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Cabellian Harmonics was conceived in the backroom of a bookshop in Lynchburg, Va., but its lineage can be traced to a term paper submitted in a senior English course at the University of Richmond, Va. The college paper, titled "Poictesme in Epic," could be considered a research project. It set out to prove by quotation and citation that the books which comprised James Branch Cabell's "Biography" had the classic qualities associated with epic poetry.

Cabellian Harmonics, on the other hand, was not intended as definitive, or even particularly serious, research. It grew out of "bull sessions" (which might be called "rapping" today) in which several avid readers of Cabell exchanged knowledge of their discoveries as to his style, his roguish games with readers, and the possible implications of his basic philosophy and attitude toward the art of writing.

Unlike many of my contemporaries, I was introduced to Cabell's writing not by the notoriety of the suppressed Jurgen but by first reading The Soul of Melicent (revised to become Domnei), which was recommended by a friend, and then going on to read all of the Cabell books I could find in local libraries. The mystery of the "mirror and pigeons" in The Cream of the Jest so intrigued me that I wrote my first letter to Mr. Cabell, sweetening my query (which was like so many others he received) by enclosing an editorial about him I had written for the Lynchburg News, the newspaper by which I was employed.

Mr. Cabell replied promptly on November 21, 1924, thanking me for the editorial and saying: "There are reasons which I consider now with real regret why I cannot explain to you the secret of the mirror and the pigeons. I am however at liberty to say that the reference is by no means to a mere 'myth'."

I might add here that the last time I saw Mr. Cabell, on a visit to Poynton Lodge on the Northern Neck of Virginia in the summer of 1957, we discussed this subject again, and he smilingly indicated that he never would spoil the fun of those who chose to speculate on his meanings in the mirror and pigeon references.

In the spring of 1925, I returned to the University of Richmond to complete work for a B.A. degree and decided to make Cabell's work the subject of a paper for my English major. In this connection I wrote to him, saying that I recognized the fictitious nature of his sources as quoted in the books, but I wondered if there were real sources in mythology or published literature from which he had drawn the characters of Jurgen and Dom Manuel. He replied in a letter dated May 25, 1925: "I sincerely hope you may complete the thesis, and I lend it what aid I may be saying, between ourselves, I believe Jurgen and Dom Manuel were--from an adulteratory rather than an adulterine point of view,--pure inventions."

When the college thesis was finished (at a length of about 10,000 words), I upset my professor by the form in which I submitted it. I had made an original and two carbon copies, type-written, double-spaced, on sheets of paper seven by eight-and-a-half inches. The pages were stapled together and then hand-bound by me in hard boards covered with a brown cloth as close as I could find to the color on the Kalki edition of Cabell's books. The teacher received a carbon copy, which raised his eyebrows, but which he agreed to accept after my explanation that a similar copy was going to Mr. Cabell and that I was holding the original in hopes that it might later be published more extensively.

Mr. Cabell acknowledged his copy in a letter dated June 20, 1925, which said:

Poictesme in Epic I have found in every way an imposing and charming performance. I view it with entire admiration and considerable gratitude, and have no fault to find anywhere.

Hugh Walpole, by the way, was the first to dwell upon the unity of my various books, and I am wondering if you know his pamphlet about me, which, on looking back, I discover you leave unquoted. And I applaud the note as to the 'contrapuntal prose' you cite.

Few things, for the rest, could please me more than to see your thesis in print. Meanwhile, I have at least delighted in my copy of the limited first edition.

Curiosity recently led me to ask Maurice Duke whether in his indexing of Mr. Cabell's personal library, which was donated to Virginia Commonwealth University, he had found any reference to my thesis. He replied that the hand-bound book had been kept by Mr. Cabell. It was inscribed "Property of James Branch Cabell/ first version of Cabellian Harmonics." It also had Mr. Cabell's

bookplate pasted in it, and two of my letters to him had been inserted.

I first met Mr. Cabell personally in 1926, when I was invited to his home in Richmond after having reviewed The Silver Stallion for the Richmond Times-Dispatch, the daily newspaper by which I was then employed.

In 1927 I returned to Lynchburg to work on the News and rejoined the group of Cabell "addicts" who gathered in the bookshop, in and out of business hours. Thereafter, a suggestion was made that since I had corresponded and talked personally with Mr. Cabell, I ought to bring together some of the material we discussed and put it into a book.

When I started the actual writing of Cabellian Harmonics in the winter of 1927-28, it was understood that the publication would be a private venture of a trio consisting of the author, who would furnish the text; the bookshop manager, who would finance the printing; and a publisher's representative, who would try to market it on his regular travels.

We felt that a profitable sale might be possible if Mr. Cabell would write a foreword, since this would make my book a "Cabell item" with appeal to collectors of first editions, who then were showing a mounting enthusiasm for Cabell. The request was made to Mr. Cabell, and in a letter dated February 2, 1928 he said: "Few things would please me better than to see you publish the book you outline. I would therefore very gladly contribute to it a foreword, which would have to be, I am afraid, mainly a disclaimer."

Referring to my theory that he was the author of various items published under other names in The Reviewer (a little magazine published in Richmond, Va., which Cabell had edited for three months in 1921), Mr. Cabell went on to say: "I would have to argue, for instance, quite seriously, the improbability of my being A. C. Fairfax and Lewis Piaget Shanks; and I wonder through what oversight you fail to accuse me of being Ben Ray Redman likewise, as was so freely done in the days of The Reviewer's existence. Anyway, I will do what I can to further your scheme, though it would first be necessary for me to see either the complete MS. or, preferably, a galley proof."

Further on the subject of Reviewer aliases, I suggested to Mr. Cabell that perhaps he would be satisfied merely to refuse to confirm some quotations which I would attribute to him and, in a letter dated February 28, 1928, he flatly advised against this, saying: "If by any awkward chance you were to prove your point (about Cabell and Shanks being identical) I would have to include his three already published books in the Storisende edition. That would make the set too long."

So the writing of Cabellian Harmonics proceeded, with many helpful hints from the creator of Poictesme, who nevertheless set the rules of the game by keeping certain areas off bounds. An example of my own effort to play the game Cabell's way may be seen in the last sentence of my book which reads: "But some there are doomed to an 'eternally unsatisfied hungering in search of beauty,' and these the writer would refer back to The Cream of the Jest where 'he who wills may read,' if he be aided by the Sigil of Scoteia, one of the most frank confessions yet made by Mr. Cabell of his purposes and his ideas."

That broad hint (including direct quotations) to anyone who had access to a copy of The Cream of the Jest still seems to me adequate and preferable to the literal translations of the whole Sigil which have appeared recently in print. If Cabell had wanted to put his author's note in plain English, he would have done so himself.

Here is another example of Mr. Cabell's attitude. Responding to one of my probing letters on November 27, 1927, he wrote: "Your letter and analyses I found, naturally, of no little interest. In some places--I admit--you seem to have found more than I consciously put there. I shall profit by it, of course, and protest hereafter that it was all quite intentional. Meanwhile, I suggest that Miramon's address to the ten redeemers in Chapter 32, can by the pertinacious be rearranged into something not unlike hexameters."

In this same letter Mr. Cabell granted his permission for production by the Lynchburg Little Theatre of the dramatized version I had made of his story "In Ursula's Garden" from The Line of Love, and in a letter dated January 1, 1928 he thanked me for sending him an account of the production in which I had played the part of the Marquis of Falmouth.

Another comment on the counterpoint in his writing was made by Mr. Cabell in a letter dated February 29, 1928, in which he said:

Your investigations have perturbed me to the point of running over my own works in search of strictly contrapuntal passages. I enclose a list of my findings, in the belief that it may aid you.

The trouble is, of course, to determine the border line. So long as the pattern remains plainly verbal, all is plain sailing. But when the pattern is based, rather,

upon the idea, then the counterpoint becomes disputable. I mean, if the reader sees it, it is there; if he misses it, the counterpoint, for all practical purposes, is not there. I, thus, can give only my own private opinion, in so far as possible, as a reader.

Discussing what he meant by counterpoint as applied to prose, Mr. Cabell wrote in another letter dated March 14, 1928:

Your book becomes to me yet more and more interesting, as you raise points I seem hardly to have settled definitely even in my own mind. Off-hand I am tempted to reply that contrapuntal prose is an exact rendering into English prose of a non-existent poem. That would cover all the passages roughly except the Jest 14 and Domnei 182, which then, I suppose, would have to be called 'paraphrases.'

Attacking the problem from another angle, I get a dreadfully pompous sounding, but I believe sound, definition. Prose counterpoint is the art of adorning one's prose with passages shaped in a pre-meditated and self-complete pattern, of which the parts are correspondent, that shall harmonize with the whole and at the same time be intrinsically melodious. I offer that tentatively as a definition which seems true to me, but which I extremely dislike.

Anyhow, I enclose (a) notes upon your various queries, and (b) an outline of the Biography as I see it. That, I consider, would be your preferable starting point--the harmony, and, as it were, the counterpoint of the whole Biography, before passing to a simpler analysis of the various volumes. But here, of course, you are the judge.

Quotation from these letters in Cabellian Harmonics was approved in a letter dated March 24, 1928 in which Mr. Cabell said: "Your first draft seems to me more than good, and upon the whole I can see no objection to your citation from my letters. Nor do I find much wherein we differ."

He then went on to comment on the unity of the books in the "Biography," giving illustrations and answering my chiding suggestion that the eighteen-volume Storisende edition violated Horvendile's decimal system, by saying: "But where is your arithmetic? The Biography is in twenty parts, since the Music and the Jewel Merchants must count as separate performances. It was for that reason, among others, The Witch Woman cannot ever be written, and all must stay in eighteen volumes. I myself ~~dis~~covered this only a brief while ago, to my sincere regret."

It might be noted here that the 1948 reprint book titled The Witch Woman contained only the three parts of this intended book which were included in the Storisende edition, but confusion as to the numbers game and the rule of ten was compounded by inclusion of The Witch Woman as a separate title in a listing of the "Biography" books printed as late as 1955 in As I Remember It. This list adds up to 21, not 20.

When my completed manuscript of Cabellian Harmonics was sent to Mr. Cabell in April 1928, he responded by sending me his forward and a note in which he said: "You will understand, I hope, that in the circumstances its tone has necessarily to be a bit aloof and to refrain from really warm admiration of either you or myself. So, my part of the book is done. I like all of it, by the way, except the title, which seems to be very bad, but I cannot think of a better substitute."

It was at this stage that our partner the publisher's representative interested Bennett A. Cerf in bringing out Cabellian Harmonics under the Random House imprint. When I advised Mr. Cabell of this proposal, he replied on May 26, 1928: "Your news as to the possible publication of your opus through the Random House people is excellent. I sincerely hope the deal goes through. I am hoping also you may light upon some better title than the book now has. Meditation suggests to me nothing preferable: but I know the present name is not good."

This view was conveyed to Mr. Cerf, who wrote to me on August 5, 1928: "Cabellian Harmonics seems to me an excellent title, and I cannot understand why any effort should be made to find another one. However, if Mr. Cabell or you hit upon a title that you like better, the change can be made. We are listing the book as Cabellian Harmonics in our catalogue and should very much prefer to let the title stand that way." And so it was decided.

Our original thought had been that the book should be limited to an edition of 1,500 copies for sale, to correspond roughly with the 1,550 sets for sale of the Storisende edition of Cabell's "Biography." Mr. Cabell suggested it might be better to limit our issue to 1,000 copies, but he offered no objection to the Random House decision to stay with the 1,500-copy figure. Cabellian Harmonics was published on November 20, 1928. A letter from Mr. Cerf in December 1928 advised me that Random House then had fewer than 30 copies on hand and expected the book to be out of print before the end of the year. Random House also printed 18 copies of the book on all-rag paper with tooled pigskin binding, not for sale. Mr. Cabell received one of these and I received one. Who got the others, I do not know.

On November 24, 1928, Mr. Cabell wrote to me, expressing appreciation for the copy of the book I had inscribed for him, and added: "I wonder, though, how we came to miss such seemingly unmissable bits as the Exit paper and section 92 of Straws and Prayer Books? I did, completely, in the role of a reader; so I deduce that 'for all practical purposes, the counterpoint is not there.'"

After publication of Cabellian Harmonics I continued my studies of the "Biography" and addressed occasional questions to Mr. Cabell concerning his writing. In a letter dated March 12, 1930, he said: "Before the knowledge that the Biography is actually finished, and above all, before the knowledge that I now need not ever read another line of it, I complain about nothing . . . Good luck to you in that proposed attempt to read the Biography straight through in its proper order. I can assure you that the feat is possible; but it has aged me."

In this same letter he said: "As to your question, there were never any omissions from Jurgen, nor any changes upon moral grounds. Nor, of course, was there ever any written matter where the asterisks occur; those breaks were but a part of the game."

Again on April 28, 1930, answering a query I had relayed from a teacher of English as to what Cabell had read which had influenced his writing, Mr. Cabell wrote: "When I look back, the question What have you read seems rather on a plane with What have you eaten?"

My contacts and exchanges with Mr. Cabell other than those involved in the production of Cabellian Harmonics are another story, possibly of interest only to me and certainly too long to include here. My memories of him, and of Priscilla Bradley Cabell and Margaret Freeman Cabell as gracious hostesses and real "help-mates" to a great man, are all on the pleasant side, however.

I particularly cherish the last letter I received from him, illustrating his ability to apply his ironic humor to himself. Dated August 22, 1957, it acknowledged a letter from me and said: "Indeed, in these days I need cheering. The infirmities of old age seem to have developed pretty much everywhere in my carcass, and with such rapidity do they thrive that every morning I am now able to wake up with a brand new malady. That does keep life interesting of course; but even so, I cannot help feeling sometimes that such continuous excitement may be bad for me at my time of life."



WARREN A. MCNEILL IN 1927 AS MARQUIS OF FALMOUTH  
IN HIS PLAY "IN URSULA'S GARDEN" PRODUCED IN  
LYNCHBURG, VA., BY THE LYNCHBURG LITTLE THEATRE  
(PHOTOGRAPH BY COURTESY OF WARREN A. MCNEILL)