

THE DENIURGE

By James Branch Cabell

This is the second of a series of selections from a forthcoming book of essays by Mr. Cabell to be called *Beyond Life*. In the previous essay Mr. Cabell had made the point that the Greek poets and dramatists, the writers of the middle ages, and the Elizabethans whose literary works have survived avoided the "vital" problems of their day and, indeed, any theme of contemporary, hence ephemeral, interest.

THEN came the gallant protest of the Restoration. When Wycherley and his successors in drama commenced to write of contemporary life in much the spirit of modern musical comedy, which utilizes a facade of the New York Pennsylvania railway station or of the capitol at Washington as an appropriate setting for a ballet and a comedian's colloquy with the orchestra leader. Thus here the scenes are in St. James park, outside Westminster, or in the New Exchange, and other places familiar to the audience; and the characters barter jokes on current events; but the laws of the performer's make existence are frankly extra-mundane, and their antics, in restoration days as now, would have subjected them to immediate arrest upon the auditorial side of foot-lights.

A great deal of queer nonsense has been printed concerning the comedy of Gallantry, upon the startling assumption that its authors copied the life about them. It is true that Wycherley, in this the first of English authors to go astray, began the pernicious practice of depicting men as being not very much better than they actually are: of that I will speak later; but Wycherley had the saving grace to present his men and women as hampered by the social restrictions of Cloud-Cuckoo-Land alone.

And, were there nothing else, it seems improbable that Congreve, say, really believed that every young fellow spoke habitually in terms of philosophic wit and hated his father; and that every old hunk possessed, more or less vicariously, a beautiful second wife; and that people married without licenses, or, indeed, without noticing very particularly whom they were marrying; and that monetary competence and happiness and all important documents, as well as a sudden turn for heroic verse, were regularly accorded to everybody toward 11 o'clock in the evening.

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THUS far the illiterate ages, when as yet so few persons could read that literature tended generally toward the acted drama. The stage could supply much illusory assistance, in the way of pads and wigs and grease paints and soft lightings, toward making men appear heroic and women charming; but, after all, the roles were necessarily performed by human beings and the charitable deceit was not continuous. The audience was ever and anon being reminded, against its firm set will, that men were mediocre creatures.

Nor could the poets, however rapidly now multiplied their verse books, satisfactorily delude their patrons into overlooking this unpleasant fact. For one reason or another men as a whole have never taken kindly to printed poetry; most of us are unable to put up with it at all, and even to the exceptional person verse after an hour's reading becomes unaccountably tiresome. Prose—for no very patent cause—is much easier going. So the poets proved ineffectual comforters who could but rarely bedrug even the few to whom their charms did not seem gibberish.

With the advent of the novel all this was changed. Not merely were you relieved from metrical fatigue, but there came no commonplace flesh and blood to give the lie to the artist's pretensions. It was possible to present in literature men "as they ought to be." Richardson could dilate as unrestrainedly as he pleased upon the supereminence in virtue and sin respectively of his Grandison and his Lovelace; emboldened by the knowledge that there was nothing to check him off save the dubious touchstone of his reader's common sense.

Fielding could not only conduct a broad shouldered young ruffian to fortune and a lovely wife, but could moreover endow Tom Jones with all sorts of heroic and estimable qualities such as (in mere unimportant fact) rascals do not display in actual life. When the novel succeeded the drama it was no longer necessary for the artist to represent human beings with even partial veracity; and this new style of writing at once became emblematic.

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AND so it has been ever since. Novelists have severally evolved their pleasing symbols wherewith approximately to suggest human beings and the business of human life, much as remote Egyptians drew serrated lines to convey the idea of water and a circle to indicate eternity. The symbols have often varied; but there has rarely been any ill advised attempt to depict life as it seems in the living of it, or to crystallize the vague notions and feeble sensations with which human beings actually muddle through to an epitaph; if only because all sensible persons, obscurely aware that this routine is far from what it ought to be, have always preferred to deny its existence. And, moreover, we have come long ago to be guided in any really decisive speech or action by what we have read somewhere, and so may fairly claim that literature should select (as it does) such

speeches and such actions as typical of our essential lives, rather than the gray interstices, which we perform fill in extempore and botch.

As concerns the novelists of the day before yesterday this evasion of veracity is already more or less conceded; the "platitudinous heroics" of Scott and the "exaggerated sentimentalism" of Dickens are notorious in quite authoritative circles whose dudcane is the honest belief that art is a branch of pedagogy. Thackeray, as has been pointed out elsewhere, avoids many a logical outcome of circumstance, when recognition thereof would be inconvenient, by killing off somebody and blinding the reader with a tear drenched handkerchief. And when we sanely appraise the most cried up writer of genteel "realism" matters are not conducted much more candidly.

Here is a fair sample: "From the very beginning of my acquaintance with you, your manners, impressing me with the fullest belief of your arrogance, your conceit, and your selfish disdain of the feelings of others, were such as to form that groundwork of disapprobation on which succeeding events have built so immovable a dislike, and I had not known you a month before I felt that you were the last man in the world whom I could ever be prevailed on to marry." It is Miss Austen's most famous novel, most beloved and most "natural" character replying—not by means of a stilted letter, but colloquially, under the stress of emotion—to a proposal of marriage by the man she loves. This is the crisis which in human life a normal young woman simply does not meet with any such rhetorical architecture.

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SO there really seems small ground for wonder that Mr. Darcy observed, "You have said quite enough, madam," and no cause whatever for surprise that he hastily left the room and was heard to open the front door and quit the house. . . . Yet be it forthwith added, Scott and Dickens and Thackeray, and even Miss Austen, were in the right, from one or another esthetic standpoint, in thus variously editing and revising their contemporaries' unsatisfactory disposition of life. Indeed, upon no plea could they be bound to emulate malfeasance.

Criticism as to the veracity of more recent writers is best dismissed with the well merited commendation that novelists today continue rigorously to respect the second commandment. Meanwhile it may with comparative safety be pointed out that no interred writer of widely conceded genius has ever displayed, in depicting the average of human speech and thought and action and general endowments, such exactness as would be becoming in an affidavit; but rather, when his art touched on these dangerous topics, has regarded romantic prevarication as a necessity. The truth about ourselves is one truth above all others which we are adamant not to face. And this determination springs not wholly from vanity, but from a profound race sense that by such denial we have little to lose and a great deal to gain.

For, as has been said before, an inveterate Sophocles notes clearly that veracity is the one unpardonable sin, not merely against art, but against human welfare. . . . You will observe that the beginnings of fiction everywhere, among all races, take with curious unanimity the same form. It is always the history of the unlooked for achievements and the ultimate very public triumph of the ill used youngest son. From the myth of Zeus, third son of Chronos, to the third prince of the fairy tale, there is no exception.

Everywhere it is to the despised weakling that romance accords the final and very public victory. For in the life battle for existence it was of course the men of puniest build who first developed mental ability, since hardier competitors, who took with bloodied hands that which they wanted, had no especial need of less reliable makeshifts, and everywhere this weakling, quite naturally, afforded himself in imagination what the force of circumstances denied him in fact. Competent persons, then as now, had neither the time nor ability for literature.

By and by a staggering stroke of genius improved the tale by adding the handicap of sex weakness, and Cinderella (whom romance begot and deified as Psyche) straightway led captive every dreamer's hitherto unvoiced desire. This is the most beloved story in the world's library, and barring a tremendous exception, to which I shall presently return, will always remain without a rival. Any author anywhere can gain men's love by remodeling—not too drastically—the history of Cinderella. Thousands of calligraphic persons have, of course, availed themselves of this fortunate circumstance, and the seeming miracle is that the naïve and the most sophisticated continue to thrill, at each retelling of the hackneyed story, with the instant response of fiddle strings, to an interpretation of life which one is tempted to describe as fiddlesticks.