

**THE ART OF JAMES BRANCH
CABELL: WITH AN APPENDIX
OF INDIVIDUAL COMMENT
UPON THE CABELL BOOKS**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649245925

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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HUGH WALPOLE

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James Branch Cabell

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NEW YORK
ROBERT M. McBRIDE & CO.
1920

BOOKS BY MR. CABELL

BEYOND LIFE

FIGURES OF EARTH (*In Preparation*)

DOMNEI (*Revision of The Soul of Melicent*)

CHIVALRY (*Revised Version in Preparation*)

JURGEN (*Suppressed*)

THE LINE OF LOVE (*Revised Version in Preparation*)

GALLANTRY (*Revised Version in Preparation*)

THE CERTAIN HOUR

THE CORDS OF VANITY (*Revised*)

FROM THE HIDDEN WAY

THE RIVET IN GRANDFATHER'S NECK

THE EAGLE'S SHADOW (*New Version in Preparation*)

THE CREAM OF THE JEST

THE ART OF JAMES BRANCH CABELL

By Hugh Walpole

THE English novel has reached in this year of grace, 1920, one of the most interesting crises of its eventful history. In a sense there is no crisis—that is, no more of a crisis than there was in 1832, the year of Walter Scott's death; in 1861, the year of the publication of "Richard Feverel"; in 1890, the year of the first appearance of "The Yellow Book." In a sense there never has been a crisis, because in spite of certain obstinate and precipitantly determined mourners the English novel will never die—so long as the English tongue is spoken and men and women are willing to catch a moment's pause from their business and listen to a story-teller.

But, if there are not crises, there are at any rate moments, such as I have named, when the novel seems to begin a new chapter in its history. Such a chapter I believe the year 1920 and its immediate successors are now writing.

In England the case is fairly plain. The war has quite definitely marked off the novelists who began to fascinate us some time before 1895 as of an older generation. That does not mean that they no longer interest us—far from it—but Thomas Hardy, Joseph Conrad, George Moore, Rudyard Kipling, and, in some degree, H. G. Wells and Arnold Bennett, are now definitely accepted figures. We know what they can do. "The figure in the carpet" is, in each case, finally marked out for us. They have staked their claim for, at any rate, some fragments of immortality.

These men were followed in England by a group of writers who suffered the misfortune of definition when they were still in their literary cradles. Somewhere about 1912 Henry James critically delivered himself in the "Times Literary

Supplement" concerning the younger generation of English novelists. After discussing the work of such seniors as Joseph Conrad, Arnold Bennett, and H. G. Wells, he grouped together comparative children like Compton Mackenzie, D. H. Lawrence, and Gilbert Cannan. This started a fashion. These unhappy ones, with certain reluctant additions, were, before they had escaped from their literary teens, christened the New Realists, or the Younger Novelists or the Neo-Romanticists. Until the war buried their youth in a common grave they were estimated with a critical seriousness that both their immaturity and their own hesitation should have forbidden. The war has at least destroyed that grouping, although I perceive, once and again, belated stragglers like Mrs. Gerould make lamentable attempts at some reassertion of it. Some of those younger novelists have already ceased to entertain us; two of the ablest of them, E. M. Foster and D. H. Lawrence, have published no fiction within the last five years. On the other hand, new and admirable examples of the younger fiction have appeared—Frank Swinnerton, Ethel Sidgwick, Brett Young, Frederick Niven (the best Scottish novelist since the author of "The House of the Green Shutters"), Clemence Dane, Virginia Woolf. Books so opposite as J. D. Beresford's "God's Counterpoint," Swinnerton's "Nocturne," Brett Young's "Crescent Moon," Compton Mackenzie's "Poor Relations," and Clemence Dane's "Legend" prove quite clearly at this moment both that no general grouping is possible and that much work is being done in England that is valuable and of important promise.

Camps are formed, battles are fought, criticism is active and alive. The future of the novel so far as England is concerned should be eventful and dramatic.

What of the novel in America? Here, also, there are pessimists. I believe there to be small justification for that pessimism. It seems to be true that the American novelists of the older school are, with the definite exceptions of Booth Tarkington and Ellen Glasgow, scarcely maintaining their earlier standards. Some of them, like Owen Wister and Mary Wilkins Freeman, have apparently said their say. Others,

like Edith Wharton, have been interrupted by the recent war.

No visitor can be six months in America, however, without realizing with an eager sense of excitement the new literature which the country is now producing. It is not my province to speak of poetry or *belles-lettres*, but the novel offers examples enough. There is, for instance, Joseph Hergesheimer, who has received in England a more eager critical attention than any American novelist since Stephen Crane and Frank Norris. There is Miss Cather, whose "O Pioneers!" and "My Antonia" are masterpieces of American life and ideas. There is Sherwood Anderson's "Winesburg, Ohio," and Mr. Fuessle's "Flail." Add the stories of Harvey O'Higgins and Fannie Hurst and Edna Ferber, and the humor, absolutely new, utterly American, of Don Marquis, Ring Lardner, and George Ade. I mention writers who have given me pleasure in the six months of my stay here; there must be many others whose work limitations of time have hindered me from approaching. Here, at any rate, is sufficient challenge to any pessimist, and such critics as H. L. Mencken, Burton Rascoe, Francis Hackett, and others are making the challenge sufficiently audible. There is a new American fiction—fiction that has burst the sentimental bonds that so long bound it. Foreigners need no longer hesitate in despair between the slushy stupidity of the imbecile Far Western story and the innocent melodramatics of the New York chronicle. Here is now God's plenty at last, and it will be a happy thing for the world outside when the full discovery of this is made.

There is also James Branch Cabell. No one travelling around the United States of America during these last months, no one at least who is interested in literature, can escape the persistent echo of that name. It may be since the stupid and entirely ludicrous censorship of "Jurgen" that Mr. Cabell has floated into a new world of discussion. I don't know. I am definitely speaking of the period anterior to that censorship. I had not been two weeks in the United States before someone said to me: "Well, at any rate, there is Cabell." That was a new name to me. I was given "Beyond Life" to read. My excitement during the discovery of that perverse

and eloquent testament was one of the happiest moments of my American stay. I spent then a wild and eccentric search after his earlier masterpieces. Inside the cover of "Beyond Life" there were the titles of no less than fourteen books. I could see from the one which I held in my hand that Mr. Cabell was no careless writer. He had been writing then for many years and he was unobtainable! "No, he has never had any success," a bookseller told me. "No one ever asks for his books."

That situation is now changed. There are, I imagine, a great many more persons in the United States of America asking for "Jurgen" than are likely to obtain it. That good, at any rate, an idiotic censorship has done.

I have now, after six months' hard work, secured all the works of James Branch Cabell save only the records of his Virginian ancestors and relations, the chronicle of whose natiivities and mortalities is not intended for a visiting stranger. I have read them all, and I am amazed that this remarkable and original talent has been at America's service for nearly twenty years, its patient waiting entirely unrewarded whether by the public or the critics or even the superior cranks.

Let it be said at once that Cabell's art will always be a sign for hostilities. Not only will he remain, in all probability, forever alien to the general public, but he will also, I suspect, be to the end of time a cause for division among cultivated and experienced readers.

His style is also at once a battleground. It is the easiest thing in the world to denounce it as affected, perverse, unnatural, and forced. It would be at once an artificial style were it not entirely natural to the man. Anyone who reads the books in their chronological sequence will perceive the first diffident testing of it in such early works as "Chivalry" and "Gallantry"; then the acquiescence in it, as though the writer said to himself—"Well, this is what I am—I will rebel against it no longer"; and the final triumphant perfection of it in "Beyond Life" and "Jurgen."

Mr. Cabell began to write when the romantic movement