

JBC

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Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 29 Nov 2000, 09:17

The following is long, rambling, off-the-cuff and probably off-topic. I beg your indulgence.

Mantis pushed a few of my buttons when he wrote...

PEACE mentions James Branch Cabell's JURGEN.

JBC is a fascinating case: notorious (mostly for the wrong reasons) and extraordinarily influential and damn near *forgotten*. One quotation, at least, I imagine you are all familiar with: "The optimist proclaims that we live in the best of all possible worlds; and the pessimist fears this is true."

I've been working, for some years, on-and-off, even more dilatorily than is usual for me, on an essay on his various influences on Heinlein*. Larry Niven wrote a minor set of stories with Cabellian-named planets (he called them, at one point, the "Leshy cycle"; the only one with real Cabellian roots, however, is "Night on Mispes Moor"). James Blish, among other major SF writers, was a member of the Cabell Society -- Cabell was still alive at the time; he survived until the late '50s -- and editor of its journal, KALKI. Mark Twain praised his short-story collection CHIVALRY extravagantly, as did Theodore Roosevelt. And the witnesses or depositions in the obscenity trial of JURGEN reads very nearly like a "Who's Who in American Literature" for the 1920s.

* Aside from the obvious -- that JOB is an homage to JURGEN -- several other RAH books are clearly Cabellian in inspiration. GLORY ROAD is a blatant Cabellian fantasy. In the collected letters (GRUMBLES FROM THE GRAVE) Heinlein describes the work-in-progress that was eventually published as STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND as "a Cabellian comedy." Etc.

I just read JURGEN, the second JCB book I've read (the other being FIGURES OF EARTH).

These are in many ways an excellent starting point; the only problem is that they are also, in many ways, too similar to each other to give a feel for the breadth of Cabell.

Make no mistake; he was in some ways a very _limited_ writer. He had a few simple themes that he expounded over and over again from his first publication to the day of his death, and a collection of literary tropes and tricks that he used reliably, almost predictably. But then, so did Twain, so did Shakespeare -- so does Wolfe, I might add.

His deepest themes were two, and both illustrated in his massive work THE BIOGRAPHY OF THE LIFE OF MANUEL ("Biog"). JURGEN and FIGURES OF EARTH are very early volumes in "Biog;" indeed, FIGURES is one of the few in which Dom Manuel of Poictesme actually appears and the _only_ one in which he is a major character. "Biog" follows the life of Dom Manuel and his descendants (not "lives"; the conceit is that his life is continued in his descendants) from the 14th century in the mythical French province of Poictesme (a conglomeration of Poitiers and

Angouleme) to the early 20th in Virginia. Over and over we see Cabell's themes played out. One of them is summarized in the prologue to "Biog," BEYOND LIFE, in describing the human race more or less as follows -- I am quoting from memory and probably badly --

an ape, reft of his tail and grown rusty at climbing,
who believes himself to be the special favorite of the
Creator.

Cabell's work was gently ironic and (as Mantis observes) gently bawdy, but his irony did not extend to the bitter hatred of the human race we often find in "humanists" like Mark Twain, George Carlin, and Kurt Vonnegut. This "ape," he posits, is blessed, condemned -- at any rate, fated -- to play out the same comedy over and over, the scenery and the names of the characters changing but the real content of the play never varying greatly. (That he could write such varied and delightful books dedicated to this theme in no way belies the theme; rather it shows that the comedy itself is rich and malleable, and that what interests us most of the time is indeed the surface dressings. It is, of course, also a tribute to his own powers of invention.)

His other great theme was that there were essentially only three attitudes toward life: he called them the Chivalrous, the Gallant, and the Poetic. The Chivalrous attitude is that by which one which views oneself as God's vicar on Earth, and responsible for justice and mercy -- in short, the hyper-responsible. The Gallant attitude says that life is for pleasure, so gather rosebuds while ye may. The Poetic attitude sees the world as raw material to be shaped into art. Each of these attitudes has its complications, ramifications, etc.; for example, each of them involves a fairly specific attitude toward the proper relations between men and women. (Chivalric: Men serve Women and worship them as intimations of Divine beauty. Gallant: Men pursue Women, who mostly want to be caught. Poetic: Men are inspired by Women to their highest creations. -- Well, this _was_ the 1910s and 20s.)

The heroes of the various novels and stories that make up the eighteen to twenty-five (depending on how you count) volumes of the "Biog" are very much illustrations of these attitudes; Jurgen himself is the ur-case of the Gallant philosophy. The clearest and purest illustrations of these attitudes, however, are in the short-story collections (with ten stories each; Cabell called them "dizains") CHIVALRY, GALLANTRY, and -- no, not POETRY but THE CERTAIN HOUR.

Both JCB books in the end are sort of circular and linear at the same time (a condition we sometimes see in PEACE).

This is true of a number of Cabell's works, though far from all. The nature of his themes makes both necessary: to any given player, the comedy is linear; to the (ideal) audience, since it is always going on with a changing cast, it is circular, always repeating with surface variation.

JURGEN has a couple of ways of =not= showing things: there are the naughty scenes that happen in the dark so you can't "see" anything, you just have the innocuous dialogue of a man and woman alone in a dark room (this was the meat of the obscenity trial, as I understand it);

This is partly due to the conventions of the time. Cabell was one of a number of figures of the time who wrote gently bawdy and irreverent comedies -- a couple of others moderately well-known in SF/F circles to this day might include Thorne Smith and (to a lesser extent) Anatole France. But it was also very deliberate on Cabell's part; he wanted to tease and gently annoy the reader.

Some editions of JURGEN, btw, include a marvellous little piece called "The Judging of Jurgen," in which Jurgen himself is called to answer the charges against the novel -- charges phrased as follows:

"You are offensive ... because this page has a sword which I chose to say is not a sword. You are lewd because that page has a lance which I prefer to think is not a lance. You are lascivious because yonder page has a staff which I elect to declare is not a staff. And finally, you are indecent for reasons of which a description would be objectionable to me, and which therefore I must decline to reveal to anybody."

The accuser, a "tumble-bug," also says:

... in Philistia to make literature and to make trouble for yourself are synonyms. I know, for already we of Philistia have been pestered by three of these makers of literature. Yes, there was Edgar, whom I starved and hunted until I was tired of it: then I chased him up a back alley one night, and knocked out those annoying brains of his. And there was Walt, whom I chivvied and battered from place to place, and made a paralytic of him: and him, too, I labelled offensive and lewd and lascivious and indecent. Then later there was Mark, whom I frightened into disguising himself in a clown's suit, so that nobody might suspect him to be a maker of literature: indeed, I frightened him so that he hid away the greater part of what he had made until after he was dead, and I could not get at him.

(The whole text of "The Judging of Jurgen" is online at <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Parthenon/1460/judging.html>).

JURGEN both made and ended Cabell's career in different ways.

The notoriety of its trial made the book sell, as no previous book of his had done -- up till then, he was mostly to be found in remainder piles. But after, as he complained bitterly, there were only two kinds of reviews available to him: that the new book was just like JURGEN, and he was repeating himself; or that it was not like JURGEN, and he was no longer worth reading. For a while, again due to the notoriety of the obscenity trial, he sold tolerably well; after people realized that there was nothing actually titillating in his novels, the sales faded away.

and then there are certain mythic scale heroic episodes, trials of mystery, which are completely missing from the text--you have all the stuff leading up to it, and all the stuff after, with only vague and/or coy hints as to what actually happened.

True. This seems to violate one of the key elements of Cabell's own aesthetic creed: he wanted to "write perfectly of beautiful happenings." I have never satisfactorily resolved this in my own mind; I can only guess that these are not the beautiful happenings of which he wanted to write perfectly. -- also, like the missing sex scenes, it is a deliberate stimulant to the reader.

(Some of them are apparently long running jokes throughout the various novels.)

These do indeed exist, but (imo) never in a form to intrude into the individual stories. With the possible exception of THE SILVER STALLION -- which is very much a sequel to FIGURES, and a kind of bridge from it to JURGEN -- the volumes of the "Biog" can all be read alone.

I believe I've seen Wolfe comment on his admiration for and affinity with "Southern writers" in an interview or two. Cabell was quintessentially Southern in the way Mark Twain was -- his writings could only come from a Southerner, and could only offend Southerners.