

# THE ARTIST

By James Branch Cabell

... people who view life sensibly—through the  
... reports transmitted to the brain centers  
... man's gullible five senses—gravely weave  
... It is they who, with a portentous  
... laughter-loving cherubs no doubt as  
... "the middle road" Thus lies lumber  
... edifying virtues, put money in bank, rise at  
... and abnegation, serve on committees, dis-  
... practical benevolence in which there is in reality  
... divine, discourses very wisely over flat-topped  
... and eventually die to the honest regret of their  
... And for such as one that forthwith begins to  
... achievement here. No doubt the gates of heaven  
... and his sturdy spirit sets about celestial labor;  
... upon earth he has got of his body no enduring incre-  
... He has left nothing durable to signalize his stay  
... on this planet. Mementoes there may be in the shape  
... of things; yet the days of these children also are num-  
... bered by no prodigal mathematician; and since to these  
... who were created when his thought ran upon  
... matters—he is certain to transmit his habits, they  
... turn begot fruitless.

... has the "practical" person builded a house,  
... time turn down, it burns or else it crumbles; and  
... window, or his paper mill, or his free circulating  
... books on the spires of Carthage and the temple  
... of Baal. Has he contrived a beneficial law with Lycur-  
... or a useful invention with Alfred the Great, his race  
... in progress of years outgrows employment of it. Has  
... he a civilization. It passes and is at one with As-  
... and Babylon. Has he even founded a religion, the  
... he gained by martyrdom is taken over by an organ-  
... church, and pared down to the tenet that it is good  
... to agree with your neighbors. . . . But the tale is  
... as to what befalls all human endeavors that are  
... guided by common sense.

... in thy mind, for example's sake, the times of  
... Trajan; and in like  
... consider all other periods, both of times and of  
... nations, and see how many men, after they had  
... all their might and main intended and prosecuted  
... some worldly thing or other, did drop away and were  
... into the elements." And Marcus Aurelius was in  
... light of it; by making any orthodox use of your body  
... you can get out of them only ephemeral results.  
... of this code of common sense, and this belief in the  
... of doing "practical" things, would seem to be but  
... a dynamic illusion through which romance retains  
... a share of average intelligence in physical employment  
... as a by-product in an augmenting continuance of  
... comforts. To every dupe, of course, romance ap-  
... pears more than a just adequate illusion, and squanders  
... needed cunning in contriving the deceit. So with  
... it is a truism that people of great mental powers are  
... deficient in common sense, for only the normally  
... can be deluded by any pretense so tenuous as this  
... ultimate value of doing "practical" things

... some few of our multifarious race this futile body-  
... wasting practiced by kings and presidents and polit-  
... ical parties, by ditch-diggers and milliners and shrewd  
... of business seems irrational. The thrifter artist is  
... to get enduring increment of his body and by  
... of that movable carcass which for a while he per-  
... controls to make something that may, with favor-  
... able, be permanent. Particularly does this incentive  
... the craftsman in that creative literature where-  
... in a man perpetuates his dreams. In all other forms  
... graphic exercise, wherein the scribe expresses his  
... likes and ostensible opinions—as in history or in  
... spy or in love letters or in novels that deal with  
... problems or in tax interrogatories—his writing is  
... very soon to require revision into conformity with  
... conditions, and is doomed ultimately to interest  
... In the sister arts, there needs only a glance at  
... restored canvases of Leonardo, or at that battered  
... of the Louvre, to show that here, too, time lies in  
... work disastrous alchemy. But the dream, once  
... down, once snared with comedy and st words,  
... perpetuated, its creator may usurp the brain  
... and prompt the flesh of generations born long after  
... mortal loans are dust; and possibly he may do  
... here is the lure—forever.

... authors who regard their art with actual reverence  
... beyond doubt exaggerate its possibilities as prod-  
... as their own—this, then, is the creative writer's goal,  
... being about this that he utilizes his human brain  
... fully; and it is to this end he devotes those imper-  
... ous. By any creative writer, as has been said, the  
... brain is perverted to uses for which it was perhaps  
... originally designed; nor is it certain that the human  
... was originally planned as a device for making marks  
... on paper. Thus the serious artist, as well as the con-  
... tributor to those justly popular magazines wherein the  
... is arranged, and to every appearance written, with  
... the inducing people to read the advertisements, will  
... often damage his fleshy allotments in adapting them  
... to his turn.

... this would be a weighty consideration to the elect  
... who is above all else an economist, were a man's  
... body, by any possibility of hook or crook, and  
... in its present imperfection, to be retained by him.  
... his chattels, as the elect artist alone would seem  
... comprehend with any clarity, are but the loans of  
... time in an indeterminable while will have need of  
... it. So always this problem confronts the creative  
... as to what compromise is permissible between his

existence as an artist and his existence as an ephemeral  
animal. And this problem has the dubious distinction of  
being absolutely the only question no writer has ever  
settled, even to his own satisfaction.

Nor is this all. Enduring literature, as it is necessary  
once more to print out in a land where custom is in-  
conspicuously dogmatic as to this or that book's "truthful-  
ness to life," does not consist of reportorial work. It is  
not a transcript of human speech and gesture, it is not  
even "true to life" in any four-square sense, nor are its  
materials to be drawn from the level of our normal and  
trivial doings. Thus very few writers establish their desks  
at street corners—which would seem the obvious course  
—but, to the contrary, affect libraries, where they grum-  
ble over being disturbed by human intrusion. I shall  
presently come back to this vital falsity of "being true  
to life."

MEANWHILE the elect artist voluntarily purchases  
loneliness by a withdrawal from the plane of com-  
mon life, since only in such isolation can he create.  
No doubt he takes with him his memories or things ob-  
served and things endured, which later may be utilized  
to lend plausibility and corroborative detail; but, precisely  
as in the Book of Genesis, here, too, the creator must  
begin in *vacuo*. And moreover, he must withdraw for  
history evaluation, to an attitude which is frankly ab-  
normal. The viewpoint of "the man in the street" is  
really not the viewpoint of fine literature; their touch-  
stones display very little more in common than is shared  
by the standards of lineal measure and avoirdupois weight;  
and for the greater part of every day, at meals; and in  
our family concerns; and in all relations with human  
beings, each one of us is perforce "the man in the street."  
It is thus from his own normal viewpoint that the artist  
must withdraw. . . . And sometimes the mind goes of  
its own accord into this withdrawal, and reveries abstracts  
the creative writer from the ties and aspirations of his  
existence as a taxpayer. Of the pleasures he knows, then,  
one need not speak; but it is a noble pleasure.

And sometimes the mind plays the refractory child, and  
clings pertinaciously to the belongings of workaday life;  
and abstractions will not come unaided. Then it would  
seem that this ruthlessly far-seeing economist induces  
such withdrawal by extraneous means (as people loosely  
say) as a matter of course, and by mere extension of the  
principle on which he closes his library door. . . . Of the  
pleasure he knows then one need not speak; but, then  
also, it is a noble pleasure. Nor with him does there  
appear to be any question of self-sacrifice or self-injury,  
since, as he must perceive with unmerciful clearness, a  
man's body, and to ultimate consideration, even a man's  
brain, is no more a part of him than is the brandy bottle  
or the pill of opium. All are extraneous things, and are  
implements of which the economist makes use to serve his  
end. So the abstraction is induced, the dream is captured;  
and presently, of course, this withdrawal requires aug-  
mented prompting. . . . Thus the wind-whirl passes  
with heightened speed, and the dust it animated is quiet  
a little sooner than any inevitable need was. And subse-  
quently commentators are put to the trouble of exposing  
"unsubstantiated traditions" and "calumnies of Griswold"  
and "Bacchic myths" and "symbolic vines" in annotated  
editions for the use of class rooms.

FOR to some of us this economy seems wrong. There  
is no flaw in it perhaps, as a matter of pure reason;  
but reasoning very often conducts one to undesirable  
results, and after all has no claim to be considered infal-  
lible. . . . Drugged by the fumes of moral indignation,  
we will even protest that, inasmuch as Prof. Henry Wad-  
sworth Longfellow was a man of irreproachable habits  
and it was only yesterday that the Christian disciples'  
pulpit was adorned by the Rev. Harold Bell Wright (to  
whom I shall recur for admiring consideration) it is, among  
other inferences, a self-evident proposition that Shake-  
peare did not die as the result of a drinking bout. Con-  
ceivably the syllogism is not builded of perennial brass.  
But, as has been said, it seems at first sight to every  
reputable connoisseur of art, that the only possible way  
to confront this unpleasant truth is to deny its existence.

We somehow know, again led by instinctive wisdom,  
that it is more salutary for us to perceive in this mythos  
of the Dive Boutaille, which clings with annoying uni-  
formity to so many great creative writers, simply a proof  
of their detractors' uninventiveness. . . . For we admire  
our corner of the planet, we prize our span of life, and  
we cherish our bodies with a certain tenderness. It is  
not the part of a well balanced person, say we, to think  
of such "economy," nor to appraise a man's relative im-  
portance in human life, far less in the material universe,  
after any such high-flown and morbid fashion, so long as  
there is the daily paper with all the local news.

So we take refuge in that dynamic illusion known as  
common sense; and wax sagacious over state elections and  
the children's progress at school and the misdemeanors  
of the cook, and other trivialities which accident places  
so near the eye that they seem large; and we care not a  
button that all about us flows and gyrates unceasingly  
an endless and inconceivable jumble of rotatory blazing  
gas and frozen spheres and detonating comets, where-  
through spins earth like a frail midge. And we decline,  
very emphatically, to consider the universe as a whole—  
"to encounter Pan," as the old Greeks phrased it, who  
rumored that this thing sometimes befell a mortal, but  
asserted likewise that the man was afterward insane.  
They seem to have had the root of the matter.