

Major Devices

in Ronald Firbank's Novels

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Ronald Firbank is, by all standards, a remarkable novelist who reshaped the Decadent Tradition into thoroughly original and highly artistic novels. However, he has fallen into obscurity due to a variety of factors, one of which is the unavailability of most of his books on a large scale until recently when his novels began to be republished in Britain and America⁽¹⁾. Another factor is the widespread wrong idea that he belongs only to the 1890s though his books were largely written in the pre-World War I and the 1920s. But the major factor, I think, is that his period coincided with the period of serious renowned novelists like James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and D.H.Lawrence who, because of the particular cultural scene of the time, overshadowed novelists like Firbank and William Gerhardie, another great novelist and equally obscure. Meanwhile, no critic can afford to disregard

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the fact that Firbank had a considerable effect on novelists like Evelyn Waugh, Ivy Compton-Burnett and Norman Douglas. Moreover, there are scenes in Firbank's novels which, as Anthony Powell remarks, are , a foreshadowing of *Finnegans Wake*....in the association of ideas⁽²⁾, But while Joyce penetrates deep into the heart of a very real Dublin, Firbank penetrates into the heartless, superfined world of imaginary courts and salons. Firbank's work does not approach the complexity and density of Joyce's , yet in reading Firbank one should be on the alert in order not to miss a fine pun or a latent wit for Firbank laboured hard to achieve the casual effect of flashing brilliance that marks his work. It is the intention of this paper to point out the major devices that make of Firbank's work a remarkable achievement.

Firbank has been classified as a satirist and this is in the most part true. But if satire is generally composed of two essential elements, one is wit or humour founded on fantasy or a sense of the grotesque or absurd, the other is an object of attack⁽³⁾, We find in Firbank, as in T.L. Peacock, more humour than attack unlike writers like Orwell or Huxley where attack outweighs humour.

Undoubtedly, he attacks the follies and ills of a degenerating society and of human nature in general, but nowhere in his novels one finds the contempt characteristic of an embittered satirist. He

does not exhibit a strong disapproval of those elements in society which he has chosen to satirize. He remains objective, withdrawn and detached but in full control over his material. Thus, his norms remain negative; no positive standards are given as alternatives to the mad chaotic world his novels portray, and this, one can safely assume, could be another reason for not taking him seriously enough by critics. But when no positive norms appear, the positive should be reached through the negative. In other words, the positive becomes the unnamed opposite of the vice and folly portrayed. In a symposium concerned with the question of norms in satire, a participant rightly says, 'It is quite enough for many kinds of satire to portray the human mess, often in a highly hyperbolic fashion, without any reference to an acceptable ideal. Like most good art, it leaves to its audience the function of interpretation'⁽⁴⁾.

A salient characteristic of Firbank's work is wit and his wit is always functional, in the sense that it is not an added feature but an integral constituent as it contributes to the total atmosphere of the novel or the delineation of a character. The introduction of *The Princess Zoubaroff* offers an apt example:

Nadine: My husband.

Blanche (genially): I think we've slept together once?

Adrian: I don't remember.

Blanche: At the opera. During Bérénice.⁽⁵⁾

There is wit here in the pun but the real wit is in Adrian's "I don't remember". Firbank's humour also defies quotation and any attempt at extracting a joke from a context. An example illustrating this can be found in *The Prancing Nigger:*

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

'Have you nothing, young man, to declare?'

'.....Butterflies'

'Exempt of duty. Pass'.

Floor of silver, floor of pear l...

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

Oh, Cuna-Cuna, little city of Lies and Peril, how many careless young nigger boys, have gone thus to seal their doom!⁽⁶⁾

His aphorisms are short, concise sentences in much the same way of the aphoristic writings of Oscar Wilde, but Wilde wrote about a world that was reasonably normal. Men and women in his works say witty things because wit is a kind

of status symbol. Meanwhile, wit in his work is frequently a display of the writer's skill. Commenting on the two writers, Evelyn Waugh rightly says that although Firbank's raw material is identical with Wilde's, 'his wit (Wilde's) is (ornamental, Firbank's is structural⁽⁷⁾' which suggests the conscious art of Firbank.

Firbank's descriptive similes and allusions are more in number than those which may be found in a similar number of pages from any novelist. This one, for example, from *Vainglory* describes Saint Dorothy's Cathedral, the setting of several incidents in the novel, '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*.'⁽⁸⁾ The comparison of the towers at twilight to the carnival helmets of eunuchs is a typical example of Firbank's use of the absurd simile. His citing of the fictitious Miss Massingham as the ultimate authority on ecclesiastical architecture is also a typical device. Finally, there is the reference to the real Fragonard (J.H. Fragonard 1732-1806 ,a master of striking effects). The re-sulting paragraph is

a combination of unlikely allusions juxtaposed against one another, and all in a most serious tone. Thus, Firbank's allusions are likely to be to imaginary artists or authorities as to actual ones. Occasionally, he alludes to a real artist, such as Raphael, but attributes to him an imaginary picture such as 'The Madonna with a Hoe'. This mixing of the factual and the fictitious can also be witnessed in the settings of his novels, which range from England to the West Indies. While these places are identifiable, they are certainly not accurately drawn, nor are they intended to be real. His settings are more like stage-sets -or like places seen in a dream. There is a surrealistic quality about them. In *The New Rythum* we find a New York city which is described in this way: "It was a pink and elusive evening towards the break of Easter, Zephyr and Flora caressed New York, yearned above her glimmering parks and gardens, brooded above her budding avenues (awakening young chestnut-leaf and brooding lilac), rippled that way, this way, all caprice...."⁽⁹⁾. This New York - full of gardens and flowers, and caressed by Zephyr and Flora - is obviously the creation of one who has seen the city through his imagination. Firbank employed a new technique that helped him bring coherence to his elusive humour and fragmentary plots where the cause-to-effect pattern is absent. As the reader embarks upon a novel, he gradually becomes aware that a casual reference on one page links up with some particular phrase on another. The novel

becomes stitched from within. The case of the Ritz Hotel in *The Flower Beneath the Foot* is typical of this Firbank method. The king at a dinner party employs the expression:

‘I could not be more astonished if you told me there where fleas at the Ritz’, a part of which assertion lady Something, who was listening, imperfectly chanced to hear.

‘Who could credit it....! It’s almost *too* appalling... Fleas have been found at the Ritz.’

Nothing more is said for forty pages, and then:

‘Had I known, Lady Something, I was going to be ill, I would have gone to the Ritz! the Hon. Eddy gasped.

‘And you’d have been bitten all over, ‘Lady Something replied. Twenty pages pass and then an, eloquent and moderately victorious young barrister, is mentioned as ‘engaged in the approaching suit with the Ritz’. A few pages farther on it is casually observed that the Ritz is empty save for one guest.

In the same way in *Cardinal Perelli* the scandal of the Cardinal’s baptism of the Duchesse’s pet dog is gradually built up. The actual baptism described; then it is approached from another angle, touched upon then left alone. There is a long scene in the Vatican apparently without relation to the rest of the story; at the end the Cardinal’s name is mentioned; another touch and then

retreat. There is a social climber who wants her dog to be baptized. Suddenly the Cardinal is in disgrace.

Firbank's achievement in dialogue is equally remarkable. Just as the novels of Huxley are labelled 'novels of ideas', Firbank's can safely be called 'novels of conversation'. His novel Inclinations is almost entirely conversation and is the most difficult to read. It is often troublesome to decide who is speaking, and one is sometimes reduced to counting back to identify the speaker. In the work of another, this might not be a problem; but Firbank's characters rarely have speech characteristics which identify them. Firbank plunges the reader in. medias res without a guide to what has gone before. He then employs snatches of conversation that give the reader the impression that he is overlooking a scene and overhearing a conversation. These overheard, thoroughly intimate conversations are generally so well handled that usually no explanation is needed; he relies on suggestiveness, on innuendo. In fact, he suggests a great deal by omitting words and employing ellipses, parentheses, exclamation marks and so on, as in this example where two women are alone in a boat:

*Oh , Olga !:

*Oh , Vi:'

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

“.....!!?”

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

"....." (10)

Also in his dialogue there is no exchange of opinion (and this is indicative of the characters' inability to understand and communicate). From the fashionable chatter of his period he has selected the particles of his design. The following serves as an apt example:

"I would give all my soul to him, Rara....my chances of heaven!"

"Your chances, Olga ——", Mademoiselle de Nazianzi murmured, avoiding some bird droppings with her skirt.

"How I envy the men, Rara, in his platoonj"

"Take away his uniform, Olga, and what does he become ?"

"Ah what ——"(11)

Firbank uses also a rather original device which is footnotes, and he uses them to serve his satirical purposes. For example, we have in *The Flower Beneath the Foot* the character of Peter Passer, a former choirboy at the 'Blue Jesus' on an island called St. Helena. He is in disgrace, having fled' when the authorities of Pisuerga were making minute enquiries for sundry missing articles, from the

trésor of the Cathedral'. Firbank lists the missing articles in a footnote:

5 chasubles

A relic-casket in lapis and diamonds,' containing the tongue of St. Thelma.

4 $\frac{3}{4}$ yards of black lace, said to have belonged to the Madonna

The use of footnotes in this way gives the impression of authenticity and objective reporting but the impression is wholly invalidated by the absurdity of the listed items. Each item, from the relic of St. Thelma to the black lace owned by the Madonna, indicates the way in which Firbank satirizes the church. His satire is in fact double-edged; aimed at the church and at Peter Passer who has stolen the items for their monetary value. A similar absurdity, equally burlesque, can be found in *Cardinal Pirelli* where a character contemplates, 'They were ringing 'Paula', a bell which, tradition said, had fused into its metal one of the thirty pieces of silver received by the Iscariot for the betrayal of Christ'⁽¹²⁾.

Firbank's characters are usually embodiments of particular forms of folly, passivity or perversity. They have no introspective

life. They are unable to realize what is wrong with the distorted world around them. Moreover, these characters are mainly types, and the word 'type' implies a simplification of motives, personal drama, emotions, and reactions as well as a reduction to the minimum of the possibilities of a character to grow. A Firbank's heroine is generally beautiful, extremely sensitive, very rich so that she does not need to think about money. A Firbank's hero is generally beautiful, extremely sensitive and someone takes care of him. When women are attracted to men, the attraction is likely to be unusual. Laura de Nazianzi, the 'saintly' heroine of *The Flower Beneath The Foot*, is in love with the prince of Pisuergra but it is only dalliance on the part of the prince, and the result of the affair is that Laura seeks solace in a most unusual nunnery where lesbianism is rampant. Thus, Firbank cuts through emotional, social and religious issues of a futile society to expose it with irreverent satirical irony. No wonder, we do not find in Firbank's work a single successful marriage because in such a grotesque mad world, no normal healthy relationship is hoped for. His subject matter is the vices, vanity and follies of man in a disintegrating society. But we do not discern in Firbank an

underlying sense of tragedy. The essentially tragic nature of human experience is reduced to comedy through absurdity; death is foolish and provides a time for the elaborate costuming of the living who will attend the funeral. Characters suffer endless frustrations, yet they persist in pursuing their ends. Frustration is only a momentary problem which could lead to sainthood. Human problems lose dignity and become grotesque silly incidents in lives full of triviality. Thus, the lack of any tragic element in the novels serves several purposes; to dehumanize Firbank's world, to emphasize the irony in all of the stories, to keep the reader from identifying with the characters, and to make a world where vice and hypocrisy are of no importance, for, where vice and vanity are the way of life, evil ceases to be evil. Ronald Firbank successfully accomplished what he had set out to do, and such a novelist is not likely to remain obscure. One cannot but agree with Edmund Wilson when he says that Firbank is 'one of the finest English writers of his period and one of those most likely to become a classic'.⁽¹³⁾

Notes

- (1) During his lifetime Firbank paid for almost all of his novels to have them published as he could rarely find a publisher willing to pay for the production of them.
- (2) Anthony Powell, Preface to *The Complete Ronald Firbank*, (New Directions, Norfolk, Conn., 1961).

++ all quotations from Firbank's work are taken from the New Directions editions.
- (3) Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 19 (3) p. 224.
- (4) Robert C. Elliott, 'Norms, moral or other, in satire: A Symposium 'Satire Newsletter, Vol. II, No 1, 'Fall 1964.
- (5) *The Princess Zoubaroff*, p. 6.
- (6) *The Prancing Nigger*, p. 609.:
- (7) Evelyn waugh, 'Ronald Firbank1, *Life and Letters*, March 1929. Republished in *Evelyn Waugh, A Little Order, A Selection of His Journalism*, edited by Donat Gallagher (Eyre Methuen, London, 1977) p.78.

- (8) *Vainglory*, p. 92.
- (9) *The New Rythum*, p. 71.
- (10) *The Flower Beneath The Foot*, p. 550.
- (11) *Ibid*, p. 565.
- (12) *Concerning The Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli*, p.666.
- (13) Edmund Wilson, 'Revival of Ronald Firbank', *New Yorker* XXV, (December 1949). Republished in *Classics and Commercials* (W.H. Allen, London 1951).

ملخص

بعض الأساليب الأساسية

في روايات الكاتب "رونالد فايربانك"

قتيبة شهاب أحمد (*)

يُعد الكاتب (رونالد فايربانك) أحد أعلام كتاب الرواية البارزين والذي إليه

إن الهدف الأساس من هذا البحث هو إبراز أهم الأساليب التي جعلت من

(*) مدرس _ قسم اللغة الإنكليزية _ كلية الآداب / جامعة الموصل.

من بين هذه الأساليب تركيزه على عوامل الفطنة والدعابة على الرغم من

و أخيرا لا يمكن لأي قارئ متمرس إلا أن يجد نفسه أمام كاتب متميز ترك