

Another Note On Cabell

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Commercialism has destroyed literature in the United States with a thoroughness to which Puritanism never pretended. The latter merely emasculated the artist; the former has removed his spinal column altogether. Criticism has been eliminated, for who will pay for it? The publisher, and the newspaper which lives on his advertisements, wants every book to sell: therefore, the reviewer must confound them all in a common *Te Deum*. The result has been in the case of James Branch Cabell that practically nobody, even among his admirers, has any idea of what he has tried to write.

My first introduction to him was *Beyond Life*. I was pleased, got *Jurgen*, and recognized at once that a new star of the first magnitude had arisen. But I did not connect the two books; I was rather annoyed to find one Horvendile recur. I had no suspicion that Horvendile was one of the principal characters in an epic of unprecedented scope. Now that I have read a number of Cabell's books, it is clear that each, though independent, is also one piece of a vast jig-saw puzzle. I have now sufficient of these sections to begin to perceive dimly the design of the gigantic picture of the Universe which he has undertaken.

We have had Homer and others to combine the affairs of gods and men in a single epos; we have had Balzac and others to combine the affairs of various families. But Cabell has done far more than either of these types of artist. He has taken the ideal forces of the Universe, and shown their relations with mankind over a period of many centuries, from the legendary demi-gods of Poictesme to the inhabitants of present-day Virginia. He has set no limits to his canvas; and while every detail

is exact and brilliant, it retains its proper subordination to the complete Idea.

It is impossible to convey the effect of the fertility of Cabell's invention. He creates so many characters, and furnishes them with so many biographical and bibliographical details, that one is utterly bewildered to decide whether—in the "historical" or even "folk-lore" sense—such people existed or no. The mythology itself is partly conventional and partly imaginative; and one cannot draw the line. Nor is there any criterion of reality by which one can distinguish between Koshchei, who made things as they are, Helen of Troy and Guinevere of Caerlaon, Manuel the Redeemer and Count Emmerick of Poictesme, and the Musgraves, Charterises, and Thurstons, of Lichfield, U.S.A. President Roosevelt is introduced—a figure no less and no more fantastic than Mother Sereda.

One perceives that Cabell has outwitted the Lords of Illusion: the ideas derived from our impressions are as objective to him as the apparent external causes of those impressions. He gives us a direct presentation of the substance of the Universe as a spiritual reality. The adventures of Jurgen are the futile wish-phantasms proper to an elderly pawnbroker who failed to be a poet; those of Manuel are the romantic dreams of a boy with a genius for sculpture. These fairy stories are thus realistic psychology no less than the meditations of the philanthropist in *The Cords of Vanity*. Equally, the doings of Virginian society are symbolic parables, eternal in their application. There is no veil between the so-called material world and that of pure Romance of Idea. The most solid human being may at any moment find himself in touch with some personified Theorem of Philosophy: one plane interpenetrates and influences the other without interfering with it or challenging its claim to existence. Thus we are shown, exactly as in our own experience, the continuity of Nature. Our dreams and our desires are, on the one hand, symbols of our "actual" life

determined (as to form) by the contents of our intellectual storehouse; on the other, they are graphic glyphs of the true self which lurks behind normal consciousness. For it is not wholly true to say that the Ego projects the non-Ego, as Fichte and the Advaitists maintain, nor that the Ego is an imaginary synthesis of the non-Ego, as Schelling and the Buddhists declare. Both positions are equally true and equally false; reality exists in every idea, in one sense of another. If what we see and hear be "true," in the Victorian interpretation, the quintessence of our impressions must be so no less. Nor does Berkeleyan idealism destroy the reality of the objects of sense; for since God has chosen to think them, they exist. No writer previous to Cabell has made this manifest; and his demonstration is only the more convincing for the admirably artistic form of his expression.

The above thesis is a necessary preliminary to any proper study of Cabell; only when it is assimilated is it possible to estimate either the scope and purpose of his work, or its ultimate implication.

We may then proceed to sum up the essence of his philosophy. He has done exactly what the Buddha did long since; he has investigated the Universe in detail and as a whole, and he has come to the same conclusion, "Everything is sorrow." But, like Buddha once more, he has failed to perceive that Sorrow is itself an illusion. Nothing is worth having, nothing is worth keeping, nothing is worth trying for: true, but only in part. Every being must come ultimately to Nothing, for there is nothing for it to attain. Every curve is closed. Every equation must cancel out to zero. Yet every being has only to rid itself of Desire, to follow out its own natural course without hankering after false ideals: so soon as it learns how to do this, sorrow disappears. "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law." Sorrow arises from our failure to understand ourselves, to calculate our proper orbit, to acquiesce in our true identity. Once we realize our relation to the Universe, the sum of things

becomes part of our own Selfhood. We cease to interfere in the necessary order of Illusions, and the collisions which have hurt us in the past no longer occur. It is true that the total is Nothing; but what we call Ourselves is merely a symbolic manifestation of Nothing as a system of equal and opposite forces. The true Self is enabled to become conscious of itself by this method, and the rest of the Universe is the complement of that Self. Each phenomenon with which we come into contact affords an opportunity for the appropriate part of the Self to unite with it by "love under will"; and each such act is an ecstasy. It destroys the yearning of that part, satisfies its hunger for completeness, and at the same time as it destroys itself, it adds to the Self that part of the Universe with which it unites in mystic marriage.

Now Cabell has not yet arrived at this annihilation of the Universal Sorrow. He sees only the futility and hopelessness of all endeavour. Yet this conclusion is based upon a strictly intellectual enquiry into Nature; and indeed, his position is impregnable by strictly rational artillery. He has, notwithstanding this, an instinct that there is a deeper form of perception. He cannot justify his spiritual sense by any appeal to reason, experience, or philosophy; but the ineradicable intuition is always present. He is compelled to admit despite himself that there is a sense in which life is worth living. Thus Rudolph Musgrave, the quiet, dignified gentleman of Virginia; Manuel, the heroic saviour of Poictesme, and Perion, the romantic lover of Dame Melicent, can each say in his own way: "Things gained are gone, but great things done endure." The noble Ideal and the courageous determination to live up to it, the high holding to Honour and the scorn of Circumstance: these things are unreasonable, unphilosophical, ridiculous. The goal is glamour, the path is puerile and perilous. The premises are absurd, and the conclusion fatuous. Yet somehow this insane intensity of devotion to imaginary idols fashioned in one's own likeness makes life seem valuable,

and—"death is the crown of all." It is the formula given in the Book of the Law.

To know one's true Will, and to do it; that is the secret of Life. It is absurd, from the standpoint of common sense, to love a woman who is no different from thousands of others, and is in any case mortal, to build a temple which Time will destroy, to fight for a kingdom which must certainly perish, to write a poem which hardly a dozen men living will appreciate, and become the prey of Oblivion, to aspire to any achievement on a planet which is doomed to extinction, to take any interest whatever in a Universe so vast, callous, and unintelligible. Yet it is worth while to dismiss all these mocking demons of thought, and to perform every act with utter faith and love, as if it were the sole and supreme sacrament.

Cabell is himself a sublime protagonist of this theory of life, which his enormous intellectual range, and piercing perception, constantly mock. He has toiled unceasingly to erect the cathedral of his life-work to the god whom he well knows to be the fantastic figment of his adolescent follies. He has builded it of his own brain and bone, moistening the mortar with his heart's blood. Year after year he has laboured, while humanity passed him by with indifference or contempt, until, with *Jurgen*, the superb spire, it became impossible to ignore him any longer, and the only policy was persecution. With smiling scorn he has gone on, and added, with *Figures of Earth*, the noble foursquare Tower of Manuel; and now, at last, in his latest book, *The Lineage of Lichfield*, he has revealed this architectural plan, showing how every detail of the mighty structure is of necessity of the whole.

It is out of the question, within the limits of an essay, to do more than indicate a few points of the technical accomplishment which has subserved the majestic conception. But much of Cabell's work demands the highest intelligence and the broadest knowledge from

his readers. The humour of some passages, the sublimity of others, can only be appreciated by those whose studies enable them to grasp the character of the allusions. He sometimes criticises an entire period of history or literature by a single paragraph of exquisite subtlety. He invents authors and statesmen by the score, giving specimens of their work which illuminate the conditions of human society and thought as has never been done—and one is only too liable to miss the whole purport of his page, from ignorance or carelessness. I have read and re-read these books again and again; every fresh application of the mind has revealed a new vision of beauty, wit, nobility, or wisdom. And I still feel that I have failed to reach the deepest and holiest sanctuaries of his thought. In *Jurgen* and *Figures of Earth*, especially, I am confident that there is an unfathomable well of Truth of which I have yet drunk but a few sparkling cupfuls. From personal correspondence, indeed, I feel certain that Cabell himself has written "as he was inspired by the Holy Ghost" more subtly and stupendously than his own intelligence is aware. It may be that so colossal a conception as his can never be wholly comprehended by the conscious mind. Certain characters, for instance, such as Manuel's wife, Horvendile, Ahasuerus, Anaitis, Freydis and Beda—the last especially when identified with Mimir—baffle by their simplicity and profundity. One cannot bring into clear consciousness why they really are. Again, one feels the organic necessity of the sequence of certain events without being able to satisfy one's philosophical reason about them. Yet again, there are problems connected with the plane of being on which various characters manifest which leave one eagerly dubious.

In Cabell's technique there are two principal features of exceptional interest and significance. One is the insidious introduction of rhythmical, riming and antistrophic forms. These give an almost uncanny quality to the texture of the tapestry; besides their beauty and their

power to exalt the soul, they possess a magical faculty of conveying fine shades of meaning and of enlightening the mind by suggesting allusions to history, literature or philosophy which enrich the explicit expression in an indescribably effective manner.

The other feature is the employment of repetitions. Some apparently casual phrase is made to recur throughout a volume in such a way as to alter the values of the episodes in which it occurs with the most magical effect. It is impossible to explain exactly how the miracle is worked; one can only say that the theme is rendered coherent and ineluctable. The use of the "leit-motif" by Wagner is a very crude prototype of Cabell's device.

Throughout the epos, there is an almost constant consciousness of the relativity of time and space, of their subjectivity. They are perceived from without, as being merely conditions through the postulation of which existence makes itself manifest. We are led to realize that the events of the past and the future are presented to us in sequence for the sake of convenience; they are contributions to our knowledge of a self which is independent of them. One's first love-affair and one's death merely help one to form a mental concept of one's self, just as one's head and one's feet do in another way. All Jurgen's adventures, whether he is traveling backward in time to the Garden between Dawn and Sunrise, or forward to postmortem conditions, are just so many windows through which he may behold himself. Manuel's "Month of Years" with the Head of Misery is no longer or shorter than Jurgen's "replevined Wednesday"; both episodes are alike facets of the souls of their respective heroes. So, too, the various scenes of our experience are not in reality separated in space; everything occurs in one place and at one time—or, rather in no place at no time at all. The apparent dividuality is only a matter of the convenience of dramatic representation. This may perhaps be clearer if we use an analogy. The let-

ters of the word l-i-o-n are separate in space and sequence; but this is merely the accident of the method chosen by us to represent the idea of a lion. None of the letters, moreover, is by itself connected with the idea. So, none of our experiences is a direct expression of ourselves; but their sum, interpreted in the light of our knowledge of the hieroglyphic language of which they are letters, is an intelligible artistic symbol thereof.

Thus we find Cabell constantly breaking up the conventions of human experience in order to demonstrate the ultimate independence of true Self-Consciousness. He enables us to become free from our natural tendency to mistake the alphabet of the intellect for the Word of the Soul. He makes Life intelligible by releasing it from the obsession that any of its phenomena are in themselves finally significant. Yet he avoids the pitfall of the ordinary mystic; he does not tell us that any experience, even the slightest, is "illusion." Every impression that we receive is, like the letters of l-i-o-n, a necessary term in our Personal Equation, although its function only applies indirectly and symbolically, having no true meaning in itself.

This intrinsic depth of Cabell's thought is to be found, in one way or another, in all his writing. Here it is only possible to explore tentatively the main branch of the Mammoth Cave of his mind; his philosophy leads into many obscure and tortuous side-issues. Equally there is apparently no limit to the range of his raids upon humanity; time, race and caste oppose no barriers to his forays.

It is for these reasons that this brief introduction may be summed in the statement that he is at once the most ambitious, the best worth study, of living authors. To attempt to do more would be presumptuous and futile; each man for himself must bring his own bucket to these springs of deep yet sparkling water. It is no unworthy service to mankind to urge it to look for light to the nebula of James Branch Cabell.