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“Some Ladies” and “Jurgen”

by Paul Spencer

A neglected area of Cabell scholarship is the relation between his books and the magazine stories or articles from which many of them evolved. Before the success of JURGEN, Cabell's chief source of literary income was not his books, which sold poorly, but his many contributions to magazines such as *The Smart Set*, *The Argosy*, *Ainslee's*, *Harper's*, and *The Saturday Evening Post*. As a self-proclaimed “Economist,” Cabell used almost all of this and later periodical material in his books—usually with modifications that provide glimpses of his literary methods. FIGURES OF EARTH, for example, started life as short stories in *McClure's*, *Century*, and *Romance*. DOMNEI was originally “The Ultimate Master” and “The Soul of Mervisaunt,” magazine stories that had nothing to do with each other, and even were set in different historical periods.

A curious example of this process is the convoluted growth of JURGEN from a short story.

Poictesme's best-known pawnbroker was introduced to the world in “Some Ladies and Jurgen,” published in *The Smart Set* for July 1918. (The book JURGEN was not published until September 1919.) The story was reprinted in *The Smart Set Anthology*, edited by Burton Rascoe and Groff Conklin (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1934; reissued in 1944 by Grayson Publishing Corp. as *The Bachelor's Companion*). In the “*Smart Set History*” which prefaces this volume, Burton Rascoe says, “I remembered that Mencken had written to James Branch Cabell and had asked him if he had any material which might be

available for *The Smart Set* and that Cabell had forthwith produced 'Some Ladies and Jurgen' and sent it to Mencken because, as Cabell wrote me, 'he seemed to deserve it.' And that this short story was the embryo out of which *Jurgen* evolved, a novel which, Cabell wrote me, 'seems to have written itself' after he had done several things, including writing the middle before the beginning or the end and the beginning last of all, *from The Smart Set story.*"

Which seems plausible enough, especially when reinforced by the footnote on the first page of "Some Ladies and Jurgen" in the anthology: "This is the short story out of which Cabell's famous novel *Jurgen* was evolved. It is instructive to compare this story with the form it took in the novel." Yet the author's own version is not so simple.

In the Author's Note to the Storisende Edition of JURGEN, Cabell says: "'Jurgen' was begun in the March of 1918, and completed in the October of the same year. . . . It received a liberal amount of retouching during the first part of 1919. Meanwhile a portion of the first chapter and of the chapters recording Jurgen's third entrance into the cave were shaped into the semblance of a short story, and the result was published in the July 1918 issue of the old *Smart Set*, under the auspices of H.L. Mencken, who thus assumed the responsibility of Jurgen's debut in print." This suggests that the short story evolved from the novel, rather than vice versa.

Cabell went into more detail, however, in an earlier letter (August 10, 1919), to Burton Rascoe (BETWEEN FRIENDS, p. 127): ". . . It was a year ago last March that I temporarily put aside my *Something About Eve* to write for Mencken the short story he requested and seemed to merit. I evolved then very much the same 'Some Ladies and Jurgen' in imagination as eventually appeared in the *Smart Set*. . . . But as I wrote it out, I scented possibilities—how much more effective, for instance, it would be if Jurgen had previously known and loved these women. Of course, that meant, to me, a dizain. . . . So, with my story still unwritten, I began to plan the dizain, of ten short stories. . . . I am getting on now, with my dizain lacking only three episodes—since the half-written magazine story has obviously split into an opening and ending of a book. . . . That is about how the outline of the book came to me: and at this stage I went back

to the *Smart Set* story and actually wrote it. Thereafter I set about writing my ten episodes (and found them resolutely determined not to be short stories, on any terms). . . ."

The evolution, then, appears to have been as follows:

- (1) Planned the short story.
- (2) Started to write the short story.
- (3) Became intrigued with its further possibilities and put aside the short story in order to sketch out the plan of the book, as a dizain of short stories.
- (4) Finished the original story.
- (5) Wrote the dizain, which in the process became a novel.

Thus both the conception and the writing of "Some Ladies and Jurgen" each preceded the corresponding stage of the novel—but the *conception* of the novel, in outline form, preceded the *writing* (in full) of "Some Ladies and Jurgen." The essential point is that conception of the short story came first, but the writing was not completed until the dizain/novel had been planned. It follows that the evolution of Cabell's ideas in the process of actually writing the novel had not taken place when he wrote the short story. There are, then, differences between the two versions of the same episodes, and these are indicative of the way the novel developed in the process of getting it down on paper.

The story-line of the *Smart Set* version is simply that of the beginning and end of the novel. Jurgen meets the black gentleman, finds Lisa missing, enters the cave in search of her, and—with no centaur, no Garden Between Dawn and Sunrise, no regained youth, no Sereda shadow, no Nessus shirt—comes to the office of Koshchei. Koshchei offers him his choice of Guenevere, Anaitis, and Helen, and Jurgen refuses them in favor of Lisa, then returns home.

The opening sentence of "Some Ladies and Jurgen" sets the keynote. Unlike the novel, there is no mention of a tale narrated in Poictesme. Instead, the story commences "In the old days lived a poet named Jurgen." So Cabell, at that point, was vague about the story's geography (Poictesme is mentioned nowhere else in the tale, either); and he saw Jurgen's essential role, not as a pawnbroker, but as a poet. The pawnbroker idea seems to have become important to him, though, for later his favored choice for the book's title was THE PAWNBROKER'S SHIRT.

Jurgen's metier as a poet is again emphasized when he refers to making verses, where in the novel he speaks of making money. Similarly, in Jurgen's talk with the black gentleman the story lacks the novel's reference to its being "a long while" since Jurgen was "a practicing poet." And nothing is said of Jurgen's shop.

The geographical vagueness continues, too: there is no mention of passing Bellegarde when the poet meets the black gentleman, and though Morven and Amneran Heath are mentioned, Aigremont is not.

Also missing from the opening paragraph is the full name of Jurgen's wife, Adelais; she is referred to only as Lisa. What is missing throughout, in fact, is the French flavor of Poictesme. "Jurgen" and "Lisa" seem vaguely Teutonic; "Koshchei" is Russian, as is "Varvara," the name the tale gives to Dorothy. Nothing in the story, come to that, relates it to Poictesme as Cabell had described it before 1918, or links it to any previous work by Cabell.

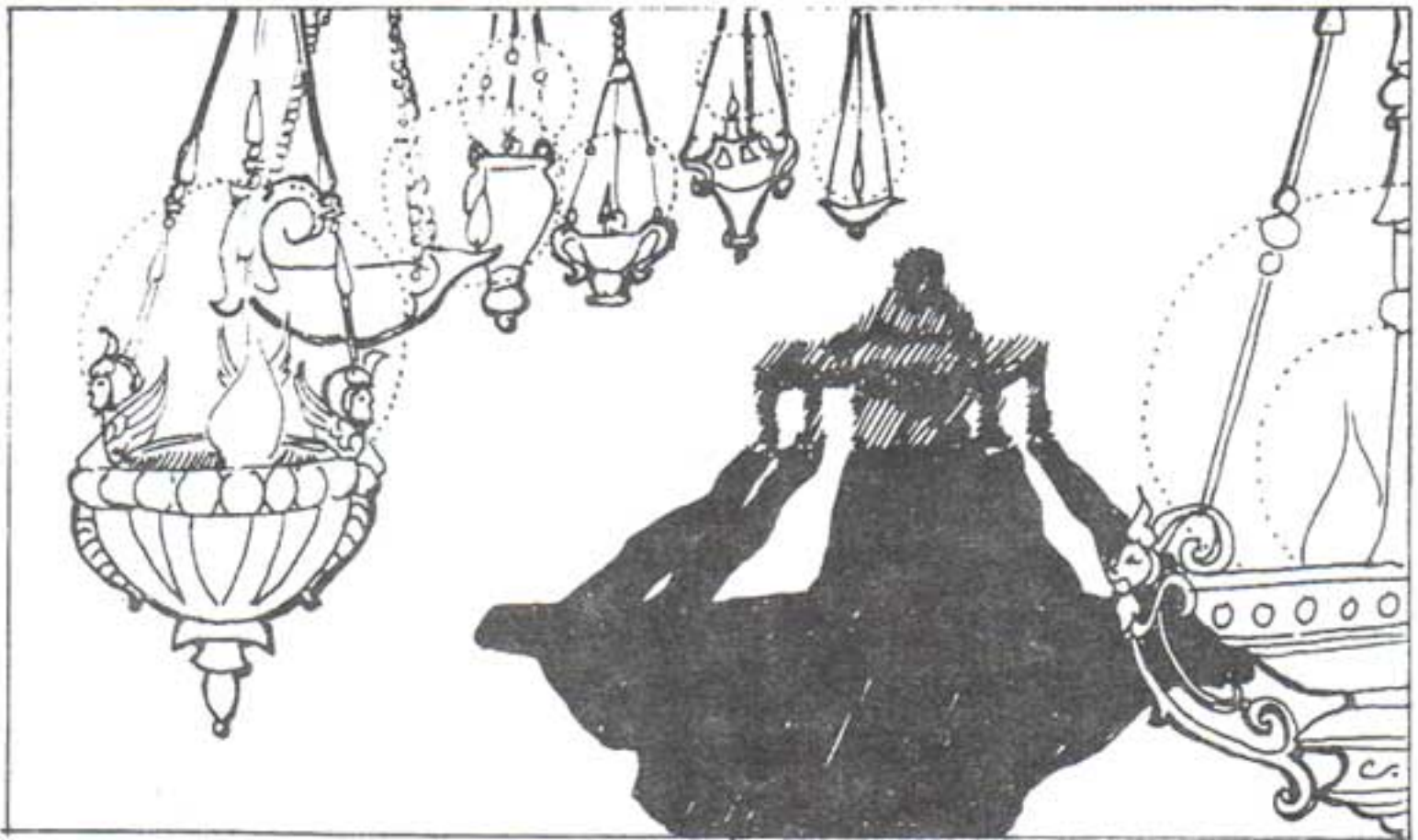
The chronology is equally vague. Nothing is said about Walburga's Eve, nor is there anything specific to identify the historical period meant by "the old days."

We are told nothing of Jurgen's age, though the context of his relationship with Lisa suggests he's middle-aged. The regained year of youth does not figure in the tale at all, and of course when Jurgen meets Guenevere, Anaitis, and Helen in Koshchei's cave it is his first encounter with them. In the novel, there is an awkwardness about the episode, for Cabell has to rationalize why Guenevere does not recognize Jurgen; he adds a whole paragraph of not wholly convincing explanation, and recapitulates it upon the appearance of Anaitis.

That Cabell already had at least some notion of the events in that regained year of youth is indicated in a nicely pregnant phrase. Jurgen, exploring the cave, "went on and on, and, *after divers happenings which do not here concern us*, he came to a notable place where seven cresset lights were burning." This seems to substantiate Cabell's claim that by the time he did much of the actual writing on the short story he already had the general conception of the novel in his head.

The most intriguing differences are those that relate to Koshchei and, by implication, to the philosophical basis of the novel. In JURGEN, the identity of Koshchei is rather awkwardly

ambiguous. The first chapter seems to present the familiar plot-gimmick of an encounter with the devil. Jurgen pleases the "black gentleman" because he has said a kind word for evil and "the divinely appointed Prince of Darkness," and the reader is "rather more than likely" to assume that this dark, enigmatic possessor of supernatural powers is Satan. When Jurgen meets him again, at the end of the book, however, the black gentleman



is revealed as Koshchei the Deathless, "who made things as they are" (and in the meantime Jurgen has met Grandfather Satan). Koshchei's conversation indicates that he created and controls the universe in all its aspects, benign as well as evil, and that he himself is beyond ethical considerations.

In the short story it is otherwise. Nowhere is any mention made that Koshchei is the Creator, or that he has any relationship to the brighter side of life; his role seems to fit snugly within the traditional concept of the devil.

Indeed, Cabell went to some pains to point up this distinction. The short story twice mentions, of Koshchei's cave, "There is no marrying or giving in marriage here, either." The "either" implies a comparison with, i.e., difference from, the Christian heaven—it seems not unreasonable to infer the contrary of heaven, or hell. But this passage was omitted from the novel.

Notice, too, the significant change in Koshchei's voice. The story tells us, "He lowered his voice to a whisper that was truly

diabolical"; the book says, "Koshchei lowered his voice to an impressive whisper." (By way of lagniappe, there's a gain in onomatopoeia.)

Contrariwise, the novel not only eliminates the hints of diabolism but adds references to a positive side of Koshchei's nature. The short story has him say, "You will pardon me, but I am positively committed to help out an archbishop with some of his churchwork this evening, and there is a rather important assassination to be instigated at Vienna." The reference to churchwork may sound godly, but from *THE WHITE ROBE* we get a picture of Cabell's ideas about bishops that allows plenty of room for evil, and thus makes churchwork a plausible employment for the devil. Whereas in the novel Koshchei says, "You will pardon me, Jurgen, but the fact is, I notice in my accounts that I am positively committed to color this year's anemones tonight; and there is a rather large planetary system to be discontinued at half-past ten." Here is an unmistakable balancing of the creative and destructive aspects of Koshchei—together with an expansion of his nature to the cosmic. The shift to the cosmic scale is neatly indicated by the nature of Koshchei's labors when Jurgen meets him in the cave: the short story has him working at "my accounts," while in the novel they become "the Stellar Accounts."

There is also Koshchei's table inlaid with thirty pieces of silver, reference to which appears in both versions. By the allusion to Judas, this appears to associate Koshchei with evil; yet Cabell left it unchanged, a residue of the original conception. An intriguing alteration, on the other hand, is that of the names Koshchei gives himself. In the book, he says he is known as "Koshchei, or Ardnari, or Ptha, or Jaldalaoth, or Abraxas." Now, all of these (except, in its original meaning, Koshchei) are the names of divine creators, not of devils. But in the short story, the black gentleman says he is "Koshchei, or Norka, or Chudo-Yudo." Am I wrong—you scholars in the realm of myth—in assuming Norka and Chudo-Yudo are the names of powers of evil?

In any case, the origin of Koshchei the Demiurge in Koshchei the mere Prince of Darkness is amply documented by Cabell himself. In the Author's Note to the Storisende *JURGEN*, he mentions that an early idea for the title of the novel-to-be was *GO TO THE DEVIL*; on the other hand, he quotes his original

outline for the novel, in which Koshchei figures as the Creator. That letter to Burton Rascoe, in describing how the conception of JURGEN evolved, mentions, "Koshchei—who, I am beginning to perceive, must be more than a mere devil if the book is to ascend. . . . Yes, he must be the Demiurge, and God his creation."

"Some Ladies and Jurgen" is a small-scale story about a man's relation to women and especially to his wife. It is no "comedy of justice." Nowhere does the question of justice arise, nor do any speculations as to life's purpose. What Cabell seems to have realized as he began work on the short story, however, is that the women all symbolize attitudes toward life. Need I add that those attitudes are the chivalrous, the gallant, and the poetic? There was more, then, to the situation than he had first thought. Jurgen's quest was not merely for a woman, but for an answer to the riddle of life.

In the end, of course, after Cabell put Jurgen through all those realms of wonder and all those symbolic sexual encounters and had him meet not merely a demon but the Author of All, Jurgen did wind up exactly where he had originally. For Cabell's message is that the nearest thing to satisfaction one can find in life is derived from commonplace existence with a spouse who suitably complements one's own fallible nature. This can be cynicism or sentimentality, as you prefer, but, from all one can gather, it does represent Cabell's real feelings.

In this connection, it is interesting to note that while Cabell was allegorizing Jurgen's lady friends and expanding cosmically the rôle of Koshchei, he added some further sympathetic details to the depiction of Lisa. He made reference to "all the buttons she had replaced, and all the socks she had darned; and . . . what tempests had been loosed when anyone else had the audacity to criticize Jurgen." And a strange psychological touch: "She really was so unattractive looking, too, poor dear, that you could not but be sorry for her"—which seems to be a roundabout way of saying that Jurgen found her more attractive than any great beauty. Another addition indicates the partially autobiographical nature of Cabell's theme: "You know," says Lisa, in the book, "when I am once disappointed in a person I am through with that person." If that sounds familiar, you have probably read AS I REMEMBER IT, which has Priscilla Bradley Cabell saying the same thing.