

JAMES BRANCH CABELL  
AND THE COMEDY OF  
SKEPTICAL CONSERVATISM

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When, in 1937, Peter Munro Jack evaluated the "James Branch Cabell Period," he charged Cabell and his period with irresponsible escapism.<sup>1</sup> Jack was apparently still irritated by the excessive claims some had made for Cabell in the twenties; today, however, few critics can be accused of placing an excessive value on Cabell, and we can look at his work afresh. If we do so, if we look past the stereotypes created by friendly and unfriendly critics, we can see that his work is not escapist, and that it embodies a conservative social philosophy much like that of his critical patron H. L. Mencken.

It is difficult to do justice to Mencken's thought today, when "conservatism" is most often a cloak for the perceived interests of the American upper-middle-class, and when most serious conservative thinkers belong to one of two schools, "organic" or "libertarian," the one stemming from Burke and the other from Locke. Mencken's conservatism is anti-idealistic, based on a radical skepticism that sees the world as ill-made but irreparable; with him it is temperamental rather than systematic, although as a world-view it is at least as old as the Greek Sophists. Our American preference for an ideological two-party system may be outraged, but Mencken is intellectually consistent in ridiculing the ideals of both Rotary and the New Deal, in scorning both Warren Gamaliel Harding and any who believe "that human beings may be made over by changing the rules under which they live, that progress is a matter of intent and foresight, that an act of Parliament can cure the blunders and check the practical joking of God."<sup>2</sup>

Mencken's praise of Cabell is likewise neither inconsistent nor inexplicable, as it might seem if we think of Mencken only as the critical sponsor of Dreiser and Lewis. There was a real ideological affinity between them, and it reveals itself in Cabell's novels both in his excursions into topical satire and in the very structure of his fictional universe. In Cabell's non-fiction, he sometimes echoes Mencken's manner as well as his attitudes. Thus in Beyond Life (1919), a Cabell spokesman says, "We live under a government which purports to be based, actually, on the assumption that one man is as good as another. No human being believes this

assumption to be true, of course, nor could any form of polity that seriously regarded it survive a week."<sup>3</sup>

Cabell is more himself and more successful in his novels, and there the most obvious evidence of his affinity with Mencken is the topical satire which dates many of his best novels. Cabell's targets are Mencken's. The traveling hero of Jurgen (1919) is momentarily conquered by the Puritan folk of Philistia, a land ruled by priests and women, "where all must do what seems expected of them."<sup>4</sup> Dom Manuel of Figures of Earth (1921) also visits Philistia and explains to his wife that while they are there they must have their children brought by the stork: "The point is that the babies of the Philistines are brought to them by the stork; and that even an allusion to the possibility of misguided persons obtaining a baby in any other way these Philistines consider to be offensive and lewd and lascivious and obscene."<sup>5</sup> Of all the offenses of American Puritanism, Mencken took its legacy of Prohibition most personally; in Jurgen, Cabell has St. Peter indignantly recall an eminent bishop who had sought admission to Heaven -- "and I with the full record of his work for temperance, all fairly written out and in my hand! . . . To my face he spoke against the first of my Master's miracles, and against the last injunction which was laid on us Twelve" (312).

Dealing with general matters like Puritanism and Prohibition, Cabell does not match the ferocity of the master. He is less gentle with the person and Administration of the President whom Mencken had named the Archangel Woodrow. In Jurgen, Wilson appears as the fallen angel Satan, ruling over a Hell where the religion "is patriotism, and the government is an enlightened democracy" (278). The enlightened democrats are fighting to make the universe safe from a celestial autocracy. Some of the younger devils, noting that Satan has held absolute power for the several thousand years of the war emergency, begin to whisper that this is not ideal democracy; their infuriated elders tear them to bits. Jurgen explains to Satan "that a devil whose patriotism has been impugned is a devil to be punished; and that there is no time to be prying into irrelevant questions of his guilt or innocence" (281). In Figures of Earth Cabell has an eagle (presumably American) try out cries: "There is such a thing as being too proud to fight," "The only enduring peace is a peace without victory," "All persons who oppose me have pygmy minds," and "If everybody does not do exactly as I order, the heart of the world will be broken." The eagle finally gives up in disgust, "for none of these axioms pleased him, and he no longer admired the pedagogue who had invented them" (79).

Mencken's rejection of Franklin Delano Roosevelt was of a piece with his rejection of Wilson, but in the twenties he swam with the tide; in the thirties he swam against it. His attitude toward the New Deal probably contributed to Mencken's loss of reputation and influence in the thirties. Cabell's fortunes waned with those of Mencken, and his attitude toward the new order was similar. In The King Was in His Counting House (1938), it

is the bad prince Lorenzo who echoes the rhetoric of F. D. R.: "'It is the deficit of today,' Lorenzo was used to declare, 'which is making possible the surplus of tomorrow.' And this sound principle of economics was applauded by every one of his barons who enjoyed a state pension."<sup>6</sup>

Cabell's topical satire shows that he shared with Mencken a rejection of certain aspects of American society. His passages of topical satire are not, however, part of the essential action of the novels in which they appear, and in isolation they can justify no statement about the essence of Cabell's thought. Rejection may well lead to escapism, and Cabell's own aesthetic pronouncements often suggest such an intent. Cabell's spokesman in Beyond Life prescribes Romance, "an attitude which views life with profound distrust as a business of exceeding dullness and of very little worth. . . . To the problem of living, romance propounds the only possible answer, which is, not understanding, but escape."<sup>7</sup> How seriously Cabell means any of the views in Beyond Life is unclear, but he returns to this position in his last book, arguing that all fiction "is escapist in that it frees the reader from the set round of his daily living."<sup>8</sup>

This romantic escapism does find its place in the novels, in their heroes' "fixed predisposition to go upon a quest or journey."<sup>9</sup> Yet Cabell's novels are not escapist but anti-escapist. His heroes fail in their quest, and their failure is comic rather than tragic. Outside of the novels, Cabell may have advocated Romance, but within the novels there is one unvarying comedy. Horvendile, the author's alter ego in several novels, sees three acts: "The first act is the imagining of a place where contentment exists and may be come to; and the second act reveals the striving toward, and the third act the falling short of, that shining goal" -- or else the attaining of it, to discover that it too is unsatisfactory.<sup>10</sup> Cabell's heroes return, having learned their lesson, to accept what they cannot admire. Mencken grasped this point better than many a subsequent critic when he called Cabell "the most acidulous of all the anti-romantics."<sup>11</sup>

Jurgen is Cabell's best-known novel and the only one still in print. As such, it is the natural test case for any interpretation of Cabell. Let us notice, then, that Jurgen's adventures start when his verses praising the existence of evil please Koshchei, who made things as they are (and hence, can feel neither pride nor love). Koshchei takes away Jurgen's wife, Dame Lisa, an obvious impediment to his poetry. Koshchei would make an odd patron for a romantic, but Jurgen is not really a romantic. Witless Mother Sereda is soon tricked into restoring to him his youthful body, but Jurgen retains his middle-aged soul. His journey is in part a quest for "justice" -- Arvin Wells argues that this means satisfaction for his "yearnings for love, beauty, and holiness"<sup>12</sup> -- but it is also a quest for Dame Lisa. At the novel's end, he does not find "justice," for Koshchei, who made things as they are, has nothing to do with justice. Jurgen does regain Dame Lisa. He is not satisfied, but he is content.

Joe Lee Davis has spoken of parts of Jurgen's journey as "a skeptic's negative, pragmatic tests of great historical systems of value or ways of life."<sup>13</sup> We may add that the particular value systems Jurgen tests are the great romantic ideals: the chivalry of Glathion, the passion of Cocaigne, the romance of Leuke<sup>14</sup>, the pride of Hell and the love of Heaven. Moreover, Jurgen does not merely find them finally unsatisfactory; even in Heaven, he misses the common-place reality he left behind. In Cocaigne, where he is the Prince Consort of a fertility goddess, and where the only law is "Do that which seems good to you" (152), Jurgen deliberately recreates the life of quiet domesticity which he had left behind.

Jurgen also settles down to the domestic life in Leuke (with a hamadryad) and even Hell (with a vacationing vampire). To do so is to mock his self-proclaimed search for "justice." It is not the only way in which he betrays his quest; often the very word is used to mean the attainment of less transcendent but more urgent goals than the "love, beauty, and holiness" claimed for him by Arvin Wells: As he rides away from a maiden he has chivalrously rescued and less chivalrously seduced, Jurgen reflects complacently, "She is a splendid woman, that Dame Yolande; and it is a comfort to reflect I have seen justice was done to her" (82). When he has treacherously slain a rival, "Justice is satisfied and all is as it should be" (51). One is tempted to conclude that there is a kind of justice in Jurgen's failure. In any event, the limitations which invalidate the romantic ideals Jurgen tests are those of his own all too human nature as well as of existence. Koshchei is not unlike Mencken's blundering God, and Jurgen is a Menckian man, whose nature cannot be changed by changing the society in which he moves.

Jurgen is a many-sided novel -- no doubt it would be inappropriate to do it "justice" -- but it should be clear that one of its implicit morals is that what is, is not good, but that what might be, would be no better. In the world of this novel, there is no romantic past to retreat to and no clear road of progress. This is a conservative position but one which urges acceptance of the status quo not because it satisfies but because there is no hope for something better, because there can be no escape.

A man unable to escape to an ideal world may yet aspire to success in this world. The theme of Figures of Earth, the immediate successor of Jurgen, is the hollowness of such success. Those who succeed are unworthy, and they get no satisfaction from their success. A swineherd at the novel's start, its hero ends as Count Manuel, the Redeemer of Poictesme. He moves through a world of medieval legend; after his death his own life becomes a religious legend, the growth of which Cabell chronicles in The Silver Stallion (1926). But Manuel is no true hero. Edmund Wilson has not unfairly described him as "an ambitious man of action who is cowardly, malignant and treacherous."<sup>14</sup> He uses all who come near him, and

his great deeds are shams. He does not even redeem Poictesme himself, but has it done for him by an imported lot of divine Redeemers.

Manuel wishes to make a figure in the world, and he is not satisfied. At the novel's end, he sees his own strivings and those of all men as "the strivings of an ape reft of his tail, and grown rusty at climbing" (289; cf. 39). Like Jurgen, he meets in his travels women who embody various romantic possibilities, but such contentment as he finds in life he finds with the ugly and stupid Naifer and in the by-no-means-remarkable children of that marriage. For the sake of Niafer, he betrays Queen Freydis (creative imagination); for the sake of his daughter Melicent, he slays Suskind (divine discontent, the Id).

Manuel's story is not simply about worldly success -- the acts of his disciples in Silver Stallion suggest that his career is meant to parallel that of Christ and other divine Redeemers -- but in so far as it is about worldly success, it implies that one's common lot cannot be significantly bettered. The simple worldly comforts which appeal to man's animal nature satisfy him best, and Jurgen was right to reject three queens to regain the cooking, baking and sewing of Dame Lisa. Cabell's comedy is a comedy of acceptance. That part of this is an acceptance of one's society is made more explicit in three later Cabell novels, the little-known Heirs and Assigns trilogy.

In the first and best of these novels, The King Was in His Counting House (1938), Cabell uses the history of the Medici, changing names and treating history with something of the florid freedom of Jacobean dramatists (vii-ix). Its hero is Cesario, the youngest of Duke Ferdinand's four sons. Unwilling to become his father's pawn in the complex game of Renaissance politics, Cesario flees to the magical Forest of Branlon, the true home of all minor poets. Years later, the dying Ferdinand decides that Cesario's surviving brother, Lorenzo, is proving unsatisfactory. The unwilling Cesario is summoned home to take over the kingdom and carry on Ferdinand's work.

Cesario's story is a typically Cabellian version of Toynbee's withdrawal-and-return, one in which the chief figure returns to maintain the social order rather than change it. His father is a more thoughtful Coolidge rather than an F. D. R. When Ferdinand first ascends the throne, Cesario predicts that "he may find starved Melpé an exorbitant mistress" (7). He does in fact give up his life to it. He represents, then, a complete acceptance of social responsibility. Ferdinand rules with "mildness and thrift" (153), making few wars, inflicting injustice only when necessary for the state's welfare. Warring nobles are suppressed, and grafting state officials are gilded publicly. He is careful to encourage trade and pays meticulous attention to fiscal matters -- as the book's title indicates. His last words to Cesario are "But this, this is important. In regard to the custom duties upon Spanish wines . . ." (237).

Ferdinand accepts the demands of reality and works to make life more comfortable for his people in the crude material way which reality allows. The people respond more warmly to the romantic prince Lorenzo, a patron of the arts who cultivates a brilliant court life and almost bankrupts the country. To Ferdinand, Lorenzo is a failure and Cesario must be summoned. So under "the tyranny of time and common-sense . . . Cesario becomes Ferdinand" (300). He is "doomed henceforward to live as a useful member of society" (300). He is to do away with corruption in the courts, make fiscal reforms, balance the budget, increase the navy, maintain a sound foreign policy and give his "entire attention to state affairs and to well-considered measures for the welfare of the kingdom at large" (299). He must serve the "stolid and stupid and sane run of mankind," or else, "why, then, the town band will not continue to play in the plaza" (297).

The imperfect nature of the social reality which Cesario accepts is emphasized by Cabell's insistence on a Machiavellian distinction between public and private morality, a principal source of the rather grisly humor of the novel. When Ferdinand finds it expedient to Melphe's welfare, "he confiscated, or he murdered, with a large lack of compunction. But he did not do this often, nor except of necessity" (124). "He did evil," says his widow, "And yet he was good" (237). His goodness consists in a willingness to do evil for the public good. As his successor, Cesario must also embrace the necessary evils of society.

So long as Cesario rejects society and declines to accept his social responsibility, Ferdinand is the better man. The novel defines Cesario's romantic escapism as selfish and irresponsible. Cesario, of course, is the son of a king, but the story of his flight and return is deliberately labeled universal: "such is the story of each human generation; and one does not find in it any varying" (300). "It is the normal story of all mankind" (xi).

The Melphe that is Ferdinand's life and Cesario's future is Cabell's clearest picture of his ideal state. Cesario's story, however, set the pattern for the Heirs and Assigns trilogy. Each hero finally "accepts more or less willingly his allotted place in the social organism of his own people and country."<sup>15</sup> The hero of Cabell's version of the Hamlet story, Hamlet Had an Uncle, is Hamlet's mother's brother, an unusual Viking who prefers begetting life to extinguishing it, and who devotes his life to gallantry rather than piracy. A prospective wife tells him: "You have evaded the responsibilities of life, even from the first, with a levity which no truly affectionate woman could ever applaud. So we must try to change all that: for it is high time, my dear friend, you were sailing in command of your own fleet, and acquiring, from the heathen nations which do not worship Odin, your riches and plunder and renown, in the manner of a well-thought-of Viking gentleman."<sup>16</sup> She has her way; by the novel's end, love of her and the folly of his nephew have made Hamlet's uncle a suitably ruthless King of Denmark.

In the last novel of the trilogy, The First Gentleman of America (New York, 1942), the hero is Nemattanon, a prince of his Indian tribe and son of its living white god. Found by the Spanish in Virginia, he leaves his wife and father to sample the delights of Christian civilization in the courts and beds of Mexico, Florida and Spain. One of the great Spanish captains treats him as a substitute for his own lost son, who died as a human sacrifice to a savage god. But Nemattanon is repelled by the savagery of his patron's patriotism and religion, observing that he is prepared to sacrifice anyone to the interests of the King of Spain and the Catholic faith. Returning to his homeland with an advance guard of Jesuits, he waits till winter and then has them murdered. His divine father dies, confessing that he has been a fraud. Nemattanon burns the body, invents an ascension to heaven, and leads his people westward across the Appalachians, to a land where they may dwell in peace and happiness for a century or so more. He saves his people "from being despoiled and decimated and enslaved,"<sup>17</sup> but he can do so only by accepting what he rejects in Mexico and Spain, a religion of pretty lies and murder in the public interest.

There are Oedipal overtones in the Heirs and Assigns trilogy, and for that matter in much of Cabell's work. It is relevant here to note that rebellion against the father (an authority figure) is naturally associated with rebellion against society. When "Cesario becomes Ferdinand," we have a reconciliation with the father and acceptance of society. When Cabell's heroes take their "allotted place" in society, it is their father's place they take, his cherished illusions which, like Nemattanon, they agree to perpetuate.

The fictional universe of Cabell's novels suggests a skepticism which can see through bourgeois ideals but cannot see beyond them. From Jurgen onwards, the novels imply that wisdom lies in a passive acceptance of the world and the social order. We may fairly call this, then, a comedy of skeptical conservatism. In America, both political and philosophical conservatism are connected with middle-class values. Here too Cabell falls in line, despite the apparent direction of his topical satire. Ferdinand's Melphé is the most acceptable society Cabell offers. Its essentially bourgeois character is duplicated in Cabell's heroes; their very rebellion takes the form of bourgeois romanticism. In social position, Manuel and the heroes of Heirs and Assigns are atypical. Cabell's mature work begins with Jurgen the pawnbroker; his last hero runs a tourist-home.<sup>18</sup> Mencken was responding warmly to Cabell's treatment of his heroes when he wrote that they "chase dragons precisely as stockbrokers play golf."<sup>19</sup>

Cabell's affinity with Mencken is demonstrated both in his choice of targets for topical satire and in the skeptical conservatism which determines his heroes' final acceptance. Even in his final, reluctant embrace of middle-class ideals he is not wholly unlike the burgher of Baltimore. Mencken could praise both Cabell and Sinclair Lewis because Jurgen and

Lewis's Babbitt were brothers under the skin. Babbitt's dream of a Fairy Girl on a golden shore is reminiscent of Jurgen's idealization of Dorothy and Queen Helen; his pathetic defeat, like Jurgen's comic acceptance, takes place in an environment which offers no real escape. The Mencken generation in American letters was tied together by more than merely accidental friendships and enthusiasms.

To demonstrate an affinity between Cabell and Mencken may suggest to some that Mencken influenced Cabell. It is true that Cabell's work before Jurgen often suffers from its author's apparent inability to decide whether his heroes' romantic ideals are noble or ridiculous. One might suppose that the writings of Mencken helped Cabell clarify his attitude. On the other hand, Cabell's early novels show he was becoming increasingly critical of the idealism of his backward-looking Virginian society, and the retreat to fantasy may have given him the distance he needed to define his own perspective. In his various memoirs, Cabell does not seem to indicate that Mencken was a major influence. The affinity exists, though any exploration of the question of influence must await the publication of Carl Bode's official biography of Mencken and an authoritative biography of Cabell.

A mid-century student of Cabell's reputation has remarked that Cabell and those associated with him in the twenties are "dismissed by most critics today as romantic escapists."<sup>20</sup> This view is at least as old as the thirties' reaction against the Cabell period. To Cabell, at least, it is unfair. Whether favorable or unfavorable, our final estimation of his literary value should start from a recognition that his attitude toward society is close to that of other major figures of his literary generation, like Mencken and Lewis, and is more complex than the stereotype of "escapist" would lead us to believe.

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Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup> New Republic, LXXXIX (Jan. 13, 1937), 323-26.

<sup>2</sup> Prejudices: First Series (New York, 1919), 33.

<sup>3</sup> Rev. ed.; New York, 1927, 175-76. Early works of Cabell are cited in the revised editions prepared for the eighteen-volume Storiseide edition of Works of James Branch Cabell (New York, 1927-30).

<sup>4</sup> Rev. ed.; New York, 1928, 231-32.

<sup>5</sup> Rev. ed.; New York, 1927, 187.

<sup>6</sup> New York, 1938, 200.

<sup>7</sup> 248. The ambiguous character of this summary of the book's argument is illustrated by the fact that it is drawn word for word from a letter of criticism from Guy Holt, Cabell's editor at McBride -- Padraic Colum

and Margaret Freeman Cabell, eds., Between Friends: Letters of James Branch Cabell and Others (New York, 1962), 189-90.

<sup>8</sup> As I Remember It (New York, 1955), 155.

<sup>9</sup> Cabell, These Restless Heads (New York, 1932), 213.

<sup>10</sup> Cabell, The High Place (rev. ed.; New York, 1928), 153.

<sup>11</sup> James Branch Cabell (New York, 1927), 18.

<sup>12</sup> Jesting Moses: A Study in Cabelian Comedy (Gainesville, 1962),

107-8.

<sup>13</sup> James Branch Cabell (New York, 1962), 92.

<sup>14</sup> Nation, CLXXXVI (June 7, 1958), 519.

<sup>15</sup> Cabell, Let Me Lie (New York, 1947), 98. Cf. his King Was in His Counting House, xi.

<sup>16</sup> New York, 1940, 69-70.

<sup>17</sup> Cabell, Let Me Lie, 36.

<sup>18</sup> Diego in Devil's Own Dear Son (New York, 1949).

<sup>19</sup> Mencken, James Branch Cabell, 19.

<sup>20</sup> Unpubl. diss. by John Edward Bellamy, "James Branch Cabell: A Critical Reconsideration of His Reputation" (Illinois, 1954), 163. Bellamy himself seems to agree with the view cited.