

The Author -- James Branch Cabell



Perhaps the most neglected of the literary giants of the '20's is James Branch Cabell of Richmond-in-Virginia, as he styled himself: Southern aristocrat, newspaper man in Richmond and New York, coal miner in West Virginia, and professional genealogist, Cabell began publishing in magazines in 1901, shortly after graduating from the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, and continued writing until 1957. Born April 14, 1879, he died of a cerebral hemorrhage on May 5, 1958.

Of all modern writers, Cabell is most difficult to classify, which probably accounts for the extremes of critical opinion about his work. In his hayday in the '20's, he was the object of an almost blind adulation; and after the collapse of 1929, he was generally dismissed by critics as faddist, escapist, or merely genteelly pornographic. Since 1956, however, he has been the subject of more serious critical appraisal on the part of a few scholars far enough removed from his own time to be capable of a more objective approach.

BY
RUFUS K.
NIGHTINGALE

Cabell began as an avowed Romanticist in a time when Romanticism was dying; his ideal was to "write perfectly of beautiful happenings", making use of "the auctorial virtues of distinction and clarity, of beauty and symmetry, of tenderness and truth and urbanity." This creed is set forth in the series of essays contained in *BEYOND LIFE*, a delightful defence of the Romantic viewpoint. But Cabell's world view was very much affected by the current philosophies of his day, that world view which led to the rise of Realism. The sweet and flowery style of his earlier books was gradually modified to an ironic and urbane comedy cast in the form of Romance. Yet through his work, the Romantic ideal of acting "as if" persists. Since "man alone of all animals plays the ape to his dreams", Romance is the very condition of improvement; for in setting forth his ideals, and believing in them, man is capable of making them come true. Realism, on the other hand, is a counsel of despair: no one likes to be told how bad his condition really is in a blind and hostile universe. So man invents his gods, his social and moral codes, his view of a comfortable and friendly world, and behaves "as if" it were true.

With the publication of *JURGEN* in 1919, followed by its suppression in 1920 for obscenity, Cabell became for a span of years a popular success; indeed, the '20's were known for a time as the "Cabell Era". *JURGEN* is the first work of his maturity and is generally regarded as his finest book; but personally, I consider *FIGURES OF EARTH* and *THE SILVER STALLION* as preeminent. These two form a perfect parallel and parody to Luke-Acts in the New Testament; if I were forced to select which books I should save from all Cabell's work, I should choose these two against all the others.

The major works of Cabell begin with *THE CREAM OF THE JEST*, the transitional work, and move through *JURGEN*, *FIGURES OF EARTH*, *THE HIGH PLACE*, *THE SILVER STALLION*, *SOMETHING ABOUT EVE*, and return to *DOMNEI*, the last being a rewriting of *THE SOUL OF MELICENT*, his most perfect bit of pure Romance, written six years before *JURGEN*. These books lie at the heart of the "Biography of the Life of Manuel" with *BEYOND LIFE* and *STRAWS AND PRAYER BOOKS*, essays dealing with Cabell's literary theories and the purposes of his writing, as prologue and epilogue. In the "Storisende Edition" of *THE WORKS OF JAMES BRANCH CABELL*, Robert M. McBride & Co., 1927-1930, all of his books then written were revised and reissued in a deluxe, limited edition, arranged to show how Dom Manuel the swineherd and Jurgen the pawnbroker, both of Poictesme, Cabell's imaginary French province, together with

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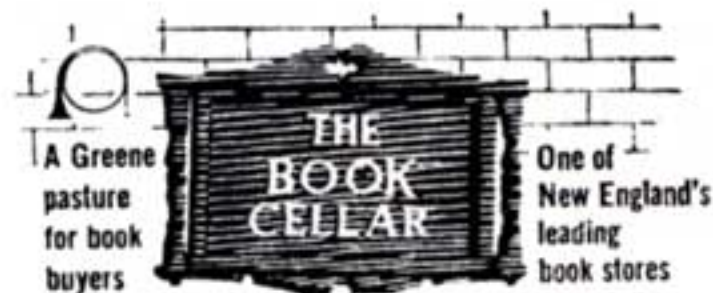
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their descendents down to the Twentieth Century, exemplify the three basic attitudes toward life: the Chivalrous, the Gallant, and the Poetic. The eighteenth volume **TOWNSEND OF LICHFIELD**, forms an appendix to the whole. Much of this edition was eventually remaindered.

From 1930 until 1955, Cabell wrote a series of trilogies unrelated to the Poictesme epic: fifteen volumes of essays, novels, and autobiography. While delightful to a Cabell lover, they are of secondary importance.

The finest study of Cabell's work to date is **JESTING MOSES** by Arvin R. Wells, professor of English at Ohio University; I commend it heartily to any one who has read and appreciated Cabell. (I should also like to make it required reading for those who have dismissed Cabell as negligible.) I am not a critic, nor do I feel it my place to set forth Dr. Wells's thesis in a truncated form; I am a lover of Cabell's books, and I read and reread Cabell for sheer enjoyment. And I believe that anyone with a measure of sophistication, erudition and wit, together with an enjoyment of seeing sacred cows (even his own) the subject of a delicately indelicate criticism, can read and enjoy Cabell's work.

Cabell's highly artificial and complex style may prove an obstacle to some contemporary readers; but once adjusted to it, many will find it a delight in itself: the man has an almost total control over his use of words. As H.L. Mencken wrote in 1926, "Cabell knows how to write. If this great Republic has ever produced a more accomplished performer upon the parts of speech, then I ask respectfully to be furnished with his name and address."

And to that I would say: Amen!



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3. Davis, Joe Lee: JAMES BRANCH CABELL, Twayne (TUSAS 21), 1962.
4. Rubin, Louis D., Jr.: No Place on Earth, University of Texas Press, 1959.
5. Rubin, Luois D., Jr.: "Two in Virginia: Ellen Glasgow and James Branch Cabell" in SOUTH: Modern Southern Literature in its Cultural Setting, ed. by Louis D. Rubin, Jr., and Robert D. Jacobs, Dolphin C316, Doubleday and Co., 1961. pp 115-141.
6. Taylor, Walter Fuller: THE STORY OF AMERICAN LETTERS, Henry Regenry and Co., 1956 (Revised Edition), pp 356-360.
7. Wells, Arvin R.: JESTING MOSES: A Study in Cabellian Comedy, University of Florida Press, 1962.
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