

*Preface*  
**TO THE PAST**



*by*

**JAMES BRANCH CABELL**

# PREFACE *to the* PAST

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*“He dwells, with a gently lingering, long-drawn music of tone, upon old, faded things: philosophies once triumphant, fashions once thought final, airs and graces long passed away, and music never heard now.”*



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## *Addenda as to Jurgén*

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LESS is the trouble that through any change of mind I wish now to write a definite commentary as to *Jurgén* than is the shock attendant upon the discovery that I have already done so. In my hands lies a copy of Burton Rascoe's *Prometheans*; and by an odd coincidence, such as few authors will find to be unexampled, I had turned first to an article which seemed to be about me.

So, on a sudden, do I find the learned author of *Prometheans* quoting in full a letter which I wrote him during the summer of 1919 in reply to his questions about how I came to work out the ideas and the construction of *Jurgén*? and what in brief had been in my mind the book's genesis?

Now at this time, as I must ask you to remember, *Jurgén* had not been published. Burton and I, having read it only in typescript, did not know that in print *Jurgén* could be regarded as a lewd story. Only in regard to the book's origins had been the questions that I had answered in this letter, the writing of which—upon the front porch of our cottage at the

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Rockbridge Alum Springs, on a pearl gray morning—I did now remember clearly enough, without being able in the least to recollect what this letter contained. The author of *Prometheans* had not asked my consent to include in his book this letter which, if I had ever thought about it at all, I would have believed to have perished long since. He had thus laid himself open, I am told, to several thousands of dollars—or perhaps it was hundreds of thousands of dollars—in the way of damages, from which I may or may not absolve him eventually. My point here is but that to discover, without any least warning, in a printed book you have honorably bought and paid for, a rather long letter which you wrote some fifteen years earlier—without any least thought of its publication—is sufficiently startling.

So I read with a lively interest this letter, which on 10 August 1919 began abruptly enough:

“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*: wherein the devil offers *Jurgen* the three symbolic ladies, *Guenevere* and *Cleopatra* and *Helen*, and the poet prefers, upon the whole, his prosaic wife. 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 and lost these women.

“Of course, that meant to me a dizain, with four tales already suggested. It would be out of space and time, of necessity, if Jurgen were to encounter these three who lived centuries apart. So, with my story still unwritten, I began to plan the dizain, of ten short stories, to be disposed of severally for much fine gold.

“Ah, but the Cleopatra episode! Here I foresee myself heading straight for an imitation of *Aphrodite* and Louys’ notion of life in Alexandria. Well, then, let us substitute the goddess herself in place of the Cleopatra who symbolizes her, and call the goddess—no, not Aphrodite, because the Grecianisms must be reserved for the Helen part. I consider her other names, and am instantly captivated by the umlaut in Anaïtis.”

It is at this point that I groan aloud. Did I actually write “umlaut” where any tolerably well educated person would have written “diæresis”? No doubt I did: but in that case Rascoe (confound him) ought to have corrected the error before printing my letter. I decide to consult with my lawyer about bringing suit; and I continue my reading.

“So my second heroine becomes Anaïtis, a moon goddess. But her lovers are solar legends . . . Why, to be sure! For does not Guenevere typify the spring? Anaïtis summer? and Helen, in her Leukê avatar,

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the autumn? I perceive that Jurgen is a solar legend—and inevitably spends the winter underground. There is the Hell episode postulated, then.

“I make out my calendar, and find it 37 days short, since obviously the year must be rounded out. Where was Jurgen between 22 March and 30 April? The question answers itself; and I spy the chance to use that fine idea, which has been in my mind for fifteen years or more, as to how Heaven was created.

“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 an ending of a book. (That is, I, thus far, think it the ending.) And now I am wondering if there is not a chance at last for that other fine idea I could not ever find a place to work into—the going back to a definite moment in one’s past.”

I pause here, aghast. After all, I was supposed to be writing in English. By-and-by I guess the enigma to mean that I was wondering if there were not a chance to work into *Jurgen* the “fine idea” of going back to a definite moment in one’s past and of thence beginning life all over again, an idea which (it seems) I had turned over in my mind before 1918, but had not thitherto found an opportunity to include in my writings. With that settled, and with a few more maledictions despatched Rascoe-ward, for not having permitted me to edit this letter before he published it, I continue to read about this idea of

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going back to a definite, a well remembered moment in one's past. I find my namesake, some fifteen years earlier, upon the front porch of a cottage at the now perished Rockbridge Alum Springs, to be asking, in regard to the purpose of this going back:

"For what?—obviously, for a woman, since Jurgen has by this time taken form as a person . . . What woman, though?—why, clearly, the woman who in his youth represented the never quite attainable Helen. And she was Count Emmerick's second sister, whose existence I had postulated in *The Jest* with the intention of using her in due time.

"I christen her Varvara, in general consonance with my Russian 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 . . . Then Koshchei must be rather stupid, and not be bothering himself about Jurgen at all. I need, therefore, another supernatural agent, some one more near to purely human affairs, to direct Jurgen's wanderings. My mind being already on Russian mythology, and the regaining of a lost day being involved, the *Léshy*, who according to Russian folklore control the days, present themselves; and I select Sereda for Jurgen to wheedle out of, of course, one of the Wednesdays when he was young. Another episode.

"But this Varvara—no, nobody will be certain as to the pronunciation of Varvara. Call her Dorothy."

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It is here that once more I desist from reading. This letter runs far too glibly. Though it does not say outright, yet it none the less implies, that Varvara was thus changed on a sudden into Dorothy la Désirée, while the book was being outlined; but in fact, as I very well know, she remained Varvara until the book was virtually finished. Yet this small point is not of importance, I decide; and I continue reading.

“This Dorothy, then, will disappoint him—a little, anyhow—if he goes back to the actual girl. Really to go back, he must return to the girl as she seemed to him, and he must himself be young again. Yet the point is already in my mind that, while Jurgen is to keep the youth which would come back to him with the replevined Wednesday, so far as his body goes, still his mind is to remain middle-aged. I grope to the ironic scheme of letting him win to his ideal girl as he actually is—and so be to her, of course, unrecognizable.

“Then he must somehow get rid of his false youth before his interview with Koshchei in the cave.”

This inference does not seem clear. Then I remember that an interview between a middle-aged poet and a putative devil was the germ from which everything began. I perceive what I was talking about,—which is always a comfort. I meant that, in order to preserve my starting point in composition, it was necessary for Jurgen, in some manner or an-



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other, to become middle-aged once more, before the now almost completely planned book could reach the actual starting point of its existence as a book, in the "situation" from which I first began to work out *Jurgen*.

I am mildly pleased. This seems to me a most excellent illustration of the "method"—of which I spoke in my commentary upon *Straws and Prayer-Books*—of commencing with the gist of a book and of working thence to the beginning and the end of its printed form. As in the forty chapters of *Figures of Earth* thirty-four, so in the fifty chapters of *Jurgen* forty-three, are but preliminary matter to the notion with which I started the book and from which the entire book developed. And here is the fifteen-year-old proof of it.

With that settled, I continue to read what remains of my letter.

"The getting rid of this false youth makes for me the tenth episode . . . No; I still lack the machinery for getting him to the Garden where he encounters young Dorothy. A Centaur appears the handiest method of combining transportation and conversation. I think inevitably of Nessus, then of his shirt. Yes, something must be done with that shirt. And that episode must come first, while Jurgen is still middle-aged.

"Well, there you are. That is about how the outline of the book came to me: and at this stage I went

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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); and rewrote them; and put in, here and there, just anything which occurred to me; and changed this, and altered that; and groped to that loathsome last chapter, as the tale's inevitable ending. And almost last of all, I pivoted the whole thing upon the shadow and the shirt, which were almost the last things of all I thought of. So, you see, the book virtually wrote itself."

That is all there is of my letter—or in any event that is all which Rascoe printed, and all with which I am nowadays conversant.

I REGARD it wistfully. If only I had known that this letter existed when in 1928 I wrote for the Storisende edition the all-dodging commentary upon *Jurgen* which is printed elsewhere, then I could have worked over this rather horribly phrased and far too elliptic letter into a most excellent commentary. For it is all first-hand information; it recorded, virtually at the moment of their happening, affairs which I have now forgotten long ago,—recording them too without any tinge of special pleading, inasmuch as this letter was written to a well-trusted friend with no thought of its publication; and above all, it is untarnished with any notion that anybody could think

*Jurgen* to be "indecent." Since 1920 that notion has cast me, willy-nilly, in the rôle of attorney for the defence whenever I had to refer to *Jurgen*; and I do not doubt my enforced position has colored my speaking.

But here you have my inedited commentary upon this book, just as I put down upon paper the mental genesis of *Jurgen* at a time when there was no question of defending this book against charges of any nature. I rejoice to have this commentary, as in some sort a yet further exoneration of my original intentions, to which I referred in prefacing the Storisende edition of *Jurgen*. But I do wish, from the grieved bottom of my heart: (*a*) that I could have seen this letter a bit sooner, before I wrote my more formal commentary; and (*b*) that before this letter was printed I had been permitted to touch up its phraseology.