

Quarantine Journal

NOTES FROM INSIDE

Wish Fulfillment

May 17, 2020

ORANGE COUNTY, VERMONT—Frederick Rolfe's *Hadrian the Seventh*

(<https://archive.org/details/hadrianseventhooorolf>) is the greatest work of wish fulfillment I know. Written in 1904, the novel's central character, George Rose—a stand-in for the author—is a struggling writer and failed candidate for the priesthood, beset with debts and enemies. But unlike his author, who would starve to death in Venice a decade later, Rose achieves everything he wants. He is elected to the papacy; as the beloved Pope Hadrian VII, he vanquishes both personal foes and the oppressors of humanity. He reorganizes the political boundaries of the world, in part by reviving the Holy Roman Empire, and as a side lark he invents color photography.

Rolfe belongs to a set of turn-of-the-century bijoux writers—Oscar Wilde, Ronald Firbank, Saki—who, writing at a time when homosexuality was illegal and hazardous, achieved their greatest stylistic convolutions when describing the beauty of young men. I first read *Hadrian* in college, when I rarely admitted to myself how much I wished to touch the girls whose white shoulders bent over their books in the library carrels next to mine. I had grown up in an evangelical Christian community and, like the intensely Catholic Rolfe, I saw my queerness as a sin. Rolfe's vision of the omnipotent, asexual Hadrian, coolly admiring handsome youths without being tempted, drew me in.

Rereading *Hadrian* in self-quarantine, finally happy in my queerness, I see that the details of Hadrian's triumphant life are so clear because they are crystallized out of Rolfe's failure and solitude. Rolfe spent nearly twenty years in self-imposed isolation before he wrote *Hadrian*, and his life is a warning of what happens when we spend too much lonely time building up our wishes.

Hadrian begins with the hero, Rose, acting like many of us during our current sheltering in place: "near collapse," so unable to work that "the mere sight of his writing materials filled him with disgust." A Catholic convert who uses a moonstone rosary and is wearing his great-great-grandfather's silver spectacles, Rose eats, exercises and sleeps without leaving his tiny room. He receives an unexpected visit from a cardinal who asks him to explain why he never became, as he had wished, a priest. Rose explains that he was kicked out of two divinity schools after malicious enemies spread lies about him, after which he drew "a sharp line across my life," cutting off everyone he thought had been a friend but who hadn't supported him. He was left with almost no one.

The cardinal apologizes on behalf of the Church, invites Rose to receive holy orders and whisks the new Father Rose to Rome. The former pope had died, and Rose arrives just in time to crowd into what Rolfe insists on spelling the Xystine Chapel for the announcement of the new pope. The cardinal's visit had been no coincidence—he had fetched Rose as the secret candidate elect.

The new Pope Hadrian changes into white robes, “tuck[s] His Handkerchief into His left sleeve” and immediately begins to reform the papacy. He starts with his living quarters, ordering the servants to cover their walls and ceilings with brown-packing paper. Hadrian keeps only the furnishings he needs, selling all the Vatican's treasures (“the collection of lace alone fetched £785,000”) and giving the money to the poor. Hadrian's orders are described in hallucinatory detail. My favorite line of the book is when Pope Hadrian “whispered explicit directions” to his majordomo about renovations to his private bathroom—even while he was trying to be discrete, Rolfe needed to let readers know that he had thought through everything.

But from the moment of his election, Hadrian is in pain. “Ouf! How it hurts!” he thinks as “the arrows of cardinalial eyes impinged upon Him” while they kiss his foot during the ceremony of adoration. By the last third of the book, barely a year into his papacy, Hadrian finds life “an ever-present horror.” Rolfe had always dreamt of having everyone's attention, but this dream was also his nightmare. He feared that the attention he longed for would reveal his secret, his (in the words used to describe another character in *Hadrian*) “acrid pungent permanent want, not-to-be-named.” Even when writing a novel whose plot fulfilled all his wishes, he could not imagine a world in which he could have sex with a man without shame. Fittingly, the novel's most erotic imagery comes in a feverish, disconnected section where a character describes seeing anarchists pushing kidnapped aristocratic youth from a high window.

I grew up convinced that if I consummated my desire, death would be the result. I would die to God. Claiming my desire was a life-and-death struggle—and now, in quarantine, it has been taken away from me. Instead of doing what I want to do, I daydream about what I'm missing. But instead of relieving me of my desires, the daydreams only inflame them.

Rereading *Hadrian* helped me see why my quarantine daydreams are so unsatisfying. It's not just that we can't physically experience the pleasures we fantasize about; it's also that the only way to imagine having everything you want is to imagine being utterly alone. As soon as you are close enough to someone to consider their desires as important as your own, you can't get your way all of the time. Only in isolation can you to control the whole narrative of your life.

Rolfe died in 1913, penniless after having fallen from too many graces. He never found companionship; he was never closer to anyone than he allows us, his readers, to get to him through the distorting lens of his alter ego. In one of the novel's most lyrical passages, Rolfe describes Hadrian's “favourite dream of being invisible and stark-naked and fitted with great white feathery wings, flying with the movement of swimming among and above men, seeing and seeing and seeing, easily and enormously swooping.” At home, endlessly scrolling through the news, I feel like this too: in total control, but only by virtue of my total disconnection. I hope, soon, I can take off my imaginary wings and push among the crowd of competing desires once more.

—ERIN THOMPSON (<https://thepointmag.com/author/erin-thompson/>)