THE LITERARY SPOTLIGHT

XVI: JAMES BRANCH CABELL

With a Caricature by William Gropper

IT has happened a few times perhaps in the history of literature that a man has waked to find himself famous because of what he has written, but, so far as I know, it has remained for Cabell to open his eyes on a world wherein he was proclaimed as infamous because of what he did not write. It was "Jurgen" that "made" Cabell, but, in the eyes of the world, it made him something other than he was.

Cabell is a man of medium height, and of a somewhat stocky figure. His head is finely molded with the broad forehead of the æsthete and the thinker, not unlike that of the young Augustus: his eyes are heavy lidded and sleepy, such eyes as one often sees in old portraits of the cavaliers and courtiers of the time of the Stuarts, rather insolent and a little bored: his mouth is delicately cut and sensitive, generous yet not too full, the mouth of a poet but not of a philosopher: and between those eyes and this mouth he has a quizzical little snout.

Cabell strikes me as a disappointed idealist who awoke from a fool's paradise to write "Jurgen" and "Figures of Earth". Within him Marlowe struggles with Congreve, and of the two is born frustration. His earlier books are realization through fantasy; his later work is fantasy baffled and broken by realization. Science, economics, sociology he knows little of; his knowledge of history is erratic, of philosophy and religion, artistic, and his one political doctrine appears to be that hatred of Woodrow Wilson, the incongruous expression of which has, for me, marred two of his books. When Cabell tries to be topical he is usually lumbering. Like the courtier and the cavalier he places polish, urbanity, and elegance first on the list of virtues, and, like the cavalier and the courtier, he has no very keen sense of ethical values. He is amoral rather than immoral. His creed embraces that type of honor which combines romance with cynicism. Manner with Cabell is much more important than matter.

His philosophic credo, in so far as he appears to have one, seems to be the eternal repetition of life, the only object of which is procreation. Now this, after all, is essentially the philosophy of the cynic, for, while beauty is its idol, it invariably remembers, and takes care to point out, that the end of all beauty is decay. It is materialistic, because while it deals with abstract truths it admits them only as the impelling forces behind the physical world — which turns to mold. It is mechanistic, because it allows no space for a higher order of evolution which could only be expressed in metaphysical terms; it repeats itself endlessly, the old gestures, the old masks, and all to the sole end that men be born, beget others in their turn, and die. It sees no further, nor does it

even admit the possibility of there being a "further".

The truth is that Cabell's work is almost entirely subjective. He is constantly in the throes of explaining and justifying himself to himself. He is able to face the general facts and conditions of life frankly and squarely — sometimes! — but this is only in moments of revolt, when his spirit is so sickened that it discharges perforce. Particular facts of life he is not able to face at all, but one may find them thrusting outward for expression in his symbols, between his lines, and in those fluent passages, the very intensity and facility of which have put him off his guard.

There are those, and Cabell is one of them, who simply cannot face life as it is. Their means and methods of escape are many and varied and, sometimes, strange. Occasionally they have, like Cabell, creative ability. There is, for example, the actual instance of the man who felt compelled to do nothing but construct small models of cities. The models were of no practical value but, having made them, their creator was able to escape into them. The laying out of the streets, squares, parks, and public buildings satisfied in some measure their maker's sense of beauty and of pattern. In time these fancied cities grew so real to him that he lived only in them, and gradually lost touch altogether with the world about him. He succeeded in escaping. Cabell is not unlike him. One finds in his elaborate genealogy of the characters in his books as set forth in "The Lineage of Lichfield" several significant indications. There is of course the recurrent expression of his hopeless philosophy of repetition, and there is likewise manifest a sense of satisfaction in almost geometrical pattern, such as the other man found in the laying out of his streets, cross streets, and squares. Beyond this there is still the attempt to clothe his mimic world in the garb of reality. And this desire for the semblance of reality is not primarily for his audience, but for himself. It makes escape more easy.

Cabell escapes into his imaginary world more and more as time goes on, as his powers strengthen, and as the actual drops from him. When one knows him one gradually comes to realize that the world of his creation, with its creatures sprung from Manuel as from Adam, constitutes the only real world to him. His eyes dull and his eyelids droop when he talks, as he seldom does, of the people and events of the life wherein he is embodied; but his interest quickens and brightens when he speaks of his mimic world, and of the persons and happenings there. He is Jurgen, and he is Charteris, and, in one form or another and under one name or another, the thread of self-identification can be followed through his work. He believes that he is writing an epos of humanity, a cycle of man, but in reality he is only writing the subjective autobiography of Cabell. It is not all life recurrent in different forms with which he deals, but simply the endless recurrence of himself within himself. The form may change, but the essence remains the same. He evidently feels that the means that lead to his ultimate destination are few, somewhat tediously few, though the combinations of which they are capable are considerably varied. For example, there are some 600,000,000,000 possible combinations of cards in bridge, but there are only fifty-two cards in the pack and the object of each hand is the same — to score. This is Ca-

Sketched by William Gropper

bell's tragedy, and it is from this that he endeavors endlessly to escape altogether.

Here is the man whom that strange uncertain quantity, the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, lifted to attention and whose *apologia pro vita sua* they succeeded in suppressing for a long two years.

A disappointed idealist: why not? Life has held great tragedy for him, and he is endowed with qualities that in themselves court and provoke tragedy almost wantonly. Many lurid tales have been circulated about Cabell, but they are untrue. Most of them have originated with the gossips of Richmond who, after looking upon Cabell as an F. F. V. gone wrong, are now forced to regard him as a bona fide celebrity whether they like it or not. And they do not like it, for they

do not at all understand Cabell, and hence are unable to patronize him as they would like to. Richmond will never forgive Cabell for the bitter truths he has told of it in "The Rivet in Grandfather's Neck", and in "Cords of Vanity". Richmond realizes that while Cabell knows it inside and out, it can really never know Cabell. Such knowledge is unpalatable.

James Branch Cabell lives a little way outside of Richmond in a middle aged house that has in it much of the Victorian, and nothing of the traditional Colonial of the south. The house is comfortable and uninteresting inside and out with little traces here and there of a certain modern efficiency — as in the folding typewriter desk in Cabell's study — that stand out baldly against a background of antimacassars and whatnot stands. The truth is that Cabell is blessed with a wife who is blessed with a sense of humor, and who sees to it that while the major portion of her husband has emigrated to Poictesme the part of him which remains at home is well cared for, let alone, and humored. It takes genius to write as Cabell does, but that genius is as nothing to the genius it must take to live happily with a genius. And Cabell stays at home. To get him as far as New York takes months of urging on the part of everyone interested, and when he finally is ousted from his small work room with its three windows and its rows of books, it is almost impossible to make him meet people or to say anything when he does meet them. They do not speak his language nor does he speak theirs.

His library is astonishingly meagre both in the quantity and quality of the books that compose it, and this in spite of Cabell's just claim, made for not by him, to real erudition. He cares nothing for fine bindings or for old editions. The author most in evidence among his books is Hewlett, but one should not deduce from this that he owes much to Hewlett, any more than he does to Anatole France whom he read really carefully only after he had been compared to him. The materials that Hewlett has used in all seriousness Cabell has burlesqued, as in "Jurgen" and "Figures of Earth". Yet how he did lose his temper when Hewlett attacked him! The attack was bad, but Cabell's reply was worse, shriek upon shriek of wounded vanity. It was childish to give his spleen any permanence in "Taboo".

He is one of the founders of that exclusive little club apparently created for the purpose of mutual admiration by Mencken, Hergesheimer, and himself. Cabell cannot stand criticism, a weakness that serves his work poorly. The success that has come to him in such a strange and ironic way after years of neglect and even contempt has embittered rather than mellowed him. Most emphatically Cabell does not belong among those who, like St. Paul, "suffer fools gladly". He first entered the lists young, ardent, and unsuspicious; but, as the years went by bringing the sting of new wounds upon old ones, he incased himself more and more in the armor of unreality, and with the sword of satire fought on.

The key to Cabell's cynicism lies in the story of the fox and the grapes. He knows he cannot reach them, and so he proclaims them sour. But, unlike the fox, Cabell has compromised. He has deliberately given up the grapes, and hence his fury is double because it arises not only from his sense of failure but from the knowledge of his own responsibility for it.

He chose the flesh pot with his eyes wide open, *vide* "Jurgen", and now all that is left to him is to hurl the pot with savage bitterness at the head of his readers.

The chief note in his later work is that of regret, regret for the youth and beauty which seem to him to pass together. Almost he feels with Dunsany that time is the most terrible enemy of man, for time, to him, is the destroyer. He is not unlike Dunsany in other ways, though I do not by any means intend to compare the two. They both, however, have a curious magic of phrases, and a cadenced prose that turns to pure verse: they both have invented a cosmogony of their own, and Cabell has in the bargain traced a very earthly dynasty which is descended from his gods. And yet . . . in all this by means of which he intends to embrace all life, he has only succeeded in embracing — Cabell. Like Narcissus he has been enchanted by an image in the pool of thought but, unlike Narcissus, he does not realize that the image is his own.

One finds always in Cabell the wail of the violins of Venusburg in combat with the long surge of the trombones of the Pilgrim's Chorus.

What is it in Cabell that we find admirable? It seems to me to be simply that he has done that which he has said again and again he wanted to do, to write beautifully of beautiful things. Not that he confines himself to that. He writes of ugly things too, but he writes of them grotesquely as is most fitting. He has the ability to an extraordinary degree of creating moods, of making a living atmosphere through which and into which the reader passes to walk with those that dwell therein, somewhat as Alice went through the Looking Glass into the country beyond. Cabell is a rebel against the bonds of flesh that hold him, and he awakens in his readers a desire to rebel likewise. The most significant passage in all his work is, to me, that in which Jurgen stands by the bedside of the sleeping Queen Helen. Even there Cabell pauses to mock a little, but his mockery rings hollow, for he knows that rail as he may at his dream, the dream is stronger than he. Here, as elsewhere, his attitude is sheer bravado. But . . . it is very human. What makes all his bitterness and all his rebellion is his knowledge of the real beauty, the beauty he has somehow missed, that eternally tangles the heartstrings of man. He knows, and he knows well how little the flesh matters, and he is infuriated at his realization that it matters even as much as it does. After a little time with Anaitis, goddess of love, Jurgen was so unutterably bored that he left her, and went to play with the children. There is no cynicism here, only a mild chuckle at the endless foolishness of man. For, whimsical as he often is, and cynical as he is upon occasion, Cabell is more quizzical than either.

What he will do next it is futile to conjecture. It may be another attempt to rationalize the literature of procreation — and whatever it is I very much fear that it will be an addition to the already too voluminous "Lineage of Lichfield" — but in any event Cabell may be trusted to do the two things he desires most to do, to conceive beautiful things and to write of them beautifully. It is for this that he is read, and it is for this that he will be remembered.