

BARON CORVO

He ran out of funds, he ran out of friends, he ran out of everything but an almost total self-absorption.

Impoverished, paranoid, sexually perverted, raging against the world, a sad figure of a man died in Venice in 1912 at the age of fifty-two. He had failed at every career he undertook, priest, photographer, artist, novelist, gondolier, pornographer -- by any reckoning the waters of the lagoon should have closed over him and total oblivion claimed him. Not at all. He has been the subject of nearly a dozen books, writers from all points of the cultural spectrum -- Graham Greene, W. H. Auden, Pamela Hansford Johnson -- have written of him, a play based on his best novel had a Broadway run a few years ago. Nothing succeeds like failure.

Frederick Rolfe came into the Church in his late twenties and despite his age became a student for the priesthood, but he was dropped after a year. Another bishop took him up and he was sent to the Scots College in Rome. This time he lasted less than a year before being expelled, literally -- his bed with him still in it was taken out onto the street and left there.

But if the man was thus taken out of the seminary, the seminary was never taken out of the man. He came to style himself Baron Corvo, a wholly bogus title, but his abiding image of himself was as the priest he

never was. The most often reprinted photograph of Rolfe shows him in biretta, cassock, Roman collar and cloak. This priest manqué avenged himself on reality with an extraordinary novel, *Hadrian VII*, the story of an English pope who is none other than Frederick Rolfe under the name of George Arthur Rose.

In every genre there are unfinished works which are cherished more than most completed ones. There are unfinished symphonies, there are the *Pensées* of Pascal, notes for the great apologetic work he never wrote, there is the *Summa theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas. Analogously, there are works that survive only in fragments but are nonetheless ranked among the greatest, like Aristotle's *Poetics* and the poems of Sappho. Failed artists, like prodigals, are often preferred in somewhat the same way uncompleted masterworks are.

The fame of Rimbaud and F. Scott Fitzgerald owes much to our sense of what they might have been. Fitzgerald died at 44 when none of his works could be found in a bookstore. A decade after his death all his books were all in print again and they still are. The attraction Frederick Rolfe exercises on so many is a little like that, but there is more. The more is his Catholicism, twisted, grotesque, almost unrecognizable at the end, but always the pulse beneath the skin of what he wrote.

Corvo made his mark in the *fin de siècle* literary circles of London, being associated with *The Yellow Book*, many of whose contributors began

or ended as Catholics -- Henry Harland, author of *The Cardinal's Snuff Box*, Oscar Wilde, Ambrose Beardsley, and Frederick Rolfe. *Stories Toto Told Me*, are whimsical pieces replete with archaic spelling, latinisms and an effete outlook, which were much appreciated at the time. Rolfe published a sequel *In His Own Image* in 1900. Frederick Baron Corvo had not yet become the principal subject of his own fiction.

His most ambitious novels, *Hadrian VII* and *The Desire and Pursuit of the Whole*, are (in the case of the latter) a fictionalized account of his own life or (in the case of the former) a compensatory idealization, also known as wishful thinking. Always obsessively present in the foreground is the soul of the author. It is a sick soul.

Early in *Hadrian VII*, George Arthur Rose, Rolfe's *alter ego* makes a general confession which, for all its self-accusation is an extended exercise in self-praise. The spurned acolyte is courted by bishops, apologized to by an obsequious cardinal, finally elected pope. Only governance of the whole Church and a choir of craven cardinals could imaginatively make up for Rolfe's clipped clerical career. Compared to the hero of *The Desire and Pursuit*, however, the Rolfe of *Hadrian VII* is in great spiritual and psychological shape.

The Desire and Pursuit was written in Venice. Rolfe had been taken there as a friend's guest and he was destined never to leave the city alive. See Venice and die, indeed. He ran out of funds, he ran out of

friends, he ran out of everything but an almost total self-absorption. The novel is an extended *j'accuse*, detailing the treachery and betrayal of which Rolfe, all innocent, has been the victim. To read it is to gain admission to at least an antechamber of hell.

Among the former benefactors pilloried in the Venetian novel -- it is a tale of bitten hands -- is Monsignor Robert Hugh Benson. Oddly, most who have written on the matter accept Rolfe's claim that Benson betrayed him. No one who reads Martindale's life of Benson could possibly think him guilty of anything more than excessive patience with a non-collaborating collaborator. They had agreed to do a life of Thomas à Becket together. Rolfe simply did not do anything on the project. Eventually, at the suggestion of the editor, Benson proposed dropping Rolfe's name from the title page but acknowledging his help. Only Frederick Rolfe could have been surprised that his failure to write the chapters he had agreed to write could have had any other result.

The ultimate puzzle about Frederick Rolfe, Baron Corvo, lies in the so-called "Venetian Letters." These are homosexual pornography in the form of letters to a British pervert in the hope of raising money. To such disfavor had this spoiled priest come. *Corruptio optimi pessima*? Not quite. From the beginning Rolfe's claim to a vocation seems to have sprung from a desire to dress up and star in liturgical spectacles.

Fiction arises from the oddest sources, but stories that feature the

writer are not always of much interest to readers. Frederick Rolfe is far more studied than Robert Hugh Benson, a better writer, but this is largely due to the fascination of his almost diabolical personality. Rolfe's novels are read as documents about himself, not as imaginative inquiries into the meaning of human existence.

We are told that Rolfe received the last sacraments. God rest his soul. And keep *Hadrian VII* in print.