

# BRAN

## Studies in James Branch Cabell

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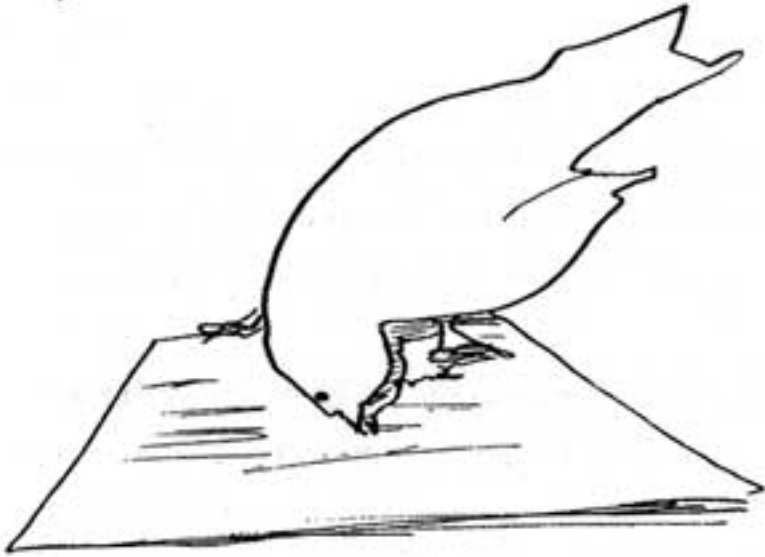


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## *another mirror for pigeons*

James Branch Cabell shared with his friend H. L. Mencken an aversion to golf, hiking, horseback riding and such other physical activities as from time to time were suggested by his doctors and well-meaning friends. In their stead Cabell devised a sport of his own: Twitting his literal-minded readers when they insisted upon a complete exposition of what Cabell "meant" when he wrote thus and so.

A taste for word play is traceable to Cabell's sophomore year at William and Mary, when he wrote pieces for the college magazine<sup>1</sup> and signed them

Clarence Ashley Bell  
(C a bell)

That sort of roguishness continued into Cabell's mature years as a writer and became increasingly subtle, much to the discomfort of reporters assigned to do stories on that queer Richmond fellow who wrote JURGEN. One reporter, asking Cabell's judgment of Harold Bell Wright, was told that "Dr. Wright is one of the best authors typewriting today".<sup>2</sup>

Although usually subtle and urbane, Cabell's wit could be devastating. He had little regard for Clifton Fadiman, then, in the late 1920's, an eager young critic who had not found much merit in Cabell's work. Hitting back, Cabell deplored the prevailing critical

habit of dissecting a novel and laying its parts bare for the sole purpose of deciding "what the author meant to say". Cabell implied that the question of intended meaning was academic because the literary ranking of American books already had been duly settled "by the Devil, known at least in our fair Southland as H. L. Mencken, and perhaps by God also, in one or another of His more thoroughly omniscient writings for *The Nation*, under the pseudonym of Clifton P. Fadiman".<sup>3</sup>

I suspect, however, that Cabell was proudest of his gems of waggery wherein even the victim was not aware of a jest. The reader finds symbolism in most of Cabell's fifty-two books, especially those in the medieval setting of Poictesme. The symbolism often seems to be deliberately ambiguous. Each reader finds in the symbols of JURGEN, for example, what his experience, perception and imagination enable him to find. A precise indexing or key pins the butterfly's wings and destroys a work of art; at least that was Cabell's position. But literal-minded readers continued to plague Cabell with the demand that he reveal to them precisely "what you had in mind".

The best known of Cabell's symbols, and the one in which he seemed to take the greatest delight, is that of the pigeons and mirror. It

appears in no fewer than five books.<sup>4</sup> At the high tide of Cabell's fame, readers weighted down the incoming mailbags pleading for, or demanding, its "true meaning".

Upon the wide distribution of JURGEN in 1922-23, the public quickly took note that Jurgen, in his borrowed youth and posing as the dashing Duke of Logreus, discussed pigeons and a mirror in a twilight meeting with Merlin Ambrosius, the prince of Satan:

In his hand Merlin held a small mirror, about three inches square, from which he raised his dark eyes puzzlingly.

"I have been talking with my fellow ambassador, Dame Anaïtis: 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 Léshy who not long ago showed me a discomfiting employment to which one may put white pigeons. She too used such a mirror. I saw what followed, but I must tell you candidly that I understood nothing of the ins and outs of the affair".<sup>5</sup>

Be it remembered at this point that Jurgen had succeeded only a short while before in becoming the lover of beautiful Guenevere on the very eve of her voyage to England and approaching marriage to King Arthur. The illicit affair had been carried out in the darkness and with every possible precaution, and Merlin's knowledge of it astonished Jurgen. How did Merlin know? And how was Guenevere to deceive King Arthur and convince him she was a maiden? Could a mirror and pigeons have something to do with it? These questions Cabell raises, but he furnishes no forthright answers. Nor, apparently, is Jurgen ever enlightened.

When letters began piling up, Cabell devised a stock reply:

"My Dear Sir: It was wholly a pleasure to

receive your letter, and I am very grateful for the kindly things you say therein. I am afraid, even so, I can but repeat what I have said in another place: that each of my books is narrated from a definite point of view, and that matters not ever made clear to my protagonist must be left unexplained, necessarily".<sup>6</sup>

But on succeeding pages, Cabell put down the letter he'd prefer to have written save for the demands of propriety. It begins—

You, sir, have written me a wholly charming letter, the point of which, as you explain toward the end of the seventh page, is to ask about an odd alliance between white pigeons and a small mirror (three inches square, to be precise) which appears time and again in so many of my books. The envelope of your letter bears two English stamps, and it comes, I observe, from a village in Berkshire which I well remember as one of the former homes of the Branch family: though indeed very much the same letter has come to me before this morning, bearing hundreds of other postmarks.

The remaining pages of the chapter add up to a monstrous tease. Cabell agrees to divulge the pigeon-mirror secret. Then he digresses time and again to complain of his hardships he had encountered in ferreting out genealogical data under the maddening regulations of British officialdom. He mentions pigeons, and interrupts again to recall the opening sentence of the first British reviewer to take note of his books—

Although Mr. Cabell is an American writer, his books are not books to be despised.

Then comes the let-down. Cabell informs his British admirer: "I feel that, Aladdin-like, I evoked strange British djinns, unknowing. I feel, I still feel, perturbed about it. In brief, nor science nor religion nor magic may quite

explain the ways of you English to an American; and this matter has long puzzled me, now for some twenty years. So do you solve, if it be permitted, this secret for me, and by return post I will forward you the secret of the mirror and the pigeons”.

Was Cabell resorting to pettishness in this seemingly unkind treatment of a British devotee? Hardly. I believe Cabell was sporting enough to include in his text sufficient clues to enable the Englishman to solve the pigeon-mirror riddle; providing, of course, the Englishman was shrewd enough and resourceful enough. Here I repeat a portion of Cabell's text and this time add emphasis.

I feel that, *Aladdin-like*, I evoked strange British *djinns* . . . .

Aladdin, of course, is known to everybody because of the magic lamp story in *The Arabian Nights*. The djinns (or jinns or janns) appear frequently, also, in Arab folklore. They are, in fact, the Moslem mythical kin of the Leshy in *JURGEN* and other Cabell books. Of human appearance and habit, the djinns are endowed with a somewhat limited divine power. They live on earth as envoys of the Divinity, Who is too busy attending to universal affairs to give human beings the constant attention they demand.

We must learn, then, what use the djinns made of mirrors, and how the medieval Arabs employed pigeons. In Sir Richard Burton's translation of *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night*, there is the tale of a deceitful virgin, Hayat al-Nufus,<sup>7</sup> who concealed the fact of previous amours from her bridegroom by smearing upon the nuptial couch the blood of a young pigeon to simulate virginal bleeding. Sir Richard adds, in a footnote, that resemblance of pigeon blood to that of a young maiden was a widely-held belief.<sup>8</sup> Pleased with her act of deceit, Hayat al-Nufus recites a quatrain that includes the line, “With worthy men a secret's

hidden deep”. Could this be the thought that inspired Cabell to put together his droll cantrap? At any rate, a practical use for pigeons by Guenevere, no longer a maiden and facing her wedding-night, suggests itself now quite strikingly.



But what of the mirror? Again checking with Burton, we turn to his translation of the *Djinn King's Story*.<sup>9</sup> As the tale opens, the king summons a young human prince and demands that the prince fetch, for the djinn king's pleasure, “a damsel whose age is fifteen, a maiden without rival or likeness in loveliness; furthermore she must be a pure virgin and clean maid who hath never lusted for male nor hath even been solicited of man”.

Understandably, Prince Zayn al-Asnam asks how he possibly could know whether the girl had yearned for men, or whether any man had approached her. To this the djinn king replies: “. . . . I will give thee a mirror of my own whose virtue is this. When thou shalt sight a young lady whose beauty and loveliness please thee, do thou open the glass, and, if thou see therein her image clear and undimmed, do thou learn forthright that she is a clean maid without aught of defect or default and endowed with every praiseworthy quality. But if, contrariwise, the figure be found

darkened or clothed in uncleanness, do thou straightway know that the damsel is sullied by soil of sex”.

Now we may be reasonably certain that Merlin learned the truth about Jurgen's affair with Guenevere by employing the magical qualities of his mirror. But why should the mirror be exactly “three inches square?” This, I confess, isn't entirely clear.

It would be a disservice to end these notes without telling how the young prince fared in his quest for a pure maiden. He finds her, a

beauty who appears in the mirror without a blemish. But on the return journey, the maiden and the prince fall in love. By the time they reach the djinn king's palace, the girl no longer fills the specifications; she is longing for the embraces of the king's emissary. There is much torment for both of them, and finally a storybook ending. The king, a sly old fellow, hadn't actually wanted the girl for himself but rather as a prize for the very prince he had commissioned to find her.

—EMMETT PETER, JR.

### FOOTNOTES

1. *William and Mary College Monthly*, V (1895), 64.
2. Julian R. Meade, *New York Herald-Tribune*, July 19, 1931.
3. Warren A. McNeill, *Cabellian Harmonics* (New York, 1928), p. 7. Fadiman turned the other cheek by sending Cabell a gift book and a letter of thanks for the promotion to divinity.
4. *The Silver Stallion*, p. 160; *Jurgen*, pp. 34, 41, 125; *Something About Eve*, pp. 201, 299; *Cream of the Jest*, pp. 78-81, 98-101, 230; *Straws and Prayer Books*, p. 62. (Page numbers, Storisende edition).
5. *Jurgen*, pp. 125-26.
6. *Special Delivery* (New York, 1933), pp. 187-212.
7. Vol. III, 289, Medina edition (1885); a part of the Cabell library.
8. Sir Richard felt compelled to spoil some of the romance by informing us the belief is erroneous; science, he claimed, finds the pig's blood more appropriate and convincing.
9. Vol. XIII, 25 ff., *Thousand Nights and a Night*. Medina edition. Also Vol. XII, 23, Benares edition.



forward on a donkey. When the Emperor took Milan, he punished these unchivalrous rebels by shoving a fig up the donkey's ass, and ordering each man on pain of death to extract it with his teeth.—**John Boardman**, 592 16th Street, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11218.

*Pigeons and Poictesme*

The reading of KALKI 8 gave me much pleasure, as a whole, but I must come back to challenge your mathematics in the Source Note on pg. 97. You say: "The ritual involves six words of power and wisdom (not five, for McNeill loses count here) which were known to Solomon, and a seventh which Solomon did not know". On pg. 95 of *Cabellian Harmonics* I wrote: ". . . the six words of power and wisdom known to Solomon are mentioned, among them 'the word of the mirror'. . . By applying the *other five* words to the things mentioned", etc. Did you read my second sentence without referring back to the first? (I sadly fear I did.—J.B.) My count of the *known* words—the only ones I referred to—seems correct and agrees with yours.

This is merely a good-natured quibble, but I would more seriously challenge your headline and text statements that the problem of the Mirror and Pigeons is "resolved" by relating Cabell's references to the textbook procedures of magic. The problem which intrigued me was not one of ritual but of *meaning*. Were the references to these objects in the several books code words? What did those who spoke of or used the mirror and pigeons have in common? Were they conveying related messages? Were the flashes from different facets of a single gem of truth?

I played with the subject inconclusively, as you indicate, ending with a broad hint about the then unpublished secret message of the

Sigil on the endpapers of THE CREAM OF THE JEST. But, as I said at the outset of my chapter, I remain grateful that a definitive answer has not robbed us of the right to hold twenty delightful theories. And, I'm glad that your "solution" leaves that right still uncompromised.

Going over to the purely complimentary side, I especially liked the illustrations in this issue, including the updated map of Poictesme. Incidentally, have you seen published Cabell's explanation of the true geographical position of his country? . . . . *It is located on a line of latitude and has no longitude*. Since it is infinitely thin, it is hard to sight looking down on a map, but if you get into the right position it becomes clear. This can be illustrated by standing a page from a book upright on a map. This is the only logical way to locate a book-country, but only Cabell, to my knowledge, has done that.

One more comment, suggested by the quotation (KALKI II:73) of Francois Villon's invocation in THE LINE OF LOVE and James Hall's discussion of the development of Cabell's personal philosophy: In the 1928 Storisende Edition preface to THE LINE OF LOVE, Cabell refers to "topofity romance fashionable in 1905" and to the memory of later years which regards that with "unreasoned wistfulness". But it is interesting to note the different twist given to the ending of the Villon story in 1905 and in 1928.

The early story ends: "O Mother of God, grant that Noel may be kind to her! Mother of God, grant that she may be happy! Mother of God, grant that I may not live long!" In the Storisende Edition the same phrases are used and then this is added: "And straightway he perceived that triple invocation could be, rather neatly, worked out in ballade form . . .

Yes, with a separate prayer to each verse. So, dismissing for the while his misery, he fell to considering, with undried cheeks, what rhymes he needed" —**Warren A. McNeill**, 3920 Leland Road, Louisville, Ky. 40207.

(Unquestionably, my title "The Mirror and Pigeons Resolved" ought to have been followed by a question-mark, at the very least. I do think I have the

right source, but Mr. Peter in this issue has another. What it all may *mean* is still up in the air, I agree.—J.B.).

*Dr. Johnson's Horse*

Did you know that our friend Imlac is from *Rasselas*? I don't recall it from the book, but ran across a reference to it lately.—**Paul Spencer**, 665 Lotus Avenue, Oradell, N.J. 07649.



*Attention Artists*

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Please also note that publication will not necessarily be prompt; material will be placed as appositely to text as possible. We send

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