

The Literary Review

New York Evening Post

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Sixteen Pages New York, Saturday  December 11, 1920 Section Three

Ironies of Authorship

None of the most diverting and individual volumes of literary criticism that have emanated from America, a certain writer, now hailed in many quarters as a supreme stylist and a literary immortal, fixed to that latest example of his then unknown work copious extracts from all the most unflattering reviews his books had received. For the judicious there is much neat irony in these comments now.

But there is such irony in the whole history of this writer's sudden popularity with the public that whatever gods there be must hold their sides. His present prominence in the general mind, if mind it may be called, is the result of the suppression of one of his latest works, lately indicted for indecency. Copies of this work, being now unprocurable, have been known to fetch astounding prices. Discussion of the book has run riot. The author's name has become known to the masses in a sensational manner. Therefore his former critics have begun to rub their eyes. As if throwing off a cloak of invisibility he has suddenly "appeared" to those of undoubtedly discerning judgment. Over and above his sudden appeal to the people, on other grounds, he has, overnight as it were, achieved fame as a great writer. His earlier books are now in demand.

This is, of course, the oldest of stories, showing precisely how history repeats itself, though it is usually after the death of a great writer that the inevitable metamorphosis takes place. Those who once said such things as "The author fails of making his dull characters humanely pitiable," and "Worse than immoral—null. . . . The narrative is cheap and sickly . . . the effect is revolting," now pen fervid appreciations. Strangely enough, certain able writers of the younger generation which now lauds him also failed to discern anything at all in the man's books in earlier days. "He is unable to create those illusions so necessary for the reality of fiction," cries one from Chicago. His "writing bristles with the maudlin and lachrymose romantics such as fascinate the shop girls in the pages of George Barr McCutcheon"; and a well-known modern poet and novelist comments scornfully, "There is no understanding in this book of social currents of the past, much less of the present. The story is . . . most banal enough to become a best seller." Most delicious are a series of one-line remarks dismissing a work that contained the whole gist of the author's aesthetic theory with comments such as this: "The story is illustrated with full-page pictures in color by Howard Pyle."

Some day, perhaps, some wise and witty pen will give us a volume with some such title as "The Ironies of Authorship" fit to put with Disraeli's "Curiosities of Literature." For the case of our chosen author is no means the first, as it will, we fear, by no means the last, of a series of cases of critical blindness and capriciousness, of odd fame built fortuitously upon quite unperfluous circumstance, of true merit and rare individuality going a-begging, till one of its random arrows stirs ignorance and dulness to rise for its suppression. Meanwhile such contemporary criticism as is found, for instance, in the footnote quotations appended to certain pages of Cabell's "Beyond Life" will be the oracles in which the public devoutly believes; periphrastics of praise for very mediocre writers, declarations that work already almost faded from the memory could prove permanent literature, emphasis upon the airy powers of the most obtuse minds! Unbelievable, if one examines closely many of these comments! Only the complete works of Shakespeare could have possibly have deserved them. Yet they were made in all earnestness. The writers they proclaimed

The Scarlet Sun

By ARTHUR SYMONS

Who shall quench the soul's desire
Of the moth, that is God's fire?
Who shall with a painted cloth
Stain the bright wings of the moth?
Who shall with an evil kiss
Scrape the life out of a root?
Who shall turn upon his heel
And bid the scarlet sun to reel?
None, for none shall know his hour
To flout the beauty of a flower.

went forth with trumpets upon the pages of the daily press.

One thing that this comic neglect and misapprehension of actual literature in favor of its meretricious imitations may inject into our American writing is an ingredient it has lacked too long (with a few outstanding exceptions). We refer to the ironic spirit. Already this gift has been bestowed upon the most persistently underrated and neglected of our best contemporary writers. The price in the loosening of our own self-esteem may seem heavy to pay, for our own part. But we must continue to pay it as long as we fail of any real acumen and discrimination. Meanwhile, may more great satirists be assigned us by the planetary powers, unworthy though we are.

The Taboo in Literature

By JAMES BRANCH CABELL

PRE-EMINENTLY the most engaging feature of the assigned topic, assigned to me in particular for reasons best known to the Editor of *The Literary Review*, is the patent case with which the topic may be disposed of. Since time's beginning every age has had its literary taboos, selecting certain things—more or less arbitrarily, but usually some natural function—as the things which must not be written about. To violate any such taboo so long as it stays prevalent is to be "indecent"; and that seems absolutely all there is to say concerning this topic, apart from furnishing a trifle of historical illustration.

The most striking instance which offhand occurs to me sprang from the fact, perhaps not very generally known, that the natural function of eating, which nowadays may be discussed intrepidly anywhere, was once regarded by the Philistines, or at all events the Shephelah and the deme of Novogath, as being unmentionable. This ancient tenet of theirs, indeed, is with such clearness emphasized in a luckily preserved fragment from the Dirghic of Saeivus Nicanor that the readiest way to illustrate the chameleon-like traits of literary indecency appears to be here to record what of this legend survives.

Now, at about the time that the Tyrant Pedagogos fell into disfavor with his people, avers old Nicanor (as the curious may verify by comparing Lib. X, Chap. 28), passed through Philistia a clerk whom some did not know where toward a goal which he could not divine. So this Horvendile said, "I will make a book of this journeying, for it seems to me a rather queer journeying."

They answered him: "Very well, but if you have had dinner or supper by the way, do you make no mention of it in your book. For it is a law among us, for the protection of our youth, that eating must never be spoken of in any of our writings."

Horvendile considered this a curious enactment, but it seemed only one among the innumerable mad customs of Philistia. So he shrugged, and he made the book of his journeying, and of the things which he had seen and heard and loved and hated and had put by in the course of his passage among ageless and unfathomed mysteries.

And in the book there was nowhere any word of eating. But to the book comes presently a garbage-man, newly returned from foreign travel for his health's sake, whose name was John. And this scavenger cried, "Oh, horrible! for here is very shameful mention of a sword and a spear and a staff."

"That now is true enough," says Horvendile, "but wherein lies the harm?"

"Why, one has but to write 'a fork' here, in the place of each of these offensive weapons, and the reference to eating is plain."

"That also is true, but it would be your writing and not my writing which would refer to eating."

John said, "Abandoned one, it is the law of Philistia and the holy doctrine of St. Anthony Koprologos that if anybody chooses to understand any written word anywhere as meaning 'to eat,' the word henceforward has that meaning."

"Then you of Philistia have very foolish laws."

To which John the Scavenger sagely replied: "Ah, but if laws exist they ought to fairly and impartially and without favoritism be enforced until amended or repealed. Much of the unsettled condition prevailing in the country at the present time can be traced directly to a lack of law enforcement in many directions during past years."

"Now, I misdoubt if I understand you, Messire John, for your infinitives are split beyond comprehension. And when you talk about the non-enforcement of anything in many directions, even though these directions were during past years, I find it so confusing that the one thing of which I can be quite certain is that it was never you whom the law selected to pass upon and to amend all books."

This Horvendile says foolishly, not knowing it is an axiom among the Philistines that literary expression is best controlled by somebody with no misleading tenderness toward it; and that it is this cus-

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But John the Garbage-man said nothing at all the while that he changed nouns at random to "fork" and "table" and "dish," and carefully annotated each verb in the book as meaning "to eat." Thereafter he carried off the book along with his garbage, and with—which was the bewildering part of it—self-evident and glowing self-esteem. And all that watched him spoke the Dirghic word of derision, which is "Tee-Hee."

But Horvendile forthwith consulted with a man of law. And the law-man answered a little peevishly, by reason of the fact that age had impaired his digestion, and he said: "But of course you are a lewd fellow if you have been suspected of writing about eating!" "Sir," replies Horvendile, "I would have you consider that if your parents and your grandparents had not eaten, your race would have perished, and you would never have been born. I would have you consider that if you and your wife had not eaten, again your race would have perished, and neither of you would ever have lived to have the children for whose protection, as men tell me, you of Philistia, avoid all mention of eating. And I would have you consider how little is to be gained by concealing even from the young the inevitability of this natural function—"

To which the man of law replied, with a bewildering effect of talking very wisely and patiently: "Ah, but it does not matter at all whether or not the function of eating is practiced and is inevitable to the nature and laws of our being. The law merely considers that any mention of eating is apt to inflame an improper and lewd appetite, particularly in the young, who are always ready to eat: and therefore any such mention is an obscene libel."

So Horvendile lamented, and fled from the man of law. Thereafter, in order to learn what manner of writing was most honored by the Philistines, this Horvendile goes into an academy where the old books of Philistia were stored, along with other relics of the past: and as he perturbedly inspected these old books, one of the fifty mummies which were kept in this place, with lackeys to attend them, spoke vexedly to Horvendile, saying, as it was the custom of these mummies to say, before this could be said to them, "I never heard of you before."

"Ah, sir, it is not that which is troubling me," then answered Horvendile; "but rather, I am troubled because the book of my journeying has been suspected of encroachment upon gastronomy. Now I notice your most sacred volume here begins with a very remarkable myth about the fruit of a tree in the middle of a garden, and goes on to speak of the supper which Lot shared with two angels and with his daughters also, and of the cakes which Tamar served to Amnon, and to speak over and over again of eating. I notice that your most honored poet, here where the dust is thickest, from the moment when he began by writing about certain painted berries which mocked the appetite of Dame Venus, and about a repast from which luxurious Tarquin retired like a full-fed hound or a gorged hawk, speaks continually of eating. And I notice that everybody, but particularly the young person, is encouraged to read these books and many other old books which speak very explicitly indeed of eating—"

"Of course," the mummy replies; "for all these books are classics, and we used to discuss them in Paff's beer-cellar."

"Well, but does the indecency of this word 'eating' evaporate out of it as the years pass, so that the word is hurtful only when very freshly written?"

The mummy blinked so wisely that you would never have guessed that the brains of all these mummies had been removed when the embalmer, called Time, prepared these fifty for the academy. "Young fellow, before estimating your literary pretensions, I must ask if you ever frequented Paff's beer-cellar?"

Horvendile said, "No."

"Then that would seem to settle your pretensions. To have talked twaddle in Paff's beer-cellar is the one real proof of literary merit, no matter what sort of twaddle you may write in your books, as I am here in this academy to attest. Moreover, I am old enough to remember when cookery-books were sold openly upon the news-stands, and in consequence I am very grateful to the garbage-man, who, in common with all other intelligent persons, has never dreamed of meddling with anything I wrote."

And all the other mummies spoke the word of derision, which is "Tee-Hee," and they said also, "He never meddled with us either, and we never heard of you." And one of the lackeys who attended the mummies said sternly, "I am not at all in sympathy," and another said, "Pseudo-littérateur," and yet another said, "I can perceive that you do not produce the necessary profound murmurs and inflowings when you meditate upon the name of Bradford," and there was much other incoherent foolishness.

But Horvendile had fled, bewildered to note that a mummy, so generally esteemed a kindly and well-meaning fossil, appeared quite honestly to believe that all literature came out of the beer-cellar of Paff, or Pflaff, or had some similarly Teutonic sponsor, and that the cookery-books of fifty years ago had something to do with Horvendile's account of his journeying, from which he did not know where toward a goal which he could not find being in the garbage pile.

after all," says the average person that boys are made, and not for mummies and men of law and scavengers."

So Horvendile went a-sking until he found a representative citizen, who was coming out of a representative restaurant with his representative wife.

"Sir," says Horvendile, "perceive that you have just been eating and that emboldens me to ask you—"

But at this point Horvendile found he had been knocked down, because the parents of the representative citizen had taught him from his earliest youth that any mention of eating was highly indecent in the presence of gentlewomen. And for Horvendile, recumbent upon the pavement, it was bewildering to note the glow of honest indignation in the face of the representative citizen, who waited there in front of the restaurant—

Here, rather vexatiously, the old manuscript breaks off. But what survives and has been cited of this fragment amply shows you, I think, that even in remote Philistia, whenever this question of "indecent" arose everybody acted very foolishly. It has attested too, I hope, the readiness with which a fanatical training may lead you to imagine some unbecoming impropriety in all writing about any natural function, even though it be a function so time-honored and general as that to which this curious Dirghic legend refers.

Cabell the Masquerader

By LOUIS UNTERMEYER.

I SPEAK by the book—the text-book, to be precise. I do not purpose by my title to call attention to the obvious fact that Cabell is a writer of prose so illuminated and fantastic that it is invariably poetic. By "poetry" I mean Poetry:—lines that tap their feet to an even measure; words that clap hands and kiss in rhyme; phrases that perform the most difficult of balances and *pas seules* and disport themselves in a round of lyrics, madrigals, sonnets, chants, ballads, bland couplets, curious quatrains, stiff little tercets. I refer specifically to a volume entitled "From the Hidden Way."

"From the Hidden Way—Being Seventy-five Adaptations in Verse by James Branch Cabell" was published by Robert M. McBride & Company in 1916. The rest was silence. Appraisers of his work summed up Cabell's varied volumes without weighing a line of his metrical experiments; friends and Philistines charged and counter-charged over the battlefield of "Jurgen," yet not one stanza was hurled or lifted in his defence. Even Hugh Walpole, in a detailed account of "The Art of James Branch Cabell" (the *Yale Review*, July, 1920), failed to mention the simple fact that an entire volume of Cabell's poetry had been published less than four years ago. Even the *cognoscenti* were ignorant both of it and of Cabell, the writer of verse. Yet Cabell had not failed to hint of his favorite occupation; to plant sign posts throughout his scattered romances, tales, and "biographies." His books are spotted with original rhymes that do duty as chapter-headings, mottoes, tail-pieces, dedications, interludes, interpolated songs, epilogues. He has even gone to the extent of inserting a technically perfect sonnet in a conversation. (The curious may find this *tour de force* disguised as prose on the ninety-seventh page of "Jurgen"—if they are fortunate enough to possess a copy of this magnificent book.) But in "From the Hidden Way" Cabell, impatient of signs and subterfuge, proclaims himself in his dearest medium. And yet the masks are not quite discarded; Cabell the paraphraser speaks through the lips of dead minnesingers, forgotten troubadours, obscure Parnassians. Here are poems "adapted" from Alessandro de Medici, Raimbaut de Vaquieras, Nicolas de Caen, Antoine Riczi, and the more modern-sounding Theodore Passerat, Charles Garnier, Paul Verville. Does the skeptical student doubt the existence of these artists? Not only has Cabell given their histories in books like "The Certain Hour," he has carefully quoted the first lines of the original (in Latin, Italian, Provençal, and modern French) before his own versions. But the persistent student still suspects. A search at the Public Library confirms his suspicion; even the Questions and Answers column in the *New York Times* yields nothing. He is still more puzzled when he finds the verses "Alone in April" (supposed to be written by Alessandro de Medici) credited in another book by Cabell ("The Line of Love") to Adhelmar de Nintel, and the poem "One End of Love" (assigned to the latter-day Alphonse Moreau) spoken (in a scarcely less musical prose) by Raimbaut de Vaquieras of the thirteenth century in the first story of "The Certain Hour," entitled "Belhs Cavaliers." Here, for the interest of controversialists and craftsmen, are segments of the tale:

Biatritz said, "It is a long while since we two met." He that had been her love all his life said, "Yes."

She was no longer the most beautiful of women, no longer his behymned Belles Cavaliers—you may read elsewhere how he came to that in all his canzons—but only a fine, fair stranger. It was uniformly gray, that hair, where once such gold had flamed and now there was no gold to be found.

splendid miracle. . . . She said: "This week the Prince sent envoys to my nephew. . . . And so you have come home again—"

Color had surged into her time-worn face and as she thought of things done long ago this woman's eyes were like the eyes of his young Biatritz. She said: "You never married?"

"Yes," said the knight; "oh, yes, we both grow old." He thought of another April evening, so long ago, when this Guillaume de Baux had stabbed him in a hedged field near Calais and had left him under a hawthorn bush for dead; and Raimbaut wondered that there was no anger in his heart. "We are friends now," he said. Biatritz, whom these two had loved and whose vanished beauty had been the spur of their long enmity, sat close to them and hardly seemed to listen.

Thus the evening passed and at its end Makrisi followed the troubadour to his regranted fief of Vaquieras. This was a chill and brilliant night, swayed by a frozen moon so powerful that no stars showed in the unclouded heavens and everywhere the bogs were curdled with thin ice. An obdurate wind swept like a knife-blade across a world which even in its spring seemed very old.

And here is how Cabell has condensed the whole episode in the compact and colorful rhymes of

ONE END OF LOVE

"It is long since we met," she said. I answered, "Yes."

She is not fair, But very old now, and no gold Gleams in that scant gray withered hair Where once much gold was: and, I think Not easily might one bring tears Into her eyes, which have become Like dusty glass.

"'Tis thirty years,"

I said. "And then the war came on Apace, and our young King had need Of men to serve him oversea Against the heathen. For their greed, Puffed up at Tunis, troubles him—"

She said: "This week my son is gone To him at Paris with his men." And then: "You never married, John?"

I answered, "No." And so we sate Musing a while.

Then with his guests Came Robert; and his thin voice broke Upon my dream, with the old jests, No food for laughter now: and swore We must be friends now that our feud Was overpast.

"We are grown old— Eh, John?" he said. "And, by the Rood! 'Tis time we were at peace with God Who are not long for this world."

I answered; "we are old." And then, Remembering that April day At Calais, and that hawthorn field Wherein we fought long since, I said: "We are friends now."

And she sate by, Scarce heeding. Thus the evening sped.

And we ride homeward now, and I Ride moodily; my palfrey jogs Along a rock-strewn way the moon Lights up for us; yonder, the bogs Are curdled with thin ice; the trees Are naked; from the barren wold The wind comes like a blade aslant Across a world grown very old.

In short, the aroused reader comes to the more or less natural conclusion that Cabell has laughed at him again; that, instead of discarding the old masks, the author has merely put on new ones; that his models are as fictitious as the impressive authorities tossed glibly between Jurgen and the priests of Philistia. In short, he believes—and believes rightly—the entire collection (names, references, first lines in the "original," and all) to be a forgery, a careful and remarkably complex hoax.

And what a brilliant hoax it is! It is, in a sense, Cabell's most adroit structure; his elaborately decorated refuge from reality. Here he adds another story to that gem-studded ivory tower in which Cabell lives and escapes the glare and blatancy of the modern world. Artificial? Perhaps. But it is the artifice solidly erected upon art. Cabell's erudition is staggering; he knows his Provence in far greater detail than any of its twentieth century commentators; in his reflections of Romance literature he puts to shame so pretentious a dabbler as Ezra Pound. Whether he echoes the mediæval planh, the canzon, the ballata, the sestina, or writes strictly in the more recent ballade, rondeau, roundel, and sonnet, the figure of the composite Cabell hero emerges—the eternally disillusioned, eternally hopeful Jurgen-Charteris-Kennaston; the human soul seeking some sort of finality, some assurance in a world of illimitable perplexities. The heat and hungers of to-day burn beneath the archaic contours of such pseudo-restorations as "Dame Venus in Thuringia," "One End of Love," "Ronsard Re-voices a Truism," "Jaunts from Stratford," "According to Their Folly," the quaintly titled "A Wood-Piece: To the Whir of Falling Leaves," and half a dozen others. Technically, "From the Hidden Way" is an amazing performance. But it is a great deal more than an exhibition of technique. It is something close to a *cri de cœur*; a musical outcry that, as keenly as anything he has written, reaches the dulled brain and complex heart of Cabell.