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THE ART OF JAMES BRANCH CABELL

By HUGH WALPOLE

THE English novel has reached in this year of grace, 1920, one of the most interesting crises of its eventful history. In a sense there is no crisis—that is, no more of a crisis than there was in 1832, the year of Walter Scott's death; in 1861, the year of the publication of "Richard Feverel"; in 1890, the year of the first appearance of "The Yellow Book." In a sense there never has been a crisis, because in spite of certain obstinate and precipitantly determined mourners the English novel will never die—so long as the English tongue is spoken and men and women are willing to catch a moment's pause from their business and listen to a story-teller.

But, if there are not crises, there are at any rate moments, such as I have named, when the novel seems to begin a new chapter in its history. Such a chapter I believe the year 1920 and its immediate successors are now writing.

In England the case is fairly plain. The war has quite definitely marked off the novelists who began to fascinate us sometime before 1895 as of an older generation. That does not mean that they no longer interest us—far from it—but Thomas Hardy, Joseph Conrad, George Moore, Rudyard Kipling, and, in some degree, H. G. Wells and Arnold Bennett, are now definitely accepted figures. We know what they can do. "The figure in the carpet" is, in each case, finally marked out for us. They have staked their claim for, at any rate, some fragments of immortality.

These men were followed in England by a group of writers who suffered the misfortune of definition when they were still in their literary cradles. Somewhere about 1912 Henry James critically delivered himself in the "Times Literary

Supplement" concerning the younger generation of English novelists. After discussing the work of such seniors as Joseph Conrad, Arnold Bennett, and H. G. Wells, he grouped together comparative children like Compton Mackenzie, D. H. Lawrence, and Gilbert Cannan. This started a fashion. These unhappy ones, with certain reluctant additions, were, before they had escaped from their literary teens, christened the New Realists, or the Younger Novelists, or the Neo-Romanticists. Until the war buried their youth in a common grave they were estimated with a critical seriousness that both their immaturity and their own hesitation should have forbidden. The war has at least destroyed that grouping, although I perceive, once and again, belated stragglers like Mrs. Gerould make lamentable attempts at some reassertion of it. Some of those younger novelists have already ceased to entertain us; two of the ablest of them, E. M. Foster and D. H. Lawrence, have published no fiction within the last five years. On the other hand, new and admirable examples of the younger fiction have appeared—Frank Swinnerton, Ethel Sidgwick, Brett Young, Frederick Niven (the best Scottish novelist since the author of "The House of the Green Shutters"), Clemence Dane, Virginia Woolf. Books so opposite as J. D. Beresford's "God's Counterpoint," Swinnerton's "Nocturne," Brett Young's "Crescent Moon," Compton Mackenzie's "Poor Relations," and Clemence Dane's "Legend" prove quite clearly at this moment both that no general grouping is possible and that much work is being done in England that is valuable and of important promise.

Camps are formed, battles are fought, criticism is active and alive. The future of the novel so far as England is concerned should be eventful and dramatic.

What of the novel in America? Here, also, there are pessimists. I believe there to be small justification for that pessimism. It seems to be true that the American novelists of the older school are, with the definite exceptions of Booth

Tarkington and Ellen Glasgow, scarcely maintaining their earlier standards. Some of them, like Owen Wister and Mary Wilkins Freeman, have apparently said their say. Others, like Edith Wharton, have been interrupted by the war.

No visitor can be six months in America, however, without realizing with an eager sense of excitement the new literature which the country is now producing. It is not my province to speak of poetry or *belles-lettres*, but the novel offers examples enough. There is, for instance, Joseph Hergesheimer, who has received in England a more eager critical attention than any American novelist since Stephen Crane and Frank Norris. There is Miss Cather, whose "O Pioneers!" and "My Antonia" are masterpieces of American life and ideas. There is Sherwood Anderson's "Winesburg, Ohio," and Mr. Fuessle's "Flail." Add the stories of Harvey O'Higgins and Fannie Hurst and Edna Ferber, and the humor, absolutely new, utterly American, of Don Marquis, Ring Lardner, and George Ade. I mention writers who have given me pleasure in the six months of my stay here; there must be many others whose work limitations of time have hindered me from approaching. Here, at any rate, is sufficient challenge to any pessimist, and such critics as H. L. Mencken, Burton Rascoe, Francis Hackett, and others are making the challenge sufficiently audible. There is a new American fiction—fiction that has burst the sentimental bonds that so long bound it. Foreigners need no longer hesitate in despair between the slushy stupidity of the imbecile Far Western story and the innocent melodramatics of the New York chronicle. Here is now God's plenty at last, and it will be a happy thing for the world outside when the full discovery of this is made.

There is also James Branch Cabell. No one travelling around the United States of America during these last months, no one at least who is interested in literature, can escape the persistent echo of that name. It may be since

the stupid and entirely ludicrous censorship of "Jurgen" that Mr. Cabell has floated into a new world of discussion. I don't know. I am definitely speaking of the period anterior to that censorship. I had not been two weeks in the United States before someone said to me: "Well, at any rate, there is Cabell." That was a new name to me. I was given "Beyond Life" to read. My excitement during the discovery of that perverse and eloquent testament was one of the happiest moments of my American stay. I spent then a wild and eccentric search after his earlier masterpieces. Inside the cover of "Beyond Life" there were the titles of no less than fourteen books. I could see from the one which I held in my hand that Mr. Cabell was no careless writer. He had been writing then for many years and he was unobtainable! "No, he has never had any success," a bookseller told me. "No one ever asks for his books."

That situation is now changed. There are, I imagine, a great many more persons in the United States of America asking for "Jurgen" than are likely to obtain it. That good, at any rate, an idiotic censorship has done.

I have now, after six months' hard work, secured all the works of James Branch Cabell save only the records of his Virginian ancestors and relations, the chronicle of whose nativities and mortalities is not intended for a visiting stranger. I have read them all, and I am amazed that this remarkable and original talent has been at America's service for nearly twenty years, its patient waiting entirely unrewarded whether by the public or the critics or even the superior cranks.

Let it be said at once that Cabell's art will always be a sign for hostilities. Not only will he remain, in all probability, forever alien to the general public, but he will also, I suspect, be to the end of time a cause for division among cultivated and experienced readers.

His style is also at once a battleground. It is the easiest thing in the world to denounce it as affected, perverse,

unnatural, and forced. It would be at once an artificial style were it not entirely natural to the man. Anyone who reads the books in their chronological sequence will perceive the first diffident testing of it in such early works as "Chivalry" and "Gallantry"; then the acquiescence in it, as though the writer said to himself—"Well, this is what I am—I will rebel against it no longer"; and the final triumphant perfection of it in "Beyond Life" and "Jurgen."

Mr. Cabell began to write when the romantic movement was in full swing. Stevenson had left behind him a fine crop of cloak and sword artifices. These were the days of Crockett and Weyman. Of "When Knighthood was in Flower," of "The Heart of Princess Osra," of "Richard Carvel," and "Janice Meredith," and finally of "The Forest Lovers." In the fierce swing back towards realism that followed we were carried, it may be, too far in the opposite direction. It is probable that Cabell was conscious in the very beginning of this impending reaction. In both "Chivalry" and "Gallantry" there is a note of irony far indeed from the innocent sentimentalities of his romantic competitors, but it is, as yet, irony very slightly enforced. "Chivalry" need not detain us, although it seems most strange that there were so few readers of that volume to detect in the swing of the prose, the brilliance of the coloring, and the gay movement of the figures something exceptional and arresting.

"Gallantry" is a more serious affair. At first sight, with its "Proems" and pictures by Howard Pyle and "Explicit" and the rest, it seems to be of the Maurice Hewlett school. Cabell has inherited these paraphernalia, and it looks now as though he will always retain them. A kind of defiant flag flung against the camp of the realists—irritating them, indeed, quite as sufficiently as the author can ever have expected.

"Gallantry" is in its inception a string of stories about the Jacobean period in England and France. It has all the right furniture; the masculine heroine scorning the effemi-

nate hero, the eavesdropping behind screens, the duel in the woods, the magnanimous man of iron, the flippant exquisite, the last moment's rescue. Cabell uses these with a delightful gusto, but they are old tricks, and some of them are allowed a too frequent repetition. Nevertheless, here for the first time some of the author's peculiar gifts are apparent. The stories are quite definitely independent, with the very slightest links connecting them, and yet, in these links and in the abundant and amusingly mock serious politics scattered about the pages, there is Cabell's first hint to the reader that he is building something more than a merely imposing erection. If the reader will follow all the stories in the volume in their given sequence, he will gradually perceive that a world of politics and permanent history is passing before him, and behind this world there is a deeper world still, a world that has no boundary of material time, a background against which the figures of the mythology of Greece and Rome and Egypt and the Middle Ages, of the eighteenth century and the twentieth, mingle with equal sight and equal blindness.

The two chief masculine figures of these tales, the Duke of Ormskirk and the dastardly Vanringham, demonstrate the first placing upon the stage of Cabell's two dominant actors. These figures are recurrent through all the later books, and I have heard it urged in adverse criticism that the author is monotonous in his use of them. I believe the exact opposite to be the truer judgment. The author, as is apparent in his later inclusion of all his novels under the single term "Biography," is engaged in the history of the human soul. His books, the reader gradually perceives, are simply varying chapters of the Wandering Jew. He may appear as Ormskirk or Vanringham, as Wycherley or Pope or Sheridan, as Jurgen or Falstaff, as the modern Charteris or Felix Kennaston; behind the ephemeral body the features of the longing, searching, questing soul are the same. There is here, as I think there has never so deliberately been in the work of any

single novelist before, the history of an eternal, ceaseless quest.

So soon as the reader discovers this intention, the books fall quite simply into line. From "The Soul of Melicent," one of the most beautiful and moving of the books, to "The Rivet in Grandfather's Neck," the most modern of the novels, it is scarcely so much a series of stories as a succession of instalments in one long history. The volume of tales known as "The Certain Hour" gives this most plainly. Outwardly and for the casual reader, these are stories concerned with the hour when the poet comes into sudden, flashing, blinding contact with beauty. From the mists and bizarre splendors of the Middle Ages, through the Elizabethan seventeenth and the Queen Anne eighteenth centuries, through the humors of Sheridan and nineteenth-century Grub Street to the modern Virginian world the poet's quest of beauty persists, hoping, suddenly exultant, ultimately defeated. The stories are told with varying success. The Shakespeare story, like all Shakespeare stories, is disappointing; the Sheridan episode definitely poor; the Herrick chronicle, to one reader at any rate, puzzling and obscure. But the two mediaeval histories are excellent, the Wycherley comedy delightful, and the Pope adventure surely one of the best short stories in the English language. "The Certain Hour" is, I believe, the only book by Mr. Cabell yet published in England. It fell, I am informed, dead at its birth. Was there not a single critic in England aware of that chronicle of Mr. Pope's love affair, and were the bookshops of London and Edinburgh so overloaded with masterpieces that there was no room for a new one? And, more serious thought, are we now missing, year by year, other books that would do credit to our literary history? And yet I am told continually that never has there been a time when original talent was so easily recognized. I wonder.

The most casual reader, at the close of "The Certain Hour," must feel that he has been reading something more

than a series of pleasant stories. Mr. Charteris, dreaming under the battered statue on the green campus of his Alma Mater, has obviously some kinship with the figures of the distant centuries that have preceded him. It has been then a story of reincarnation—Kipling's "Brushwood Boy," Arnold's "Phra the Phoenician," and the rest. And yet not that entirely. In most reincarnation stories it is the contrast of the backgrounds that gives the interest to the performance. Here, it is the central figure that matters. The pathos of the poet, his frustration and still, at the very last, his persistent hope, makes the varying centuries of scarcely any effect, so immortal is it.

"It is only by preserving faith in human dreams that we may, after all, perhaps some day make them come true." This text from "The Cream of the Jest" is at the very heart of all this long chronicle. In spite of its qualifying clauses it is Cabell's final assertion of immortality. His hero is, after all, even now, only in the midst of his quest.

We come, then, to the modern novels, the modern fragments in the long, as yet uncompleted history. These are "The Eagle's Shadow," "The Cords of Vanity," and "The Rivet in Grandfather's Neck." These three of all the books are the most vulnerable to attack. They must seem to the reader who picks them up casually, confused, unpleasant, and uncompleted. "The Eagle's Shadow," which is an early work, need not detain us. "The Rivet in Grandfather's Neck" remains a very admirable example of Cabell's modern work. It is, superficially, the familiar story of the old husband and the young wife. It has pathos, humor, a pleasant background of modern Virginia; but, when it is read without any sense of the general scheme of which it forms a part, it must appear unsatisfactory. Mr. Cabell is always more deeply interested in the stream of life that flows beneath his characters than in the characters themselves. In the accepted, conventional sense of the word he is scarcely a novelist at all. He takes shocking liberties

with his individuals as human beings. He is not, I think, very deeply aware of the motives that move ordinary minds. He is not, in the debased Freudian sense, a modern psychologist; we may thank heaven that he is not—there are plenty of others. It follows that the heroine of "The Rivet" is irrational and spasmodic.

She loves and she loves not, she accepts and she rejects, and the reader must simply take the author's word for it. Mr. Cabell here is too ready to cover up weak spots with a motto, an epigram, a footnote. "This is really not my game at all," he seems to say to us. "I don't understand the stupid female. I have to include her because my Eternal Hero meets her at this moment, but I know very little about her and she is not important."

All this is simply to emphasize that Cabell is not a modern realist. In "Beyond Life," which is his magnificent, unequivocal, defiant testament, he proclaims again and again that he is not. We have had quite enough in modern criticism of the determination of critics to force writers into some shape or form that they could never possibly support. There is no need to commit this crime over Cabell, but it is a legitimate criticism, I think, that, being what he is, he would be wiser to leave alone themes that demand realism and psychological analysis for true revelation. Nevertheless, the very limitations of "The Cords of Vanity" and "The Rivet in Grandfather's Neck" make them remarkable books. They are unlike any other novels in the English language. The nearest in kind are "The Halfway House" and "The Open Country" of Maurice Hewlett, but those comedies have nothing of Cabell's peculiar qualities and are orderly and straightforward histories compared with these odd Virginian ironies.

"The Rivet in Grandfather's Neck" concluded Cabell's middle period. It is with these latest works—"The Cream of the Jest," "Beyond Life," and "Jurgen"—that he has reached the full command of his talent. Among many true

and many false things that George Moore has said in the course of his self-revealing history there is that admirable verity: "All except an emotional understanding is worthless in art." That is so true that it is astonishing that so many honest critics should be able to forget it. But the converse is also true, namely, that there is nothing so blinding to true criticism *as* an emotional understanding.

I am very conscious of this same converse in my estimation of these three books of Mr. Cabell's. I know that they are not perfect. I am aware that greater than they have been written in the past and that, in all probability, greater than they will be written again. I am aware also that contemporary criticism must be, nine times out of every ten, a case of blind leading the blind. Nevertheless, with the single exception of Joseph Hergesheimer's work, I know of no three books by one and the same author written in the last ten years that have given me so vivid a sense of a new, defiant, and genuine personality, whose arrival on the scene must make a definite impression upon English literature. Whom have we had within the last ten years? Mr. E. M. Forster ceased to write with "Howard's End," which was published, I think, in 1910. Mr. D. H. Lawrence? The impression made by "Sons and Lovers" was not confirmed. Edgar Lee Masters? To me, at any rate, the author of one book. Mr. Lytton Strachey? So far only one book. James Joyce? "Ulysses" is surely a poor second to "The Portrait of an Artist." Virginia Woolf? "Night and Day" is not quite so good as "The Voyage Out"; it ought to have been better. Sporadic works of individual talent, quite a number; and there are the poets—Robert Nichols, Sassoon, Vachel Lindsay, Robert Frost, and many others. But I am only the more strongly confirmed in my confidence after such a retrospect that no writer, new to us in the last ten years, has revealed, in English, so arresting a personality as has James Branch Cabell in these three books.

What do we ask for in a new writer? Individuality, inde-

pendence of thought, courage, and above all what George Moore (to quote him once again) has called "the great realism of the idea." All these things are in the three books absolutely displayed. You may dislike "Beyond Life"; it may irritate you profoundly. You may curse the man's affectations and poses (they are of course not affectations and poses at all). You may condemn him as narrow and pedantic and far from life as it is. He acknowledges all these things. He calls his book "Beyond Life," and it is on the world beyond life that his gaze is resolutely fixed. That will naturally irritate you whose duty it is to number the holes in the spout of your neighbor's gardening watering-can. But at least you must admit that he has been truthful with you. His man Charteris says at once: "It is by the grace of romance that man has been exalted above the other animals," and in close connection with this: "The cornerstone of chivalry I take to be the idea of vicarship; for the chivalrous person is, in his own eyes at least, the child of God, and goes about this world as his Father's representative in an alien country."

"Beyond Life" directs this gospel especially towards literature, and in a series of statements, Charteris, the author's mouthpiece, examining the art of Marlowe, Congreve, Sheridan, Dickens, Thackeray, brings us finally to our own day. In his indictment of modern realism he goes, as the author is delightfully aware, beyond the bounds of truth and plausibility, and the later chapters of the book may be read side by side with Frank Swinnerton's indictment of romance in his study of Robert Louis Stevenson. Here is a piquant study in contrasts. But Mr. Cabell knows well enough that his Charteris is going too far; a delightful irony pervades the book and involves Charteris himself in its atmosphere. In his final pages he is concerned perhaps too closely with ephemeral literature. Need Mr. Charteris disturb himself so deeply over the popularities of Mr. Harold Bell Wright and Mr. Zane Grey? Moreover, towards the last,

the crabbed and irritable personality of the little jaundiced author separates itself quite deliberately from its creator. Charteris, in these determinate paragraphs, is the villain of "The Rivet in Grandfather's Neck." We are aware of his earlier history and are uncomfortable in contemplation of him.

"Romance," says Charteris, "is an expression of an attitude which views life with profound distrust, as a business of exceeding dulness, and of very little worth."

That was never Mr. Cabell's judgment, and we cannot but feel that at the last it is the author rather than Charteris that we would prefer to hear.

And, after all, it is in the final paragraph Mr. Cabell himself to whom we are listening:

"We are being made into something quite unpredictable, I imagine; and through the purging and smelting we are sustained by an instinctive knowledge that we are being made into something better. For this we know, quite incommunicably, and yet as surely as we know that we will to have it thus.

"It is this will that stirs in us to have the creatures of earth and the affairs of earth, not as they are, but as 'they ought to be,' which we call romance. But when we note how visibly it sways all life we perceive that we are talking about God."

After finishing "Beyond Life," the reader should at once move on to "The Cream of the Jest" to observe how precept "may be turned into practice." This work, although "Jurgen" is more entertaining, more various, more complete, and more humorous, is the best summary of Mr. Cabell's art that we have.

In scheme it amplifies the machinery of "Chivalry" and "The Certain Hour" and reminds us of Wells's "Time Machine" and many another less able fairy story. Kenaston, the author, whom we have met before, from whose works Mr. Cabell has frequently quoted, adequately but unromantically married, finds a piece of metal that transports

him, through dreams, back into certain existences. The metal is the Nessus shirt of "Jurgen," the talisman that Mr. Cabell must always carry with him in order that dreams may begin so soon as possible.

In this story there is nothing very striking and, as always in Mr. Cabell's books, the story is most certainly "not the thing." What *is* the thing here is Kennaston's passionate, poignant longing for the active realizing of his fugitive dreams. Again and again, as I have said before, this longing has been Mr. Cabell's theme, but he has never in any other work expressed it so clearly, so dramatically, so beautifully, so truthfully.

From the merely technical point of view the little cameos of vanished moments in past civilizations are admirable. So often this has been attempted, so often the attempt has failed. How vivid for instance such a vignette as this:

"Again Kennaston stood alone before a tall window, made up of many lozenge-shaped panes of clear glass set in lead framework. He had put aside one of the two great curtains—of a very fine stuff like gauze, stitched over with transparent, glittering beetle-wings and embroidered with tiny seed pearls—which hung before this window.

"Snow covered the expanse of housetops without, and the sky without was glorious with chill stars. That white city belonged to him, he knew, with a host of other cities. He was the strongest of kings. People dreaded him, he knew; and he wondered why anyone should esteem a frail weakling such as he to be formidable. The hand of this great king—his own hand—that held aside the curtain before him, was shrivelled and colorless as lambs' wool. It was like a horrible bird claw."

Kennaston, his hero, thus pursues through the centuries his dreams and so resolves himself as another manifestation of the eternal Cabell figure.

The physical trappings do not matter. In himself he is less than nothing, in his purpose everything. Of him the

author says: "He could face no decision without dodging; no temptation without compromise; and he lied, as if by instinct, at the threatened approach of discomfort or of his fellows' disapproval: yet devils, men, and seraphim would conspire in vain in any effort to dissuade him from his self-elected purpose."

So when we come to Mr. Cabell's final and at present most famous figure, Jurgen, we find him to be a dirty little paunch-bellied pawnbroker of the Middle Ages, tied to a shrew of a wife, of a niggardly, cowardly nature.

Jurgen's history has been accused of many ancestries. From Rabelais to Lord Dunsany authorities have been quoted and emphasized. I don't think that any reader of the book need worry over this. Jurgen is born of a mind teeming with literature; he is the descendant of many centuries, many libraries, many stories and chronicles, but at the last he is his author's own child, original and defiant in his own right, owing no man anything for his ultimate personality.

Nor do I think that the reader need worry himself here about symbols, metaphors, and philosophies. "The history of Jurgen" is precisely what any reader chooses to make it. It is not for every reader any more than are the earlier Cabell books. Some will find it heavy, some tedious, some puzzling and wayward; and some, as it appears according to the Comstockians, find it improper. This censorship quarrel is an old one, but while the Bible, Rabelais, Gautier, Fielding, and the rest are open before us, and while the latest *Midnight Revues* are delighting New York, it seems something absurd and not a little pathetic that one of the few original works of literature that the English language has furnished us lately should be taken away from us. This, however, is a matter of no lasting importance. Jurgen will survive no matter what the Comstockians may do to him. He has the gaiety and beauty of permanence about him; the Nessus shirt is not easily destroyed by a policeman's baton.

This at least may be said: If "Jurgen" is read simply for amusement, for the humor and brilliance of its episodes, for the drama of chapters, like the adventure with Guinevere, the fall of Pseudopolis, the episodes in hell, and, above all, the meeting with his grandmother's God in heaven, there is benefit and happiness enough to be got from the book. Nothing can be harder to write than fantasy of this kind, and yet for one reader, at least, the story never flags, the interest is never dropped, the humor and beauty and very gentle irony are everywhere present.

Finally, it is the crown of Mr. Cabell's work. He is, as writers go, a young man. He has, in all probability, many years of fine and successful labor in front of him, but, were he never to publish another line, he has, with three books, staked his claim and taken his place. Jurgen is the most triumphant manifestation of that travelling soul who remains, from first to last, his unfaltering subject.

And, with the ending of Jurgen's chronicle, we can acclaim with no uncertain voice the definite arrival of a talent as original and satisfying as anything that our time has seen.