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## Rethinking the Origins of Camp: The Queer Correspondence of Carl Van Vechten and Ronald Firbank

**Kate Hext**

In March 1922 Carl Van Vechten wrote with tongue-in-cheek respect to Ronald Firbank, whom he did not know personally, in appreciation of his novels. “Dear Mr. Ronald Firbank,” he began, “I am very sorry to be obliged to inform you that, I think, there is some danger of your becoming the rage in America.”<sup>1</sup> Firbank was flattered, touched even. “Nothing would give me more happiness than that my books should be known in America,” he replied.<sup>2</sup> This flirtatious transatlantic correspondence lasted over three years and comprised at least 58 letters, though the two men would never meet.<sup>3</sup> Almost ignored by scholars hitherto, the letters not only reveal a personal relationship between Van Vechten and Firbank, but redefine our understanding of how and when camp style emerged.

Discussions of Van Vechten and Firbank together hitherto have been few and brief. They have focused on Van Vechten’s professional advice to Firbank regarding his black novel, *Sorrow in Sunlight*, retitled *The Prancing Nigger* (1924) in the US edition on Van Vechten’s recommendation.<sup>4</sup> In large part this emphasis is due to the fact that only five of their letters (all written by Van Vechten) have been published. These have given the impression of a short exchange which ended in October 1923 with Van Vechten advising Firbank on how to publish in the United States.<sup>5</sup> Although Brigid Brophy alludes to the full correspondence in a number of places in her magisterial biography of Firbank, attention to the extensive unpublished correspondence is necessary in order to reveal its untapped significance.<sup>6</sup> It is an overlooked

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166 source highly pertinent to current scholarship on “Camp Modernism,” in the 1920s as well as the post-1895 history of decadence.<sup>7</sup> These letters show Van Vechten and Firbank cultivating what they call “camping” as a self-conscious performative style inextricably linked with both the principles of fin-de-siècle decadence and their own affectionate friendship, over ten years before self-conscious camp style is thought to have emerged in America. In light of this correspondence, what critics have regarded as apparently unconscious instances of camp writing by Firbank and Van Vechten separately, must be understood as emerging from a fully self-aware discussion-cum-performance of “camping,” developed in a transatlantic dialogue that helped to define modern camp.

A 1923 article by Edmund Wilson suggests a starting point for how to approach this evolution of decadence into camp in the works of Van Vechten and Firbank. Seemingly unaware of their personal relationship, Wilson ambivalently links them as “Late Violets from the Nineties” before suggesting that the genesis of their fiction lies in the fin-de-siècle decadent movement.<sup>8</sup> Subsequent assessments of Firbank have similarly viewed him as a successor to 1890s decadence.<sup>9</sup> Indeed Van Vechten was one such critic, as his most famous comment about Firbank attests: “To be 1890 in 1890 might be considered almost normal. To be 1890 in 1922 might be considered almost queer.”<sup>10</sup> Firbank’s debt to decadence was clear from the time he went up to Cambridge, where his reading centered on *The Yellow Book*, *The Savoy*, and works by Oscar Wilde.<sup>11</sup> Despite Van Vechten’s comment, he knew that Firbank’s fiction was not a mere vestige of the 1890s; rather, it develops its overt references to Wilde’s *Salome* (1893) into the possibility of a cosmopolitan queer citizenship that is distinctly modern.<sup>12</sup> Van Vechten himself became acquainted with the literature of European and American decadence as an adult in Manhattan; he positioned several of his novels in “the new decadence” or “decadent revival” of the 1920s when this was a hallmark of sophistication.<sup>13</sup> The title figure of his debut novel *Peter Whiffle* (1922) draws heavily on the quintessential decadent anti-heroes Dorian Gray and Des Esseintes, and its style exemplifies the stifling “cataloguing” of beautiful objects and sensations characteristic of decadent literature at the fin de siècle (MacLeod, “Making it New,” 214). Subsequent novels—including *The Blind Bow-Boy* (1923) and *Parties* (1930), discussed below—would be less derivative, with Van Vechten honing an economical narrative that drew on contemporary influences including cinema.

Wilson ends his essay by focusing on what separates Firbank and Van Vechten from their fin-de-siècle predecessors. Decadent writers of the 1890s, Wilson explains, truly believed that sin was an evil punishable by God; the dual feelings of moral fear and fatal allure that follow from this belief defines their work. Van Vechten and Firbank, by contrast, he continues, represent the sensibility of their generation: brought up on Wilde and Beardsley, any sincere belief in the evils of sin and its metaphysical consequences is no more, and thus “it is possible for the sinner to be amiable again” (Wilson, *Shores of Light*, 72). The figure of the amiable sinner, conceived by Wilson as a new turn in the decadent movement, would be presented by later critics—without any reference to decadence—as the unconscious beginnings of camp style. After all, this amiability is the nod and wink implicit in camp; it is the “naughtiness” that Douglas Mao sees as

essential to the afterlife of decadence in the 1920s and which Chris Baldick defines as “a new shared spirit of . . . frivolity” in those postwar years, bordering always on sexual transgression or the promise of it.<sup>14</sup> In other words, this is camp style before it had a public name or even before camp style was consciously formed.

Susan Sontag defines camp in her germinal “Notes on ‘Camp’” (1964) as comprising irony, aestheticism, theatricality, and humor.<sup>15</sup> With these qualities as a guide, she includes Firbank’s novels in her list of “Random examples of items which are part of the canon of Camp.”<sup>16</sup> And again, Allan Pero’s recent, provocative, post-Sontag “Fugue on Camp” defines Firbank as “the Samuel Beckett of camp” and features Van Vechten’s novel *The Blind Bow-Boy* (1923) in its “Selected Canon of Camp Modernism.”<sup>17</sup> Where Sontag and Pero agree is in their assumption that camp is an incidental, as-yet-unnamed quality, developed separately by Van Vechten and Firbank. Their style is, to take up Sontag’s influential terminology, “naïve Camp” in contrast to “Camp which knows itself to be Camp” or “deliberate Camp” (“Notes on ‘Camp,’” 282). Not so. Van Vechten’s short notice “Ronald Firbank” in *The Double-Dealer*, and the subsequent letters between them, show that their “camping,” and by extension the history of camp, should be reconceived. For they emerge not as passive illustrators of “naïve Camp” before camp style developed as a conscious affectation, but rather as conscious innovators moulding camp style.

The historical-cultural relationship between decadence and camp style has rarely been discussed, so the case of Firbank and Van Vechten allows us to address this silence. This critical omission is remarkable given the general links between decadent style and camp in circulation since Sontag dedicated “Notes on ‘Camp’” to Wilde and interspersed the essay with his epigrams (276).<sup>18</sup> Perhaps criticism has not gone further to historicize this relationship because camp resists critique. Its elusive center lends itself more to the provocation of aphorisms than it does to sustained argumentation. Despite some acknowledgment that camp as Sontag uses the term originates somewhere in the early twentieth century, the beginning of “Camp which knows itself to be Camp” in literature has been routinely referenced to its cursory discussion in Christopher Isherwood’s *The World in the Evening* (1954).<sup>19</sup>

Camp has seldom featured in scholarly accounts of the afterlife of the decadent movement either.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps the most sustained discussions of camp’s origins in Wildean decadence are Moe Meyer’s compelling illustration of how Wilde reinscribes the Balzacian dandy into a homosexual social identity and Gregory W. Bredbeck’s “Narcissus in the Wilde: Textual Cathexis and the Historical Origins of Queer Camp,” which convincingly argues that Wilde’s displacement of heteronormative ontology in his textual-cum-sexual inversions is the foundation of camp identity.<sup>21</sup> These texts are essential reading on how Wilde anticipated and founded elements of camp. However, their interest does not lie with how Wilde’s self-fashioning is taken up in the early twentieth century, leaving the question of whether critics are talking about an elective affinity or, if not, whether we can say with any more precision how Wilde influences the emergence of conscious camp style in the twentieth century.<sup>22</sup>

168 As Firbank and Van Vechten defiantly but amiably turn away from the metaphysical, ontological and ethical questions that troubled the works of fin-de-siècle decadence, and towards the “embroidery of nothingness” that is the superficial essence of camp, their correspondence becomes central to this history (Pero, “A Fugue on Camp,” 29). Even as this inquiry offers decadence an alternative afterlife to that which overtly couples it to politics and modernism, it suggests how the strategies of Wildean posing were taken up to subvert future-oriented narratives and dominant politics in order to make frivolity itself a radical act.

### Firbank’s Performance of Camping

It is doubtful that Van Vechten could have known how welcome his praise would be when he first wrote to Firbank. Firbank had been considering writing an American novel since 1916 and the attractions it held for him were intensified by Van Vechten’s insistent enthusiasm about reading his novels and testimony regarding his popularity in the United States: “To say that you are a sensation in New York is to speak modestly”; “All the world is reading you . . . you are almost a ‘best seller.’”<sup>23</sup> This praise contrasted sharply with Firbank’s reception at home in Great Britain where he felt undervalued and underpaid. To his mother Firbank duly wrote of Van Vechten as “my first intelligent critic,” and to Sewell Stokes he enthused that this praise was “enough to give one wings for a week.”<sup>24</sup> To Van Vechten his appreciation took the form of a vignette:

It is very mysterious & strange, & I had really no idea that my books were so restless or had found their way over to the United States & were wandering about all alone in New York like a family of orphans in their deep black jackets.<sup>25</sup>

Their mutual admiration evolved quickly into playful flirtation. Firbank’s letters to Van Vechten show a charming, witty and expansive side, singularly absent from his friends’ posthumous accounts of his character.<sup>26</sup> They sent each other portrait photographs, praised each other’s looks, and continued protracted musings and half-formed plans about meeting in person.<sup>27</sup> These discussions give their letters a homoerotically-charged atmosphere of expectation, in which cautious intimacies and innuendoes arise. “Dear—Carl?,” Firbank wrote in one of several attempts to initiate a meeting or at least some greater intimacy.<sup>28</sup> Later on he wrote, “How I wish we might meet, but I don’t suppose I will ever come to America—unless I do.”<sup>29</sup> Initially, Van Vechten seemed no less enthusiastic to meet Firbank, addressing him as “Dear Gay Genius” and enthusing, “It is quite possible that I may go to London or to Italy or somewhere a little later. I do want to see you!”<sup>30</sup>

Their discussion of “camping” develops in the context of this intimate flirtation. It appears first, hidden in plain sight, in Van Vechten’s enthusiastic notice of Firbank’s works in *The Double Dealer*:

[Firbank's narrative] form arranges itself for the most part in a diagram of dialogue . . . and such dialogue! In the argot of perversity one would call it camping. These mad romances are a Uranian version of Alice in Wonderland. (186)

The two-page notice has never been republished and it was superseded by a composite essay, also called "Ronald Firbank," that omitted these sentences.<sup>31</sup> Firbank does not mention the notice directly in his subsequent letter, written from Florence in May 1922, but he takes up the phrase with alacrity: "What does 'camping' mean? I seem to set it in the air, though not quite . . . I fancy the French word 'chichi' (how does one spell it?)."<sup>32</sup> It is not surprising that Firbank had never heard of the phrase nor that he seized on it, as he had an ear for new, sexually suggestive phrases.<sup>33</sup> In the early 1920s there were several definitions of camp and camping in Great Britain and the United States, but none were common. In Great Britain, the term itself was used only in the homosexual demimonde, where it was a synonym for homosexuality.<sup>34</sup> By contrast, in Van Vechten's adopted home of Manhattan, gay argot was emerging to create a sense of collective identity in the homosexual community, and the term "camp" had a little more prominence.<sup>35</sup> It was used as a synonym for homosexuality, as Van Vechten implies in *The Double-Dealer*, but it also had various coexistent meanings in 1922. It drew on the French phrase "se camper" meaning to exaggerate. At the same time, it had some currency as a slang term for someone who "tries to look as effeminate as possible," and the verb "to camp" in this sense was familiar enough that Mae West used it in the stage directions for her Broadway play *Pleasure Man* in 1928 (Simes, "Gay Slang Lexicography," 31).<sup>36</sup> With this in mind, perhaps Firbank's affected phrase "chichi" was calculated to evoke longstanding associations between France and effeminacy in the British press.<sup>37</sup> The phrase "you are a camp" also meant "you are fun" in some homosexual circles (Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 290; Simes, "Gay Slang Lexicography," 31). It could have been in any of these senses, or indeed in all three, that Djuna Barnes glossed Van Vechten's personal manner in a French bookshop as "camping," describing how he theatrically name-dropped his literary friends and declared himself to be Edna St Vincent Millais.<sup>38</sup> Barnes's description, which recalled a trip in 1921, together with Van Vechten's use of the term suggests that "camping" was in general use in his circle and—crucially—that by 1922 it had already acquired much of the self-conscious performativity, effeminacy, and humor that would feed into Sontag's definition of camp style forty years later.

Firbank's brief question and comment show early signs of how he is adopting the term from Van Vechten's Manhattan slang as a way to understand himself. His tone is typical of his letters to Van Vechten, combining performative self-assurance with partly-feigned uncertainty in a playful flirtation. When homoerotic flirtation emerges in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it centers on the "intensified appreciation of the arbitrary and ambiguous natures of language itself," seeking to "becom[e] not simply a postponement of erotic play but a means of keeping one's sexual identity open-ended and deliberately unstable."<sup>39</sup> As such, flirtation is intimately related to camping; it is a manifestation of early camp's effeminate performance; a means to direct the over-

170 the-top performance or writing in which camping is *set in the air* into an erotic play between just two persons, aching with possibilities but unresolved—perhaps forever. Still, Firbank's modesty captures the sense that he is articulating his own unfinished thinking about how he and his work relate to "camping." While Barnes's description of Van Vechten makes camping the quality of an individual, in Firbank's conception it has become an all-pervasive atmosphere: "I seem to set it in the air," he writes, before his ellipses dramatize his own thought-process about precisely how this might be. After all, in Firbank's fiction, and particularly in *The Flower Beneath the Foot* (1923), which he was drafting at the time, camp aestheticism and theatricality is a quality of whole locations and groups of people.

The introduction of "camping" inaugurates a new intimacy in the correspondence between Firbank and Van Vechten, with longer, chatty letters between them from May 1922. During that summer, their letters—especially those written by Firbank—expand the qualities of self-conscious performativity and humor just beginning to define camp in Manhattan slang. In these letters Firbank's initial uncertainty about the phrase evolves so that his address to Van Vechten becomes a literary fusion of the various camping qualities in circulation in Manhattan. His staged emotion when he discusses a plan for them to meet is illustrative:

How dangerous for us no [*sic*] to meet—Let us keep one another as last Illusions . . . . Yet of course we must—meet, I mean, I would disappoint you I wonder, for I think you wouldn't me! . . . But I do not think I have the chastity requisite for America . . . Perhaps next year I will come & start a small Crusade in June: Costumes by Bendle [*sic*] . . .<sup>40</sup>

He first entertains the melodramatic consequences of their not meeting, performed in the style of the disjointed movie intertitles he loved; second, he assumes the faux-noble sentiment of a grand but ill-fated passion; third, following the dramatic pause of his ellipses, he draws back to a more personal and hesitant address which lends poignancy to the foregoing performance, before the flamboyantly funny idea that he will lead an anti-Puritan crusade in drag, for Henri Bendel was a women's dress designer based in New York. This passage illustrates Madelyn Detloff's argument that camp possesses a "rhetorical functioning [as] a queer form of dramatic irony that creates an insider group which is *in the know* (and thus is in a position to appreciate the sublime, bitchy social critique leveled by camp)."<sup>41</sup> As is typical in camp style, the force of the passage is ambiguous, with Firbank seeming both to parody the ceremonies of heteronormative desire and to long for these, in a pose of "ironic nostalgia," as described by Caryl Flinn ("The Deaths of Camp," 436). At the same time Firbank's performative prose further queers the textual and sexual inversions first seen in Wilde's writing.<sup>42</sup> The idea of a crusade in drag opens up the possibility of a non-binary social identity. This is not a vision of the queer as a Wildean dandy, but a performative identity still more subversive, which, in abandoning cisgendered masculinity altogether, chooses to adopt the pose of a theatrical grand dame.

Camp style evolves in the letters in the context of regular homoerotic innuendoes, which create a flirtatious duality between public and private language. Discussing *The*

*Blind Bow-Boy*, for example, Firbank writes in June 1922, "I long to read it, & hope it is very revealing, with subteranian [*sic*] touches."<sup>43</sup> Here, innuendo and desire become linked, with the phrase "subteranian touches" acting as a double entendre wrapped in a sexual metaphor to open the question of whether Van Vechten is also interested in desire between men, and how this permeates his writing. Van Vechten's reply takes up the metaphor to indicate that they do understand each other, although he is typically non-committal: "It has been so long since I read [the manuscript of *The Blind Bow-Boy*] that I find difficulty remembering whether or no[t] there are any subteranean [*sic*] passages; if there are you will find them!"<sup>44</sup> This exchange exemplifies Richard Kaye's point that homoerotic flirtation has an edge of danger absent from heterosexual flirting: it is the danger of discovery that quickens the frisson of desire whilst requiring that this be evoked without leaving too much incriminating evidence behind.<sup>45</sup> Van Vechten subsequently took pains to send Firbank the US edition of his novel, which included homosexual references censored in the British edition, such as the epigraph, "A thing of beauty is a boy forever."

Van Vechten's address to Firbank as his "Gay Genius" on several occasions plays with the innuendo beginning to emerge around the term "gay" amongst his own friends. It was mainly used to mean happy in the early twentieth century, it was also used as a slang term for female prostitute and "gaycat" referred to a young male hobo.<sup>46</sup> However, Van Vechten's close friend Gertrude Stein played a vital role in how "gay" began to emerge as a synonym for homosexual in American slang in the very year that Van Vechten began to call Firbank "Gay Genius."<sup>47</sup> Stein exploits the ambiguity between these different meanings in her short story "Miss Furr and Miss Skeene" (1922), where the incessant repetition of "gay"—over 100 times—draws attention to, and accentuates, its ambiguity for the first time in print. The full effect is created by accumulation through the few pages of the story, but here is a taste:

They were quite regularly gay there, Helen Furr and Georgine Skeene, they were regularly gay there where they were gay. They were very regularly gay.<sup>48</sup>

Transplanting and repeating the term defamiliarizes its meaning so that it becomes increasingly freighted with sexual innuendo about the exact nature of the relationship between the title figures.<sup>49</sup> Van Vechten's address, "Dear Gay Genius," borrows Stein's innuendo and turns it into a part of the flirtatious repartee that had been established between himself and Firbank. Or perhaps he is entertaining himself alone in the act of writing (as he often did), bearing in mind that the British Firbank would be most unlikely to understand the dual reference. This is a moot point. Whereas innuendoes operate on the basis that each party knowingly engages in the joke of what goes unsaid, the force of Van Vechten's "gay" turns on its being uncertain either whether he is performing this utterance knowingly or whether the reader will understand the veiled meaning. He does a similar thing in the 1922 essay, "Ronald Firbank," as he notes, "There is, indeed, something baffling about Firbank's lucidity, his gay firm grasp of his trivial peccancies" (185). Here, "gay" operates in a structurally similar way to Stein's

172 use of it, with its unexpected appearance in the sentence casting doubt on exactly what it is meant to denote, whilst also creating a private discourse within the public space of the essay for those already in the know.

Like “subterranean” and “gay,” “camping” is a queer term, which “perplexes certainty,” gleefully refusing to situate itself on either side of the heterosexual-homosexual binary (Caserio, “Queer Modernism,” 201). In doing so, it expands the “intensified appreciation of the arbitrary and ambiguous nature of language” that is the essence of flirtation (Kaye, *The Flirt’s Tragedy*, 34). When Firbank mentions camping again to Van Vechten seven months after he asked “What is ‘camping’?” he exploits the unsettled nature of its definition in order to bring its meaning closer to the established features of his own fiction:

I have a divine libretto (panting for music) for an “all British” musical comedy.  
 Archie: “Let us go out and gather lotuses on the lake, shall we girls?”  
 Girls (ensemble): “Oh yes. That would be fun!”  
 Once long ago I used to idolize Edna May. (how charming in the “Belle of New York,” & the “Girl from Up There”) & my style, as I grow old, seems to be becoming more and more like that of Mrs Leslie Carter, or Mrs Fiske . . . I am writing before a bowl of French Mignonette, so forgive this frivolity & incoherence.  
 She (looking up at him, with the air of a Gaiety Girl when a Peer proposes “etc, etc . . . [”]  
 But you would probably accuse the juvenile lead of “camping,” if not the leading lady as well.<sup>50</sup>

This is an assured performance of camping, which amalgamates the term’s respective early-1920s associations: effeminacy, gratuitous fun, and theatricality. At the same time, Firbank brings the “camping” of Manhattan argot much closer to modern camp style by infusing it with the aestheticism and pastiche he develops from Wilde. When Wilde uses pastiche to dramatize a disconnection between interiority and the surfaces of the body in “The Portrait of Mr W. H.” and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* the effect is “the elimination” of the models’ identities (Meyer, “Under the Sign of Wilde,” 84).<sup>51</sup> In Firbank’s performance the pastiched surface of his musical comedy is also uncoupled from interiority to a large extent. However, the effect empowers Firbank, because its effect is not to eliminate his identity but to multiply it exponentially so that what his real feelings are is a question both unanswerable and beside the point. His camping is indeed “set in the air.” Effeminacy, gratuitous fun, and performance transcend individuals to characterize a self-contained world of endless leisure, of the kind evoked fleetingly in Wilde’s plays and dialogues, with Firbank himself at its center. Only, this is placed finally out of reach of the external world that threatens to imperil it in Wilde’s London drawing rooms. The effect is, as Sontag would later write of camp, “a vision of the world in terms of style—but a particular kind of style. It is the love of the exaggerated, the ‘off,’ of things-being-what-they-are-not” (“Notes on ‘Camp,’” 279). The brief extract above shows in microcosm how Firbank achieves this in his fiction. The fun and effeminacy implicit in Manhattanite camping are here infused with a new irony and elegance. Like Firbank’s earlier fiction—*Vainglory* (1917) or *Valmouth*

(1919), say—with its prose often breaking into song and dialogue that develops into choral harmonies, this vignette aspires to the condition of musical comedy. In effect, the “*maladie fin de siècle*” characteristic of both Wildean decadence and Firbank’s own early novels is revolutionized.<sup>52</sup> Firbank retains the pursuit of sensual pleasure for its own sake and the revision of Judeo-Christian morality characteristic of fin-de-siècle decadence. However, communal frivolity and nonchalance now replace cynicism and languor.<sup>53</sup> It is in this atmosphere that same-sex desiring bodies and identities, which the decadent movement linked with “degenerate aestheticism, feebleness, and social alienation,” could be reinigorated (Deutsch, “Robust Body and Social Souls,” 470). The homosexuality associated with camping is legitimized, as part of a wholesale re-inscription of social values in Firbank’s fiction, with fun and whimsy allied to deflect disapproval. His “camping” exemplifies the amiable sinning Wilson sees as characteristic of latter-day decadence and combines it with the naughtiness that Mao shows to evolve from US decadence during the 1910s and 1920s.

### Van Vechten’s Queer Firbankian Camping

Firbank’s flights of fantasy in turn redefine camping for his correspondent. In the letters and novels he sent to Van Vechten, Firbank infuses the sense of fun, exaggeration and effeminacy in Manhattan “camping” with an elegance, irony and insouciance, borrowed from decadence, expanding it into an atmosphere in which everyone and everything is defined by these qualities. Van Vechten’s published comments on Firbank indicate how this becomes central to his own developing concept of camp style.

It was during his first flush of excitement about discovering Firbank in the spring of 1922 that Van Vechten wrote the laudatory essay titled “Ronald Firbank,” the essay in which “camping” was first mentioned, as well as an article titled “Pastiches et Pistaches” in which Firbank features under the sub-heading “Satirist or Decadent?,” and these were followed by an introduction to *The Prancing Nigger* in its first American edition.<sup>54</sup> As noted above, Van Vechten brought elements of these pieces together and expanded them into a longer piece also called “Ronald Firbank.” It is in this last essay that he presents an extensive answer to the question of whether Firbank is a satirist or decadent, indicating how he conceived his new friend’s novels as an exemplification of decadence developing into a sensibility we would now call camp:

To be 1890 in 1890 might be considered almost normal. To be 1890 in 1922 might be considered almost queer. There is a difference, however. The color is magenta. Oscar’s hue was green. The fun is warmer; the vice more léger. Soon or late one hears a good deal about light touch in literature. It might be believed, forsooth, that this was no rare quality, so frequently do reviewers apply this ready epithet to writing which has no touch at all. Speaking for myself, I may say that after reading one of [Firbank’s] books I find even Max Beerbohm a trifle studied, a little composed.<sup>55</sup>

174 The first two sentences—quoted above in my introduction—are styled as a Wildean aphorism, gesturing to Firbank's thematic continuities from Wilde. Having set up this impression, though, Van Vechten's third sentence halts it in order to focus instead on how Firbank's work distinguishes itself from late-Victorian decadence. Stylistically this development is marked by a shift from Wilde's declarative bon mots to hesitating and self-revising sentences. Van Vechten seems to draw here on the illustration of "camping" in Firbank's letters to him. He takes pains to identify how Firbank's writing gives a new character to fin-de-siècle decadence: warm, with casually licentious subject-matter and a lightness of touch which is integral to its modernity. In the following year Wilson's essay on Firbank and Van Vechten ended with a similar sentiment: "This fin de siècle genre may be destined to grow dimmer and dimmer, but at least it fades away with a smile"—although Wilson predictably sees less longevity in the afterlife of decadence (*Shores of Light*, 72). In Van Vechten's account the vibrancy with which Firbank combines decadent sensibility and modernity effectively presents him at the vanguard of a fledgling literary movement: "Firbank is more than up-to-date," he writes, "He is the Pierrot of the minute. Félicien Rops on a merry-go-round. Aubrey Beardsley in a Rolls-Royce. Ronald in Lesbosland. Puck celebrating the Black Mass. Sacher-Masoch in Mayfair. A Rebours à la mode. Aretino in Piccadilly. Jean Cocteau at the Savoy" (*Excavations*, 172–73). These vivid metaphors combine and affirm the sexual licentiousness, theatricality, light-heartedness, and modernity of Firbank's work, whilst the references to key figures and works of fin-de-siècle decadence stress that such qualities in Firbank are rooted in the decadent movement. Van Vechten transforms the funereal lethargy of Beardsley or Des Esseintes in Huysmans's *A Rebours* (1884) into a skitishness, the pace of which, reflected in the short structurally repetitious sentences, is identified with the roaring twenties. Would Van Vechten call this "camping"? It is clear that the atmosphere he creates here takes up the performativity, aestheticism, sexual innuendo, and ironic humor that Firbank identifies with "camping." He then applies it to Firbank himself through the creation of a camp atmosphere. As he does so Van Vechten is innovating with how camp style could define the written word. Camping as it had appeared in Manhattan argot had been a conscious act, physically performed by an individual; Firbank's dialogue commits this performance to the page, creating new structural effects to bring it to life; Van Vechten, above, evokes a sense of camp through metaphors that link its performance directly back to the 1890s figures whose work has influenced both Firbank and himself.

In *The Blind Bow-Boy* Van Vechten draws on the warmth, sexual innuendo, and lightness of touch he associated with Firbank in his essay. This novel was written in 1922 when his correspondence with Firbank was at its most intense, with Van Vechten giving Firbank regular updates on his progress in writing it. The farcical plot, in which Harold is sent away by his industrialist father to live amongst a group of hedonists, and ultimately sets sail for England as part of a bisexual ménage-à-trois, is not of primary importance. The novel is typical of how Van Vechten brought the pace and structure of Keystone Kops comedy to redefine his neo-decadent novels after the more derivative *Peter Whiffle*. Amongst the hedonists, the Duke of Middlebottom's Firbankian

name is emphasized by the fact that his Christian name is also Ronald, whilst his ironic performance of gender and aestheticism closely connects him with Firbank's conception of "camping." When the Duke decides to put on a play for the amusement of his friends, he first suggests Firbank's *Princess Zoubaroff* (1920).<sup>56</sup> For the few readers familiar with Firbank's play, its focus on the dullness of heterosexual monogamy queers the marriage-plot central to *The Blind Bow-Boy* and anticipates its final plot twist.

Van Vechten creates a personal space between himself and Firbank in *The Blind Bow-Boy*, extending their private flirtation through the frisson of an intimate secret hidden in plain sight. When one of the central figures in the hedonistic circle, Campaspe, wanders around her apartment in a state of restless ennui, only reading Ronald Firbank's *Vainglory* can satisfy her (Van Vechten, *Bow-Boy*, 103). The passage suggestively fuses textual and sexual desire in a way that recalls the innuendoes of their letters. Later on, the Duke continues the fictionalized compliments, calling Firbank "A master of wordcraft!" before discussing his current projects:

He's writing something new—I forget the name —: Mackerel Fishing in the Bois de Boulogne; perhaps that's it—or Cocktails.  
Is it about America? Asked Paul.  
Possibly. *Le vit est dur partout [sic].* (135)

The passage makes several allusions to confidences within Firbank's letters. Van Vechten was one of the few people Firbank told of his intention to write a novel set in America. In one of several letters mentioning the possibility of a visit to New York in spring 1922 Firbank romanticized cocktails and Prohibition:

It must be marvellous, New York, very fascinating and nerve-shattering with the remains of exquisite Bars that one would visit with regret & emotion:—"Here the last champagne-cocktail was mixed, and here the last martini."<sup>57</sup>

This interest in cocktails and perhaps Van Vechten's later teasing reference to the rumour that Firbank would drink only champagne is reflected in Van Vechten's invention of "Cocktails" for the title of Firbank's next novel.<sup>58</sup> The concealment of "camping" in the character of the Duke and indeed within the texture of the novel is part of the innuendo, separating the reader in the know—and even more the reader Firbank—from the general reader.

As the Duke contemplates staging *Princess Zoubaroff* in *The Blind Bow-Boy*, he even cables Ronald "to come over to make bows," an evocation of Firbank's longed-for invitation to New York that only Firbank himself would understand as he read the unexpurgated copy of *The Blind Bow-Boy* sent to him by Van Vechten (*Bow-Boy*, 136). However, the figure of Firbank fades from Van Vechten's novel soon after the Duke's cable: the hedonists decide to stage Nozière's *l'Après-midi Byzantine* instead of Firbank's play and the reader is left to almost forget Firbank or wonder whether he ever responded to the Duke's telegram; perhaps even as the assembled cast perform *l'Après-midi Byzantine*, a faithful Firbank is arriving, and, like his vision of his novels, might be seen "wandering about all alone in New York."

176 **Melancholic Camping**

The note of melancholy left by Firbank's disappearance in *The Blind Bow-Boy* is foreboding. Despite enthusiastic accounts of Firbank's work, Van Vechten's enthusiasm for meeting Firbank himself was waning. By 1924 his letters became cursory and, on his side, suggestions that they might meet ceased. The reasons are uncertain, but Van Vechten's enthusiasms were often short-lived, and Firbank's persistence might have taken on the complexion of neediness following Philip Moeller's extensive tragi-comic account to Van Vechten of his own meeting with Firbank in July 1924.<sup>59</sup>

After further attempts to engineer a meeting with Van Vechten, Firbank ceased to write to him. In his final letter, sent from Egypt, camp performance, which had been a mode of flirtation and delight for its own sake, has become a self-preservation strategy as he refers to a last failed attempt for them to meet, apparently thwarted by Van Vechten. It begins thus:

My dear, you're as fickle as fickle as fickle as fickle, and I, & the late Mrs. Browning, are agreed on that score: As her Spirit-voice said this morning (speaking through the instrument of the Sphinx—"never trust a man, my dear!!" Well, I never have, but I certainly am disappointed . . . I have just started my American novel with New York & Palm Beach for setting.<sup>60</sup>

As an exaggerated performance of feminized indignation and disappointment, played to the gallery, this passage exemplifies the way in which camp style creates "an aesthetic, rather than forensic, relation to the anatomy of melancholy" (Pero, "A Fugue on Camp," 29). It is, once again, a theatrical pastiche, used as a defence against self-revelation. Still, the fragility of his camp frivolity is all too apparent. The "unmitigated sadness" that lies beneath the surface of Firbank's major novels is made explicit and poignant by the emphatic underlining and double-exclamations that protest their performative irony too much to be dismissed as mere performance.<sup>61</sup> "Is it time to bestow more attention on camp emotions . . . ?" Bryant and Mao ask.<sup>62</sup> Firbank's letter begins to indicate how this line of inquiry could—and indeed should—nuance the intentions and effects of camp. Whilst the letter opens with a confident performance of sorrow, the hesitant, elliptical sentences that follow have a bathos that returns with his sign-off: "Addios [*sic*] Don Carlos, et bonne nuit."<sup>63</sup> His modulation of self-consciously camp performance with intimate and seemingly sincere statements highlights the disjunction between the private self and performative self. With this modulation, he resists the idea that camp could be a whole world outlook or permanent state of being. Or perhaps it is not resistance on Firbank's part exactly but, rather, an understanding of camp as a series of brief performative acts that never really could redefine reality as camp, in the way that his earlier letters or novels like *The Flower Beneath the Foot* indicated that it might. And so it becomes clear that the melancholic, self-destructive thread running through 1890s decadence (in Wilde's *Salome* or Pater's "Apollo in Picardy" for instance) is not erased from its 1920s revivification, frivolous though it may often seem to be. The inherent sorrow of the isolation and evasions necessitated

by “the love that dare not speak its name” persists, albeit refashioned by Firbank into a self-preservation strategy.

After his correspondence with Van Vechten ceased in the winter of 1925, which would be his last, Firbank continued to work on the manuscript of the fledgling American novel he called *The New Rythum* (1925–26; 1962). Although the novel was left unfinished at his death in May 1926, it marks a further development of his conception of “camping,” taking up the characteristics of theatricality, irony, aestheticism and humour illustrated by Firbank’s letters and mid-period novels. However, the carefree theatricality and aestheticism of camp as Firbank illustrated it in 1922 and 1923 is modulated with the theatricalized melancholia evident in his final letter to Van Vechten. *The New Rythum* opens with the same whimsical and over-aestheticized atmosphere as Firbank’s earlier novels; its slight plot concerns socialite Mrs Rosemerchant’s endeavors to uncover Manhattan gossip before anyone else, and her adventures in doing so. The novel rehearses the camp presentation of personal identity as a farcical performance notable in Firbank’s earlier letter and novels. In moments such as Heliodora creeping around her friend’s house “like a thief in the movies” in joyous search of scandal or Mrs Rosemerchant’s decision to dress up as an extravagantly fashioned flying fox for a costume party, Firbank expands the theatricality of his earlier work to make its comedy more visually motivated.<sup>64</sup> A melancholic strain soon emerges in *The New Rythum*; at first images of decay begin to undermine the healthy sexual deviance David Deutsch identifies in Firbank’s earlier writing (“Robust Body and Social Souls,” 472). Firbank disrupts his overtly camp goings-on by evoking a dark underside of the amoral pleasure essential to camp. For example, when Mrs Rosemerchant outrageously feigns illness to leave the Met so that she not miss out on a piece of delicious gossip, the exaggerated and ironic description of her chase across Manhattan is interrupted:

It was the hour when ring-eyed travellers from the violet South emerge from the Central Terminus to be caught up in the great nocturnal pleasure-stream of New York. Driving exuberant citizens from the bright-lit restaurants, dandy mechanics, holding some one word tight in their linnet-heads—Astor? Belasco? Criterion? Hackett?—must here slacken down, often for only a battered taxi-cab or a common lorry. (*The New Rythum*, 89)

*The Waste Land* (1922) echoes through this paragraph, drawing attention to the fragility of the camp carnivalesque. Its decisive opening is uncharacteristic of Firbank, who ordinarily displays a studied carelessness regarding passing time. Like Eliot, Firbank is describing the time of day at which “the eyes and back / Turn upward from the desk”; his “violet South” recalls Eliot’s “At the violet hour,” and adopts its unsettling proximity to *violent*. The “battered taxi-cab” waiting pick up people from the station echoes Eliot’s “taxi throbbing waiting.”<sup>65</sup> Eliot’s dystopian pleasure city develops out of his early immersion in the sense of belatedness of decadent writing, especially that of Wilde.<sup>66</sup> To the question, “Is camp the antidote to modernism’s high seriousness?,” in this case at least, the answer might be another question: is modernism’s high seriousness an infection that threatens camp’s insouciant play? (Bryant and Mao, “Camp Modernism Introduction,” 4). The allusions to *The Waste Land* mean that Firbank’s campiness is

178 shot through with a brutal rejection of its frivolity and amorality. It is a very different image from that we usually associate with his novels.

These tensions indicate Firbank's broader design for *The New Rythum*. His handwritten plans for the novel's final chapter reveal that he planned to end it with an abrupt change of tone: "N.B. preceding chapter should be poetic lyric fantastic anything. Then cold snap as—" (*The New Rythum*, 109). The sentence breaks off here. However, Firbank's following comments explain that the narrative would have Mrs Rosemerchant and Heliodora go to Palm Beach together in an ambiguous sleeping arrangement where "Mrs R. refuses to send her away. 'She is sleeping with me tonight'" (108). Firbank's plan for the novel's finale was an homage to Van Vechten's *The Blind Bow-Boy*. Van Vechten ended his novel with the elopement of Harold, Ronald the Duke of Middlebottom and Campaspe (whose name perhaps hides in plain sight the *camp* play of identities in the novel). *The New Rythum* echoes this with Firbank suggesting a ménage à trois between Mrs Rosemerchant, her husband and Heliodora, before Mrs Rosemerchant and Heliodora disappear together: "Rumours from time to time reached New York that they had been seen together in Paris restaurants or in Egypt. While some believed they were living together in the mountains of Nirvana—in those blue hills" (*The New Rythum*, 109). There are, however, two crucial differences between the endings. Firbank's narrative distances itself from the events to create ambiguity regarding exactly what had happened to the women. Moreover, he extends this ambiguity into darker territory in the penultimate line of his notes, writing that "Many, and particularly Mr Rosemerchant's friends, believed that he had quietly murdered them" (*The New Rythum*, 109). With this, Firbank subverts the sense of playful farce that closed *The Blind Bow-Boy*; same-sex desire is shown to have potentially destructive consequences.

The almost total absence of words like sadness or melancholy in accounts of camp seems to prove Esther Newton's point that camp is rarely sad.<sup>67</sup> Camp exists, or came to exist by the 1950s, to gloss over sorrow with the play of alternative identities and innuendoes. It became a means of survival for the gay community within hostile societies. If Firbank's last letter to Van Vechten shows that this function was already evolving in the mid-1920s, the downbeat ending of *The New Rythum* also foregrounds the vulnerabilities of camp's blithe refusal to take melancholy seriously. This is a vulnerability that has been all but lost from post-Sontag accounts of camp.

There is no record of Van Vechten's reaction to Firbank's untimely death, but Firbankian camp haunted his work thereafter. In exacting specifications for his Hollywood novel, *Spider Boy* (1928), he insisted that it be printed on Japan Vellum paper, the same paper that he had admired in the copy of "Odette" sent to him by Firbank in 1922, but never used before by Van Vechten himself.<sup>68</sup> Despite his praise in 1923 of Firbank's modernity, when traces of Firbank reappear in Van Vechten's final novel, *Parties* (1930), it is as a vestige of the past. *Parties* charts the disintegration of jazz-age Manhattan through a group of wealthy socialites and their series of almost disconnected and anarchic parties. When a touring English novelist appears briefly and without explanation, he conjures the memory of Firbank in *The Blind Bow-Boy*, wandering around the city on the visit he never made in fact or fiction. But this unnamed novel-

ist marks a poignant departure from Firbank: he delivers a sententious Panglossian lecture about modern literature and at a cocktail party in his honor—the kind of party Firbank imagined in his letters—his company is dull.

The presence of the Gräfin Adele von Pulmernl und Stilzernl throughout *Parties* acts to extend the suggestive references to Firbank into an integral part of Van Vechten's comment on hedonism in 1930. Like the inhabitants of Firbank's *Valmouth* (1919), she is a seemingly ageless woman of "seventy (or over)," marked out like the Duke of Middlebottom by her whimsical name and provenance.<sup>69</sup> Frustrated by the dullness of the aging people around her she arrives in New York to seek pleasure. Unlike any other character in *Parties*, she is "capricious" and whimsical—even described using these two of Firbank's favorite words (*Parties*, 24). She is not only Firbankian; the whole style of the narrative alters in the scenes in which the narrative is focalized through her, drawing back from the frenetic, montaged scenes that largely define the narrative's construction. The Gräfin is a ghost, not of innocent pleasure but of hedonism without consequence, quite at odds with Manhattan as Van Vechten sees it in 1930: exhausted, peripatetic, violent. The way in which she at first delights in pleasure for its own sake makes her a lightning rod for scenes of unadulterated pleasure, briefly lending the depressed cityscape the kind of vision of pleasure that Van Vechten had seen in it in the early 1920s. The frivolity central to Firbank's camping style in the letters, and which Van Vechten identifies as his defining feature in the laudatory essays of the early 1920s, is unsustainable, though, in *Parties*. The violent death of the Gräfin's young companion forces her to confront her grief and responsibilities. She represents the ultimate shattering of the fantasy world-apart created by Firbank's fiction, a world in which consequences are rarely faced, and in which even bad things are cushioned by irony and bathos. The carnal and ethereal brought together in the naughtiness of camp flirtation are brought to book by death, and camping becomes the relic of a lost carelessness.<sup>70</sup>

## Conclusion

The emergence of camp is a turn in the genealogy of the decadent movement, that should not be left out of the critical landscape even as recent critics harness the significance of decadence to the weighty subjects of modernism, global war, and politics. Van Vechten and Firbank illustrate the cosmopolitan nature of camping, which, as it evolved out of the 1890s decadent movement, continued to pursue its ideal of a cosmopolitan queer community. At the same time, they begin to suggest how the camp afterlife of decadence intersects with camp modernism in the 1920s. For, the respective camp styles of Firbank and Van Vechten are not separate phenomena from modernism, different though they look when put beside high modernism's insistent seriousness. The unstable dynamic between camp and modernism cannot be fixed in a formulated phrase, and the camping of Firbank and Van Vechten must be understood as a case study in this disconcerting uncertainty. Their writing operates as a form of modernism in the way that it reinscribes linguistic meaning, and experiments in ex-

180 panding the boundaries of what the written word can express, or suggest; but it also uses its decadent inheritance to distance it from the ostentatiously serious ambitions of modernism à la Eliot and Pound. Firbank's allusions to *The Waste Land* in *The New Rythum* mark a proximity to Eliot's "Unreal city," certainly, but in turning away from its vision of the future to a riotous ménage à trois, Firbank is radically redefining the gender roles and heteronormative relationships. The flirtations, caprices and play in his novels and Van Vechten's, seek to construct an alternative world of words that untethers the Judeo-Christian concept of the Good entirely from utility and futurity, opening the possibility of a radical reconception of sexual ethics and gender identity.

The fragility of camping style in the final novels of Firbank and Van Vechten sets them apart from later takes on the decadent-made-camp. After Firbank and Van Vechten, the influence of the decadent movement on the irreverent "naughtiness" of the twentieth century emerged in public performance and often became enshrined in the fabric of the culture. Firbankian camping directly influenced the sensibility of the young Noel Coward, the aesthetics of Vincente Minnelli's Hollywood musicals, and the experimental films of Kenneth Anger, whilst later, the naughty-campiness of Aubrey Beardsley reappeared as a shaping influence in late-1960s London through the clothing designs of Antony Little for Biba, and John Pearce for Nigel Waymouth at Granny Takes a Trip. These were simpler modes of camp. If the most recognizable instances of camping in work by Firbank and Van Vechten seem to exist in the realm of endless possibility, as stylistic playfulness that subverts the status quo of gender and sexuality, in the end this is not out of reach of violence and cruelty. Subsequent accounts of camp style retroactively narrow the conception of camping at play in their work, not accounting for the ways in which the camp qualities of theatricality, humour, effeminacy, and aestheticism functioned to express the dark underside of pleasure. Firbank and Van Vechten, then, still have things to teach us about camp. Relocating them at the genesis of "deliberate Camp" may help to give further cultural context to the emergence of camp and help to nuance our reading of its significance today.

## Notes

1. Carl Van Vechten to Ronald Firbank, March 12, 1922, folder 1, Berg Collection MSS, New York Public Library, New York.

2. Ronald Firbank to Carl Van Vechten, March 29, 1922, folder 1, Berg Collection MSS.

3. This is the number of letters held in the Berg Collection, at the New York Public Library. As noted below, 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.

4. A recent example is the excellent biography by Edward White, *The Tastemaker: Carl Van Vechten and the Birth of the Modern America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014).

5. See *Letters of Carl Van Vechten*, ed. Bruce Kellner (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), 42, 44, 46, 47, 58.

6. Brigid Brophy, *Prancing Novelist: In Praise of Ronald Firbank* (London: Harper and Row, 1973).

7. See "Camp Modernism Forum," ed. Marsha Bryant and Douglas Mao, special issue, *Modernism/modernity* 23, no. 1 (2016): 1–36.

8. Edmund Wilson, *The Shores of Light: A Literary Chronicle of the Twenties and Thirties* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1952), 68.

9. See David Deutsch, "Robust Body and Social Souls: Reassessing Ronald Firbank's Effeminate Queer Men," *Studies in the Novel* 47, no. 4 (2015): 469–90.

10. This line was first published in "Ronald Firbank," *The Double-Dealer* 3, no. 16 (1922): 185–86, 185. It is better known in the longer essay on Firbank, in which it was republished: *Excavations: A Book of Advocacies* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926), 170–76, 172.

11. See A. C. Landsberg, "Firbank at Cambridge," in *Ronald Firbank: Memoirs and Critiques*, ed. Mervyn Horder (London: Duckworth, 1977), 89–93, 90.

12. See Joseph Bristow, *Effeminate England: Homoerotic Writing after 1885* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1995), 105–9; Robert L. Caserio, "Queer Modernism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms*, ed. Peter Brooker, Andrzej Gasiorek, Deborah Longworth, and Andrew Thacker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 199–217, 206–8.

13. Anonymously quoted in Kirsten MacLeod, "Making it New, Old School: Carl Van Vechten and Decadent Modernism," *Symbiosis* 16, no. 2 (2012): 209–24, 210; see Alex Murray, *Landscapes of Decadence: Literature and Place at the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 181–82; David Weir, *Decadent Culture in the United States: Art and Literature Against the American Grain, 1890–1926* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008), 151.

14. Douglas Mao, "Mauve Vows and Tender Buttons: Donald Evans' Claire Marie" (presentation, Aestheticism and Decadence in the Age of Modernism: 1895–1945, Senate House, London, April 17, 2015); Chris Baldick, *Literature of the 1920s: Writers Among the Ruins* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 168.

15. For clear definitions of how these elements come together in camp, see Jack Babuscio, "Camp and the Gay Sensibility," in *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality*, ed. David Bergman (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 19–38.

16. Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp,'" in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Penguin, 2009), 275–92, 276–78.

17. Allan Pero, "A Fugue on Camp," *Modernism/modernity* 23, no. 1 (2016): 28–36, 29, 30.

18. The association is reiterated by Jack Babuscio, who quotes from Wilde's "Decay of Lying" in order to point out how camp's aestheticism opposes puritan morality and Allan Pero, who draws on Wilde's dialogues when he suggests that "Camp luxuriates in ennui; it has a profound intellectual respect for boredom" (Babuscio, "Camp and the Gay Sensibility," 21; Pero, "A Fugue on Camp," 29).

19. See Christopher Isherwood, *The World in the Evening* (London: Methuen, 1954), 125–26.

20. The potential for this turn in the discussion of decadence has been passed over. For example, *The Wilde Century: Oscar Wilde, Effeminacy, and the Queer Moment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), Alan Sinfield's study of Oscar's twentieth-century influence, mentions camp only in passing, while Joseph Bristow's tantalizing suggestion that Ronald Firbank modernizes Wilde's aesthetic into a queerer and, "in a word, camp" aesthetic—in *Effeminate England: Homoerotic Writing after 1885* (Berkshire: Open University Press, 1995)—has not been taken up.

21. See Gregory W. Bredbeck, "Narcissus in the Wilde: Textual Cathexis and the Historical Origins of Queer Camp," in *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, ed. Moe Meyer (London: Routledge, 1994), 51–74; Moe Meyer, "Under the Sign of Wilde: An Archaeology of Posing," in *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, 75–109.

22. The recent turn in criticism to the influence of the decadent movement in the twentieth century has so far omitted camp. Kristin Mahoney's *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) and Vincent Sherry's *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) have significantly advanced discussions of how queer fin-de-siècle style exerted an influence on twentieth-century art and literature. However, camp is not part of their focus. Mahoney's interest in the ways that Decadent style becomes repurposed into a means of political resistance in the twentieth century and Sherry's recovery of the ways in which Wildean decadence provides the foundations of high modernism's queer longing for the past seem to lead us into quite other discussions. And yet, the ironic edge of camp does not divorce Firbank and Van Vechten from high modernism. Nor does it undermine social and political concerns, though there is always that danger. Camp style is—in part at least—a political tool used to resist dominant

- 182 ideologies, whether they be literary or political ones and the “ironic nostalgia” that forms part of the camp pose is no less than another queer inheritance of decadence’s temporality. On the final point, see Caryl Flinn, “The Deaths of Camp,” in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 433–57, 436.
23. Ronald Firbank to Grant Richards, ca. Feb 1916 and August 6, 1916, Ronald Firbank Papers, 1896–1976, box 1, Butler Library, Columbia University, New York; Carl Van Vechten to Ronald Firbank, May 20, 1922, folder 1, Berg Collection MSS.
24. Ronald Firbank to Jane Harriette Firbank, May 7, 1922, in *Letters to his Mother, 1920–24 and La princesse aux soleils*, ed. Anthony Hobson (London: The Roxburghe Club, 2001), 90; Sewell Stokes, “Reminiscences of Ronald Firbank,” in *Firbank: Memoirs and Critiques*, 127–33, 131.
25. Ronald Firbank to Carl Van Vechten, May 3, 1922, folder 1, Berg Collection MSS.
26. See *Ronald Firbank: A Memoir*, ed. Ifan Kyrle Fletcher (London: Duckworth, 1930) and *Firbank: Memoirs and Critiques*, which gather these with uncollected obituary essays, letters, and fictions based on Firbank.
27. See for example Carl Van Vechten to Ronald Firbank, August 30, 1922, folder 2, Berg Collection MSS; Firbank to Van Vechten, March 1, 1923; Carl Van Vechten to Ronald Firbank, October 30, 1923, folder 3, Berg Collection MSS.
28. Ronald Firbank to Carl Van Vechten, September 11, 1922, folder 2, Berg Collection MSS.
29. Ronald Firbank to Carl Van Vechten, June 29, 1922, folder 2, Berg Collection MSS.
30. Carl Van Vechten to Ronald Firbank, May 20, 1922, Berg Collection MSS; Carl Van Vechten to Ronald Firbank, October 30, 1923, folder 3, Berg Collection MSS.
31. See Carl Van Vechten, “Ronald Firbank,” in *Excavations*, 170–76.
32. Ronald Firbank to Carl Van Vechten, May 4, 1922, folder 1, Berg Collection MSS.
33. See Deutsch, “Robust Body and Social Souls,” 485–86.
34. See 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, 24–26; see also Baldick, *Literature of the 1920s*, 166.
35. See George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York: BasicBooks, 1994), 287.
36. See Mae West, *Pleasure Man*, in *Three Plays by Mae West*, ed. Lillian Schlissel (London: Nick Hern Books, 1997), 161.
37. Dominic Janes, *Oscar Wilde Prefigured: Queer Fashioning and British Caricature, 1750–1900* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 97–99.
38. See Simes, “Gay Slang Lexicography,” 38–39.
39. Richard Kaye, *The Flirt’s Tragedy: Desire without End in Victorian and Edwardian Fiction* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002), 34, 33
40. Ronald Firbank to Carl Van Vechten, September 11, 1922, folder 2, Berg Collection MSS.
41. Madelyn Detloff, “Camp Orlando (or) *Orlando*,” *Modernism/modernity* 23, no.1 (2016): 18–22, 18, emphasis in original.
42. See Bredbeck, “Narcissus in the Wilde,” 54–58.
43. Ronald Firbank to Carl Van Vechten, June 29, 1922, folder 1, Berg Collection MSS.
44. Carl Van Vechten to Ronald Firbank, July 12, 1922, folder 1, Berg Collection MSS.
45. See Kaye, *The Flirt’s Tragedy*, 179.
46. Ronald R. Butters, “Cary Grant and the Emergence of *Gay* Homosexual,” *Dictionaries: Journal of the Dictionary Society of North America* 19 (1998): 188–204, 189. See also Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 286.
47. See Butters, “Cary Grant,” 188–89.
48. Gertrude Stein, *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein*, ed. Carl Van Vechten (New York: Random House, 1946), 497.
49. See Marjorie Perloff’s discussion of how Stein’s repetition of “gay” generates new meanings within her own lexicon in *Poetic License: Essays on Modernist and Postmodernist Lyric* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1990), 151–53. Writing to Stein in 1936, Van Vechten singles this story out for inclusion in the Modern Library of America anthology of Stein’s work he is editing.

50. Ronald Firbank to Carl Van Vechten, December 2, 1922, folder 2, Berg Collection MSS.
51. See Meyer, "Under the Sign of Wilde," 83–88.
52. Arthur Symons, "The Decadent Movement in Literature," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, November 1893, 858–67, 859.
53. See Deutsch, "Robust Body and Social Souls," 471–72.
54. Carl Van Vechten, "Pastiches et Pistaches," *Reviewer* 3 (1922): 454–59, 458–59.
55. See Van Vechten, *Excavations*, 172. Please note that the first four sentences originally appeared in the 1922 "Ronald Firbank" essay in *The Double-Dealer* and are republished here with minor alterations (185).
56. See Carl Van Vechten, *The Blind Bow-Boy* (London: Grant Richards, 1923), 135.
57. Ronald Firbank to Carl Van Vechten, June 29, 1922, folder 2, Berg Collection MSS.
58. Carl Van Vechten to Ronald Firbank, August 20, 1922, folder 2, Berg Collection MSS.
59. See Philip Moeller, "Letter to Van Vechten," in *Ronald Firbank: A Memoir*, ed. Ifan Kyrle Fletcher (London: Duckworth, 1930), 82–84. Van Vechten acknowledged this letter with delight on July 15, 1924: see *Letters of Carl Van Vechten*, ed. Bruce Kellner (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 66.
60. Ronald Firbank to Carl Van Vechten, December 17, 1925, folder 4, Berg Collection MSS.
61. Sarah Barnhill, "Method in Madness: Ronald Firbank's *The Flower Beneath the Foot*," *English Literature in Transition, 1880–1920* 32, no. 3 (1989): 191–300, 291.
62. Marsha Bryant and Douglas Mao, "Camp Modernism Introduction," in "Camp Modernism," ed. Marsha Bryant and Douglas Mao, special issue, *Modernism/modernity* 23, no. 1 (2016): 1–4, 4.
63. Ronald Firbank to Carl Van Vechten, December 17, 1925, folder 4, Berg Collection MSS.
64. Ronald Firbank, *The New Rythum in The New Rythum and Other Pieces* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1962), 100, 77.
65. T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, in *The Poems of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue (London: Faber and Faber, 2015), 1:53–78, 63, lines 215–17, 220, 217.
66. See Vincent Sherry, *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 264.
67. See Esther Newton, "Role Models," in *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality*, 39–53, 50.
68. Carl Van Vechten, Carl Van Vechten Papers, box 113, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library, New York; Van Vechten to Firbank, May 20, 1922; Carl Van Vechten to Ronald Firbank, May 24, 1922, folder 1, Berg Collection MSS.
69. Carl Van Vechten, *Parties: Scenes from Contemporary New York Life* (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Press, 1993), 13.
70. See Caserio, "Queer Modernism," 205.