

EXAMINATION PAPERS IN MATHEMATICS

♩ CABELLIAN
HARMONICS

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With an Introductory Note
by JAMES BRANCH CABELL



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Reflections

As to Mirrors and Pigeons

SOME years ago the writer of this paper was so thoughtless as to ask Mr. Cabell to explain the secret of the mirror and the pigeons: "thoughtless" seems now the proper word to describe this action because reflection has made the situation then existing seem analogous to that confronting Gerald Musgrave when he declined to enter Antan.

"After dark," one reads in *Something About Eve*, "Antan always displayed eight lights, six of them grouped together in the middle of the vista with the general effect of a cross, and the other two showing much farther to the northwest. About these never-varying huge lights Gerald had formed at least twenty delightful theories, all plausible as long as you remained upon Mispic Moor, whereas if you went to Antan not more at most than one of these theories could be true.

"To go to Antan thus meant the destruction of no less than nineteen rather beautiful ideas as to those lights alone. . . ."

So, the writer thoughtlessly might have robbed himself of perhaps twenty delightful theories as to the significance of the mirror and pigeons—each theory

based on a separate reference in the Biography—had not Mr. Cabell been discreet enough to reply: “There are reasons, which I consider now with real regret, why I cannot explain to you the secret of the mirror and the pigeons. I am however at liberty to say that the reference is by no means to a mere ‘myth’.”

But even realization of the advantage of not being confined to one theory regarding Mr. Cabell’s favorite mystery has not served to quench the desire to understand these enigmatic references, and the result has been the working out of an hypothesis. This suggested explanation is given, however, with the understanding that it is not to prejudice the right of any person—including the author—to formulate and to believe in any other theory or theories that he may elect.

In the first place, then, it would seem after considering all the references to mirrors and pigeons in the Biography that these objects are devices used in some branch of sorcery.

Jurgen in his first encounter with Mother Sereda sees, hung above a table in her apartment, “a wicker cage containing a blue bird, and another wicker cage containing three white pigeons.” After he has asked her to let him have one of her Wednesdays she offers him the blue bird, which he declines to accept. “So Mother Sereda took from the wall the wicker cage containing the three white pigeons: and going before him . . . she led the way into a courtyard, where, sure enough, they found tethered a he-goat. Of a dark blue color this beast was, and his eyes were wiser than the eyes of a beast. Then Jurgen set about that which Mother Sereda said was necessary.”

And here it is to be recalled that the Sabbat, "a meeting attended by all witches in satisfactory diabolical standing" was graced also by the company of the devil who "usually attended in the form of a monstrous goat," according to the statement of Mr. Richard Harrowby, as recorded in *The Cream of the Jest*.

Returning to *Jurgen* we read, "In his hand Merlin held a small mirror, about three inches square, from which he raised his dark eyes puzzlingly.

"I have been talking to my fellow ambassador, Dame Anaitis: and I have been wondering, Messire de Logreus, if you have ever reared white pigeons.'

"Jurgen looked at the little mirror. 'There was a woman of the Leshy not long ago showed me an employment to which one might put the blood of white pigeons. She too used a mirror. I saw what followed, but I must tell you candidly that I understood nothing of the ins and outs of the affair'."

From which it would seem that the use to which the sorcerer puts the mirror and pigeons is in establishing a communication with beings or a world that is supra-mundane.

Another example of the use of these devices in some form of sorcery is to be found in *Something About Eve* when "Horvendile gave Gerald a queer word of power, and Horvendile took out of his pocket a little mirror three inches square. You heard in the duskiess the flapping of small vigorous wings. Then three white pigeons stood among the swine, at the feet of Horvendile. He did what was requisite: and Gerald thus came straightway into a place that was not unfamiliar."

In this same book is found a more definite sugges-

tion as to the significance of mirrors and pigeons when the six words of power and wisdom known to Solomon are mentioned, among them "the word of the mirror. It was spoken, and before him stood a wicker cage containing three pigeons. Beside this cage lay a small mirror three inches square."

By applying the other five words to the things mentioned over which it is obvious that they were intended to give power, it appears in the elimination that the mirror and pigeons made him master of "the elemental spirits and the ghosts of the dead." And, as to the one word of power not known to Solomon, "his little mirror showed him that word, as it showed every other thing; but the word was written in a language which he could not read."

Also in this book is found the following conversation between Gerald and the Sylan:

"And this Queen Freydis has a mirror which must, they say, be faced by those persons who venture into the goal of all the gods of men—"

"That mirror too," said Gerald airily, "I may be needing. Mirrors are employed in many branches of magic."

And Glaum said: "For one, I would not meddle with that mirror. Even in the land of Dersam, where a mirror is sacred, we do not desire any dealings with the mirror of the Hidden Children and with those strange reflections which are unclouded by either good or evil."

Now, here is found no mention of the pigeons, nor is the size of the mirror specified and so, there seems no bar to the supposition that the small mirror used with the pigeons in sorcery may be a symbol representative of the "mirror of the Hidden Children."

To understand the significance of this last phrase it is necessary to refer to *Figures of Earth* and to a passage in which neither mirrors nor pigeons are mentioned, but which seems to furnish the only clue as to the nature of the mirror of Freydis.

Ruric, young clerk to Dom Manuel, has been tempted to go out through the third window of Ageus into the scented dusk that the count of Poictesme is dubious about entering in person; and, on his return, Ruric replies to the questioning of his master:

“Count Manuel, I will tell you a merry story of how a great while ago our common grandmother Eve was washing her children one day near Eden when God called to her. She hid away the children that she had not finished washing: and when the good God asked if all her children were there, with their meek little heads against His knees, to say their prayers to Him, she said Yes. So God told her that what she had tried to hide from God should be hidden from men: and He took away the unwashed children and made a place for them where everything stays young, and where there is neither good nor evil, because the children are unstained by human sin and unredeemed by Christ’s dear blood.”

And, in *Straws and Prayer-Books*, Mr. Cabell and Mr. Harrowby have the following conversation, Cabell speaking first:

“Men, it was whispered, had, for however brief a while, escaped from the obligations and restraints and, above all, from the tediousness of workaday life,—that tediousness which people have always tried to vary and color, under every sort of human civilization, with so many forms of fiction. . . .”

“But you have the ladder of the seven metals, and you know perfectly well the secret of the mirror and the pigeons—”

“That,” I protested, “isn’t the point!” . . . For I was in fact not at all concerned with the exact amount of truth upon which these legends were based. The point with me, was that man has since time’s beginning wanted such tales to be true; and that these stories illustrated man’s immemorial and universal desire to escape from the self-imposed routine of his daily life. Man had always believed that he could do this by the aid of wizardry: and in this belief, as I now saw, he had been always and perfectly right.

Here, then, are suggestions that there is a world wherein reside beings untouched by the ravages of time or sin and having nothing to do with questions of good or evil. And it is suggested that men may, through the aid of wizardry, come into contact with this world.

Consider now the statement of Evarvan of the Mirror, as made to Gerald in *Something About Eve*:

“There is for you through my mirror’s aid an open way to contentment. You shall know an untruth, and that untruth will make you free: the doings of the world . . . will then run by you like a little stream of shallow bickering waters: and you will heed none of these things, but only that loveliness which all youth desires and no man ever finds save through the mirror’s aid. You will live among bright shadows very futilely: yes: but you will be happy.”

And this idea of the mirror as a means of entering the abode of the Hidden Children seems confirmed by another passage in the same book when Gerald, being

drawn into the mirror of Caer Omn, views "with lively admiration a throng of strange and lovely beings such as he had not known in Lichfield."

One may recall also the passages in *Figures of Earth* when Queen Freydis tells of her kingdom that lies "behind this veil of human sight and sense" and when Manuel says, "He that has willed to look upon Queen Freydis does not dread to consort with serpents nor with swine (there were swine present when Horvendile employed the mirror and pigeons) he faces the mirror wherein a man beholds himself without self-deceiving; he views the blood (of white pigeons?) that drips from his soiled hands, and knows that this, too, was needed."

Thus, the mirror and pigeons seem firmly linked with the familiar Cabellian doctrine of escape from reality. And the mirror is associated with the sigil that was to Kennaston, in *The Cream of the Jest*, a means of communication with that "bright shadow" whom he named Ettarre, for in this book we read:

"Ah, yes, those little magics, those futile troubling necromancies that are wrought by portraits and unfamiliar rooms and *mirrors and all time-worn glittering objects*. . . . These are the little magics that have no large power, but how inconsequently do they fret upon men's heart-strings!"

Here it is seen that the mirror and such a time-worn glittering object as the sigil may be classed together in their effects.

Two passages in *The Cream of the Jest* are those which most often arouse curiosity as to the secret of the mirror and the pigeons. In the first of these the "personage" tells Kennaston "Those portions of your

book relating to the sigil of Scoteia struck me as being too explicit. . . . Do you think it quite wise? I seem to recall a phrase about birds—”

As Kennaston looks at him, bewilderedly, the personage takes from his pocket “a small square mirror, which he half-exhibited, but retained secretively in the palm of his hand” and he says: “I am presupposing that, as a country-gentleman, you have raised white pigeons, Mr. Kennaston?”

When he is considering the incident later Kennaston wonders if the reference to mirrors and pigeons was some pass-word unknown to him and he reflects: “What could a little mirror, much less pigeons, have to do with this bit of metal?—except that this bit of metal (the sigil), too, reflected light so that the strain tired your eyes, thus steadily to look down upon the thing.”

Thus, at the end of a suggestion that the sigil and the mirror are unrelated, their similarity is re-emphasized.

The second passage that attracts attention in this book has to do with the meeting of Kennaston and the prelate who asks if Kennaston has followed the example of his uncle in raising white pigeons, and “Kennaston saw that the prelate now held a small square mirror in his left hand.”

The prelate says: “yet, in dealing with the sigil of Scoteia—or so it would seem to me—you touched upon subjects which had better be left undisturbed.”

And again Kennaston feels that he is being tested, especially when the prelate admits that many men in public life carry such mirrors as his and even suggests that there may be some secret which they hold in common.

And these two suggestions as to the desirability of keeping from the general public the secret of the mirror and the pigeons is in accord with the sentiment expressed in the tale about Dr. Herrick entitled "Concerning Corinna" in *The Certain Hour*. Here are described dealings with a world beyond the veil of sight and sense and it is suggested that such experiences are not to be given to the public but are to be talked of only between the discerning elect.

In keeping with these suggestions as to secrecy is the attempt, near the end of *The Cream of the Jest* to discount the mystery of the mirror and the pigeons, when we read: "The coincidence of the mirrors was quaint, but in itself came to less than nothing; for as touches the two questions as to white pigeons, the proverb alluded to by the personage, concerning the bird that fouls its own nest, is fairly familiar, and the prelate's speech was the most natural of prosaic inquiries. What these two men had said and done, in fine, amounted to absolutely nothing until transfigured in the crucible of an ardent imagination by the curious literary notion that human life as people spend it is purposeful and clearly motivated."

But here is a restriction rather than a denial,—the incidents, it is admitted, *are* significant when transfigured in the crucible of an ardent imagination by the curious literary notion that human life is purposeful and clearly motivated.

In *The Silver Stallion* is another reference to pigeons, but this seems merely casual rather than significant, Guivric coming into a room in which "white pigeons were walking about and eating barley."

A new idea as to the characteristics of the mirror is suggested in this book however. When the suitors of Morvyth returned with the treasures they had won, "Prince Duneval of Ore said nothing. His mutely tendered offering was a small mirror about three inches square. Morvyth looked into this mirror: and what she saw in it was very little like a sumptuous dark young girl. She hastily put aside that gleaming and over-wise counselor: and the queen's face was troubled, because there was no need to ask what mirror Duneval had fetched to her from out of Antan."

And this new idea as to the characteristics of the mirror of the Hidden Children is supported, in one respect at least, by the passage in *Figures of Earth* in which Manuel, contesting with Freydis, finds himself grasping "a thick slab of crystal, like a mirror, wherein he could see himself quite clearly. Just as he really was, he who was not at all familiar with such mirrors, could see Count Manuel, housed in a little wet dirt with old inveterate stars adrift about him everywhere: and the spectacle was enough to frighten anybody."

Still other testimony as to the use of the mirror in revealing things as they actually are is found in the statement of Maya to Gerald in *Something About Eve*: "It is said that Queen Freydis holds her mirror up to nature, and that she does not scruple to hold this mirror up to her disreputable visitors too. . . . And there is no flaw in it, people say, no distortion of any kind, no flattering in it, and no kindly exaggeration."

And in *The Cream of the Jest* when Kennaston asks about the small square mirror which Cromwell and

other famous men also carried he is told: "Yes, that mirror aids them. In that mirror they can see only themselves. So the mirror aids them toward the ends they chose, with open eyes."

And in this last statement a suggestion is found as to how the idea of the mirror as revealing reality may be combined with the conception of the mirror and pigeons as means of access to the world of the Hidden Children.

So far we have been dealing with the significance and the purpose of the mirror and pigeons, rather than the manner in which they work. But, is it not plausible to suppose that human beings can establish communication with the world of the Hidden Children only by first looking into the unconsolingly frank mirror without a flaw? Those who are satisfied with what they see go on, as Cromwell and the personage and the prelate did, becoming successes in the material world. But others, having realized their deficiencies as human beings, are filled with such self-loathing that they must perforce seek more perfect beings and a more perfect world.

These unsatisfied persons journey, through the aid of the mirror and pigeons, toward Suskind's "April scented dusk," or Freydis' "Antan, the goal of all the Gods of men."

Still unanswered remains the question of how the mirror and pigeons operate other than by creating the desire for a glimpse of the abode of the Hidden Children.

To those easily satisfied it may be enough to suggest that a small mirror is an excellent device with

which to look backward and "Antan" is rather easily translated "yesteryear." Certainly there is reason for concluding that only in memories of the past may perfection be found and Mr. Cabell himself seems, at times, to concur in this view.

But some there are doomed to an "eternally unsatisfied hungering in search of beauty," and these the writer would refer back to *The Cream of the Jest* where "he who wills may read", if he be aided by the sigil of Scoteia, one of the most frank confessions yet made by Mr. Cabell of his purposes and his ideas.

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