Other Stories* (Ware: Wordsworth, 1996), pp. 3-88 (p. 22).

¹⁸⁹ John Harwood, *Eliot to Derrida: The Poverty of Interpretation* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1995), pp. 34, 31.

¹⁹⁰ Laura Riding and Robert Graves, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (London: William Heinemann, 1927).

¹⁹¹ Latham and Rogers, p. 22.

¹⁹² Jean Cocteau, 'Parade: Ballet Réaliste – In Which Four Modernist Artists Had a Hand', *Vanity Fair*, September 1917, pp. 37, 106 (p. 37).

¹⁹³ Cocteau, 'The Comic Spirit in Modern Art', p. 66.

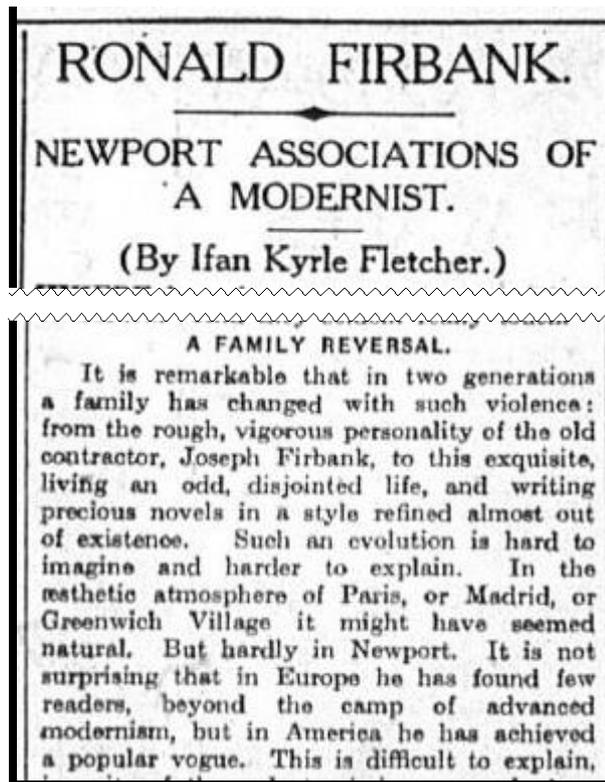


Figure 5. Ifan Kyrle Fletcher uses ‘modernist’ for Firbank
South Wales News, 20 August 1927

Like Cocteau, Firbank was a recipient of this early usage of ‘modernist’ after his death in 1926. In 1927 the book dealer and theatre historian Ifan Kyrle Fletcher, then living in Newport, published a literary article in the *South Wales News* titled ‘Ronald Firbank: Newport Associations of a Modernist’. This describes Firbank as a ‘modernist’, in the sense of being among the ‘strange reactions to Industrialism within our own time’.¹⁹⁴ Fletcher defines Firbank’s own literary modernism as a sense of a ‘flat design and connected pattern of a tapestry, full of grotesques of engaging and unique people, with never a portrait or an everyday event to connect them with life as we know it’.¹⁹⁵ He further remarks that ‘in Europe he [Firbank] has found few readers, beyond the camp of advanced modernism, but in America he has achieved a popular vogue’.¹⁹⁶ In the same way that Van Vechten dropped the word ‘camping’ from reprints of his *Double Dealer* essay, Fletcher effaced the term ‘modernist’ in his subsequent writings on Firbank. When the 1927 article was reprinted in the *South Wales Argus* the following year, it was retitled ‘A Modern Eccentric: Memories of the Exquisite Work of a True Bohemian’ with all references to ‘modernist’ or ‘modernism’ omitted.¹⁹⁷ Fletcher’s full-

¹⁹⁴ Ifan Kyrle Fletcher, ‘Ronald Firbank: Newport Associations of a Modernist’, *South Wales News*, 20 August 1927, p. 6. See Figure 5.

¹⁹⁵ Fletcher, ‘Ronald Firbank: Newport Associations of a Modernist’, p. 6.

¹⁹⁶ Fletcher, ‘Ronald Firbank: Newport Associations of a Modernist’, p. 6.

¹⁹⁷ Fletcher, ‘A Modern Eccentric: Memories of the Exquisite Work of A True Bohemian’, *South Wales Argus*, 6 October 1928, p. 4. Miriam J., Benkovitz, ‘The Fabric of Biography’, *Columbia Library Columns*, 29.2 (1980), 23-32 (p. 25).

length biographical essay in his book *Ronald Firbank: A Memoir* (1930) equally lacks any mention of the term.¹⁹⁸ Interestingly, one of the people Fletcher contacted when seeking reminiscences of Firbank's life was Ezra Pound.¹⁹⁹ Although Pound was not acquainted with Firbank personally, this move by Fletcher shows his initial characterization of Firbank as belonging to what he regarded as the milieu of 'advanced modernism'.

In fact, from as early as 1919 Firbank was compared to writers now considered canonical modernists. A 1919 column in *The Atlanta Constitution* nominates Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and Richardson's *Pilgrimage* as examples of 'a new novel form which is analogous to the Pointilliste school of painting', being the style of painting associated with artists such as Seurat and Signac.²⁰⁰ In such novels, the article explains, disconnected 'dots' of thought are arranged so that 'with proper perspective the whole appears with a brilliance and animation'.²⁰¹ The use of 'pointillism' to describe the signature modernist device of the 'stream of consciousness' had already appeared the previous year, when Scofield Thayer called Joyce's paragraphs 'suggestive fancifully at least of pointillist painting', as they give the reader 'the streaming impressions, often only subconsciously cognate to one another, of our habitual life – that vague, tepid river of consciousness to which only our ephemeral moments of real will or appetite can give coherence.'²⁰² This comparison was echoed in *The Little Review*, the journal then serializing *Ulysses*, in a letter from the artist Marsden Hartley: he wondered if Joyce was 'a Seurat [or] a Signac in wordy dots?'²⁰³ In the *Atlanta Constitution* article, Firbank is included in this burgeoning trend:

An interesting development similar in form but not in content to the Pointilliste style, in which all unessential connectives are eliminated, leaves a design as dainty and elaborate, as light and fastidious as a dentelle pattern on a renaissance binding. Ronald Firbanks [sic] has produced three chef d'oeuvres in this manner: *Vainglory*, *Inclinations* and *Caprice*.²⁰⁴

This, then, is evidence of an early critical response to Firbank's work as a combination of modernism and camp, albeit without using either term. There are his formally innovative elements, compared here to the modernist painting style of pointillism, and his 'dainty' and 'fastidious' elements, which we can now read as camp. The 1919 article also helps to explain why Fletcher used the term 'modernist' for Firbank in 1927.

¹⁹⁸ Ifan Kyrle Fletcher, 'The Memoir', in Ifan Kyrle Fletcher et al, *Ronald Firbank: A Memoir* (London: Duckworth, 1930) pp. 9-100.

¹⁹⁹ Benkovitz, 'The Fabric of Biography', p. 27.

²⁰⁰ 'Library Notes', *The Atlanta Constitution*, 11 May 1919, p. 4.

²⁰¹ 'Library Notes', p. 4.

²⁰² Scofield Thayer, 'James Joyce', *Dial*, 65, no. 773 (19 September 1918), 201-3 (p. 203).

²⁰³ Marsden Hartley, 'Divagations', letter in 'The Reader Critic' column, *Little Review*, 5.5 (September 1918), 59-62 (p. 61).

²⁰⁴ 'Library Notes', p. 4.

Despite the Riding and Graves anthology, the association of the word ‘modernism’ with writers like T. S. Eliot was not widely accepted until the 1950s and 1960s, although two books of the 1930s made important steps in this direction. Edmund Wilson’s study *Axel’s Castle* (1931), which Vincent Sherry calls ‘the first major literary history of modernism’, groups Eliot with Joyce, Stein, Yeats, and Proust, albeit as a new version of French Symbolism, rather than ‘modernism’.²⁰⁵ More significantly for this discussion, the artist and writer Wyndham Lewis’s memoir *Blasting and Bombardiering* (1937) groups Lewis with Joyce, Eliot, and Pound, and briefly labels his own work as “‘modernist’ art”, although he prefers the term ‘the “Men of 1914”’.²⁰⁶ The exclusion of Firbank from this group is made explicit when Lewis describes how the ‘Men of 1914’ opposed a ‘post-war’ sensibility, being ‘a recrudescence of “the Nineties”’ whose creators were ‘completely impervious to the changes in the world around them’.²⁰⁷ He calls Firbank ‘the very *genius loci* of the “post-war”, and the reincarnation of all the Nineties – Oscar Wilde, Pater, Beardsley, Dawson all rolled into one, and served up with *sauce créole*’.²⁰⁸ Lewis admits, however, that Firbank ‘seemed’ to like his work, so much so that in 1922 Firbank commissioned a Vorticist portrait from Lewis, later using it for the first edition of *The Flower Beneath the Foot* (1923).²⁰⁹ This keenness by Firbank to align himself with Lewis contradicts Lewis’s concept of him as ‘completely impervious’ to the culture of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, the perceived incompatibility of Firbank with modernism owes something to Lewis’s remarks.

After 1945, a number of essays configured ‘modernism’ as an expired historical movement: their examples include Georg Lukács’s ‘The Ideology of Modernism’ (1955) and Harry Levin’s ‘What Was Modernism?’ (1960).²¹⁰ Three major anthologies then consolidated the canon: Richard Ellmann and Charles Feidelson’s *The Modern Tradition* (1965), Irving Howe’s *Literary Modernism* (1967), and Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane’s *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature, 1890-1930* (1974).²¹¹ As a result, the ‘defining element’ of ‘modernism’ by this time became a sense of innovation to the point of difficulty, with the key examples being the literary works of Joyce and Eliot, along with the art of Picasso.²¹² Tellingly, all three of these anthologies omitted the Harlem Renaissance and women

²⁰⁵ Vincent Sherry, *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 15.

²⁰⁶ Wyndham Lewis, *Blasting and Bombardiering* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1937; repr. London: Imperial War Museum, 1992), pp. 4, 254.

²⁰⁷ Lewis, p. 225.

²⁰⁸ Lewis, p. 225.

²⁰⁹ Lewis, p. 228. Benkovitz, Miriam J. Benkovitz, *Ronald Firbank: A Biography* (1969; repr. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1970), p. 222.

²¹⁰ Latham and Rogers, pp. 58, 78.

²¹¹ Latham and Rogers, pp. 73-76.

²¹² Latham and Rogers, p. 76.

writers like Djuna Barnes and Mina Loy. Discussions of homosexuality, meanwhile, were, as Latham and Rogers note, ‘barely present’.²¹³

Since then, debates on the meaning of ‘modernism’ have both honed and expanded the term. The problems caused by such groupings and exclusions led to the first discussion of ‘modernisms’, plural, in Frank Kermode’s *The Sense of an Ending* (1967).²¹⁴ This in turn enabled the first discussion of ‘postmodernism’ in 1971, via Ihab Hassan’s essay ‘POSTmodernISM: A Paracritical Bibliography’, with ‘high modernism’ emerging in 1976, thanks to Charles Altieri’s ‘Objective Image and Act of Mind in Modern Poetry’.²¹⁵ Altieri called for the recognition of Eliot and Pound’s ‘high modernism’ as a foregrounding not only of difficulty but of formal experimentation in representing human experience. Despite this, as Chris Baldick warns, there has been a tendency in literary scholarship since the 1970s to allow ‘dubious additions’ into the canon of modernism, ‘straining to justify’ many writers as ‘more consistently modernistic than they really were’.²¹⁶ Baldick’s concept of ‘modernist’ calls instead for a focus on texts which contain ‘radical disruptions of form’ and which have aspirations to the avant-garde; these texts allow one ‘to indicate some common features of experimental work in several Western arts (and theories of art) in the first half of the twentieth century’.²¹⁷ His entry for ‘modernism’ in the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* maps art movements such as Vorticism, Futurism, Expressionism, and Surrealism onto the rejection of chronology by Proust, the stream-of-consciousness styles of Joyce and Woolf, and the fragmentary and allusive imagery of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound.²¹⁸ Baldick further accepts the term ‘modernist’ for Edith Sitwell, Dorothy Richardson, Ford Madox Ford, T. E. Hulme, and Wyndham Lewis.²¹⁹

More recently, critics have accentuated the ‘high modernism’ argument while nevertheless expanding the canon. Vassiliki Kolocotroni, Jane Goldman, and Olga Taxidou accentuate formal experimentation as ‘the essence of the Modernist impulse’.²²⁰ David Trotter specifically urges that the label of ‘modernism’ be kept for works which present experimentation as the product of ‘a specific crisis’, such as the seismic social changes brought about by war and technological advances after 1910.²²¹ Modernist writers, Trotter advises, should ideally be defined as those who embrace ‘difficulty’ and ‘self-consciousness’ to a level

²¹³ Latham and Rogers, p. 77.

²¹⁴ Latham and Rogers, p. 83.

²¹⁵ Latham and Rogers, pp. 134, 86.

²¹⁶ Chris Baldick, *The Oxford English Literary History, Vol 10: 1910-1940 – The Modern Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 399, 400.

²¹⁷ Baldick, *The Modern Movement*, pp. 399, 398.

²¹⁸ Baldick, ‘modernism’, in *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 4th edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) <<http://www.oxfordreference.com>> [accessed 29 January 2018].

²¹⁹ Baldick, *The Modern Movement*, p. 399.

²²⁰ Vassiliki Kolocotroni, Jane Goldman and Olga Taxidou, eds., *Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), p. xvii.

²²¹ David Trotter, *The English Novel in History, 1895-1920* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 3.

which allows readers ‘to discriminate between them and their immediate predecessors’; to be modernist is thus to perform a break from the recent past.²²² Lawrence Rainey’s voluminous *Modernism: An Anthology* (2005), meanwhile, uses the term to denote individual writers rather than a strict historical era. This allows for the inclusion of Samuel Beckett as a ‘late modernist’, with work from 1989, the year of Beckett’s death, considered by Rainey to be as ‘modernist’ as Pound’s poetry from the 1910s.²²³ Rainey also acknowledges Stein and Barnes as modernists, in addition to Baldick’s choices, and includes Mina Loy and Nancy Cunard (who was a friend of Firbank’s), but not Firbank himself. This tendency to exclude Firbank, despite the early reviews labelling him as a ‘Modernist’ comparable with Richardson and Joyce, demonstrates the persistent assumption that campness is incompatible with modernism.

1.9 Steps Towards ‘Camp Modernism’, 1995-2016

In their 1995 study of queer approaches to popular culture, Corey Creekmur and Alexander Doty briefly refer to the sensibility of camp as ‘gay culture’s crucial contribution to modernism’, although by this they mean twentieth-century culture in general, and particularly cinema rather than experimental prose.²²⁴ For them, camp was ‘the first intellectual (although highly aestheticized) approach to indicate the potential for gays, lesbians, or bisexuals to reverse, or at least question, the terms of dominant cultural production and reading’.²²⁵ However, they also regard it as remaining largely a ‘private, subcultural form’ until Sontag’s essay in the 1960s.²²⁶ Thus the pre-Sontag literary ‘outings’ of the term by Van Vechten, McAlmon, and Scott Moncrieff can be seen as essentially overlooked by critics, giving rise to the idea that camp readings of modernism are purely retrospective; for many critics, camp begins and ends with Sontag.

There have been, however, a number of attempts before the 2016 *Camp Modernism* special issue of *Modernism/modernity* to discuss camp and literary modernism in relation to each other. Linda Watts, for example, has pointed out how many modernist texts ‘began as jokes’ in the camp mode, notably Woolf’s *Orlando* and Stein’s *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933).²²⁷ Watts highlights Gertrude Stein’s use of camp, partly as a way for Stein to create her dandyish public persona (much like Wilde and Firbank), partly as a means of

²²² Trotter, p. 4.

²²³ Lawrence Rainey, ed., *Modernism: An Anthology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 1017-1085.

²²⁴ Corey K. Creekmur and Alexander Doty, ‘Introduction’, in *Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian and Queer Essays on Popular Culture*, ed. by Corey K. Creekmur and Alexander Doty (London: Cassell, 1995), pp. 1-11 (p. 2).

²²⁵ Creekmur and Doty, p. 2.

²²⁶ Creekmur and Doty, p. 3.

²²⁷ Linda S. Watts, *Gertrude Stein: A Study of the Short Fiction*, Twayne’s Studies in Short Fiction, 77 (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1999), p. 61.

expressing her marginalized perspective as both a lesbian and an expatriate, and also as a tempering effect ‘to keep modernism from taking itself too seriously’.²²⁸ Despite its historical origins, camp is, Watts argues, mostly a modern phenomenon. One reason why this is the case may be due to its roots in modern mass culture’s ambience of ‘doubt, alienation, relativism, and pluralism’.²²⁹ Watts also wonders if it is ‘appropriate’ to respond to modernist texts with laughter (despite the large amounts of comedy in *Ulysses*), something which might explain the overlooking of Firbank as a modernist innovator.²³⁰

In the 2000s, critics such as Dennis Denisoff have argued for Max Beerbohm to be viewed as both modernist and camp, due to his innovative use of parody as a ‘tool for socio-political interrogation’.²³¹ Beerbohm’s parodies of Ada Leveson and Robert Hichens now show how camp was a way of sustaining ‘aestheticism’s political utility into the twentieth century’.²³² Although Beerbohm’s novel *Zuleika Dobson* (1911) is included in Sontag’s ‘canon of Camp’, Denisoff suggests that it lacks the necessary ‘camp love’ and core respect for the subjects under its mockery.²³³ Instead, he nominates ‘No. 2, The Pines’ (1920) as a better example of Beerbohm’s modernist camp, combining as it does themes of ‘aestheticism, effeminacy, and uncommon sexuality’ in a self-reflexive ‘mise-en-abîme’ style which ‘allows him to out-manoeuvre those modernists who tried to establish their avant-gardism by anxiously proclaiming their separation from history’.²³⁴ As Kristin Mahoney has argued, Beerbohm’s ‘treatment of the Victorian past was also often at once critical and sympathetic, derisive and loving, in a manner that only the term *camp* properly encapsulates’.²³⁵ Just as Van Vechten had to reach for the term ‘camp’ to describe Firbank in 1922, Mahoney shows how the term is productive for literary modernist scholarship in 2015.

An argument for the recognition of ‘modernist camp poetics’ presents itself in Grzegorz Czemieli’s 2014 essay on the writer Mina Loy.²³⁶ Czemieli argues that Loy’s poem ‘Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose’ (1923-25) contains imagery in a tone of camp ridicule similar to ‘Ronald Firbank and Jane Bowles’.²³⁷ As with many theorists on camp, Czemieli notes the way camp uses ‘excess and exaggeration’ to create space ‘within the realm of the visible for new

²²⁸ Watts, p. 68.

²²⁹ Wayne Dynes, ed., *Encyclopedia of Homosexuality*, 2 vols (London: St James Press, 1990), I, pp. 189-90 (p. 190). Watts, p. 69.

²³⁰ Watts, p. 60.

²³¹ Denisoff, p. 125.

²³² Denisoff, p. 98.

²³³ Denisoff, p. 127.

²³⁴ Denisoff, p. 127.

²³⁵ Kristin Mahoney, *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 29.

²³⁶ Grzegorz Czemieli, ‘Mina Loy’s Deconstructions of Modernity as an Early Instance of Modernist Camp Poetics’, in *Redefining Kitsch and Camp in Literature and Culture*, ed. by Justyna Stępień (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), pp. 85-97.

²³⁷ Czemieli, p. 95.

identities that have hitherto remained repressed or non-represented in the dominant discourse'.²³⁸ In this way, to express a homosexual identity through the code of camp was to annex an abstract space for the subject's own sense of self-preservation. To 'camp' in this sense was, historically, a strategy of representing queer identity that could slip under the radar of legally permitted behaviour.

One of the few twentieth-century discussions of camp's overall relation to modernism is Peter Horne's 1996 essay 'Sodomy to Salome: Camp Revisions of Modernism, Modernity and Masquerade'. Horne argues that scholarly attention to the formation of camp seems to be 'missing in most accounts of modernism', and that Sontag failed to acknowledge camp's direct link with modernist homosexual identities.²³⁹ While Horne applauds Eve Sedgwick's work on this connection (as discussed in this thesis's introduction), he points out how 'some of the elements of camp' emerged earlier, during the late nineteenth century's intensification of homophobic legislation.²⁴⁰ Specifically, camp was evident in the appreciation of 'the excessive woman as spectacle', as seen in Wilde's take on the Salome myth.²⁴¹ Horne also stresses that the sense of community produced by the shared pleasure of camp makes it different from kitsch; kitsch lacks, he argues, 'a language that offers an identification'.²⁴²

It is only in 2000 that the term 'camp modernism' is finally used in the sense of identifying a canon. The sixth edition of the *Oxford Companion to English Literature* (2000), edited by Margaret Drabble, adds an entry for 'Gay and Lesbian Literature' for the first time. This states that 'Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* and the fiction of Ronald Firbank (1886–1926) effected a transition from decadence to camp modernism'.²⁴³ Otherwise, as Margaret Gillespie notes in her 2016 essay on the camp of Barnes's *Nightwood*, 'the concept of "camp modernism" [...] remains surprisingly understudied'.²⁴⁴ Just as in the 1960s, when Sontag's essay felt inevitable and necessary, by the 2010s it was only a matter of time before studies of modernism turned their attention to camp.

²³⁸ Czemiel, p. 88.

²³⁹ Peter Horne, 'Sodomy to Salome: Camp Revisions of Modernism, Modernity and Masquerade', in *Modern Times: Reflections on a Century of English Modernity*, ed. by Mica Nava and Alan O'Shea (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 129-60 (p. 152).

²⁴⁰ Horne, p. 153.

²⁴¹ Horne, pp. 153, 156.

²⁴² Horne, p. 153.

²⁴³ 'Gay and lesbian literature', in Margaret Drabble, ed., *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, 6th edn, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 398-99 (p. 399).

²⁴⁴ Margaret Gillespie, "'The Triumph of the Epicene Style": *Nightwood* and Camp', *Miranda*, 12 (2016) <<http://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.8634>> (para. 11).

1.10 *Modernism/modernity*'s 'Camp Modernism' Forum, 2016

As this thesis's introduction has stated, the first substantial academic study of 'camp modernism' as a named concept was claimed by the January 2016 issue of *Modernism/modernity*, the journal of the US-based Modernist Studies Association.²⁴⁵ The section editors, Marsha Bryant and Douglas Mao, explained that the essays, 'which take up the question of camp's relation to modernism', were versions of talks given in Las Vegas at the MSA's conference there in 2012.²⁴⁶ The last MSA event to focus on camp before this was a 'Camp Modernism' panel organized by Melissa Bradshaw at MSA 2 in 2000, which focused on Djuna Barnes, Ada Levenson, and Amy Lowell.²⁴⁷ In their introduction to the 2016 forum, Bryant and Mao believe 'more scholarly attention is due the camp-modernism nexus' because of the way modernist studies often include figures of the early twentieth-century cultural scene who come under the umbrella of camp, such as Josephine Baker, Cecil B. DeMille, and Cecil Beaton.²⁴⁸

One result of the special issue of *Modernism/modernity* was that a 'fundamental tension' was revealed by the essays, between Sontag's 'curatorial mode of privileging objects and canons' and Christopher Isherwood's more theatrical idea of camp as a 'gravitation toward people and performance'.²⁴⁹ This tension can, however, be resolved when, as this chapter has shown, one compares the Sontag essay with Van Vechten's 1922 essay on Firbank. The Van Vechten piece combines camp people with modern objects ('Aubrey Beardsley in a Rolls Royce') and highlights how Sontag and Van Vechten both turn canon-forming into a camp, Wildean performance on the page. The true 'tension' is the playing-down by Sontag of homosexuality, while the earlier discussions by Isherwood and Van Vechten had made the sexual implications of camp more overt.

Among the *Modernism/modernity* essays on camp modernism, only 'A Fugue on Camp' by Allan Pero attempts a general survey of the idea, with a style based on Sontag's 'Notes on "Camp"'. As with Sontag, the essay is a list of pronouncements on the nature of camp modernism, but with little explanation for each claim. Indeed, Bryant and Mao accurately call Pero's piece a 'swag bag of bon mots'.²⁵⁰ Nevertheless, some of Pero's statements are useful points of departure. For example, Pero echoes Peter Nicholls's concept of 'other modernisms' when he calls camp not only a 'symptom of modernism' but also 'one of modernism's others'.²⁵¹ He also labels Firbank 'the Samuel Beckett of camp', albeit without further

²⁴⁵ 'Special Section: Camp Modernism Forum', *Modernism/modernity*, 23.1 (January 2016), 1-36.

²⁴⁶ Bryant and Mao, notes, pp. 32-33, n. 4.

²⁴⁷ Bryant and Mao, notes, pp. 32-33, n. 4.

²⁴⁸ Bryant and Mao, p. 2.

²⁴⁹ Bryant and Mao, p. 3.

²⁵⁰ Bryant and Mao, p. 3.

²⁵¹ Allan Pero, 'A Fugue on Camp', *Modernism/modernity*, 23.1 (January 2016), 28-36 (p. 29).

explanation.²⁵² While this is a frustrating claim, it does at least acknowledge Firbank's compatibility with *Modernism/modernity's* concept of suitable writers. The most intriguing part of Pero's essay is a list within his list, 'A Selected Canon of Camp Modernism'.²⁵³ Although it is difficult to tell the extent of Pero's playfulness, seven texts in the list do seem worthy of note, in that they have already received critical attention as both camp *and* modernist works. These are:

Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood*

Max Beerbohm, *Seven Men*

Charles Henri Ford, *Sleep in a Nest of Flames*

James Joyce, 'Circe' (from *Ulysses*)

Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*

Evelyn Waugh, *Vile Bodies*

Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*

Firbank is overlooked entirely in Pero's list, an omission made all the more puzzling by the inclusion of Evelyn Waugh's *Vile Bodies* (1930). Waugh himself was at pains to declare the influence of Firbank on this novel, so much so that he stated as much in the preface to a later edition.²⁵⁴

Since *Modernism/modernity's* special issue, a new essay collection has appeared which touches on both camp modernism and Firbank. Kate Hext and Alex Murray's *Decadence in the Age of Modernism* (2019) recognizes 'camp modernism' as one of the 'many manifold modernisms now in play'.²⁵⁵ Although their book favours 'decadence' as its operative term for new essays on Firbank, Van Vechten, Gertrude Stein, Ada Leverson, and Richard Bruce Nugent, it concedes that in the modernist era, 'decadence began to evolve into another new language of sexual dissidence: camp'.²⁵⁶ The function of camp for queer identities in the modernist era cannot be underestimated; it addressed the 'fundamental issue of how to codify an identity that is irrevocably at odds with society'.²⁵⁷ Regarding Firbank's reputation in 2019, the editors note how 'critics have seemed irredeemably uncertain about how to make sense of his legacy'.²⁵⁸ Indeed, this seems to be the case with the overlooking of Firbank in the *Modernism/modernity* special issue.

²⁵² Pero, p. 29.

²⁵³ Pero, p. 30.

²⁵⁴ See section 4.4.

²⁵⁵ Kate Hext and Alex Murray, 'Introduction', in *Decadence in the Age of Modernism*, ed. by Kate Hext and Alex Murray (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), pp. 1-26 (p. 8).

²⁵⁶ Hext and Murray, p. 19.

²⁵⁷ Hext and Murray, p. 20.

²⁵⁸ Hext and Murray, p. 21.

This thesis, then, brings new certainty to the Firbank legacy. The next chapter will show what it is about Firbank's novels that led them to be labelled both 'camp' and 'modernist' in the 1920s, and why they are such vital texts to consider if, as this chapter has demonstrated, explorations of camp modernism have only just begun. For a writer like Ronald Firbank, steeped in the signs of Wilde but working in the age of modernism, a *camp* modernism was the only modernism that made sense.

2 Ronald Firbank, Camp Modernist

Having established in the previous chapter Firbank's connection to the histories of the terms 'camp' and 'modernism', this chapter investigates the aspects of Firbank's work that make him an exemplar of the term 'camp modernism'. Firbank's major works are usually considered to be the seven novels published in his lifetime. These are: *Vainglory* (1915), *Inclinations* (1916), *Caprice* (1917), *Valmouth* (1919), *The Flower Beneath the Foot* (1923), *Sorrow in Sunlight* (1924; also known in the US, and for a time in the UK, as *Prancing Nigger*), and *Concerning the Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli* (1926). An eighth novel written mostly before 1915 but finished by Firbank in 1925, *The Artificial Princess*, was published posthumously in 1934. *The Complete Ronald Firbank* (1961; retitled *The Complete Firbank* in 1973) collects all eight novels along with the short fictions *Odette* (1916) and *Santal* (1921), and a play, *The Princess Zoubaroff* (1920). The draft of an unfinished novel, *The New Rythum*, which Firbank was working on when he died in 1926, was published in 1962. Since the early 1990s a number of new editions of Firbank's work emerged which corrected errors in previous reprints and favoured the author's last known revisions.²⁵⁹ These include *The Early Firbank* (Quartet, 1991) and *Complete Plays* (Dalkey Archive, 1994), both edited by Steven Moore; *Valmouth & Other Stories* (editor unnamed, Wordsworth Classics 1996); *Three Novels* (Penguin, 2000, comprising *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, *Sorrow in Sunlight*, and *Concerning the Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli*) and *The Flower Beneath the Foot* by itself (Picador 2018), both edited by Alan Hollinghurst, along with a single-volume edition of 'Vainglory' with 'Inclinations' and 'Caprice' (Penguin Classics, 2012), edited by Richard Canning. This thesis uses these more scholarly-adjacent editions when quoting from Firbank.

2.1 A Child of Aubrey Beardsley

When considering accounts of Firbank's influences, the most frequently-recurring name is Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898), the decadent *fin-de-siècle* artist and writer. As discussed in Chapter One, Beardsley's drawings and prose have been cited as examples of camp art and literature from Sontag onwards. The impact of Beardsley on Firbank was acknowledged by Firbank himself in late 1914 when he discussed his first proper novel, *Vainglory*, with the

²⁵⁹ Richard Canning, 'A Note on the Texts', in Ronald Firbank, *Vainglory' with 'Inclinations' and 'Caprice'*, ed. by Richard Canning (London: Penguin, 2012), pp. xlix-l.

London publisher Grant Richards. When Firbank discovered Richards had been friends with Beardsley in the 1890s, he made the association personal. According to Richards, Firbank said:

He [Firbank] had attempted to do something [in prose] like Beardsley had done in the illustrations to *The Rape of the Lock*. Was I an admirer of Beardsley? Did I like Felicien Rops's work? So I knew Beardsley...! Surely I would bring his child into the world. I could not be so unkind as to turn it from my door.²⁶⁰

Yet Firbank seems to have worried about making the debt too obvious in the designs for his books' jackets and frontispieces. He stopped at using Beardsley's art, preferring artworks by Felicien Rops (for *Vainglory*), Albert Rutherston (for *Inclinations*), Augustus John (for *Caprice*, *Valmouth*, *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, and *Concerning the Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli*), and C. R. W. Nevinson (for *Sorrow in Sunlight*), as well as the distinctly modernist Wyndham Lewis (for *The Flower Beneath the Foot*). In fact, he stipulated to the printer of *Vainglory*, George Wiggins, that the Rops drawing needed to be captioned with the artist's name, in case it might be mistaken for a Beardsley; the latter assumption might tempt, he wrote, 'hostile critics'.²⁶¹

Other accounts of Firbank's life which confirm his taste in Beardsley also illustrate Beardsley's association in the 1920s with sexual non-conformity. The London bookseller C. W. Beaumont recalled how Firbank thought of Beardsley's prose work *Under the Hill* as 'restful', whereas, as Beaumont put it, 'the normal male would doubtless consider such a work, on the contrary, disturbing'.²⁶² Beaumont's use of 'normal' indicates the function of intentionally camp art as a non-normative, or indeed queer, mode of expression. Furthermore, Firbank was viewed as Beardsley-esque in his physical appearance. When Robert McAlmon met Firbank in 1922, he thought Firbank 'belonged to the Beardsley tradition' not only in his writing style, but in his physical appearance. McAlmon says Firbank's hands were 'long, beautifully manicured and cared for. They were a dream of Aubrey Beardsley'.²⁶³

The Beardsley comparison has appeared in print from at least 1917. When discussing Firbank's *Caprice* (1917) in his regular advertisement for his publishing company, Richards named Beardsley as one of several artists comparable to Firbank's prose: 'I am sure that the man who has a Lautrec, a Beardsley, a Conder, a Picasso, or a Nevinson will find it [*Caprice*] a

²⁶⁰ Grant Richards, *Author Hunting* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1934), p. 249.

²⁶¹ Ronald Firbank, letter to George Wiggins, 3 March 1915. Quoted in Benkovitz, *Ronald Firbank: A Biography*, p. 134.

²⁶² Ifan Kyrle Fletcher, contribution to *Ronald Firbank: A Memoir* (1930), revised version with corrections by Mrs C. A. Kyrle Fletcher, in *Ronald Firbank: Memoirs and Critiques*, ed. by Mervyn Horder (1977; repr. Dallas: Duckworth, 1979), pp. 3-56 (p. 25)

²⁶³ Robert McAlmon, *Being Geniuses Together: 1920-1930*, revised by Kay Boyle (London: Michael Joseph, 1970), p. 80.

congenial companion for his pictures'.²⁶⁴ Firbank was himself happy to use Beardsley's name to describe his work for new readers, as seen in the 1920 advertisement for *Valmouth*, which was approved by Firbank and which carried a quote from *Irish Life*: 'a weird medley of Beardsley-esque chatter'.²⁶⁵ In 1922, Grant Richards similarly used Van Vechten's description of Firbank as an 'Aubrey Beardsley in a Rolls-Royce' when publicizing Firbank's back catalogue in his house advertisement.²⁶⁶ In 1924 *The Double Dealer* carried a review of Firbank's *Prancing Nigger* by Louis Gilmore, which regarded Firbank as the 'most successful exponent' of 'the *genre* that is the invention of Beardsley', but added that 'in *Under the Hill* there are a few dull passages, whereas in Mr Firbank's works there are none'.²⁶⁷

After Firbank's death in 1926, the Beardsley comparisons persisted. Evelyn Waugh's 1929 article on Firbank acknowledged the influence of *Under the Hill*, albeit a 'superficial' one.²⁶⁸ E. M. Forster, meanwhile, thought Firbank derivative, in that his 'mind inherits the furniture and his prose the cadences of Aubrey Beardsley's *Under the Hill*'.²⁶⁹ By the 1940s, the comparisons show how *Under the Hill* and other prose works of Beardsley had become more obscure. This can be seen in Jocelyn Brooke's fictionalized memoir from 1949, *A Mine of Serpents*, when the character Hew Dallas says: 'You haven't read Firbank? Oh my dear you *must* – Beardsley in prose, but *much* better'.²⁷⁰ More recently, Joseph Bristow has indicated a specifically modernist aspect to Firbank's debt to Beardsley's novel, calling Firbank 'the modernist heir to this extreme of fin-de-siècle aestheticism'.²⁷¹

One passage from Firbank that bears the influence of *Under the Hill* is, as Gary McMahon suggests, the following extract from *The Flower Beneath the Foot* (1923):

Lying amid the dissolving bath crystals while his man-servant deftly bathed him, he fell into a sort of coma, sweet as a religious trance. Beneath the rhythmic sponge, perfumed with *Kiki*, he was St Sebastian, and as the water became cloudier and the crystals evaporated amid the steam, he was Teresa... and he would have been, most likely, the Blessed Virgin herself, but that the

²⁶⁴ Grant Richards, 'Grant Richards Ltd', advertisement column, *Times Literary Supplement*, 25 Oct 1917, p. 513.

²⁶⁵ Advertisement for *Valmouth*, *Times*, 23 March 1920, p. 6.

²⁶⁶ Richards, 'Grant Richards Ltd', advertisement column, *Times Literary Supplement*, 18 May 1922, p. 322.

²⁶⁷ Louis Gilmore, 'A Dingy Lilac Blossom of Rarity Untold', review of Firbank's *Prancing Nigger*, *The Double Dealer*, 6.35 (April 1924), 132-33 (p. 132).

²⁶⁸ Evelyn Waugh, 'Ronald Firbank', in Evelyn Waugh, *A Little Order: Selected Journalism*, ed. by Donat Gallagher (1977; repr. London: Penguin, 2019), pp. 77-80 (first publ. in *Life and Letters*, 2.10 (March 1929), 191-96), p. 77.

²⁶⁹ E. M. Forster, 'Our Butterflies and Beetles', *New York Herald Tribune*, 5 May 1929, supplement XI ('Books'), pp. 1 & 6 (p. 6)

²⁷⁰ Jocelyn Brooke, *A Mine of Serpents* (London: Bodley Head, 1949), p. 126.

²⁷¹ Joseph Bristow, 'The Aesthetic Novel, from Ouida to Firbank', in *A History of the Modernist Novel*, ed. by Gregory Castle (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 37-65 (p. 58).

bath grew gradually cold.²⁷²

As McMahon argues, this passage has a strong resonance of Beardsley's 'decadent yet precious sensuality', of the kind seen in *Under the Hill*'s Saint Rose of Lima passage.²⁷³ It contains Beardsley's same mode of oneiric Catholic fantasy, combined with homoerotic, gender-ambiguous imagery, and subversive irony. However, the Firbank passage is even more knowing and more transgressive in terms of gender. Compared to the Beardsley passage, it is more allusive, aerated, and impressionistic: 'steamier' in every sense. As Marina Maymone Siniscalchi argues, Firbank's style has more 'lightness', 'evanescence', and more of a sense of 'artificiality and transience' than one finds in the world of Beardsley.²⁷⁴ Firbank also tends to use a very twentieth-century form of bathos, such as the bath water getting colder in the above passage. This is typical of the high-to-low juxtaposition often found in examples of twentieth-century types of camp, rather than in Beardsley's more nineteenth-century, decadent version.

2.2 Camp Echoes: Wilde, Beckford, Corvo

After Beardsley, the next most overt influence on Firbank is Beardsley's collaborator, Oscar Wilde. Brigid Brophy devotes a substantial section of *Prancing Novelist* to Firbank's interest in Wilde, and claims that 'Firbank modernised Oscar Wilde's camp'.²⁷⁵ John Mortimer, meanwhile, suggests that Firbank can be read as 'a bridge between Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* and Evelyn Waugh's *Vile Bodies*'.²⁷⁶ Firbank certainly saw himself as a Wilde disciple; Ifan Kyrle Fletcher records that the young Firbank collected rare editions of Wilde, in addition to his collections of Beardsley, Beerbohm, and Dowson.²⁷⁷ While at Cambridge, Firbank befriended Wilde's son Vyvyan Holland.²⁷⁸ Through Holland, Firbank met Wilde's close friend Robbie Ross, who in 1907 threw a birthday party for Holland at which the guests included Firbank, Wilde's other son Cyril, and the writer Henry James.²⁷⁹ When becoming a published author, Firbank was keen to use his and Grant Richards's contacts to have his work endorsed by the surviving Wilde circle. Richards passed on a comment from Robbie Ross on

²⁷² Firbank, *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, p. 65.

²⁷³ McMahon, p. 161. For the Beardsley passage, see section 1.6 of this thesis.

²⁷⁴ Marina Maymone Siniscalchi, *Aubrey Beardsley: contributo ad uno studio della personalità e dell'opera attraverso l'epistolario* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1977). Quoted in Steven Moore, *Ronald Firbank: An Annotated Bibliography of Secondary Materials, 1905-1995* (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive, 1996), p. 135.

²⁷⁵ Brigid Brophy, *Prancing Novelist: A Defence of Fiction in the Form of a Critical Biography in Praise of Ronald Firbank* (1973; repr. Victoria, TX: Dalkey Archive, 2016), p. 171.

²⁷⁶ John Mortimer, 'Introduction' (1986), in Ronald Firbank, *The Flower Beneath the Foot* (London: Penguin 1986), pp. 5-12 (p. 6).

²⁷⁷ Fletcher, *Ronald Firbank: A Memoir* (1977), p. 24.

²⁷⁸ Vyvyan Holland, *Son of Oscar Wilde* (1954), ed. by Merlin Holland, rev. edn (London: Robinson Publishing, 1999), p. 181.

²⁷⁹ Holland, *Son of Oscar Wilde*, pp. 188-89.

Vainglory ('very clever').²⁸⁰ Ada Levenson, Wilde's 'Sphinx', praised the novel in terms that suggest a type of camp taken to a level of intensity that verged on difficulty; she thought the novel 'restless and witty and allusive enough to give anyone who understands it a nervous breakdown'.²⁸¹

As James Merritt points out, there is a dearth in Firbank of the style of ominous tragedy found in Wilde's *Dorian Gray* and *Salome*.²⁸² The aesthetic 'falling' associated with the etymological roots of 'decadence' is transformed by Firbank into a breezier and more uplifting variety. A Firbank protagonist like Cardinal Pirelli might meet an untimely death like Wilde's Dorian, but he does so with a 'serene' expression of 'distinction and sweetness' on his face.²⁸³ For Angus Wilson, Firbank's *Prancing Nigger* may be 'utterly unconcerned with the health of society', yet it is the novel he most regards, out of all English literature, as 'in love with life', and indeed the novel deemed most likely 'to make its reader in love with life'.²⁸⁴ Despite Firbank's sense of an anachronistic world in his fiction, this distinction locates him further from Wildean decadence and closer in spirit to the airier, effervescent cultural moods associated with the 1920s.

Certainly, some moments in Firbank are likely to be Wildean references. One scene in *Sorrow in Sunlight* (1924) echoes the popular anecdote of Wilde arriving at New York harbour in January 1882, when he stated to a US customs official that he had 'nothing to declare but my genius'. Although, as Richard Ellmann points out, there is 'no contemporary account' or evidence that Wilde said this remark at the time, the quip became attached to Wilde's name in print from at least 1912, when it appeared in Arthur Ransome's *Oscar Wilde: A Critical Study*.²⁸⁵ It is likely, therefore, that Firbank was aware of the anecdote when he wrote the following scene, set in a customs house:

Floor of copper, floor of gold... Beyond the customs-house door, ajar, the street at sunrise seemed aflame.

²⁸⁰ Manuscripts: Grant Richards, letter to Ronald Firbank, 26 April 1915, *Archives of Grant Richards, 1872-1948*, British Publishers' Archives on Microfilm (Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1979), microfilm scans of papers held at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (USA), copy at London, British Library, Mic.B.53/273-344, reel 23, letterbook 23, p. 307.

²⁸¹ Manuscripts: Grant Richards, letter to Firbank, 10 May 1915, *Archives of Grant Richards*, reel 23, letterbook 23, p. 334.

²⁸² James Douglas Merritt, *Ronald Firbank*, Twayne's English Authors, 93 (New York: Twayne, 1969), p. 133.

²⁸³ Ronald Firbank, *Concerning the Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli* (1926), in Ronald Firbank, *Three Novels*, ed. by Alan Hollinghurst (London: Penguin, 2000), pp. 183-247 (p. 247).

²⁸⁴ Angus Wilson, 'Letter from London' (1961), in *Diversity and Depth in Fiction: Selected Critical Writings of Angus Wilson*, ed. by Kerry McSweeney (London: Secker & Warburg, 1983), pp. 134-39 (p. 138).

²⁸⁵ Arthur Ransome, *Oscar Wilde: A Critical Study* (1912; repr. London: Methuen, 1913), p. 67.

‘Have you nothing, young man, to declare?’

‘... Butterflies!’

‘Exempt of duty. Pass.’

Floor of silver, floor of pearl...

Trailing a muslin net, and laughing for happiness, Charlie Mouth marched into the town.²⁸⁶

As Brophy puts it, Firbank here ‘adopts a model from the mythology of Oscar Wilde’ but then translates it into what she calls ‘Firbankian imagery’, with fragmentation, concision, unattributed dialogue, and impressionistic shards of description, all of which locate the passage closer to the modernist mode than the world of Wilde.²⁸⁷ In the final scene of his next novel, *Concerning the Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli* (1926), Firbank repeats the reference twice in what Brophy calls ‘yet more nakedly Wildean form’: literally naked.²⁸⁸ As the cardinal is packing to leave, the boy Chicklet says to him: ‘I suppose, as you cross the border, they’ll want to know what you have to declare.’ Pirelli replies: ‘I have nothing, child, but myself.’²⁸⁹ Pirelli then lasciviously chases the boy around his cathedral, tearing off all his own clothes in the process (which itself has camp overtones of the dance in Wilde’s *Salome*), until he suddenly announces to ‘some phantom image in the air’: ‘As you can see, I have nothing but myself to declare’.²⁹⁰ Firbank thus turns the Wilde anecdote into a more camp, more bawdy, and more explicitly homosexual moment of intertext.

When looking further back in history for influences on Firbank, a key name is William Beckford (1760-1844), the wealthy writer and aesthete. Referring to a flamboyantly ornate sentence in William Beckford’s *Vathek* (1786), where a character’s dreams contain ‘pieces of brocade, nosegays of flowers, and other unmeaning gewgaws’, Edmund Wilson remarks: ‘one cannot think of any other English writer up to our own time who would be likely to have written this; but it is the sort of thing one finds in Firbank’.²⁹¹ Wilson further argues that Beckford and Firbank share a ‘cool and trivial cruelty that we might call cattily feminine if it were not so plainly something else’.²⁹² This ‘something else’ is left unexplained by Wilson, but it is not

²⁸⁶ Ronald Firbank, *Sorrow in Sunlight* (1924), in Ronald Firbank, *Three Novels*, ed. by Alan Hollinghurst (London: Penguin, 2000), pp. 117-182 (p. 147).

²⁸⁷ Brophy, *Prancing Novelist*, pp. 133-34.

²⁸⁸ Brophy, *Prancing Novelist*, p. 134 (n. 1).

²⁸⁹ Firbank, *Concerning the Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli*, p. 245.

²⁹⁰ Firbank, *Concerning the Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli*, p. 247.

²⁹¹ William Beckford, *Vathek* (1786), ed. by Thomas Keymer (Oxford: OUP, 2013), p. 71. Edmund Wilson, ‘Firbank and Beckford’ (1926), in Edmund Wilson, *The Shores of Light: A Literary Chronicle of the Twenties and Thirties* (London: W. H. Allen, 1952), pp. 264-66 (p. 266).

²⁹² Edmund Wilson, ‘Firbank and Beckford’, p. 266.

unreasonable to suggest he is reaching for a synonym for ‘camp’, given it was a word and concept he was familiar with at the time.²⁹³

David Duck notes biographical similarities between Beckford and Firbank’s lives, pointing out that when in Portugal, Firbank stayed in Beckford’s house in Sintra.²⁹⁴ Duck also argues that both writers ‘had little patience with words which did not rapidly achieve one point and let the writer and reader push on to the next’.²⁹⁵ This is not true of *Vainglory* and *Inclinations*, with their many chapters of inconsequential dialogue, but the tight pacing of *Sorrow in Sunlight* certainly evokes the conciseness of *Vathek*. Kenneth Clark similarly connects the work of Beckford and Firbank, calling the styles of both writers ‘absurd’, and adding that Beardsley’s *Under The Hill* was ‘a sort of link’ between the two.²⁹⁶

For Firbank’s Edwardian influences, one can look to Baron Corvo (aka Frederick ‘Fr.’ Rolfe) and Robert Hugh Benson, brother of the more middlebrow camp writer E. F. Benson. Firbank met Hugh Benson while a student at Cambridge, when Benson was working there as a Catholic priest. Indeed, Benson was the officiating priest when Firbank converted to the faith in 1907.²⁹⁷ Robert Scoble argues that the title character of *Concerning the Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli* combines aspects of the flamboyant Benson with those of the protagonist of Corvo’s *Hadrian VII*, a book that Benson introduced to Firbank.²⁹⁸ Firbank’s early stories are also sometimes derivative of Benson, adds Scoble, with Firbank’s story ‘Lady Appledore’s Mesalliance’ (c. 1908) virtually ‘a parody of Benson’s *The Sentimentalists*’ (1906).²⁹⁹ Corvo, meanwhile, would inspire Firbank right up until the weeks before his death in 1926, when he visited Genzano, the Italian town used in Corvo’s *Toto* stories.³⁰⁰

2.3 Firbank as Early Modernist

While the campness of Firbank’s novels is easily indicated through prominent surveys of camp such as Sontag’s, claims to his credentials as a modernist innovator tend to be located outside of similar surveys of modernism. One example is his entry in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, a text worth acknowledging given that Firbank himself joked about such an entry in *Vainglory*, via his

²⁹³ See section 1.3.

²⁹⁴ David Duck, ‘Ronald Firbank’, in *Frederick Rolfe and Others*, editor unknown (Aylesford: St Albert’s Press, 1961), pp. 14-17 (p. 16).

²⁹⁵ Duck, p. 16.

²⁹⁶ Kenneth Clark, *The Best of Aubrey Beardsley* (London: John Murray, 1979), p. 41.

²⁹⁷ Edward Martin Potoker, *Ronald Firbank* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), p. 11.

²⁹⁸ Robert Scoble, *The Corvo Cult: The History of an Obsession* (London: Strange Attractor, 2014), p. 181.

²⁹⁹ Scoble, *The Corvo Cult*, p. 194 (n. 45).

³⁰⁰ Scoble, *The Corvo Cult*, p. 181.

fictional avatar ‘Claud Harvester’, author of ‘*Vaindreams*’.³⁰¹ The real-life *Britannica* has included an entry on Firbank from 1964, calling him ‘a literary innovator of some importance’.³⁰² Richard Canning supports this claim, calling Firbank ‘among the most brilliant and idiosyncratic innovators of the modernist novel’ and ‘among the supreme prose stylists of high modernism’.³⁰³ He believes Firbank ‘virtually single-handedly revolutionized the representation of dialogue on the page’, and constitutes one of the few ‘tangible connections’ between the aesthetic values of the *fin de siècle* and Ezra Pound’s modernist credo of ‘Make it New’.³⁰⁴ Alan Hollinghurst similarly argues that *Vainglory*’s ‘fragmented texture, elliptical structure and suppression of plot certainly entitle it to be considered the most advanced and concentrated modernist novel that had so far appeared in England’.³⁰⁵ In another essay, Hollinghurst maintains that Firbank’s work shares two ‘processes’ with the modernist work of T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and W. B. Yeats: namely ‘his cutting-out of superfluties’ and ‘his amassing of fragments’.³⁰⁶

In addition to his camp influences such as Beardsley, Wilde, Beckford, and Corvo, Firbank was influenced by painters of the Post-Impressionist and Futurist movements, both of which Christopher Butler identifies as examples of ‘Early Modernism’, being ‘innovative work in music, painting, and literature, from the turn of the twentieth century to the period of the First World War’.³⁰⁷ Of the Post-Impressionist artists, Firbank especially admired Paul Gauguin, known for his vivid use of form and his interest in representing the indigenous people of French Polynesia. *Inclinations* (1916) equates the sight of a black woman with Gauguin’s paintings: ‘There’s the Negress you called a *Gauguin*’ [sic].³⁰⁸ When pitching to publishers his novel *Sorrow in Sunlight* (1924), which foregrounds black characters on a fictional tropical island, Firbank described it as ‘purposely a little “primitive”, rather like a Gauguin in painting’.³⁰⁹ Brigid Brophy argues that the novel ‘simply *is* a Gauguin’; it has the same ‘tropically enervated vitality’.³¹⁰ Another Post-Impressionist Firbank admired was Matisse, with his intense colours and strong sense of design over depth; in a letter, Firbank fantasized about owning Matisse’s

³⁰¹ See section 2.6.

³⁰² ‘Firbank, Ronald’, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc, 1964), vol IX, p. 291. ‘Ronald Firbank’, *Encyclopedia Britannica* (online), last revised 17 May 2021 <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ronald-Firbank>> [accessed 28 September 2021].

³⁰³ Richard Canning, ‘Introduction’, in Ronald Firbank, *‘Vainglory’ with ‘Inclinations’ and ‘Caprice’*, ed. by Richard Canning (London: Penguin, 2012), pp. xiii-xliv (pp. xiii, xxxviii).

³⁰⁴ Canning, ‘Introduction’, p. xiii.

³⁰⁵ Hollinghurst, ‘Introduction’, in *The Early Firbank*, p. vii.

³⁰⁶ Hollinghurst, ‘I Often Laugh When I’m Alone: The Novels of Ronald Firbank’, *Yale Review*, 89.2 (2001), 1-18 (p. 3).

³⁰⁷ Christopher Butler, *Early Modernism: Literature, Music and Painting in Europe, 1900-1916* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. xv.

³⁰⁸ Firbank, *Inclinations*, p. 199.

³⁰⁹ Firbank, letter to C. S. Evans of Heinemann, quoted in Richards, *Author Hunting*, p. 257. Benkovitz, *Ronald Firbank: A Biography*, p. 240.

³¹⁰ Brigid Brophy, ‘Firbank’ (1962), in Brigid Brophy, *Don’t Never Forget* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1966), pp. 243-48 (p. 247).

paintings.³¹¹ This affinity was detected in his prose by critics; in 1929, Arthur Waley called Firbank ‘the earliest writer to discard the load of realistic lumber under which the modern story is interred – to do in writing what Cezanne, Matisse, Renoir did in painting’.³¹² Perhaps one factor in the exclusion of Firbank from the modernist canon is that he does not appear in Edmund Wilson’s canon-forming *Axel’s Castle* (1931), even though Wilson notes the influence of Matisse in Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons*, in which she was now writing ‘pungently, impressionistically, concisely’ – a description which could equally apply to Firbank.³¹³

The other key term for thinking of Firbank as an early modernist is Futurism. Firbank admired the artist C. R. W. Nevinson, who, as Christopher Butler points out, was for a time allied with the Italian Futurist, Marinetti.³¹⁴ Firbank commissioned Nevinson to illustrate the dustcover and endpapers of *The Flower Beneath the Foot* (1923) and the endpapers of *Sorrow in Sunlight* (1924). *Flower* also contained a 1922 portrait of Firbank by Wyndham Lewis on the title page, in a hard, metallic Vorticist style, opposite a light, more humanized sketch of Firbank by Augustus John. Richards tried to persuade Firbank against having two different author portraits in the same novel, but Firbank insisted.³¹⁵ It is a perfect illustration of Firbank’s self-promotion as a writer who synthesizes two sides of himself: the camp charmer (in the Augustus John portrait), and the difficult modernist (the Lewis). Firbank’s identification with Futurism can also be seen in his selection of quotes from reviews with which to advertise his books. One uses the *Glasgow Herald*’s comparison of his fiction to ‘the work of the Futurists in painting’, while a later one uses the *Birmingham Gazette*’s labelling of Firbank as ‘a futurist among novelists’.³¹⁶ As Marjorie Perloff notes, the lower-case ‘futurist’ was sometimes used in the 1910s and 1920s for discussing the more general avant-garde art of early modernism, as opposed to the specifically self-labelled group of Italian Futurist painters.³¹⁷

Of the Futurist criteria shared across various different early modernist movements, from Dada to Vorticism, Perloff notes a shared sense of ‘an ‘aggressive, polemical tone’, ‘unusual typography’, and an ‘extensive use of onomatopoeia, pun, and extravagant metaphor’.³¹⁸ Van Vechten’s 1922 article on Firbank for the *Double Dealer*, with its own list of ‘extravagant metaphors’ for Firbank’s work, along with its quotable aphorisms, reads not only like the

³¹¹ Firbank, letter to Tony Landsberg, n.d. Quoted in Canning, ‘Introduction’, p. xxiv.

³¹² Arthur Waley, ‘Introduction to Limited Edition’ (1929), in *Ronald Firbank: Memoirs and Critiques*, ed. by Mervyn Horder (1977; repr. Dallas: Duckworth, 1979), pp. 166-74 (first publ. as ‘Introduction’ in Ronald Firbank, *The Works of Ronald Firbank*, 5 vols (London: Duckworth, 1929), I, 1-11), p. 168.

³¹³ Edmund Wilson, *Axel’s Castle: A Study of the Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930* (1931; repr. New York: Collier, 1991), p. 242.

³¹⁴ Christopher Butler, p. 223.

³¹⁵ Benkovitz, *Ronald Firbank: A Biography*, pp. 222-23.

³¹⁶ Firbank, *Odetta: A Fairy Tale for Weary People* (London: Grant Richards, 1916), front matter. Advertisement for *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, *Times Literary Supplement*, 29 March 1923, p. 207.

³¹⁷ Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant Guerre, and the Language of Rupture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. xvii.

³¹⁸ Perloff, p. 111.

manifestos associated with modernist magazines like *Blast*, but also like Wilde's preface to *Dorian Gray* on the nature of art, itself now anthologized as a modernist source.³¹⁹ The Van Vechten essay even contains a camp quip about Firbank being '*plus chic que le futurisme*'.³²⁰ It anticipates the implicit camp joke behind Sontag's 'Notes on "Camp"' (1964), where Sontag uses the Wildean aphoristic style of modernist manifestos to discuss the seemingly frivolous subject of camp. With his Firbank article and its innovative use of 'camping' to describe a literary style, Van Vechten beat Sontag to this idea by forty years. His references to cultural signifiers of the 1920s such as merry-go-rounds, Rolls Royces and boat races illustrate how Firbank's type of camp style is more amplified, accelerated, and advanced than Wilde's – and this is what makes it 'more than up-to-date', or in other words more modernist. As Kristin Mahoney argues, in Firbank, *fin-de-siècle* decadence is 'so exaggerated and amplified' that it becomes 'a type of modernism' in that sense alone.³²¹

Firbank's novels aspired to these same modernist qualities. When Firbank wrote to his mother, he was capable of making statements that sound like those made by Pound or Lewis: 'I imagine my writing must always bring discomfort to fools, since it is aggressive, witty and unrelenting!'³²² Moreover, his novels certainly contain 'unusual typography', with Firbank's love of unexpected capitalization, ellipses, and even Maltese crosses invading the texture of his work. When comparing Firbank to Derrida's theories of frivolity, Jonathan Goldman identifies *Valmouth*'s crosses (190) and onomatopoeic dashes (182) as examples of the 'friable signifiers that Derrida cites'.³²³ Whereas modernism for Goldman is a 'metamorphosis' of signs, 'imbued with new significance', frivolity is 'delighting in the purloined signifier's signifying nothing but itself'.³²⁴ But this is to overlook the mechanics of queer camp behind Firbank's frivolity. The signification is pure queer identity: the camp queering *of* signification to claim queer space. With Firbankian camp, the 'nothing' read by Derrida as 'frivolity' can instead be read as Sedgwick's 'empty secret' of homosexuality.³²⁵

In terms of locating the modernist love of onomatopoeia and puns, one can look to lines like the following from *Valmouth*, in which Lady Parvula articulates the noise of a bird, then turns it into a camp pun: 'We shall be like the little birds tonight. Just hark to that one: *tiara*,

³¹⁹ Oscar Wilde, 'Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*' (1891), in *Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents*, ed. by Vassiliki Kolocotroni, Jane Goldman and Olga Taxidou (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), pp. 119-120.

³²⁰ Carl Van Vechten, 'Ronald Firbank', *The Double Dealer*, 3.16 (April 1922), 185-6 (p. 186).

³²¹ Mahoney, p. 10.

³²² Firbank, letter to Lady Harriette Jane Firbank, Tunis, 14 November 1920, quoted in Ronald Firbank, *Letters to his Mother: 1920-1924*, ed. by Anthony Hobson (Verona: Anthony Hobson, 2001), p. 18.

³²³ Jonathan Goldman, 'The Parrotic Voice of the Frivolous: Fiction by Ronald Firbank, I. Compton-Burnett, and Max Beerbohm', *Narrative*, 7.3 (October 1999), 289-306 (p. 293).

³²⁴ Jonathan Goldman, p. 303.

³²⁵ See the introduction to this thesis, section 3.

*tiara, tiara. It wants a tiara!*³²⁶ Firbank's puns also take on Perloff's 'extravagant metaphor', to the extent that they bear comparison to the canonical modernism of Joyce. James Merritt agrees with Anthony Powell that some Firbank scenes are 'a foreshadowing of *Finnegans Wake* [...] in the association of ideas'.³²⁷ Powell's example is the following description from *Vainglory* (1915):

The moon shone out now high above the trees. In smoke-like dreamy spirals streamed the elms, breaking towards their zeniths in incredible *ich diens*.³²⁸

The '*ich diens*' in this instance is an allusion to the curling feathers of the Prince of Wales's heraldic crest, which are usually accompanied by the German motto *Ich Dien* ('I serve'). There is also something of Joyce's wordplay in monologues like Parvula's from *Valmouth*:

How quiet the rooks are today. I don't hear any. Why aren't they chanting their unkydoodleums? Swing high, swing low, swing to, swing fro, swing lal-lal-lal-la. What keeps him ever? Some horrid cow? I can't bear to think of the man I love under some cow's chidderkins.³²⁹

Passages like this demonstrate how Firbank's style moves at times from Wildean camp to a form of Joycean camp. His text thus blends Wilde's decadent flourishes with the early modernist spirit of puns, fragmentation, and textual irruption, to produce a hybrid style for which the term 'camp modernism' is a logical and useful label.

2.4 Grant Richards: Midwife of Camp Modernism

Grant Richards's suitability as a publisher for Firbank can be seen in his taste for both *fin-de-siècle* camp and Joycean modernism. In terms of the former, as well as knowing Aubrey Beardsley in the 1890s, Richards published Lord Alfred 'Bosie' Douglas's 1899 collection of poems, *The City of the Soul*, at a time when the Wilde trials of 1895, which linked Douglas to Wilde as lovers, were still fresh in the public mind. In 1898 Wilde mentioned Richards in a letter to his friend Reginald Turner, joking about a scandalous novel he might write. If Leonard

³²⁶ Firbank, *Valmouth*, p. 216.

³²⁷ Merritt, p. 17. Anthony Powell, 'Introduction' (1961), in Ronald Firbank, *The Complete Firbank* (London: Picador, 1988), pp. 5-16 (first publ. as 'Preface' in *The Complete Ronald Firbank* (London: Duckworth, 1961), pp. 5-16), p. 15.

³²⁸ Firbank, *Vainglory*, p. 163.

³²⁹ Firbank, *Valmouth*, p. 217.

Smithers would not publish this putative book, Wilde said, ‘I am going to try Grant Richards. I hear he is daring’.³³⁰ Although not homosexual himself, Richards certainly had a ‘daring’ taste for works with homosexual subtexts. He published two volumes of homoerotic ‘Uranian’ poetry: Horatio Brown’s *Drift* (1900), and Arthur Lyon Raile’s *Itamos* (1903), and the first novel to allude to gay relationships in English public schools, Alec Waugh’s *The Loom of Youth* (1917).³³¹ Robert Scoble suggests, by way of explanation, that Richards seems to have had ‘a characteristically relaxed attitude to sexual transgression of any kind’ albeit with ‘the late Victorian’s belief, however, in discreet and gentlemanly conduct’.³³² In the case of Firbank, it is possible that Richards was naïve of the codified homosexuality of Firbank’s camp style, or, more likely, that he simply enjoyed publishing literature that tempted the censor, while being playfully and pragmatically disingenuous about doing so. In his memoir, written in the 1930s, Richards discussed how American publishers would not ‘dare’ to publish Firbank. Richards wrote: ‘Dare what? I couldn’t see it’.³³³ The remark could be a piece of knowing camp in itself.

What makes Richards relevant to this investigation is that his taste for ‘daring’ books applied to modernism as well. Richards issued Joyce’s *Dubliners* (1914) after it had spent years being turned down by other firms for what was then considered obscene content.³³⁴ Richards also published Joyce’s play *Exiles* in 1918. He had his limits, though, wrestling with Joyce over the more explicit passages of *Dubliners*.³³⁵ But as Firbank was paying for the production costs of each book out of his own pocket, Richards was more inclined to let him have the final say when it came to experimentation. He frequently wanted to ‘correct’ Firbank’s idiosyncratic punctuation and capitalization, later dismissing it as ‘mere carelessness’ rather than creativity.³³⁶ But on receiving the proofs of *Vainglory*, Firbank was firm: ‘All my beautiful capital letters you have taken from me. However on pages 49 and 179 they are absolutely needed – the rest I will relinquish’.³³⁷ When receiving a corrected proof copy of *Inclinations* (1916), Firbank complained that the printers had ‘dressed me out in armour – far too much. By changing the

³³⁰ Oscar Wilde, letter to Reginald Turner, 25 May 1898, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, edited by Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), pp. 1074-5 (p. 1075).

³³¹ Scoble, *The Corvo Cult*, p. 134.

³³² Scoble, *The Corvo Cult*, p. 133.

³³³ Richards, *Author Hunting*, p. 256.

³³⁴ William S. Brockman, ‘Grant Richards’, in *British Literary Publishing Houses, 1881-1965*, ed. by Jonathan Rose and Patricia J. Anderson, *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, 112 (Detroit, MI: Gale, 1991), pp. 272-79 (p. 275).

³³⁵ Brockman, p. 275.

³³⁶ Canning, ‘Introduction’, p. xxxi. Richards, *Author Hunting*, p. 249.

³³⁷ Manuscripts: Ronald Firbank, letter to Grant Richards, 25 January 1915, 1st of 2 letters on this date, typed transcript, London, UCL Special Collections, MS OGDEN 97.

punctuation all “goes”. Since one never attempted to be classic – looking through the spare proofs again I feel like “a waiter” in evening-dress!’³³⁸

The professional relationship between Firbank and Richards was an increasingly strained one, as their archived correspondence testifies. Firbank would blame Richards’s methods for his books’ continuing lack of sales, while Richards would retort that Firbank’s style was too uncommercial. In 1922, when Firbank’s mother contacted Richards to ask why her son’s books had failed to generate any royalties, despite Van Vechten’s claims to Firbank that the novels were popular in America, the publisher told her: ‘Your son’s work, everybody says, is esoteric: he makes no concessions’.³³⁹ But the fact that both parties persevered, over the course of eleven years and nine books, suggests that Richards himself had qualities that were uniquely suited to publishing work that could be considered camp modernism.

However, when Richards praised Firbank’s *Caprice* in one of his advertorial columns for being ‘not very like anything else on earth’, Firbank took this to be an insult.³⁴⁰ In an apologetic letter, Richards tried to appeal to Firbank’s ambitions as a modernist: ‘*Caprice* is like nothing else on earth in the sense that some of the greatly admired paintings by the very modern men are like nothing on earth’.³⁴¹ The relationship was eventually severed by Firbank in 1923, when he took *Sorrow in Sunlight* to a different publisher, Brentano’s of New York. Although by this point Richards had lost Joyce too, he nevertheless publicized his British edition of Carl Van Vechten’s *The Blind Bow-Boy* (1923) with a quote by Ernest Boyd that indicated a continuing interest in camp and modernism: ‘Like Joyce [in *Ulysses*], he [Van Vechten] has taken a segment of life, but he portrays it with the fine, deft bizarre strokes of Beardsley’.³⁴² When, in 1925, Brentano’s refused to publish Firbank’s next book, *Concerning the Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli*, citing their reason as ‘religious and moral grounds’, Firbank returned to Richards, much as Joyce returned for *Exiles*.³⁴³ For all his troubled relationships with his authors, Richards’s interest in camp and modernism was still ‘daring’ enough to make them return.

³³⁸ Manuscripts: Ronald Firbank, letter to Grant Richards, 26 March 1916, New York, Columbia University in the City of New York, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Ronald Firbank Papers, MS#0422, box 1.

³³⁹ Manuscripts: Richards, letter to Lady Firbank, 3 May 1922, *Archives of Grant Richards*, reel 32, letterbook 32, p. 312.

³⁴⁰ Richards, ‘Grant Richards Ltd’, advertisement column, *Times Literary Supplement*, 25 October 1917, p. 513.

³⁴¹ Manuscripts: Richards, letter to Ronald Firbank, 31 October 1917, *Archives of Grant Richards*, reel 25, letterbook 25, p. 989.

³⁴² Richards, ‘Grant Richards Ltd’, advertisement column, *Times Literary Supplement*, 25 Oct 1923, p. 705. Quote taken from Ernest Boyd, ‘Van Vechten’s New York’, *Nation*, 5 September 1923, pp. 244-45.

³⁴³ C. J. Herold, on behalf of Brentano’s of New York, letter to Firbank, 18 June 1925, quoted in Benkovitz, *Ronald Firbank: A Biography*, p. 276. The quotation is confirmed in Sotheby & Co., *Catalogue of Nineteenth-Century and Modern First Editions, Presentation Copies, Autograph Letters and Important Literary Manuscripts, Day of Sale: Tuesday, 12th of December, 1961, at Eleven O’Clock* (London: Sotheby, 1961), p. 24.

2.5 The Camp Novelist as Queer Body

In the accounts of those who met him, Ronald Firbank's camp style was often read as an extension of his body, in the sense of being exaggerated, effeminate, and eccentric. When Firbank visited Grant Richards's office, he would sway and 'wave' his body 'sinuously'.³⁴⁴ Harold Nicolson's fictional sketch, 'Lambert Orme' (1927), is not a precise portrait of Firbank but does, as Mervyn Horder points out, include a 'wonderfully exact physical description' of the man which echoes Richards's account, depicting Firbank's gait as 'more than sinuous, it did more than undulate; it rippled'.³⁴⁵ The bookseller C. W. Beaumont recalled Firbank's appearance as weakness personified: he was 'a decidedly limp specimen of mankind'.³⁴⁶ With his camp style of writing, Firbank acknowledged these pejorative judgments of his queer body, reclaiming and transforming them into a defiant body of literary work.

In Angela Carter's radio play about Firbank, *A Self-Made Man* (1984), his bodily presentation is a vital part of the discussion of his work. One passage of Carter's play focusses on the way Firbank's nervous, effeminate giggle contributes to his own artificial selfhood, while providing a form of defence within a homophobic society. As Charlotte Crofts argues, the laugh is Firbank's 'survival mechanism'.³⁴⁷ Carter describes the laugh as both 'his spontaneous tribute to his own inventions' and a tool with which he 'orchestrated his compulsive shyness'.³⁴⁸ In the original BBC Radio 3 production, Lewis Fiander's performance as Firbank renders the laugh into a high-pitched burst of noise, combining nervousness with defiance.³⁴⁹ But it also resembles a lonely sobbing, illustrating how Firbank spent most of his life alone. As Philip Core suggests, Firbank's campness may indeed have been a 'consolation for the depths of his loneliness'.³⁵⁰ Thus bodily camp can be a strategy of liberation for the queer subject, if a bittersweet one. If lasting liberation does not feel attainable, a camp bodily presentation can be used, as Carter puts it, 'to withstand the buffetings of the world'.³⁵¹ The paradox of camp is that it deals in notions of frivolity and unseriousness, yet for a practitioner like Firbank, whose level

³⁴⁴ Richards, *Author Hunting*, p. 249.

³⁴⁵ Harold Nicolson, 'Lambert Orme', in *Some People* (London: Constable, 1927), pp. 55-78 (p. 55). Mervyn Horder, 'Introduction', in *Ronald Firbank: Memoirs and Critiques*, ed. by Mervyn Horder (London: Duckworth, 1977), pp. vii-xii (p. ix).

³⁴⁶ Fletcher, *Ronald Firbank: A Memoir* (1977), p. 25.

³⁴⁷ Charlotte Crofts, *Anagrams of Desire: Angela Carter's Writing for Radio, Film and Television* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 82.

³⁴⁸ Angela Carter, *A Self-Made Man*, published script for radio play (first broadcast 1984), in Carter, *The Curious Room*, ed. by Mark Bell (London: Chatto & Windus, 1996), pp. 121-51 (p. 130).

³⁴⁹ Manuscripts: Angela Carter, *A Self-Made Man*, radio play, digitized audio file of unedited studio recording, 67 minutes, recorded and edited 25-29 June 1983 for broadcast on 4 May 1984, dir. by Glyn Dearman for BBC Radio. London, British Library Sound Archive. ³⁴⁹

³⁵⁰ Core, p. 86.

³⁵¹ Carter, *A Self-Made Man*, published script (1996), p. 132.

of effeminacy made him unable to take part fully in society, camp was a strategy of self-preservation.

Moreover, Firbank used camp modernism to daringly express his queerness, throwing ‘notions of stable gender identities, normative desire, and conventional domesticity into chaos’.³⁵² By way of further codification – a kind of textual drag act – Firbank often expresses his male homosexuality through lesbian characters. Canning notes how *Vainglory*’s Mrs Shamefoot marks ‘the first of Firbank’s Sapphic heroines’.³⁵³ Equally, *Inclinations* focuses on an ‘unorthodox relationship’ between Geraldine ‘Gerald’ O’Brookomore and the fifteen-year-old Mabel Collins, while *Caprice*’s heroine Sarah Sinquier seeks ‘a lover: a sort of husbandina’, as in a woman.³⁵⁴

Despite the use of innuendo, Firbank still found his work tempting the censors. In 1922, Ernest Boyd discussed the homosexual implications of Firbank’s camp style in somewhat veiled language himself, given that Boyd was writing in the *New York Tribune*. Firbank’s style was ‘bizarre and allusive’, he wrote, a style which contains certain ‘intentions and implications’ and ‘hints of curious carnalities’ but which ‘eludes the uninitiated’:

Ronald Firbank is not obscene. His creations move in a world that is outside of time and space, and their sins are not those of which the police take cognizance in uptown cabarets – and that surely is the only tangible definition of wickedness with which the moralists can grapple.³⁵⁵

This allusion to ‘wickedness’ in ‘uptown cabarets’ is as close as Boyd can get, in a mainstream newspaper, to acknowledging Firbank’s signification of homosexuality. But the implication is there: camp modernism could be a mode of homosexual expression through style rather than content.

The queerness of Firbank’s camp can be further identified in his use of fantastical geographic spaces, which produce a sense of alternative societies: safe spaces for queer lives. Perhaps the best example is the island paradise of Tacarigua in *Sorrow in Sunlight*, loosely based on Firbank’s visits to Jamaica and Cuba. Tacarigua warrants an entry in Alberto Manguel’s *Dictionary of Imaginary Places*, alongside Carroll’s Wonderland, C. S. Lewis’s Narnia, and Tolkien’s Middle Earth.³⁵⁶ By this point in his career, with his mother dead and with his growing resentment that his work could be summarised as frivolous ‘camping’, Firbank

³⁵² Mahoney, p. 10.

³⁵³ Canning, ‘Introduction’, p. xxvi.

³⁵⁴ Canning, ‘Introduction’, pp. xxxv & xxxvii.

³⁵⁵ Ernest Boyd, ‘A Song of Innocence’, *New York Tribune*, 14 May 1922, section 4 (Weekly Review of the Arts), p. 8.

³⁵⁶ Alberto Manguel and Gianni Guadalupi, *The Dictionary of Imaginary Places* (1980), rev. edn (London: Bloomsbury, 1999), p. 636.

was becoming bolder and more explicit. Manguel's entry collates the details of the island's colourful city of Cuna Cuna and points out its unabashed community of male prostitutes – the 'bwam-wam bwam-wams'. In this way, Firbank's work often suggests the idea of a gay *pastoral*, and gay in every sense: an idealized, hermetic world of infinite queer charm.

Firbank's last completed novel, *Cardinal Pirelli*, finally pushes the innuendo out of the closet, with its finale in which the titular priest, naked, chases a choirboy around an empty cathedral at night. In his 1930 biographical essay on Firbank, Fletcher speculates about the novels Firbank might have written had he lived longer, giving the increasing amount of undisguised homosexual content. Perhaps, Fletcher thought, the next book 'would have earned the distinction of causing a conference between the Home Secretary and the Director of Public Prosecutions'.³⁵⁷ Fletcher may well be referring to the case of Radclyffe Hall's novel *The Well of Loneliness*, banned in 1928 for depicting homosexuality in a realistic, if not sexually explicit, sense. That Firbank's books could be published in the UK without such legal attention, as indeed could Woolf's *Orlando*, is a testament to the importance of camp as a mode of publishable queer expression during the modernist era.

2.6 Camp Constituents: Ekphrasis, Drag, Aristocracy

In his 1922 Firbank essay, Van Vechten suggests that Firbank's style is, as Sontag might say, against interpretation: 'Quotations would solve no purpose... Can one quote from a tapestry?'.³⁵⁸ He goes on to add that such quotations 'would be unseemly in a family paper', gesturing at the implied incompatibility of camp homosexual humour with the serious modernist texts typical of the magazine he was writing for, *The Double Dealer*. Nevertheless, Van Vechten provides a single quotation from *Vainglory* (1915), in which Firbank 'sums, perhaps, himself up'.³⁵⁹ The passage describes the fictional novelist Claud Harvester, author of *Vaindreams*:

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

'He's too cold. Too classic, I suppose.'

³⁵⁷ Fletcher, *Ronald Firbank: A Memoir* (1977), p. 50.

³⁵⁸ Van Vechten, 'Ronald Firbank', *The Double Dealer*, p. 186.

³⁵⁹ Van Vechten, 'Ronald Firbank', *The Double Dealer*, p. 186.

‘Classic! In the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* his style is described as *odd spelling, brilliant and vicious*.³⁶⁰

The campness of this dialogue is evidenced by linguistic flourishes as ‘by chance’ and ‘care to’. They inject a sense of exaggerated gestures, while invoking the common camp sentiments of aloofness and ennui.

The reference to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* is especially typical of Firbank’s camp love of cultural allusion. A further passage in *Vainglory* describing a cathedral is, argues James Merritt, ‘properly labelled as camp’, due to its combination of improbable allusions, absurd juxtapositions, and a narrative tone that is ironic throughout:

Miss Massingham, in her *Sacerdotalism and Satanism*, has called the whole thing heavy. ‘*Very weighty indeed*’, although she willingly admits that at twilight the towers, with their many pinnacles, become utterly fantastic, *like the helmets of eunuchs in carnival time*. But then, if there was not much spontaneity about them on the whole, they had taken a long time to build. Some towers cannot be dashed off like Fragonard’s *Inspiration*.³⁶¹

This digression into a reference to a book which does not exist (one of many fictional books in Firbank) demonstrates the common high-to-low vicissitudes typical of camp humour. The idea of a serious study on religion calling a cathedral ‘very weighty indeed’ is an example of a camp quip of dismissive bathos, anticipating Noel Coward’s ‘very flat, Norfolk’.³⁶²

More specifically, this digression on architecture illustrates Firbank’s use of camp ekphrasis. Ekphrasis, being the textual mobilization of visual art, is, as Allan Johnson argues, ‘regularly exploited by modern gay narratives’, as it evokes the sense of one subject (an onlooker perceiving an artwork) apprehending and commenting on a separate world (the artwork) from an ‘outside’ position.³⁶³ Implicitly, such scenes evoke the way a sexually marginalized experience is located ‘outside’ mainstream society while being a part of society at the same time. One obvious example is Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. As Brian Glavey argues, when the homosexual content of *Dorian* is mediated through its identification with a painting, it becomes simultaneously inside and yet outside of discourse. In this way ‘it becomes possible at any moment to deny that [the novel] is sexual at all’.³⁶⁴ Firbank’s own use of camp

³⁶⁰ Firbank, *Vainglory*, p. 150. Van Vechten, ‘Ronald Firbank’, *The Double Dealer*, p. 186.

³⁶¹ Firbank, *Vainglory*, p. 60. Merritt, p.18.

³⁶² Noel Coward, *Private Lives* (1930), in *Play Parade: The Collected Plays of Noel Coward, Vol. I* (London: Heinemann, 1934), pp. 465-554 (p. 494). Act 1, spoken by Amanda.

³⁶³ Allan Johnson, *Alan Hollinghurst and the Vitality of Influence* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 115.

³⁶⁴ Brian Glavey, *The Wallflower Avant-Garde: Modernism, Sexuality, and Queer Ekphrasis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 36.

ekphrasis can be seen in the description of Lady Georgia's townhouse in *Vainglory*:

On the opposite side of the room hung a second portrait of herself with her husband and her children – a lovely Holy Family, in the Venetian manner, and in between, all round the room, at varying heights, in blotches of rose and celestial blue, hung a sumptuous *Station of the Cross*, by Tiepolo. Upon the ceiling, if one cared to look so high, some last few vestiges of the embassy might be seen – quivers, torches, roses, and all the paraphernalia of Love... But the eyes, travelling over these many obstacles, would invariably return to the Venetian portrait, spoken of, as a rule, somewhat breathlessly, as the *Madonna in the Osprey*.³⁶⁵

For Merritt, the language of Firbank's ekphrasis takes the passage into campness, as well as implied queerness: 'the juxtaposition of the clutter of the "paraphernalia of Love" and the Tiepolo *Stations of the Cross* is a good example of camp and of Firbank's use of it. It is exquisite bad taste'.³⁶⁶ By camp, Merritt suggests a sense of excess in the decor, of a too-much-ness. It is not just a too-much-ness, but a *too much* of a too-much-ness, a concentrated level of campness that goes beyond Wilde's style to verge on the avant-garde. Furthermore, the use of camp in these moments of ekphrasis accentuates Firbank's expression of a modern homosexual identity, being a form of detachment from the mainstream world.

Firbank's camp extends to usages of the practice of drag, as in cross-dressing. Mark Booth cites the following passage from Firbank's *Pirelli* to illustrate drag as a camp codification of queerness, in the sense of 'holding back secret knowledge':³⁶⁷

The dear street. The adorable Avenidas. The quickening stimulus of the crowd: truly it was exhilarating to mingle freely with the throng!

Disguised as a cabellero from the provinces or as a matron (disliking to forgo altogether the militant bravura of a skirt), it became possible to combine philosophy, equally, with pleasure. [...] *Olé!* He swayed his shawl. [...]

Purring to himself, and frequently pausing, he made his way, by ecstatic degrees, towards the mirador on the garden wall.

Although a mortification, it was imperative to bear in mind the consequences of cutting a too dashing figure. Beware display. Vanity once had proved all but fatal: 'I remember it was the night I wore ringlets, and was called "my queen"'.³⁶⁸

³⁶⁵ Firbank, *Vainglory*, pp. 4-5.

³⁶⁶ Merritt, p. 56.

³⁶⁷ Booth, p. 110.

³⁶⁸ Firbank, *Concerning the Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli*, p. 192.

Here, cross-dressing brings not just the freedom of identity but freedom from gender. Having used female characters to express his male effeminacy by proxy in previous novels, Firbank's later novels such as *Pirelli* are bolder in their exploration of femininity and gender play through male characters like Pirelli himself.

The aristocratic aspect of Firbank's camp is equally crucial. It is especially prominent in *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, with its cast of royals, countesses, duchesses, and dignitaries. Mark Booth argues that the camp 'pseudo aristocratic style' manifested in a use of affected speech and artificial gestures may be a 'relic' of the term 'camp's origins with *se camper* and the Versailles of Louis XIV: a site which Booth calls 'the camp Eden'.³⁶⁹ Independently wealthy, Firbank was close to a form of aristocracy himself. After his father was knighted in 1902, his mother bore the honorific title of Lady Firbank.³⁷⁰ But the Firbanks' riches were a relatively recent development, in the sense that Joseph Firbank, Ronald's working-class grandfather, built up the family money from nothing through his work as a leading railway contractor.³⁷¹ As Booth argues, 'camp people have mostly been arrivistes (e.g. Brummell, Beckford, Disraeli and Firbank) who have despised their own class'.³⁷² In Firbank's case, 'despised' may be extreme, but Firbank certainly directed, as Hollinghurst notes, 'a kind of poignant ridicule at upward mobility'.³⁷³

Firbank's aristocratic flourishes also relate to his perpetuation of nineteenth-century dandyism, which as Ellen Moers points out, began as a middle-class reaction to the waning popularity of hereditary aristocrats.³⁷⁴ However, as Baudelaire's essay on dandyism argues, dandies are hardly class warriors. Instead, they 'conceive the idea of establishing a new kind of aristocracy', based on 'the divine gifts which work and money are unable to bestow'.³⁷⁵ Firbank's novels may be full of aristocratic characters, but they lack, as Hollinghurst puts it, 'the security of any clear social or moral system'.³⁷⁶ This dandified air of 'glorious elitism' also makes, as John Simons argues, Firbank's camp a crucially modernist kind as opposed to 'the valueless democracy' associated with Sontag's later 'pop' camp.³⁷⁷ Further, as David Van Leer points out, there is a queer implication too, as homosexuality becomes in Firbank as much a

³⁶⁹ Booth, pp. 83, 33.

³⁷⁰ Benkovitz, *Ronald Firbank: A Biography*, p. 37.

³⁷¹ Benkovitz, *Ronald Firbank, A Biography*, p. 5.

³⁷² Booth, p. 83.

³⁷³ Hollinghurst, 'Introduction', in *The Early Firbank*, p. ix.

³⁷⁴ Ellen Moers, *The Dandy* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1960), pp. 12-14.

³⁷⁵ Charles Baudelaire, 'The Painter of Modern Life', in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, ed. and trans. by Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon, 1964), pp. 1-40 (p. 28).

³⁷⁶ Hollinghurst, 'I Often Laugh When I'm Alone', p. 5.

³⁷⁷ John Simons, 'Introduction: Some Contexts for a Re-Reading of Ronald Firbank', in *Critical Essays on Ronald Firbank, English Novelist, 1886-1926*, ed. by Gill Davies, David Malcolm and John Simons, *Mellen Studies in Literature: English and American Studies*, 38 (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2004), pp. v-ix (p. viii).

sign of ‘extravagance’ as ‘princes, prelates, or actresses’: a luxury for those who can afford it.³⁷⁸ As Philip Core notes in language that anticipates Judith Butler, a queen is herself ‘a grandiose sort of camp: a series of stylised rituals and appearances designed to conceal an ordinary human woman under a carapace of political divinity’.³⁷⁹ It is this focus upon the carapace, as opposed to any sense of political leadership, which marks out Firbank’s camp. His novels are so steeped in fantastical communities they barely acknowledge the systems of the real world.

2.7 Firbank and Menippean Satire

Firbank’s campness is sometimes thought to be incompatible with satire. Robert Kiernan’s concept of a camp novel like Max Beerbohm’s *Zuleika Dobson* is one which, as Jonathan Greenberg understands it, has ‘an absence of clear targets’, and so refutes the label of satire.³⁸⁰ In fact, this definition of satire really applies to the more commonplace Juvenalian version, in which the targets are specific individuals and groups. Firbank’s camp shares more of the effects of the genre of *Menippean* satire, in that his characters, as Merritt observes, are usually ‘satires of types rather than of specific people’.³⁸¹ Indeed, David Bergman calls Firbank ‘the master of the modern Menippean satire’.³⁸² Named after the Greek philosopher Menippus, Menippean satire is, according to Chris Baldick, ‘a form of intellectually humorous work characterized by miscellaneous contents, displays of curious erudition, and comical discussions on philosophical topics’.³⁸³ When Northrop Frye revived the term in *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), he pointed out how Menippean satire allows for flat characterizations, because it ‘presents people as mouthpieces of the ideas they represent’.³⁸⁴ For an example of a ‘modern development’ of the Menippean symposium, Frye suggests the ‘country-house weekend’ scenes of Aldous Huxley’s early novels, such as *Crome Yellow* (1921).³⁸⁵ In fact, as will be discussed in Chapter Four, *Crome Yellow* is in turn an early example of Firbank’s impact on literature.

However, there are instances in Firbank where Juvenalian satire also creeps in, in the form of references to real-life individuals. When working on the proofs of *Caprice*, Firbank wrote to Grant Richards: ‘To my horror I remember my reference to [Augustus John] in the MS

³⁷⁸ David Van Leer, *The Queening of America: Gay Culture in Straight Society* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 28.

³⁷⁹ Core, p. 155.

³⁸⁰ Jonathan Greenberg, *Modernism, Satire, and the Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2011), p. 24.

³⁸¹ Merritt, p. 50.

³⁸² David Bergman, ‘Fiction’, in *Gay Histories and Cultures*, ed. by George E. Haggerty (New York: Garland, 2009), pp. 309-15 (p. 310).

³⁸³ Chris Baldick, *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 4th edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) <<http://www.oxfordreference.com>> [accessed 29 January 2018].

³⁸⁴ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 309.

³⁸⁵ Frye, pp. 310-11.

& also Lady Mary's Ballad on Judy Johncock – how unfortunate.³⁸⁶ 'Johncock' was corrected to 'Jacock' in the final book. In *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, the character of 'Mrs Harold Chilleywater', the 'virile' lesbian writer and wife of an English diplomat, is a direct satire of Vita Sackville-West, aka Mrs Harold Nicolson. Firbank admitted this in a letter to his mother.³⁸⁷ Readers of the first edition in 1923 would have easily identified this character, as Sackville-West's affair with Violet Trefusis was then part of public gossip.³⁸⁸ Sackville-West herself was aware of the reference, buying a copy of *Flower* on publication when she lived in Long Barn, Sevenoaks, and retaining the book in her library when she moved to Sissinghurst Castle Garden, Kent (now part of the National Trust). My correspondence with Helen Davis, the Senior House Steward at Sissinghurst, confirms that Sackville-West's only annotation to her copy was to add her name in the endpapers, and that this was unusual for her: she would typically make notes in the margins.³⁸⁹ Whatever her reaction was, there is no evidence of protest.

Arthur Waley's introduction to Firbank's collected *Works* criticizes Firbank for this particular device, as it shows him 'slipping into the world of tiresome everyday discord, to which he does not properly belong'.³⁹⁰ Although specific attacks were indeed unusual for Firbank, the brief Sackville-West parody does provide a link between *The Flower Beneath the Foot* and another camp modernist novel published five years later, one in which Sackville-West would be more lovingly turned into a fictional character: Woolf's *Orlando*.

2.8 Firbank and Catholic Camp

One of Firbank's recurring camp devices is religious parody, particularly of Catholicism. In terms of defining what makes Firbank camp, Brigid Brophy identifies 'all the classic camp dramatis personae', which are also mostly Catholic roles: 'Popes, cardinals, choirboys, nuns, flagellants, queens (both senses)'.³⁹¹ Robert Kiernan, who calls Firbank's novels 'definitive' in their campness, regards the climactic chase scene of *Pirelli*, in which the cardinal pursues a choirboy around an empty cathedral for sex, only to undergo a heart attack, as the campest scene in Firbank's *oeuvre*.³⁹² Firbank's hero, Oscar Wilde, had already made the aesthetic link

³⁸⁶ Manuscripts: Firbank, letter to Grant Richards, 1 July 1917, typed transcription, London, UCL Special Collections, MS OGDEN 97.

³⁸⁷ Firbank, letter to Lady Firbank, 14 January 1923, Bordighera, quoted in Firbank, *Letters to his Mother, 1920-1924*, ed. by Anthony Hobson (Verona: Anthony Hobson, 2001), p. 114.

³⁸⁸ Victoria Glendinning, *Vita: The Life of V. Sackville-West* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1983), p. 129.

³⁸⁹ Email from Helen Davis, Senior House Steward at Sissinghurst Castle Garden, Kent, to Dickon Edwards, 25 October 2018. The book's National Trust CMS item code is NT 3174691. The endpapers are inscribed "V.N. (i.e. Vita Nicolson), Long Barn, 1923".

³⁹⁰ Waley, p. 169.

³⁹¹ Brophy, *Prancing Novelist*, p. 171.

³⁹² Kiernan, p. 65.

between the appeal of Catholicism and camp before him. Wilde had toyed, if ambiguously, with converting to the Church throughout his life, although he was also equally attracted to aspects of Greek Hellenism and Protestantism.³⁹³ He had variously described Catholicism as more attractive ‘for the aesthetic mind’, as ‘the greatest and most romantic’ of religions, and had once, while with a student friend, experienced a private audience with Pope Pius IX in Rome.³⁹⁴ Wilde resisted conversion, however, right up to his dying moments in a hotel room in Paris, when his friend Robert Ross invited a priest to perform the last rites. Even then, it was unclear whether Wilde saw this ceremony as a solemnly wished-for pardon or that it was more, as Richard Ellmann puts it, ‘like putting a green carnation in his buttonhole’ – a final camp flourish.³⁹⁵

Firbank’s religious affiliation has similarly been the subject of dispute, not least in the matter of his burial. The consensus is that Firbank converted to Roman Catholicism in December 1907, while at Cambridge University.³⁹⁶ What is less certain, given the many satirical references to Catholicism in his work, is whether Firbank’s faith became unserious to the point of rejection, as Ross had suspected with Wilde. James Merritt thinks there is ‘considerable doubt’ about Firbank’s level of belief during his writing life.³⁹⁷ The last person Firbank spoke with before he died in Rome, Lord Berners, thought Firbank had fully rejected the faith. Berners quoted Firbank as telling him: ‘The Church of Rome wouldn’t have me and so I laugh at her’.³⁹⁸ This was, Scoble thinks, probably a reference to Firbank’s unsuccessful application in 1909 to enter papal service.³⁹⁹ In fact, other friends such as Shane Leslie were ‘convinced’ of Firbank’s Catholicism remaining with him throughout his life.⁴⁰⁰ Firbank’s sister Heather also thought of Firbank as Catholic, so much so that she arranged to have his body exhumed and moved to the Catholic cemetery of Campo Verano, Rome, a few months after Berners had buried him in the Protestant cemetery (Cimitero Acattolica) at Testaccio in Rome, where the poets Keats and Shelley are interred.⁴⁰¹

Whether or not Firbank himself was a believer, the use of Catholic imagery in his style of camp is manifestly affectionate, supporting Sontag’s notion of camp as not just exaggeration in itself but ‘the love of the exaggerated’.⁴⁰² As Ellis Hanson argues, affection is particularly true of Firbank’s ‘ecclesiastical camp’, which takes delight in Catholicism’s ‘lovely gestures, its

³⁹³ Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (1987; repr. London: Penguin, 1988), p. 71.

³⁹⁴ Ellmann, pp. 133, 495, 70.

³⁹⁵ Ellmann, p. 549.

³⁹⁶ Benkovitz, *Ronald Firbank: A Biography*, p. 93.

³⁹⁷ Merritt, p. 26.

³⁹⁸ Lord Berners, contribution to *Ronald Firbank: A Memoir* (1930), in *Ronald Firbank: Memoirs and Critiques*, ed. by Mervyn Horder (1977; repr. Dallas: Duckworth, 1979), pp. 82-85 (p. 85).

³⁹⁹ Scoble, *The Corvo Cult*, p. 194 (n.48).

⁴⁰⁰ Scoble, *The Corvo Cult*, p. 180.

⁴⁰¹ Sotheby & Co., *Catalogue*, p. 27.

⁴⁰² Sontag, ‘Notes on “Camp”’, p. 279.

perverse sensuality, its wan-faced obsessions', in the same manner that 'drag queens adore the tragic divas that they travesty'.⁴⁰³ In Firbank's case, observes Hanson, camp is a complex and nuanced mode of queer expression, enabling not just 'a potentially subversive mode of humour but also a backhanded mode of worship'.⁴⁰⁴ Firbank's camp take on Catholicism, therefore, can be read as essentially one of fond irreverence by one of its own.

Indeed, this aspect of Firbank's style is his most consistent, instilled as it was in his juvenile works, years before not just his modernist ambitions but also his conversion to Rome. Michael Dirda indicates a moment in the early story 'A Study in Opal' (1907) which has 'the genuine Firbank tang'.⁴⁰⁵ When Lady Henrietta learns that her new husband, a bishop, has died, her reaction is as follows: 'Lady Henrietta gasped. Her fingers wound about her jewelled crucifix. Surely a stone was missing? She bent her eyes to see'.⁴⁰⁶ This bathetic shift from the shock of receiving devastating news to a sudden concern over the condition of personal jewellery would still be a comic moment had the item been a non-religious ring or necklace. By making the jewelled item a crucifix, Firbank performs the camp tension of being aesthetically drawn to Catholicism's love of ornate surfaces, while satirizing these same trappings. It is this version of camp which he would fuse with modernist experimentation in his mature work.

2.9 Firbank's Innovations: Ambience of Dialogue, Occlusion of Plot

Firbank's innovations in writing dialogue are neatly glossed by William Plomer: 'He noticed that people don't listen much to one another, that in conversation they pursue their own thoughts rather than other people's, and that much of what they say is calculated to advertise their own importance, beauty, cleverness, knowledge or taste'.⁴⁰⁷ Firbank takes this degree of social satire into more formally experimental territory than readers were used to at the time. Canning argues that *Inclinations* (1916) marks Firbank's 'extreme condition' in terms of his experimental use of dialogue, with a predominance of conversations over any description, and frequent and intentional 'moments of difficulty about the identity of any given speaker'.⁴⁰⁸ Andrew Sanders groups Firbank with Edith Sitwell as evincing a form of "'Modernist" interplay of tradition and individual talent' in this way, by exploring 'the creative potential of the

⁴⁰³ Ellis Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 355

⁴⁰⁴ Hanson, p. 354.

⁴⁰⁵ Michael Dirda, 'The Triumph of Frivolity', *Washington Post*, 16 December 1990, Book World section, p. 6.

⁴⁰⁶ Firbank, 'A Study in Opal', in *The Early Firbank*, ed. by Steven Moore (London: Quartet, 1991), pp. 85-103 (p. 99).

⁴⁰⁷ William Plomer, *Electric Delights*, ed. by Rupert Hart-Davis (Boston: David Godine, 1978), p. 15.

⁴⁰⁸ Canning, 'Introduction', p. xxxv.

impressionistic verbal mosaic'.⁴⁰⁹ According to Ifan Kyrle Fletcher, the young Firbank indeed spoke to his friends about his intent to make 'a sort of mosaic' in prose, based on 'scraps of conversation', in which 'the pattern was picked out in pretty touches and amusing details lifted from life'.⁴¹⁰ One example is the following passage from *Valmouth*:

There uprose a jargon of voices:

'Heroin.'

'Adorable simplicity.'

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

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

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

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

'Cruelly lonely.'

'Leery . . .'

'Vulpine.'

'Calumny.'

'People look like pearls, dear, beneath your wonderful trees.'

'... Milka, tonight – she is like a beautiful Cosway.'

'Above social littleness...'

'Woman as I am!'

'Philanthropy!'⁴¹¹

As Alan Hollinghurst puts it, this 'verbal collage' technique of Firbank's emulates the technology of the modern age in the form of 'a roving microphone, picking up and juxtaposing random snippets of talk'.⁴¹² The campness of this device can be identified in the intense valorization of frivolity, to the point where the voices sound interchangeable. As Jonathan Goldman argues, one reason for Firbank's 'exclusion from the modernist canon' may be this

⁴⁰⁹ Andrew Sanders, *The Short Oxford History of English Literature*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 543.

⁴¹⁰ Fletcher, *Ronald Firbank: A Memoir* (1977), p. 18.

⁴¹¹ Firbank, *Valmouth*, pp. 60-61.

⁴¹² Hollinghurst, 'I Often Laugh When I'm Alone', p. 2.

ambience of monophony. Goldman regards Firbank's dialogue as a monophonic form of 'designification' compared to the poetry of T. S. Eliot: 'Eliot may do the police in different voices, but Firbank does everything speaking one frivolous voice'.⁴¹³ However, this overlooks how Firbank's camp designification can be read as a *signification* of queer ambience. As shown by the claiming of Firbank by explicitly homosexual writers such as Hollinghurst, the 'one frivolous voice' in his camp modernist style is a serious voice of sexual identity, claiming valuable literary space for people like himself. Moreover, this modernist 'stream' is not the signature modernist device of a stream of internal consciousness, but a stream of external utterances. Camp modernism in this sense can be comprehended as a *stream of externalities*.

There are, however, moments where Firbank's characters are granted a sense of an individual voice. The fragmentary dialogue technique is taken to its extreme in Chapter 20 of Part One of *Inclinations*, which articulates the heartbreak of Geraldine O'Brookomore when she learns that her companion Mabel Collins has decided to get married. The chapter, in full, is as follows:

'Mabel! Mabel! Mabel! Mabel!
Mabel! Mabel! Mabel! Mabel!'⁴¹⁴

With its shocking brevity, this chapter might be said to prefigure the irruptive effects of Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930), where one chapter is devoted to the sentence 'My mother is a fish'.⁴¹⁵ As John T. Matthews observes, such techniques by Faulkner demonstrate a 'modernist aesthetic' as they 'mediate the emancipatory, yet deadening, antagonisms of social disintegration by formalizing them'.⁴¹⁶ Isolated and fragmented in Firbank's chapter as she is in her romantic life, Geraldine becomes more than just a part of the flat, camp 'frieze' Firbank calls his style in *Vainglory*; she gains a very modernist sense of complexity and depth. Even in this brief chapter, Canning argues, 'every vicissitude of the fear, upset, anger, desperation and loss implicit in being abandoned romantically may be inferred'.⁴¹⁷

As opposed to the bulk of *Ulysses*, Firbank's modernism favours extreme concision. Material brevity of text is not enough for Firbank; his concision is signified with a proliferation of ellipses. Discussing his technique, he wrote: 'I think nothing of fileing [sic] fifty pages down

⁴¹³ Jonathan Goldman, p. 303.

⁴¹⁴ Ronald Firbank, *Inclinations*, p. 256.

⁴¹⁵ William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying* (1930; repr. London: Penguin, 1963), p. 67.

⁴¹⁶ John T. Matthews, 'As I Lay Dying in the Machine Age', *boundary 2*, 19.1 (1992), 69-94 (pp. 72, 87).

⁴¹⁷ Canning, 'Introduction', p. xxxv.

to make a brief, crisp paragraph, or even a row of dots'.⁴¹⁸ In this statement one can see how the flippant exaggeration of camp can be applied to the serious practice of modernist art. The visual effect of Firbank's ellipses is primarily one of fragmentation. This trait of modernist fiction, as Randall Stevenson observes, is 'characteristic of modernism's innovative view of the world', due to the representation of modern life's own 'fragmentary, disjointed quality'.⁴¹⁹ More specifically, modernist literature often reflects its historical moment by presenting contrasts between what Stevenson calls 'fragment and flow, between atom and wave, between the divisions of the clock and the continuity of consciousness'.⁴²⁰ The reading experience of a Firbank novel similarly shifts between versions of these two modes.

One reading of Firbank's ellipses is as a modernist take on camp innuendo. Canning reads Firbank's use of such dots as able to imply 'a multitude of unstated truths, invariably sexual'.⁴²¹ As early as 1951, when homosexuality in the UK was still criminalized, Jocelyn Brooke used the name of specific sexologists when arguing, in a camp statement of his own, that one ellipsis in Firbank could indicate 'the whole of Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis – and even more'.⁴²² One example is the scene in *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, depicting the aftermath of a lesbian tryst in a rowing boat on a still lake:

'Oh Olga!'

'Oh Vi!'

'... I hope you've enough money for the boat, dear? ...?'

'...!!?'

'Tell me, Olga: Is my hat all sideways?'

'.....',⁴²³

Thus one aspect of camp modernism might be said to be a blend of same-sex innuendo with fragmentary elisions in form. If, as in the case of E. M. Forster's *Maurice*, writing homosexual desire was legally unprintable at the time, the use of camp ellipses could be a means of side-stepping such laws. As Evelyn Waugh argued in 1929, Firbank was 'the first quite modern writer to solve for himself [...] the aesthetic problem of representation in fiction, to achieve, that

⁴¹⁸ Firbank, letter to Stuart Rose, 17 May 1924, quoted in Benkovitz, *Ronald Firbank: A Biography*, p. 116.

⁴¹⁹ Randall Stevenson, *Modernist Fiction: An Introduction*, rev. edn (London: Prentice Hall, 1998), p. 141.

⁴²⁰ Randall Stevenson, p. 141.

⁴²¹ Canning, 'Introduction', p. xxiii.

⁴²² Jocelyn Brooke, *Ronald Firbank* (London: Arthur Barker, 1951), p. 57.

⁴²³ Firbank, *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, p. 117.

is to say, a new, unique and balanced interrelation of subject and form'.⁴²⁴ But more specifically, his camp ellipses solved the problem of representing that which could not be *legally* represented at the time: a homosexual identity

In his argument for acknowledging Firbank's modernism, particularly in the case of *Vainglory*, Canning indicates Woolf's essay 'Modern Fiction' (1919, revised 1925), in which she foresees a revolution of fiction where 'there would be no plot [...] in the accepted style', in favour of a representation of life as a more static 'luminous halo'.⁴²⁵ Although this essay has been 'widely interpreted', writes Canning, as theorizing Woolf and Joyce's innovations in their fiction, by 1919 Firbank had already published fiction steeped in an impressionistic 'luminous halo' effect, from *Vainglory* (1915) onwards.⁴²⁶ Similarly, Joseph Bristow notes *Vainglory*'s 'wholesale attack on naturalism' whose fictional world 'disabuses us of any illusion we may have had about time, manner and place reverting to some conventional ordering'.⁴²⁷ Any expectation of a realistic plot is 'entirely obscured from view', while chronology is abandoned in favour of 'interruptions, digressions and hiatuses'.⁴²⁸ As a result, Bristow calls Firbank's work 'expressly modernist in its marked self-consciousness'.⁴²⁹ In this way, Firbank's camp modernism is queer in the anti-normative sense, where to embrace the conventional plots of literary naturalism is aesthetically to embrace the 'natural' reputation of heteronormativity.

2.10 A Firbankian Stream of Consciousness

While Firbank's camp modernism is typified by a 'stream of externalities', in terms of its relentless valorization of dialogue and surfaces, it also deploys its own version of a stream-of-consciousness effect, which functions as part of Firbank's interest in concision, ellipsis, and fragmentation. As Randall Stevenson points out, the stream-of-consciousness is often held to be 'the principal innovation and distinguishing achievement of modernist fiction'.⁴³⁰ Robert Humphrey credits its invention to Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage*, the first volume of which was published in 1915.⁴³¹ Humphrey defines it as a form of fiction 'in which the basic emphasis is placed on exploration of the prespeech levels of consciousness for the purpose, primarily, of revealing the psychic being of the characters'.⁴³² When comparing stream-of-consciousness

⁴²⁴ Waugh, 'Ronald Firbank', p. 79.

⁴²⁵ Virginia Woolf, 'Modern Fiction' (1919, rev. 1925), in Virginia Woolf, *Selected Essays*, ed. by David Bradshaw (2008; repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 6-12 (p. 9).

⁴²⁶ Canning, 'Introduction', p. xxiii.

⁴²⁷ Bristow, *Effeminate England*, pp. 103, 102.

⁴²⁸ Bristow, *Effeminate England* pp. 102, 104.

⁴²⁹ Bristow, *Effeminate England* p. 104.

⁴³⁰ Randall Stevenson, p. 5.

⁴³¹ Robert Humphrey, *Stream of Consciousness in the Modern Novel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954), p.9.

⁴³² Humphrey, p.4

passages from Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* and Joyce's *Ulysses*, Humphrey notes two 'striking similarities' that make them examples of modernism, in the sense that they could not be taken 'from almost any other novels written before approximately 1915'.⁴³³ These shared criteria in Woolf and Joyce are (a) 'a studied element of incoherence; that is, references and meanings are intentionally vague and unexplained', and (b) 'an element of disunity, of wandering from a single subject.'⁴³⁴

Hollinghurst admits that Firbank may have not worked 'in any systematic way at the evocation of a stream of consciousness', but nevertheless affirms that a 'significant' part of his novels is made up of the tracing of his characters' thoughts, 'as they uncurl in droll or wistful arabesques'.⁴³⁵ Hollinghurst's example is from *Flower*, in which the Hon. "Eddy" Monteith muses on the language of bees:

Through the open window a bee droned in on the blue air of evening and closing his eyes he fell to considering whether the bee of one country would understand the remarks of that of another. The effect of the soil of a nation, had it consequences upon its Flora? Were plants influenced at their roots? People sometimes spoke (and especially ladies) of the language of flowers . . . the pollen therefore of an English rose would probably vary, not inconsiderably, from that of a French, and a bee born and bred at home (at *Intriguer* [his family home] for instance) would be at a loss to understand (it clearly followed) the conversation of one born and bred, here, abroad. A bee's idiom varied then, as did man's! And he wondered, this being proved the case, where the best bees' accents were generally acquired . . .⁴³⁶

The above passage certainly lacks both of Humphrey's criteria for identifying a strictly modernist stream of consciousness; there is neither a sense of incoherence nor a wandering between different ideas. This would support Hollinghurst's argument that Firbank tends to represent consciousness in his own camp yet ordered fashion.

However, the following passage from *Caprice* does seem to fit the Humphrey definition. When Sarah Siquier prepares to leave her home town of Applethorp, her memories are rendered at first in a relatively linear manner, but then as incoherent, fragmentary, and tangential:

Opening a levant-covered box, she drew out a long flat tray.

⁴³³ Humphrey, p. 32.

⁴³⁴ Humphrey, p. 32.

⁴³⁵ Hollinghurst, 'I Often Laugh When I'm Alone', p. 16.

⁴³⁶ Firbank, *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, pp. 66-67.

Adorable pearls!

How clearly now they brought her Godmother to mind ... a little old body ... with improbable cherry-cheeks and excrescent upper lip, with always the miniatures of her three deceased husbands clinging about one arm ... 'Aren't they pleasant?' she would say proudly every now and then ... What talks they had had; and sometimes of an evening through the mauve moonlight they would strut together.

Ah! She had been almost ugly then; clumsy, gawky, *gauche* ...

Now that she was leaving Applethorp, for ever perhaps, how dormant impressions revived!

The Saunders' Fifeshire bull, one New Year's night, ravaging the Close, driven frantic by the pealings of the bells. The time poor Dixon got drowned – at a Flower Show, a curate's eyes – a German governess's walk – a mould of calves' -foot jelly she had let fall in the Cathedral once, on her way somewhere—

She replaced ruefully her pearls.⁴³⁷

Although Firbank frames the latter string of memories with the phrase 'dormant impressions', thus locating them firmly within a more conventional style, they nevertheless fit Humphrey's definition. Sarah Sinquier's memories are certainly vague, not to say puzzling, and clearly shift randomly from subject to subject. With its absurd comedic tone, and the references to priests, cathedrals and governesses, the passage can therefore be read as an example of a camp *and* modernist stream-of-consciousness in Firbank.

James Merritt, meanwhile, argues that *The Flower Beneath the Foot* contains a conscious influence of Joyce in this sense. Merritt thinks the influence is 'visible' and that it is 'inconceivable' that Firbank was not aware of Joyce's innovations by this point.⁴³⁸ As the elderly Archduchess Elizabeth lies on her deathbed, her babbling is intercut with the Latin phrases of the priest attending to her:

'Pull up your skirt, Marquise! Pull it up . . . It's dragging, a little, in the water.'
'*Judica me, Deus,*' in imperious tones, the priest by the bedside besought: '*et discerne causam meum de gente non sancta. Parce, Domine! Parce populo tuo –! ne in aeternum irascaris nobis.*'

'A whale! A whale!'

'*Sustinuit anima mea in verbo ejus speravit anima mea in Domino.*'

'Elsie?' A look of wondrous happiness overspread the Archduchess' face – She was wading – wading again among the irises and rushes; wading, her hand in

⁴³⁷ Ronald Firbank, *Caprice* (1917), in Firbank, *'Vainglory' with 'Inclinations' and 'Caprice'*, ed. by Richard Canning (London: Penguin, 2012), pp. 295-378, pp. 305-06.

⁴³⁸ Merritt, pp. 89-90.

Princess Elsie's hand, through a glittering golden sea, towards the wide horizon.⁴³⁹

The Archduchess's death scene certainly achieves a level of comic pathos which one might associate with Joyce, especially as she narrates her memories of paddling in the castle's grottos. Nevertheless, it is also firmly Firbankian, with its typical lack of attribution of speakers, its incongruous comedy, and its camp love of aristocracy and Catholic ceremony.

Merritt further argues that in Chapter 6 of *Concerning the Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli*, the representation of the thoughts of the papal spy Madame Poco, as she sits alone and sews, read like a 'burlesque of Molly Bloom's monologue at the end of *Ulysses*'.⁴⁴⁰ The passage may not be as 'dense' as Joyce's work, Merritt concedes, but it nevertheless demonstrates Firbank's command of an 'associative flow' handled with 'real discipline'.⁴⁴¹ This modernist touch demonstrates the serious artistic ambitions behind the camp comedy:

She had been freshening a little the chasuble worn last by his Eminence at the baptism of the blue-eyed police-pup of the Duquesa DunEden, and which bore still the primrose trace of an innocent insult.
 'A disgraceful business altogether,' Madame Poco sighed.
 Not everyone knew the dog was christened in *white menthe*...
 'Sticky stuff,' she brooded: 'and a liqueur I never cared for! It takes a lot to beat Aniseed brandy; when it's old. Manzanilla runs it close; but it's odd how a glass or two turns me muzzy.'⁴⁴²

With short paragraphs like the sentence 'Not everyone knew...', Firbank's narratorial voice shifts directly into Poco's unspoken digressions, in this case prompting her to discuss her favourite liqueurs out loud. Moreover, although it is easy to imagine *Ulysses* referring to a stain of puppy urine, it is only Firbank who would use the phrase 'the primrose trace of an innocent insult'.

Later, the Cardinal is caught in a similar stream of reflection over his past female lovers. In contrast to Madame Poco's halting series of short paragraphs, Pirelli's thoughts are crammed into fat, giddy blocks of thought:

Poor woman. What had become of her? Her enthusiasm, had it lasted? She had been very ardent. Perfervid! 'Instruction' would quite wear it out of them. Saint

⁴³⁹ Firbank, *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, pp. 78-79.

⁴⁴⁰ Merritt, p. 17.

⁴⁴¹ Merritt, p. 99.

⁴⁴² Firbank, *Concerning the Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli*, p. 212.

Xarifa's at fall of day; ... an Autumn affair! Chrysanthemums; big bronze frizzlies. A Mrs Mandarin Dove. American. Ninety million sterling. Social pride and religious humility, how can I reconcile? The women in Chicago. My God!!! My little stepdaughter... Her Father, fortunately... Yes, your Eminence, he's dead. And, oh, I'm *glad*. Is it naughty? And then her photograph a la Mary of Magdala, her hair unbound, décolletée, with a dozen long strands of pearls. 'Ever penitently yours, Stella Mandarin Dove.'⁴⁴³

These are the 'semirandom reflections' that Hollinghurst argues 'Firbank so excels at'.⁴⁴⁴ In this way Firbank takes a Wildean instinct for camp phrases and flourishes, and melds it with a modernist impulse to represent the fragmentary nature of human consciousness.

2.11 Firbank's Changing Critical Reputation

The fluctuations in Firbank's literary reputation after his death in 1926 suggest that, while his work has never been embraced by the mainstream to any lasting degree, it has nevertheless found its admirers and champions down the decades. One of the first posthumous Firbank appraisals is Ifan Kyrle Fletcher's 1927 article for the *South Wales News*, which as Chapter One has already discussed, was also an early use of the term 'modernist' in literary criticism.⁴⁴⁵ Fletcher was clearly inspired by Carl Van Vechten's 1922 essay for the *Double Dealer*, given his plagiarizing of Van Vechten's sentence 'And such dialogue!' without credit: 'And such dialogue! It sparkles with a humour ageless yet modern: ageless in its unfailing wit, modern in the vivacity of its application to every foible of our day.'⁴⁴⁶ A more significant surge of interest followed in 1928, when the young Anthony Powell used his position at the London publishers Duckworth to organize a limited edition of Firbank reprints.⁴⁴⁷ This became the five-volume *Works of Ronald Firbank* (1929).⁴⁴⁸ The first volume included an introduction by Arthur Waley and a biographical essay by Osbert Sitwell, both stating the case for Firbank's literary importance and innovation. This edition quickly sold out, prompting the issuing by Duckworth of a series of mass-market reprints across eight volumes, unofficially known as the 'Rainbow Edition' (1929-1930) due to each volume having a differently coloured cover.⁴⁴⁹

The publication of the Duckworth editions in 1929 prompted a flurry of new essays and memoirs. Key essays on Firbank from this period include one by Evelyn Waugh (who argued

⁴⁴³ Firbank, *Concerning the Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli*, p. 228.

⁴⁴⁴ Hollinghurst, 'I Often Laugh When I'm Alone', p.16.

⁴⁴⁵ See section 1.8.

⁴⁴⁶ Fletcher, 'Ronald Firbank: Newport Associations of a Modernist', p. 6.

⁴⁴⁷ Powell, p. 10.

⁴⁴⁸ Miriam J. Benkovitz, *A Bibliography of Ronald Firbank*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), p. 41.

⁴⁴⁹ Benkovitz, *A Bibliography of Ronald Firbank*, p. 41.

for his value as an innovator), one by E. M. Forster (who praised him, albeit more as a late decadent), and one by Leonard Woolf (who denigrated Firbank, calling him ‘silly and second-rate’).⁴⁵⁰ The Forster and Woolf essays both call Firbank a ‘butterfly’ of prose, in the sense of being ornate yet delicate, a metaphor which also appears in the essays by Waley and Sitwell in *The Works of Ronald Firbank*.⁴⁵¹ According to a memoir by Sewell Stokes, published in the same period, Firbank himself once spoke of his style this way: ‘I am a butterfly, waiting for caterpillars to drop from the leaves’.⁴⁵² This period also saw the publication of Fletcher’s *Ronald Firbank – A Memoir* (1930), which included memoirs by Vyvyan Holland and Lord Berners, along with a revised version of Sitwell’s piece. At this time, the critical term ‘Firbankian’ began to appear in reviews of other authors.⁴⁵³ In 1934, Firbank’s remaining finished novel *The Artificial Princess* was published. Eight years after his death he had gone from a niche figure having to fund his own novels to a respected author with a readership large enough to warrant reprints, essays, biographies, and his own adjective.

A second and more substantial revival of Firbank took place in 1949, with the publication of the anthology *Five Novels*. The American edition by New Directions prompted Edmund Wilson’s essay ‘A Revival of Ronald Firbank’ (1949), which Steven Moore calls ‘probably the most important and influential review written about RF’s work’.⁴⁵⁴ Wilson proclaimed that, as the 1929 *Works* had ‘aroused little interest in America’, *Five Novels* was the US public’s chance to acknowledge Firbank as ‘one of the finest English writers of his period and one of those most likely to become a classic’.⁴⁵⁵ Shaun McCarthy equally indicates the significance of the Wilson essay, although he attributes the post-1945 revival as ‘chiefly’ down to Sandy Wilson’s stage musical version of *Valmouth* (1958).⁴⁵⁶ The first full-length monograph, *Ronald Firbank* by Jocelyn Brooke (1951) appeared during this period, as did appraisals by W. H. Auden, Leslie Fiedler, C. P. Snow, and V. S. Pritchett, along with an anthology of Firbank’s remaining major works, *Three Novels* (1950).⁴⁵⁷

By 1961, Duckworth felt there was interest enough to put together the single-volume, 750-page *Complete Ronald Firbank*, with an Anthony Powell preface, along with Firbank’s

⁴⁵⁰ Waugh, ‘Ronald Firbank’. E. M. Forster, ‘Our Butterflies and Beetles’. Leonard Woolf, ‘Butterflies’, *Nation and Athenaeum*, 44 (5 January 1929), p. 495.

⁴⁵¹ Forster, ‘Our Butterflies and Beetles’, p. 6. Leonard Woolf, ‘Butterflies’, p. 495. Waley, p. 173. Osbert Sitwell, ‘Biographical Memoir’, in Ronald Firbank, *The Works of Ronald Firbank* (London: Duckworth, 1929), 5 vols, I, 12-34 (p. 14).

⁴⁵² Sewell Stokes, *Pilloried!* (London: The Richards Press, n. d. [1928]), p. 227.

⁴⁵³ See Chapter Four, introductory section.

⁴⁵⁴ Steven Moore, *Ronald Firbank: An Annotated Bibliography of Secondary Materials*, p. 21.

⁴⁵⁵ Edmund Wilson, ‘A Revival of Ronald Firbank’ (1949), in Edmund Wilson, *Classics and Commercials: A Literary Chronicle of the Forties* (London: W.H. Allen, 1951), pp. 486-502 (pp. 487, 486).

⁴⁵⁶ Shaun McCarthy, ‘Firbank’s Inclinations and the Nouveau Roman’, *Critical Quarterly*, 20.2 (1978), 64-77 (p. 64).

⁴⁵⁷ Excerpts from these pieces are reprinted in Moore, *Ronald Firbank: An Annotated Bibliography of Secondary Materials*, pp. 18-23.

unfinished novel, *The New Rythum* (1962). At the same time, Penguin Books released a compact Modern Classics paperback (containing *Valmouth*, *Prancing Nigger*, and *Cardinal Pirelli*), making Firbank, as he had joked in *Vainglory*, officially a ‘classic’ author. The Firbank books produced in this era include two important works by Miriam J. Benkovitz: *A Bibliography of Ronald Firbank* (1963; revised in 1982) and *Ronald Firbank: A Biography* (1969), along with monographs by James Merritt, Edward Potocke, and John Kiechler (all 1969), and Brigid Brophy’s voluminous *Prancing Novelist* (1973). Mervyn Horder’s 1977 compilation *Ronald Firbank – Memoirs and Critiques* reprinted the 1930 Fletcher *Memoir* alongside a selection of other important essays, such as those by Van Vechten (albeit not the 1922 version with its early use of ‘camping’), Wyndham Lewis, Waugh, Forster, and Edmund Wilson.⁴⁵⁸ In his introduction to this latter book, however, Horder noted that the post-1945 Firbank revival was now over, and that in 1977 the novelist was in danger of ‘receding from our view altogether’.⁴⁵⁹ The word ‘camp’ was now used to dismiss Firbank as a museum piece: “‘That camp old thing – who reads him now?’ snort the *literati*’.⁴⁶⁰

Nevertheless, a modest level of interest in Firbank continued into the 1990s and early 2000s. Harold Bloom included Firbank’s *Five Novels* in his *Western Canon* (1994), while in 1996 the US critic Steven Moore published his exhaustive *Ronald Firbank: An Annotated Bibliography of Secondary Materials, 1905-1995*. Firbank’s letters to his mother appeared in a limited edition in 2001, while 2004 saw the Edwin Mellen Press release the only collection of Firbank essays to date: *Critical Essays on Ronald Firbank, English Novelist, 1886-1926*. As Michael Allen Hunter comments, this book is interesting ‘primarily as an indicator of the current state of Firbank studies’; the essays themselves, with the exception of one by Don Adams, are ‘oddly untheoretical’, suggesting that ‘Firbank and serious criticism don’t mix’.⁴⁶¹ Certainly, the lack of any major books on Firbank since Brophy’s *Prancing Novelist* (1973) has contributed to Firbank’s present diminished visibility.

The twenty-first century has seen several respectful new editions of Firbank’s work, either edited by Alan Hollinghurst (*Three Novels* in 2000 and *The Flower Beneath the Foot* in 2018) or by Richard Canning (*Vainglory, with Inclinations and Caprice* in 2012). In their introductions, both these editors champion Firbank as not just a pioneering gay writer, but as a modernist. This thesis, however, argues for the recognition of Firbank’s style as its own type of modernism. Through Firbank, camp modernism in literature can be defined as a queer-informed hybrid style, combining the campness of exaggerated language, faux-aristocratic gestures, and

⁴⁵⁸ Horder, ‘Introduction’, p. viii.

⁴⁵⁹ Horder, ‘Introduction’, p. ix.

⁴⁶⁰ Horder, ‘Introduction’, p. ix.

⁴⁶¹ Manuscripts: Michael Allen Hunter, ‘Bodies at Work in Bodies of Work: Ronald Firbank and the Corpus of Modernist Authorship’ (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Stanford University, California, 2007), deposited online at *ProQuest Dissertations & Theses*, p. 31.

unlikely juxtapositions (often with allusions to the trappings of gender and sexuality), with the modernist devices of fragmentation, ellipses, and representations of the random flow of consciousness.

That said, Firbank's camp modernism needs to be considered separately from the more systematic experiments of the canonical modernists. It is, as Peter Nicholls would say, a type of 'other modernism', a parallel canon. By referencing Firbank, discussions of camp in literature can usefully acknowledge this modernist connection, while discussions of modernist literature in turn can acknowledge the use of camp in texts by canonical modernist writers. The next chapter will demonstrate this latter claim by examining works by Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Djuna Barnes, and using comparisons with Firbank to disclose the camp moments of modernism.

3 Streams of Externalities: Camp in Modernist Fiction

Having shown how Firbank's work can be read as a prime example of camp modernism, this chapter moves the investigation to writers who are more typically associated with modernism than with camp. A Firbankian reading of such writers illuminates hitherto overlooked or underrated aspects of the modernist canon, aspects which touch either on homosexual and queer expression during the modernist era, or in the case of Joyce's 'Circe', aspects which interrogate gender and sexuality within a more heterosexual framework. As a result, it will be shown that, far from being incompatible with the spirit of modernism, camp was an occasional means for modernist writers to explore these issues.

This chapter comprises four case studies from the modernist literature canon. James Joyce's 'Circe' chapter from *Ulysses* (1922) might be an unexpected choice for discussing camp, but its gender-changing comedy, its references to Oscar Wilde, and its possible usage of the term 'camp' itself, make it a convincing candidate. The three other texts, Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* (1914), Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928), and Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* (1936), are by writers included in surveys of modernist fiction, if sometimes belatedly, who have also been read in the context of gay and lesbian literature. The *Edinburgh Dictionary of Modernism* (2018), for example, categorizes all three texts as examples of 'Sapphic Modernism', where textual innovation can be read as a response to the modernist era's 'climate of censorship' regarding 'expressions of same-sex desire'.⁴⁶² In each case, the indisputably camp works of Ronald Firbank are a compelling point of reference with which to identify the less obviously camp elements of these texts.

Each section of this chapter begins with an indication of the text's modernist reputation, followed by an investigation into biographical connections with Firbank and/or camp, if any, before moving onto an analysis of the text itself. The texts are presented in chronological order, in order to show how camp modernism can be thought of as having an 'early' phase of 'flatness', stasis, and abstraction (as in Stein's *Tender Buttons* and Firbank's *Vainglory*) which developed into a 'late' phase of deeper characterization, more linear narratives, more vividly realized settings, and bolder sexual content (as in Barnes's *Nightwood* and Firbank's *Concerning the Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli*).

⁴⁶² Jana Funke, 'Sapphic Modernism', entry in *The Edinburgh Dictionary of Modernism*, ed. by Vassiliki Kolocotroni and Olga Taxidou (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), pp. 329-31 (p. 330).

3.1 Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* (1914)

The categorization of Gertrude Stein (1874-1946) as a modernist is demonstrated in major anthologies such as Lawrence Rainey's *Modernism* (2005), which also notes how feminist critics expanded the canon of modernism over the decades to include the likes of Stein and Djuna Barnes.⁴⁶³ In fact, Stein was included in book-length studies of the subject from as early as 1931. Edmund Wilson's *Axel's Castle* (1931) discusses Stein along with James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound as participants in 'a self-conscious and very important literary movement'.⁴⁶⁴ As an example, Wilson names Stein's *Tender Buttons*, a book that consists of a series of random, often surreal, passages of poetic prose and fragmentary statements, ostensibly on the theme of domestic objects, items of food, and rooms. *Tender Buttons*, Wilson argues, can be compared to movements in modern art; the book is like 'a Cubist canvas', on which Stein writes 'pungently, impressionistically, concisely'.⁴⁶⁵ This analogy has been affirmed in more recent discussions. Christopher Butler argues, for instance, that *Tender Buttons* parallels the 'Cubist breakdown of the elements of representation in painting', in that it transforms domestic objects 'in a kind of timeless continuous present'.⁴⁶⁶

Despite the early grouping by Edmund Wilson, however, Stein's innovations have tended to be framed as an 'other' type of modernism, separate to that of Joyce, Eliot, and Pound. Often, this 'other' category is a queer version of modernism. As Christopher Butler puts it, Stein's work has been read as 'supporting evidence for a critical-theoretic position which sees much gay writing as a category-transgressing type of activity'.⁴⁶⁷ In his own argument for recognizing 'other modernisms', Peter Nicholls indicates the influence on Stein of a 'certain feature of decadent writing – notably its particular forms of linguistic opacity and its preoccupation with psychic disunity'.⁴⁶⁸ This idea of a 'linguistic opacity' derived from Wildean decadence suggests the innuendo of camp; 'psychic disunity', meanwhile, can be located in camp's association with a marginalized or subcultural perspective.

3.1.1 Reading the Camp in Stein

Stein's work has been explicitly categorised as 'camp', and grouped along those lines with Firbank, from at least the 1930s. In a 1939 arts column for the New York magazine *Spur*,

⁴⁶³ Rainey, p. xxvii.

⁴⁶⁴ Edmund Wilson, *Axel's Castle*, p. 1.

⁴⁶⁵ Edmund Wilson, *Axel's Castle*, p. 242.

⁴⁶⁶ Christopher Butler, p. 70.

⁴⁶⁷ Christopher Butler, pp. 71-72.

⁴⁶⁸ Nicholls, p. 217.

Salvador Dalí's work is described as taken too seriously by 'those *chichi* folk' who were 'probably weaned on Ronald Firbank', and who need to realize that Dalí's art, 'like Miss Stein's *Four Saints in Three Acts*' is 'just a big camp'.⁴⁶⁹ As the previous chapters have shown, 'chichi' was a pre-1960s synonym for 'camp' that Firbank himself recognized.⁴⁷⁰

This rare usage of 'camp' for *Four Saints* (1934), Stein's opera with music by Virgil Thomson, clearly falls into a pejorative and dismissive sense, however. By the time full-length books are being published on camp in the 1980s, Stein receives the label more positively. Her camp effects, argues Philip Core, are related to her persona, namely her exaggerated air of 'solitude, oracular attitude and masculine intelligence' which was played against an 'innate girlish shyness'.⁴⁷¹ In the 1990s, Linda Watts moved the discussion from Stein's persona to her work, arguing that it is productive 'to think about Stein in terms of literary camp, a stylized sensibility historically associated with homosexual cultural statement'.⁴⁷² The campness of Stein's work could not only create room for gay and lesbian readers 'to claim and inhabit literary texts in ways all their own' but could also challenge the broader, implicitly heteronormative modernism project through its aloof and mocking tone.⁴⁷³ But as with Firbank, Stein's anti-seriousness has risked her work being dismissed as *unserious* in its ambition.

In the last decade, Stein's camp modernism has been acknowledged, if briefly, by *Modernism/modernity*. Allan Pero's 'Canon of Camp Modernism' nominates Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933) as an example, while the issue's editors acknowledge two writers on the subject: Nick Salvato (2010) and Barbara Will (2000).⁴⁷⁴ Salvato includes Stein's 1938 libretto *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* as part of his study of 'closet dramas' by modernist writers that are also 'significant camp artifacts'.⁴⁷⁵ Barbara Will, meanwhile, argues that in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* Stein employs 'the hallmarks of "camp" – hyperbole and gestural excess – to invert traditional autobiographical notions of narrativity and to foreground the performance and constructedness of identity'.⁴⁷⁶ Stein's latter book plays not only with conventional sexual categories, with its depiction of her lesbian relationship with Toklas, but also demonstrates how the category of the modernist writer as 'genius' can be 'camped up', and therefore have its implied position of 'high' cultural power questioned.⁴⁷⁷ Diana Souhami's group biography *No Modernism Without Lesbians* (2020), meanwhile,

⁴⁶⁹ Thomas Devine, 'Galleries in May', *The Spur*, 63.5 (1 May 1939), p. 31.

⁴⁷⁰ See sections 1.4 and 1.5.

⁴⁷¹ Core, p. 174.

⁴⁷² Watts, p. 62.

⁴⁷³ Watts, p. 68.

⁴⁷⁴ Pero, p. 30. Bryant and Mao, notes, p. 32, n. 3.

⁴⁷⁵ Nick Salvato, *Uncloseting Drama: American Modernism and Queer Performance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 180.

⁴⁷⁶ Barbara Will, *Gertrude Stein, Modernism, and the Problem of "Genius"* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 147.

⁴⁷⁷ Will, p. 145.

acknowledges the campness of Stein's *Four Saints* as something positive and progressive: '*Four Saints* spoke for an inclusive, diverse world. It was camp and outrageous, the coming together of unfettered imaginations in a spectacle that sloughed off the past and let everyone have a good time'.⁴⁷⁸

Stein herself never met or communicated with Firbank, but she admired his work. In 1923 their mutual friend Carl Van Vechten tried to bring both writers together. He encouraged Stein to read Firbank's *The Flower Beneath the Foot* (1923), and added that he was sending Firbank a copy of Stein's *Geography and Plays* (1922): 'He will love it'.⁴⁷⁹ In July 1924 Stein read Firbank's *Prancing Nigger* and told Van Vechten she was 'delighted with it. It is sweet and funny'.⁴⁸⁰ Stein subsequently became a champion of Firbank herself. Ernest Hemingway writes in *A Moveable Feast*: 'I cannot remember Gertrude Stein ever speaking well of any writer who had not written favourably about her work or done something to advance her career except for Ronald Firbank, and later, Scott Fitzgerald'.⁴⁸¹ Paul Bowles supports this memory, recalling in 1931 how Stein would praise Firbank in company, telling people: 'He did it, and no one else can'.⁴⁸²

There are two strong reasons for selecting *Tender Buttons* (1914) for an investigation into camp modernism. One is that the earlier date of publication – one year before Firbank's debut *Vainglory* – supplies evidence for the idea of camp modernism as a phenomenon emerging independently among different writers, of which Firbank is the richest example rather than the originator. Another reason is to respond to Douglas Mao's recent essay highlighting the connection between *Tender Buttons* and Wildean decadence.⁴⁸³ Mao points out that the publisher of Stein's book, Claire Marie of New York, was associated with a love of *fin-de-siècle* culture, so much so that the first edition of *Tender Buttons* had a canary-yellow cover, evoking the *Yellow Book* journal (1894-1897), with its yellow Aubrey Beardsley covers.⁴⁸⁴ However, Mao argues for the reading of *Tender Buttons* not as 'decadent', due to its comparatively 'sober' tone, but 'naughty', a related quality that inhabits 'the space between the cute and the louche, between the childish and the decidedly-not-for-children, and between the earnest and the less-

⁴⁷⁸ Diana Souhami, *No Modernism Without Lesbians* (2020; repr. London: Head of Zeus, 2021), p. 389.

⁴⁷⁹ Carl Van Vechten, letter to Gertrude Stein, 22 February 1923, quoted in Edward Burns, ed., *The Letters of Gertrude Stein and Carl Van Vechten, 1913-1946*, 2 vols (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 1 (1913-1935), pp. 66-67.

⁴⁸⁰ Gertrude Stein, letter to Carl Van Vechten, 23 July 1924, in Burns, p. 105.

⁴⁸¹ Ernest Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1964), p. 30.

⁴⁸² Letter from Paul Bowles to Bruce Morrisette, July 1931, in Jeffrey Miller, ed., *In Touch: The Letters of Paul Bowles* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994), p. 77.

⁴⁸³ Douglas Mao, 'The Naughtiness of the Avant-Garde: Donald Evans, Claire Marie, and *Tender Buttons*', in *Decadence in the Age of Modernism*, ed. by Kate Hext and Alex Murray (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), pp. 197-228.

⁴⁸⁴ Mao, p. 202.

than-sincere'.⁴⁸⁵ As Kate Hext suggests, Mao's concept of 'naughtiness' can also be read as 'the nod and wink implicit in camp'.⁴⁸⁶ It seems logical to take the cue from these recent discussions and examine the Firbankian camp in *Tender Buttons*.

3.1.2 Firbankian camp in *Tender Buttons*: innuendo, fragmentation, epigram

As with Firbank, *Tender Buttons* uses camp to express homosexuality under the guise of innuendo, thus flouting the obscenity laws of the time. Carl Van Vechten made his admiration of this aspect of *Tender Buttons* clear in 1914, describing Stein's method as an ability to 'say unsuspected and revolting things, because [she] so cleverly avoids saying them'.⁴⁸⁷ In particular, the 'SUGAR' section suggests a sex scene. The activity begins with: 'The teasing is tender and trying and thoughtful', continues to 'wet crossing and a likeness', then to 'One, two and one, two, nine, second and five and that', before reaching a 'sugar' rush of climax: 'A blaze, a search in between, a cow, only any wet place, only this tune'.⁴⁸⁸ The subsequent phrases produce a tone of the post-coital: 'Cuddling comes in continuing a change. [...] A canoe is orderly. A period is solemn. A cow is accepted' (46). This use of 'cow', particularly in the sense of 'having', recurs elsewhere in *Tender Buttons* ('I hope she has her cow' (27)) as well as in Stein's later prose piece 'As a Wife has a Cow – A Love Story' (1926). As Christopher Reed notes, Stein's phrase 'is now widely understood as a coded question of sex [...], in which "have a cow" refers to orgasm'.⁴⁸⁹ The phrase 'a canoe is orderly' is especially echoed in Firbank's lesbian sex scene in *The Flower Beneath the Foot* (1923), which takes place in a becalmed rowing boat on a lake.⁴⁹⁰

Many of Stein's fragmentary sentences, such as 'May not be strange to' (14) mirror Firbank's dialogues in which sentences are interrupted or partially obscured, in the process often gesturing at sexuality. This camp modernist connection between fragmentation and mannered innuendo is further highlighted through repetition in both writers. We can note the repetitions of 'please' in the disembodied dialogues of Firbank's *Inclinations*, as in "Order

⁴⁸⁵ Mao, pp. 204, 215.

⁴⁸⁶ Kate Hext, 'Rethinking the Origins of Camp', p. 166. Hext refers to an earlier version of Mao's 'naughtiness' argument, given as an unpublished paper in 2015.

⁴⁸⁷ Carl Van Vechten, 'How to Read Gertrude Stein' (1914), in *Gertrude Stein Remembered* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), ed. by Linda Simon, pp. 37-48 (first publ. in *The Trend*, 7.5 (August 1914), 553-57), p. 42.

⁴⁸⁸ Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons: The Corrected Centennial Edition*, ed. by Seth Perlow (1914; repr. San Francisco: City Lights, 2014), p. 46. Subsequent references given as page numbers in the main text.

⁴⁸⁹ Christopher Reed, 'Ladies Almanack showing their Satire and Irony...', in *Queer Difficulty in Art and Poetry: Rethinking the Sexed Body in Verse and Visual Culture*, ed. by Jongwoo Jeremy Kim and Christopher Reed (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), pp. 120-139 (p. 128).

⁴⁹⁰ See section 2.9.

what you please from Tanguay,” he said – “a tiara, what you please.”⁴⁹¹ *Tender Buttons* contains comparable statements, taking politeness into absurd territory: ‘Please beef, please be carved clear, please be a case of consideration’ (39). Firbank’s *Flower Beneath the Foot* includes concise descriptions which verge on Stein’s fragmentation: ‘Swans and sunlight. A little fishing boat with coral sails. A lake all grey and green. Beatitude intense. Consummate calm.’⁴⁹² These lines are anticipated in *Tender Buttons* with phrases such as ‘Calmness, calm is beside the plate and in way in’ (40) and ‘A seal and matches and a swan and ivy and a suit’ (12). Both writers steep their fragments of prose in this shared tone of mannered comedy, simultaneously camping up their modernist instincts, and modernizing their camp instincts.

Although there is no explicit impression of people speaking in *Tender Buttons*, the text breaks out into phrases that suggest a series of utterances, with all the homogenous and directionless chatter of a Firbank scene. One example from ‘A TABLE’ is: ‘A table means does it not my dear it means a whole steadiness’ (28). The unexpected use of ‘my dear’ not only produces two bodies in an ambience of feminized (or effeminate) affectation, but it also hints at an ironic *unsteadiness* caused to the world of heterosexual realism. As suggested by Stein’s section title ‘A FRIGHTFUL RELEASE’ (21), which could be a Firbank exclamation in itself, camp provides a sense of colour and energy in what might initially appear to be a text of inert difficulty. There are also mysterious references to female names which would not be out of place in Firbank: ‘Mildred’s Umbrella’ (15), Pauline (27), Aider (31), Susan (50), and the sister who ‘was not a mister’ (65). When Stein writes of ‘a perfectly unprecedented arrangement between old ladies and mild colds’ (26), she evokes Firbank’s Miss Critchett from *Vainglory*, whose life ‘is one ceaseless cold’, and who, like the female names in *Tender Buttons*, is mentioned once and never again.⁴⁹³

Stein also peppers her text, as does Firbank, with modernist twists on Wilde’s style of declarative quips and epigrams. In ‘A SUBSTANCE IN A CUSHION’, the statement ‘What is the use of a violent kind of delightfulness if there is no pleasure in not getting tired of it’ (12) finds echoes in the Wildean ennui of Firbank’s *The Princess Zoubaroff* (‘Shake me a cocktail, darling, Do’. ‘Oh, don’t ask me to do anything so violent, Eric’).⁴⁹⁴ Stein’s sense of being ‘tired’ in a world of domestic objects also anticipates the Queen of Pisuerga in Firbank’s *Flower Beneath the Foot*, who complains that her earrings ‘tire’ her.⁴⁹⁵ Equally, Stein’s play on gender, as suggested in the sister who ‘was not a mister’ (65) is channelled into more Wildean language elsewhere: ‘Replacing a casual acquaintance with an ordinary daughter does not make a son’

⁴⁹¹ Firbank, *Inclinations*, p. 194.

⁴⁹² Firbank, *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, p. 81.

⁴⁹³ Firbank, *Vainglory*, p. 103.

⁴⁹⁴ Firbank, *The Princess Zoubaroff: A Comedy* (1920), in Ronald Firbank, *Complete Plays*, ed. by Steven Moore (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1994), pp. 47-127 (l. 12, p. 70).

⁴⁹⁵ Firbank, *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, p. 13.

(65); ‘a blind agitation is manly and uttermost’ (23). When the text offers more sober instructions, such as ‘Act so that there is no use in a centre’ (63), even this has the declarative air of a Wilde character. In fact, in a post-Wilde age of homosexual marginalization, the statement reads as a deliberate claiming of an alternative society away from the mainstream. In this way it is closer to a Firbankian statement, in that it distances itself from the heteronormative ‘centre’ of canonical modernism, and calls out for others to join in.

3.1.3 Firbankian camp in *Tender Buttons*: cataloguing, aristocracy, jazz

Tender Buttons evokes the camp love of cataloguing, as if recruiting items to furnish its own hermetic world. As Kirsten MacLeod has pointed out, cataloguing is one of the ‘new decadent’ aesthetics of Carl Van Vechten’s 1920s fiction, as it reads as a modern update on the collecting and cataloguing found in Huysmans and Wilde.⁴⁹⁶ When, as with Stein, the tone of such cataloguing includes notes of humour, exaggeration, and bathos, the effect shifts into a very modern sense of camp. Indeed, Sontag’s ‘Notes on “Camp”’, a work of camp cataloguing in itself, has echoes of Stein’s language patterns in its opening line, as Sharon Monteith argues: ‘Many things in the world have not been named; and many things, even if they have been named, have never been described.’⁴⁹⁷ When Sontag goes on to describe camp as ‘a tender feeling’, Stein’s *Tender Button* is evoked, given its recurring use of the word ‘tender’.⁴⁹⁸ Just as Sontag stuffs her essay with examples of camp arranged in groups, like an exhibition curator, *Tender Buttons* fills a short book – as does Firbank with his novels – with a sense of abundance under extreme (if tender) control, while gesturing humorously to the artificiality of such control. This camp effect can be seen in Stein’s promise of categories (‘Objects’, ‘Food’, ‘Rooms’, the ‘contents’ list at the beginning for ‘Food’, and the sub-section titles), only to playfully resist these categories. Stein camps up the act of cataloguing itself in the passage titled ‘A RED STAMP’:

If lilies are lily white if they exhaust noise and distance and even dust, if they dusty will dirt a surface that has no extreme grace, if they do this and it is not necessary it is not at all necessary if they do this they need a catalogue. (15)

This effect is mirrored in a scene in Firbank’s *Inclinations* (1916), set at a crowded private view in an art gallery. The scene is written mostly as dialogue, where, as is typical of Firbank, few of

⁴⁹⁶ MacLeod, p. 235.

⁴⁹⁷ Sontag, ‘Notes on “Camp”’, p. 275. Sharon Monteith, *American Culture in the 1960s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008) p. 128.

⁴⁹⁸ Sontag, ‘Notes on “Camp”’, p. 292.

the speakers are identified.⁴⁹⁹ One line, ‘you have the catalogue’, is repeated three times, mirroring Stein’s highlighting of catalogues as tools of collecting and categorization. The camp modernist version of this strategy reacts to legal, cultural and social consolidations of *sexual* categories, in the wake of the Wilde trials. The ‘not at all necessary’ aspect of categories, not least those related to gender and sexuality, is directly addressed by camp.

Tender Buttons’s environment of collected objects hints at another key aspect of Firbankian camp: aristocracy. Although *Tender Buttons* creates no realistic sense of the ‘rooms’ it promises to represent in its sub-headings, the sheer volume and diversity of objects on show, with its seltzer bottles, dresses, and its ‘kitchen full of the proteins and the luxuries’ makes it, as Juliana Spahr argues, ‘clearly a bourgeois interior’.⁵⁰⁰ Other lines in *Tender Button* suggest a Firbank character commenting on the importance of being well-dressed to appear well-bred: ‘Suppose ear rings, that is one way to breed, breed that’ (30). When *Tender Buttons* suddenly utters that ‘The rest was mismanaged’ (21), the text anticipates one of Firbank’s most cited quotations, from *Vainglory*: ‘The world is disgracefully managed, one hardly knows to whom to complain’.⁵⁰¹ Firbank’s world favours those either in an economic position of being able to collect so many ‘tender objects’, or those in straitened circumstances who act with a campily aristocratic air of defiance, like the black characters in *Sorrow in Sunlight*. The voice of *Tender Buttons* is a queenly one in the camp sense: a voice of possessions that is *in* possession. Stein’s domestic space may appear surreal and undefined, but it is nevertheless an estate.

When Stein’s wordplay takes on a rhythmic and jazz-like form, the camp becomes distinctly modernist. As Jocelyn Brooke notes, the eccentric placing of words in Firbank gives his prose a ‘syncopated’ quality suggesting ‘the influence of jazz music, whose beginnings were more or less contemporaneous with Firbank’s debut as a novelist’.⁵⁰² *Tender Buttons* certainly has a number of ‘jazz’ moments. In the section ‘IT WAS BLACK, BLACK TOOK’, the hard onomatopoeic consonants of ‘no precise no past pearl pearl goat’ (31) take the language into the realm of jazz improvisations performed in a syncopated style. It is not difficult to think of Stein’s ‘Boom in boom in, butter’ (52) as a jazz shout, as it is with ‘A no, a no since, a no since when, a no since when since, a no since when since a no since when since’ (59). The same tone anticipates Firbank’s *Sorrow in Sunlight*, where ‘the latest jazz’ is as ‘exuberant as the soil [...], pulsating, with a zim, zim, zim, a jazz all abandon and verve’.⁵⁰³ It is the ‘abandon’ aspect that connects Stein and Firbank in this respect, allowing their work to be read as joint participants in

⁴⁹⁹ Firbank, *Inclinations*, p. 192-94.

⁵⁰⁰ Juliana Spahr, ‘Afterword’, in Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons: The Corrected Centennial Edition*, ed. by Seth Perlow (San Francisco: City Lights, 2014), pp. 107-129 (p. 110).

⁵⁰¹ Firbank, *Vainglory*, p. 86. Elizabeth Knowles, ed., *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 8th edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 316.

⁵⁰² Jocelyn Brooke, *Ronald Firbank and John Betjeman, Writers and Their Work*, 153 (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1962), p. 8.

⁵⁰³ Firbank, *Sorrow in Sunlight*, p. 133.

a camp modernist project, informed as much by the experimental and modernist freedom of ‘the latest jazz’ as by the campness of Wilde.

3.2 James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922)

In studies of literary modernism, James Joyce’s novel *Ulysses* (1922) is often cited as one of the defining examples of the term, if not ‘the most important novel of the twentieth century’.⁵⁰⁴ Its modernist techniques are, as Randall Stevenson puts it, ‘fully and spectacularly deployed’.⁵⁰⁵ The book’s reputation as a work of serious ambition and difficulty might at first suggest a humourless tone. The truth is that *Ulysses* is not only rich in many styles of humour, but that it includes its own version of Firbankian camp as one of these styles. Firbank and Joyce were both ex-pat nomads interested in pushing the boundaries of what could be published, formally and sexually, and both were, in different ways and to different degrees, interested in blending Wildean camp with literary innovation.

Despite its association with the explicit details of heterosexuality, *Ulysses* appealed to Firbank, as it did to other homosexual readers of the era. Four of the people who helped to get *Ulysses* published, at the risk of prosecution for obscenity, were lesbians: Sylvia Beach of the Paris bookshop Shakespeare and Company, her lover Adrienne Monnier, who published the French edition of *Ulysses*; and Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap, who serialized extracts of Joyce’s novel in their journal *The Little Review*. As Alison Bechdel puts it when reflecting on *Ulysses* in her graphic memoir *Fun Home*: ‘I like to think [the four women] went to the mat for this book because they were lesbians, because they knew a thing or two about erotic truth’.⁵⁰⁶ Firbank is actually mentioned in Gordon Bowker’s Joyce biography as one of the subscribers to Beach’s first edition of *Ulysses*.⁵⁰⁷ However, Bowker gives no source for this claim, which is contradicted by a letter from Firbank to his mother in June 1922. There, Firbank refers to the book’s subscribers as a group he is not a part of, although he is curious about *Ulysses*:

And now I am just back from the other side of Paris having been after a scarce book that is published only for ‘subscribers’ and costs £7! In London I hear they are asking £15 – the book is ‘Ulysses’ by James Joyce who is supposed to be almost as corrupting to good morals as me! Grant Richards published his early work, and Miss Beach the Librarian has nearly all my books and was so interesting on the subject of Richards! Joyce has never received any royalty on

⁵⁰⁴ Rainey, p. 223.

⁵⁰⁵ Randall Stevenson, p. 48.

⁵⁰⁶ Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), p. 229.

⁵⁰⁷ Gordon Bowker, *James Joyce: A Biography* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2011), p. 295.

his work at all – yet all his books are out of print and unattainable. I did not buy ‘Ulysses’ as I hope to get a copy second-hand later on.⁵⁰⁸

There is no evidence that Firbank eventually procured a copy of *Ulysses*, but this letter at least demonstrates the book’s appeal to him. It reveals that Firbank saw himself as akin to Joyce, not only as a fellow author published (and not paid) by Grant Richards, but as an author thought ‘corrupting to good morals’ – a remark clearly meant sardonically, given that it was addressed to his mother. The quip hints that one appeal of *Ulysses* to a homosexual writer like Firbank, was, as with its lesbian publishers, its serious and innovative expression of writing about *any* sexuality.

Joyce was indirectly connected with Firbank, and with the word ‘camp’, through his friend and occasional *Ulysses* typist, Robert McAlmon. In the summer of 1922, McAlmon met Firbank in London’s Eiffel Tower restaurant, when he was told about ‘the book which he [Firbank] was then doing, *The Flower Beneath the Foot*’.⁵⁰⁹ As discussed in Chapter One, McAlmon’s interest in camp men and homosexual slang can be seen in his short story ‘Miss Knight’ (1925), which uses the word ‘camp’ in this way. Joyce admired the story enough to have it translated into French and published in the quarterly *900: Cahiers d’Italie et d’Europe*.⁵¹⁰ But Joyce may have learned the term ‘camp’ earlier than this, before the completion of *Ulysses*. One possibility is that McAlmon made Joyce aware of the term during their socializing in 1921, given that, according to McAlmon, Joyce had a habit of ‘constantly leaping upon phrases and bits of slang which came naturally from my American lips’.⁵¹¹ An earlier awareness is also possible, as Garry Leonard points out, given that *Ulysses* is set in the early 1900s, when the word ‘camp’ was in burgeoning circulation as street slang.⁵¹² As Chapter One has shown, the term was used in Dublin in the 1880s, as demonstrated in the proceedings of the Gustavus Cornwall trial. Joyce makes a possible reference to this trial in the ‘Eumaeus’ chapter of *Ulysses*, when Leopold Bloom reflects on ‘the Cornwall case’ (600).⁵¹³ Regardless, Joyce’s interest in sexual slang in general, as well as his allusions in the fifteenth

⁵⁰⁸ Ronald Firbank, letter to Lady Firbank, Paris, June 1922, quoted in Firbank, *Letters to his Mother*, p. 94.

⁵⁰⁹ McAlmon, *Being Geniuses Together* (1938), p. 45.

⁵¹⁰ McAlmon, ‘Miss Knight’, trans. by Christian Dumont, *900: Cahiers d’Italie et d’Europe*, 2 (Winter 1926-1927), 115-34. McAlmon, *Being Geniuses Together* (1938), p. 148. Kay Boyle, supplementary chapters in Robert McAlmon, *Being Geniuses Together: 1920-1930*, revised by Kay Boyle (1968; repr. London: Michael Joseph, 1970), p. 265.

⁵¹¹ McAlmon, *Being Geniuses Together* (1938), p. 14. Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce*, new and revised edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 514.

⁵¹² Garry Leonard, “‘A Little Trouble about Those White Corpuscles’: Mockery, Heresy, and the Transubstantiation of Masculinity in “Telemachus””, in *Ulysses En-Gendered Perspectives: Eighteen New Essays on the Episodes*, ed. by Kimberly J. Devlin and Marilyn Reizbaum (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), pp. 1-19 (p. 9).

⁵¹³ Jeri Johnson, ‘Explanatory Notes to *Ulysses*’, in *Ulysses: The 1922 Text*, ed. by Jeri Johnson (1993; repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp.763-980 (p. 953).

chapter of *Ulysses* – also known as ‘Circe’ – to camp styles, as part of what Cheryl Herr observes as ‘performance styles and dramatic modes typical of his era – with music-hall acts, with melodramatic conventions, with pantomime’, invites a consideration of camp in *Ulysses*.⁵¹⁴

3.2.1 Camp in *Ulysses*: Mulligan and ‘Circe’

In his book-length study of literary camp, Robert Kiernan briefly calls Joyce, along with Laurence Sterne and Henry Fielding, ‘arguably camps’ due to their liberating use of frivolity, although he does not pursue this idea with examples.⁵¹⁵ The field of *Ulysses* studies has been more specific, locating camp in the character of Malachi ‘Buck’ Mulligan. In the first chapter of Joyce’s book, also known as ‘Telemachus’, Mulligan’s parodic poses and gestures, which he makes in front of Stephen Dedalus, are, argues Garry Leonard, ‘a “camp” performance of masculinity’, comparable to the ‘voguing’ dancers of the Madonna pop video, *Vogue* (1990).⁵¹⁶ Leonard makes this comparison due to Mulligan’s ‘rapid changes of posture and performance’ which suggest the jump-cut qualities of music videos.⁵¹⁷ In fact, as Pamela Robertson points out, Madonna’s ‘Vogue’ video is a strong example of a camp text, as it in turn quotes a camp dance style, ‘voguing’, which originated from New York’s black homosexual and transgender ballroom scene, as explored in the documentary *Paris is Burning* (1990).⁵¹⁸ As with many moments of camp, the scene in *Ulysses* is at once affectionate, parodic, and appropriating. Hence, when Mulligan gets dressed in ‘rebellious tie’, ‘puce gloves and green boots’ he revealingly tells Stephen, ‘we have grown out of Wilde and paradoxes’.⁵¹⁹ This can be read as a piece of Wildean paradoxical wit in itself, in the double sense of ‘grown out’. Mulligan’s ‘we’ can be said to originate from Wilde, while simultaneously eclipsing him – a concept that could equally describe the work of Firbank, and of camp modernism. In Leonard’s reading, Mulligan is a post-Wilde camp dandy, one who has engaged with the newly cinematic speed of the twentieth century and ‘developed his own style’.⁵²⁰ Indeed, he anticipates one of Sontag’s ‘Notes’: ‘Camp is the answer to the problem: how to be a dandy in an age of mass culture’.⁵²¹

If a post-Wilde dandy is needed for reading the camp in Joyce, it makes sense to reference Firbank. Not only because his work is (unlike Madonna’s) from the same era, but also because of the very Catholic aspect of the mockery as signified by Mulligan. When Mulligan

⁵¹⁴ Cheryl Herr, *Joyce’s Anatomy of Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), p. 5.

⁵¹⁵ Kiernan, p.18.

⁵¹⁶ Leonard, p. 8.

⁵¹⁷ Leonard, p. 8.

⁵¹⁸ Robertson, ‘Mae West’s Maids’, p. 402. *Paris is Burning*, dir. by Jennie Livingston (Off-White Productions, 1990).

⁵¹⁹ James Joyce, *Ulysses: The 1922 Text*, ed. by Jeri Johnson (1993; repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 17, 18. Subsequent references given as page numbers in the main text.

⁵²⁰ Leonard, p. 10.

⁵²¹ Leonard, p. 10. Sontag, ‘Notes on “Camp”’, p. 288.

takes off his gown and announces ostentatiously, ‘Mulligan is stripped of his garments’(16), he parodies the Bible’s tenth Station of the Cross.⁵²² As James Merritt argues, a ‘good example of camp and of Firbank’s use of it’ is the scene in *Vainglory* where a sumptuous Tiepolo painting of a *Station of the Cross* is juxtaposed with banal floral ceiling decorations, described as ‘all the paraphernalia of Love...’ (sic).⁵²³ Although, as Merritt puts it, Joyce is more ‘raucously vulgar’ than Firbank, the detail of mocking the Stations of the Cross with more everyday ‘paraphernalia’ – such as Mulligan’s robe and razor – aligns Joyce’s scene with Firbank’s oeuvre as examples of Catholic camp modernism. Crucially, as Jonathan Greenberg points out, Mulligan ‘has no *stream of consciousness*’ [Greenberg’s italics] – ‘he exists only as a performance’.⁵²⁴ Greenberg’s italics suggest that as Mulligan is an exception to the signature device of modernist literature, he is therefore a different type of modernist character – a camp one. His modernist ‘stream’ is not of internal consciousness, but of external surfaces. Camp modernism in this sense can be comprehended as a *stream of externalities*.

The most sustained stream of externalities in *Ulysses* is the entirety of the ‘Circe’ chapter. The chapter is a camp performance by the novel itself. Vladimir Nabokov notes the clear sense of exaggeration – the key synonym for camp – when he suggests that the chapter is best perceived as ‘an exaggeration, a nightmare evolution of its [the novel’s] characters, objects, and themes’.⁵²⁵ In other words, ‘Circe’ is the chapter in which *Ulysses* camps *itself* up. Colleen Lamos argues, more specifically, that ‘Circe’s ‘theatricalization of inner sexuality, along with satires on ‘the sciences devoted to its study’, produces ‘a camp perversion’ throughout.⁵²⁶ Frances Devlin-Glass similarly argues that the style of the ‘Circe’ chapter, along with the character of Mulligan in the wider novel, share ‘the theatricality of high camp performance’.⁵²⁷ But whereas Mulligan’s camp aspects are contained in his character, in ‘Circe’ the whole text channels exaggerated satires of sexuality and gender roles, using the form of a stage script to highlight the performative aspects of such roles.

3.2.2 Firbankian camp in ‘Circe’: ‘camp mass’, homosexuality, innuendo, excess

Having established the possibility that Joyce was aware of the homosexual usage of the term ‘camp’ before he completed *Ulysses*, we can consider the implications of the word’s appearance

⁵²² Jeri Johnson, ‘Explanatory Notes to *Ulysses*’, p. 772.

⁵²³ Merritt, p. 56.

⁵²⁴ Jonathan Greenberg, *Modernism, Satire, and the Novel*, p.35.

⁵²⁵ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, ed. by Fredson Bowers (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), p. 350.

⁵²⁶ Colleen Lamos, ‘Signatures of the Invisible: Homosexual Secrecy and Knowledge in *Ulysses*’, *James Joyce Quarterly*, 31.3 (Spring, 1994), 337-355 (p. 346).

⁵²⁷ Frances Devlin-Glass, ‘Writing in the Slipstream of the Wildean Trauma: Joyce, Buck Mulligan and Homophobia Reconsidered’, *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 31.2 (Fall 2005), 27-33 (p. 32).

in the context of 'Circe', a text steeped in camp style. One of the stage directions towards the end of the chapter is as follows: '*Father Malachi O'Flynn in a long petticoat and reversed chasuble, his two left feet back to the front, celebrates camp mass*' (556). As Greg Winston points out, this use of 'camp' is nominally intended in the military sense. It sustains 'the battlefield conceit' of the wider scene, in which Stephen Dedalus's altercation with Private Carr transforms into a magical conflict. 'Armed heroes' of history spring up from a rain of 'dragon's teeth' to do battle (555), while a spontaneous mass on a 'field altar' is performed (556). This mass is often read as a 'black mass', in which the practices of a Catholic mass are reversed, typically in the context of Satanic cults.⁵²⁸ But Winston argues that the scene also touches on gender, as it parodies 'the mock mass from the book's opening' as a 'climactic antidote to primarily masculine orthodoxies of calculated violence and sexual oppression'.⁵²⁹ As previously discussed, the 'mock mass' of the 'Telemachus' chapter is an isolated moment of Firbankian camp, blending as it does Mulligan's Wildean posing with parodies of Catholic ritual. While Winston highlights the military connotation of 'camp mass', he overlooks the possibility of a secondary meaning in the punning sense: 'camp' as in theatrical, homosexual, effeminate, and exaggerated.⁵³⁰

Certainly, the 'Circe' chapter is full of nods to camp as a homosexual style. The reference to Father O'Flynn's '*long petticoat and reversed chasuble*' (556) combines the Firbankian markers of Catholic satire and gender parody. Indeed, the sentence would not be out of place in Firbank's *Cardinal Pirelli*, where a typical clause is: 'Father Fadrique, the splendid swagger of whose chasuble every woman must admire'.⁵³¹ The name 'Father Malachi O'Flynn', as Colleen Lamos argues, reads as a composite of two previously-introduced Joyce characters, both of whom have been interpreted as homosexual: Malachi 'Buck' Mulligan and Father Flynn from 'The Sisters' in *Dubliners*.⁵³² 'Circe' also features a fantastical satire on the Wilde trials, when Mulligan becomes a 'sex specialist' giving medical evidence on behalf of Bloom: 'Dr Bloom is bisexually abnormal [...] There are marked symptoms of chronic exhibitionism' (465). As Frances Devlin-Glass argues, this 'diagnosis' suggests 'a covert explanation/defence of Wilde's theatricality, bisexuality and medical pathology'.⁵³³ But crucially, explicit references to *homosexuality* are left out of the scene, as if, as with Firbank, same-sex relationships are better left implicit within the camp style of the text itself.

⁵²⁸ Greg Winston, 'Barracks and Brothels: Militarism and Prostitution in *Ulysses*', in *Bloom'sday 100: Essays on 'Ulysses'*, ed. by Morris Beja and Anne Fogarty (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009), pp. 96-114 (p. 111).

⁵²⁹ Winston, p. 111.

⁵³⁰ Winston, p. 111.

⁵³¹ Firbank, *Concerning the Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli*, p. 236.

⁵³² Lamos, p. 351.

⁵³³ Devlin-Glass, p. 32.

These implicit qualities of ‘Circe’ touch on a common weapon of camp: innuendo. One example is Bloom’s encounter with Mrs Breen, when the characters play the ‘teapot’ guessing-game, wherein ‘teapot’ is substituted for missing words (423). Joyce camps up the game by taking it into the territory of codified sexuality, echoing Stein’s innuendo employed around domestic objects in *Tender Buttons*, as well as an enigmatic remark in Firbank’s *Inclinations*: ‘Such a sturdy little tea-pot! With the sweetest spout... *Pout*.’⁵³⁴ As Joseph Allen Boone points out, the ‘floating signifier’ of ‘teapot’ in the scene with Mrs Breen becomes more overtly sexual later in the chapter.⁵³⁵ When Bloom is changed into a woman, Bello uses this word for Bloom’s penis, with allusions to the curly genitalia of pigs, the animal which men are transformed into by the mythical Circe from *The Odyssey*: ‘Where’s your curly teapot gone to?’ (506). Whereas in early Firbank – as in earlier chapters of *Ulysses* – there is innuendo represented in the dots of ellipses, in ‘Circe’ these ellipses are now delved into – and turned inside out. As Hélène Cixous puts it, this is ‘the underside of the text’ breaking through, ‘where discourse becomes detached and fantasies imprint their anxiety.’⁵³⁶ Just as Jocelyn Brooke reads Firbank’s ellipses as implying ‘the whole of Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis’, Joyce uses this sense of ‘upturned’ ellipses in ‘Circe’ to explore his known interest in the sexology of Ellis.⁵³⁷ Nevertheless, homosexuality is still contained on the level of camp innuendo. As Bloom says, simpering ‘with forefinger in mouth’, in reply to Bello’s command to ‘pander to their Gomorrahan vices’: ‘O, I know what you’re hinting at now’ (506).

The camp qualities of exaggeration are very much a part of ‘Circe’. Just as Jocelyn Brooke noted how Firbank’s syntax is often ‘strained to bursting point’ with its ornate effects, clausal flourishes, and excess of detail, Joyce himself planned the chapter of ‘Circe’ to have a sense of ‘vision animated to the bursting point’.⁵³⁸ But Joyce’s moments of camp excess, such as the list of characters in a chase scene (544-45), are also examples of a heterosexual author using such effects on his own terms; the possibilities of queer or homosexual perspectives are acknowledged, but are nevertheless kept firmly at a distance. As Boone argues, in such moments of Joycean camp, ‘freeing the polymorphous perverse [...] becomes another name for policing the other’s desire’.⁵³⁹ Sontag’s notion of camp as ‘tender’, as evinced by Firbank and Stein, is nowhere to be found in this more aggressive, Joycean version of camp. Nevertheless, Joyce’s choice of the final name in the chase scene, ‘Mrs Miriam Dandrade and all her lovers’, being an allusion to Bloom’s transvestite fantasies, is, as Boone argues, a reminder that the chapter still represents the idea that ‘all sexual identification is a masquerade, a fluid exchange

⁵³⁴ Firbank, *Inclinations*, p. 229.

⁵³⁵ Boone, pp. 451-52, n. 29.

⁵³⁶ Hélène Cixous, ‘At Circe’s, or the Self-Opener’, trans. by Carol Bové, *boundary 2*, 3.2 (Winter 1975), 387-397 (p. 390).

⁵³⁷ Jocelyn Brooke, *Ronald Firbank* (London: Arthur Baker, 1951), p. 57. Devlin-Glass, p. 27.

⁵³⁸ Brooke, *Ronald Firbank and John Betjeman*, p. 9. Jeri Johnson, ‘Explanatory Notes to *Ulysses*’, p. 921.

⁵³⁹ Boone, p. 160.

of roles and masks and words [...] imbricated in a performative play of surfaces and exteriors'.⁵⁴⁰ Joyce's type of camp may be his own version, but when analysed alongside Firbank, its value *as* a kind of camp is more vividly demonstrated.

3.2.3 Firbankian camp in 'Circe': aristocracy, flatness, costume

'Circe' especially evinces Firbank's camp use of aristocracy and high society. When Cixous calls the chapter 'the ascendancy of the Other', her description invokes Firbank's recurring cast of duchesses and countesses and queens: drag manifestations of homosexual identity, figures who are not just socially accepted but socially ascended.⁵⁴¹ In the courtroom scene of 'Circe', the witnesses to Bloom's character include a trio of 'several highly respectable Dublin ladies', such as the Honourable Mrs Mervyn Talboys, a name that could be straight out of Firbank (442). Bloom's plea to be spanked by Mrs Talboys ('Refined birching to stimulate the circulation' (443)) recalls *Vainglory's* Mrs Shamefoot, with her interest in owning the 'Old Flagellites Club', on 'Whip-me-Whop-me-Street'.⁵⁴² When Bello lists the men (and dog) who were once 'about to violate' Bloom in his Mrs Drandade persona, Joyce makes the final name 'Bobs, dowager duchess of Manorhamilton' (503), thus ending with a Firbankian flourish.

The dialogue of 'Circe' also has a quality of hermetic flatness typical of the conversations in Firbank. As Cixous puts it, in 'Circe' 'isolated voices float and call, each speaks toward the exterior', a description which echoes Firbank's summation of his own style in *Vainglory* as 'a frieze with figures of varying heights trotting all the same way'.⁵⁴³ The dialogue often touches on Firbankian markers, such as Bloom wistfully recalling how he was 'converted' into a 'true corsetlover' by his school friend 'dearest Gerald' (503) – an echo of Firbank's *Inclinations* (1916), with its same-sex couple Geraldine 'Gerald' O'Brookomore, and Mabel Collins. Firbank's love of ornate alliteration is mirrored by such remarks as Lynch's: 'Pornosophical philotheology. Metaphysics in Mecklenburg Street!' (411), as well as by stage directions such as the following for Molly/Marion, which touches on the camp love of grand opera: '*In disdain she saunters away, plump as a pampered pouter pigeon, humming the duet from Don Giovanni*' (419).

Firbank's love of descriptions of feminine clothes is evoked when considering lines in 'Circe' such as Bello's command to Bloom: 'learn the smooth mincing walk on four inch Louis XV heels' (506). Joyce wrote in 1920 that he wanted 'to make "Circe" a costume episode'.⁵⁴⁴

⁵⁴⁰ Boone, p. 161.

⁵⁴¹ Cixous, p. 388.

⁵⁴² Firbank, *Vainglory*, p. 75.

⁵⁴³ Cixous, p. 387. For the full Firbank quote, see section 2.6.

⁵⁴⁴ James Joyce, letter to Budgen, quoted in Jeri Johnson, 'Explanatory Notes to *Ulysses*' p. 921.

This intention behind the chapter is revealed in its relating of sexuality and gender roles to performativity and exaggerated artificiality, as evinced in the camp practice of drag. Mrs Breen, for instance, hits a Firbankian mode in the following line, which ends with a misquote of *Don Giovanni*:

MRS BREEN: (*In a onepiece evening frock executed in moonlight blue, a tinsel sylph's diadem on her brow with her dancecard fallen beside her moonblue satin slipper, curves her palm softly, breathing quickly.*) *Voglio e non.* (423)

The costume play reaches more grotesque heights when Bloom's mother, Ellen, appears 'in pantomime dame's stringed mobcap, crinoline and bustle, widow Twankey's blouse with muttonleg sleeves buttoned behind, grey mittens and cameo brooch' (417). The reference to traditional pantomime dames like Widow Twankey is a reminder that in Dublin in 1904, a version of everyday camp existed in the genre of pantomime theatre. It is no surprise that *Ulysses*, with its interest in the everyday, should touch on this outlet of camp in the mainstream world, whereas Firbank's camp always gestures to a separate, permanently unreal world, away from the mainstream.

3.3 Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928)

As with 'Circe', Virginia Woolf's novel *Orlando: A Biography* has the sense of a temporary excursion from a usual style. Woolf deliberately wrote the book, about an Elizabethan aristocrat who lives through four centuries and magically changes gender along the way, as a momentary change of direction from her previous works, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927), which along with *The Waves* (1931) have become recognized as the defining examples of her modernist work. Whereas these works foreground her modernist style of 'elaborate transactions of consciousness among characters and with the author', *Orlando* does something different, something more playful and arch.⁵⁴⁵ As Woolf herself told her diary when planning the book: 'Satire is to be the main note [...]. My own lyric vein is to be satirised. Everything mocked.'⁵⁴⁶ Much of the mockery comprises jokes meant for the book's dedicatee, her friend and sometime lover Vita Sackville-West: 'Sapphism is to be suggested', Woolf wrote in her diary.⁵⁴⁷ Yet this private theme resulted in a text with a wide public appeal. The book's popular

⁵⁴⁵ Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, eds., *Modernism 1890-1930* (1976; repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), p. 639.

⁵⁴⁶ Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf – Vol III: 1925-1930*, ed. by Anne Olivier Bell with Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth Press, 1980), entry for 14 March 1927, p. 131.

⁵⁴⁷ Virginia Woolf, *Diary – Vol III*, entry for 14 March 1927, p. 131.

success on its publication in October 1928 can be linked with the public interest in the obscenity trial and subsequent banning of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) at the same time. As Quentin Bell puts it, Hall's novel, which depicted lesbianism through a prose style of conventional realism, gave 'the sexual theme of the book [*Orlando*] topicality'.⁵⁴⁸ Crucially, the camp elements of Woolf's book helped it to escape the same censorship.

The campness of *Orlando* may, however, be one reason for its periods of critical dismissal. By 1960, the novel was still popular enough for Woolf to be referred to as 'the author of *Orlando*' in landmark essays on modernism.⁵⁴⁹ In the 1960s and 1970s, however, Woolf's reputation as a modernist became her books' main commercial appeal, to the point where the anomalous *Orlando* fell out of favour critically and commercially.⁵⁵⁰ Once the term 'camp' was diffused in criticism by Sontag, *Orlando* was cited in articles offering further examples of the term.⁵⁵¹ But the label was not always positive; in the 1970s Elaine Showalter summarized the novel as 'tedious high camp'.⁵⁵² After Sally Potter's 1992 successful film adaptation coincided with the emergence of seminal queer theory texts like Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990), the novel's reputation as a queer classic was established.⁵⁵³ In 2018, this aspect was demonstrated in an episode of the Netflix TV series for young adults, *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, where the book was used to indicate a teenager's transgender identity.⁵⁵⁴ If the campness of *Orlando* is something scholars like Showalter are uneasy about, then a knowledge of the more synonymously camp Firbank can show how this aspect enhances Woolf's novel rather than diminishes it.

3.3.1 *Orlando*, Strachey, and the Camp Sublime

The camp elements of Woolf's book have been discussed seriously from at least the 1990s. George Piggford has published two essays on the subject, although without using the phrases

⁵⁴⁸ Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography – Volume Two: Mrs Woolf 1912-1941* (London: Hogarth Press, 1972), p. 139.

⁵⁴⁹ Harry Levin, 'What Was Modernism?', *Massachusetts Review*, 1.4 (Summer 1960), 609-30 (p. 625).

⁵⁵⁰ Leonard Woolf, *Downhill All The Way: An Autobiography of the Years 1919-1939* (1967; repr. London: Hogarth Press, 1975), p. 147.

⁵⁵¹ Thomas Meehan, 'Not Good Taste', *New York Times*, 21 March 1965, magazine section, 30, 31, 113, 115 (p. 30). Barbara Green, 'They Call it Camp', *Epaulet* (Fredericksburg, VA: Mary Washington College), spring 1966, 6-10 (p. 9).

⁵⁵² Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 291.

⁵⁵³ Elsa Högberg and Amy Bromley, 'Introduction: Sentencing Orlando', in *Sentencing Orlando: Virginia Woolf and the Morphology of the Modernist Sentence*, ed. by Elsa Högberg and Amy Bromley (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), pp. 1-14 (p. 3).

⁵⁵⁴ *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (Netflix TV series, 2018-2020), Series 1, episode 9, 'The Returned Man' (2018).

‘camp modernism’ or ‘modernist camp’.⁵⁵⁵ D. A. Boxwell does accept the term ‘modernist camp’ for *Orlando*, and makes a link with Firbank, suggesting that *Orlando* has fewer ‘affinities’ with the rest of Woolf’s canon and more with the works of ‘producers of camp’ of the 1920s, a group that Boxwell defines as including Firbank, Noel Coward, Cecil Beaton, Carl Van Vechten, ‘any and all of the Sitwells’, and ‘of course, Vita Sackville-West’.⁵⁵⁶ The 2016 Camp Modernism special issue of *Modernism/modernity* included a discussion by Madelyn Detloff of Jessica Thebus’s camp stage adaptation of *Orlando*.⁵⁵⁷ Detloff criticizes Sally Potter’s film version, for being ‘ultimately too artistically earnest to communicate the gist of Woolf’s *Orlando*’, suggesting that the film has contributed to a general neglect of the campness of the source material.⁵⁵⁸ However, the film certainly has its moments of isolated camp, such as the casting of Quentin Crisp as Elizabeth I, a performance that Fabio Cleto describes as ‘fulfilling the wildest camp dream’.⁵⁵⁹

Woolf herself had a taste for Firbank. In 1929 she read Firbank’s *Works* (1929), possibly the same copy that her husband Leonard had reviewed unfavourably, and recommended them to her friend Mary Hutchinson; they had given her, she said, ‘some unstinted pleasure’.⁵⁶⁰ Maureen Duffy speculates that Woolf must have read Firbank’s *Vainglory* (1915) much earlier, because a character in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), Rezia Smith, recalls *Vainglory*’s Mr Rienzi-Smith.⁵⁶¹ The most convincing connection, however, is that Firbank’s camp persona had an impact on Woolf via his fictionalized portrait in Harold Nicolson’s *Some People* (1927) as ‘Lambert Orme’. *Some People* is one of the probable inspirations for the style of *Orlando*, as Woolf had greatly admired the way Nicolson ‘combine[d] the advantages of fact and fiction’.⁵⁶²

A further camp influence on *Orlando* was Woolf’s friend Lytton Strachey’s *Eminent Victorians* (1918). Barry Spurr, who calls Strachey’s style ‘Camp Mandarin’, uses it to argue

⁵⁵⁵ George Piggford, ‘“Who’s That Girl?”: Annie Lennox, Woolf’s *Orlando*, and Female Camp Androgyny’, *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, 30.3 (September 1997), 39-58. George Piggford, ‘Camp Sites: Forster and the Biographies of Queer Bloomsbury’ (1997), repr. and rev. in *Queer Bloomsbury*, ed. by Brenda Helt and Madelyn Detloff (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), pp. 64-88.

⁵⁵⁶ D. A. Boxwell, ‘(Dis)orienting Spectacle: The Politics of *Orlando*’s Sapphic Camp’, *Twentieth-Century Literature*, 44.3 (Autumn 1998), 306-327 (pp. 309, 324 (n. 1)).

⁵⁵⁷ Madelyn Detloff, ‘Camp Orlando (or) *Orlando*’, *Modernism/modernity*, 23.1 (January 2016), 18-22.

⁵⁵⁸ Detloff, p. 21.

⁵⁵⁹ *Orlando*, dir. by Sally Potter (Sony Pictures International, 1992). Fabio Cleto, ‘Introduction: The Spectacles of Camp’, p. 53.

⁵⁶⁰ Virginia Woolf, letter to Mary Hutchinson, 6 May 1929, in Virginia Woolf, *Leave the Letters till We’re Dead: The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume VI: 1936-1941*, ed. by Nigel Nicolson with Joanne Trautmann (London: Hogarth Press, 1980), appendix of previously uncollected letters, p. 526.

⁵⁶¹ Brophy, *Prancing Novelist*, p. 435 (n. 1).

⁵⁶² Virginia Woolf, letter to Harold Nicolson, 15 June 1927, in *A Change of Perspective: The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume III: 1923-1928*, ed. by Nigel Nicolson with Joanne Trautmann (London: Hogarth Press, 1977), p. 392.

against Cyril Connolly's reflection on Firbank, where Connolly argued that homosexuality was 'not a factor of importance in the assessment of a writer's style'.⁵⁶³ As with Woolf's intent in *Orlando* to suggest Sapphism, Strachey articulated his homosexuality in his camping up of the style of Victorian biographies. As Spurr puts it, Strachey 'impersonates [the genre's] mannerisms and humorously exaggerates its gestures, even as he reveals a residual affection for them'.⁵⁶⁴ Notably, Michael Holroyd defines Strachey's style as 'like the novels of Ronald Firbank', due to its 'ornate overstatements, its laconic recording of incongruities, its unpredictable transpositions, its ironic crescendos and plummetings into bathos'.⁵⁶⁵

In this respect, George Piggford describes the 'Stracheyesque passage' that opens *Orlando*'s Chapter II to be 'as close as any writer in English has ever approached to the camp sublime'.⁵⁶⁶ The passage anticipates Orlando's change of sex with a tone of bathetic camp, in that it blends exaggeration with deflation:

The biographer is now faced with a difficulty which it is better perhaps to confess than to gloss over. Up to this point in telling the story of Orlando's life, documents, both private and historical, have made it possible to fulfil the first duty of a biographer, which is to plod, without looking to right or left, in the indelible footprints of truth; unenticed by flowers; regardless of shade; on and on methodically till we fall plump into the grave and write *finis* on the tombstone above our heads. But now we come to an episode which lies right across our path, so that there is no ignoring it. Yet it is dark, mysterious, and undocumented; so that there is no explaining it. Volumes might be written in interpretation of it; whole religious systems founded upon the signification of it. Our simple duty is to state the facts as far as they are known, and so let the reader make of them what he may.⁵⁶⁷

As Piggford points out, this passage uses 'an over-the-top and parodic style' as part of its queer strategy of a camp textual style, in order to inscribe a queer character 'whose irregular desires implicitly critique simplistic, binaristic notions of sexual identity'.⁵⁶⁸ Woolf's implication in the passage is that there is 'no ignoring' of queer identities, but also 'no explaining' of them through the style of Victorian biographies. As the received language of biography is, by extension, a heteronormative strategy, it must be challenged, or in this instance, camped up.

⁵⁶³ Barry Spurr, 'Camp Mandarin: The Prose of Lytton Strachey', *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 33.1 (1990), 31-45 (p. 34). Cyril Connolly, *Enemies of Promise* (1938), rev. edn (1948; repr. London: André Deutsch, 1973), p. 46.

⁵⁶⁴ Spurr, p. 35.

⁵⁶⁵ Michael Holroyd, *Lytton Strachey*, new edn (1994; repr. London: Vintage, 1995), p. 428.

⁵⁶⁶ Piggford, 'Camp Sites', p. 75.

⁵⁶⁷ Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* (1928), ed. by Michael H. Whitworth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 41. Subsequent references given as page numbers in the main text.

⁵⁶⁸ Piggford, 'Camp Sites', p. 75.

Furthermore, Piggford's use of the phrase 'camp sublime' for this passage affirms the idea – until recently – that modernism is incompatible with camp, in the same way that it is incompatible with the Romantic idea of the sublime. Fredric Jameson uses this idea in his negative conception of postmodernism, where camp is a type of 'hysterical sublime' and is 'one of the most fateful differences between high modernism and postmodernism'.⁵⁶⁹ The sublime's sense of being overwhelmed by an external aesthetic maps directly on to the camp apprehension, and simultaneous celebration, of exaggerated surfaces. The camp sublime in the *Orlando* passage hits its zenith with the inclusion of bathos, as in the statement: 'we fall plump into the grave and write *finis* on the tombstone above our heads'. Indeed, the imagery recalls a sentence in Firbank's *Valmouth*: 'One gaunt, tall cross, however, half hidden by conifers, a little apart, almost isolated, solitary, alone, was, to the excellent Englishwoman, in its provocativeness, as a chalk egg is to a sensitive hen'.⁵⁷⁰ In both examples, the sting of mortality is rendered absurd and comical through an excessive series of clauses, imbued with a self-conscious tone of exaggerated mannerisms. While Jameson regrets how the camp love of bathos represents 'the utter extinction of that pathos or even tragic spirit with which the high moderns lived their torn and divided condition', he overlooks the potential of camp bathos as a mode of expressing *queer* pathos, and in this case by a modernist like Woolf.⁵⁷¹

3.3.2 Firbankian camp in *Orlando*: epigrams, ellipses, exaggeration

Orlando's camp follows Strachey and Firbank in its love of Wildean epigrams. Strachey's use of 'epigrammatic succinctness' particularly belongs, observes Spurr, to the 'tradition of High Camp', a tradition which Spurr argues includes Strachey with Wilde and Firbank.⁵⁷² One can certainly see a Wildean aspect to *Orlando* in lines such as: 'As long as she thinks of a man, nobody objects to a woman thinking' (157); and in the description of the lawsuits against the female Orlando, following her transformation from a man: 'The chief charges against her were (1) that she was dead, and therefore could not hold any property whatsoever; (2) that she was a woman, which amounts to much the same thing' (100). Where *Orlando* moves closer to Firbank's camp *modernism*, though, is in its blending of this epigrammatic ambience with ellipsis, as in the eighteenth-century salon hosted by 'the Countess of R.':

As for what they said — nothing more tedious and trivial could be imagined. Everybody fidgeted and those who had fans yawned behind them. At last Lady R. rapped with hers upon the arm of her great chair. Both gentlemen stopped

⁵⁶⁹ Jameson, 'Baudelaire as Modernist and Postmodernist', p. 234.

⁵⁷⁰ Firbank, *Valmouth*, p. 50.

⁵⁷¹ Jameson, 'Baudelaire as Modernist and Postmodernist', p. 234.

⁵⁷² Spurr, p. 39.

talking. Then the little gentleman said,
 He said next,
 He said finally,
 Here, it cannot be denied, was true wit, true wisdom, true profundity. The
 company was thrown into complete dismay. One such saying was bad enough;
 but three, one after another, on the same evening! No society could survive it.
 (118)

Woolf adds a footnote to the line ‘He said finally’: ‘These sayings are too well known to require repetition, and besides, they are all to be found in his published works’ (118). The joke is that the author’s identity is equally omitted. Although a Firbank novel would include many more lines of dialogue than this, Firbank too tends to deny the reader simple Wildean epigrams in favour of fragmented lines of dialogue, suggesting a world built more from the *ruins* of epigrams.

In this way, *Orlando* reveals a further influence shared by Firbank: Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*. As Alan Hollinghurst argues, in contrast to Wilde’s closed epigrams and inherent conservatism, Sterne’s novel enabled Firbank to use the open potential of digression, suggestive ellipses, and ‘the radically unsentimental scope of discontinued syntax’, a fusion of which could articulate the author’s homosexuality.⁵⁷³ It is enlightening, then, to know that Woolf was writing about *Tristram Shandy* at the same time as she was writing *Orlando*.⁵⁷⁴ When planning the novel, she intended that it was ‘to end with three dots... so.’⁵⁷⁵ As Judith Allen points out, *Orlando* has ‘numerous signifying acts of omission’ and ‘many ellipses’.⁵⁷⁶ While Bellamy argues that Sterne provided Woolf with a general tone of ‘humour and self-mockery’, the use of Sterne’s ellipsis to channel a codified form of *homosexual* humour – camp – reads as something *Orlando* very much shares with Firbank.⁵⁷⁷ One example, which recalls the single blank page in *Tristram Shandy*, is the ‘great blank’ of white space inserted by Woolf during Orlando’s conversations with Shelmerdine, ‘to indicate that the space is filled to repletion’ (147). Just as Firbank’s ellipses often indicate sexual ambiguity, George Piggford argues that the ‘great blank’s insertion in Orlando’s discussions on gender ‘continues to suggest the ambiguity of Orlando’s sexual identity’.⁵⁷⁸ Woolf’s line about the blank space being ‘filled

⁵⁷³ Manuscripts: Alan Hollinghurst, ‘The Creative Uses of Homosexuality in the Novels of E. M. Forster, Ronald Firbank, and L. P. Hartley’, unpublished M. Litt thesis, University of Oxford (1979); print copy at Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. M. Litt. c. 515 (p. 115).

⁵⁷⁴ Suzanne Bellamy, ‘“... and nothing whatever happened”: Orlando’s Continuous Eruptive Form’, in *Sentencing Orlando: Virginia Woolf and the Morphology of the Modernist Sentence*, ed. by Elsa Högberg and Amy Bromley (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), pp. 80-91 (p. 82).

⁵⁷⁵ Virginia Woolf, entry for 14 March 1927, *Diary – Vol III*, p. 131.

⁵⁷⁶ Judith Allen, ‘Orlando and the Politics of (In) Conclusiveness’, in *Sentencing Orlando: Virginia Woolf and the Morphology of the Modernist Sentence*, ed. by Elsa Högberg and Amy Bromley (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), pp. 198-209 (p. 206).

⁵⁷⁷ Bellamy, p. 82.

⁵⁷⁸ Piggford, ‘“Who’s That Girl?”’, p. 55.

to repletion' also mirrors the extreme concision of plot found in Firbank. With both authors, there is a sense of things being cut out in an extreme and humorous fashion, as with Sterne, but used to express the very modern problems of expressing homosexual identity during a time of homosexual illegality.

Elsewhere in *Orlando*, as in Firbank, there is an impression of things being inflated: the exaggeration crucial to camp. Here Woolf was quite deliberate, writing in her diary that Orlando was to have 'great splashes of exaggeration'.⁵⁷⁹ Certainly, some of the extravagant aristocratic names in *Orlando* are more Firbank than Woolf, such as 'Archduchess Harriet Griselda of Finster-Aarhorn and Scand-op-Boom in the Roumanian territory' (68), or 'The Lady Margaret O'Brien O'Dare O'Reilly Tyrconnel' (26). There are also touches of exaggeration in the topography, such as the view from Orlando's oak tree from which one can see 'thirty or perhaps forty' English counties (13). But the bulk of the novel's exaggeration is in its 'hyperbolic spoofs of normative gender performance', as Detloff puts it, such as the many references to Orlando's shapely legs, in both states of gender.⁵⁸⁰ The pivotal transformation scene, in particular, is a feast of exaggerated allegory, with its many capitalizations and exclamation marks, and its repeated references to 'Truth!' and 'Chastity, Purity, and Modesty' (81-83). The scene mirrors Firbank's love of capitalizations, and especially recalls the Hon. 'Eddy' Monteith's bath scene in Firbank's *Flower Beneath the Foot*, in which he imagines himself shape-shifting from St Sebastian to St Theresa.⁵⁸¹

3.3.3 Firbankian camp in *Orlando*: satire, gender parody

In terms of camp parody, the most Firbankian aspect of *Orlando* is that it follows Firbank's *Flower Beneath the Foot* (1923) by featuring a character based on Vita Sackville-West. Sackville-West is a camp figure in her own right, warranting an entry in Philip Core's gazetteer of camp. Core notes the 'grandeur' of her image, living as she did in Sissinghurst, a real castle surrounded by ornate gardens, but also in the way she channelled her relationship with Violet Trefusis into her novel *Challenge* (1924), which Core regards as a naïve camp work of 'humourless grand amour'.⁵⁸² In *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, Firbank spoofs her as Victoria Gellybore Frinton, the 'virile' writer married to the British diplomat Harold Chilleywater; in *Orlando* she is portrayed rather more affectionately as the gender-changing protagonist. The satirizing of Sackville-West in both novels also extends to her works. In *The Flower*, Gellybore Frinton's novel-in-progress appears to be, according to Brigid Brophy, a parody of Sackville-West's *The Dragon of Shallow Waters* (1921), while *Orlando* references *Challenge* (1924) and

⁵⁷⁹ Virginia Woolf, *Diary – Vol III*, entry for 20 December 1927, p. 168.

⁵⁸⁰ Detloff, p. 20.

⁵⁸¹ See section 2.1.

⁵⁸² Core, p. 165-66.

the Sackville-West poem 'The Land' (1927).⁵⁸³ This 'in the know' aspect of *Orlando*, as Detloff puts it, turns the whole novel into 'a camp performance, with camp love at its core'.⁵⁸⁴ Firbank's camp may be more mocking, but it nevertheless shares Woolf's interest in celebrating the real-life campness of Vita Sackville-West.

The camp theme of satirical gender-changing in *Orlando* also invites comparisons with the Bella/Bello scene in Joyce's 'Circe'. The transformation in *Orlando*, argues Adam Parkes, 'offers some striking parallels' with Joyce's 'Circe', with the same sense of the 'instability of sexual roles dramatized'.⁵⁸⁵ In this way, both texts invoke the desire to 'throw off an assigned social role, to remake an identity', and to reject 'those received, official versions of the past that censor one's possibilities in the present and the future'.⁵⁸⁶ However, as Oriana Palusci points out, this analogy diverges when one notes how in 'Circe', 'sex-change and cross-dressing deploy a caricature on gender relations', while in *Orlando*, by extending the theme across a whole novel, and by responding to Joyce's gendered name-switching (when the brothel madam Bella Cohen becomes the male 'Bello') with one name – Orlando – for both her protagonist's genders, Woolf brings to light 'something much richer and more relevant to the definition of a gendered identity'.⁵⁸⁷ In 'Circe', Stephen's 'nightmare of history' may be challenged by Joyce's own camp dream of phantasmagorical possibilities, but gender roles, heterosexuality, and narrative prose are all restored as the chapter closes. As Lamos suggests, Bloom's desires, despite the transformations in the chapter, 'are always heterosexually framed'.⁵⁸⁸ In *Orlando*, meanwhile, as in all of Firbank, every chapter performs a fantastical camp defiance of Parkes's 'official versions of the past', indicating the appeal of a more sustained use of camp to gay and lesbian writers in the 1920s. Woolf's camp modernism is closer to Firbank's than Joyce's, with the suggestion of *Orlando*'s whole text as a queer utopian space, as opposed to Joyce's use of camp moments as temporary diversions from the norm.

⁵⁸³ Brigid Brophy, 'Mrs Harold Chillywater', review of *V. Sackville-West* by Michael Stevens, *London Magazine*, n.s., 13.2 (1973), 138-141 (p. 140). Whitworth, 'Orlando: Explanatory Notes', in Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography*, ed. by Michael H. Whitworth (1928; repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 195-227 (pp. 200 (n. 24), 205 (n. 55), 213 (n. 109), 221 (n. 154)).

⁵⁸⁴ Detloff, p. 20.

⁵⁸⁵ Adam Parkes, *Modernism and the Theater of Censorship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 168.

⁵⁸⁶ Parkes, p. 168.

⁵⁸⁷ Oriana Palusci, 'Modernist Sex-Change on Paper: Gender Markers in Joyce's 'Circe' and Woolf's *Orlando*', in *Parallaxes: Virginia Woolf Meets James Joyce*, ed. by Marco Canani and Sara Sullam (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), pp. 152-66 (p. 161).

⁵⁸⁸ Lamos, pp. 351, 348.

3.4 Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* (1936)

The association of Djuna Barnes's novel *Nightwood* with modernism has existed since its first publication. Lawrence Rainey's anthology *Modernism* (2015), which includes a section of Barnes's poems and stories, quotes T. S. Eliot's 1937 championing of *Nightwood* in terms that express the modernist belief in difficulty as high art: 'It is so good a novel that only sensibilities trained on poetry can wholly appreciate it'.⁵⁸⁹ Barnes is also included in *Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents* in an excerpt from Robert McAlmon's memoirs, in which McAlmon refers to Barnes's personality in somewhat camp terms; she has a tendency for 'rather over-doing the grande dame manner'.⁵⁹⁰ The campness of Barnes's work, however, has only been explicitly acknowledged in recent years. D. A. Boxwell includes Barnes with Stein in a list of 'prominent' European and American lesbians who 'invented and articulated camp along distinctively butch-femme lines, and enacted, or rather "performed" it as both style and discourse'.⁵⁹¹ One example is the 'anarchically comic' and Firbankian name of Duchess Clitressa of Natescourt, from Barnes's *Ladies Almanack* (1928).⁵⁹²

As was the case with Elaine Showalter and *Orlando*, the camp aspects of *Nightwood* have been sometimes read as shortcomings. Daniela Caselli identifies moments in *Nightwood* in which 'meaning vacillates' as 'camp' and regrets how these moments sabotage 'the very possibility of holding an external perspective'.⁵⁹³ Margaret Gillespie, in contrast, contends that 'camp is key to the aesthetic expression of deviant sexuality in *Nightwood* and integral to the novel's often incongruous, often outrageous textual modus operandi'; an informed reading of camp *modernism* in the novel can therefore uncover the way it apprehends unconventional gender and poetics 'conjointly'.⁵⁹⁴ As we shall see, this fusion by Barnes of two reputedly incompatible concepts – camp and modernism – is especially apparent when comparing her work with Firbank.

3.4.1 Camp in *Nightwood*: censorship, 'chi-chi people', Firbank comparisons

In fact, the campness of *Nightwood* was suppressed on its first publication. When T. S. Eliot and his colleagues at Faber prepared the novel for publication in 1936, they excised some of its

⁵⁸⁹ Rainey, pp. 922-45. T. S. Eliot, 'Preface to Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*' (1937), repr. in Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood* (1936; repr. London: Faber, 2015), pp. xvii-xxii (p. xviii).

⁵⁹⁰ Kolocotroni et al, *Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents*, p. 448. Robert McAlmon, *Being Geniuses Together* (1938), pp. 21-22.

⁵⁹¹ Boxwell, p. 309.

⁵⁹² Boxwell, pp. 312, 325 (n. 5). Djuna Barnes, *Ladies Almanack* (1928; repr. New York: New York University Press, 1992), p. 8.

⁵⁹³ Daniela Caselli, *Improper Modernism: Djuna Barnes's Bewildering Corpus* (2009; repr. London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 159, 186. Gillespie, para. 2. Caselli, p. 184.

⁵⁹⁴ Gillespie, para. 2.

camper aspects in order to strengthen its appeal as a work of serious modernism. Although Faber's Frank Morley reported to Geoffrey Faber that the manuscript of *Nightwood* made him feel 'as I felt when I read *The Waste Land*', he advised it should be nevertheless be edited to remove any 'reporting of lesbianism [...]; the conflict is one of souls, not bodies, and if for censors' sake there have to be any individual words cut out; the work itself wouldn't much suffer'.⁵⁹⁵ These cuts, Gillespie argues, 'doctored the novel of some of its most blatantly camp anecdotes' in order to 'stress the novel's highbrow modernist credentials'.⁵⁹⁶ One example is a reference by the character Matthew O'Connor to a trial in the American mid-West for homosexual soliciting, which now reads like a quip from a Joe Orton play:

So what does the judge do but call up the nuncio of the office and he says 'John, what do I give a man of this sort?' And the clerk answered back, as quick as hitting yourself in the eye, 'A dollar, a dollar and a half, two dollars.'⁵⁹⁷

Gillespie suggests that in cutting passages like this, Eliot was 'keen perhaps to stall unflattering comparisons between *The Waste Land*'s Tiresias and his trashy Barnesian alter-ego, Matthew O'Connor'.⁵⁹⁸ In which case, the camp of *Nightwood* can be read not only as a strategy of lesbian response to canonical modernism, but as something that might threaten the high reputation of canonical modernism. Just as camp has been historically dismissed as 'trashy' or cheap or frivolous, camp modernism, in the eyes of Eliot, posed a threat to the value of the modernist project itself.

Faber also feared that *Nightwood*'s readership might be limited only to those interested in lesbian and gay subcultures, as suggested euphemistically in Eliot's 1937 preface:

The miseries that people [in *Nightwood*] suffer through their particular abnormalities of temperament are visible on the surface: the deeper design is that of human misery and bondage which is universal [...]. To regard this group of people as a horrid sideshow of freaks is not only to miss the point, but to confirm our wills and harden our hearts in an inveterate sin of pride.⁵⁹⁹

⁵⁹⁵ Frank Morley, letter to Geoffrey Faber, quoted in Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood* (1936; repr. London: Faber, 2015), unpaginated appendix.

⁵⁹⁶ Gillespie, para. 13.

⁵⁹⁷ Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood: The Original Version and Related Drafts*, ed. by Cheryl J. Plumb (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1995), p. 134.

⁵⁹⁸ Gillespie, para. 14.

⁵⁹⁹ T. S. Eliot, 'Preface to Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*' (1937), p. xxi.

It is quite clear that Eliot's 'our' does not apply to people with 'abnormalities of temperament', his euphemism for homosexuality. In his desire to promote *Nightwood* for the largest possible readership, Eliot seems to use 'universal' to denote 'heterosexual', with the 'our' of 'our hearts' suggesting that, however sympathetic Eliot is, his intended readership is not a homosexually inclusive one. Dylan Thomas echoed this sentiment in his 1937 review of the novel, fearing that the subject matter might only attract a readership of 'chi-chi people'.⁶⁰⁰ As Chapter One of this thesis has shown, 'chi-chi' (or 'chichi') was a synonym for homosexual camp at the time. By 1977, this fear was still persisting, now with the term 'camp' explicitly included; in his book-length study of Barnes, Louis F. Kannenstine worried that *Nightwood* had 'become ready game for literary cultists, devotees of 1920s expatriate lore or proponents of "camp culture"'.⁶⁰¹ As with Firbank's novels, to recognize *Nightwood* as a work of camp modernism is to recognize it as a work of homosexual art, which consolidates rather than detracts from Eliot's 'universal' intentions.

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that *Nightwood* found itself associated with 'camp culture' during the post-war Firbank revival. In his introduction for Firbank's *Three Novels* (1950), Ernest Jones argued that Firbank's aristocratic characters were steeped in 'ennui' because their form of aristocracy was '*parvenu*', as in rising from an obscure origin to a position of influence. Specifically, such characters are of 'that fragmented, corrupt and anarchic milieu known today as café society', which resembles 'that aristocracy of the circus described by Djuna Barnes in *Nightwood*'.⁶⁰² Retrogressively, Jones reads Firbank's *parvenu* aristocrats as closer to the spirit of Barnes than Wilde, being twentieth-century characters who are absurd and isolated from 'normal' society to the point where they resemble circus performers – literally so in the case of *Nightwood*'s trapeze artist the Duchess of Broadback, or its lion tamer Princess Nadja. Some of the minor characters in *Nightwood* are introduced in Firbankian detail, such as 'the Marchesa de Spada, a very old rheumatic woman (with an antique spaniel, which suffered from asthma)'.⁶⁰³ The characters in Firbank and *Nightwood* both exist in a carnivalesque world of their own, outsiders able to thrive in fantastical spaces that could only be created by modernity. In the sense that Osbert Sitwell saw Firbank as a 'war writer', as in the first World War, in that his novels were 'far more truly than any others in the English language, the product of the conflict', *Nightwood* maps Barnes's similar response to the ex-pat, post-war café culture

⁶⁰⁰ Dylan Thomas, 'Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood*' (review), in *Dylan Thomas: Early Prose Writings*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: J. M. Dent, 1971), pp. 182-83 (first publ. in *Light and Dark*, 1.2 (March 1937), 27, 29), p. 182.

⁶⁰¹ Louis F. Kannenstine, *The Art of Djuna Barnes: Duality and Damnation* (New York: New York University Press, 1977), p. xii.

⁶⁰² Ernest Jones, 'Introduction' (1950), in Ronald Firbank, *Three Novels* (1950; repr. Norfolk, CT: New Directions, n.d. [1951]) pp. vii-xx (p. ix).

⁶⁰³ Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood* (1936; repr. London: Faber, 2015), p. 63. Subsequent references given as page numbers in the main text.

of Paris and Berlin in the 1920s.⁶⁰⁴ As Jones suggests, Firbank and Barnes's camp aristocrats are detached and 'fragmented' in a very modern way: the diaspora of difference.

3.4.2 Firbankian camp in *Nightwood*: flatness, innuendo, race

The textual camp modernism of *Nightwood* is of an intermittent quality, rather than the more unrelenting style of Firbank. It can be especially located in some of the passages of narration, or in the many speeches by the character of 'Doctor' Matthew O'Connor. An example of the former, as identified by Gillespie, is the very first sentence of the novel. Ornate enough to take up an entire paragraph, the sentence evokes Firbank in its linguistic styling, its comic tone, and its reduction of characters to flat, detached signs. The camp targets in this case are 1930s attitudes towards race and aristocracy:

Early in 1880, in spite of a well-founded suspicion as to the advisability of perpetuating that race which has the sanction of the Lord and the disapproval of the people, Hedvig Volkbein, a Viennese woman of great strength and military beauty, lying upon a canopied bed of a rich spectacular crimson, the valance stamped with the bifurcated wings of the House of Hapsburg, the feather coverlet an envelope of satin on which, in massive and tarnished gold threads, stood the Volkbein arms – gave birth, at the age of forty-five, to an only child, a son, seven days after her physician predicted that she would be taken. (1)

The race in question is, of course, Jews. In this way *Nightwood* announces its uncompromising style with a camp aside on racial categorization, in much the same way that Firbank subverts Western attitudes towards black people in the early 1920s. The passage then consolidates its camp approach through its digression into the fabrics of the 'military beauty' Hedvig Volkbein's bed, recalling the digressive style that Firbank inherited from Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, then feminized in his own way. Gillespie points out that Hedwig is not just physically concealed within the ornate bed, but textually buried too, within 'the heavily laden phrases' of the passage.⁶⁰⁵ These 'function to reduce her to the status of sign and spectacle—as if she too has been blazoned onto the coat of arms, and the entire room has been flattened out into an armorial image.' This effect not only evokes the flattening 'frieze' aspect of Firbank's characters, but also Firbank's device of ornate concision; as with Firbank's novels, *Nightwood* is misleadingly short, demanding extra effort to apprehend the density of its sentences.

⁶⁰⁴ Osbert Sitwell, 'Ronald Firbank' (1929), rev. version, in Osbert Sitwell, *Noble Essences* (London: Macmillan, 1950), pp. 68-88 (first publ. as 'Biographical Memoir', in Ronald Firbank, *The Works of Ronald Firbank* (London: Duckworth, 1929), 5 vols, I, 12-34), p. 73.

⁶⁰⁵ Gillespie, para 24.

Gillespie's other key example of camp modernism in *Nightwood* equally touches upon race. Matthew O'Connor's description of the tattooed body of Nikka, the black wrestler at the Cirque de Paris, is 'an enactment of the workings of camp that are at play' in the novel.⁶⁰⁶ As O'Connor describes Nikka's tattoos, which he says – in Firbankian terms – have 'all the *ameublement* of depravity' (14), he concocts 'a high-camp cocktail of religious and homoerotic sentimentalism' that includes such camp elements as aristocratic names, 'sophisticated' phrases of non-English, Catholic ceremonial imagery, and sexual innuendo.⁶⁰⁷ In particular, the passage contains two instances of Firbankian ellipsis:

'[...] and running into the arm-pit, all down one side, the word said by Prince Arthur Tudor, son of King Henry the Seventh, when on his bridal night he called for a goblet of water (or was it water?). His Chamberlain, wondering at the cause of such drought, remarked on it and was answered in one word so wholly epigrammatic and in no way befitting the great and noble British Empire that he was brought up with a start, and that is all we will ever know of it, unless,' said the doctor, striking his hand on his hip, 'you are as good at guessing as Tiny M'Caffery. [...] And just above what you mustn't mention, a bird flew carrying a streamer on which was incised, "*Garde tout!*" I asked him why all this barbarity; he answered he loved beauty and would have it about him.' (15)

The elided body part that one 'mustn't mention', the penis, is already present in the passage as 'Tiny M'Caffery', O'Connor's camp name for his own genitalia; he also uses 'Tiny O'Toole' (119). In the 1950s, Barnes explained to a German translator that 'Tiny' was a 'camping word' for 'penis', as used by homosexuals in 1920s Paris.⁶⁰⁸ To emphasize this, O'Connor makes the statement while 'striking his hand on his hip' (15), a performative 'camping' gesture of the 1920s.

In turn, the reference to 'Tiny' being 'good at guessing' in the case of the elided 'epigrammatic' word from the Prince Arthur Tudor anecdote, makes it clear that the cause of the prince's thirst is a synonym for sexual intercourse. Jane Marcus's theory that the word must be '*merde*', the French word for 'shit', seems unlikely given this context.⁶⁰⁹ A further clue is that Barnes refers to an anecdote from British royal history. In 1501, Prince Arthur Tudor was indeed reputed to have made a bawdy boast of consummation after his wedding to the Spanish

⁶⁰⁶ Gillespie, para 26.

⁶⁰⁷ Gillespie, para 27.

⁶⁰⁸ Djuna Barnes, letter to Wolfgang Hildesheimer, 17 July 1959, quoted in Mary Lynn Broe, ed., *Silence and Power: A Reevaluation of Djuna Barnes* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), p. 219.

⁶⁰⁹ Jane Marcus, 'Laughing at Leviticus: *Nightwood* as Woman's Circus Epic' (1984), *Cultural Critique*, 13 (Fall 1989), 143-190 (p. 152).

princess, Katherine of Aragon.⁶¹⁰ According to a court deposition made by Sir Antony Willoughby, one of Arthur's servants, the remark was: 'Willoughby, bring me a cup of ale, for I have been this night in the midst of Spain'.⁶¹¹ The *Nightwood* passage thus demonstrates how Barnes uses camp to satirize the connections between innuendo, sexuality, and societal power. With the final word going to Nikka's Wildean explanation for his tattoos ('he loved beauty and would have it about him' (15)), Barnes shows the way camp can give agency to the marginalized.

This satirizing of racial otherness through camp textual stylings is further evident in *Nightwood* in the descriptions of the character born in the opening sentence, Felix Volkbein, along with those of his father, Guido. The narrator makes this quite explicit, while maintaining the same arch, epigrammatic tone in such statements as 'the Jew seems to be everywhere from nowhere' (7) and 'cut off from their people by accident or choice, [all Jews] find that they must inhabit a world whose constituents, being alien, force the mind to succumb to an imaginary populace' (3). Felix's Jewishness, coupled with the anachronistic aristocracy of his family, Barnes suggests, attracts him to the campy aristocratic outcasts of the novel, even marrying the androgynous lesbian, Robin Vote. As with Firbank's black characters, Felix has enough agency in this world to contribute camp narrations himself, as in his description of Jenny to O'Connor:

She had spared no pains to make her toilet rusty and grievous by an arrangement of veils and flat-toned dark material with flowers in it, cut plainly and extremely tight over a very small bust, and from the waist down gathered into bulky folds to conceal, no doubt, the widening parts of a woman well over forty. (102)

Like the many speeches of O'Connor, it is difficult to imagine this sentence spoken aloud in any realistic conversation, outside of the world of *Nightwood*, or indeed outside of Firbank's world. The focus on women's clothes in particular echoes Firbank's style. Firbankian camp in this case is a way of producing the 'imaginary populace' to which Barnes's Jewish characters are drawn.

⁶¹⁰ Rosemary Horrox, 'Arthur, Prince of Wales (1486–1502)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. by H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison, 60 vols, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), II, pp. 545-46 (p. 546).

⁶¹¹ Sir Antony Willoughby, deposition, 12 July 1529, quoted in J. S. Brewer, ed., *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII, Volume 4, Part 3: 1529-1530* (London: Longman, 1876), item no. 5774 ('Katherine of Aragon'), section 3, p. 2577.

3.4.3 Firbankian camp in *Nightwood*: drag, melodrama

Many of O'Connor's digressions in *Nightwood* evoke Firbank's style of potted hagiographies, in that they touch on absurd juxtapositions that combine bathos with feminine clothes or jewellery:

'... which reminds me of Mademoiselle Basquette who was damned from the waist down, built like a medieval abuse. She used to wheel herself through the Pyrenees on a board. [...] I wanted to give her a present for what was missing and she said, "Pearls — they go so well with everything."' (23)

The incongruous use of pearls is a camp motif that runs through camp modernism. In *Tender Buttons*, there is the random, jazz-like usage of the word in Stein's games of substitution and innuendo: 'no precise no past pearl pearl goat'.⁶¹² In Firbank's *Vainglory*, an unnamed woman is said to have had trouble selling her house: 'In the end, quite in despair, and simply prostrate, she exchanged it for a string of pearls.'⁶¹³ Similarly, in *Caprice* a string of pearls is exchanged by the heroine for enough money to rent a London theatre.⁶¹⁴ In *Orlando*, meanwhile, the newly female protagonist uses pearls from her 'ambassadorial wardrobe' to pay her way through Turkish gypsy society until she returns to England.⁶¹⁵ What makes the joke camp is not just that a string of pearls has the same value as a London theatre, a house, or even a pair of false legs (in the implied case of *Nightwood*) but that an incongruous context of pearls can signify a subcultural sexual identity, hinting as it does at parodies of gender and class, and the workings of drag.

Nightwood further aligns itself with Firbank in its choice of named artists. When the circus performer Princess Nadja presents her back to Felix, she does so 'as certain of the justice of his eye as she would have been of the linear justice of a Rops' (11). Rops was the artist Firbank chose for the wrapper of *Vainglory*, while a painting by 'a pupil of Félicien Rops' (of a crucified woman bound to her cross through a rope of pearls) appears in Firbank's *The Artificial Princess*.⁶¹⁶ Most significantly, one of Van Vechten's similes for Firbank in the *Double Dealer* essay is 'Félicien Rops rides on a merry-go-round'.⁶¹⁷ Indeed, horses from a merry-go-round also appear in the world of *Nightwood*, in the list of Nora and Robin's shared furniture (50). This transplanting by Barnes of the nineteenth-century Rops into a modern world of circuses

⁶¹² Stein, *Tender Buttons*, p. 31.

⁶¹³ Firbank, *Vainglory*, p. 64.

⁶¹⁴ Firbank, *Caprice*, p. 335.

⁶¹⁵ Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, pp. 84, 85, 90, 91.

⁶¹⁶ Firbank, *The Artificial Princess* (1934), in Firbank, *Five Novels* (1949; repr. New York: New Directions, 1981), pp. 241-287 (p. 246).

⁶¹⁷ Carl Van Vechten, 'Ronald Firbank', *The Double Dealer*, 3.16 (April 1922), 185-6 (p. 185).

and carnivals further supports the reading of *Nightwood* as a continuation of the camp modernist project exemplified by Firbank.

The Catholic style of campness so prevalent in Firbank is similarly present in *Nightwood*, with some sentences resembling Firbank paraphrases. The sudden and comical use of angels in descriptions is one example. A prime example in Firbank's *Vainglory*, memorable enough to warrant a place in the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* and a recycling by Firbank in *The Artificial Princess* (1934), is 'There was a pause – just long enough for an angel to pass, flying slowly'.⁶¹⁸ In *Nightwood*, a similar tone is struck when O'Connor describes Jenny as the sort of woman 'who had spent all her life rummaging through photographs of the past, searching for the one who would be found leaning sideways with a look as if angels were sliding down her hip' (91). There are further echoes of Firbank's religious camp when O'Connor uses the Latin 'Misericordia!' (81) as an exclamation, which Firbank's characters use in *Vainglory*, *Caprice*, and *Pirelli*.⁶¹⁹ Similarly, O'Connor's "*Terra damnata et maledicta!*" (113) echoes a passing nun's 'Maladetta!' in *The Flower Beneath the Foot*.⁶²⁰

One problem with describing *Nightwood* as camp, which suggests lightness and humour, might be the large amount of suffering and unhappiness experienced by its characters. But here one can indicate the camp love of diva melancholia, where levels of suffering and tragedy, particularly through female characters, become camp through their sheer sense of excess. As Elizabeth Pochoda argues, 'Nora's passion appears moving until one realizes that it is heightened just enough to suggest melodrama', which proves that, she adds, *Nightwood* is 'not meant to be taken straight', something that Gillespie further identifies as the novel's 'camp spin'.⁶²¹ In *Nightwood*, Nora's distress over Robin's wanderings leaves her crying, 'Oh, God! Oh, God! Oh, God!', which we are told is 'repeated so often that it had the effect of all words spoken in vain' (55). The campness of this aspect of *Nightwood* is illuminated further if one compares this to the final line of Firbank's *Flower*, where the lovelorn protagonist is left crying 'Yusuf! Yusuf! Yusuf!'.⁶²² Nora's melancholy is not just sentimental, but the depthless and camp form of sentiment found, as Sontag points out, in the performances of Greta Garbo, or in the various versions of the Salome narrative.⁶²³ They are as much a part of camp modernist expression as O'Connor's humorous quips.

⁶¹⁸ Elizabeth Knowles, ed., *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 8th edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 316. Firbank, *The Artificial Princess*, p. 246. Firbank, *Vainglory*, p. 52.

⁶¹⁹ Firbank, *Vainglory*, p. 126. Firbank, *Caprice*, p. 305. Firbank, *Concerning the Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli*, pp. 187, 243.

⁶²⁰ Firbank, *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, p. 60.

⁶²¹ Elizabeth Pochoda, 'Style's Hoax: A Reading of Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*', *Twentieth-Century Literature*, 22.2 (May 1976), 179-191 (p. 184). Gillespie, para. 18.

⁶²² Firbank, *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, p. 156.

⁶²³ Sontag, 'Notes on "Camp"', p. 286.

The camp modernism of *Nightwood*, then, can be read as a development within a parallel tradition that began with Stein's *Tender Buttons* (1914) and Firbank's *Vainglory* (1915). While those earlier texts used camp to create static ambiances and bubble-like worlds of pure ideas, abstract innuendo, and a sense of extreme flatness, *Nightwood* builds and responds to the deeper, more populated camp worlds of 'Circe' (1922), Firbank's later novels – such as *Sorrow in Sunlight* (1924) and *Cardinal Pirelli* (1926) – and Woolf's *Orlando* (1928). As the years pass, we can use Firbank to not only identify traits of camp in these works, but to show there was an increasing boldness in the sense of carving out spaces for queer identities. The bodies become more realized, the narratives more linear. At the heart of literary modernism, meanwhile, the campness of Joyce's 'Circe' can be read as just one of the range of styles available to an innovative heterosexual writer. In which case, Firbank's later novels, and *Orlando* and *Nightwood*, can be read as responses to this aspect of *Ulysses*: queer modernist reclamations and reaffirmations of camp style. In these texts, the 'tender buttons' of camp do not snap off to restore a dominant heterosexual order. To use Hollinghurst's term for Firbank, they are 'steelier' than their associations with 'frivolity' might suggest.⁶²⁴ As the next chapter will demonstrate, camp modernism was versatile enough to be adopted by a range of twentieth-century writers beyond the canon of modernism itself. As with the texts discussed above, Firbank's work can be used as a means of disclosing this adoption.

⁶²⁴ Alan Hollinghurst, 'Saved By Art: The Shy, Steely, Original Ronald Firbank', *Times Literary Supplement*, 17 November 2006, 12-15.

4 Camp Fire Cameos: Twentieth-Century Legacies, 1917-1984

This chapter investigates the use of camp modernism away from the field of modernism itself, uncovering its legacy in the wider field of twentieth-century Anglophone literature. As with previous chapters, the intention is to show how a whole creative strategy in literature is in danger of being overlooked. With some writers, as seen in the cases of Firbank and Stein, camp modernism can be a codified means of expressing homosexual identities and sensibilities. With others, like James Joyce's 'Circe', it can be a way of depicting modern experience in a deliberately performative and comic way. The present chapter turns to eight diverse literary works published across the twentieth century, all of which represent different aspects of the legacy of camp modernism: Norman Douglas's *South Wind* (1917), Aldous Huxley's *Crome Yellow* (1921), Richard Bruce Nugent's 'Smoke, Lilies and Jade' (1926), Evelyn Waugh's *Vile Bodies* (1930), Charles Henri Ford and Parker Tyler's *The Young and Evil* (1933), Ivy Compton-Burnett's *Manservant and Maidservant* (1947), Brigid Brophy's *In Transit* (1969), and Angela Carter's *A Self-Made Man* (1984). Some of the texts, like *South Wind*, have been chosen to show parallel emergences of camp modernism that are probably not down to a conscious influence by Firbank. Others, like *Vile Bodies*, are selected to illustrate how direct debts to Firbank manifested themselves.

A Self-Made Man, Carter's experimental hour-long radio biography of Firbank, is chosen to represent the last gasp of the post-1945 Firbank revival. It is a work that scholars of both Firbank and Carter have often overlooked, yet it represents an important aspect of Firbank's legacy, showing how he influenced Carter's own style.⁶²⁵ The section on Carter accordingly includes revelations from Carter's unpublished material held at the British Library. Throughout this chapter, camp modernism will be conceived as making isolated 'camp fire cameos' in twentieth-century literature, a phrase taken from Angus Wilson's *Hemlock and After* (1952).⁶²⁶ Just as Wilson's novel depicted gay people living quietly in 1950s Britain as part of mainstream society, this chapter uncovers versions of camp modernism hiding in literature's plain sight.

One way of assessing Firbank's impact on literary criticism in the twentieth century is to note when the critical term 'Firbankian' begins to appear in reviews of other authors. One early sighting is in 1931, during the first revival of interest in Firbank following the success of

⁶²⁵ Steven Moore's book *Ronald Firbank: An Annotated Bibliography of Secondary Materials, 1905-1995* (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive, 1996) lists many creative works which have passing mentions of Firbank, yet omits Carter's *A Self-Made Man*.

⁶²⁶ See section 1.5.

his collected *Works* (1929). When the *OED* recognized ‘Firbankian’ in 1972 (‘of, pertaining to, or characteristic of Ronald Firbank or his works and opinions’), Cecil Beaton’s diary for 1931 was used as the first citation.⁶²⁷ The context was Beaton remarking on unspecified ‘Firbankian intrigues’ while visiting Lord Berners at his home in Rome.⁶²⁸ Given that Berners had been responsible for the erroneous burial of Firbank in that city in 1926, Beaton’s use of ‘Firbankian’ may have been biographical rather than critical. My own research has discovered a definite critical usage of ‘Firbankian’ in a 1931 book review for the *Saturday Review*. When critiquing the novel *Yellow Brimstone* (1931) by Richard Blake Brown (1902-1968), H. C. Harwood accuses it of containing ‘some Firbankian dialogue’ that evinces a sense of the author being ‘rather pleased with himself’.⁶²⁹ The titles of Brown’s subsequent novels certainly read like books in a Firbank text: *Rococo Coffin* (Fortune Press, 1936), *My Aunt in Pink* (Martin Secker, 1936), and *Spinsters, Awake!* (Martin Secker, 1937). Today, the term haunts Brown for posterity. His letters are archived in the United States at Cornell University Library, where Brown is described in the catalogue as a ‘sub-Firbankian gay novelist’.⁶³⁰ This dismissive summary was written, according to my correspondence with the library, not by library staff but by the bookseller who sold the letters to the library in 2001.⁶³¹ Whether the labelling of Brown as derivative of Firbank is fair, the usage of ‘Firbankian’ in both these instances establishes that from the early 1930s Firbank’s name became an acceptable synonym for a certain camp style in fiction, at a time when the term ‘camp’ itself was still relatively unused by critics. In the 1930s, with Sontag’s ‘Notes on “Camp”’ still three decades ahead, a critic could say ‘Firbankian’ rather than ‘camp’, and readers would understand the meaning. Moreover, it shows how Firbank paved the way for homosexual writers like Brown.

In fact, it is often the campness of Firbank that is being alluded to in such comparisons, rather than his camp *modernism*. A number of further works from the early part of the twentieth century which owe a debt to Firbank are listed in Richard Canning’s 2012 introduction to Firbank’s *Vainglory*. As with Richard Blake Brown’s novels, many of the titles alone have a camp tone: C. H. B. Kitchin’s *Streamers Waving* (1925) and *Mr Balcony* (1927), and Richard Oke’s *Frolic Wind* (1919) and *Wanton Boys* (1932).⁶³² Canning further names Compton Mackenzie’s satire on real-life lesbian figures holidaying on the island of Capri, *Extraordinary*

⁶²⁷ ‘Firbankian, *adj.*’, *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, June 2021. [accessed 23 July 2021].

⁶²⁸ Cecil Beaton, *The Wandering Years – Diaries: 1922-1939* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1961), p. 226.

⁶²⁹ H. C. Harwood, ‘New Novels’, *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art*, 24 October 1931, p. 528.

⁶³⁰ Online catalogue for Cornell University Library (Ithaca, NY), Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, entry for ‘Richard Blake Brown Letters, #7659’ <<https://newcatalog.library.cornell.edu/catalog/3929640>> [accessed 5 May 2020].

⁶³¹ Email from Eisha Neely, Research Services Librarian, Rare and Manuscript Collections, Carl A. Kroch Library, Cornell University, to Dickon Edwards, 4 August 2020.

⁶³² Canning, ‘Introduction’, p. xv.

Women (1928), as a text influenced by Firbank.⁶³³ This idea is supported by the Mackenzie book's inclusion in Allan Pero's 'Selected Canon of Camp Modernism', though, as with many of Pero's examples, it is more reasonable to regard Mackenzie's novel as a work of camp *from* the age of modernism.⁶³⁴ Similarly, if, as Nicola Humble argues, E. F. Benson's popular *Mapp and Lucia* stories (1920-1939) are examples of camp functioning within middlebrow fiction as a 'spearhead for gay rights, insinuating "queerness" into mainstream culture', then, as Canning suggests, there are grounds for noting a 'Firbankian musicality' behind Benson's style too.⁶³⁵ Regardless, the innovative and difficult aspects of Firbank – his modernism as opposed to his campness – can be recognized in the following eight texts.

4.1 Norman Douglas, *South Wind* (1917)

In terms of novels that have received a recurring comparison with Firbank, one of the earliest examples is *South Wind* (1917) by Norman Douglas (1868-1952). Douglas was a British novelist and travel writer who spent most of his life in Italy, notably on the island of Capri. As later satirized in Compton Mackenzie's *Extraordinary Women* (1928), Capri was a favourite resort for Western homosexual men and women in the early part of the twentieth century. *South Wind* also captures Capri in prose, thinly disguised as the fictional island of Nepenthe. Richard Canning suggests that there is an 'unmistakable influence' of Firbank in Douglas's novel.⁶³⁶ Although this is not impossible, by the time Douglas started writing *South Wind* in January 1916, the only Firbank novel available was *Vainglory*, published only a few months earlier in April 1915, to very few sales and reviews.⁶³⁷ It is more likely that both writers came to their respective styles independently, through similar tastes, influences, and agendas.

South Wind features a large cast of the island's visitors and residents discussing various forms of hedonism, as seen through the eyes of Thomas Heard, a visiting Anglican bishop. As Michael Schmidt's introduction to the 2017 edition of *South Wind* proposes, the works of Firbank and Douglas 'keep natural company' due to Douglas's 'Firbankian delight in the well-proportioned sentence itself as an object of contemplation, in paradox and innuendo deployed with precision'.⁶³⁸ Such sentences are easy to indicate in *South Wind*: 'When people cease to reflect, they become idealists', 'Nobody can misunderstand a boy like his own mother', 'You

⁶³³ Canning, 'Introduction', p. xv.

⁶³⁴ Pero, p. 30.

⁶³⁵ Nicola Humble, 'The Queer Pleasures of Reading: Camp and the Middlebrow', in *Middlebrow Literary Cultures: The Battle of the Brows, 1920–1960*, ed. by Erica Brown and Mary Grover (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 218–30 (p. 229). Canning, 'Introduction', p. xv.

⁶³⁶ Canning, 'Introduction', p. xv.

⁶³⁷ Mark Holloway, *Norman Douglas: A Biography* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1976), p. 223. Benkovitz, *Ronald Firbank: A Biography*, pp. 135, 141.

⁶³⁸ Michael Schmidt, 'Introduction' (2016), in Norman Douglas, *South Wind* (1917; repr. London: Apollo, 2017), pp. vii-xiii (pp. xii & ix).

can tell the ideals of a nation by its advertisements’, and ‘To find a friend one must close one eye. To keep him—two.’⁶³⁹ The ‘Firbankian delight’ is Firbank’s updating of the Wildean epigram for the twentieth century, imbued with a more daring tone of innuendo and the sense of expressing homosexual identities, while still not breaching the laws of obscenity.

Firbank and Douglas also shared a taste for Catholic camp, so much so that it has been suggested that Firbank drew from Douglas for his later novels. This idea was held among some of Firbank’s more critical peers; Forrest Reid, Firbank’s contemporary at Cambridge, remarked in 1940 that ‘there is nothing in [Firbank’s] books that is not in *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *South Wind*’.⁶⁴⁰ Robert Scoble specifies this influence as Firbank’s use of Catholic camp; he claims that ‘Firbank’s later novels are clearly influenced by Norman Douglas’s *South Wind*, which had sent up saints and relics in this way’.⁶⁴¹ Scoble does not give details, but at least one example suggests itself in the form of what Jocelyn Brooke calls Firbank’s ‘thumbnail hagiography’ device.⁶⁴² This comprises a digression into humorous passages sketching the lives of Catholic saints: a camp technique in which the effusive sentiment associated with the elevation of historical human figures into minor religious icons is both mocked and celebrated. In Firbank’s case, Brigid Brophy argues, this device is ‘probably inspired’ in turn by the hagiography of Saint Rose of Lima in Aubrey Beardsley’s *Under the Hill*.⁶⁴³

Three phrases in one particular ‘thumbnail hagiography’ in *South Wind* resonate in Firbank. Douglas describes how Saint Eulalia ‘wore under her rough clothing iron spikes’, anticipating Firbank’s character of Mrs Eulalia Hurstpierpoint in *Valmouth* (1919), who is rumoured to wear ‘spiked garters’.⁶⁴⁴ Further, the same section of *South Wind* opens with the phrase ‘Concerning the life and death of Saint Eulalia’, and records how the saint ‘appeared too late to find her proper niche in Monsignor Perrelli’s *Antiquities*’.⁶⁴⁵ These two phrases are echoed in Firbank’s title for his 1926 novel, *Concerning the Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli*. At the very least, then, Firbank appears to have thought along the same lines of Catholic camp as Douglas.

South Wind, however, lacks Firbank’s more modernist interest in concision, ellipsis, abstraction, difficulty, and fragmentation. Its long passages of witty, Wildean conversation, often using innuendo, are relatively conventional by comparison with Firbank. This can be seen in criticism from the modernist era. In 1924, Gerald Gould, the literary critic of the *New*

⁶³⁹ Norman Douglas, *South Wind* (1917; repr. London: Apollo, 2017), pp. 155, 204, 64, 135.

⁶⁴⁰ Forrest Reid, *Private Road* (London: Faber, 1940), p. 58.

⁶⁴¹ Robert Scoble, ‘Firbank’s Faith’, in *Ronald Firbank: One Hundred Items From the Collection of Robert Scoble* (Portsmouth: Callum James, 2016), auction catalogue, pp. 121-24 (p. 123).

⁶⁴² Jocelyn Brooke, *Ronald Firbank* (London: Arthur Barker, 1951), p. 53.

⁶⁴³ Brophy, *Prancing Novelist*, p. 282. For the Beardsley passage, see section 1.6.

⁶⁴⁴ Douglas, p. 398. Firbank, *Valmouth*, p. 19.

⁶⁴⁵ Douglas, pp. 398-99.

Statesman, regarded Firbank as ‘an author whose themes, whose scholarship, whose fantasy, suggest some affinity with Mr. Douglas’.⁶⁴⁶ However, Gould saw Firbank’s formal obscurity as an obstacle; although he did not ‘think his wit in the same class’ as Douglas’s, such comparisons were redundant as ‘I often cannot even guess at what he [Firbank] is talking about’.⁶⁴⁷ A decade later, Harold Nicolson made a similar distinction; Firbank’s language, he wrote, lacked ‘the hearty innuendo of Norman Douglas’, being more ‘a baroque type of innuendo’.⁶⁴⁸ ‘Hearty’ suggests a closer connection with mainstream readers; ‘baroque’ suggests something more crafted and demanding. Indeed, Schmidt suggests that Firbank’s work is ‘more formally contained’ and ‘more refined’ than *South Wind*, and that Douglas’s humour, for all its Wildean innuendo, still only ‘verges on the camp’.⁶⁴⁹ These assessments hint at something recondite in Firbank’s style, while Douglas’s is conceived as a more accessible, modern take on Wildean style.

Nevertheless, the style of *South Wind* was still unusual enough on its publication in 1917 to be praised as innovative, a judgment made by the young Virginia Woolf in an anonymous review for the *Times Literary Supplement*. Significantly, Woolf reads Douglas’s style as a new development of not just the style of Oscar Wilde, but also that of Thomas Love Peacock, the nineteenth-century author of conversational satires such as *Nightmare Abbey* (1818):

We glance at Peacock, and then, for a second, at Oscar Wilde. Peacock is superbly eccentric and opinionated; Wilde is persuasive and lucid. Mr Douglas possesses these qualities, but they are his own. His book has a distinguished ancestry, but it was born only the day before yesterday. So individual is the character of his mind that as we read we frequently congratulate him upon having found the right form for a gift that must have been hard to suit. [...] The achievement of *South Wind* is that it has [...] proved once more what a narrow convention the novelist is wont to impose on us.⁶⁵⁰

In this way, Woolf delineates the qualities of *South Wind* that have since invited the recurring comparisons with Firbank: an attempt to sublimate influences such as Wilde’s epigrammatic precision and Peacock’s mannered discussions into a new form of literary camp for the modern age. What is missing in *South Wind* is Firbank’s – and Woolf’s – more overtly modernist interest in an impressionistic and fragmentary approach to form.

⁶⁴⁶ Gerald Gould, *The English Novel of To-Day* (London: John Castle, 1924), p. 166.

⁶⁴⁷ Gould, p. 166.

⁶⁴⁸ Harold Nicolson, ‘First of the Moderns and Last of the Decadents: Brilliant Ronald Firbank’, *Telegraph*, 11 May 1934, p. 6.

⁶⁴⁹ Schmidt, ‘Introduction’, pp. xii, xiii.

⁶⁵⁰ Virginia Woolf, ‘South Wind’ (1917), unsigned review, *Times Literary Supplement*, 804 (14 June 1917), p. 283; repr. in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Vol II: 1912-1918*, ed. by Andrew McNeillie (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987), pp. 125-28.

Woolf's mention of Wilde in her review of *South Wind* is particularly important for modernist studies, as it challenges Ann Ardis's claim that Woolf 'offers no commentary' whatsoever on Wilde in her writings until 1931, as part of a general 'ghosting' of Wilde from the 'modernist mappings of literary history' (with the exception of James Joyce).⁶⁵¹ The overlooking of Woolf's review, despite its inclusion in her collected essays, is evidence of the trend in modernist studies to view Wildean camp as unappealing to modernist writers. In fact, the 1917 review suggests that *South Wind* may be an early influence on Woolf's own *Orlando*, in that it invited her to consider how the 'narrow convention' of the novel might be escaped through a new version of Wildean camp. It is not difficult to hear in *Orlando*, as in *South Wind*, the rhythms of Wilde's epigrams put to fresh use.⁶⁵² Woolf may have kept her interest in Wilde's "persuasive and lucid" style quiet during the 1920s, but her love of Douglas offers a forgotten clue to the camp modernism in *Orlando*.

4.2 Aldous Huxley, *Crome Yellow* (1921)

While *South Wind* is more likely to be a parallel development rather than a text influenced by Firbank, *Crome Yellow* (1921), the debut novel of Aldous Huxley (1894-1963), was written by an author whose familiarity with Firbank, both the man and his work, is on record. In the late 1920s, Huxley replied to Ifan Kyrle Fletcher confirming that he had met Firbank in person 'from time to time' at London theatres, when Huxley was 'doing dramatic criticism'.⁶⁵³ This would date their meetings to between April and September 1920, when Huxley reviewed plays for the *Westminster Gazette*.⁶⁵⁴ Huxley last laid eyes on Firbank in 1922 at London's Café Royal, when Firbank greeted him with the phrase: 'Aldous – always my torture.'⁶⁵⁵ But a further interaction occurred the following year in Rome, when Huxley was involved in an impromptu present sent to Firbank from a group of party guests at Lord Berner's house there. Firbank, who was staying in Rome at a nearby hotel, was sent by taxi a life-size plaster cast of a statue of Psyche, the mythological goddess, causing an 'uproar' at the hotel on its arrival.⁶⁵⁶ The statue, which had been part of the collection of Lord Berners, was signed to Firbank by Berners and his guests, a group which included all three Sitwell siblings, Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson, the composer William Walton, and Huxley and his wife Maria.⁶⁵⁷ Although

⁶⁵¹ Ardis, pp. 46-47.

⁶⁵² As discussed in section 3.2.2.

⁶⁵³ Fletcher, *Ronald Firbank: A Memoir* (1977), p. 36.

⁶⁵⁴ Claire John Eschelbach and Joyce Lee Shober, *Aldous Huxley: A Bibliography, 1916-1959*, University of California Bibliographic Guides (1961; repr. New York: Octagon, 1979), pp. 79-80.

⁶⁵⁵ Fletcher, *Ronald Firbank: A Memoir* (1977), p. 36.

⁶⁵⁶ Ronald Firbank, letter to Lady Firbank, Rome, 28 October 1923, quoted in Firbank, *Letters to his Mother*, p. 144.

⁶⁵⁷ Firbank, letter to Lady Firbank, Rome, 28 October 1923, quoted in Firbank, *Letters to his Mother*, p. 144.

Huxley was never quite a friend of Firbank's, his acquaintance with Firbank was enough to be involved in such affectionately mocking stunts that played on Firbank's reputation as a Wildean aesthete.

In late 1919, Huxley published a review of Firbank's *Valmouth* (1919) that gestured at Huxley's own intentions as a budding novelist.⁶⁵⁸ Although he praised Firbank for 'a gift of style' which he hoped might lead to Firbank producing 'a real comedy of manners' in the future (despite this being Firbank's fourth novel), Huxley 'tired very quickly' of *Valmouth's* 'atmosphere of rarefied and dissembled sexual perversion'.⁶⁵⁹ 'Personally', he went on, 'we like our grossness in lumps, all at once [...] In *Valmouth* grossness, if we may call by that name anything so refined as the subtle aroma of the book, is diffused throughout'.⁶⁶⁰ These comments hint at Huxley's own aspirations for *Crome Yellow*, which is indeed 'a real comedy of manners', in the sense that it is a comedy based mainly around conversations, and written in a relatively realistic style.

Firbank's influence on Huxley is indeed discernible in *Crome Yellow* as isolated 'lumps' of camp modernism. The novel features a group of colourful upper-middle-class guests meeting at an English country house, 'Crome', in the early 1920s, where they discuss their opinions and beliefs at length. As Chris Baldick notes, the novel is on one level a satire of the intellectual salons of the time, in particular those held by Ottoline Morrell at her country house, Garsington Manor.⁶⁶¹ One distinctly Firbankian 'lump' in the novel is the description of the fictional writer Knockespotch, author of *Tales of Knockespotch*, as given by the character Mr Scogan, a spoof of Bertrand Russell.⁶⁶² According to Scogan, Knockespotch, 'delivered us from the dreary tyranny of the realistic novel', and preferred to depict the human mind 'in a vacuum, freely and sportively bombinating.'⁶⁶³ Scogan goes on:

Those *Tales*! How shall I describe them? Fabulous characters shoot across his pages like gaily dressed performers on the trapeze. [...] All the ideas of the present and of the past, on every possible subject, bob up among the *Tales*, smile gravely or grimace a caricature of themselves, then disappear to make place for something new. The verbal surface of his writing is rich and fantastically diversified. The wit is incessant.⁶⁶⁴

This passage has been interpreted by a number of critics as a parody of Firbank. Jocelyn

⁶⁵⁸ Eschelbach and Shober, p. 70.

⁶⁵⁹ Aldous Huxley, 'Ronald Firbank: *Valmouth*', review (unsigned), *The Athenaeum*, 19 December 1919, 'List of New Books' section, p. 1386.

⁶⁶⁰ Huxley, 'Ronald Firbank: *Valmouth*', p. 1386.

⁶⁶¹ Baldick, *The Modern Movement*, p. 242.

⁶⁶² Baldick, *The Modern Movement*, p. 242.

⁶⁶³ Aldous Huxley, *Crome Yellow* (1921; repr. London: Vintage, 2004), p. 76.

⁶⁶⁴ Huxley, *Crome Yellow*, p. 76.

Brooke, for example, wonders if Knockespotch ‘might almost have written *Valmouth* or *The Flower Beneath the Foot*; and one wonders whether Mr. Huxley, when he conceived this *éloge*, had Firbank in mind.’⁶⁶⁵ Joseph Bristow agrees that ‘the features that Scogan identifies – the idiosyncratic characters, the arresting scenes, the textured prose, and the inimitable wit – certainly typify the stylized movement of Firbank’s finest novels’.⁶⁶⁶

In fact, a close examination of the Knockespotch passage reveals a possible direct reference to Firbank’s work. Huxley’s line about ideas which ‘grimace a caricature of themselves’ recalls the use of ‘grimace’ in Firbank’s *Vainglory* (1915). There, the ‘strange’ style of ‘*Vaindreams*’, by the fictional author ‘Claude Harvester’ – an obvious Firbank self-portrait – is described as evoking ‘a frieze with figures of varying heights trotting all the same way. If one should by chance turn about it’s usually merely to stare or to sneer or to make a grimace.’⁶⁶⁷ The choice of ‘grimace’ in the *Crome Yellow* passage is too much of a coincidence, given that Huxley was by this point familiar with Firbank’s work. Equally, the lines about Knockespotch’s style being a non-realist ‘vacuum’ in which ‘the wit is incessant’ can further be read as an echo of Huxley’s review of *Valmouth*, in which he compares Firbank’s style to a stifling and constant ‘atmosphere’ that is ‘diffused throughout’ the text. In which case, the Knockespotch description is not only parodying Firbank’s own self-portrait in *Vainglory*, but suggesting that a style like Knockespotch’s – and Firbank’s – is something to admire rather than emulate. The cruel joke on Firbank is that in *Crome Yellow* Knockespotch’s books exist as spines only, as part of a decoration of fake bookshelves in Crome’s library, disguising the door to a cupboard. They are literally unreadable.

Some critics have read the Knockespotch passage without this satirical aspect, thinking it to be Huxley setting forth his intentions for his own style. Malcolm Bradbury regards ‘the spirit of the unread Knockespotch’ as ‘plainly the spirit of Huxley’s own novel’, due to Knockespotch’s style of ‘sportively bombinating’, which suggests to Bradbury a ‘mixed bag of styles and mannerisms’.⁶⁶⁸ *Crome Yellow* certainly is closer to this description, with Firbank’s camp modernism as one of the different styles and ideas in the novel’s mix. Peter Bowering, meanwhile, reads the passage as Huxley seeing Firbank as a role model: ‘It is too much to claim that *Crome Yellow* lives up to this’ [the Knockespotch passage]; ‘only a Sterne, or a Firbank, perhaps, could do justice to Scogan’s enthusiasm, but it is reasonable to suppose that the intent was there.’⁶⁶⁹ The ‘intent’, however, is more likely to be Huxley demonstrating how he is keen to distance himself *from* Firbank, given that both authors dealt in satirizing the conversations of

⁶⁶⁵ Brooke, *Ronald Firbank*, p. 11.

⁶⁶⁶ Joseph Bristow, ‘The Aesthetic Novel, from Ouida to Firbank’, p. 37.

⁶⁶⁷ See section 2.6.

⁶⁶⁸ Malcolm Bradbury, ‘Introduction’ (1994), in Aldous Huxley, *Crome Yellow* (1921; repr. London: Vintage, 2004), no pagination (page 5 of 5).

⁶⁶⁹ Peter Bowering, *Aldous Huxley: A Study of the Major Novels* (1968; repr. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), p. 34.

English high society. Although he acknowledges Firbank's ambitions at creating an 'atmosphere' style (a trait of his camp modernism), Huxley is at pains to carve out his own belief in a more conventional form, in which Firbank is one of many experimental ambitions and ideas of the day to be acknowledged and satirized.

As with Douglas's *South Wind*, Huxley's style certainly has aspects of *modern camp*, with all of the Firbankian quickness of characterization and none of the intense atmospherics or fragmentations. Jonathan Greenberg suggests that even a later Huxley work like *Brave New World* 'gestures at modernist style' through a 'Firbankian collage of dialogue snippets' in an early chapter.⁶⁷⁰ Huxley also created characters that have been recognized as distinctly camp, such as Myra Viveash, the heroine in *Antic Hay* (1923), who is labelled by Mark Booth as an example of 'the archetype of the Vamp'.⁶⁷¹ Similarly, in *Crome Yellow*, the middle-aged Priscilla Wimbush is distinctly Firbankian. After reading aloud from a book on etiquette by the writer Barbecue-Smith, Priscilla talks about the time the house's swimming pool was open to the local villagers. Here, her speech breaks into a highly Firbankian use of ellipses:

She leaned forward, speaking in a confidential whisper; every now and then she uttered a deep gurgle of laughter. '... mixed bathing... saw them out of my window... sent for a pair of field-glasses to make sure... no doubt of it...' The laughter broke out again. Denis laughed too. Barbecue-Smith was tossed on the floor.⁶⁷²

The use of explanatory phrases such as 'The laughter broke out again' anchors the text firmly in the world of realist fiction, signalling a clear break to the 'lump' of Firbankian 'grossness' that Huxley delineates in his *Valmouth* review. Such phrases also provide more of a sense of breathing space for the reader, deliberately diluting the 'lump' of Firbankian influence. Although, as Robert McAlmon points out in his memoirs, Firbank 'says more in a sentence than Huxley does in a chapter', this is a desirable effect for Huxley, who favours passages of elaboration over Firbank's extreme concision.⁶⁷³ While Priscilla Wimbush may be a creature from Firbank, she is isolated within *Crome Yellow*'s more realistic style of narrative. At Huxley's party, Firbank is always the guest, never the host.

⁶⁷⁰ Jonathan Greenberg, 'Wells, Forster, Firbank, Lewis, Huxley, Compton-Burnett, Green: The Modernist Novel's Experiments with Narrative (II)', in *The Cambridge History of the English Novel*, ed. by Robert L. Caserio & Clement C. Hawes, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 612-28 (p. 622).

⁶⁷¹ Booth, p. 139.

⁶⁷² Huxley, *Crome Yellow*, p. 9.

⁶⁷³ McAlmon, *Being Geniuses Together* (1938), p. 128.

4.3 Richard Bruce Nugent, 'Smoke, Lilies and Jade' (1926)

As section 1.7 discussed, Firbank's use of black characters in his work, most notably the protagonists of *Sorrow in Sunlight / Prancing Nigger* (1924), was praised by a number of black New York-based writers from the movement now recognized as the Harlem Renaissance. But his influence on the work of one particular Harlem writer has been less explored. Richard Bruce Nugent (1906-1987) may be, as Michèle Mendelssohn puts it, 'a minor figure of the Harlem Renaissance' but he is significant in the history of black LGBTQ+ writing.⁶⁷⁴ Given the 1926 publication of Nugent's story 'Smoke, Lilies and Jade', which contains unambiguous expressions of same-sex desire, he deserves wider recognition as 'the first African American to write from a self-declared homosexual perspective'.⁶⁷⁵ Moreover, as Peter Nicholls suggests, he was possibly one of the few Harlem writers who was 'self-consciously avant-garde' in the sense of using recognizably modernist techniques, such as stream-of-consciousness constructions.⁶⁷⁶ As a result, Mendelssohn suggests that Nugent 'created black queer modernity'.⁶⁷⁷ Furthermore, as with Firbank, Nugent's queer modernity used elements of European *fin-de-siècle* decadence to claim space for his own identity.

Despite Nugent's innovation, his love of decadent figures from the previous century, such as Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley, was criticized as a negative influence by other black writers at the time. 'Smoke, Lilies and Fire' first appeared in the magazine *Fire!! A Quarterly Devoted to the Younger Negro Artists*, which included contributions by Langston Hughes, Wallace Thurman (Nugent's flatmate and fellow enthusiast of decadence), and Zora Neale Hurston. Hughes later remarked on the way Nugent's story affected the reception of the whole magazine: 'the Negro press called it [*Fire!!*] all sorts of bad names, largely because of a green and purple story by Bruce Nugent, in the Oscar Wilde tradition, which we had included.'⁶⁷⁸ Alain Locke, the black philosophy professor who had encouraged Nugent, regretted not so much the influence on *Fire!!* of white writers from the nineteenth century, as the influence of 'the "naughty nineties" and effete echoes of contemporary decadence', which he deemed incompatible with progressive politics: 'Back to Whitman would have been a better point of support than a left-wing pivoting on Wilde and Beardsley'.⁶⁷⁹ In Wallace Thurman's autobiographical novel *Infants of the Spring*, Locke is spoofed as a character who warns that

⁶⁷⁴ Michèle Mendelssohn, 'A Decadent Dream Deferred: Bruce Nugent and the Harlem Renaissance's Queer Modernity', in *Decadence in the Age of Modernism*, ed. by Kate Hext and Alex Murray (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), pp. 251-275 (p. 253).

⁶⁷⁵ Thomas H. Wirth, 'Introduction' (2002), in Richard Bruce Nugent, *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance: Selections from the Work of Richard Bruce Nugent*, ed. by Thomas H. Wirth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), pp. 1-62 (p. 1).

⁶⁷⁶ Nicholls, p. 350 (n. 59).

⁶⁷⁷ Mendelssohn, p. 253.

⁶⁷⁸ Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea: An Autobiography* (1940; repr. New York: Hill and Wang, 1996), p. 237.

⁶⁷⁹ Wirth, 'Introduction' (2002), p. 49.

younger black writers ‘must not, like your paleface contemporaries, wallow in the mire of post-Victorian license’.⁶⁸⁰ Thurman’s use of ‘license’ in this respect indicates an answer to Locke’s complaint. As Kirsten MacLeod puts it, the queer freedom enabled by an influence of nineteenth-century decadence was something that Nugent shared with Firbank via their mutual friend, Carl Van Vechten; it was ‘not only as an aesthetic counter to other types of emerging modernist high culture and avant-gardism but also as a vehicle for expressing proscribed sexualities’.⁶⁸¹

On top of Wilde, Nugent’s interest in Firbankian camp is evident from his work as well as from the accounts of critics and biographers. According to Wirth, Nugent ‘devoured the novels of Firbank’, while Cynthia Davis and Verner D. Mitchell point out that ‘Ronald Firbank is a particular favourite of Nugent’.⁶⁸² Nugent’s own autobiographical novel, *Gentleman Jigger*, contains what Wirth describes as a ‘campy rendition’ of the social scene around the *Fire!!* writers, a group which named itself with a provocative camp pun on ‘literati’: ‘The Niggeratti’.⁶⁸³ Nugent’s title echoes Firbank’s *Prancing Nigger*, while the characters based on Nugent and Thurman are depicted bringing books by ‘Firbank and Proust’ to read aloud at picnics.⁶⁸⁴ The names of modernist writers such as Stein and Joyce are equally played with; when the Nugent character, Stuartt, offers to read his story, the Thurman character says ‘Go on, read it, Stuartt-Stein-Joyce’.⁶⁸⁵ It is this dual interest in the modernist experiments of Joyce and Stein as much as the nineteenth-century camp of Wilde that aligns Nugent with Firbank, and offers him as a strong argument for the existence of camp modernism within the Harlem Renaissance.

Nugent’s story ‘Smoke, Lilies and Jade’ tends to be cited as his most important work. It is, for example, the only piece of his to be included in *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*.⁶⁸⁶ The story takes the form of a prose monologue by Alex, a close self-portrait of Nugent, with his thoughts punctuated constantly by ellipses. The combination of fragments and ellipses with Wildean language certainly suggests why Hilton Als has referred to the text as a

⁶⁸⁰ Wallace Thurman, *Infants of the Spring* (1932; repr. New York: Modern Library, 1999), p. 145.

⁶⁸¹ MacLeod, p. 233.

⁶⁸² Thomas H. Wirth, ‘Richard Bruce Nugent’, *Black American Literature Forum*, 19.1 (Spring 1985), 16-17 (p. 16). Cynthia Davis and Verner D. Mitchell, ‘Modernism and the Urban Frontier in the Work of Dorothy West and Helene Johnson’, in *A Companion to the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. by Cherene Sherrard-Johnson (Chichester: Wiley, 2015), pp. 103-118 (p. 111).

⁶⁸³ Thomas H. Wirth, ‘Introduction’ (2008), in Richard Bruce Nugent, *Gentleman Jigger: A Novel of the Harlem Renaissance (1928-1933)*, ed. by Thomas H. Wirth (Philadelphia: Da Capo Press, 2008), pp. x-xviii (p. xii).

⁶⁸⁴ Richard Bruce Nugent, *Gentleman Jigger: A Novel of the Harlem Renaissance (1928-1933)*, ed. by Thomas H. Wirth (Philadelphia: Da Capo Press, 2008), p. 131.

⁶⁸⁵ Nugent, *Gentleman Jigger*, p. 31.

⁶⁸⁶ Richard Bruce Nugent, ‘Smoke, Lilies and Jade’, in *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, ed. by David Levering Lewis (1994; repr. New York: Penguin, 1995), pp. 569-83.

‘classic Ronald Firbank-esque story’.⁶⁸⁷ Sometimes the Wildean references are explicit quotations from *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: ‘was it Wilde who had said... a cigarette is the most perfect pleasure because it leaves one unsatisfied...’⁶⁸⁸ But there are also strong parallels with Firbank. In the following excerpts, for instance, both writers use ‘fairy’ as an abstract adjective, with hints of the homosexual slang use of ‘fairy’, within a style of languid, ornate language, peppered with repetitions and alliterations:

the dulcet clear tone of a blue like night... of a red like pomegranate juice...like Edith’s lips... of the fairy tones to be heard in a sunset... like rubies shaken in a crystal cup...⁶⁸⁹ [Nugent]

In the simoon that scatters the silver sand, in the words of the nomads, in the fairy mornings beneath the palms, society with its foolish *cliché*... the duchess smiled.⁶⁹⁰ [Firbank]

Nugent’s dwelling on colours also recalls *Vainglory*’s Mrs Shamefoot, who dreams of becoming her own commemorative stained-glass window: ‘What joy to be pierced each morning with light; her body flooded through and through by the sun, or in the evening to glow with a harvest of dark colours, deepening into untold sadness with the night... What ecstasy!’.⁶⁹¹ In Nugent’s story, Alex wonders that ‘soon the moon would rise and then he would clothe the silver moon in blue smoke garments’; later, he has a dream of ‘a field of blue smoke and black poppies and red calla lilies’.⁶⁹² In Firbank’s *Caprice*, Sally Siquier is similarly caught ‘swathed in black mousseline and nursing a sheaf of calla lilies’ while in *Flower*, the florist Bachir looks up ‘towards the moon, that drooped like a silver amulet in the firmament above: in the blue nocturnal air he looked like a purple poppy’.⁶⁹³ When referring to Firbank, it is easy to see how both writers use a deliberately anachronistic and decadent-informed style of language as part of a modern strategy of queer expression. A separate space is being carved out, and claimed, and delighted in.

⁶⁸⁷ Hilton Als, ‘Ham, Interrupted: Langston Hughes – The Musical’, *New Yorker*. 78.30 (7 October 2002), 106-107.

⁶⁸⁸ Richard Bruce Nugent, ‘Smoke, Lilies and Jade’ (1926), in Richard Bruce Nugent, *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance: Selections from the Work of Richard Bruce Nugent*, ed. by Thomas H. Wirth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), pp. 75-87 (p. 78).

⁶⁸⁹ Nugent, ‘Smoke, Lilies and Jade’ (2002), p. 79.

⁶⁹⁰ Firbank, *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, p. 134.

⁶⁹¹ Firbank, *Vainglory*, p. 17.

⁶⁹² Nugent, ‘Smoke, Lilies and Jade’ (2002), pp. 78, 82.

⁶⁹³ Firbank, *Caprice*, p. 360. Firbank, *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, p. 132.

Nugent's use of ellipses extends to a sex scene between Alex and his lover Adrian, who call each other 'Dulce' and 'Beauty' respectively. In the process, the text demonstrates how intentional camp is able to blend coy humour with sensuality:

Alex opened his eyes... into Beauty's... parted his lips... Dulce... Beauty's breath was hot and short... Alex ran his hand through Beauty's hair... Beauty's lips pressed hard against his teeth... Alex trembled... could feel Beauty's body... close against his... hot... tense... white... and soft... soft... soft... ...⁶⁹⁴

The scene breaks off with those doubled ellipses. It is reminiscent of the similar use of ellipses in Firbank's *Flower Beneath the Foot*, during the love scene between two women in a boat on a lake.⁶⁹⁵ In this way, Nugent takes up Firbank's tentative comic eroticisms, and turns them into more explicit and sober passions, while still hinting coyly at the acts in question. As Scott Herring observes, Nugent's 'erotic ellipses' may appear serious in tone, but they are still 'cheeky' in their 'campy queer male eroticism'.⁶⁹⁶ With the inclusion of the aestheticized pet names 'Dulce' and 'Beauty', there is a sense of sumptuousness and excess in what is actually said, which makes the missing details in the ellipses all the more vivid and transgressive. The use of this effect for expressing a homosexual identity is original to Nugent, but there are nevertheless clear gestures to Firbank throughout.

4.4 Evelyn Waugh, *Vile Bodies* (1930)

The influence of Firbank on the early novels of Evelyn Waugh (1903-1966) is frequently acknowledged, not least by Waugh himself. Even though in 1929 Waugh called Firbank 'too individual and intangible to become a literary influence', he admitted, decades later, that his own novel *Vile Bodies* (1930) was written 'under the brief influence of Ronald Firbank', before he 'struck out' in his own style.⁶⁹⁷ In fact, Waugh's interest in Firbank persisted until the mid-1940s, when he gave Firbank a flattering reference in *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), by which point Waugh's literary style had become more conventional. In *Brideshead*, the effeminate character Anthony Blanche, first seen as a student at Oxford in the 1920s, is described as connected with various real-life homosexual artists and resorts of the era: 'he dined with Proust and Gide and was on closer terms with Cocteau and Diaghilev; Firbank sent him his novels with

⁶⁹⁴ Nugent, 'Smoke, Lilies and Jade' (2002), p.85.

⁶⁹⁵ See section 2.9

⁶⁹⁶ Scott Herring, 'The Sexual Objects of "Parodistic" Camp', *Modernism/modernity*, 23.1 (January 2016), 5-8 (p. 6).

⁶⁹⁷ Evelyn Waugh, 'Ronald Firbank', p. 78. Waugh, 'Preface to *Vile Bodies*' (1964), in Waugh, *Vile Bodies* (1930), rev. edn (1965; repr. London: Penguin, 2011), pp. ix-x (p. x).

fervent inscriptions; he had aroused irreconcilable feuds in Capri'.⁶⁹⁸ The gathering of these names not only gestures at Firbank's name as a code word for homosexuality, but of Waugh's admiration for Firbank as a writer. Blanche is arguably the secret hero of the novel, last seen in the 1930s holding court in a London 'pansy bar'.⁶⁹⁹ A camp taste for modernism is also suggested in the 1920s scenes, when Blanche stands on a balcony in Christ Church college and recites passages from T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* through a megaphone at passers-by.⁷⁰⁰

Throughout Waugh's career he was compared to Firbank. When John Betjeman reviewed Waugh's late novel *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* (1957), he praised it for its 'Firbankian gift for the unexpected'.⁷⁰¹ It is perhaps no wonder, then, that by the 1960s Waugh was at pains to reframe his love of Firbank as a youthful phase. In 1962, he declined to review a new Firbank edition: 'In youth I was fascinated by Firbank. Now I can't abide him'.⁷⁰² In an interview from the same year, Waugh explained that he 'can't read him [Firbank] now. I think there would be something wrong with an elderly man who could enjoy Firbank'.⁷⁰³ The older Waugh's performative dismissals of his own past enthusiasms, as with his near-dismissals of much of his own back catalogue, are themselves a version of the camp performance Betjeman recognizes in *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold*. It is no wonder, then, that Waugh has his own entry in Philip Core's encyclopaedia of camp, as someone whose 'camp façade of tweediness, snobbery, literary argumentativeness' and 'downright insulting behaviour' hid a 'tenacious insecurity' that was 'social, sexual, and aesthetic'.⁷⁰⁴ In his interviews, photographs, and letters, Waugh performed a consciously cartoon version of a post-1945 reactionary Conservative, dressing in anachronistic tweed suits, and clinging to fading stereotypes of both the English aristocracy and Anglo-Catholicism. Firbank may have been Waugh's youthful interest, but one aspect of Firbank's legacy, the defensive strategy of camp, was too useful not to take up permanent residence in Waugh's persona.

A recurring critical argument in discussions of Waugh is that his earlier style, as seen in novels like *Decline and Fall* (1928) and *Vile Bodies*, is not just influenced by Firbank but is a watered-down, more conventional, and (implicitly) more heterosexual version. This argument can be found in a range of texts from the mid- to late twentieth century. For instance, it appears in Clive James's *Unreliable Memoirs* as part of a conversation among English students at

⁶⁹⁸ Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited: The Sacred and Profane Memories of Captain Charles Ryder* (1945), rev. edn (1960; repr. London: Penguin, 2011), pp. 57-58.

⁶⁹⁹ Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited*, pp. 353-54.

⁷⁰⁰ Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited*, p. 40.

⁷⁰¹ John Betjeman, "About a Novelist Going Mad", *Daily Telegraph*, 19 July 1957, p. 13.

⁷⁰² Waugh, postcard to Anthony Curtis, 4 July 1962, quoted in Evelyn Waugh, *The Letters of Evelyn Waugh*, ed. by Mark Amory (1980; repr. London: Phoenix, 1995), p. 587.

⁷⁰³ Julian Jebb, 'Evelyn Waugh' (1962), interview, in *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews, Third Series*, ed. by George Plimpton (1967; repr. New York: Viking, 1972), pp. 103-14 (first publ. as 'The Art of Fiction, No. 30: Evelyn Waugh', *Paris Review*, 30 (Summer/Fall 1963)), p. 111.

⁷⁰⁴ Core, p. 191.

Sydney University, Australia, during the late 1950s. When one student, Cameron, recommends Waugh to the young James, with the declaration that ‘Waugh’s early novels were unbeatable for comic invention’, another student, the bisexual Spencer, interjects with ‘How can you talk about Waugh when I’m reading Firbank?’⁷⁰⁵ A similar note is sounded in Joe Orton’s diaries of the late 1960s, when Orton finds he cannot enjoy Waugh’s *Black Mischief*: ‘patchy – Waugh isn’t up to Firbank, the source’.⁷⁰⁶ Around the same time, the cult science fiction writer Michael Moorcock has his dandyish hero Jerry Cornelius musing that ‘Things had come to a pretty pass when the work of Firbank was ignored in favour of his imitator Waugh whose prose, diffuse in comparison with that of his master, was thought to represent the best of English style’.⁷⁰⁷ The sentiment in these examples is that by the late 1960s Waugh was acceptable to a wider public, and to the establishment, while Firbank, was, by comparison, neglected. Waugh’s version of Firbank’s camp modernism was subtle enough to appeal to the general public, yet not so subtle that a reader familiar with Firbank could not detect the obvious influence.

In an interview in 1962, Waugh is more specific about his debt to Firbank. Discussing *Vile Bodies*, his portrait of the ‘Bright Young Things’, the upper-class socialites of 1920s London, the older Waugh calls the book ‘second hand’, confessing that he ‘cribbed much of the customs scene from Firbank’.⁷⁰⁸ Indeed, the scene in question evokes Firbank’s own customs scene from *Sorrow in Sunlight*.⁷⁰⁹ In *Vile Bodies*, a group of young American women arrive from a cross-channel ferry at Dover. They are travelling as part of an evangelical stage show, where they appear as costumed angels:

‘Have you anything to declare?’

‘Wings.’

‘Have you wore them?’

‘Sure.’

‘That’s all right, then.’

‘Divine Discontent gets all the smiles all the time,’ complained Fortitude to Prudence. ‘Golly, but it’s good to be on dry land.’

Unsteadily, but with renewed hope, the passengers had disembarked.⁷¹⁰

⁷⁰⁵ Clive James, *Unreliable Memoirs* (1980; repr. London: Pan, 1981), p. 132.

⁷⁰⁶ Joe Orton, diary entry, 25 March 1967, in Orton, *The Orton Diaries*, ed. by John Lahr (1986; repr. New York: Da Capo, 1996), p. 124.

⁷⁰⁷ Michael Moorcock, ‘Epilogue: The Dodgem Decision’ (1968), in *The Lives and Times of Jerry Cornelius* (1976; repr. London: Grafton, 1987), pp. 177-85 (p. 179).

⁷⁰⁸ Jebb, ‘Evelyn Waugh’, p. 109.

⁷⁰⁹ See section 2.2.

⁷¹⁰ Evelyn Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, (1930), rev. edn (1965; repr. London: Penguin, 2011), p. 20.

Discussing this passage, Alex Murray points out the elements taken ‘straight from Firbank’, namely ‘snippets of conversation, speakers not identified, language too ornate to be realistic, and little division between the tone of the narrative and those of the characters’.⁷¹¹ A more overt ‘cribbing’, though, is the Firbankian device of following lines of unattributed dialogue with a single line of narration that provides the bare minimum of explanation, like a cinematic cutting away from a close-up to a wide shot of the setting. Chris Baldick identifies this technique in *Vile Bodies* as an ‘intercutting rapidly between events and dialogues to produce a modernist ‘montage’ effect of constant flickering motion.’⁷¹² Baldick makes no mention of Firbank’s influence, an omission all the more frustrating when Waugh himself argued in 1929 that Firbank pioneered this ‘flickering’ effect: ‘occasionally, a brief, visual image flashes out to illuminate and explain the flickering succession of spoken words’.⁷¹³ But whereas Firbank uses camp modernism to create queer fantasy pastorals of aesthetic pleasure, Waugh locates *Vile Bodies* in a real world of consequences and accountability, in which camp behaviour exists, but must ultimately play by the real world’s rules.

A further overtly Firbankian passage in *Vile Bodies* is a scene set in a hotel dining room, in which the speakers are attendants at a local motor race, including drivers, race officials, journalists, and enthusiasts:

Scraps of highly technical conversation rose on all sides of them.

‘...Changed the whole engine over after they’d been scrutineered. Anyone else would have been disqualified...’

‘...just cruising round at fifty...’

‘...stung by a bee just as he was taking the corner, missed the tree by inches and landed up in the Town Hall. There was a Riley coming up behind, spun round twice, climbed the bank, turned right over and caught fire...’ [...]

‘... She wouldn’t tell me her name, but she said she’d meet me at the same place to-night and gave me a sprig of white heather for the car. I lost it, like a fool. She said she’d look out for it too...’ [...]

‘...Tailwag...’

‘...Speed-wobble...’

‘... Merc...’

‘... Mag...’

⁷¹¹ Alex Murray, ‘Decadence Revisited: Evelyn Waugh and the Afterlife of the 1890s’, *Modernism/modernity*, 22.3 (September 2015), 593-607 (pp. 598-99).

⁷¹² Baldick, *The Modern Movement*, p. 243.

⁷¹³ Waugh, ‘Ronald Firbank’, p. 79.

‘...crash...’⁷¹⁴

Waugh draws from Firbank not only the technique of juxtaposing fragments of overheard conversation, but also the grouping of single word remarks together (‘...Merc...’, ‘...Mag...’, ‘...crash...’) late in the passage, as if the act of overhearing is accelerating. The similarity extends even to the introductory single sentence. Where Firbank in *Valmouth* starts dialogue with a line like ‘There uprose a jargon of voices’, Waugh begins with a slightly expanded and less ornate version: ‘Scraps of highly technical conversation rose on all sides of them’.⁷¹⁵ The ‘jargon of voices’ become literal in Waugh; these are men discussing the specialized field of racing cars. Waugh thus shows how camp modernism can be used to represent a community that might not normally be associated with campness.

4.5 Charles Henri Ford and Parker Tyler, *The Young and Evil* (1933)

When Richard Bruce Nugent’s story, ‘Smoke, Lilies and Jade’ (1926) depicted homosexual desire in an American modernist style, one of the longer and more expansive works it ‘foreshadowed’ in this way, as Thomas Wirth notes, was *The Young and Evil* (1933), the novel written by Charles Henri Ford (1908-2002) with Parker Tyler (1904-1974).⁷¹⁶ First published in Paris by the Obelisk Press (with Ford’s name shortened to ‘Charles Ford’), and based on the experiences of the authors, it depicts the lives of young homosexual men living in Greenwich Village, a then bohemian district of New York, around 1930. Banned in the US and UK in the 1930s for obscenity, its first legal American edition was not until 1960, through the Olympia Press, the first home of William Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch*, which in some ways it anticipates.⁷¹⁷ More recently it has been discussed in the context of modernism, notably by Joseph Allen Boone (1998) and Juan A. Suárez (2007), with the latter calling it ‘a mixture of experimental narrative and camp’.⁷¹⁸ Most significantly for this thesis, it has lately been recognized by Alexander Howard as a ‘seminal text of camp modernism’.⁷¹⁹ Certainly, the novel is explicitly conscious of both the concepts of camp and literary modernism. It uses urban slang, including the word ‘camp’ itself, not just to depict the homosexual subcultures of the time

⁷¹⁴ Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, pp. 188-90.

⁷¹⁵ Firbank, *Valmouth*, p. 60.

⁷¹⁶ Thomas H. Wirth, ‘Introduction’ (2002), p. 44.

⁷¹⁷ Steven Watson, ‘Introduction’ (1988), in Charles Ford and Parker Tyler, *The Young and Evil* (1933; repr. London: GMP Publishers (Gay Men’s Press), 1989), no pagination.

⁷¹⁸ Boone, pp. 251-265. Juan A. Suárez, *Pop Modernism: Noise and the Reinvention of the Everyday* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), p. 181.

⁷¹⁹ Alexander Howard, ‘Camp, Modernism, and Charles Henri Ford’, *Modernism/modernity*, 23.1 (January 2016), 9-13 (p. 12).

but also to blend such slang with Richard Bruce Nugent's example of using modernism as a homosexual literary mode.

As with Nugent's autobiographical novel *Gentleman Jigger* from the same era, *The Young and Evil* illustrates the artistic tastes and ambitions of its young New York characters by dropping the names of their literary heroes into their conversations. But whereas Nugent's characters mention Firbank alongside the likes of Proust, James Joyce and Gertrude Stein, Ford and Tyler's characters mention T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound (39), Joyce (202), Stein and Wyndham Lewis (98), and Djuna Barnes (18) but not Firbank.⁷²⁰ Firbank certainly appealed to Parker Tyler in later life, in the same way that Firbank appealed to Stein after she had already produced the camp modernist likes of *Tender Buttons*. Firbank's *Five Novels* (1949) became one of Tyler's favourite books; Tyler 'lovingly inscribed and decorated' his first edition copy with 'a Scotch-taped flower petal' and an inscription that suggests Firbank was a form of 'little master' to Tyler: 'Great poor / dead / petit / maître!!'.⁷²¹ Tyler, who is fictionalized as 'Karel' in *The Young and Evil*, was something of a Firbank-esque dandy himself. He wore eyebrow pencil and mascara, 'mix-and-match Victorian garments', had a distinctive ironic laugh, and was, at the time of the novel, known as much for 'his theatrical self-presentation' as for the poetry he published.⁷²² One of Tyler's books of autobiographical poetry was *The Granite Butterfly* (1945), a title which echoes the recurring description of Firbank by critics as a 'butterfly' writer.⁷²³

The legacy of Firbank, whether conscious at this stage or not, can be seen in selected passages from *The Young and Evil*. The style is steeped in New York 1920s slang, which includes the word 'camp':

Vincent rushed to him and shouted have you got a cent on you Phil wait for me after it's over and we'll go to Child's Paramount or pick up a couple of broads and take them up to the joint and *camp like mad!* (167)

It is big Karel said that is why you are, too, are big looking at it.

You are not the only one Frederick said oooooooooOOO.

Don't camp like that Karel said. Or I'll leave. (179)

While the campness of Firbank's creations was only labelled as such externally by critics, from Van Vechten in 1922 onwards, the flamboyant characters of *The Young and Evil* claim the term

⁷²⁰ All page references to *The Young and Evil* taken from Charles Ford and Parker Tyler, *The Young and Evil* (1933; repr. London: GMP Publishers (Gay Men's Press), 1989). The GMP text is a facsimile of the 1933 edition.

⁷²¹ Watson, 'Introduction', note 11.

⁷²² Watson, 'Introduction'.

⁷²³ See section 2.11.

for themselves with pride, as part of the same idiom of American street slang that includes the words ‘broads’ and ‘joint’. The authors’ modernist experiments in form, meanwhile, mainly manifest as a lack of conventional punctuation. However, they crucially still retain the use of italics, a mode beloved of Firbank, who in 1919 told Siegfried Sassoon ‘I adore italics, don’t you?’⁷²⁴ Indeed, Firbank’s association between slanting text and the concept of camp male bodies as *not straight*, not least in the connotations of ‘limp-wristedness’, is adopted further by Ford and Tyler. When Karel and Frederick appear in court for soliciting, the narration describes them as sitting ‘as straight as this: ii’ (189). As Boone argues, this use of typeface to indicate ‘sexual *typing*’ underscores the ‘performative element of all sexual identity’, where the straightness of the characters’ legs while sitting down is part of their attempt to pass for heterosexual.⁷²⁵ This sense of Ford and Tyler’s ‘queer typography’ can thus be compared to Firbank’s frequent and flamboyant use of italics as elements of camp modernism.

A further use of the word ‘camp’ which gestures to Firbank’s style is in the chapter in which, as Suárez puts it, ‘camp is most fully anthologized’ as a mode of speech.⁷²⁶ Chapter Thirteen, which is titled ‘I Don’t Want To Be A Doll’, is set at a drag ball in Harlem, and mostly consists of, as Suárez notes, ‘a sound assemblage of snatches of conversation revolving largely around sexual gossip’.⁷²⁷ As Boone specifies, these ‘fragments of overheard conversation’ produce the impression of a ‘surreal collage of thought detached from character’, a description that could equally apply to Firbank’s dialogues.⁷²⁸ Although Ford and Tyler’s method omits Firbank’s quotation marks, the dialogue at the ball reads as a more explicit version of Firbank’s signature style:

baggage grand cocksucker
 fascinated by fairies of the Better
 Class chronic
 liar fairy
 herself sexual
 estimate crooning I’M A CAMPfire girl
 gratuitous sexually meaning
 both my thighs are so much
 stouter tongue’s hanging (164)

⁷²⁴ Siegfried Sassoon, *Siegfried’s Journey: 1916-1920* (London: Faber, 1945), p. 136.

⁷²⁵ Boone, p. 264.

⁷²⁶ Suárez, p. 197.

⁷²⁷ Suárez, p. 197

⁷²⁸ Boone, p. 256.

The ‘camp’ pun here, according to Alexander Howard, is a reference to a popular song of the time, ‘I’m a Campfire Girl’, by Beatrice Lillie.⁷²⁹ As with Firbank, plot and narrative momentum are eschewed in favour of a claiming of space for a non-normative identity. With Firbank, the claimed space is fantastical, with the sense of homosexual identity mostly implicit within the texture of the prose. With *The Young and Evil*, the claimed space is based on real locations used by a subcultural community of homosexual men. The content may be more social realist in Ford and Tyler, but the sense of an infinite, directionless stream of performative campness is the same as in Firbank.

Unlike Firbank’s more homogenous use of campness in his fiction, *The Young and Evil* uses camp as one of several modes. In one scene, Karel delivers a long and sober lecture at a public symposium ‘on political liberty and the artist’ (112). The only markers of camp are the occasional remarks among his friends in the audience: ‘The adorable Kareletta Frederick giggled’ (118). These echo utterances in Firbank’s dialogues, like ‘Adorable simplicity’ from *Valmouth*.⁷³⁰ A further break in the lecture is marked with another camp aside: ‘Frederick wondered to Julian where Karel’s feather fan was’ (119). Feather fans are easily found in Firbank, such as the one carried by Mrs Shamefoot in *Vainglory*.⁷³¹ Firbank’s concise yet florid style of descriptive language is echoed by Ford and Tyler in lines like ‘the dance-floor was a scene whose celestial flavour and cerulean colouring no angelic painter or nectarish poet has ever conceived’ (152): ‘celestial’ is in *Vainglory*, while ‘cerulean’ is in *The Flower Beneath the Foot*.⁷³² The fantastical aristocratic women of Firbank may be replaced by Ford and Tyler’s New York drag queens, but there is a clear sense of a camp modernist method being passed on and adapted. Where Firbank used his style as a psychic space for isolated queer subjects like himself, Ford and Tyler used it to articulate and represent burgeoning communities of homosexual urban society.

4.6 Ivy Compton-Burnett, *Manservant and Maidservant* (1947)

Her nineteen novels, not counting her uncharacteristic debut *Dolores* (1911), may fall in and out of print and fashion, but the campness of Dame Ivy Compton-Burnett (1884-1969), who wrote as ‘I. Compton Burnett’, will persist. At least, for as long as Sontag’s ‘Notes on “Camp”’ persists. One line of Sontag’s brief ‘Canon of Camp’ list simply reads: ‘the novels of Ronald

⁷²⁹ Howard, ‘Camp, Modernism, and Charles Henri Ford’, p. 13.

⁷³⁰ Firbank, *Valmouth*, p. 60.

⁷³¹ Firbank, *Vainglory*, p. 101.

⁷³² Firbank, *Vainglory*, p. 4. Firbank, *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, p. 68.

Firbank and Ivy Compton-Burnett', as if the two authors were somehow a collaborative team.⁷³³ But, as with Firbank, summarising Compton-Burnett as camp alone is unfair to her serious artistic achievements. Compton-Burnett's intensely mannered fictions, usually concerning dark secrets among wealthy late-Victorian families, have strong elements of stylistic difficulty that twenty-first-century readers might find unexpected. These invite comparisons with Firbank not just in the camp sense, but in the camp modernist sense.

In discussions of Firbank, various critics over the years, from Anthony Powell in 1961 to Richard Canning in 2012, have named Firbank as a clear influence behind Compton-Burnett's novels.⁷³⁴ The style is unquestionably Firbankian in the sense of being rendered in, as John Kiechler observes, 'continuous almost uninterrupted dialogue' among aristocratic, anachronistic, epigrammatic, and often interchangeable speakers.⁷³⁵ Compton-Burnett's fondness for alliterative titles like *A Family and a Fortune* (1939), and *A House and its Head* (1935), also evokes the Firbank titles *The Flower Beneath the Foot* and *Sorrow in Sunlight*. Brigid Brophy further notes that 'servants in the novels of Ivy Compton-Burnett are often named on Firbankian precedents'.⁷³⁶ In *Manservant and Maidservant* (1947), for instance, the butler's unusual name of Bullivant echoes the likes of Sumph, Ffoliott and Ffines, the names Firbank gives to servants in his novels.⁷³⁷ Yet in other respects – tonally, thematically – her work is the polar opposite to Firbank's. In fact, Sontag's unhelpful pairing can be more usefully adapted into viewing Firbank and Compton-Burnett as two sides of a well-matched balance: light camp versus ominous camp; air camp versus earth camp; intoxicated camp versus sober camp, liberated camp versus confined camp.

One key difference between the writers is the level of camp intention. Robert Kiernan's study of camp novelists puts Firbank as the most 'intentionally camp' of his choices, with Compton-Burnett as the least.⁷³⁸ Firbank's work is characterized by knowing gestures, sexual hints through fragmentation, provocative allusions, and innuendo; Compton-Burnett is rigidly formal, with everything articulated in perfect, full sentences, but to an equally camp level of intensity. When interviewed, Compton-Burnett would insist that her style was entirely instinctive:

⁷³³ Sontag, 'Notes on "Camp"', p. 278.

⁷³⁴ Powell, p. 11. Canning, 'Introduction', p. xvi.

⁷³⁵ John Anthony Kiechler, *The Butterfly's Freckled Wings: A Study of Style in the Novels of Ronald Firbank* (Bern: Francke Verlag, 1969), p. 120.

⁷³⁶ Brophy, *Prancing Novelist*, p. 347.

⁷³⁷ For Sumph, see Firbank, *Vainglory*, p. 43. For Ffoliott, see Firbank, *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, p. 101. For Ffines, see Firbank, *Valmouth*, p. 15.

⁷³⁸ Kiernan, p. 126.

My writing does not seem to me as ‘stylised’ as it apparently is, though I do not attempt to make my characters use the words of actual life. I cannot tell you why I write as I do, as I do not know. [...] I think people’s style, like the way they speak and move, comes from themselves and cannot be explained.⁷³⁹

Yet to label this approach as ‘naïve camp’ is not strictly fair. Compton-Burnett’s extended dialogues are closer to intellectual reflections on domestic power and cruelty, rendered through a surreally overwrought language of rueful, bleak, and bittersweet wit. The characters and plots may be nominally tragic, but the camp detachment of the prose style, steeped as it is in relentless epigrams, means that any engagement with emotional pain is impossible. As V. S. Pritchett points out: ‘In a world like this, in which there is no hope, irony is the great and brilliant means of keeping people at arm’s length’.⁷⁴⁰ As with Firbank, this form of camp, too, is a defensive strategy for self-preservation.

Compton-Burnett’s version of camp relates to the monophonic nature of her dialogue. These conversations, as Jonathan Goldman argues, are different to Firbank’s as they only arrive at a single voice of ‘frivolity’ inadvertently, through the surreal channelling of characters’ ‘inner discomfort’ into the exteriority of conversation.⁷⁴¹ Compton-Burnett is so extreme in this regard that Mark Booth’s book on camp mistakenly conflates two of her characters as one:

Since camp people control their personalities so rigidly, since, indeed, their personalities are their own creations, it is only to be expected that they should know them thoroughly. They would agree with the sentiment expressed by one of Ivy Compton-Burnett’s characters: “‘Know thyself’ is a superfluous injunction: one can’t help knowing oneself, the thing is to stop others from finding out!”⁷⁴²

Tellingly, Booth gives no citation of either the ‘one’ character or the novel in question, perpetuating the idea that Compton-Burnett’s books are, like her characters, interchangeable. The actual quotation is from *A Family and A Fortune* (1939) and is as follows:

‘That is our reason,’ said Mark. “‘Know thyself’ is a most superfluous direction. We can’t avoid it.’

⁷³⁹ ‘A Conversation Between I. Compton-Burnett and Margaret Jourdain’ (1945), in *The Art of I. Compton-Burnett: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Charles Burkhart (London: Victor Gollancz, 1972), pp. 21-31 (first publ. in *Orion*, I, 1945), p. 22.

⁷⁴⁰ V. S. Pritchett, ‘The Comic Element in the English Novel: V – The Last Forty Years’, *Listener*, 51.1320 (17 June 1954), 1047-53 (p. 1048).

⁷⁴¹ Jonathan Goldman, ‘The Parrotic Voice of the Frivolous: Fiction by Ronald Firbank, I. Compton-Burnett, and Max Beerbohm’, *Narrative*, 7.3 (October 1999), 289-306 (p. 298).

⁷⁴² Booth, p. 95.

‘We can only hope that no one else knows,’ said Dudley.⁷⁴³

This further illustrates how Compton-Burnett differs from Firbank. Despite the rhythm of a Wildean epigram behind the observation, it is shared by characters speaking *to* each other, with a Compton-Burnett sense of progression, rather than *at* each other, with a Firbankian sense of stasis. Moreover, there is a more ominous tone to the Compton-Burnett exchange, which is entirely omitted in Booth’s recalling. Thus, while it is reasonable to read Compton-Burnett as a monophonic writer comparable to Firbank, it is important to note how this is more of a literary effect than a narrative voice.

Although *Manservant and Maidservant* has passages which clearly bear the influence of Firbank, it is, as Greenberg argues, ‘not given to Firbank’s illusion-shredding jokes’.⁷⁴⁴ Instead, Compton-Burnett’s style ‘signals the inescapability of artifice’ in a more menacing way.⁷⁴⁵ The opening passage of the novel not only sets up its style of unnatural, relentless Firbankian dialogue, but also its more serious, confrontational tone, which is unique to Compton-Burnett:

‘Is that fire smoking?’ said Horace Lamb.

‘Yes, it appears to be, my dear boy.’

‘I am not asking what it appears to be doing. I asked if it was smoking.’

‘Appearances are not held to be a clue to the truth,’ said his cousin. ‘But we seem to have no other.’⁷⁴⁶

In this way, Compton-Burnett is like a Freudian take on Firbank, where inner thoughts and feelings are emptied out and located to the exterior. Her fictions are camp modernist in the sense that they, too, are ‘streams of externalities’: unending worlds of utterances by creatures who seem entirely made of flatness and surface, and deliberately so.

While Firbank’s sense of heady, queer delight is absent, it is difficult not to regard conversations like the following as sharing Firbank’s same love of taking camp, Wildean satires of formal conversation to a monophonic intensity that borders on the avant-garde, by way of Lewis Carroll:

⁷⁴³ Ivy Compton-Burnett, *A Family and a Fortune* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1939), p. 14.

⁷⁴⁴ Greenberg, ‘Wells, Forster, Firbank...’, p. 624.

⁷⁴⁵ Greenberg, ‘Wells, Forster, Firbank...’, p. 624.

⁷⁴⁶ Ivy Compton-Burnett, *Manservant and Maidservant* (1947; repr. New York: New York Review Books, 2001), p. 3.

‘Do you take your tea strong or the reverse, Miss Buchanan?’

‘Neither one nor the other,’ said the guest, using her rather loud voice for the first time.

‘That is my own preference,’ said Bullivant.

‘My bias is also towards the mean,’ said Cook, with her eyes on the teapot. ‘I am not in favour of excess in any direction.’

‘How do the young people like it?’ said Miss Buchanan, both her utterance and its nature coming as a surprise.

‘I am conversant with their preferences,’ said Cook, with nothing in her tone to indicate that she would be influenced by these.⁷⁴⁷

The reader is not told what these youthful ‘preferences’ for drinking tea might be, only that they exist and do not apply here. The language is entirely unnatural, yet compared to Firbank it is buttoned-down, monochrome, and rigidly English. In Firbank’s *Caprice*, a similar conversation about how people take their tea is more effervescent, elliptical, exotic, and ready to make jokes of which the characters enjoy the benefit, in this case, given the conversation is between actresses, about the plot of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*:

‘Do you like porridge?’

‘Oh, Rene!’

Miss Mant raised a bare shoulder and crushed it to an ear.

‘Really,’ she remarked, ‘I’m at a loss to know what to give you, Sally; I sometimes ask myself what Juliet took...’

‘Why, potions.’

‘*Ita* takes tea luke with a lemon; and it makes her *so* cross.’

‘Disgusting.’

‘*À la Russe.*’⁷⁴⁸

In this way, Compton-Burnett’s style can be seen as a version of camp modernism worthy of comparison, or even conflation (as Sontag suggests), with Firbank, but one which is much more sober, considered, glacial, dark, and grounded. Her novels evoke the bleak comedies of Samuel Beckett as much as Firbank, or even a camp version of Greek drama, as suggested by Brophy’s

⁷⁴⁷ Compton-Burnett, *Manservant and Maidservant*, p. 184.

⁷⁴⁸ Firbank, *Caprice*, pp. 357-58.

nickname for the author: ‘Grandma Oedipus’.⁷⁴⁹ The arch, linguistic humour is always present, however unhappy the situation might be for the characters. Writing Compton-Burnett’s obituary, Angus Wilson called her ‘the most penetrating critic of the darkness and light of her own time’, even though she also ‘made us laugh, laugh subtly, laugh a great deal, and laugh to some purpose’.⁷⁵⁰ Although the latter statement may also be said of Firbank, it is difficult to see him as a ‘penetrating critic’ of ‘darkness’. Sontag’s casual coupling of these two very different authors thus reveals the shortcomings of her ‘Notes on “Camp”’ essay, and supports the need for more nuanced discussions of literary camp.

4.7 Brigid Brophy, *In Transit* (1969)

When considering the works of Brigid Brophy (1929-1995) in relation to Firbank, two books tend to be referenced: one work of non-fiction and one novel. The former, *Prancing Novelist: A Defence of Fiction in the Form of a Critical Biography in Praise of Ronald Firbank* (1973), is considered by Richard Canning as ‘the only book without which no serious Firbank scholarship may be undertaken’.⁷⁵¹ The novel is *The Finishing Touch* (1963), Brophy’s comedy about lesbian passions at a girls’ boarding school. This is glossed by the entry on Brophy in the *Oxford Companion to English Literature* (2009) as ‘a pastiche of Ronald Firbank’.⁷⁵² Indeed, in *Prancing Novelist* Brophy herself refers to *The Finishing Touch* as written ‘in a superficially Firbankian idiom’ and representing in fictional form ‘a good part’ of *Prancing Novelist*’s ‘anatomy of Firbank’s fiction’.⁷⁵³ More significantly, however, Brophy pairs this remark with a reference to another of her novels, *In Transit* (1969), which she claims channels in an ‘implicit, fictional incarnation’ *Prancing Novelist*’s larger, more ambitious purpose: its ‘anatomy of fiction’ in general.⁷⁵⁴ *In Transit*’s description in the aforementioned *Oxford Companion to English Literature* is ‘an experimental neo-Joycean “transsexual comedy”’.⁷⁵⁵ As a result, the Firbankian elements of *In Transit* have tended to be overlooked, perhaps due to the assumption that a ‘neo-Joycean’ work cannot also be neo-Firbankian. As this section will show, *In Transit* in fact contains the overt influence of not only Joyce, but also Firbank. While *The Finishing*

⁷⁴⁹ Brigid Brophy, ‘I. Compton-Burnett’ (1963), in *Don’t Never Forget*, pp. 167-70 (p. 170).

⁷⁵⁰ Angus Wilson, ‘Ivy Compton-Burnett’, obituary, *Observer*, 31 August 1969, p. 20.

⁷⁵¹ Richard Canning, ‘Penetrating (the) *Prancing Novelist*’, in *Brigid Brophy: Avant-Garde Writer, Critic, Activist*, ed. by Richard Canning and Gerri Kimber (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), pp. 49-74 (p. 70).

⁷⁵² ‘Brophy, Brigid’, in Dinah Birch, ed., *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, 7th edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 162.

⁷⁵³ Brophy, *Prancing Novelist*, p. 49.

⁷⁵⁴ Brophy, *Prancing Novelist*, p. 49.

⁷⁵⁵ The use of inverted commas by the *Oxford Companion to English Literature* (2009) is probably a misquote of ‘a trans-sexual adventure’, the subtitle for *In Transit* used on the cover of the Penguin paperback edition (1971).

Touch is, as Brophy suggests, a light tribute to the camp of Firbank, *In Transit* builds on his ambitions for textual difficulty: his camp modernism.

When *In Transit* was last reissued in 2002, it was contextualized by an introduction by Christine Brooke-Rose as ‘an early and very funny version of the Postmodern novel’.⁷⁵⁶ Certainly, the legacies of modernism are played with in a very retrospective way. The plot concerns the adventures of Evelyn Hilary ‘Pat’ O’Rooley, an androgynous Irish intellectual, who spends the novel in the transit lounge of an unnamed international airport. As the story progresses, Pat undergoes a number of farcical crises of identity: firstly a dose of ‘linguistic leprosy’ as their grasp of languages escapes them, then a bout of ‘sexual amnesia’, in which they lose all sense of their own gender.⁷⁵⁷ This theme nods at both Woolf’s *Orlando* and Joyce’s ‘Circe’ episode in *Ulysses*. When Pat shifts from ‘Patrick’ to ‘Patricia’ and back again (117), the change in his/her pronouns and name echoes Joyce’s renaming and resexing of the brothel keeper in ‘Circe’ from ‘Bella’ to ‘Bello’.⁷⁵⁸ The Joycean debt can further be seen in Brophy’s relentless use of puns in the style of *Finnegans Wake*, including puns on *Ulysses*. These include phrases like: ‘your mollibloomers is shewin’ (36), and Pat’s comparing of a rotating rack of postcards to a ‘martello tower’, which they turn ‘to see if Buck Mulligan would come out to play on words today’ (36). Joyce himself is referred to in the novel as ‘the old pun gent himself [...] reJoyce with me’ (36). Indeed, the Joyce scholar Terence Killeen regards *In Transit* as ‘one of the most creative and stimulating responses to *Finnegans Wake* yet penned’.⁷⁵⁹

In Transit breaks with Joyce, though, in its interest in disrupting heteronormativity. As Karen Lawrence points out, the ‘bracketed status’ of ‘Circe’ within the wider narrative of *Ulysses* ‘complicates’ the significance of its example for Brophy.⁷⁶⁰ *In Transit* reads as if Joyce had written *Ulysses* entirely in the style of ‘Circe’. Many of the Joycean puns in *In Transit* are closer to the camp, decadent, and queer interests of Brophy alone, such as a lesbian character being described as ‘Radclyffe-tall’ (194), a piece of graffiti reading ‘DON’T FORCIBLY SHAVE ME, NURSE – I’M TRYING TO GROW A BEARDSLEY’ (209), and Pat’s remark, ‘Our programme: – Undo the Normative Conquest’ (27). Accordingly, for all its Joycean references, Lawrence regards *In Transit* as written by an author who aligns herself ‘more strongly’ with Firbank than with Joyce.⁷⁶¹ Indeed, as Lawrence points out, when Brophy names in a 1962 essay on Firbank ‘the three greatest novels of the twentieth century’ as *The Golden*

⁷⁵⁶ Christine Brooke-Rose, ‘Introduction’, in Brigid Brophy, *In Transit* (1969; repr. Chicago: Dalkey Archive Press, 2002), pp. i-vii (p. vi).

⁷⁵⁷ Brigid Brophy, *In Transit: An Heroi-Cyclic Novel* (1969; repr. Chicago: Dalkey Archive Press, 2002), pp. 11 & 79. Subsequent references given as page numbers in the main text.

⁷⁵⁸ As discussed in Chapter 3.

⁷⁵⁹ Terence Killeen, ‘No Fear of Joyce’, *James Joyce Literary Supplement*, 25.2 (Fall 2011), 11-12 (p. 11).

⁷⁶⁰ Karen R. Lawrence, *Who’s Afraid of James Joyce?* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010), p. 178.

⁷⁶¹ Lawrence, pp. 178-79.

Bowl by Henry James, *A la recherche du temps perdu* by Marcel Proust and *Concerning the Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli* by Firbank, ‘*Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* are conspicuously absent’.⁷⁶² This position was still affirmed by Brophy in 1980, when she suggested in an essay that the reputed difficulty of *Ulysses* is matched by Firbank, whose readers ‘have to perform ecstatic mental leapfrog in order to divine which dialogue issues from which speaker, and who have to discern the subject-matter of his novels by [...] letting it creep into their peripheral vision.’⁷⁶³ When remarking on Joyce’s major works, she makes her true literary hero clear:

I think it would be wiser to admit that the sensuous and intellectual attractions of almost any given page of *Finnegans Wake* don’t include much inducement to turn to the next page, and that the Edwardian pace of *Ulysses*, the slowness it attributes to the reader in taking a point, may make the book seem thin and straggly, especially if you have accustomed yourself to the dense concentration of images in Firbank.⁷⁶⁴

Indeed, *In Transit* ends on a vivid image rendered in language that reads like a 1960s update of Firbank: ‘In the truth of baroque metaphor, Bernini’s Saint Teresa reclined and expired in a smile of orgasmic ecstasy, while her honey-tongued, artificial-shepherd-cheeked seraph, in an act of inspired and transcendent bad taste, pierced and pierced her with his phallic spear, wearing on his honeysweet and musical lips a silly sexy simper.’ (236).

Moving away from Joyce and modernism, the campness of *In Transit* is enough to be remarked upon in Gary McMahon’s *Camp in Literature*, although McMahon regrets that its intellectual digressions on the reading process, for the most part, lack Firbank’s ‘frivolous yet no less novel invention’.⁷⁶⁵ Nevertheless, there are moments in *In Transit* where Brophy successfully blends her novel’s addresses to the reader with touches of Firbankian frivolity:

Why should I not appear to you as a free-moving figure in costume? My pelt, could it move away from you, might by its narcissistic unconcern with what it provoked in you, by the mystery of its self-movingness, excite you into admiring pursuit. Free-standing, my plumage might curl into crests and cartouches and thus cut a dash on the retina of your imagination.’ (86)

⁷⁶² Lawrence, p. 179. Brophy, ‘Slim Prancing Novelist’, in Brigid Brophy, *Reads: A Collection of Essays* (London: Sphere / Cardinal, 1989), revised repr. of ‘Firbank’ (1962), pp. 37-43 (p. 38).

⁷⁶³ Brigid Brophy, ‘James Joyce and the Reader’s Understanding’, *London Review of Books*, 2.3 (21 February 1980), 8-9 (p. 8).

⁷⁶⁴ Brophy, ‘James Joyce and the Reader’s Understanding’, p. 9.

⁷⁶⁵ McMahon, p. 48.

Elsewhere, Brophy makes her interest in camp clear, with references such as Pat becoming ‘the Great Camp Queen-Pin herself’ (184), and the instruction: ‘Fly with me. But do not deCamp’ (47). Indeed, the *New Statesman*’s review of *In Transit* on its first publication in 1969 made this aspect clear: ‘If, as seems likely, sexual ambiguity and style for its own sake are key elements of “camp”, Brigid Brophy must be its Queen’.⁷⁶⁶

But the Firbankian elements of *In Transit* go further than the themes and the language. There are nuns used for comedic purposes (224), discussions of flagellation (136), and references to Catholic saints and the poet Sappho. Brophy’s dedication for the novel is ‘to Saint Sexburga (abbess of Ely)’, and there is a scene in which lesbian revolutionaries cry ‘Pray for us, Saint Sappho’ (184). Indeed, Sonya Andermahr argues that the use of Sappho elsewhere for the baritone role in a gender-switched Italian opera, one of *In Transit*’s many digressions, is ‘undoubtedly inspired by her literary hero Ronald Firbank’s use of her’.⁷⁶⁷ Brophy’s typographical tricks also include the use of Maltese Crosses on two occasions of religious remarks (177, 203), echoing the instances of the same symbol in Firbank’s *Flower Beneath the Foot* and *Valmouth*.⁷⁶⁸

Late in *In Transit*, when a grisly aeroplane crash attracts a crowd of impromptu organ harvesters, Firbank’s dialogue style is used in a manner similar to the *Vile Bodies* scene of the racing drivers at dinner.⁷⁶⁹ As with the Waugh scene, the dialogue is all masculine noise and little campness, yet is still recognizably influenced by Firbank’s technique of unattributed fragments of gossip:

If we didn’t, someone else wou-

No point in letting it go to wa-

Well this doctor said, but for his heart, he’d be good for another twenty years of happy li-

Listen, Brian, I fixed it with that refrigeration chap. All you have to do is get it out. Then pass it to me, and I’ll pass it to him and he’ll rush it to-

If we didn’t do it to them, they’d do it to u-

I promised her, solemn like. She was in mortal terror. So I promised her. I promised you, mum, I says, if I can ever lay my hands on a – (230)

⁷⁶⁶ Clive Jordan, ‘Camp Jokes’, book review column, *New Statesman*, 26 September 1969, 429-30.

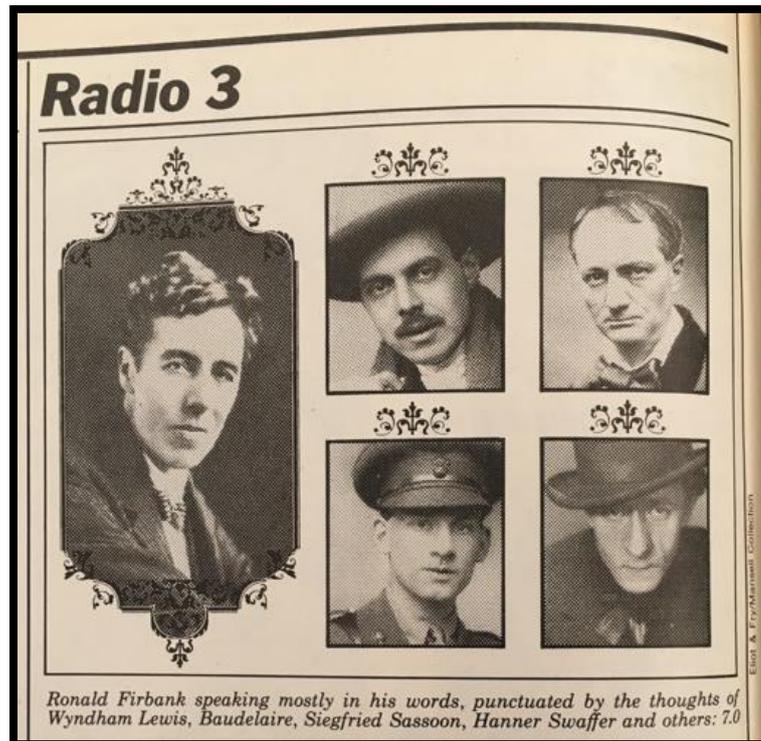
⁷⁶⁷ Sonya Andermahr, ‘Both/And Aesthetics: Gender, Art, and Language in Brigid Brophy’s *In Transit* and Ali Smith’s *How to Be Both*’, *Contemporary Women’s Writing*, 12:2 (July 2018), 248-63 (p. 258).

⁷⁶⁸ Firbank, *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, p. 60. Firbank, *Valmouth*, p. 41.

⁷⁶⁹ See section 4.4.

With all these Firbankian touches, it is difficult not to think that Firbank himself makes a supernatural cameo when, during the carnage of the novel's final scenes, there is a fleeting reference to a 'mannerist angel of panic' who passes 'with his lovely, long, nervous, affected and invisible strides above the Transit Lounge' (227). For all *In Transit's* reputation as a 'neo-Joycean' work of experimental fiction, it is Firbank who informs much of the novel's postmodern play on camp modernism.

4.8 Angela Carter, *A Self-Made Man* (1984)



7.0 Stereo
A Self-Made Man
 An exploration for radio of the life and character of RONALD FIRBANK written and compiled by ANGELA CARTER, with **Lewis Fiander** as Firbank **Frances Jeater** as the Female Narrator, and **John Westbrook** as the Male Narrator

Lord Berners
 TIMOTHY BATESON
 Nancy Cunard. LIZA GODDARD
 Sir Osbert Sitwell
 JOHN WEBB
 Sewell Stokes
 GEOFFREY COLLINS
 Baba.....KATE BINCHY
 Joseph Firbank
 JAMES GARBUTT
 Sir Thomas Firbank
 PETER TUDDENHAM
 Augustus John. JAMES BRYCE
 Evan Morgan... CLIVE PANTO
 Grant Richards.. ERIC ALLAN
 Wyndham Lewis
 KERRY FRANCIS
 Harold Nicholson
 BRETT USHER
 Oscar Wilde JAMES KERRY
 Forrest Reid. TOM HUNSINGER
 Duncan Grant. MICHAEL SPICE
 Directed by GLYN DEARMAN

Figure 6. The *Radio Times* listing for *A Self-Made Man*, 4 May 1984

The influence of Firbank on the work of Angela Carter (1940-1992) has tended to be underrated. Edmund Gordon's biography, for instance, mentions Firbank in a list of 'the writers who had the greatest impact on her throughout her life', but does not indicate how this influence manifested.⁷⁷⁰ The evidence can be found in Carter's essays and interviews. In a discussion of D. H. Lawrence she briefly calls Firbank one of the 'major English novelists this century'.⁷⁷¹ When comparing Firbank to Lawrence in a further essay, she argues that *Women in Love* has a scene of 'camp ecstasy' that 'more properly belongs in Firbank', except that Firbank, 'as plucky a little bantamweight as ever bounced off the ropes, had *real* moral strength'.⁷⁷² In a 1980s interview, she credits Firbank as an influence behind the 'malign fairy tale' style first employed with her second novel *The Magic Toyshop* (1967): 'I had been reading [...] people like Isak Dinesen, Cocteau and Firbank – a certain kind of non-naturalistic writing'.⁷⁷³ Carter particularly praises Firbank's 'beautiful precision of language', how he is 'so very funny and melancholy; his evocation of landscape is as economical and beautiful as *haiku*'.⁷⁷⁴

The greatest example of Carter's debt, however, is *A Self-Made Man* (1984), her hour-long radio play about Firbank, first broadcast on BBC Radio 3 on 4 May 1984.⁷⁷⁵ When her friend and literary executor Susannah Clapp re-listened to the play in 2021 she found, to her surprise, that it was 'difficult to distinguish between her [Carter's] voice and his [Firbank's]. There were phrases which completely overlapped'.⁷⁷⁶ Firbank's intellectual, often difficult use of camp resonates with Carter's interest in interrogating conventions of literary realism, as well as questioning conventions of gender. In which case, it makes sense to grant *A Self-Made Man* a degree of analysis based on a working knowledge of both writers.⁷⁷⁷ Accordingly, this section draws on archival research at the British Library, where Carter's unpublished drafts and handwritten notes for the play are available for public access.

For the first two-thirds of *A Self-Made Man*, fragmentary quotations by and about Firbank are mixed with Carter's own insights, and are performed by a large cast with two narrators, one male and one female. As the page references in Carter's notes prove, her sources

⁷⁷⁰ Edmund Gordon, *The Invention of Angela Carter* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2016), p. 36.

⁷⁷¹ Angela Carter, 'D. H. Lawrence, Scholarship Boy' (1982), in Angela Carter, *Shaking a Leg: Collected Journalism and Writings*, ed. by Jenny Uglow (1997; repr. London: Vintage, 2013), pp. 649-655 (p. 650).

⁷⁷² Angela Carter, 'Lorenzo the Closet-Queen' (1975), in *Shaking a Leg*, pp. 610-617 (p. 613).

⁷⁷³ John Haffenden, 'Angela Carter', *Novelists in Interview* (London: Methuen, 1985), pp. 76-96 (p. 80).

⁷⁷⁴ Haffenden, pp. 80-81.

⁷⁷⁵ *A Self-Made Man*, listing in BBC Radio 3 schedule for 4 May 1984, *Radio Times*, 243.3155 (28 April-4 May 1984), pp. 60-61. See Figure 6.

⁷⁷⁶ Susannah Clapp, spoken introduction to *A Self-Made Man*, in *The Angela Carter BBC Radio Drama Collection*, digital audiobook (BBC Digital Audio, 2021).

⁷⁷⁷ Although Charlotte Crofts's book, *Anagrams of Desire: Angela Carter's Writing for Radio, Film and Television* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003) covers *A Self-Made Man*, it does so without (a) access to the British Library archive, and (b) any substantial references to Firbank's work. This section answers some of the questions Crofts asks, such as confirming Carter's sources for the play.

for the quotations included *The Complete Firbank* (1961) and Mervyn Horder's anthology *Ronald Firbank: Memoirs and Critiques* (1977), which includes Ifan Kyrle Fletcher's 1930 *Memoir*.⁷⁷⁸ The last third of the play takes the form of an academic 'paper', 'Elementary Structures in the Life and Art of Ronald Firbank', delivered by the narrators at 'the first seminar on modernist literature to be conducted by the literature department of the University of Pisuerga at Kairoulla', held, surreally, at Firbank's deathbed in his hotel room in Rome (140). The country of Pisuerga, and its capital city Kairoulla, are fictional locations in Firbank's *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, although Carter does not make this connection clear. In fact, while Kairoulla is Firbank's invention, the university is Carter's. In this scene, Carter proves John Gross's theory that 'the idea of a graduate seminar on Ronald Firbank would be Firbankian', by extending Firbank's world in order to discuss him.⁷⁷⁹ Moreover, her use of 'modernist literature' to describe Firbank in the 'seminar', while the term 'camp' does not appear in the play, suggests that Carter was aware of the problems of taking a writer who uses camp seriously. Indeed, this was a concern she was voicing at the time regarding her own work. When asked about her feminist themes, she insisted that it was possible to 'make space for certain kinds of discussion, however frivolously they're conducted'.⁷⁸⁰

Carter was, however, aware of the need to *imply* campness in the production. The one place she does use the word 'camp' in the production script in is in her page of 'Character Notes' for the actors. These instructions remain unpublished; Mark Bell does not include them alongside the published script in the posthumous Carter dramatic collection *The Curious Room* (1996).⁷⁸¹ They are a work of Carteresque camp in themselves, as the following extract shows:

LORD BERNERS: Middle-aged, deeply odd, dry voice, intellectual, stylised, upper class

WYNDHAM LEWIS: 40-50; heavy butch upper class

AUGUSTUS JOHN: 30s, bluff, upper class

SIEGFRIED SASSOON: upper class; but less offensively so

MAURICE SANDOZ: 30-35; modified camp European

CARL VAN VECHTEN: 35; American N.Y.; intellectual; slightly camp

⁷⁷⁸ Manuscripts: Angela Carter, *A Self-Made Man*, autograph notes, London, British Library Western Manuscripts Collection, 'Angela Carter Papers: "The Curious Room" 4 (1983, n.d.)', Add MS 88899/1/50, section 1 of 3.

⁷⁷⁹ John Gross, *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters: Aspects of English Literary Life Since 1800* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969), p. 298.

⁷⁸⁰ Haffenden, p. 93.

⁷⁸¹ Angela Carter, *A Self-Made Man*, published script for radio play (first broadcast 1984), in Angela Carter, *The Curious Room: Plays, Film Scripts and an Opera* (titled on the spine as *The Curious Room: Collected Dramatic Works*), ed. by Mark Bell (London: Chatto & Windus, 1996), pp. 121-51. Subsequent references to the published script given as page numbers in the main text.

BAUDELAIRE: 40s, French, dry, nasty

CYRIL BEAUMONT: Edward Heath vowels⁷⁸²

The note for Wyndham Lewis crosses over into the play when the Female Narrator introduces him as ‘the butch Vorticist’ (136). When Carl Van Vechten appears, proclaiming his ‘Aubrey Beardsley in a Rolls Royce’ list of similes for Firbank, Carter inserts the stage direction ‘(getting carried away)’ halfway through, and accompanies it with Firbank giggling ‘with childlike delight’ at the praise (146). This moment of the play is, as Gary McMahon points out, a piece of literary camp on Carter’s part, where she uses Van Vechten and Firbank as both influences and characters in her own form of Carteresque camp.⁷⁸³ As with her seminar, it is an example of camp’s paradoxical love of combining critical analysis with a performative refusal of seriousness, with one eye on making, as McMahon puts it, ‘the dons and deans of Oxbridge frown’.⁷⁸⁴

These character notes suggest that the play is best experienced in performance rather than read as a script. Until June 2021 the BBC recording was difficult to access outside of archives like the British Library.⁷⁸⁵ However, in 2012 several clips were made commercially available as part of *Writing in Three Dimensions*, an audio documentary on Carter’s radio work.⁷⁸⁶ As the clips were chosen to represent Carter’s ideas for the play, they are worth considering here. The first clip illustrates Firbank’s youthful stay in Paris:

(Champagne cork pops: bubble, bubble, bubble; fade in, softly, Eric Satie’s ‘La Belle Eccentrique’.)

MALE NARRATOR: (Over.) In Paris of the early nineteen hundreds, the height of the ‘belle époque’, polishing up his French in preparation for the diplomatic service –

FEMALE NARRATOR: The diplomatic service?!?

BABA (Firbank’s mother): Since Artie had such a gift with languages, we thought . . . perhaps . . . the diplomatic service . . .

⁷⁸² Manuscripts: Angela Carter, *A Self-Made Man*, BBC production script (1983), London, British Library Western Manuscripts Collection, ‘Angela Carter Papers: “The Curious Room” 4 (1983, n.d.)’, Add MS 88899/1/50, section 3 of 3 (no page number).

⁷⁸³ McMahon, p. 40.

⁷⁸⁴ McMahon, p. 40.

⁷⁸⁵ In June 2021 the 59 minute broadcast version of the recording was released as part of the digital audiobook *The Angela Carter BBC Radio Drama Collection* (BBC Digital Audio, 2021). Further slight cuts have been made for this release, such as the mentions of Firbank’s title *Prancing Nigger*. The full 67 minute version of the recording, as archived at the BL, remains unreleased.

⁷⁸⁶ *Writing in Three Dimensions: Angela Carter’s Love Affair with Radio*, audio documentary, produced by Sara Davies, BBC Radio 4, 16 February 2012 [on BBC Digital audiobook, released 2012].

MALE NARRATOR: – polishing his French –

FIRBANK: ‘Tell me, do, of a place that soothes and lulls one . . . The Countess of Tolga considered. “Paris,” she hazarded.’

(*Music up and fade; champagne cork pops; bubble, bubble, bubble.*) (131)

As the recording shows, the music and sound effects are blended into a form of Firbankian party chatter, with the biographical facts behind the young Firbank’s stay in Paris interrupted and questioned in a manner recognizable, as Susannah Clapp points out, as ‘the voice of her [Carter’s] fiction and journalism’.⁷⁸⁷ But the Male Narrator’s repeating of the elliptical fragment ‘polishing his French’, to interrupt the other speakers, is also a clear use of Firbank’s dialogue technique.

Equally fragmentary in the above clip is the quotation by Firbank of his own work, from the first chapter of *The Flower Beneath the Foot*.⁷⁸⁸ Not only is this quotation presented without attribution but it is also a section of dialogue in itself, where the character of Firbank performs both characters from that novel’s scene. In an earlier typewritten draft Carter inserts the names of Firbank’s books after these quotations from his work, as might be expected by a more conventional documentary.⁷⁸⁹ By the stage of the production script, the citations have been cut, making for a more Firbankian ambience of uncertainty and disembodiment, of texture rather than narrative.⁷⁹⁰ As John Wain puts it in his review of the original broadcast, the resulting ‘unity of tone between writing, acting and direction’ is ‘as mannered in its way as Firbank’s own writing’.⁷⁹¹ Moreover, there was an innovative aspect to this treatment of Firbank. The radio critic Bob Giddings notes in the 2012 documentary that the play cuts ‘from narrative voice to narrative voice’ giving the whole production ‘a sort of high camp quality which I’d never heard in radio biographies before. That was unique’.⁷⁹² It is a Firbankian prose technique that Carter translated into an aural form of camp modernism.

A further clip used in the *Writing in Three Dimensions* documentary is a line wittily re-used by the producer Sara Davies to interrupt the critics in their discussion of the play:

FIRBANK: ... by the way, ‘I wish you wouldn’t call me Firbank. It gives me a sense of galoshes.’ (139)

⁷⁸⁷ Susannah Clapp, ‘Introduction’, in Angela Carter, *The Curious Room* (1996), pp. vii-x (p. ix).

⁷⁸⁸ Firbank, *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, pp. 7-8.

⁷⁸⁹ Manuscripts: Angela Carter, *A Self-Made Man*, draft script, typewritten fair copy, lightly annotated; n.d., London, British Library Western Manuscripts Collection, ‘Angela Carter Papers: “The Curious Room” 4 (1983, n.d.)’, Add MS 88899/1/50, section 2 of 3.

⁷⁹⁰ Manuscripts: Carter, *A Self-Made Man*, BBC production script.

⁷⁹¹ John Wain, ‘Radio: Dickens on Air’, *Listener*, 111.2857 (10 May 1984), p. 33.

⁷⁹² *Writing in Three Dimensions*.

This quotation, which Carter takes from the Fletcher *Memoir*, is a further example of her Firbankian usage of Firbank material.⁷⁹³ It illustrates Val Arnold-Foster's gloss of the play as 'a Firbankian artifice [...] full of high-camp quips, nicely mirroring Firbank's life and as stylishly devised as the best of his work'.⁷⁹⁴ Indeed, the 'galoshes' quip is the kind of camp epigram that demonstrates Firbank's use of Oscar Wilde as a role model. Carter makes this point elsewhere in the play, quoting from the final scene of *Cardinal Pirelli*:

FIRBANK: 'Dispossessed of everything but his fabulous mitre, the Primate was nude and elementary now as Adam himself. "As you can see, I have nothing but myself to declare," he addressed some phantom image in the air.'⁷⁹⁵

FEMALE NARRATOR: When asked what he had to declare by American customs –

OSCAR WILDE: (Rich Irish accent.) 'Nothing but my genius.'

MALE NARRATOR: – said Oscar Wilde, converted to Rome on his deathbed. (144)

Later, Carter quotes from the customs scene in *Sorrow in Sunlight*, and has the Female Narrator interrupting to wonder: 'Who, at customs, had only genius to declare?' Wilde appears again, to reply: 'The unfortunate Oscar Wilde' (149). The unpublished notes for the play reveal that Carter was also considering using the earlier line from the final chapter of *Cardinal Pirelli*, in which the boy Chicklet says to the Cardinal: 'I suppose, as you cross the border, they'll want to know what you have to declare', to which Pirelli replies: 'I have nothing, child, but myself.'⁷⁹⁶ Carter thus shows her interest in the way Firbank was influenced by Wilde's epigrammatic and declarative camp. By extension, she highlights the Wildean affinity of her own style.

But it is the campness of ironic laughter that Carter ultimately believes in, as an effective weapon against the 'buffetings of the world'. In Carter's novel *The Passion of New Eve*, the protagonist Evelyn reflects on the way his lover Leilah responds to his beatings with a 'curious, ironic laugh'; 'Isn't irony the victim's only weapon?', he reflects.⁷⁹⁷ Carter similarly writes about the importance of the feminine giggle in Chaucer's 'Miller's Tale'; it was a feminist weapon 'with which women humiliate men in the only way available to them, through

⁷⁹³ Fletcher, *Ronald Firbank: A Memoir* (1977) p. 43.

⁷⁹⁴ Val Arnold-Foster, 'Jobs for the boys, but not the girls?', radio review column, *Guardian*, 11 May 1984, p. 18.

⁷⁹⁵ Firbank, *Concerning the Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli*, pp. 246-47.

⁷⁹⁶ Firbank, *Concerning the Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli*, p. 245. Manuscripts: Carter, *A Self-Made Man*, autograph notes.

⁷⁹⁷ Carter, *The Passion of New Eve* (1977; repr. London: Virago, 2014), p. 24.

a frontal attack on male pride'.⁷⁹⁸ As Charlotte Crofts points out, the recurring motif of *A Self-Made Man* is Firbank's own giggle; it is not just his 'calling card' but his 'survival mechanism'.⁷⁹⁹ This reaches an apotheosis in the play when a real-life reference to his laughter is presented in the Firbankian style of an elliptical fragment:

MALE NARRATOR: Harold Nicolson.

HAROLD NICOLSON: '... epicene giggling ...' (145)

The original context of this fragment, Nicolson's review of *The Artificial Princess* in 1934, was a criticism of Firbank's use of innuendo: 'The timidity inseparable from such epicene gigglings has discouraged me from becoming an admirer of Ronald Firbank.'⁸⁰⁰ In Carter's play, she regards 'epicene' not as a sign of unmasculine weakness but as a strength; she presents feminine – or effeminate – laughter as a defiance of gender categories. Carter's play thus reworks negative quotes like Nicolson's into Firbank's style, fragmenting them and camping them up. Moments like this demonstrate how much Carter's arch, camp, postmodern literary voice owes to Firbank.

A Self-Made Man, then, is invaluable when considering the twentieth-century trail of Firbank. His camp modernist style resonated with a range of very different writers, although these can be arranged into two distinct groups. One group comprises homosexual writers seeking to represent their sexual identity in prose, such as Norman Douglas, Charles Henri Ford and Parker Tyler, and Richard Bruce Nugent. The other group comprises writers interested in an aesthetic use of wit to interrogate conventions of traditional literary realism, such as Aldous Huxley, Evelyn Waugh, Ivy Compton-Burnett, Brigid Brophy, and Angela Carter. The lack of repeat broadcasts of *A Self-Made Man* suggests that there was a decline in this stylistic Firbankian interest after 1984. But as the first part of the final chapter will discuss, the homosexual signification of Firbank would now be seized upon by a writer keen to advance the cause of homosexual expression in the literary novel: Alan Hollinghurst.

⁷⁹⁸ Carter, 'Alison's Giggle' (1983), in Carter, *Shaking a Leg*, pp. 662-676 (p. 663).

⁷⁹⁹ Crofts, pp. 81, 82.

⁸⁰⁰ Harold Nicolson, 'First of the Moderns and Last of the Decadents: Brilliant Ronald Firbank', *Telegraph*, 11 May 1934, p. 6.

5 Hypercamp: Contemporary Legacies, 1988-2021

This chapter continues Chapter Four's tracing of the influence and legacy of camp modernism in literature, moving now to the works of authors writing at the present time. The first to be discussed is Alan Hollinghurst (born 1954). Hollinghurst not only explicitly touches on the work and life of Ronald Firbank in his debut novel *The Swimming-Pool Library* (1988), but has since continued to publicly declare his interest, not only in his editing of new editions of Firbank, but in subtle aspects of his own subsequent novels, including his most recent, *The Sparsholt Affair* (2017). At the other end of the scale, in terms of mainstream impact, are three writers working in more radically queer and experimental modes, often publishing through small independent presses: Lauren John Joseph, Isabel Waidner, and Shola von Reinhold. All three use aspects of camp modernism in their contemporary approaches to queer identity. The intention of this chapter is to show that what was once a creative strategy in literature for expressing homosexual identities in a hostile society has undergone a new emergence as a form of what Isabel Waidner refers to as 'hypercamp'. This incarnation can be seen to meet not only the challenges of writing queer identity, but also the challenges of responding to online hypertext culture, which, like camp, itself valorizes exaggeration, the better to cut through an excess of information.

5.1 Alan Hollinghurst's Fiction, 1988-2017

Since the acclaim that met his first novel *The Swimming-Pool Library*, Alan Hollinghurst has used his public profile as a leading writer of contemporary literature to promote the work of Ronald Firbank. His scholarly interest in Firbank dates back to 1979, with his thesis for his postgraduate degree, 'The Creative Uses of Homosexuality in the Novels of E. M. Forster, Ronald Firbank and L. P. Hartley'.⁸⁰¹ Despite the title's suggestion of a group study, Hollinghurst makes his championing of Firbank clear. He argues that Firbank's use of style to reflect his homosexuality was 'an artistic success', while Hartley's was a relative 'failure' (*CUOH* ii). Furthermore, in contrast to Forster's more conventional style for *Maurice*, his sober novel of homosexual love, the fragmentary nature of Firbank's novels makes them into nothing short of 'artistic, personal and moral acts of subversion and rejection of English life' (*CUOH* ii).

⁸⁰¹ Manuscripts: Alan Hollinghurst, 'The Creative Uses of Homosexuality in the Novels of E. M. Forster, Ronald Firbank and L. P. Hartley', unpublished M. Litt thesis, Oxford University (1979); print copy at Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. M. Litt. c. 515. Subsequent references given in the main text as *CUOH*.

Firbank, posits the student Hollinghurst, 'is clearly a camp writer', although his implicit use of 'moral seriousness' regarding homosexuality, his 'artistic concentration', his 'intensive discipline', and 'increasingly subversive subjects' transcend 'the emotional obliqueness of camp' (*CUOH* 113). To this end, Hollinghurst praises Brophy's creative, idiosyncratic biography *Prancing Novelist* (1973) while criticizing Miriam Benkovitz's dry and factual *Ronald Firbank: A Biography* (1969). Benkovitz, he suggests, fails to respond to the way camp is 'an art for the knowing' (*CUOH* 118). This position of Hollinghurst's went on to inform the uses of Firbank, and indeed of camp, in his published fiction.

Hollinghurst's interest in Firbank has since manifested itself in his novels, which (for the most part) favour the perspectives of middle-class English gay men living in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Until 2004, his first three novels, *The Swimming-Pool Library* (1988), *The Folding Star* (1994), and *The Spell* (1998), tended to be discussed as part of the genre of gay fiction. It was his winning of the Booker Prize with *The Line of Beauty* (2004) that brought him to the notice of a large, mainstream readership, something he consolidated with *The Stranger's Child* (2011) and *The Sparsholt Affair* (2017), both of which were bestsellers. In 2012 the paperback of *The Stranger's Child* was one of the UK's biggest-selling books of any genre.⁸⁰² This perhaps reflects, in one sense, the shift in British mainstream attitudes to gay literature as part of the wider acceptance of queer lives *per se*, given the repeal of Section 28 in 2003, the legalization of civil partnerships in 2005, and the legalization of same-sex marriage in 2014. But alongside this success, Hollinghurst has continued to champion Firbank in his public statements. These include his introduction for Steven Moore's anthology of Firbank's early stories and plays, *The Early Firbank* (1991), substantial essays on Firbank for *The Yale Review* (2001) and the *Times Literary Supplement* (2006); his choice of Firbank for the National Portrait Gallery's *Gay Icons* exhibition (2009); his nomination of Firbank's *The Flower Beneath the Foot* for BBC Radio 4's series *Queer Icons* (2017), and, most significantly, the editing of two Firbank editions for mainstream publishers: *Three Novels* (*The Flower Beneath the Foot*, *Sorrow in Sunlight*, *Concerning the Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli*) for Penguin Modern Classics in 2000, and *The Flower Beneath the Foot* by itself, for Picador Classics in 2018.

Hollinghurst's editing of Firbank reveals his level of commitment. For one, he has argued the importance of respecting Firbank's own editing decisions, pointing out how the editors at the publisher Duckworth were in error when they 'regularized' Firbank's punctuation and 'corrected his grammar' for the posthumous *Works of Ronald Firbank* (1928), texts which were used for most of the Firbank reissues until the 1990s.⁸⁰³ To make such 'corrections', says Hollinghurst, is to overlook how Firbank deliberately used textual idiosyncrasies for 'emphasis

⁸⁰² John Dugdale, 'Commentary: Fifty Shades of Success', *Guardian*, 29 December 2012, Review section, p. 17.

⁸⁰³ Alan Hollinghurst, 'Textual Note', in Ronald Firbank, *Three Novels* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. xxiv.

and rhythm’, elements that contribute to Firbank’s more modernist aspects.⁸⁰⁴ It is not surprising that Hollinghurst once considered writing a new critical biography of Firbank, only to feel that he ‘probably wasn’t cut out to write biography’.⁸⁰⁵ He has, nevertheless, contributed the entry on Firbank for the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004).⁸⁰⁶ As with Brigid Brophy before him, it is therefore not unreasonable to consider the influence of Firbank in Hollinghurst’s own fiction.

5.1.1 *The Swimming-Pool Library* (1988): Saint Firbank

The role of Firbank is undeniable in *The Swimming-Pool Library*, which as Hermione Lee remarks, has a degree of ‘Firbankian high camp’.⁸⁰⁷ The book foregrounds the sexually explicit antics of Will Beckwith, a young and privileged British gay man in early 1980s London. At the same time, it makes comparisons with the more legally suppressed lives of gay men in earlier generations, namely Lord Nantwich, whose historical diary entries punctuate Will’s 1980s exploits. Firbank may not be the main character in this narrative, but he is nevertheless a recurring icon for its themes. His books are read and discussed by Will, he makes an appearance in Nantwich’s diaries of the 1920s, and he eventually takes up the modern hagiographic position of a film ‘star’, of a kind. Given Hollinghurst’s later naming of Firbank for the NPG and BBC as respectively a ‘gay icon’ and a ‘queer icon’, it is unsurprising that his calling for a secular ‘canonization’ of Firbank is implied in the epigraph for this first novel:

‘She reads at such a pace,’ she complained, ‘and when I asked her *where* she had learned to read so quickly, she replied, “On the screens at Cinemas.”’
– *The Flower Beneath the Foot*⁸⁰⁸

As Angus Brown points out, this epigraph demonstrates how ‘[b]efore we get to the first word of Hollinghurst’s writing, we find Hollinghurst reading.’⁸⁰⁹ Not only in the sense of reading

⁸⁰⁴ Alan Hollinghurst, ‘Textual Note’, p. xxiv.

⁸⁰⁵ Hermione Lee, ‘What Can I Say?: Secrets in Fiction and Biography – Hermione Lee Interviews Alan Hollinghurst’ (2012), in *Alan Hollinghurst: Writing Under the Influence*, ed. by Michèle Mendelssohn and Denis Flannery (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), pp. 191-207 (p. 191-92).

⁸⁰⁶ Alan Hollinghurst, ‘Firbank, (Arthur Annesley) Ronald (1886–1926), novelist’, in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, rev. 2008), online version <oxforddnb.com> [accessed 3 December 2020].

⁸⁰⁷ Hermione Lee, ‘What Can I Say?’, p. 200.

⁸⁰⁸ Alan Hollinghurst, *The Swimming-Pool Library* (1988; repr. London: Vintage, 2015), unpaginated front matter. Subsequent references given in the main text as *SPL*. Firbank, *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, p. 9.

⁸⁰⁹ Angus Brown, ‘The Touch of Reading in Hollinghurst’s Early Prose’, in *Alan Hollinghurst: Writing Under the Influence*, ed. by Michèle Mendelssohn and Denis Flannery (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), pp. 25-39 (p. 31).

Firbank but highlighting Firbank's reflection on the changing act of reading in the age of modernism. The quotation is a camp quip across the class divide (the speaker is a queen referring to a servant) about how modernity and popular culture – the then-recent invention of cinema – has changed the way texts are received. Moreover, an epigraph is often a device for setting up the tone of a novel or indicating an author's guiding 'icons' for a text. Indeed, Firbank's own epigraphs for *The Flower Beneath the Foot* are fictional quotations from his saintly character, St Laura de Nazianzi.⁸¹⁰

Considering the prose style of *The Swimming-Pool Library*, which as Alan O'Leary suggests, is in itself 'unflappable rather than camp', and is written in what O'Leary conceives as a 'middlebrow queer' style, this use of an extract of Firbank's 'elliptical modernist style' might seem, suggests O'Leary, 'curiously inapt', incongruous, or even puzzling.⁸¹¹ But as the reader progresses through the novel, the epigraph is revealed as less of an alignment of styles and more as an invocation of Firbank as the novel's guiding icon, and by extension a gay icon. Indeed, Firbank himself is not named in the epigraph, signifying the idea of his novels as alternative 'holy' texts within a community: in this case, Hollinghurst's community of gay men across different generations. With its near absence of heterosexual and female characters, Hollinghurst's novel claims Firbank as a saint for a parallel world. The implication is that Firbank's sufferings during his lifetime (his poor health, loneliness, and lack of literary success), are transformed by Hollinghurst into a form of gay martyrdom.

Accordingly, the end of Hollinghurst's book pauses the action to allow a community of gay men to pay homage to Firbank the icon, this time in a valedictory sense, and again with a reference to the medium of film. Will, Nantwich, and Will's friend James are assembled in a private house to watch a rare piece of silent film from the 1920s. This turns out to be candid footage of Firbank in Genzano, Italy. Some readers unfamiliar with Firbank's life might assume the film is, as O'Leary presumes, 'apparently Hollinghurst's invention'.⁸¹² In fact, it is based on a short memoir of Firbank by Lord Berners, first published in Ifan Kyrle Fletcher's *Ronald Firbank – A Memoir* (1930). Berners was with the ailing Firbank in Italy in May 1926, in the days leading up to his death. Hollinghurst hints at this 'holy' knowledge when Will's friend James, who, like Hollinghurst, is an invested admirer of Firbank, says at the screening, 'If it's what I think it is [...] it must be at the very end of his life.' (SPL 411) As the film plays, Hollinghurst, through the narration of Will, describes Firbank on screen:

⁸¹⁰ Firbank, *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, p. 5.

⁸¹¹ Alan O'Leary, 'Cinema in the Library', in *Alan Hollinghurst: Writing Under the Influence*, ed. by Michèle Mendelssohn and Denis Flannery (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), pp. 141-55 (p. 143).

⁸¹² O'Leary, p. 146.

He was tackling a steep cobbled hill [...] A couple of small children at the roadside watched him pass and then started to follow him. [...] A taller boy, a ten-year-old in ragged clothes, joined them, imitating the novelist's walk. [...] Then Firbank's hand went into his pocket and flung backwards a scatter of nickel coins. Unsurprisingly the next scene showed the crowd about twenty strong. [...] They were [...] chanting something together – a name, an epithet. [...] [Y]et the figure at the heart of their charivari took on the likeness not only of a clown, but of a patron saint. (*SPL* 411-12)

With an awareness of the Berners memoir, the missing 'name, an epithet' is revealed to be an Italian slapstick film star of the day, Ridolini:

Almost my last impression of him was seeing him ambling down the precipitous streets of Genzano followed by a crowd of children shouting "Ridolini! Ridolini! (Ridolini [...] is the name of a popular Italian comic film character.) From time to time Firbank would stop and scatter handfuls of nickel coins, a proceeding which only tended to aggravate the situation.⁸¹³

Hollinghurst's detail of 'nickel coins' rather than just 'coins' makes the link to the Berners memoir clear. In fact, Hollinghurst is referencing two historical gay authors rather than just one. Firbank's visit to Genzano was a likely tribute to one of his own camp literary heroes, Baron Corvo, who wrote about Genzano in his fiction.⁸¹⁴ Hollinghurst thus highlights the connection between literary taste and the representation of sexual identity, from the camp implicitness of Corvo and Firbank to the more sober explicitness of *The Swimming-Pool Library*.

By having Will, rather than James, who is more familiar with Firbank, narrate the film, Hollinghurst performs a kind of camp modernist tribute to Firbank's effects, if a very subtle one. Indeed, the narrator labels himself as a camp voice *per se*, when, elsewhere in the novel, Will remarks on the 'camp, exploitative, ironical control of my own speech' (*SPL* 91). There is certainly irony in the group's gathered worship of Firbank, a 'patron saint' (*SPL* 412), as Hollinghurst labels him, who resembles to the Italian children in the film a slapstick star, a predicament which leads to them following him in the street like a carnivalesque Christ.

The touch of Firbank's modernism, meanwhile, manifests itself in Hollinghurst's elliptical withholding of information. Without reference to Firbank studies, the casual reader is denied the name 'Ridolini' or the Berners source. Hollinghurst's own plot suffers a sudden ellipsis after this scene, when the hunt for an incriminating photograph is abandoned. In a novel that elsewhere deals in explicitness of sexual acts, such lacunae might complicate expectations

⁸¹³ Lord Berners, contribution to *Ronald Firbank: A Memoir* (1930), in *Ronald Firbank: Memoirs and Critiques*, ed. by Mervyn Horder (1977; repr. Dallas: Duckworth, 1979), pp. 82-85 (p. 84).

⁸¹⁴ See section 2.2.

on the part of the reader. In fact, many of Hollinghurst's subsequent novels like *The Stranger's Child* also end in unsolved mystery, with the implication that this is truer to life than the closure demanded by conventional storytelling. But, as Paul Vlitos suggests, this recurring device of Hollinghurst's can also be read as a 'formal tribute to Firbank's status as a radical technician' with its 'refusal to provide conventional closure in favour of ambiguous, suggestive, unsettling openness of implication and possibility', albeit within a more naturalistic style of prose.⁸¹⁵ In this sense, Hollinghurst's novels have elements of a modernist sensibility that belie his reputation as a mainstream realist.

A light and embedded sense of Firbankian innuendo further informs Hollinghurst's approach to politics. As Emily Horton argues, despite its setting during the rise of 'the Gay Liberationist ideal of combined resistance' against the era's 'Thatcherite Conservatism', *The Swimming-Pool Library* 'more generally reaffirms Firbank's camp outlook', indeed his camp *modernist* outlook, in that it evokes the impressionism of 'a direct sensuality', of ambiances and textures.⁸¹⁶ Firbank's lack of interest in *Sorrow in Sunlight* of satirizing colonialism, in favour of atmosphere and texture, is evoked in Will Beckwith's hotel room encounter with the Argentinian Gabriel, set soon after the Falklands war. When Gabriel suggests whipping Will 'for what you did to my country during the war', Will gives a camp retort: 'I think that might be to take the sex and politics metaphor a bit too seriously, old chap' (*SPL* 396). Will further worries that he 'could see the whole thing deteriorating into a scene from some poker-faced left-wing European film' (*SPL* 396). In doing so, he is not so much aligning himself with the right-wing politics of Conservatism as embracing a camp politics of detachment. In this way, Will echoes Firbank's use of camp detachment as the prerogative of homosexual self-definition: for some, a more pressing battle.

Instead of representing the politicized experiences of gay men in the AIDS-inflected 1980s, Hollinghurst uses the example of Firbank to focus on examples of individual survival against the odds. As with Angela Carter in her radio play about Firbank, *A Self-Made Man*, Hollinghurst is keen to depict Firbank as a figure of individual resilience and toughness. One moment from the Firbank biographies can be found in both these works: in the Café Royal, London, in 1925, aware of his terminal illness, Firbank was seen at a table crying out aloud, 'I don't want to die'.⁸¹⁷ The agendas are different; Hollinghurst stages the scene within Lord Nantwich's diaries of the 1920s, casting Firbank as a celebrity to young gay men who come to his table and hear this cry at close range (*SPL* 220). Given that Hollinghurst is writing in the late

⁸¹⁵ Paul Vlitos, 'Homosexualising the Novel: Alan Hollinghurst, Ronald Firbank and *The Swimming-Pool Library*', in *Sex and Sensibility in the Novels of Alan Hollinghurst*, ed. by Mark Mathuray (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 13-33 (p. 31).

⁸¹⁶ Emily Horton, 'A Conflicted Inheritance: The Opposing Styles of Wilde, Forster and Firbank in *The Swimming-Pool Library*', in *Sex and Sensibility in the Novels of Alan Hollinghurst*, ed. by Mark Mathuray (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 35-55 (p. 52).

⁸¹⁷ Fletcher, *Ronald Firbank: A Memoir* (1977), p. 47.

regal titles such as ‘Her Gaudiness the Mistress of the Robes’, ‘Her Dreaminess the Queen’, or ‘His Weariness the Prince’.⁸²⁴ Just as Angela Carter’s play *A Self-Made Man* includes a reference to the ‘University of Pisuerga at Kairoulla’, being place names in *Flower Beneath the Foot*, there is a sense that to pay tribute to Firbank one must also participate in his world of codified, elliptical humour, at the risk of puzzling the casual reader or listener.⁸²⁵ Firbank’s style demands a degree of immersion, to the level of textual infection. In this way, Firbank haunts the language of *The Swimming-Pool Library* as much as its plot.

One important divergence by Hollinghurst from Firbank’s style is on the matter of religion. As irreverent as Firbank is towards Catholicism, there is always an element of camp affection for its imagery, ceremonies, accessories, and saints. Hollinghurst’s touches of camp, meanwhile, favour a more secular world. By the 1980s, Saint Sebastian is still a homoerotic icon, not least in the wake of Derek Jarman’s film *Sebastiane* (1976), but Hollinghurst’s gay men are less interested in the religious aspect. In *The Swimming-Pool Library*, the erotic photographer Ronald Staines (a camp joke of a name in itself) discusses a photoshoot with a Saint Sebastian theme. The theme is very light indeed:

‘Oh, no arrows, dear; it’s before the martyrdom. He’s quite unpierced. But looks ready for it, somehow, the way I’ve done it.’

‘How can you tell it’s Sebastian, then,’ said Nantwich emphatically, ‘since the only thing that identifies Se-bloody-bastian is that he’s got all those ruddy arrows sticking up his arse?’ This seemed a fair criticism, but Staines ignored it. (*SPL* 62)

As Martin Lockerd argues, Hollinghurst is here following in the tradition of ‘the comic style of both Firbank and his self-identified imitator, Waugh’, specifically their roots in what Lockerd calls ‘decadent Catholicism’.⁸²⁶ However, Hollinghurst ‘evacuates’ decadence of most of its religious significance, reducing Catholicism to just ‘another garment in the dusty decadent wardrobe of camp fashion’.⁸²⁷ Where Firbank hints at a degree of religious faith informing his irreverence, Hollinghurst is unambiguously secular. This theme carries through into *The Line of Beauty*, where the character of Wani Ouradi is described as ‘sweet-natured, very rich, and beautiful as a John the Baptist painted for a boy-loving pope’.⁸²⁸ While the same statement would risk breaking the obscenity laws in Firbank’s time (the phrase evokes Firbank’s *Cardinal Pirelli*, which Brentano’s refused to publish in 1926), by the 2000s it is a reference that, as

⁸²⁴ Vlitos, p. 26.

⁸²⁵ Carter, *A Self-Made Man*, published script (1996), p. 140.

⁸²⁶ Martin Lockerd, *Decadent Catholicism and the Making of Modernism* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), p. 184.

⁸²⁷ Lockerd, pp. 184-85.

⁸²⁸ Alan Hollinghurst, *The Line of Beauty* (2004; repr. London: Picador Classic, 2015), p. 64.

Lockerd notes, ‘has largely ceased to be dangerous’.⁸²⁹ In this way, Hollinghurst acknowledges the aspects of Firbank that have changed from being shocking into being part of camp gay heritage. The ‘boy-loving pope’ is suggested as an imagined figure from history rather than an attack on contemporary religious leaders. It is the historical aspect of these camp religious references that Hollinghurst employs as part of his project of depicting the importance of an alternative heritage for gay lives, an iconography of which Firbank is a part.

Where Hollinghurst does employ the language of sacred relics is in his description of a first edition of Firbank’s *The Flower Beneath the Foot* (1923). Here, through his narrator Will, the author makes his true worship clear:

It was *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, in a still crisp, slightly torn grey wrapper with a drawing of a nun on the front. It felt deliciously light, cool and precious in my hand. [...] The book was beautifully designed, refined but without pretension, with restfully little of the brilliant text on each thick, wide-margined page. It was a treasure [...] (*SPL* 240-41)

With this passage, written with the same concise elegance as his sex scenes, Hollinghurst performs a kind of preservation: not only of the object’s material appearance, but of its effect on a reader. Moreover, Will receives this copy as a gift from Lord Nantwich, illustrating the importance of book-collecting as the transmission of knowledge across generations of gay men, something evoked with Wilde’s Dorian Gray receiving his ‘poisonous book’ from Lord Henry.⁸³⁰ In a novel where Firbank is a ‘patron saint’, and religion is a secular camp joke, this scene supplies a Bible for the theme implied by the title of *The Swimming-Pool Library*: homoeroticism and books. Indeed, the phrase ‘refined but without pretension’ serves as a reflection on Hollinghurst’s ambitions for his own prose, diverging from the more modernist and difficult aspects of Firbank.

When the book is later destroyed in a violent attack on Will by skinhead thugs, the bodies of Hollinghurst’s protagonist and Firbank are conflated. The passage extends Firbank’s title into an evocation of the ordeals of gay people across history:

I saw two things: my beautiful new copy of *The Flower Beneath the Foot* had been jerked from my pocket in the scuffle. It was just in front of my eyes, standing on end its pages fanned open. There was a peculiar silence of several seconds, in which I thought they might be calling it off. I read the words ‘perhaps I might find Harold ...’ two or three times. That must have been

⁸²⁹ Lockerd, p. 185.

⁸³⁰ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), ed. by Joseph Bristow (2006; repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 106-07.

enough to show how I cared for it. A boot slammed down on it, buckling the binding, and then again and again, grinding the pages into the warm-smelling spilt rubbish, scuffing to pulp the lachrymose saint on the wrapper. The second thing, as my head was jerked back by the hair, my cheek squashed and grazed on the ground, was a boot drawn back, very large and hard, then slamming towards my face. (SPL 249-50)

Here, the theme of Firbank as a queer saint takes on the more violent and emotional imagery of martyrdom, not least with the reference to the image of the ‘lachrymose saint’ on the cover of the first edition of *The Flower*, by C. R. W. Nevinson.⁸³¹ The line Will reads from the book, ‘Perhaps I might find Harold’ is not only fragmented like a piece of Firbank dialogue, but alludes to further queer lives, namely the bisexual Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson.⁸³² The speaker of the line is Mrs Chilleywater, Firbank’s satirical model for Vita.⁸³³ As Angus Brown suggests, Mrs Chilleywater’s search for her husband here gets ‘twisted into Will’s search for Arthur’, his lover, the reason for his visit to the block of flats where he is noticed by the skinheads.⁸³⁴ Will’s only defence in the attack is to look towards the Firbank book being crushed on the pavement: his last sight before unconsciousness. His desire for the book merges with his own desire for Arthur, along with the bisexual Mrs Chilleywater’s desire to find her husband, and, by implication, the history of any queer desire that has fallen ‘beneath the foot’ of persecution.

For all the toughness of Firbank’s intensity in his prose style, its campness is still a vulnerable and visible sign of queerness when viewed by the harsher, heteronormative world. The attack scene recalls Firbank’s refusal of Grant Richards’s attempts to ‘correct’ his punctuation, as this would be an attempt to have him ‘dressed in armour’.⁸³⁵ The point of his style is that it is a defiant form of homosexual self-exposure. The downside is that such visibility risks attack from those who resent the existence of queerness. In this scene, therefore, Firbank’s importance to Hollinghurst as a gay icon is at its most visceral.

As the photographer in Doris Lessing’s ‘The Day Stalin Died’ says, Firbank is a writer capable of saying ‘the last word’ to gay readers.⁸³⁶ In *The Swimming-Pool Library*, he says ‘the last word’ twice: once through his books, when the copy of *The Flower* is Will’s last sight before he loses consciousness in the skinhead attack, then again at the end of the novel, when the film footage of Firbank in Italy is screened to the main characters. His occasional yet vital

⁸³¹ As seen in Benkovitz, *Ronald Firbank: A Biography*, plate X.

⁸³² Firbank, *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, p. 70.

⁸³³ See section 2.7.

⁸³⁴ Angus Brown, p. 37.

⁸³⁵ See section 2.4.

⁸³⁶ See the Introduction to this thesis, section 1.

appearances in Hollinghurst's first novel affirm not only the theme of queer survival against adversity, but of the importance of camp modernism to that same survival.

5.1.2 Firbank in Twenty-First-Century Hollinghurst

One less trumpeted technique of Firbank's, which Brigid Brophy labels as his 'cross-perpetuation', is his referencing of characters from earlier novels. As Brophy points out, Mrs Asp from *Vainglory* (1915) goes on to appear briefly in *Inclinations* (1916), while the Ex-Princess Thleeanouhee in *Inclinations* returns in *The Flower Beneath the Foot* (1923), now promoted to Queen Thleeanouhee.⁸³⁷ Hollinghurst also employs this device in *The Line of Beauty* (2004), his fourth novel, when Will's father Denis Beckwith, a homophobic legislator from *The Swimming-Pool Library*, reappears in *The Line of Beauty* in a single line, as 'a handsome old saurian of the right enjoying fresh acclaim these days'.⁸³⁸ This cameo implies that Hollinghurst's novels share the same fictional universe – a 'Hollingverse', as it were – albeit only in brief, wry, throwaway moments like this. Nevertheless, with the sense of gossip implied by the narrator's phrasing of 'these days', the imprint of Firbank is there.

After four novels which focus on gay male protagonists, Hollinghurst's fifth and sixth novels are departures into longer timeframes, across more generations, and crucially across more genders and sexual identities. *The Stranger's Child* (2011) features what Joseph Ronan argues is a theme of 'bisexual camp', comprising an ostentatious avoidance of Hollinghurst's usual depiction of gay male sex, in favour of bisexual suggestion and innuendo, which, as with moments in Firbank, can make 'the ostensible absence of sex outrageously sexualized'.⁸³⁹ One particular scene evokes Firbank's set pieces of lesbian flirtation, such as the boat scene in *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, which is also steeped in innuendo.⁸⁴⁰ As Ronan observes, the 'bisexual camp' of *The Stranger's Child* reaches a point of 'near-constant innuendo' in the dialogue between the character of Daphne and the fashion designer Eva Riley, as Eva clearly tries to seduce her.⁸⁴¹ While Ronan rightly identifies this scene as camp, he overlooks how it is specifically the camp of Firbank. The detail of the language of women's clothes, coupled with the setting of a party in the gardens of an English country mansion in the 1920s, makes the passage more overtly Firbankian than anything in *The Swimming-Pool Library*:

⁸³⁷ Brophy, *Prancing Novelist*, p. 208.

⁸³⁸ Hollinghurst, *The Line of Beauty*, p. 246.

⁸³⁹ Joseph Ronan, 'Ostentatiously Discreet: Bisexual Camp in *The Stranger's Child*, in *Alan Hollinghurst: Writing Under the Influence*, ed. by Michèle Mendelssohn and Denis Flannery (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), pp. 96-109 (p. 105).

⁸⁴⁰ See section 2.9.

⁸⁴¹ Ronan, p. 104.

They paced on, in apparent amity, whilst Eva perhaps worked out what to say. Her evening bag, like a tiny satchel slung down to the hip, nudged against her with each step, and evidence about her underclothes, which had puzzled Daphne a good deal, could obscurely be deduced in the warm pressure of Eva's side against her upper arm. She must wear no more than a camisole, no need really for any kind of brassière ... She seemed unexpectedly vulnerable, slight and slippery in her thin stuffs.

'Can I tempt you?' said Eva, her hand dropping for a second against Daphne's hip. The nacreous curve of her cigarette case gleamed like treasure in the moonlight.

'Oh ...! hmm ... well, all right ...'

Up flashed the oily flame of her lighter. 'I like to see you smoking', said Eva, as the tobacco crackled and glowed.

'I'm starting to like it myself,' said Daphne.

'There you are,' said Eva; and as they strolled on, their pace imposed by the darkness more than anything else, she slid her arm companionably round Daphne's waist.

'Let's try not to fall into the fishpond,' Daphne said, moving slightly apart.

'I wish you'd let me make you something lovely,' said Eva.

'What, to wear, you mean?'

'Of course.' [...]

Now they had stopped, and Eva was assessing her, through the fairy medium of the moonlight, one hand on Daphne's hip, the other, with its glowing cigarette, running up her forearm to her shoulder, where the smoke slipped sideways into her eyes. [...] In a hesitant but almost careless tone Eva said, 'I wish you'd let me make you happy.'

Daphne said, 'We simply must get back,' a tight stifling feeling, quite apart from the smoke, in her throat. 'I'm really rather cold, I'm most frightfully sorry.' She jerked herself away, dropping her cigarette on the path and stamping on it.⁸⁴²

With language like 'nacreous curve of her cigarette case' and 'the fairy medium of the moonlight', and especially with the narrator's breaking into ellipses when Daphne muses on Eva's 'no need really for any kind of brassière ...', the scene strongly evokes Firbank's blend of Sapphic comedy, coded sensuality, and elliptical camp innuendo. The crafted rhythms and flowing naturalism may keep the prose closer to Hollinghurst's own style, but it is the legacy of Firbank that informs its humour.

Firbank can also be briefly detected in *The Sparsholt Affair* (2017), this time in terms of the style of dialogue. The influence has been noticed in a negative capacity, if unconsciously.

⁸⁴² Alan Hollinghurst, *The Stranger's Child* (2011; repr. London: Picador, 2012), pp. 214-15.

Reviewing *The Sparsholt Affair* on its publication, the novelist John Boyne complained that it contained ‘moments and scenes that often feel superfluous to the action’.⁸⁴³ In particular, ‘conversations in restaurants and literary salons occasionally overstay their welcome’, especially when ‘the various personalities struggle for identification and the reader feels tempted to tune out the noise’.⁸⁴⁴ This critique makes a direct connection with the original reviews of Firbank’s novels a century earlier. Just like Boyne, the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1916 regretted that Firbank’s style in *Inclinations* (1916) made it ‘impossible to make out who is speaking without close and prolonged calculations’.⁸⁴⁵ In one of the literary salon scenes from *The Sparsholt Affair*, which Boyne alludes to, there is a distinctly Firbankian atmosphere. There, a group of older and upper-middle-class women are encountered by Johnny Sparsholt, a young gay man. The scene is set in 1970s London, but the salon could be one of Firbank’s Edwardian pastorals:

‘Ah,’ said the first woman, ‘you’re a picture person. We thought you might be going to read to us.’

‘Read to you?’ said Johnny, with a giggle.

‘Well, Evert will be reading tonight himself,’ said the second woman, looking round. ‘You know he’s writing this book about his father.’

‘Oh I didn’t know,’ said Johnny, ‘no.’

‘You know about Evert’s father, at least,’ the grey-haired woman said, with her slightly arch severity, as if to suggest he would feel foolish when he realized who she was.

‘He only had one leg, didn’t he,’ said Johnny.

‘Well, there was rather more to him than that,’ said the second woman.

‘Oh God yes,’ said the third woman, who’d been gazing up at him in a preoccupied way. A smile spread slowly across her face. ‘You must forgive me if I say I’m madly envious of your hair.’

‘Oh, er, thank you . . .’ said Johnny, feeling he mustn’t look too closely at hers, which was fluffy and dyed a strange rust-red; he glanced up into the mirror again.

‘But isn’t it an awful nuisance to you?’ asked the second woman, with artless curiosity, and a sense she was glad the subject had been broached.

‘We haven’t been told your name,’ said the first woman.

⁸⁴³ John Boyne, ‘*The Sparsholt Affair* Review: A Blitz of Gay Longing’, *Irish Times*, 7 Oct 2017 <<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/the-sparsholt-affair-review-a-blitz-of-gay-longing-1.3238553>> [accessed 28 November 2020] (para. 7 of 8).

⁸⁴⁴ Boyne, para. 7 of 8.

⁸⁴⁵ ‘Ronald Firbank: *Inclinations*’ (unsigned review), *Times Literary Supplement*, 22 June 1916, p. 299.

Johnny told them now, and on one face at least he saw the familiar momentary suspicion, and its tactful suppression, and the lingering curiosity, half cunning, half sympathetic, that ensued. As if to discountenance all this, the third woman said, ‘I’m iffy, by the way.’

‘Oh . . . um . . .’

‘Iphigenia,’ the second explained.

‘Old, old friend of Evert’s.’⁸⁴⁶

It is no surprise that the name Iphigenia can also be found in three Firbank novels.⁸⁴⁷ Boyne’s argument that a conversation like this feels ‘superfluous to the action’ of *The Sparsholt Affair* and merely adds ‘noise’ to the novel may seem convincing when read purely in the context of a naturalistic narrative. But when considering the ongoing importance of Firbank to Hollinghurst, and indeed Hollinghurst’s belief in Firbank as a queer icon, this scene continues the author’s project of weaving Firbank’s style into a text, the better to occasionally ‘homosexualise’ the prose. Only with an awareness of Firbank, and of the importance of camp to queer lives, can a reader fully appreciate this aspect of Hollinghurst’s work. For all his mainstream success, Hollinghurst has never stopped writing for gay readers. His light and occasional uses of Firbank’s style may favour a more naturalistic style of his own, but he continues to affirm the importance of Firbank, paying tribute subtly yet persistently in his fiction.

5.2 The Firbankian Transgressive: Lauren John Joseph’s *Everything Must Go* (2014)

To locate the more innovative aspect of Firbank’s legacy, it is necessary to turn from the established and relatively conventional style of Hollinghurst to the work of three emerging queer writers who have favoured experimental approaches to writing fiction: Lauren John Joseph, Isabel Waidner, and Shola von Reinhold. All three writers use the non-binary pronouns ‘they’ and ‘them’, though Joseph supplies a camp twist in their Twitter biography, describing their pronouns as ‘them fatale’.⁸⁴⁸ Under their previous working name of La JohnJoseph, Joseph has worked since the 2000s as a flamboyant, gender-ambiguous performance artist, touring shows across the world such as *A Generous Lover* and *Boy In A Dress* (published in a single volume by Oberon Books, 2019). In February 2021, the *Bookseller* magazine announced that a new novel by Joseph, *At Certain Points We Touch*, had been acquired by the mainstream publisher Bloomsbury, with a view to publication in 2022 amid a ‘high-profile marketing and

⁸⁴⁶ Alan Hollinghurst, *The Sparsholt Affair* (2017; repr. London: Picador, 2018), pp. 160-61.

⁸⁴⁷ Firbank, *Vainglory*, p. 102. Firbank, *Inclinations*, p. 229. Firbank, *The Artificial Princess*, p. 250.

⁸⁴⁸ Lauren John Joseph, Twitter profile, <<https://twitter.com/lajohnjoseph>> [accessed 24 July 2021].

publicity campaign’.⁸⁴⁹ It will be interesting to see if this new book shares the experimental qualities of their debut novel, *Everything Must Go*, published by the Brooklyn-based indie press ITNA in 2014. Although a small-scale release, *Everything Must Go* was shortlisted for two LGBTQ+ prizes: the UK’s Polari First Book prize, and the US’s Lambda Literary Award in the Best Transgender Fiction category.

Everything Must Go is a novel that explicitly identifies itself as Firbankian – twice. The book’s description on the back cover invites the potential reader to ‘follow our hero/ine through a dreamlike jungle of orgies and terrorist explosions, described in language as word-rich and surreal as a Ronald Firbank novel’.⁸⁵⁰ Firbank’s name is then repeated on the same back cover, as part of a recommendation by the American author Bruce Benderson, who praises the novel’s ‘shining currency of invention, worthy of an R. Firbank or Dame E. Sitwell’. In this way, the novel not only indicates its own Firbankian affinity, but also reflects how Firbank still has a reputation as an icon in the field of American queer experimental fiction.

The novel’s content is, in fact, far more surreal, graphic, and violent than anything by Firbank, and is closer in this sense to the works of Jean Genet, Kathy Acker, and William Burroughs, being influences that Joseph has named in their interviews.⁸⁵¹ But a further writer that Joseph admires, Angela Carter, is, as Chapter Four has discussed, influenced in turn by Firbank.⁸⁵² In fact, *Everything Must Go* particularly recalls Carter’s *Passion of New Eve*, with its apocalyptic setting, its picaresque plot, its gender-changing protagonist, its references to classic American film stars, and its gangs of armed children based on the Children’s Crusade of the thirteenth century, who in Joseph’s novel are said to blow up a building ‘with an innovative mixture of dynamite and *démaquillant*’ (make-up remover) (*EMG* 128). As with Carter’s novel, the Firbankian traits can be found in Joseph’s combination of a camp, aloof tone with a concise, dense style of writing, an effect then intensified to the point of difficulty and experimentation. When the protagonist, Diana, decides to set off to trigger the end of the world, she calls it ‘a mercy killing’: ‘the earth was stubborn and denied it was ill, terminally ill; she just scrawled a little more lipstick wildly across her pock-marked cheeks and said, “See? I’m just fine”’ (*EMG* 24). For all its bad-taste comedy, as Mitch Kellaway observes, this theme of the novel reflects ‘perfectly’ the serious discussions within queer theory texts like Lee Edelman’s *No Future*

⁸⁴⁹ Ruth Comerford, ‘Bloomsbury Bags “Razor-Sharp” Novel from Lauren John Joseph’, *The Bookseller*, 1 February 2021 <<https://www.thebookseller.com/news/bloomsbury-bags-lauren-john-josephs-razor-sharp-novel-1235350>> [accessed 3 February 2021].

⁸⁵⁰ Lauren John Joseph (writing as La JohnJoseph) *Everything Must Go* (Brooklyn, NY: ITNA Press, 2014), back cover. Subsequent references given in the main text as *EMG*.

⁸⁵¹ Jane Flett, ‘Interview with La JohnJoseph’, *Leopardskin and Limes* website, 8 January 2016 <<http://www.leopardskinandlimes.com/interview-with-la-johnjoseph/>> [accessed 3 February 2021].

⁸⁵² Max Steele, ‘La JohnJoseph: It’s the End of the World as We Know It’, interview, *Lambda Literary* website, 16 April 2014 <<https://www.lambdaliterary.org/2014/04/la-johnjoseph-its-the-end-of-the-world-as-we-know-it/>> [accessed 4 February 2021].

(2004) and Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011).⁸⁵³ The implication is that contemporary queerness often engenders a revolutionary, utopian desire to interpret the current, mainly heteronormative world as ultimately doomed, and to 'create a new world' instead. Indeed, Joseph's protagonist decides, at the last minute, not to destroy the world but to carry on living in the present one, albeit in their own unconventional way.

Despite these older influences, and its depiction of an apocalyptic world where the internet and mobile phones are non-existent, *Everything Must Go* channels the experience of the internet age in its concentrated, relentless juxtaposition of imagery, ideas, locations, and historical moments. Firbank's camp love of anachronism, not least in his use of the *fin de siècle* persisting into the age of modernism, is evoked in Joseph's cameo roles by long-dead film stars like Joan Crawford, Charlie Chaplin, Eartha Kitt, and Liza Minnelli. Chaplin speaks entirely by holding up cue cards, sometimes using the slang of New York drag balls, which as a character in Isabel Waidner's fiction observes, is now used on the internet as part of everyday online discourse: 'Work!' 'Fierce!' 'Bitch, Please! (151)'.⁸⁵⁴ As Joseph has said, 'Reading the book is like having several different tabs open on the browser. Everything's always happening at once, across narratives, across time and place.'⁸⁵⁵ If there is a camp aspect to this sense of digitally-mediated excess, Joseph nevertheless affirms that their own idea of 'everything' has camp taste. One example is a line in which Diana's unborn baby misses an event due to being 'up reading *Vile Bodies*', a reference to Evelyn Waugh's Firbankian novel (*EMG* 48). One of Waugh's camp characters from *Brideshead Revisited*, Sebastian Flyte, is referenced by the inclusion of a teddy bear called Aloysius, which, like many supposedly lifeless things in the novel, comes alive and talks (*EMG* 106). Elsewhere, an aristocratic character confesses to being 'the son and heir of nothing in particular', a line which links the Firbankian love of the upper classes with the lyrics to *How Soon is Now?* by The Smiths (*EMG* 33).

A more traditional manifestation of Firbankian camp is Joseph's use of Catholic imagery. Saint Sebastian, the queer icon whom Hollinghurst references in *The Swimming-Pool Library*, is reconfigured by Joseph, arrows intact, as a statue that comes to life and has sex with Diana, as part of an LSD-fuelled orgy set at Westminster Cathedral (*EMG* 144-45). The camp juxtapositions continue when Diana has a vision of the Virgin Mary in a graveyard in Turin, who is said to have 'vaporized like the azure smoke from a joint' (*EMG* 64). Diana then remarks: 'I could not believe I had met our Holy Mother without my Garfield autograph book!'

⁸⁵³ Mitch Kellaway, 'Everything Must Go by La JohnJoseph', review, *Lambda Literary* website, 6 May 2014 <<https://www.lambdaliterary.org/2014/05/everything-must-go-by-la-johnjoseph/>> [accessed 4 February 2021].

⁸⁵⁴ See section 5.3.2.

⁸⁵⁵ Josie Thaddeus-Johns, 'LSD Church Orgies and Babysitting on Codeine', interview with La JohnJoseph, *Dazed Digital* website, 27 March 2014 <<https://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/19375/1/everything-must-go-la-johnjoseph-debut-novel-interview>> [accessed 4 February 2021].

(EMG 64) Joseph has confirmed in interviews that they ‘grew up Catholic’ and was not only ‘entranced’ by religious icons and patron saints but saw how ‘those compressed archetypes had been transferred on to movie stars and brand names’.⁸⁵⁶ Whether it’s ‘Greta Garbo or a can of Coke’, these are all ‘loaded symbols which we store so much common knowledge in. And of course it’s terribly camp, because it’s so reductive, people only become iconic after they’ve become 2D caricatures of themselves’.⁸⁵⁷ In this way, Joseph articulates the camp potential of daily contemporary life, with brands encouraging a sense of genuflection once given to religious icons, a quality that online life has only intensified.

Everything Must Go further adopts the stylistic rhythms of the Wildean epigram, just as Firbank did in his novels. One example is ‘I’d do very well as a cannibal, if only I weren’t one of a kind. If you go killing other species it’s merely murder, and that has been done to death’ (EMG 125). The gender theories of Judith Butler are camped up in a single line: ‘[L]ittle girls and drag queens are ultimately the same thing, imitations of imitations, becoming wilder with each extrapolation’ (EMG 126). Diana’s own sudden change of gender is remarked upon by the character Candy Bar, a drag queen: ‘I literally do not care what’s in your trousers [...] You’re the air, I’m the air, that old lady is the air, and half a dozen oysters down in Acapulco are the air’ (EMG 81). This offhand, absurdist tone, familiar as a camp trait from Firbank to drag queen competitions, is thus applied to the contemporary issue of trans identities. As Joseph suggests, trans issues are serious, but they can still be mediated through a frivolous, camp approach. Indeed, to do so might enhance the sense of a trans queer identity, drawing on a history of queer expression that goes back to Firbank.

5.3 Isabel Waidner: *Gaudy Bauble* and *We Are Made Of Diamond Stuff*

One means of indicating experimental work in the crowded world of publishing is to examine the shortlists of a literary award such as the Goldsmiths Prize, which promotes ‘fiction that breaks the mould or extends the possibilities of the novel form’.⁸⁵⁸ The 2019 shortlist for the prize included *We Are Made of Diamond Stuff* (2019) by Isabel Waidner (born 1974). Waidner’s novel, along with its predecessor *Gaudy Bauble* (2017), was also shortlisted by the Republic of Consciousness Prize, which promotes literary fiction published by British small presses. In Waidner’s case, their books were published by the Manchester imprint Dostoyevsky Wannabe, which is low-budget enough to use Amazon’s print-on-demand system, CreateSpace,

⁸⁵⁶ Flett, ‘Interview with La JohnJoseph’.

⁸⁵⁷ Flett, ‘Interview with La JohnJoseph’.

⁸⁵⁸ Official website for the Goldsmiths Prize, <<https://www.gold.ac.uk/goldsmiths-prize/about/>> [accessed 7 January 2021].

as its ‘gigantic photocopier’.⁸⁵⁹ This choice of a self-publishing model evokes Firkbank’s financing of his own production costs with the Grant Richards imprint: the same sense of a need for artistic expression without compromise.

In biographical terms, one quality Waidner shares with the more mainstream Hollinghurst is an attraction to London as a queer space. While Hollinghurst’s *The Swimming-Pool Library* and *The Line of Beauty* re-imagine a 1980s London as a place for middle-class English gay men to stage their desires, Waidner’s *Gaudy Bauble* articulates the author’s working class, non-binary migrant’s attraction to London in the 1990s, when they moved there from the rural Black Forest region of Germany. ‘London and, I guess by extension, British culture has always represented a level of queer freedom that was unavailable to me at home,’ Waidner told the *Financial Times* in 2019.⁸⁶⁰ In the early 2000s, Waidner, who now uses the pronouns ‘they’ and ‘them’, was an indie rock musician, releasing records as part of the band Klang.⁸⁶¹ Waidner can be heard in this capacity as one of the voices in the documentary film about London life, *Finisterre* (2003), remarking how concert audiences in London are more keen than regional audiences to analyse a band’s influences, rather than ‘just listen to what the band does’.⁸⁶² This desire to build on selected influences, while not letting them eclipse a new work’s original effects, has continued into Waidner’s literary career.

5.3.1 Brophy as Waidnerian Icon

Waidner’s present relationship with influence, and specifically with the influence of camp, is indicated in their essay for the ICA, ‘Class, Queers and the Avant-Garde’ (2019). They quote a description of *We Are Made of Diamond Stuff* by an anonymous writer at *Tank Magazine*, which reads the novel’s references to B. S. Johnson as evidence that Waidner ‘aligns their work with a generation of post-war experimentalists exploring class and culture with a camp and baroque cleverness’.⁸⁶³ At this point, Waidner adds an emoticon of a smiley, indicating their approval of the ‘camp’ label. Equally, in a separate piece of metafiction, ‘Camp Crystal’ (2017),

⁸⁵⁹ Fernando Sdrigotti, ‘Low Cost, Big Aims: An Interview with Dostoyevsky Wannabe’, *3:AM Magazine* website, 10 July 2018 <<https://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/low-cost-big-aims-an-interview-with-dostoyevsky-wannabe/>> [accessed 9 January 2021].

⁸⁶⁰ Elsa Court, ‘Expat Identities: A Queer Migrant’s Reinvention Abroad’, *Financial Times* website, property section, 30 April 2019 <<https://propertylistings.ft.com/propertynews/united-kingdom/5776-expat-identities-a-queer-migrants-reinvention-abroad.html>> [accessed 7 January 2021].

⁸⁶¹ Manuscripts: Isabel Waidner, ‘Experimental Fiction, Transliteration & *Gaudy Bauble*: Towards A Queer Avant-Garde Poetics’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Roehampton, 2016), deposited online at *EThOS*, p. 98. Subsequent references given in the main text as *EFTGB*.

⁸⁶² *Finisterre*, dir. by Paul Kelly and Kieran Evans (Onedotzero, 2003), accessed on DVD as *Saint Etienne Presents Finisterre: A Film About London* (Brooklyn, NY: Plexifilm, 2005). Waidner’s voice appears 42 mins into the film.

⁸⁶³ Isabel Waidner, ‘Class, Queers, and the Avant-Garde’ (2019), ICA website <<https://www.ica.art/live/class-queers-and-the-avant-garde>> [accessed 14 January 2021], p. 3.

Waidner uses ‘camp’ as a positive descriptor for their work, referring to ‘the camp anti-horror aesthetic I have been pursuing, in *Gaudy Bauble* and *In Real Life*’.⁸⁶⁴ Where Waidner takes issue with the *Tank Magazine* description is in the implication that they are an uncritical disciple of all experimental writers from the past. On the contrary, *Diamond Stuff* is intended by the author as ‘an intervention against the normativity and elitism of much of English-language and European avant-garde literature’, in favour of a more communal and diverse ‘queer avant-garde’ and specifically an articulation of ‘the queer migrant experience’ in 2019 Britain.⁸⁶⁵

One experimental influence that Waidner is, however, happy to acknowledge is Brigid Brophy’s *In Transit* (1969), which, as Chapter Four of this thesis has argued, is an example of the Firbank legacy in 1960s fiction. Waidner regards *In Transit* as ‘a rare example of a queer avant-garde British novel’, thus hinting at the purpose of their own ongoing project.⁸⁶⁶ When Brophy’s novel *The Snow Ball* (1964) was reissued by Faber in 2020, Waidner’s name appeared on the back cover as one of several literary figures offering their praise, alongside Sarah Waters and Terry Castle: ‘The Brophy renaissance can’t come soon enough’, says Waidner in their quotation.⁸⁶⁷ Furthermore, the introduction to this edition was by another emerging writer of queer and (lightly) experimental fiction, Eley Williams. Williams praises Brophy’s novel as ‘a camp refiguring of canons of Western art’ and includes in a short list of ‘suggested further reading’ Brophy’s *Prancing Novelist* (her book on Firbank), and Sontag’s ‘Notes on “Camp”’.⁸⁶⁸ ‘Camp’ is clearly not a pejorative or dismissive term in this context. As far as Isabel Waidner is concerned, it is a label to embrace when producing queer experimental fiction.

Waidner’s *Gaudy Bauble* (2017) was originally submitted as part of their doctoral thesis for a practice-based PhD in English and creative writing, ‘Experimental Fiction, Transliteracy & *Gaudy Bauble*: Towards A Queer Avant-Garde Poetics’ (subsequently referenced here as *EFTGB*). In the thesis, Waidner not only names Brophy’s *In Transit* as a ‘close reference point, precedent and inspiration’, but includes it as part of a small canon of queer avant-garde fiction which includes Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood* (as argued as a work of camp modernism in Chapter Three of this thesis), William Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch* (1959), and Ali Smith’s *How To Be Both* (2014) (*EFTGB* 106-07, 35). Waidner goes on to discuss *Gaudy Bauble* as an intentional ‘development of postmodernist experimental fictions, specifically Brigid Brophy’s queer avant-garde novel *In Transit*’ (*EFTGB* 39). In this way, Waidner’s fiction is an example of what

⁸⁶⁴ Isabel Waidner, ‘Camp Crystal’ (2017), *Queen Mob’s Teahouse* website <<https://queenmobs.com/2017/02/23645/>> [accessed 16 January 2021].

⁸⁶⁵ Waidner, ‘Class, Queers, and the Avant-Garde’, p. 3.

⁸⁶⁶ Leo Robson, ‘Isabel Waidner: “There is a Huge, Under-Explored Potential in ‘Innovative’ Literature”’, *New Statesman* online, 11 November 2019 <<https://www.newstatesman.com/goldsmiths-prize/2019/11/isabel-waidner-there-huge-under-explored-potential-innovative-literature>> [accessed 9 January 2021].

⁸⁶⁷ Brigid Brophy, *The Snow Ball* (1964; repr. London: Faber, 2020), back cover.

⁸⁶⁸ Eley Williams, ‘Foreword’, in Brophy, *The Snow Ball*, pp. v-x (pp. vi, x).

Martin Eve identifies as a recent trend of ‘literature against criticism’.⁸⁶⁹ Indeed, in terms of specifically *queer* literature that charts ‘its own literary-historical placement’ in this way, Eve indicates Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* (2006).⁸⁷⁰ He cites Heike Bauer’s observation that Bechdel uses ‘British, Irish, and U.S. texts and European writing in English translation’, not least *Ulysses*, to ‘historicize her family and interrogate the queer entanglements of her own lesbian life’.⁸⁷¹ In fact, as Eve argues, this same methodology by Bechdel is also, in a ‘more formalist sense’, ‘a validating move, a self-situation by Bechdel of her work within a high literary tradition’.⁸⁷² Waidner’s similar engagement with writers like Brophy is equally a self-aware, self-situating move, and a form of ‘writing back’ to this tradition. However, it is a ‘writing back’ to not just the academy, as Eve suggests, but to the perceived omissions or shortcomings of these influences.

In particular, Waidner argues that the very 1960s style of giddy, psychedelic surrealism in Brophy’s *In Transit* limits its relevance to the queer identities of the 2010s. For all their admiration of Brophy’s ‘high camp sex and gender-flicking adventures’, their ‘sheer impossibility’ Waidner suggests, ‘arguably deprives them of subversive power when refracted through current LGBTQ+ realities, concerns and debates’ (*EFTGB* 112, 109). *Gaudy Bauble* is therefore intended as a reconfiguration of Brophy’s speculative and fantastical project, relevant to the real-life queer identities of 2017. Waidner calls this new style ‘agential realist fiction’, as it enacts a ‘shift from the deconstruction of sex and gender in *In Transit* towards the proliferation and pluralification of nonconforming, but not antirealistic, sexes in *Gaudy Bauble*’ (*EFTGB* 107, 117). In this way, the experimental legacy of camp modernism can be read as passing from Firbank in the modernist era, when the term ‘camp’ was first used for fiction, through to Firbank’s disciple Brophy in the era of Sontag’s ‘Notes on “Camp”’, and now to Brophy’s disciple Waidner in the 2010s, where camp is an articulation of more politicized identities such as the non-binary, the queer, the trans, the non-white, the migrant, and the working class.

In *Gaudy Bauble* itself, Brophy’s *In Transit* is referenced directly in association with camp. In a typically farcical scene that Waidner admits is ‘innuendo laden’, two butch female characters, Blulip and Hilary, balance together on a fibreglass cygnet in order to change a light bulb, in the process becoming a composite character, the GoldSeXUal StatuEtte. Blulip is wearing a gold crown, which Blulip’s lover, Belahg, remarks upon:

⁸⁶⁹ Martin Paul Eve, *Literature Against Criticism: University English and Contemporary Fiction in Conflict* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2016), p. 82.

⁸⁷⁰ Martin Paul Eve, p. 82.

⁸⁷¹ Heike Bauer, ‘Vital Lines Drawn From Books: Difficult Feelings in Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* and *Are You My Mother?*’, *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 18.3 (2014), 266–81 (p. 267).

⁸⁷² Martin Paul Eve, p. 82.

Heh, Princess Blulip! Belahg called. The GoldSeXUal StatuEtte froze. “Don’t,” Blulip said. “Don’t call me ‘Princess’.” Blulip let go of Hilary’s legs and confronted Belahg. “Call me the Great Camp King Pin, if you must,” Blulip said. Blulip had the great British novelist Brigid Brophy to thank for this title (*In Transit*, 1969). If Blulip was not part of the GoldSeXUal StatuEtte, she was the Great Camp King Pin. NOT Princess Blulip. See that crown?! It’s a camp king thing. It’s not a tiara. Ok, Belahg said. A camp king thing. Belahg was sorry she had referred to the Great Camp King Pin as ‘Princess Blulip’. Satisfied, the G.C.K.P. resumed her position as the GoldSeXUal StatuEtte’s crown-wearing head and navigational motor. Normality returned quickly.⁸⁷³

Waidner’s blend of experimental prose with camp humour echoes *In Transit* literally, with its quotation and attribution, as well as stylistically. In fact, the phrase ‘Great Camp King Pin’ is a paraphrasing based on two separate quotes from *In Transit*, the ‘Great Camp King’ and the ‘Great Camp Queen-Pin’.⁸⁷⁴ But the 2010s direction taken by Waidner is evident from the gestures to gender identity; Blulip is at pains to point out that her love of wearing a crown is akin to a camp drag *king* action, part of her female masculinity. Brophy’s novel, steeped as it is in 1960s camp, is uninterested in the more twenty-first-century idea of gender identity as a human rights issue. Waidner manages to use camp comedy while simultaneously acknowledging this serious question. In fact, with the crown-wearing Blulip as the ‘navigational motor’ of the balancing bodies, there’s an echo of a memorable image in Firbank’s *The Artificial Princess* (1934), in which the story’s Queen ‘would motor for hours and hours with her crown on’.⁸⁷⁵ The context may be very different, but the incongruity is of the same camp kind.

Two further moments in *Gaudy Bauble* pay tribute to Brophy while making clear the way Waidner’s style diverges. In *In Transit*, Brophy refers to an armed rebellion of butch lesbians as a ‘butsch, a takeover bid’.⁸⁷⁶ *Gaudy Bauble* opens with a trio of epigraphs, one of which is a near-quote from the novel itself: “‘Camp coup or butch putsch?’” – *Gaudy Bauble*’ (GB 5). As with the ‘Great Camp King Pin’, Waidner delights in the chaotic, breathless art of the paraphrase; the actual quotes in *Gaudy Bauble* are ‘Was this a camp coup? A butch putsch?’ (GB 10), and ‘[t]his was not quite a camp coup, nor a butch putsch’ (GB 11). Regardless, the joke is the same, but Waidner has transformed it from Brophy’s Joycean wordplay of ‘butsch’ in favour of the more rhythmic, repetitive, and Steinian (and arguably funnier) ‘butch putsch’, to which they prefix their own similar joke, ‘camp coup’. Indeed, amongst the back matter of *Gaudy Bauble* is a ‘camp coup’ of a collage against Brophy herself, where Waidner has cut out a text from one of Brophy’s own biographical blurbs, substituted their own name over

⁸⁷³ Isabel Waidner, *Gaudy Bauble* (Manchester: Dostoyevsky Wannabe, 2017), p. 46. Subsequent references given in the main text as GB.

⁸⁷⁴ Brigid Brophy, *In Transit* (1969; repr. Chicago: Dalkey Archive Press, 2002), pp. 49, 177, 184.

⁸⁷⁵ Firbank, *The Artificial Princess*, p. 244.

⁸⁷⁶ Brophy, *In Transit* (2002), p. 184.

Brophy's, and blacked out most of the rest of the text (GB 99). Brophy's 'Irish descent' is changed to Waidner's 'German descent', while Brophy's campaigning for the rights of animals and authors is redacted by Waidner into the simple: 'She campaigns'. Waidner, in effect, is performing a textual drag act as Brophy, as irreverent yet affectionate as Firbank is with his Catholic saints. As with the lip-synching methods of drag queens, Waidner's use of Brophy in these examples is a form of parodic ventriloquism, typical of camp, but which nevertheless makes the sense of affection clear.

5.3.2 Storming the Capitals: Waidnerian Camp

Moving away from the influence of Brophy, *Gaudy Bauble* performs a more contemporary form of experimental camp that, as with Joseph's *Everything Must Go*, combines echoes of the styles of Stein and Firbank with a more internet-informed sense of wordplay. Indeed, one such coinage by Waidner, 'hypercamp', might describe this distinctly queer style of writing fiction in the age of *hypertext*, with its constant saturation of new images, new tweets, new content: where only the most exaggerated and cartoonish images can cut through. When the *Gaudy Bauble* character Blulip watches *L'Hippocampe* (1934), the real-life nature film by Jean Painlevé featuring a pregnant male seahorse in labour pain, she is inspired to create a drag alter ego for herself, 'Painlevé Hypercamp' (GB 62). Waidner explains the pun in their thesis; the seahorse's 'reversal of conventional sex roles subtly affects the particular queerness' of the persona, being 'a (hyper)camp drag persona' that can engage with female butchness (*EFTGB* 123). This persona finds its purpose when Blulip's lover Belahg experiences a crisis of gender identity, due to being forced to wear a bikini in her own attempt to don a popular, commercially-friendly, feminine persona, 'AxoLottl'. The scene creates a further pun, 'hypocamp', implying a queer act of sexual consolation that involves going beneath the surface, beneath the skin:

Painlevé Hypercamp was to provide the context in which a bikini on a butch meant genderqueer camp rather than normative femininity. In short, Painlevé Hypercamp was to re-establish the abnormality that they normally inhabited day in day out, and that temporarily seemed to have disappeared in an autobiographical time-warp. Pressed to save the day *subito*, Painlevé Hypercamp, when it came to it, was just Blulip with her top off, engaging in hypocamp micromovement. Hypocamp micromovement was a strangely microfied, butoh-like, and restrained full-body expression of gay exuberance. [...] AxoLottl returned from her psychojourney *prontamente*. Painlevé Hypercamp and AxoLottl proceeded to hypocamp in a most consolatory fashion. (GB 67)

The low camp bathos of ‘with her top off’, along with italicized flourishes into Italian musical terms (*subito*, and *prontamente*) are both Firbankian touches which find new relevance and application within Waidner’s own style of camp.

The meaning of ‘hypercamp’ is further explored as a positive and empowering concept in Waidner’s thesis: ‘AxoLottl’s hypercamp form of butchness is a joyous sex’. However, unlike the transformations of *In Transit*, or indeed of *Orlando*, ‘her transformation is not quick, nor is it based on spontaneity, gender fluidity, or self-definition’ (*EFTGB* 130). Waidner’s contemporary and academic approach to camp modernism diverges from those more historical narratives. In their thesis Waidner supports Judith Butler’s theory that ‘non-binary sexes and genders are, often traumatically, linked to a body and subject’, shaped by and within what Butler calls ‘prior and subjectivating norms’ (*EFTGB* 130).⁸⁷⁷ As Butler puts it, these norms not only ‘work, animate, and constrain the gendered subject’ but are also ‘the resources from which resistance, subversion, displacement are to be forged’.⁸⁷⁸ As a result, Waidner’s ‘hypercamp’ style works the ‘trap’ of gender norms to articulate their own style of twenty-first-century, openly genderqueer camp, just as Firbank used his style to articulate his Edwardian, implicitly homosexual camp.

With *Gaudy Bauble*’s 94 pages, and indeed with *We Are Made of Diamond Stuff*’s 104 pages, Waidner’s novels physically mirror both Firbank’s novels and Stein’s *Tender Buttons*, in that they compress a sense of camp excess and density into a small number of pages. Mark Booth notes the tendency of a camp style to resist a ‘sustained effort of creation’, often offsetting this tendency with a love of lists, catalogues and taxonomies: ‘the literary manifestation of the camp mania for collecting’.⁸⁷⁹ As Rosie Šnajdr notes in the *TLS* review of *Gaudy Bauble*, ‘Waidner’s prose style is joyously camp in its excesses’, as seen in the following passage about ‘the zoomorphic taxonomy of male gay culture, with its “bears”, “otters” and “cubs”’.⁸⁸⁰ The section also includes a play on Stein’s popular phrase from *Sacred Emily* (1913), ‘Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose, is a rose’.⁸⁸¹

Blulip’s fibreglass taxa were hooved. A horse’s foot is a horse’s foot is a horse’s foot. Everything was equipped with a *Pferdefuss* (horse’s foot). A *Pferdefuss* is a jinx or a drawback. [...] The *Pferdefüsse* signified longstanding PROBLEMS with Gay Bears, Cubs, and significant Otters. [...] Had there been

⁸⁷⁷ Judith Butler, ‘Critically Queer’, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 1 (1993), 17-32 (p. 22).

⁸⁷⁸ Judith Butler, ‘Critically Queer’, p. 22.

⁸⁷⁹ Booth, pp. 122-23.

⁸⁸⁰ Rosie Šnajdr, ‘Toothsome Prose’, review of *Gaudy Bauble* and other experimental fiction, *TLS*, 5981 (17 Nov 2017), 27-8 (p. 27).

⁸⁸¹ Elizabeth Knowles, ed., *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 8th edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 746.

a lesbian equivalent to the historical, hysterical, galvanising, generative, prolific, prohibitive, empowering, limiting, liberating, inclusive, exclusive, offensive Gay Zoo? [...] We could have been fruit flies. Jellyfish. Carnivorous plants. We could have been crystals. (*GB* 21-22)

After the comic surfeit of adjectives ('historical, hysterical...') Waidner slows down the sense of excess to create a moment of reflection on this subcultural observation, in the process evoking Stein's sparse, absurd, yet careful style in *Tender Buttons* – itself an example of the camp love of categories. In this way, Waidner updates Stein's early twentieth-century love of cataloguing to address the self-cataloguing in contemporary gay culture. As with Stein's 'cow' imagery, Waidner is attracted to more obliquely codified comparisons than the simple 'bear' and 'otter' of the gay male world, with their more easily-decoded implications for body shape and hirsuteness.

Where Waidner's fiction particularly makes the link between Firbank's style and twenty-first-century life is in the closing pages of *We Are Made of Diamond Stuff* (2019). This setting is Sandown Zoo on the Isle of Wight, which as the narrator states is housed in a Victorian military fort on the seafront. On top of the building is a concrete sculpture of a leopard, which the narrator calls 'the gayest thing on the Isle of Wight', describing it with the language of drag balls: it 'strides majestically towards the sea. (Queen.) (A red white orange black power stride, set in concrete.)'⁸⁸² Reflecting on the shabby state of the zoo, and by implication the state of Brexit Britain, the narrator closes the novel with five pages of anonymous quotations, all giving negative feedback on the zoo, apparently taken from the tourism ratings website *TripAdvisor*. In the context of a novel, these quotations read like dialogue, and Firbankian dialogue at that, particularly when a series of long quotations are followed by a sequence of much shorter ones:

'Half an hour of my life I can't get back.'

'This is a con.'

'Symptomatic.'

'The staff really do try.'

'Desolate.'

'Heartbreaking.' (*WAMODS* 105)

⁸⁸² Waidner, *We Are Made of Diamond Stuff* (Manchester: Dostoyevsky Wannabe, 2019), pp. 99-100. Subsequent references given in the main text as *WAMODS*.

At this point the novel ends abruptly. This technique of ‘overheard party chatter’, with the sense that it could otherwise go on for ever, is one of Firbank’s innovations, as discussed previously. What Waidner does differently is to make the connection, if unconsciously, between this signature style of Firbank’s and the experience of online life today, where an excess of anonymous utterances proliferates.

In fact, elsewhere in *We Are Made of Diamond Stuff*, Waidner’s narrator remarks resentfully on the way that decades-old phrases from queer drag subcultures like ‘queen!’, ‘selling the look’, ‘fierceness’, and ‘realness’ have become part of mainstream online discourse: ‘Why do the English middle classes sound like they’ve come through the New York voguing and ballroom scene on social media, never mind’ (*WAMODS* 32). Firbank’s skill as, to use V. S. Pritchett’s phrase, ‘the first disinterested, clinical listener to the lunacy of conversation’ finds a mirror in Waidner’s observation of these digital forms of discourse.⁸⁸³ To access social media is analogous to reading a camp modernist text, in the sense that both experiences produce a ‘stream of externalities’. It is Waidner’s fiction that not only highlights this connection but reclaims it as part of a queer, avant-garde heritage.

Waidner’s distinctive punctuation is a further development of the legacy of Firbank. As Šnajdr notes, with phrases like ‘GoldSeXUal StatuEtte’ in *Gaudy Bauble*, Waidner is ‘waving away even the polite conventions of standard capitalization’.⁸⁸⁴ Mark Booth suggests that this is a typical feature of camp; ‘lots of capital letters’ and a ‘heavy emphasis on inappropriate words’ often indicate a ‘camp quality of voice’.⁸⁸⁵ More specifically, Firbank’s own heavy use of capitals is, as Hollinghurst points out, part of his ‘mannered typographical emphasis’ which ‘relates to his taste for the camp declarative nature of Restoration comedy and the highly stylized forms of the eighteenth century’, not least in the case of Sterne’s experimental *Tristram Shandy*.⁸⁸⁶ While Firbank builds on Sterne’s unconventional punctuation to make it more implicitly queer for the early twentieth century, Waidner’s love of excessive capitals is a distinctly twenty-first-century version. It relates to the present era’s reliance on acronyms for identities: ‘The Male Owl had lived, fought, and died for today’s QUILTBAG communities (Queer, Undecided, Intersex, Lesbian, Trans, Bi-sexual, Asexual, Gay)’ (*GB* 21). In the more politicized *We Are Made of Diamond Stuff*, Waidner uses the acronyms of political groups to let the rise of right-wing camp speak for itself:

⁸⁸³ V. S. Pritchett, ‘Books in General’, review of *Five Novels* by Ronald Firbank, *New Statesman and Nation*, 7 January 1950, 15-16 (p. 15).

⁸⁸⁴ Šnajdr, p. 27.

⁸⁸⁵ Booth, p. 67.

⁸⁸⁶ Alan Hollinghurst, ‘Saved by Art: The Shy, Steely, Original Ronald Firbank’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 17 November 2006, 12-15 (p. 15).

Justin Biebers — I recognize them as the demonstrators on Ryde beach earlier this year. They used to be UKIP or EDL (LGBTQ+ divisions), but they're Tory now. [...] They, occasionally, might tip off Immigration. They've seen Shae and I around and they WANT. US. OUT. They think that, by association, our queerness brings their gayness into disrepute. (*WAMODS* 83)

In 2019, Waidner suggests, 'gayness' can be a category of conventionality, even conservatism, to be opposed with the more radical 'queerness'. Waidner's style is still using camp humour, not least in the comparison of young right-wing gay activists to the pristine, boyish pop star Justin Bieber, but the threat to the protagonists' lives as queer migrants in England is real. With the capitals of 'WANT. US. OUT' evoking Donald Trump's signature use of capital letters in his tweets, Waidner shows how camp exaggeration is everywhere. Nevertheless it can still be, and perhaps must be, reclaimed as a strategy of defence and expression by the queer and the disenfranchised. Firbank's recurring theme (in *Sorrow in Sunlight* and *Cardinal Pirelli*) of camp characters defiantly having 'nothing to declare' to a questioning world – itself a nod to Oscar Wilde – has travelled down through camp literature, via Waugh's customs scene in *Vile Bodies*, to end up in Waidner's narrative of queer migrants seeking citizenship in a post-Brexit Britain. Camp modernism is now, as then, a strategy of belonging.

5.4 Transfixions of Blackness: Shola von Reinhold's *LOTE* (2020)

In 2019, when Isabel Waidner was asked to name their influences for *We Are Made of Diamond Stuff*, they indicated that such texts were 'referenced in the novel itself', like B. S. Johnson's *House Mother Normal*. Instead, Waidner recommended a number of new and forthcoming books 'by writers who shape the contemporary context I work within'.⁸⁸⁷ One of these was *LOTE* (2020), the debut novel by the black Scottish writer Shola von Reinhold (born 1993). Indeed, a quote of recommendation by Waidner appears in the book's flyleaf, in which Waidner states how *LOTE* 'recruits literary innovation into the project of examining social marginalization, queerness, class, Black Modernisms and archival absences'.⁸⁸⁸ *LOTE* is narrated by a young black British woman in the present day, Mathilda, who searches for evidence of a forgotten black modernist poet, the fictional Hermia Drutt. In 2021, *LOTE* won both the Republic of Consciousness Prize and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize, the latter being one of the longest-running awards for British literary fiction.

⁸⁸⁷ 'Writing Britain Now: Isabel Waidner', *Wasafiri* website, 26 February 2020 <<https://www.wasafiri.org/article/writing-britain-now-isabel-waidner/>> [accessed 19 January 2021].

⁸⁸⁸ Waidner, quotation, in Shola von Reinhold, *LOTE* (London: Jacaranda Books, 2020), front matter. Subsequent references given in the main text as *LOTE*.

Prior to publishing *LOTE*, Reinhold had articulated the novel's themes in an article for the *Independent*, in the process revealing their familiarity with Firbank.⁸⁸⁹ Despite their love of 'experimental modernist prose like Woolf's' and 'baroque, marginal, high-camp' queer English fiction 'like Denton Welch and Ronald Firbank's', Reinhold had found this taste 'sitting uncomfortably with my economic reality, with an anti-capitalist, anti-colonial worldview, and above all, with my race'.⁸⁹⁰ It was only when discovering the work of the Harlem Renaissance writer and artist Richard Bruce Nugent, who appears in *LOTE* and whose interest in Firbank was discussed in this thesis's Chapter Four, that Reinhold realized that black, queer writers and artists with a taste for both the baroque and the experimental existed during the modernist era.

Reinhold's interest in the histories of camp and modernism is further expounded in their experimental essay, 'The Anti-Monarchial Electress of the Revolutionary Communist Republic Drops Hirre Booke in Hirre Soup' (2020). Here, in a typeface that switches in places from black ink to purple, evoking Firbank's love of purple ink, Reinhold discusses the pastoral as a queer genre, comparable to camp and decadence under 'an umbrella of the hyperaesthetic'.⁸⁹¹ Although the idea of 'camp modernism' is never explicitly mentioned, they nevertheless allude to it by noting how Woolf and Firbank are often positioned in separate, incompatible genres, with one taken more seriously than the other: 'high modernism championing over the *fin de siècle*, a.k.a. masc & virile rigour defeating too-soft & too-dusty decadence'.⁸⁹² One reference that makes Reinhold especially relevant to this thesis is their engagement with Brigid Brophy's passing comment in her book *Prancing Novelist*, suggesting that Woolf's *Between the Acts* (1940) may have been influenced by Firbank's *The Artificial Princess* (1934).⁸⁹³ Reinhold adds detail to Brophy's idea, noting that Woolf remarked in a letter that she enjoyed Firbank's work, while pointing out how *Between the Acts*, Woolf's 'most pastoral and artificial' work, is 'replete with butterflies, pageant costumes, flowers, Wildean *mise-en-abyme*', a 'whip-wielding lesbian', and a 'porcelain-entranced gay', making it 'shot through with echoes of Firbank'.⁸⁹⁴ In this way, it is reasonable to read Reinhold as an informed contributor to the burgeoning discourse on camp modernism. In Reinhold's case, though, they favour, as the best exponent of

⁸⁸⁹ Shola von Reinhold's name is indexed by the British Library's Cataloguing in Publication system as 'Reinhold, Shola von'. It is bibliographically precise to style references as 'Reinhold' rather than 'von Reinhold'.

⁸⁹⁰ Shola von Reinhold, 'What Happened to Britain's Black Avant-Garde Fiction Writers?', *Independent* (UK), 14 May 2019 <<https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/black-writers-books-publishing-diversity-bame-racism-margaret-busby-jacaranda-a8909461.html>> [accessed 19 January 2021].

⁸⁹¹ Shola von Reinhold, 'The Anti-Monarchial Electress of the Revolutionary Communist Republic Drops Hirre Booke in Hirre Soup', in *Love & Solidarity, Solidarity & Love*, collection of essays published to accompany exhibitions by Jamie Crewe (Birmingham: Grand Union Gallery, 2020) <<https://grandunion.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/LOVE-SOLIDARITY-SOLIDARITY-LOVE.pdf>> [accessed 23 January 2021], 21-39 (p. 27).

⁸⁹² Reinhold, 'The Anti-Monarchial Electress', p. 31.

⁸⁹³ Brophy, *Prancing Novelist*, p. 425.

⁸⁹⁴ Reinhold, 'The Anti-Monarchial Electress', p. 30.

this idea, not Firbank but Richard Bruce Nugent, the ‘Black Queer hyperaesthetic modernist [...] who made the crossover of all these things’.⁸⁹⁵ Moreover, Reinhold suggests that Nugent’s critical neglect might be due to ‘the narrational separation’ of not only ‘aestheticism and modernism’ but also ‘Blackness and aestheticism’ and ‘Blackness and modernism’.⁸⁹⁶ Thus informed by an awareness of Nugent, Firbank, Brophy, Woolf, and modernist literary debates, but foregrounding the question of racial representation, *LOTE* takes this theory into the form of a full-length novel.

5.4.1 Camp Language in *LOTE: South Wind, Earthly Powers, Firbank*

The legacy of camp modernism in the language of *LOTE* can be detected in the reservations of some of its reviewers. In an otherwise favourable critique in the *Guardian*, Houman Barekat worries that its ‘twee-adjacent idiosyncrasies may grate on some readers’, as the novel is ‘heavy on submodifiers such as “rather” and “entirely”; “veritable” crops up repeatedly’.⁸⁹⁷ This links directly to the style of *South Wind* (1917) by Norman Douglas, the earliest novel in this study to bear elements of camp modernism. The use of the adverb ‘rather’ in Douglas’s opening lines is highlighted by Michael Schmidt:

The bishop was feeling rather sea-sick. Confoundedly sea-sick, in fact.⁸⁹⁸

As Schmidt observes, ‘the adverb *rather*, used for deliberate understatement in a certain class of English discourse, is immediately corrected by another adverb, also rooted in class usage, which exaggerates’.⁸⁹⁹ In *LOTE*, ‘rather’ is used to produce a similar tone of aristocratic camp, when the protagonist Mathilda reflects on the nature of gossip in a sentence that would not be out of place in *South Wind*. It includes the recurring joke of Mathilda referring to her friend by the initially guessed-at choice of ‘Elizabeth/Joan’, even though she has since learned that she is called Eliza:

I recognised in Theo the universal spirit of the gossip-chatterbox that also inhabited Elizabeth/Joan, but suspected it found a rather unworthy receptacle in

⁸⁹⁵ Reinhold, ‘The Anti-Monarchial Electress’, p. 33.

⁸⁹⁶ Reinhold, ‘The Anti-Monarchial Electress’, p. 33.

⁸⁹⁷ Houman Barekat, ‘*LOTE* by Shola von Reinhold, review: A Celebration of Eccentricity’, *Guardian*, 10 June 2020 < <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/jun/10/lote-by-shola-von-reinhold-review->> [accessed 22 January 2021].

⁸⁹⁸ Norman Douglas, *South Wind* (1917; repr. London: Apollo, 2017), p. 1

⁸⁹⁹ Michael Schmidt, *The Novel: A Biography* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap / Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 655.

him, clearly lacking as he did the carnivorous spark that made Elizabeth/Joan interesting no matter how dull her subject-matter. (*LOTE* 108)

Crucially, though, this type of camp language lends itself to the expression of contemporary queer identities. The character Erskine-Lily, who is young, black, androgynous, and effeminate, complains about being called male: ‘*Man*. So harsh and vulgar. So... *absolute*. It always makes me feel sick.’ (*LOTE* 396). When reviewers like Barekat worry that these sort of ‘twee-adjacent’ linguistic flourishes might repel readers, they illustrate the long-standing critical unease with camp in literature. Despite the success of TV programmes like *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, some critics still misunderstand the value of camp to queer identities, and in this case to queer black identities. It is exactly this type of misunderstanding that this thesis hopes to dispel.

The most concentrated example of camp modernism in *LOTE* is in the novel’s opening lines. Before discussing them, it is useful to consider the opening to a much earlier novel, Anthony Burgess’s *Earthly Powers* (1980), which also owes something to the history of camp literature:

It was the afternoon of my eighty-first birthday, and I was in bed with my catamite when Ali announced that the archbishop had come to see me.⁹⁰⁰

Michael Schmidt traces a ‘coarsened residue’ of Norman Douglas in Burgess’s words, but notes how it loses the ‘filigree’ tone of Douglas’s style.⁹⁰¹ Indeed, given Burgess’s admiration for Joyce, the *Earthly Powers* opening more recalls the aggressive style of camp Joyce uses in the ‘Circe’ chapter of *Ulysses*, which has little interest in the perspectives of queer identities. Burgess even adds a note of colonial power to this type of camp with his reference to Ali, a servant of colour.

The opening of *LOTE*, on the other hand, writes back directly to this racial and class aspect of camp literature, while adding to the tradition of the ‘camp crossing’. This latter theme includes Douglas’s sea-sick bishop, the ‘nothing to declare’ anecdote of Oscar Wilde at US customs, the similar customs scenes in Firbank’s *Sorrow in Sunlight* and Waugh’s *Vile Bodies*, the airport setting of Brophy’s *In Transit*, and Isabel Waidner’s theme of post-Brexit queer migrants seeking citizenship. *LOTE*’s opening is as follows:

⁹⁰⁰ Anthony Burgess, *Earthly Powers* (1980; repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), p. 7

⁹⁰¹ Schmidt, *The Novel*, p. 655.

An incensed blond twink said, “Excuse me, miss! Where do you think you’re going? This is a members-only club.”

Knowing:

- i. People rarely allow for Blackness and caprice (be it in dress or deportment) to coexist without the designation of Madness.
- ii. People like to presume Madness over style whenever they have the chance.

I gathered that my eBay lab diamonds, silver leatherette and lead velvets had been mentally catalogued as a few of the traditional accoutrements of the Maniacal Black Person who possesses no taste, only variations of a madness which comes down on her from on high. (*LOTE* 12)

In place of Burgess’s archaic ‘catamite’ (a boy used for homosexual sex), is the specialized slang word from contemporary gay club culture, ‘twink’, meaning a youthful male. The ‘queer crossing’ theme is evoked with the character of the hostile doorman, whose province turns out to be not a ‘members-only club’ but the National Gallery picture archive. The scene thus sets up the theme of archival exclusion with a camp retort which dates back to Wilde. The narrator Mathilda’s explanation then takes the form of a list (another camp criterion), with idiosyncratic capitalizations like ‘Maniacal Black Person’ (as used by writers from Firbank to Waidner), ornate, unexpected words like ‘caprice’ (the title of a Firbank novel), and details of eccentric and flamboyant clothes, updated for 2020 (‘my eBay lab diamonds, silver leatherette and lead velvets’).

The Firbankian elements of *LOTE*’s prose reach their zenith in one particular section of dialogue, where Mathilda and Erskine-Lily finally meet up and realize they were made for each other. Their utterances are absurd, fragmented, camp, and very Firbankian:

“Liverish.”

“No, loooong—personality-wise.”

“Beyond extra.”

“Quelle dommage.”

“Quelle dishwater.”

“Oh, by the way, I have this book as well.”

“Yes, I adore it: it’s abominable!”

“But did you also know about the cellotape?”

“...?”

“Picturesque.”

“...!” (*LOTE* 290)

This passage, which begins a chapter without explanation, is clearly an homage to Firbank, given its unattributed utterances, its seemingly random parade of camp chatter, its absurd adjectives (‘liverish’), its flourishes into non-English words, its juxtapositions of high to low (‘dishwater’) and vintage to modern (‘cellotape’), and its use of entirely elliptical remarks (‘...?’), which especially recur in *The Flower Beneath the Foot*.

Where *LOTE* takes Firbank’s use of ellipses further, though, is in applying them to the queer identity issues of 2020. Just as Firbank used his ellipses to say the unsayable in the 1910s and 1920s, implying legally unprintable references to homosexuality, Reinhold uses them to allude to the issue of ‘deadnaming’ for transgender and non-binary people, in which the former name of a queer subject is mentioned, often as a gesture of ridicule or hurt, implying that an affirmed identity is not authentic. In a climactic moment in *LOTE*, the character Hector cruelly reveals Erskine-Lily’s ‘actual name’, as in the male name they were given at birth, to Mathilda (*LOTE* 452). Reinhold erases this name from the novel, however, with black blocks of redaction, just as they redact the titles of some of the historical accounts of Hermia Druitt’s life, the years of Mathilda’s own history, and indeed Mathilda’s own birth name (*LOTE* 36). The Firbankian flourish of ellipses now lends itself to this very twenty-first-century issue, and further highlights the usefulness of camp modernism to the writing of transgender and non-binary perspectives. In an updating of the way that Firbank’s ellipses indicated something that needed to be said, but could not be said, due to the legal suppression of homosexual identities at the time, Reinhold indicates information that exists but which needs to be *not* said, in the context of validating a trans or non-binary identity.

5.4.2 *LOTE*: Decolonization and the Camp Recovery Novel

LOTE especially engages with long-standing tensions over the relationship between camp, queerness, and blackness. In the novel, Mathilda’s pronouncements on camp make Reinhold’s sentiments clear; camp is not exclusively white. She reflects on the lives of Hermia Druitt and Richard Bruce Nugent, and how their ‘love of Beauty, in that High Camp sense of the word, had not diluted their Blackness. It arose, monadically, from the same place’ (*LOTE* 208). In a flashback, Mathilda recalls being depressed on reading the black critic bell hooks’s essay on the documentary *Paris is Burning* (1990), which depicts New York’s black drag ballroom scene. Mathilda initially reads the essay as accusing the ‘Black queer and trans people’ in the film of worshipping ‘at the throne of whiteness [...] it was all about assimilating Beauty under Europatriarchy’ (*LOTE* 207). But Mathilda’s friend Malachi argues to the contrary:

Between the ‘assimilation’ and the fantasy there was another space which is not about championing the thing that speaks against you [...] but instead about showing your ability to embody the fantasy regardless, in spite of, *to spite*, and in doing so extrapolate the elegance, the fantasy, Romance, or whatever it was, abstract it and show it as a universal material, to be added to the toolbox. (*LOTE* 207)

The ‘whatever it was’ in this case can be read, on one level, as accepting the camp practice of drag as a valid idiom for black subjects. But in the case of *LOTE*, the same sentiment also applies to the recovery of black figures in the field of Western modernism. Reviewing the novel in *The White Review*, Izabella Scott calls this theme ‘a thrilling land-grab’ and ‘a kind of decolonization of Modernism via fiction’.⁹⁰²

This theme manifests itself in *LOTE*’s contribution to the camp love of lists, catalogues, and collections. Mathilda creates a set of annotated illustrated cards, each one depicting one of her beloved ‘Transfixions’, figures from history who are, as Skye Arundhati Thomas puts it, ‘high camp, daringly queer and gender fluid’.⁹⁰³ These include real-life figures like Stephen Tennant (the effeminate, white, 1920s aristocrat and socialite), Richard Bruce Nugent (the Harlem Renaissance writer and artist), Josephine Baker (the dancer and singer), Nancy Cunard (publisher of black writers and a friend to Firbank), and the Marchesa Luisa Casati (the eccentric socialite) (*LOTE* 31). As Thomas observes, Mathilda’s self-alignment with these figures goes further than the search for inspiration and role models or ‘the bliss of representation’: history here is ‘feeling, not just narrative’.⁹⁰⁴ In particular, when contemplating such figures Mathilda experiences ‘the feeling of interior lightness, of elevation – like an Assumption in miniature’ (*LOTE* 229). The Transfixion cards have, as Mathilda puts it, a ‘devotional function, like prayer cards. Miniature icons’ (*LOTE* 31). In this way, the novel not only touches on the camp love of collections, but the camp affinity for effusive religious ceremony and hagiography. Indeed, the annotations for one figure, the fictional black composer Ardizzoni, includes the same kind of comic hagiography of saints typically found in Firbank and Douglas:

Wrote an unsuccessful opera based on the life of Saint Christina the Astonishing, the 12th-century saint who awoke during her funeral and flew up

⁹⁰² Izabella Scott, ‘Shola von Reinhold’s *LOTE*’, *White Review* website, September 2020 <<https://www.thewhitereview.org/reviews/shola-von-reinholds-lote/>> [accessed 22 January 2021].

⁹⁰³ Skye Arundhati Thomas, ‘Glamour and Resistance in Shola von Reinhold’s *LOTE*’, *Freize* online, 3 July 2020 <<https://www.frieze.com/article/glamour-and-resistance-shola-von-reinholds-lote>> [accessed 23 January 2021].

⁹⁰⁴ Skye Arundhati Thomas.

into the rafters because the stench of sin became too unbearable. Spent much of her saintly life living in trees and throwing herself into fires, which had no effect on her. (*LOTE* 46)

One minor genre that *LOTE* suggests is the queer recovery novel. As Ana Quiring argues, *LOTE* shares the genre of the more general recovery novel with *Possession* (1990) by A. S. Byatt, where the protagonist visits libraries and archives and uncovers certain writers or figures previously deemed unimportant to history.⁹⁰⁵ In the case of *LOTE*, Mathilda's pursuit of Hermia Druitt via photographs in archives and references in letters resembles Hollinghurst's queer recovery theme in *The Swimming-Pool Library*, where gay male characters pursue first editions and archive footage of Firbank. In *LOTE*, Mathilda searches for Druitt's lost book *The Fainting Youth*, a work of not just black modernism, but transgender and non-binary modernism; it is described as 'a long, formally innovative work concerned with androgyny' which features 'like its near-contemporary, *Orlando*, a transfiguration, though this is from woman to man to both to neither' (*LOTE* 91).

There is a strong echo in *LOTE* of the climax of *The Swimming-Pool Library* in this regard. As discussed previously, the Hollinghurst novel features a fictional film of Firbank (albeit based on a real memoir), in which Firbank is chased by Italian children due to being mistaken for a film star.⁹⁰⁶ This is strongly evoked in *LOTE*, which cites an equally fictional letter depicting Hermia Druitt travelling through a Swiss town with Nancy Cunard in 1928: 'Then it began. Children, running towards her, shouting, "Josephine! Josephine!" which I could only take to mean they had somehow confused H. with Josephine Baker. Soon half the town had gathered, asking for autographs' (*LOTE* 50). Hermia is also found in a photograph of Bloomsbury Group members at Garsington, the rural English retreat satirized as *Crome Yellow* in Aldous Huxley's camp modernist novel of that name, as discussed in Chapter Four (*LOTE* 24). Just as Hollinghurst reclaims Firbank as a gay male icon, Mathilda reclaims Hermia – and real-life figures like Richard Bruce Nugent – as icons of non-binary, non-male blackness located at the intersections of camp and queerness with the modernist age.

The love of camp for the aesthetics of aristocratic eccentricity further relates to this sense of identity. In *LOTE*, Hermia Druitt is often referred to in historical accounts by her nickname of 'the Black Princess' (*LOTE* 87), while noting how the real-life Josephine Baker 'opted to live in a turreted, gargoyle château' rather than a modern building (*LOTE* 333). The novel points out, though, that there is sometimes a sense of racial exclusion from the category of the eccentric, and uses the pop singer Grace Jones as an example. The text of *LOTE* frequently

⁹⁰⁵ Ana Quiring, 'LOTE – Shola von Reinhold', *Full Stop* website, 8 January 2021 <<https://www.full-stop.net/2021/01/08/reviews/ana-quiring/lote-shola-von-reinhold/>> [accessed 29 January 2021].

⁹⁰⁶ See section 5.1.1.

quotes from a fictional study, *Black Modernisms*. Among these passages is a discussion of the singer:

whose performativity and engagement with style situates her within both High Camp and avant-garde visions of eccentricity, but being Black, Jones has been presented equally as ‘mad’, as behaving and dressing as she does, as creating works as she does, due to being a Mad Black Woman. The truly transgressive often dislodges the appellation of eccentricity. (*LOTE* 278)

This tendency to deny the socially acceptable term ‘eccentric’ for black figures, Reinhold suggests, relates to their similarly rare inclusion in the fields of (high) camp and modernism (or the ‘avant-garde’).

The ‘recovery novel’ theme in *LOTE*, however, goes further, reclaiming blackness as a forgotten influence on the whole nature of ornateness and decoration, and, by implication, camp itself. Where Hollinghurst cited Hogarth’s ‘line of beauty’ curve in the title of his 2004 novel, comparing it with the curve of a naked male back, Reinhold’s character Erskine-Lily includes ‘Hogarth’s serpentine line’ as part of their own theory, in which Western decorative features all derive from ancient black cultures (*LOTE* 390). According to Erskine-Lily, blackness is the original model for *all* ornamentation:

Locked into each coil, each curl of ornament, just like the coil and curl of your hair, and my hair, darling— Afro hair, as we call it—is the secret salvation of us all. (*LOTE* 310)

The establishers of Western aesthetics, from the Romans to philosophers like Kant and Hegel, they claim, ‘humiliated our ancestors for adorning themselves in flowers and beads and gold and tattoos and braids and jewels; they’re still at it’ (*LOTE* 311). Erskine-Lily’s own defiant adornments in the twenty-first century strongly evoke the camp language of Firbank. One outfit comprises ‘burgundy doublet and plum velvet robes, with a matching train [...] made, in fact, from a well-preserved old theatrical curtain’ (*LOTE* 293). In another scene they are dressed in ‘five metres of lapis lazuli chiffon and caramel crepe de chine.’ (*LOTE* 430), evoking Firbank’s black character Edna Mouth in his novel *Sorrow in Sunlight* (1924), who similarly favours ‘a toilette of white *crepe de chine*’.⁹⁰⁷ In *LOTE*, however, Reinhold suggests that Firbank’s prose style ultimately owes its campness to blackness, something which may help to explain why

⁹⁰⁷ Firbank, *Sorrow in Sunlight* (1924), in Ronald Firbank, *Three Novels*, ed. by Alan Hollinghurst (London: Penguin, 2000), pp. 117-182 (p. 176).

Sorrow in Sunlight received praise from Harlem Renaissance writers like W. E. B. Du Bois and Langston Hughes at the time.⁹⁰⁸ In his camp, fantastical capturing of real-life Caribbean patois of the 1920s, Firbank may have unconsciously touched on this affinity.

It is the anger behind the detail of the ‘Maniacal Black Person’, though, that signifies the key difference between Firbank and *LOTE*. As with Waidner’s fictions, the legacy of camp modernism is channelled into a desire for political change in the twenty-first century. The novel’s dedication makes this quite direct and explicit: ‘Solidarity, love and adoration for all those resisting universal tedium; to all those struggling with fascism, racism and capitalism in any of their forms’ (*LOTE*, front matter). The only aspect of this statement that bears the mark of Firbank is the idea of ‘universal tedium’, a humorous nod to the common camp theme of ennui. As this chapter has demonstrated, Firbank’s influence can manifest as an apolitical sign of queer identity across history, as seen in Hollinghurst, or as a means of directly interrogating political issues related to contemporary queer identities, whether these are issues of transgender identity (as with Lauren John Joseph), of migration and class (as with Waidner) or of blackness (as with Reinhold). For all its love of ornament and surface, the continuing appeal of camp modernism proves that it is far from superficial.

⁹⁰⁸ See section 1.7.

Conclusion: The Future of Firbank

Why should anyone care about Ronald Firbank in the twenty-first century? The answer, as this thesis has shown, is because his work can be used as the defining example of camp modernism, a hidden strategy in English literature that has existed from the 1910s to the present day. Like the works of canonical modernism, such as James Joyce's *Ulysses*, camp modernist texts contain elements of experimental ambition, formal innovation, avant-garde difficulty, and fragmentation. Unlike canonical modernism, they fuse these elements with aspects of camp, a sensibility that has frequently been thought incompatible with modernism. As Chapter One has demonstrated, the twin historical trajectories of the terms 'camp' and 'modernist' crossed paths in the 1920s in articles written about Firbank. In the mid- to late nineteenth century, 'camp' was part of homosexual street slang. It denoted a humorous performance of exaggerated gestures, particularly gestures that satirized gender. The purpose was partly for amusement, but also to signify a homosexual identity. The first definitions of 'camp' in print appear in courtroom records related to sexual offence cases, the earliest being a letter read at the Boulton and Park trial, written in 1868. By 1920, as a vaudeville review in *Variety* magazine proves, 'camping' had spread to the vocabulary of the American entertainment industry.

Firbank's intensified use of camp in his novels, beginning in 1915 with his debut *Vainglory*, led to the term moving into serious literary criticism in 1922, when Carl Van Vechten wrote about him for the modernist magazine *The Double Dealer*. This discovery reveals two significant findings: first, that the term 'camp' was in use in criticism long before Sontag, and secondly, that it was the context of 1920s modernism which enabled the word to be used in this way. As unpublished letters from Firbank to Carl Van Vechten show, Firbank was himself unfamiliar with the term until he read Van Vechten's article. As a result of this finding, Firbank's later novels, such as *Concerning the Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli*, can now be read as among the earliest works of camp art produced with knowledge of the *label* of 'camp', forty years before Sontag's essay. The simile for camp that Firbank was aware of, 'chichi', is a reminder that 'chichi' was a euphemism for homosexuality during the first half of the twentieth century. This can be seen in the use of 'chichi' in the 1920s stories of Robert McAlmon, and in C. K. Scott Moncrieff's translation of 'chichi' in Proust as 'camping'. The use of 'modernist' during the 1920s to describe the innovative art of the time was also rare, yet Firbank's style was labelled as such in a 1927 newspaper article by Ifan Kyrle Fletcher.

In Chapter Two, Firbank's importance as the richest example of camp modernism was demonstrated by examining his work and reputation. The appearance of the term 'Firbankian' in

reviews from as early as 1931 reveals that Firbank's style was recognized in the 1930s as unique, and needing its own adjective, at a time when 'camp' was still rare as a critical term. The older label of 'Firbankian' can now be usefully reconsidered as a synonym for 'camp modernist'. By drawing on the sexual signification of Oscar Wilde's faux-aristocratic and decadent flourishes, Firbank articulated yet codified his own homosexual identity, thus evading the obscenity laws of his time. But he went further, channelling his take on Wildean camp through his own version of the modernist spirit of fragmentation. While Joyce's modernism drew upon fragmentation in an expansive, voluminous approach, Firbank favoured fragments in extreme concision, often peppering his texts with ellipses. In doing so, he not only distanced his style from the heteronormative implications of literary naturalism but also gestured to the way homosexual identities necessitated a sense of a refusal of the normative. Firbank's novels are instead steeped in hermetic ambiances: pastorals of a distinctly queer utopia.

Chapter Three then applied Firbank's work to canonical modernists, in order to show how an informed knowledge of camp can enrich modernist studies. If literary modernism's signature device is the stream of consciousness, camp modernism's counterpart is its fondness for a *stream of externalities*, as illustrated in Firbank's sense of unending gossip and his valorization of surfaces. To apply a camp reading to a modernist text, as Nick Salvato argues, can produce new insights through camp's '(re)mediating' effect.⁹⁰⁹ The sexual innuendo of Gertrude Stein's title for *Tender Buttons*, for example, finds a camp resonance in Bloom's trouser button popping off in the 'Circe' chapter of *Ulysses*. Joyce's style of camp, being a more heterosexual, masculine version, is an appropriate strategy for articulating the themes in 'Circe' of 'camp mass', Wilde's trial, pantomime, and gender change. The latter takes centre stage in Woolf's subtly camp *Orlando*. In the late 1920s, Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, a lesbian novel written in a sober, realist style, was prosecuted for obscenity, while *Orlando* evaded such laws by using camp modernism to codify similar themes. The knowledge that Woolf was fond of Wilde and Firbank, and that *Orlando* was described as 'camp' from as early as the 1960s is crucial to studies of the novel's reception. Similarly, T. S. Eliot's fears that Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* might not be taken as seriously as *Ulysses*, because of its themes of homosexual camp, supports the argument to take Firbank seriously. 'Chichi' was used as a synonym for 'camp' in this way in Dylan Thomas's 1937 review of *Nightwood*, while in 1939 the New York magazine *Spur* used both 'chichi' and 'camp' to pejoratively group Firbank's work with Gertrude Stein's *Four Saints in Three Acts*.

Building on these insights, Chapter Four showed how Firbank's work influenced the development of camp modernism in wider twentieth-century English literature. The selection for this comparison included the inevitable (Evelyn Waugh), and the reasonable (Norman

⁹⁰⁹ Nick Salvato, *Uncloseting Drama: American Modernism and Queer Performance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 182.

Douglas, Aldous Huxley, Ivy Compton-Burnett), but also the less common (Richard Bruce Nugent, Charles Henri Ford and Parker Tyler, Brigid Brophy, and Angela Carter). Camp modernism was revealed as a strategy available to all, from privileged white English male novelists like Waugh, who used it to ‘solve’ the aesthetic problem of satirizing modern experience, to Nugent, one of the earliest known ‘out’ black gay American writers, who like Douglas, and Ford and Tyler, saw the style as a means of articulating a homosexual identity. The heterosexual Carter, meanwhile, used it as part of a postmodern and feminist strategy for interrogating the limitations of the traditional realist novel, in tandem with questioning the social trappings of gender and sexuality. Carter’s own work argues for the recognition of Firbank, in the case of her underrated radio play *A Self-Made Man* (1984).

The argument that camp modernism has continued into the twenty-first century, particularly as a strategy for the expression of queer identity, was examined in Chapter Five. Alan Hollinghurst’s lifelong fascination with Firbank led to the use of the author as a gay icon in *The Swimming-Pool Library* (1988) as well as the more subtle uses of Firbankian style in novels like *The Sparsholt Affair* (2017). In the last decade, the novels of the non-binary writers Lauren John Joseph, Isabel Waidner, and Shola von Reinhold all adopt aspects of camp modernism to articulate contemporary queer identities. In the case of Reinhold’s *LOTE* (2020), the link between black modernism, queer modernism, and camp is recovered and reclaimed, most crucially, through the lens of a young black British writer who is familiar with Firbank, Brophy and Nugent.

Camp is now a commercialized style of empowerment and ambition, from the presentation style of heterosexual politicians such as Donald Trump to the mainstream popularity of drag, as seen in the global franchise of the US TV programme *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. Donna M. Goldstein and Kira Hall, for instance, use Sontag’s essay to define Trump’s political camp as a style that ‘incarnates a victory of “aesthetics” over “morality”’, representing ‘a variant of sophistication, but hardly identical with it’.⁹¹⁰ Although social media is ostensibly a form of connection, the sheer glut of postings online evokes what Edward Potoker in 1969 presciently observed in Firbank’s characters: a sense of people endlessly ‘twittering with the same witty disconnectedness’.⁹¹¹ In this sense, everyday experience now involves a Firbankian ‘stream of externalities’. Similarly, a contemporary realist novel like Lorrie Moore’s *A Gate At The Stairs*, which uses wit and irony, particularly through long passages of unattributed dinner

⁹¹⁰ Donna M. Goldstein and Kira Hall, ‘Postelection Surrealism and Nostalgic Racism in the Hands of Donald Trump’, *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 7.1 (2017), 397-406 (p. 401). Sontag, ‘Notes on “Camp”’, pp. 287, 275.

⁹¹¹ Edward Martin Potoker, *Ronald Firbank*, Columbia Essays on Modern Writers, 43 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), p. 34.

party dialogue, where characters speak *at* each other rather than *to* each other, can be read as continuing Firbank's legacy.⁹¹²

Today, the field of Firbank studies is undergoing a tentative resurgence. Whit Stillman's film *Damsels in Distress* (2011), set in the present day at an American university, briefly features a seminar on Firbank. The fictional lecturer in the film is defensive, perpetuating the narrative that Firbank is only important in terms of his 'liberating influence' on later writers like Waugh.⁹¹³ But in real life, Firbank is being taken seriously again in his own right. One example is the inclusion in the essay collection *Decadence in the Age of Modernism* (2019) of Ellis Hanson's 'The Queer Drift of Firbank', alongside discussions of Gertrude Stein and Richard Bruce Nugent. Hanson reveals that he teaches Firbank alongside Stein, Joyce, Barnes, and Beckett, 'to make him more recognizable, more audible, as a queer renegade and an innovative and challenging experiment in style'.⁹¹⁴ The publication in 2020 in *Modernism/modernity* of Kate Hext's essay on the letters of Firbank and Van Vechten, which reveals Firbank's own initial encounter with the word 'camp' in 1922, is an essential text for those interested in camp and queer modernism.⁹¹⁵ The same year saw Kristin Mahoney's 'Camp Modernism and Decadence', which calls Firbank 'camp modernism's most central figure' and includes Ivy Compton-Burnett as a further example of the term.⁹¹⁶ An essay by Michael Hunter on Firbank's 'aesthetics of surface', was also published in 2020 as part of a book on David Bowie's use of the 'mask'.⁹¹⁷ The appearance of these four essays within the last two years indicates a shift in the field's favour.

Ultimately, camp modernism matters if the humanities are to concern themselves with the full spectrum of responses to modernity. There are currently some encouraging signs. In a March 2021 article in the *Times Literary Supplement* by Nonia Williams, Firbank's disciple Brigid Brophy was praised for her 'camp aesthetic', with its 'prescient reflections on queer sexuality and gender fluidity'.⁹¹⁸ Williams reproduces, however, the tendency to cite Sontag's 'Notes on "Camp"' in these discussions, without indicating that essay's many shortcomings. When Williams quotes Sontag's declaration that camp 'involves a new, more complex relation to the "serious"', there is a danger of perpetuating the misconception that camp is a product of

⁹¹² Lorrie Moore, *A Gate at the Stairs* (London: Faber, 2010), pp. 154-8, 186-90, 194-201, 235-8.

⁹¹³ *Damsels in Distress*, dir. by Whit Stillman (Sony Pictures Classics, 2011), on DVD (London: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2012).

⁹¹⁴ Ellis Hanson, 'The Queer Drift of Firbank', in *Decadence in the Age of Modernism*, ed. by Kate Hext and Alex Murray (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), pp. 118-134 (p. 120).

⁹¹⁵ Kate Hext, 'Rethinking the Origins of Camp: The Queer Correspondence of Carl Van Vechten and Ronald Firbank', *Modernism/modernity*, 27.1 (January 2020), 165-183.

⁹¹⁶ Kristin Mahoney, 'Camp Modernism and Decadence', in *Decadence: A Literary History*, ed. by Alex Murray (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 341-60 (pp. 345, 350).

⁹¹⁷ Michael Hunter, 'The Skin and the Double: Firbank's Aesthetics of Surface', in *Masks: Bowie and Artists of Artifice*, ed. by James Curcio (Bristol: Intellect, 2020), pp. 205-21.

⁹¹⁸ Nonia Williams, 'Sensuous, Shameless', *Times Literary Supplement*, 6153 (5 March 2021), p. 8.

the 1960s, when Sontag wrote her essay.⁹¹⁹ As this thesis has demonstrated, camp was a vital means of articulating queer identities during the age of modernism in the 1910s and 1920s, and thanks to Van Vechten's essay on Firbank, it was labelled as such at the time. The sheer persistence of camp, despite its recurring dismissal as light or frivolous, testifies to its necessity for those who feel disenfranchised by systems of gender, sexuality, and race. To quote Judith Butler on gender, camp's enduring function has been as a strategy for 'increasing the possibilities for a liveable life for those who live, or try to live, on the sexual margins.'⁹²⁰ To overlook the use of camp as a queer modernist impulse, as seen in Firbank, is to neglect the full history of queer expression in literature.

If the recent Covid-19 pandemic has drawn new attention to the influenza pandemic of 1918-1920, it is heartening to remember that Firbank responded to the latter with the pastoral *Valmouth* (1919), in which the intensity of the prose style makes it, as Will in *The Swimming-Pool Library* remarks, 'as tough as nails' (*SPL* 77). Like the heavy make-up of drag, an exaggerated camp style like Firbank's, if intensified to the levels of modernist difficulty, can produce a kind of shielding effect: a sense of queer resilience. Camp endures because it is what Eve Sedgwick calls a 'reparative impulse', especially for the 'queer-identified' reader, due to its 'glue of surplus beauty'.⁹²¹ For Firbank, camp modernism was a means of articulating his homosexual identity at a time when homosexuality was criminalized. Today, it can be a means of consolidating an individual human identity of any kind. When one finds the normative pressures of society and culture impossible, camp can be a defensive strategy, even a sustaining one.

⁹¹⁹ Nonia Williams, p. 8. Sontag, 'Notes on "Camp"', p. 288.

⁹²⁰ Judith Butler, 'Preface (1999)', in Butler, *Gender Trouble*, pp. vii-xxviii (p. xxviii).

⁹²¹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 149-50.

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