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James Branch Cabell : laughing existentialist

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**JAMES BRANCH CABELL:
LAUGHING EXISTENTIALIST**

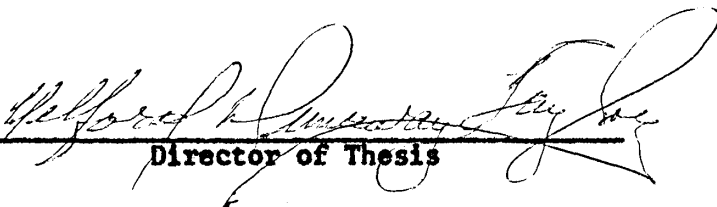
BY

GEORGE R. HAZELTON

**A THESIS
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OF THE UNIVERSITY OF RICHMOND
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FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH**

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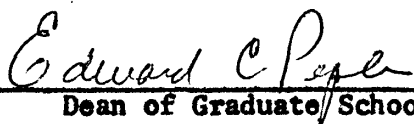
Approved For The Department of English
And The Graduate School By



Director of Thesis



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In the history of American literature, there have been numerous authors whose popularity and critical acclaim were long in coming often delayed long past their deaths. Melville, for example, comes immediately to mind. Others have enjoyed a brief noteriety and have then slipped into oblivion for years until their "rediscovery."

One of the prime vehicles for renewed interest in ignored American authors has been the critical consideration of American humorous literature that has flowered during the 1940's, 50's and the 60's. This criticism, given impetus by Walter Blair's Native American Humor (1937) has made Seba Smith, Edgar Wilson Nye, and Finley Peter Dunne if not household words, at least familiar names to students of American literature.

James Branch Cabell, however, has been largely overlooked by students of American humor. Indeed, Cabell has been ignored by criticism in general since his brief heyday in the 1920's. Only since 1950 has he been rediscovered to the extent of three books and a few articles--a pittance for the author of more than fifty volumes!

It is difficult for this writer, admittedly a partisan, to understand the long neglect of Cabell's works, unless literary fashions are founded on other than merit. Perhaps fashion is

indeed a proper word to use; Cabell certainly is far removed from other authors of his period--Faulkner, Dreiser, Lewis, Fitzgerald and Hemingway. However, the recent flurry of enthusiasm for the fantasies of J. R. R. Tolkien suggests that Cabell, an author of far greater scope and substance, may shortly enjoy a revival.

This thesis will seek to make some amends for the long eclipse in attention by focusing its attention on the nature of Cabell's humor. After the customary review of the relevant primary sources, it will examine Cabell's work in the light of various theories of the comic, and attempt an analysis of the underlying philosophy of his work and its effect upon the peculiar quality of his humor.

A review of the available literature on Cabell is a fairly brief undertaking. If it were limited to material considering Cabell primarily as a humorist it would be far briefer; thus a more catholic survey has been undertaken. Early criticism, that appearing in the 1920's and early 30's, is marked by rather extreme polarization. There is little evidence of calm, rational assessment. Part of this situation may be attributed to the trial for obscenity by the County of New York of Jurgen (1919). A mobilization of the literati helped secure the book's acquittal on October 19, 1922, and Cabell's sales and critical attention rose. Naturally, those critics who believed in artistic freedom

would hardly fail to praise Cabell; otherwise they might be suspected of Comstockery. And on the other hand, disciples of Mrs. Grundy could hardly fail to attack this example of the lascivious corrupter of the nation's morals. Thus the absence of balanced judgements set the stage for the critical repudiation and neglect of Cabell that prevailed through most of the 1930's and 40's.

One of the earlier essays of criticism was The Art of James Branch Cabell by Hugh Walpole. Shortly after arriving in the United States Walpole was introduced to Cabell's apologia, Beyond Life, and quickly read it and the rest of Cabell's then extant works.

Apparently the Virginian's books struck a responsive chord, for the pamphlet is the testament of an enthusiastic convert. This is not to say, however, that Walpole produced a mere puffery, for he demonstrates at least an attempt at objectivity. He almost at once comes to grips with one of the major bones of contention regarding Cabell--style. Walpole admits that it would be easy to characterize it as "affected, perverse, unnatural and forced," were it not "entirely natural to the man."¹ It will be seen later that Cabell's style has been his most irritating facet to many commentators.

Walpole detects the note of irony which separates Cabell's works from the neo-romanticism which competed against the prevalent

¹Hugh Walpole, The Art of James Branch Cabell (New York, 1920), p. 6.

realism, but he either failed to see or chose to ignore the rather strong meat below the surface of such a book as Jurgen. But of course, millions have missed the bitter social commentary in Huckleberry Finn.

This interesting comment on characterization deserves notice:

Mr. Cabell is always more deeply interested in the stream of life that flows beneath his characters than in the characters themselves. In the accepted conventional sense of the word he is scarcely a novelist at all. He takes shocking liberties with his individuals as human beings. He is not, I think, very deeply aware of the motives that move ordinary minds.²

Walpole makes this comment in a brief discussion of three early novels, The Eagle's Shadow (1904), The Cords of Vanity (1909), and The Rivet in Grandfather's Neck (1915). In this context his assertion has validity, for these three novels are decidedly minor works. Surely Mr. Walpole would have qualified this assertion had he had access to The Silver Stallion (1926).

The Art of James Branch Cabell, although intended as little more than an appreciation of Cabell, represents an attempt at balance, one of the few critiques with that quality appearing during Cabell's heyday. It raises some seminal issues, although it expands on them but little.

Vernon Louis Parrington, author of the monumental Main Currents in American Thought offers an interpretation of Cabell

²Ibid., p. 10.

somewhat typical of the adulation of the 1920's. Reprinted from The Pacific Review, (December, 1921) Parrington's essay is faulted not so much by its observations and conclusions, which are often sound, but by the hyperbole of its language. Too often it reads like the puffery of a dust-jacket blurb, rather than a judicious appraisal. Consider the following statements.

Speaking of The Cords of Vanity, Parrington writes:

It is Congreve at his best, scintillating, brilliant, with a delightful affectation of pose and gesture, and it is Marlowe also, with its galloping wit steeped in pure poetry.³

Referring to critical comment, he states, quite correctly, that

such Homeric absurdities of comment have been flung at him, that he is in a fair way to becoming our classic example of the fatuousness of contemporary estimates.⁴

Parrington closes his essay with a statement which invites comparison with the above assertion.

A self-reliant intellectual, rich in the spoils of all literature, one of the great masters of English prose, the supreme comic spirit thus far granted us, he stands apart from the throng of lesser American novelists, as Mark Twain stood apart, individual and incomparable.⁵

The first and third statements unfortunately tend to invoke the second. This is sad, for Parrington's essay contains much of value. He correctly assesses that to Cabell romance and realism

³Vernon Louis Parrington, Main Currents in American Thought (New York, 1930), p. 344.

⁴Ibid., p. 335.

⁵Ibid., p. 345.

do not carry their customary meanings, but are closer to idealism and conventionalism.⁶ He also understands that Cabell's pessimism is no undergraduate cynicism, but the result of a perceptive mind facing reality.⁷ That Cabell can confront reality with a jest instead of a sneer he rightly considers a measure of the man's greatness.

Had Parrington been more moderate in his language, he might have aided Cabell's cause. Instead, he helped set the stage for the vitriolic attacks of the 1930's and 40's.

Probably the best example of the abuse heaped upon Cabell during these years is furnished by Oscar Cargill in his tome Intellectual America: Ideas on the March. Cargill seems to abandon all attempts at objectivity or restraint and mounts a personal attack. As an example of Mr. Cargill's scholarship, consider the following:

to undertake the rereading of James Branch Cabell is to suffer monstrously on the rack of one's innocence. We were bored with him at the outset, yet read from a sense of duty; our minds atrophy, our organs decay, our flesh shreds from our bones as we whip ourselves through him again. He is . . . the most tedious person who has achieved high repute as a literatus in America. . . .⁸

If, however, Cabell's work suffers by comparison with the Congressional Record, as Mr. Cargill says it does,⁹ why does he

⁶Ibid., p. 337.

⁷Ibid., p. 336.

⁸Oscar Cargill, Intellectual America: Ideas on the March (New York, 1941), p. 495.

⁹Ibid.

bother to devote five or so pages from his magnum opus to a second-rate hack of an eclectic who borrowed from Stevenson, Harland, Hope, James, Pollard, Thompson, Barres, France, Mencken, and Edgar Saltus?¹⁰ Indeed, if Cabell, is so inconsequential, why consider him at all?

Alfred Kazin, in his On Native Grounds, also belittles Cabell, but in a far more urbane, civilized manner. He finds Cabell shallow, because

he made almost no demands upon his readers; and since he took such pains to be cute, it was impossible to resist him. He was not a decadent at all, but a mischievous and tryingly whimsical old uncle.¹¹

Cabell is thus seen as a writer not of allegory, but of innuendo, a satirist with a smirk, a complacent author writing safe, synthetic depravity for good, middle class fathers, citizens, and undergraduates.¹²

What might be considered the watershed in Cabell's critical fortunes was 1956. The April 21 issue of The New Yorker contained an article by Edmund Wilson, "The James Branch Cabell Case Reopened."¹³ This sympathetic treatment either brought the author of Jurgen to the attention of a new generation of critics, or encouraged devotees to come out of hiding.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 496.

¹¹ Alfred Kazin, On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature (New York, 1942), p. 234.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Edmund Wilson, "The James Branch Cabell Case Reopened," The New Yorker, April 21, 1956, p. 129.

Wilson recognizes the damage done by the "Cabell Cult."¹⁴ He sees Cabell as a Southern writer, by virtue of the feudal background of many of his books and his refusal to deal directly with the "vital issues" of his time.¹⁵

Wilson also sees Cabell as a comic writer, "one of--for modern times--almost unexampled splendor."¹⁶ He finds the comic vision based on a realization that life is full of uncomfortable ironies, but they are rarely a cause for weeping; in the long run, life is hardly susceptible of improvement.

Dealing with Cabell's rejection of "realism," Wilson makes the excellent point that both "realism" and "romanticism" are fictional conventions, and that glorifying the "dream" as against the "real" is merely expressing a preference for one literary convention instead of another.¹⁷

Wilson removes from Cabell the onus of being considered a throwback to the nineteenth century and brings him closer to Joyce and Faulkner.

These fantasies [Figures of Earth, The Silver Stallion, Jurgen, and The High Place] are not logical allegories; it is one of their great virtues that they are not. They are closer to the psychology of dreams, and this gives them their uncanny effectiveness.¹⁸

Indeed, Mr. Wilson does not equivocate; he declares that Cabell's distinction "is real and of an uncommon kind."¹⁹

¹⁴Ibid., p. 129.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 134.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 141.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 150.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 129.

Fanciers of Cabell owe Mr. Wilson a debt of gratitude for being the first major critic in almost thirty years to make such a forthright statement of approval.

Louis D. Rubin Jr.'s The Curious Death of the Novel is also very complimentary to Mr. Cabell. Considering him as one of the first of the modern Southern writers (along with Ellen Glasgow),²⁰ Rubin finds that one of the basic convictions of Cabell's works is identical with the touchstone of Faulkner's novels, the indomitable nature of man. Man is, whether or not he knows how or why. This alone erases the charges of cheap and shallow pessimism, for at the heart of Cabell's work is

a kind of visceral and rock-bound humanism, a conviction that in the very absurdity of his dreams, . . . man is demonstrating that he can and will survive.²¹

Rubin makes the excellent comment that while the Cabellian hero manages to ignore the laws of nature and chronology and escape to a fantasy land "his findings are always the same . . . he is still human, still subject to the usual limitations of mortality."²² Indeed, Cabell's heroes do not attain satisfyingly heroic achievements; they are no more successful than had they lived in the present day.

To Mr. Rubin, as to Desmond Tarrant (to be discussed later) Cabell was a dealer in myths and dreams for, as in a moderate

²⁰Louis D. Rubin, Jr., The Curious Death of the Novel: Essays in American Literature (Baton Rouge, 1967), p. 180.

²¹Ibid., p. 179.

²²Ibid., p. 172.

solipsism, the dream was the only true reality and myth-making the only important literary activity.²³

Three major book length studies of Cabell have happily appeared within the last seven years, Joe Lee Davis' James Branch Cabell, Desmond Tarrant's James Branch Cabell: The Dream and the Reality, and Arvin Wells' Jesting Moses: A Study in Cabellian Comedy. These three books take as their basic premise that Cabell is a major writer, one worth consideration without qualification as a curious backwater of twentieth century literature.

James Branch Cabell by Joe Lee Davis, a long-time Cabell fancier, is cast in the more or less traditional mode of criticism. Davis is concerned, and rightly so, with the influences of Cabell's early years and education on his writing. He finds evidence of Cabell's Southern rearing in the myth of the Confederacy, which developed in the Reconstruction period; these myths he maintains, with their divergences between the actual and the ideal, find their counterpart in The Silver Stallion.²⁴

Davis finds in Cabell's genealogical work (Branchiana, 1907 and Branch of Abingdon, 1911) the source for two of his basic metaphors. One is that of a river or stream, endlessly flowing. Ripples--human lives--rise to the surface, remain an instant, and dissolve, but the river always continues. The other is that of a

²³Ibid., pp. 174, 175.

²⁴Joe Lee Davis, James Branch Cabell (New York, 1962), pp. 24. 25.

vaudeville-like play or skit performed by changing actors on varying but remaining essentially the same stages.²⁵ Thus life is a constant, enduring force, manifesting itself in transient human existences, the possessors of which act out, as if it were new and fresh, the same drama.

In dealing with the "Biography of the Life of Manuel," Davis is one of the first commentators to stress the comic aspect of Cabell's writing. Indeed, he characterizes the "Biography" as "an elaborate experiment to capture the comic spirit in a romance cycle."²⁶ Davis sees Cabell's comedy as a departure from the comic tradition of the English novel. Rather than social, it is "'cosmic comedy' because it puts its protagonist--Manuel--against the universe and the gods."²⁷

In dealing with the classification problem, Davis neatly avoids the romanticist-realist conflict by turning to Northrup Frye's Anatomy of Criticism, which utilizes four categories--the novel, dealing with a society which has existed; the romance, mythic and archetypic; the confession; and the anatomy, an intellectual ordering and oversimplification of existence.²⁸ Davis asserts that the "Biography" is a blending of romance, of confession and anatomy.²⁹

²⁵Ibid., pp. 27, 28.

²⁶Ibid., p. 54.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid., pp. 57, 58.

²⁹Ibid., p. 60.

Within this framework of the "Biography" Cabell manipulates characters exemplifying singly and in combination three basic attitudes toward life--the chivalric, the gallant, and the poetic. Davis accepts this classification and discusses his works as they fall into these three categories. The scheme of his study is essentially that of a reader's guide, furnishing brief plot outlines and usually sound, if sometimes a bit pedestrian, commentary on each work. This Baedeker approach is illustrated by the proportions of the book; roughly one-half is devoted to the biographical sketch and ways to approach the body of Cabell's work, almost one-half is taken up by plot summaries and commentaries on individual works, and only a few pages are devoted to a "final judgement" on Cabell's place in literature. This "final judgement" is very brief, and indeed this is a virtue. Davis has furnished the reader with informed commentary, indicated various approaches to the problems of evaluating Cabell, but inevitably each reader must form his own opinion. Davis' opinion of Cabell is high, but he doesn't gloss over Cabell's faults and he leaves the final judgement to the reader.

Desmond Tarrant's James Branch Cabell: The Dream and the Reality, while it does not concern itself with Cabell's comedy, is too important a study to omit. Tarrant considers Cabell from a mythic standpoint. Drawing on Jung's theories of archetypes, he finds that Cabell has created a myth for our age, he has taken

the immemorial and traditional bodies of materials and transmuted them so that they represent a mythologem of the American way of life.³⁰

Tarrant does not see myth-making as an escape mechanism; rather he feels that if an artist has enough to say he must use myth.³¹ Myths permit a duality of expression, both intellectual and emotional, and Tarrant finds in this dualism of Cabell's expression "everything we most lack and most need"--in other words, a key to survival.³²

It is unfortunate, however, that Tarrant has neglected the comic side or aspect of Cabell. Indeed, out of 280 pages only four (96-97, 117-118) concern themselves with humor in Cabell. Tarrant finds that Cabell's humor "is a very serious thing. It underlies everything, but it can be grim and forboding if not forbidding."³³ He perceptively observes that Cabell's humor expresses reality without being dispiriting. This is, as he states, a very real achievement. Cabell is also able to counter the hostile gods, or the indifferent cosmos, with humor.³⁴ This produces a catharsis, comic though it may also incorporate pity and terror.

One can only hope that Mr. Tarrant will follow this book with one dealing with the comedy in Cabell. The Dream and the

³⁰ Desmond Tarrant, James Branch Cabell: The Dream and the Reality (Norman, 1967), p. 15.

³¹ Ibid.

³³ Ibid., p. 96.

³² Ibid., p. 17.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 117.

Reality is a valuable study, but it ignores almost completely a major aspect of Cabell.

Arvin Wells' Jesting Moses is unusual and of especial value in that it, unlike its predecessors, concerns itself with Cabell as a comic writer, not merely as a writer who is incidentally comic. Indeed, Cabell uses the term "comedy" in the subtitles of most of the key works of The Biography of Manuel. While other critics have been content to make vague generalities concerning Cabell's comedy and its nature none had taken the time nor the space to attempt an explanation or definition of it. Wells is to be commended for attempting this essential task.

After laying ground work with chapters on Cabell's world-view and the comic vision of existence, Wells discusses the several theories of comedy which he classifies under the headings of corrective-reformatory, the cathartic, and the related ritual-expulsion theory of Cook.³⁵ His purpose in this is not to pigeonhole Cabell, but to provide a background for considering Cabell's ideas.³⁶

Wells finds that Cabell doesn't use comedy strictly in the service of commonsense as a corrective, but rather that he uses it in the vicarious evasion or breaking of taboos.³⁷ Yet commonsense and the proprieties of society receive their due, but only after ironic examination of and experimentation with society's taboos.

³⁵ Arvin R. Wells, Jesting Moses, A Study in Cabellian Comedy (Gainesville, 1962), p. 31.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 38.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 39.

In a sense Wells says that Cabell wrote comedies of disillusionment, developed by the irony of the contrast of the ideal and the actual, the dream and the reality. But Cabell's irony is not embittering; the knowledge of the divergence of the dream and the reality does not lead to cynicism. The reader has been amused; the comic protagonist, while "disappointed" does not regret his adventures.³⁸ Disillusionment is thus a state of disintoxication, a freedom from the delusion of finding the ideal embodied in the actual.³⁹

Wells finds Cabell's comedy to have its source in the pattern of human living seen against a naturalistically conceived universe. It is closest to the cathartic theories, since it lifts the reader from his egotism and makes available a cosmic vision of reality.⁴⁰ The reader thus achieves a double-vision, seeing human existence from both a human and a god-like perspective, and he is thus able to consider with Olympian laughter that which would be painful to a restricted point of view.

Thus, according to Wells, Cabell's comedy "threads the line between comedy and tragedy without being tragicomic."⁴¹ While tragicomedy is dependent upon a last-minute reversal, Cabellian comedy is comic overall. Like tragedy, it attempts to transcend the finite predicament and thereby reconcile man to his place in the universe.

³⁸Ibid., p. 44.

³⁹Ibid., p. 45.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 61.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 136.

Unfortunately, Wells does not, to my satisfaction, reconcile properly the rather bleak, deterministic philosophy which he finds operating as the ground of Cabell's comedy. Much of what he says about the comedy is pertinent, but without a base it does not seem to explain how Cabell is able to wrest comedy from the bleak view of man and the universe which Wells imputes to him. Wells' study is an invaluable one, a valiant attempt at a comprehensive theory of Cabell's comedy, but it does not represent a totally satisfactory effort.

Because of the volume of Cabell's output, spanning more than fifty years and fifty volumes, close consideration of more than a fraction of his writing is impossible in a thesis of this size. Indeed, even a book-length study would leave stones unturned, as evidenced by the necessity for selection displayed by Davis, Tarrant, and Wells. Consideration of even a major fraction of Cabell's works would also, inevitably, entail repetition, since no author can avoid the recurrence of certain themes basic to his character. Representative volumes, therefore, have been chosen from what I prefer to call Cabell's Early, Middle and Late Periods.

The Early Period spans from 1904 and the publication of The Eagle's Shadow through 1915 and The Rivet in Grandfather's Neck. This period might also be characterized as that of Social Comedy. The Middle Period, 1916 through 1930, saw the publication of Cabell's major fiction, culminating in the publishing of the Storisende Edition (1927-1930) of his then extant works. The Later Period, 1930 to 1955 comprises fiction under the name Branch Cabell, some essays, and his reminiscences. The Appendix presents a chronological list of Cabell's publications.

While the second and third periods are naturally divided by the publication of the Storisende Edition, the situation is vexed

for the first and second. Though chosen on the basis of Cabell's developing predilection toward fantasy, 1915 is a rather arbitrary date. This development was not, of course, an overnight occurrence. Figures of Earth, which is fantasy and highly representative of the second period, both in tone and mastery, was written in 1912. Another factor which complicates the issue is Cabell's habit of revision. The early novels were revised before inclusion in the Storisende Edition, thus earlier editions must be sought to give an accurate representation of his early work.

Cabell's first novel, The Eagle's Shadow furnishes a good example of his Early Period. While in many ways it represents an artistic dead end--social comedy was not Cabell's metier--it does introduce three characters who appear in later works, Richard Harrowby and Felix Kennaston of The Cream of the Jest, and Orven Deal (Horvendile) who appears in many of the major works.

The plot, such as it is, hinges on the old standbys of multiple wills and marriage proposals. Margaret Hugonin has come into a sizeable fortune from her uncle, Frederick R. Woods. Billy Woods, Mr. Woods' disinherited nephew, has just returned from Paris, where he had pursued an artistic career while trying to forget Margaret. Of course, upon seeing her, the old flame is rekindled for both of them.

Margaret, however, is loath to commit herself, and so is Billy, because of her wealth and the incessant flood of marriage

proposals it has brought from the philanthropic parasites who infest Selwoode, her estate.

Billy discovers two wills both later than the one which leaves the estate to her. One again names her the heir; the other leaves the estate to him. He pockets the latter as Margaret walks in, and after his proposal is rejected, shows her the former. She leaves, her suspicions of his avarice confirmed. However, she returns to see Billy throw something in the fire; when he leaves she recovers it from under the grate and finds it to be the will in his favor. Filled with love at his unselfishness, she destroys the will bearing her name, fervently hoping he will repeat his proposal.

Then, of course, the proper complications must be introduced. Billy tells Kathleen, with whom he had had a brief flirtation, of his love for Miss X; she, of course, thinks he means her. Billy also believes that Margaret has accepted Felix Kennaston. Then at breakfast Margaret dramatically reveals that Billy is the true heir. Kathleen, of course, accepts his putative proposal, and as a "gentleman" he cannot disabuse her. Margaret hears of this and believes Billy to be a trifler. Kathleen, in the meantime, is wooed successfully by Felix Kennaston.

To resolve this impasse, Cabell introduces the ruffian Cockeye Flinks, sent by Orven Deal. He robs Margaret and, coming to her aid, Billy is bludgeoned. Margaret hears his delirious babbling and is convinced of his love, so all ends well with Billy the master of Selwoode.

"The Biography of the Life of Manuel" represents the culmination of Cabell's Middle Period. Comprising twenty volumes, it follows the essence of Manuel's personality as it reappears in various of his descendents from Medieval times to the twentieth century. While Cabell intended it to be considered as one book, as evidenced by its title, the individual volumes can stand alone. I have chosen the four which comprise the core of the Biography. They are Figures of Earth, The Silver Stallion, Jurgen, and The High Place. They comprise a tetralogy which embodies most of Cabell's major concerns and which amply illustrates the workings of his comic spirit.

I. Figures of Earth

We encounter Manuel, a pig tender, sitting by a pool trying to follow his mother's advice to make a good figure in the world by molding figures out of clay. He is accosted by a stranger who urges him to a quest to rescue a princess imprisoned by an evil magician in his castle. Manuel goes, bearing the magic sword Flamberge, and is aided in his quest by Niafer, a kitchen wench, who removes all the monsters guarding the castle by cunning ruses. Reaching the magician's chamber, Manuel finds he is Miramon Lluagor, the maker of dreams and the same man who urged Manuel on his quest. The princess is Miramon's wife, who bores him and hampers his creativity by restricting the dreams he makes to pleasant, edifying ones.

Instead of taking the princess who, by the laws of romance, Miramon can be rid of only by the intercession of a champion, Manuel chooses Niafer, who represents something real amid all this fraud. Returning, they encounter Grandfather Death, who demands that one accompany him. Niafer goes and Manuel does not hinder her, for self-preservation prevails.

Manuel returns to the pool and there finds a feather lost by Princess Alianora while in the guise of a swan-maiden. It serves as a lure and passport for him, even though it is destroyed, and enables him to win her. The goose-feather, with which he replaces the lost magic feather, inspires him to trade upon the desires of men to believe in the appearance, not the reality, in order to advance his own desires.

Ever molding figures, Manuel leaves Alianora to win Queen Freydis, a supernatural being. She is able to vivify the ten clay figures that Manuel shapes, but he prefers the lost, flesh and blood Niafer to his animated sculpture, and so he journeys to serve Misery in order to regain Niafer. After a month of years in service, Manuel is able to form an image of Niafer and fill it with her spirit.

Manuel attains political power, to become the Redeemer and Count of Poictesme. But he still longs to pursue "his own thinking and own desires" with Sosphra (anagram of Phrases), the first image he made. But the conventions and obligations of daily life now hold him. The high achievements of his life seem unimportant

beside the activities of his daughter, Millicent. When Grandfather Death comes again, Manuel departs with him and the mode of his leaving is reported by a young boy, Jurgen, son of Coth of the Rocks, and Jurgen unconsciously improves on reality.

II. The Silver Stallion

This second novel of the tetralogy is a frame novel revealing the fates of seven of the nine remaining champions of the Fellowship of the Silver Stallion, of which Manuel was chief. The Fellowship, in the background in Figures of Earth, aided Manuel in his redemption of Poictesme. A picture now emerges of the Fellowship, and it is not attractive. It was a gang of brigands who in the name of patriotism, justice, and manly amusement, perpetrated an astounding variety of outrages.

We also find that Manuel has been memorialized by a resplendent statue atop an enormous cenotaph. He has become the model of a Christian warrior of high ideals and firm purpose, a conception hardly consistent with the man of Figures of Earth. He is now looked upon as a messiah, eventually to return and bring the spiritual redemption of Poictesme. This faith is based on the report of Jurgen, who as a boy saw Manuel ride away with Grandfather Death. Since Jurgen had stayed out all night, he invented the story to avert a spanking.

Seven "heroes" of the Fellowship are assigned quests by Horvendile to keep them out of trouble. They pursue their dooms without really changing, but the myth transforms them into its

own imposture. Of the seven only Coth seeks Manuel, in the land of the dead, and begs him to return and correct certain false impressions. Manuel, always the pragmatist, reproves him and says the myth is better, for it has increased the general welfare.

As the novel ends Jurgen, now a respectable pawnbroker in middle life, comes to appraise the jewels in the statue of Manuel with an eye to loaning Dame Niafer money after replacing them with colored glass. To his surprise they are colored glass! but everyone had forgotten. Jurgen views this vast, hollow image, studded with valueless glitter, and perceives that it is valuable for the ideals it has fostered. And he wonders what it really was that he saw when Manuel rode westward with Grandfather Death.

III. Jurgen

Jurgen finds the pawnbroker defending evil to a monk who has tripped over a stone and blamed his misfortune on the Devil. Walking on, Jurgen meets a black gentleman who thanks him for his good word and wishes him a life free of care. When Jurgen implies this is hardly possible, since he is a married man, the stranger promises to reward him. Arriving home, Jurgen finds his wife, Dame Lisa, has disappeared. Later she is seen acting strangely near a cave and Jurgen yields to his sense of honor--and to family pressure--and goes into the cave after her.

Within the cave, Jurgen meets a centaur who carries him to the Garden Between Dawn and Sunrise, where he meets the ideal woman of his youth. She, of course, doesn't recognize this

fortyish pawnbroker, and he departs to beg a bygone Wednesday from Mother Sereda (anagram of Dea Res, the Thing Goddess).

Having recovered his youthful appearance but still in possession of his mature mind, Jurgen regains his bygone Wednesday. He embraces the ideal woman of his youth, Dorothy, but finds that at the end of the Wednesday things revert to the present, and Dorothy is just the same as in actuality. Jurgen gingerly puts her aside.

Searching further for the actualization of the ideal in a woman, Jurgen, "a monstrous clever fellow" by his own admission, succeeds by mountebankery in possessing Gunevere before her marriage to Arthur and in seducing Yolande in the course of a quest in Glathion. He marries Anaitis (anagram of Insatia) in Cockaigne, enjoys domesticity with the Hamadryad Chloris in Leuke and marries the vampire Florimel in Hell where he also meets his father Coth, demanding a hotter flame. Jurgen even has the opportunity to have Helen of Troy, although he wisely, as shall be seen later, desists.

After a visit to his grandmother's heaven, where he encounters his childhood self as she imagined him and where he even sits in the Throne of God, Jurgen confronts Koshchei the Deathless, god of things as they are. Koshchei parades the above-mentioned women before him and desires him to choose. But Jurgen will have none save Dame Lisa, for he is used to her and does rather like her.

IV. The High Place

Florian, the protagonist, presents another incarnation of the archetype originated with Manuel. As a ten-year-old boy in 1698, long after Jurgen's adventures in 1279, he falls asleep in his father's garden and dreams of finding the sleeping princess Melior, held in enchantment on the High Place since medieval times. Presumably awakened by his father, he grows up during the decadent Orleans Regency but, before making his fifth marriage, is given the chance to obtain the ideal princess of his childhood dream, the ideal he has been pursuing. To obtain Melior he makes a pact with Janicot, the Brown Man, a Pan figure.

Jurgen had the chance to possess Helen of Troy, his embodiment of the ideal, but relinquished it, wisely preferring to keep the ideal alive in his imagination, unsullied by reality. Florian is not so wise; he frees Melior and finds her to be an enormous bore--she is spiritually and intellectually null, and she talks incessantly about nothing. Florian was to give his first child to Janicot as a condition of their pact; this was to end Melior's stay. The last blow, the crushing disillusionment comes when he finds the child to be that of Hoprig, his patron saint!

The church had canonized a martyr named Horrig. The tail of the first "R" on his tombstone had worn away, so that he was called Hoprig. The real Hoprig was a pagan priest, responsible for Horrig's death, and had been asleep on the High Place.

Unable to fulfill his contract with Janicot, Florian, stripped of all delusions save his assertion of selfhood and the honor of his

word, faces real disaster. He wakes up to find it had been a dream. The epilogue tells us that he lived his life much as the dream, with the exception of the entanglement with Melior.

Cabell's Later Period saw a change in his fantasy. Relying less on pure invention and more on historical fact and literary sources, Cabell's fantasy is less his own and more that of the period he describes. The change occurs with the trilogy "Heirs and Assigns," which encompasses the years 1938 through 1942. After this trilogy Cabell was to write but four more books, only two of which are fiction. (The Witch Woman, which appeared in 1948, is a combination in one volume of three earlier short novels.)

Hamlet Had An Uncle and The First Gentleman of America are good examples of this later tendency of Cabell. Both deal with recognizable historical persons and periods (the latter with the Spanish conquest of the New World). And both differ sharply in their general tone of sardonic, cynical disillusionment from what had preceded them. Indeed, the difference in tone is comparable to that between Shakespeare's early comedies and his so-called black comedies.

Hamlet Had an Uncle derives from the Ur-Hamlet but, unlike Shakespeare, Cabell thrust the story back to the Norse period, complete with blood, gore, atrocities, and its insane concepts of "honor" or "face." As indicated by the title, the protagonist is not Hamlet but his uncle, not his paternal uncle Fengon (Claudius) but one unmentioned by Shakespeare. Fengon is Hamlet's actual

father while Horvendile, Hamlet's putative father, is his actual uncle. Thus, when Hamlet slays Fengon, the slayer of Horvendile, he actually avenges his uncle's death by killing his own father.

With the aid of Orton, an incarnation of the preternatural Horvendile of the "Biography," Hamlet succeeds in assuming the throne of Jutland and in making a political marriage with Alftruda, previously promised to Wiglerus, the uncle of the title. Eventually he divorces her and marries the Pict's Amazon-like queen Hermetrude, also loved, or lusted for, by Wiglerus. Wiglerus, who loves Alftruda, now has cause for acting on a promise of fidelity to Alftruda made by Hamlet.

At this point Hamlet's fortunes sink and Wiglerus' rise. Orton changes favorites and reveals to Wiglerus that through the mutual murder of his two brothers, he is now King of Denmark and Hamlet's liege-lord.

Wiglerus defeats Hamlet and Hermetrude, trapping them and their remaining followers in a swamp. Hamlet in a soliloquy tells Hermetrude that honor is all; she finds this impractical and a poor substitute for the comforts of her Pictland castle (or Wiglerus' Danish castle) and kills him and gains an armistice from Wiglerus.

Now, of course, by the rules of honor Wiglerus must avenge Hamlet's death; furthermore Hamlet's infant son by Alftruda may later cause trouble if he doesn't. He therefore has Hermetrude expertly killed by Magnus the Skald (a poet who kills for art's sake) and thus is able to live in security.

II. The First Gentleman of America

Here Cabell presents the story of Nemattanon, an Indian prince of early Virginia's Ajacan tribe, said to be the son of the god Quetzal. Nemattanon leaves his Indian wife and goes with Pedro Menendez to learn the ways of civilization. The book concerns his education in the ways of a Christian gentleman, his adventures in New Spain and Spain, and his eventual return to lead his people.

There is little to be said of the plot--it is mainly episodic and concerned with contrasting Nemattanon's innocent humanism with a credo that puts God and country above all else. And yet, the issues are not black and white, for Menendez is like Manuel--a simple man of action who acts with the highest motives believing them implicitly although we can see the cynicism with which others use these same motives.

Despite Nemattanon's humanism, he is able, as are the Spaniards, to let the end justify the means; he returns to his tribe and as their werrorance he safeguards their way of life as long as possible, leading them into the Alleghanies where they feast any visiting Europeans before they kill them.

In calling Cabell a humorous or a comic writer, it is perhaps well to emphasize that humor and comedy are not restricted to slapstick and farce. Indeed, these two are but divisions of comedy, a fact which seems to have escaped today's writers of television scripts. Aristotle recognized this, terming comedy

an imitation of men worse than the average; worse, however, not as regards any and every sort of fault, but only as regards one. . . the Ridiculous, which is a species of the Ugly. The Ridiculous may be defined as a mistake or deformity not productive of pain or harm to others. . . .¹

Thus, according to Aristotle the main distinction of comedy is that the fault possessed by the protagonist does not, as in tragedy, excite pity and terror, but rather laughter. Comedy may, therefore, concern itself with almost any subject; action which might well result in tragedy can, if resolved in a happy or fortunate manner, result in comedy.

The fact that comedy may concern itself with almost any subject is vital to an appreciation of Cabell as a comic writer. As can be seen from the above plot summaries, many of Cabell's subjects are hardly laughable--at least in the skeletal form of an outline.

Generally speaking, therefore, the comic or the humorous in Cabell arises not from an intrinsic "funniness" of the plot, but from the actions and reactions of the characters who move within the plot. Cabell has given us comedies of ideas and attitudes. It is difficult, therefore, to cite specific examples of Cabell's comic muse.

Davis has furnished an approach which seems to be useful in considering the development of Cabell's comedy and its

¹Aristotle, "The Poetics," trans. by Ingram Bywater (Chicago, 1952), II, 683.

varying applications.² He finds three differing qualities of "laughter" in the "Biography." First is the laughter of superiority, satire, of the mind and directed at--rather than oriented with--certain characters. This, of course, would characterize the social comedy. Second is laughter at--a reaction to grossness, as exemplified in farce or slapstick. Third is laughter with certain characters, laughter we share with them as they triumph over circumstances or, in failure, maintain a certain savior faire, or balanced, sane outlook. It is an expression of admiration for accomplishment or for a gracefully accepted failure or disillusionment. This laughter engages both intellect and emotion and seems to me the highest of the three forms. Davis, however, does not attempt to assign Cabell's novels to any of these categories, he is content to assert that they may be applied to Cabell.

Let us examine the above novels and see which type of laughter predominates. The Eagle's Shadow, as evidenced by its plot, is social comedy or satire. Indeed, it could easily be translated into a typical Restoration Comedy of Manners. There is little in the characterization to excite our sympathy or promote identification or a sense of deja-vu. The plot, with its array of proposals, broken hearts, and wills, is rather predictable, and we feel a sense of smugness in observing the shallow, sophomoric infatuations and discomfitures of Margaret and Billy.

²Davis, pp. 55-56.

There is also an element of laughter at in Cabell's ridicule of the various philanthropic causes and their sponsors who surround and batten off Margaret Hugonin. Even here, though, satire predominates--Mr. Petheridge Jukesbury is president of the Society for the Suppression of Nicotine and the Nude, vice-president of the Anti-Inebriation League, and Secretary of the Society for the Eradication of the Erotic.³ As one might expect, his nature contradicts his official capacities, he is rather gross and sensual. Yet he is able to act decisively and even heroically in ministering to Billy after he has been injured. It is difficult to judge too harshly a man who knowingly saves the life of the man who will stop the accustomed largesse.

Thus The Eagle's Shadow is virtually pure satire, and satire of a rather non-intellectual sort. At the most, it pokes fun at philanthropy and questions its motives, but in the main the book satirizes what would now be called the "Beautiful People." As one would expect, they are revealed as a shallow lot, generally unworthy of our real sympathy. It is not surprising, therefore, that Cabell abandoned this form of comedy.

It is in Figures of Earth that Cabell reaches his true metier. Here he leads us to feelings of admiration and envy toward Manuel; we laugh with him, albeit we sometimes smile at his seeming naivete.

³James Branch Cabell, The Eagle's Shadow (New York, 1923), pp. 52, 53.

Manuel is Everyman. He intends to leave his mark on the world--if not to remodel it, at least not to leave it unaltered. And he does leave his mark. He gains political power, is successful in battle and in the boudoir, and becomes the beloved leader of Poictesme. Yet all this is obtained at great cost, as is true of the realized ambitions of all men.

Were Manuel unaware of the price he paid for his success, we would laugh at him as a fool. But Manuel knows the price; he was forewarned by Horvendile on Vraidex after he had given Niafer to Grandfather Death:

This is but the beginning of your losses, Manuel, for I think that a little by a little you will lose everything which is desirable, until you shall have remaining at the last only a satiation, and a weariness, and an uneasy loathing of all that the human wisdom of your elders shall have induced you to procure.⁴

Here is material for tragedy, yet Manuel is able to surmount it by sheer egoism. He proclaims over and over that he follows after his own desires and this assertion, though intellectually he cannot accept it, is emotionally sustaining and allows him to face life with good cheer. We laugh with him because while he is bound by society and its demands, as are all men, he is able in some measure, even if in an illusory manner, to transcend the obligations of family, position, and all the other exigencies which hedge about and constrict man.

⁴James Branch Cabell, Figures of Earth (New York, 1927), p. 38.

The Silver Stallion continues this same vein, telling of Manuel's companions and their fates after his death. Much of the humor in this work arises from the disparity between Manuel as he was and as the Fellowship of the Silver Stallion remembers him, and the image of Manuel projected by Niafer and the respectable citizenry. Manuel's erstwhile companions struggle against the false image created by the new religion, but eventually they realize that the world does indeed wish to be deceived and that speaking the truth is no guarantee of popularity.

The laughter here is a curious mixture of superiority and empathy. Knowing Manuel's entirely human, though admirable nature, we laugh at the edifice constructed on young Jurgen's inventiveness. Doing so, we laugh with Manuel's old companions, who are also in on the secret. This double laughter is intensified by the ironic fact that we and the Fellowship come to realize that Manuel dead is more useful than Manuel alive.

With seven stories to relate, it is inevitable that some of the champions are laughable, at least initially. Consider, for example, Kerin, a scholarly warrior, who insisted he would leave home only at the command of his recently acquired wife. He was told by Horvendile

You, Kerin, will go downward, whither nobody will dare to follow you, and where you will learn more wisdom than to argue with me, and to pester people with uncalled for eurdition.⁵

⁵James Branch Cabell, The Silver Stallion (New York, 1927), p. 13.

And it was so. Kerin's wife, Saraide, was of a curious nature and possessed a talisman which would indicate the truth when it was found. One day she imagined the glow of truth in a well and summoning Kerin to see, she hastened his search for truth. Saraide then pursued her quest, nocturnally, and with the aid of divers male assistants.

Kerin discovered a library at the end of a long passageway at the bottom of the well and, supplied with food by Sclaug, a strange bibliophile, pursued the truth for many years. Eventually, with the one wholly true thing he had found, he made his way out to rejoin his wife.

Saraide seemed unimpressed, for she too seemed to have discovered the truth. They went together into their eight-sided house and lit the lantern with Kerin's paper bearing the truth. In the glow of the lantern the one truth was apparent, that time maims everything, and that it was the height of wisdom to treat the one truth as if it were not true at all. "He temperately kissed his wife, and he temperately inquired, 'My darling, what is there for supper?'"⁶ Thus we initially laugh at Kerin for giving up youth and pleasure for a futile search, and end by admiring his wisdom in accepting the existential dilemma of life.

Probably the funniest of the tales is that of Ninzain, fated to remain at home and uphold the motto of Poictesme,

⁶Ibid., p. 208.

Mundus vult Decipi. Ninzain was highly respected, a pillar of church and charity, so all made allowances for his indulgence in wine at a banquet save one. Ninzain was married.

In his tipsiness Ninzain stepped off the path to his house, and his wife observed the footprint he left. Next morning she called his attention to its similarity to that of a huge bird, and he was forced to admit that he was a member of the opposition--from down under. Naturally his wife would be forced to relate this to St. Holmendis at confession, thus placing Ninzain in jeopardy.

Ninzain, therefore, called upon his spells to eliminate St. Holmendis--but he had forgotten them from living virtuously too long. He was forced to call upon Lucifer, who was most displeased with Ninzain's fall from wickedness. With appropriately supernatural presence of mind, Ninzain wheedled Lucifer's forgiveness. The problem of St. Holmendis was solved by Ninzain's wife calling out that supper was getting cold and that he should be more considerate of company. Ninzain explained to Lucifer,

If I could explain it, I would perhaps care less for her. In part, I think, it means that she loves me: in part, I fear--upon looking back--it means that no really conscientious person cares to entrust the proper punishment of her husband to anybody else.⁷

Any husband will laugh (ruefully perhaps) and attest to the truth of this observation.

⁷Ibid., p. 243.

In view of Davis' three types of laughter, Jurgen is probably the best example of sustained laughter with the protagonist. It might be well to note, however, that the above statement might be disagreed with by women--Jurgen seems to me a book of primarily masculine appeal. Men delight in Jurgen because the pawnbroker fulfills a common daydream of men--to play the role of great lover. Jurgen the pawnbroker is able to do just this, to the delight of all the ladies he encounters and yet escape censure or even guilt because all is accomplished through supernatural means and because in the end he willingly and almost happily returns to his shrewish wife. For in a sense it was all a dream, having been managed by Koshchei, god of things as they are.

Thus it may be seen that Jurgen is both a critique of marriage and a satire on hedonism.⁸ Jurgen's marriage is hardly ideal--his wife berates him constantly for his poetic aspirations and his station in life as a pawnbroker--but he seems to find it preferable to his liasons with the various passionate ladies he encounters during his year away. He finds his taste for unbridled lust quickly fades, and that it becomes boring, something life with Lisa never was.

Jurgen is indeed a "monstrous clever fellow," thus we admire him for his wit in meeting his adventures. But he has his failings which make him human. Like all humans, he does not really know who

⁸Julius L. Rothman, "A Glossarial Index to the 'Biography of the Life of Manuel'" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1954), p. 35.

he is or what he wants. In heaven Jurgen addresses God

'O God, why could You not let me have faith? for You gave me no faith in anything, not even in nothingness. It was not fair.' . . . Jurgen began to weep.⁹

Later he sits in the throne of God and cries "'For I do not know. Oh, nothing can help me, for I do not know what thing it is that I desire!'"¹⁰

Out of these cries comes the angst that torments the "heroes" of many a modern novel, but Jurgen is able to accept it as part of the human condition. He searches for justice and for the realization of that perfect love of woman which all men envision; unable to find them in Heaven, or Hell, or on Earth, he returns to Lisa, who is at least familiar, and whom he does rather like. Thus Jurgen is Everyman, acting out the Human Comedy, striving toward the divine and at last contenting himself with merely human contentment.

The High Place marks the tentative emergence of the hints of the darker sort of comedy that was to emerge more and more in Cabell's later works. Edmund Wilson, referring to Cabell's last four novels (The King Was in His Counting House, Hamlet Had an Uncle, The First Gentleman of America, and There Were Two Pirates) speaks of the development of a "misanthropic sadism" which was

⁹James Branch Cabell, Jurgen (New York, 1922), p. 297.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 306.

"a feature" of earlier work.¹¹ This is perhaps a bit strong, but in The High Place there is an unpleasantness which is hardly in evidence in Jurgen or in The Silver Stallion. I can offer no explanation, especially since The Silver Stallion and Something About Eve both followed The High Place and do not seem to embody this undercurrent.

In The High Place we laugh primarily from a sense of superiority and from an observance of excess, or of grossness. Florian is a seeker after beauty and the ideal woman--to the extent of marrying and murdering four wives! Furthermore, his "moral code" consists only of the injunction not to offend one's neighbors. Thus much of the laughter of the book springs from an uneasy contemplation of excess--Florian's marital and sexual predilections, the stilted formalities of the French court of the Regency, where one killed a brother over a coat button, and from Cabell's satire on religion and the code of honor.

The laughter of admiration is muted; it is difficult to admire Florian except as one might admire a daring and able criminal--the certain pleasure which obtains in regarding a man performing a task exceptionally well. It must be admitted that Florian acted in accord with the social norms of his time and station in life, but this does not ease the strain that the modern reader feels in trying to view his actions as "normal." Indeed,

¹¹Edmund Wilson, "James Branch Cabell: 1879-1958," Nation CLXXXVI (June 7, 1958): 519-520.

virtually the only true admiration we can feel for Florian is at the climax, when he faces real disaster, pitting only his assertion of selfhood and personal honor against Janicot. Then we find it was all a dream, and perhaps this allows us to laugh--out of relief.

Hamlet Had an Uncle and The First Gentleman of America display the unpleasantness of The High Place to a far greater degree, perhaps warranting Mr. Wilson's comment mentioned above. If not "misanthropic sadism," they certainly evidence an awareness of that portion of man's nature which makes him most uncomfortable: the carefully ignored propensity toward evil and brutality known variously as "man's essentially evil nature," or the "id" or the "old Adam."

Both novels might be considered anatomies of the raw lust for power and its temperance by societal obligations. Both Hamlet and his uncle set about achieving their desire--women and authority--in the methods which their Norse society provides for them--political machinations and when necessary carefully calculated murder. The measure of Hamlet's ultimate failure and his uncle Wiglerus' ultimate triumph lies in the relative degree to which each is able to subdue his emotions to the exigencies imposed upon him by society. Davis refers to the "altruistic urge" to do what is required by society.¹² It seems rather to

¹²Davis, p. 140.

me to be a realization that society can destroy those who flout it and that one's desires can be achieved with society's blessings if they are pursued in the acceptable manner.

Nemattanon, like Wiglerus, achieves and retains power by carefully observing the conventions of society (both Spanish and his own Indian) and by keeping tight rein on his emotions. He learns from Don Pedro and the Spanish that treachery and atrocities, if necessary, are the only defenses his tribe has against the encroachments of "civilization."

Like Wiglerus, Nemattanon is able to bide his time, to make conventions work for him. Don Pedro, like Hamlet, tends to succumb to his emotions. In addition he, unlike the other three characters, is essentially admirable. He adheres to the fanatical strictures of Spanish colonial society because he believes them right, not for personal gain as do his fellows. This essential honesty is ultimately defeating and Nemattanon learns that the Spaniards are not to be trusted. Thus he "regresses" and leads his tribe back into the remote mountain valleys.

Laughter in these two novels is laughter at the essential absurdity of the societies presented and their conventions. It is uncomfortable laughter; the reader feels an uneasy kinship with the persons of the novels, in view of recent history many parallels are disturbingly apparent. Were it not for the distance which Cabell allows us, and the consequent sense of detachment, the

novels would be disturbing and depressing. As it is, we view these human midges from a comfortable distance and laugh at their grotesqueness--except when we uneasily see ourselves.

It is perhaps basic to the nature of man to theorize about the nature of things, to try to explain that which eludes easy comprehension. Literature is no stranger to such philosophizing, and comedy has been one of its richest fields. Thus several comic theories will be examined, and their applicability to Cabell will be assessed. These theorists have been chosen for various reasons. Aristotle, of course, is always a valid beginning. Fielding is included because of his early mastery of the comic novel. Hazlitt merits inclusion because of his general value as a critic, and Bergson is an adequate representative of the modern school of "scientific" philosophy.

Aristotle asserts that "comedy is...an imitation of lower types; though it does not include the full range of badness, nevertheless to be ridiculous is a kind of deformity. The causes of laughter are errors or deformities that do not injure us...."¹

After Aristotle most theories of the comic utilized the concept of the humors, those four constituents which, in equal

¹Aristotle, p. 683.

proportions made up a "normal" individual. An overabundance of one or another predisposed a person toward certain types of action. The concept of the humors was extended to describe any person who had a mania of some sort, a driving passion. Thus in Ben Jonson's The Silent Woman the main character's humor was his desire for quietness in all things. As can be imagined the humor character was one-dimensional; as the Enlightenment progressed the humors dwindled, although traces of the philosophy persisted.

As an example of this persistence, Henry Fielding first distinguishes between the comic and the burlesque. The burlesque is, he says, "ever the exhibition of what is monstrous and unnatural, and where our delight, if we examine it, arises from the surprising absurdity...."² The comic, however, is a "just imitation" of nature, for life furnishes an accurate observer with the ridiculous.³ Thus burlesque is exaggerated, overdrawn, closer to the humor character, while the comic is true to life, a natural portrayal which does, of course, tend to emphasize the ridiculous.

With this distinction made, Fielding is able to concern himself with defining the source of the ridiculous. This he finds to be affectation, which proceeds from either vanity or hypocrisy.⁴ Fielding holds that from the discovery of affectation comes the

²Henry Fielding, from "Author's Preface" [1742], in Joseph Andrews (New York, 1948), p. xviii.

³Ibid., p. xix.

⁴Ibid., p. xxi.

ridiculous, causing surprise and pleasure to a higher degree from the apprehension of hypocrisy than from vanity. He explains that this is because vanity is merely ostentatious and often asserts a greater degree of virtue than is present, while hypocrisy presents the reverse of what actually is, hence the high degree of the ridiculous.⁵

Fielding undoubtedly wrote about comedy with his own excellent novels as examples. It would be well to see how a writer known primarily for criticism would discuss comedy unbiased by his own creations.

William Hazlitt echoes Aristotle, stating that both tears and laughter are allied reactions to a sudden change of circumstances; tears being the result of sudden or violent emotion, and laughter the result of mere surprise or contrast.⁶ The comic is the result of incongruities between what ought to be and what is. Hazlitt assigns three degrees of the comic--the laughable, the ludicrous, and the ridiculous--all operating on the same principle of contrast. They vary in the strength of the contrast and the degree to which the observer is intellectually aroused or disturbed.⁷

⁵Ibid., pp. xxi, xxii.

⁶William Hazlitt, from "On Wit and Humour" [1819], in Lectures on the English Poets and the English Comic Writers, ed. William Carew Hazlitt (London, 1884), p. 2.

⁷Ibid., p. 6.

Hazlitt draws a distinction between humor and wit. Humor is a mere description of the ludicrous; wit is its exposure by comparison or contrast with something else.⁸ Thus humor may be entirely unconscious and accidental, but wit is always purposeful and intellectually directed. Wit is "the eloquence of indifference," whether its subject is serious or light, if it discusses the serious seriously it becomes something else.⁹

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, along with the rise of realism and naturalism, were marked by the feeling that everything could be scientifically explained. This led to the scientific philosopher, a good example of whom is Henri Bergson. Bergson's main thesis is that a person is comic to the extent that his attitudes, gestures, movements, etc., present an aspect of rigidity, or a kinship with a machine.¹⁰ Thus the Chaplin walk is comic because of its kinship to a mechanical doll, and the jerkiness of early movies elicits laughter because of the reduction of humans to automata. Drawing upon this touchstone, Bergson develops various corollaries. A person embarrassed by his body (cf. television commercials) elicits laughter. He generalizes his main thesis and asserts that we laugh when a person gives the impression of being a thing (and of course one cannot feel for a thing). It is open to question whether a robot could be comic, so Bergson

⁸Ibid., p. 15.

⁹Ibid., p. 16.

¹⁰Henri Bergson, from "Laughter" [1900], trans. Clouesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell, in Comedy (New York, 1956), p. 74.

considers as comic "any arrangement of acts and events which gives...in a single combination, the illusion of life and the distinct impression of a mechanical arrangement."¹¹

Aristotle, of course, wrote in response to what he observed of the drama of his day. When applied to Cabell, discrepancies become apparent. Cabell's comic figures are not of a "lower type"; while their errors do not injure us, Cabell's heroes are too much like us for them to be termed ridiculous without similarly labeling ourselves.

Fielding's "just imitation" of life is very applicable; for all of the medieval trappings in many of Cabell's works his characters are convincing, they act and react as humans, not as do the idealizations of Hope, Pyle, and Major.* However, Fielding's discovery of the ridiculous, springing from vanity or hypocrisy, as the source of laughter doesn't work well with Cabell. Jurgen is anything but a stock humor character; while his search for justice may seem humorous, he is never made to appear foolish and the butt of the scornful laughter characteristic of the downfall of one motivated by vanity or hypocrisy.

Hazlitt attributes the comic to the incongruity between what ought to be and what is, a principle much at work in Cabell. Hazlitt's description of wit as "the eloquence of indifference,"

¹¹Ibid., p. 105.

*Three novelists, popular in the early twentieth century, who wrote stories set in a heavily romanticized era of chivalry.

however, does not apply to Cabell, for while Cabell's comedy is intellectual, it is hardly indifferent--any more so than is Shakespeare's in the Dark Comedies.

While Bergson's mechanistic theory seems quite up-to-date, its emphasis on rigidity of attitudes and movement seems little more than an extension of the comedy of humors. His theory admirably explains Punch and Judy, and much of current television comedy, but it seems inadequate for any work in which people are presented as anything more than stereotypes.

Thus it can be seen that the above theories of the comic are not readily applied to the distinctive Cabellian comedy. The three major works on Cabell discussed in Chapter I also deal with Cabell's comedy; they therefore demand closer consideration.

Desmond Tarrant's The Dream and the Reality unfortunately may be dismissed after a brief discussion. He is little concerned with Cabell as a comic writer. As have many other commentators, Tarrant finds irony a prime ingredient of Cabell's comedy. The reader shares with the author a knowledge of the gods' hostility and their delight in toying with men as children with flies, and is thus able to view the antics of the artist's creations with detached amusement from a superior viewpoint as he jerks the strings that control them. This produces the catharsis mentioned in Chapter I (comic though often incorporating pity and terror), the result not of genial skepticism but of "considerable passion and intense agony of spirit."¹²

¹²Tarrant, p. 118.

Tarrant does not seem to have been concerned with developing a unified concept of Cabell's world-view. We find various comments here and there which seem to hint at Cabell's thought, or this thought as transmitted by Tarrant's thought (an inevitable occurrence, to some degree). For example, "[Irony is] the sane man's defense against an insane world..."¹³ or "...nothing is good or bad but thinking makes it so,"¹⁴ or "For life itself is perverse, and Cabell presents life--not only its stupidity and ugliness but also its music and its beauty...."¹⁵ Finally, speaking of Jurgen's refusal of the beautiful women offered him by Koshchei, Tarrant writes "This return to mundane reality--the greatest tragedy of all--is the master touch which completes a masterpiece."¹⁶ Perhaps Tarrant is a discouraged romantic, an impression strengthened by his assertion that in life "we weep for joy even at the possibility of getting what we want."¹⁷ Would not this approach admit humor into the grimmest naturalistic novel whenever the hero succeeds even momentarily?

Joe Lee Davis, unlike Tarrant, grapples with the question of Cabell's world-view. Having disposed of the classification problem as mentioned in Chapter I, Davis discusses the intellectual climate of the 1890's to the 1920's. He finds the period a conflict among several philosophical viewpoints. One of the contenders was what

¹³Ibid., p. 62.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 56.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 58.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 114.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 96.

Davis terms "reductive naturalism." It was essentially a thoroughgoing materialism, explaining the traditional roles of God, the soul, and reason as nothing but (Davis' italics) manifestations of purely physical processes, even if not readily measurable in the laboratory.¹⁸

A popular alternative to this materialism, with its severely deterministic implications, was a "constructive naturalism" rather similar to the melioristic naturalism implied in much of Thomas Hardy's work. It posited the eventual emergence by strictly evolutionary means of the traditional universals and spiritual entities.¹⁹

Pragmatism in various forms enjoyed quite a vogue, as it does today, with its premise that as long as any hypothesis which "worked" and could be empirically "checked" was "true," it was not in direct conflict with the above two naturalisms. It, however, admitted many of the traditional absolutes, if they were found helpful, as usable "fictions."²⁰

Traditional realism persisted, though drawn to constructive naturalism, in its belief in the primacy of reason, the existence of universals, and the dualism of res interna and res externa. Unlike the constructive naturalists, realists avoided appeal to the evolutionary process.

¹⁸Davis, p. 49

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid.

Idealism--often termed personalism--continued to hold to the primacy of self or consciousness and its essences. Truth was to be found only through these. Idealism could, of course, lead to solipsism--the concept that matter is only the product of the human imagination as inspired by a supernatural deity.²¹

Davis sees Cabell as a "libertine skeptic," toying with, over the course of "The Biography," the whole gamut of the above ideas and making especial use of the *as if* philosophy (Davis' italics) which held that man might make some of his dreams come true by acting *as if* they would.²² Davis holds that Cabell, as an amateur or "literary" thinker, was often unsure where his philosophical beliefs lay, so he used almost all of them in a continuous dialogue. It would seem that Davis is unwilling or unable to find in Cabell either a sustained philosophical viewpoint or evidence of an evolving one, and that this may explain Davis' failure to discuss Cabell's comedy beyond terming it cosmic comedy and applying the three useful classifications mentioned in Chapter II.

Arvin Wells has developed what is thus far the most comprehensive theory of Cabell's world-view and the comedy which results from it. Wells holds that Cabell professes an inability to find any order--moral or otherwise--in the universe. The structure of the universe is, from a human viewpoint, irrational and therefore incomprehensible. If there is some pattern, if man imagines laws

²¹Ibid., p. 50.

²²Ibid., p. 51.

operating; they work toward an unknowable end.²³

This would seem to align Cabell with the naturalists; however, Wells feels he must decline to share their conclusions. Although Cabell "knows" that humanistic values and ideals are fictitious, he refuses to view man merely as a transmitter of life force or as a social phenomenon.²⁴ Thus Cabell's world-view is a sort of lopsided compromise between idealism and naturalism.²⁵

Echoing Davis, Wells finds that this compromise has been effected by using the as if philosophy, which Wells correctly attributes to Vaihinger.²⁶ Wells holds the as if philosophy to be the only anodyne available or possible to a "skeptical mind far gone in disillusionment; that is, a mind no longer capable of a whole-hearted act of faith, no longer able to give unquestioning allegiance to any particular ideal or concept."²⁷

How then, does Wells envision Cabell wresting comedy from this rather grim philosophy? As discussed in Chapter I, Wells finds much of Cabell's comedy the result of the irony of the contrast between the ideal, or the desired, and the actual. The irony, Wells says, is not embittering, for the hero is "disintoxicated," i. e., freed from the delusion of finding the ideal actualized.²⁸ The source of the comedy derives from human beings

²³Wells, p. 10.

²⁴Ibid., p. 12.

²⁵Ibid., p. 5.

²⁶Ibid., p. 13.

²⁷Ibid., p. 29.

²⁸Ibid., p. 44.

struggling in a naturalistic universe, attempting the impossible and inevitably failing.²⁹ Wells finds catharsis implicit in the comedy, for the reader is given a cosmic vision, and is able to view human existence dispassionately. As mentioned in Chapter I, Wells states that Cabell's comedy "threads the line between comedy and tragedy...."³⁰ Like tragedy, it attempts to reconcile man to his place in the universe. But what does Wells feel is Cabell's conception of man's place in the universe? The following passage seems to typify his findings.

From Cabell's point of view, though he disclaims any knowledge of the plot of the universal drama, one thing is certain--insofar as man strives to exceed the very severe limitations which material nature imposes upon him, he casts himself in the role of fool. Thus, the comic is inherent in every pattern of human living which departs from the purely sentient and instinctive.³¹

These statements seem to predicate a crassly deterministic, materialistic view of existence and the universe, with man reduced to the status of a laboratory rat, running its prescribed pattern through a maze, punished for deviations from the foreordained path. It is difficult to see how Wells' conception of Cabell's world-view could lead him to speak of Cabell's comedy as being "not embittering" and lacking in cynicism.³²

Indeed, what is there in this sort of view of man and the universe which would make comedy possible at all, save to the most

²⁹Ibid., p. 61.

³⁰Ibid., p. 136.

³¹Ibid., p. 26.

³²Ibid., p. 44.

callous and misanthropic author and reader, the sort of persons who would find humor in the facial contortions of a man being gassed? It would seem to me that Mr. Wells has misunderstood Cabell's philosophy, the basis of his comedy, thus casting doubts on the validity of his later comments. An understanding of the philosophy seems vital; our understanding of Pope is flawed without knowledge of the Great Chain of Being, so too did the spirit of his times mold Cabell's work.

It is generally accepted, of course, that an author is a product of his times. Thus a brief consideration of some of the forces which molded and continue to influence the attitudes of the twentieth century seems in order. It would take many times the available space to trace fully the various sources of those attitudes which produced the tenor of the twentieth century, but perhaps these comments will enable Cabell to be placed in the context of his times.

William Barrett finds the watershed to have been the Protestant Reformation--man stripped of the comforting mediators of priest and confession and was required to face God in all his nakedness, to face a God who had, ages before, decided his individual fate.³³ Here, Barrett believes, began the continuing process to strip man naked of his comfortable, ego-supporting beliefs.

³³William Barrett, Irrational Man (Garden City, 1962), p. 27.

The rise of the new astronomy hastened the process, removing man from his place in the center of the universe and relegating him to an uneasy rider of a whirling speck. Even, however, with Newton's demonstration of the superfluity of a personal God in a clock-like universe man could still be comforted by his divine parentage.

Darwin and The Origin of the Species weakened that comforting prop, however, and astronomy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries further expanded the universe, reducing man to an ever-smaller accidental aggregation of molecules. The reason apparent in the universe and reflected in man suffered heavy damage at the hands of Freud, who reduced free will to reactions to uncontrollable subconscious drives. Even the universe became a random motion of particles of matter, matter which was insubstantial, a mere aggregate of electrical charges and empty space. As Joseph Wood Krutch wrote,

The universe revealed by science...is one in which the human spirit cannot find a comfortable home.... It needs to believe...that right and wrong are real, that Love is more than a biological function, that the human mind is capable of reason rather than merely of rationalization, and that it has the power to will and to choose instead of being compelled merely to react in the fashion predetermined by its conditioning.³⁴

Krutch sees two possible alternatives for man to utilize in reacting to this world-view. He may either surrender his humanity

³⁴Joseph Wood Krutch, The Modern Temper (New York, 1956), p. xi.

by adjusting to the "real world," or he may "live some kind of tragic existence in a universe alien to the deepest needs of his nature."³⁵ The first alternative is exemplified in literature by the Naturalistic School, by such authors as Zola and Dreiser. Man is but one of the higher animals, jerking through life in reflex arcs predetermined by his heredity and environment. Outside forces which he is powerless to resist impinge upon him and, regardless of his desires, mold him to circumstances. The universe, at best indifferent, is at worst seemingly actively hostile. Man is a mere pawn in the vast flux of the universe.

The second alternative is the way of Existentialism, which is the dominant reaction to Krutch's statement today. If the first alternative is a mindless acceptance of an animal existence, the second is an attempt to deal rationally with an indifferent universe, or to find reasons to justify existence in a purposeless universe.

Camus holds that there is only one truly serious philosophical question, and this is suicide.³⁶ Suicide is a response to a world without lights and illusions. "A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world."³⁷ But without reasons, there is no cure for the feeling of alienation, and there is a feeling of absurdity, which engenders a longing toward death.³⁸

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays, trans. from the French by Justin O'Brien (New York, 1955), p. 3.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 5.

³⁸ Ibid.

Camus continues that absurdity arises from the realization of the disparity between or the comparison between a bare fact and a certain reality, between an action and the world that transcends it.³⁹ A man attacking a tank with a club is absurd, because of the disparity between his aim and his strength.

Thus Camus sees existence in the modern world as a struggle characterized by an absence of hope (but this has nothing to do with despair), a continual rejection (but not renunciation), and a conscious dissatisfaction (not to be compared with immature unrest).⁴⁰ Life, then, is a grim effort, justified only by the meanings man can attach to it, knowing such meanings to be mere inventions.

Can Cabell be associated with either of these reactions to reality as modern man perceives it? Certainly, Cabell's characters do not mindlessly accept the existence of automatons. Manuel is a mere swineherd, but he transcends his heredity and environment to become Redeemer and Count of Poictesme. He is used to following after his own thinking and desires, even though in doing so he may be only fulfilling the obligations put on him by other people.⁴¹ He establishes a kingdom for Niafer to make amends for giving her to death. He fights for Alianora when she sends her talisman.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 22.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 23.

⁴¹ Davis, p. 72.

Even when Grandfather Death comes and confronts him with evidence of his unimportance--for to death accomplishments are nothing-- he is obliged to defend the figure he has made in the world.

Jurgen is a thoroughly domesticated pawnbroker, a fit specimen for the slice of life technique, highly subject to the circumstances of his environment. He is, however, able to bargain with time and its debilitating effects, in the person of Mother Sereda, and subvert the laws of the universe to search for his ideal. He ranges freely over Heaven, Earth, and Hell, debating God and flirting with the Devil's wife. Indeed, he is "a monstrous clever fellow."

Florian, too, conspires against reality to win to his desire-- the ideal woman. That he wins her is unfortunate, for he discovers that the attainment of a desire marks the beginning of its death. He, too, is unfettered by a sense of his own impotence (psychic or physical!) and he senses, vaguely, the repercussions of his murder of Phillip of Orleans.

Even in The Silver Stallion, perhaps the most iconoclastic and disillusioned of the tetralogy, comprising the core of "The Biography," individuals still manage to achieve the human dignity that Naturalism would deny. Manuel's life acquires new and greater relevancy as the origin of a religion, which people believe because it is absurd and which has a beneficial effect on their lives. Coth of the Rock achieves our admiration and a measure of dignity in his adherence to the real Manuel he knew. Indeed, it is this

hard core of egotism, of self-importance and self-assertion that preserves Cabell's characters from the typical Weltschmerz of modern realism.

What, then, of the other alternative, the tragic sense of life implicit, according to Camus, in the existential approach? Camus sees a continual rejection, but not a renunciation. Manuel desires to follow after his own thinking and desires, and he rejects the assertions by King Helmas that he, Manuel, brings wisdom but having been accorded the rewards of wisdom, he keeps them, for one must live in the world, absurd as it may be. He can intellectually reject his own importance when he meets Death, but to renounce it would be a dissolution of self.

Donander, too, in The Silver Stallion, having become a god, is forced to reject intellectually the idea of the Judgement Day when Manuel shall return. He is shown the cinder that remains of Earth. Yet he persists in his faith, for that bolsters his ego.

Jurgen and Florian are forced to reject the possibility of attaining the perfect love, yet they retain the idea as a talisman.

Dissatisfaction enters, also. It is that feeling which arises from having done what one could, what one must, and yet knowing it to be inadequate, or of no lasting importance. Kerin, in The Silver Stallion, after years of study, writes on a slip of paper the one true saying, and then, when he finds it meaningless, lights a lamp with it. Jurgen is dissatisfied with the marriage

with Dame Lisa, but he has explored the alternatives, so he accepts the compromises of life without unrest. Indeed, all of Cabell's main characters are dissatisfied--with themselves, with the actions of others, with life as it is.

Cabell's characters commonly experience fits of existential anxiety or alienation. Manuel says,

But I cannot put aside the thought that I, who for the while exist in this mortgaged body, cannot ever get out to you. Freydis, there is no way in which two persons may meet in this world of men: we can but exchange, from afar, despairing friendly signals, in the sure knowledge they will be misinterpreted.⁴²

And Jurgen sits upon the throne of God and wonders

'And what will you do now?' says Jurgen, aloud. 'Oh, fretful little Jurgen, you that have complained because you had not your desire, you are omnipotent over Earth and all the affairs of men. What now is your desire?' And sitting thus, enthroned, the heart of Jurgen was as lead within him, and he felt old and very tired. 'For I do not know. Oh, nothing can help me, for I do not know what thing it is that I desire...for I am Jurgen who seeks he knows not what.'⁴³

Florian says, when all crumbles about him,

'The pious old faith that made my living glad has been taken away from me, the dreams that I preserved from childhood have been embodied for my derision. I see my admirations and my desires for what they are, and this is a spectacle before which crumbles my self-conceit. The past...has become hateful: and of my hopes for the future, the less said the better. All crumbles, Collyn: but Puyssange remains Puyssange.'⁴⁴

⁴²Cabell, Figures of Earth, p. 129.

⁴³ _____, Jurgen, pp. 305,306.

⁴⁴ _____, The High Place, p. 239.

Thus Cabell fits reasonably well into the category of the tragic, or existential, sense of life with its dissatisfaction and rejection. But Cabell does not deny his characters hope, and herein, I believe, lies a facet of his tolerant, human realism and of his comic power.

Indeed, hope is perhaps a touchstone of comedy, hope and a refusal to be stifled by the limitations of ordinary human existence-- in other words, endurance. Consider the example of Dicken's Mr. Micawber, a character who could have served as an example of the defeat of the human spirit by the crass materialism of nineteenth century British society. Instead he emerges triumphant through his ever-present, ridiculous, thoroughly comic hope for a brighter future.

Mr. Micawber hopes for a brighter future; Yossarian, in Joseph Heller's Catch 22, hopes merely to survive World War II. Perhaps survival or endurance is what hope degenerates to in much modern comedy. Certainly Cabell's characters exhibit resilience in the face of apparently crushing obstacles. Wiglerus, for example, despite the apparent loss of all power and all he holds dear, persists in his hopes of satisfying his honor and he succeeds. Ninzain, cajoling the Devil, is even able to joke. Yet even in adversity, Cabell's creations exhibit a certain zest in life which is conspicuously absent from much recent fiction.

Hope and endurance, however, are not the only necessities for comedy, were they the Horatio Alger novels would be unfailing sources.

Equally important is a certain sense of detachment, a psychic separation of author and subject, author and reader, reader and subject. That which affects us directly may or may not be amusing, the same event is more likely to be amusing if its effect is somewhat peripheral.

In the case of Cabell's Existential comedy, this distance is even more vital. The world view Cabell constructs is too realistic, too close to the surreal events of recent history for us to take pleasure in contemplating it without the softening effects of distance. Catch 22, for example, would hardly have found such an enthusiastic following had it been published immediately following World War II. Even at this distance it probably evokes unpleasant memories from those who fought.

The distance is even more pronounced in most of Cabell. The books discussed above, with the exception of The Eagle's Shadow, deal with events in virtually mythical times. Their remoteness and the various trappings of magic, gods, and mythical beasts, soften the impact of the Existential viewpoint just beneath the surface. Existence is often absurd in the novels, but then so is the stage on which it occurs. We somehow feel aloof and isolated emotionally, although we realize intellectually that realism is a matter of human portrayal and not scene-setting, we tend to ignore this fact. Mundus Vult Decepi is Poltesme's motto, it has far wider significance than to this mythical kingdom. Cabell realized this, as do most modern Existential writers. Both attempt to disabuse the reader of

his erroneous preconceptions and lead him to a clear-eyed view of the human condition. Usually the result is angst; Cabell, however, is able to make the absurd amusing rather than disturbing, and his actors human rather than puppets of chance.

The Cabellian hero, for all his hope for the future, realizes that he exists in a bleak, twentieth-century universe. He realizes this, and is yet able to live with the self-confidence and hope of an earlier age when the universe was rational and benevolent. This combination of hope and determinism, the ability to realize the comic absurdity of existence without robbing it of the dignity we crave, represents the measure of Cabell's achievement.

Thus in Cabell's major works we find a common theme with modern imaginative art--the anti-hero. Cabell's heroes share with him the discomfiture of an insane, purposeless universe, the feeling of personal and collective impotence in the face of the vast indifference of existence and the dim, uneasy realization that in the final analysis one's life will count for nothing. Nor is the anti-hero, Cabell's or that of the present, allowed the anti-theistic posture that Stephen Crane expressed.

XIII

If there is a witness to my little life,
 To my tiny throes and struggles,
 He sees a fool;
 And it is not fine for gods to menace fools.¹

For God, if not dead, does not wish to become involved or, assuming His good intentions, His attention has been diverted, allowing the world to careen aimlessly, a ship without a helmsman.

Unfortunately for the state of comic writing, the above view of man is most conducive to the sort of embittered black comedy exemplified by Joseph Heller's Catch 22, a tour-de-force in its own right but hardly a reassuring view of humanity. Heller's

¹Stephen Crane, The Collected Poems of Stephen Crane, ed. Wilson Pollett (New York, 1932), p. 15.

cosmos admits two types of man--the man of action who is, however, corrupt and totally self-centered and his opposite, whose intentions are good but who, aghast at the insanity and amorality of the world, throws up his hands in despair and, retreating into himself, abdicates responsibility.

The essential factor that separates Cabell's humane comedy from the black comedy of typical contemporary fiction is hope. Cabell allows his characters hope, or at least the semblance of hope. This allows Jurgen and Manuel and all the others to attain if not heroic stature at least one worthy of the reader's affection and respect. These two qualities, especially the latter, seem to be essential for the attainment of sustained laughter with the protagonist. It should be noted that they are the antitheses of the pity tinged with contempt that is often the reader's reaction to the current anti-hero.

Indeed, by contrast with the ineffectual anti-hero, Cabell's heroes are movers and shakers, at least in their own eyes. Some, like Manuel, are pivotal figures in the history of Poictesme, but all act from a sense of healthy self-importance and self-determination. It is this feeling of self-determination, supporting and supported by hope, that separates Cabell from his contemporaries and from most modern fiction.

There is an apparent incongruity in speaking of hope, self-importance, self-determination and Existentialism coexisting in a

novel. Even the most deterministic world-view admits of a negative form of self-determination--suicide. Cabell resolves the incongruity by the use of what John Charteris, in Beyond Life, calls the "dynamic illusions."² Wells calls this the "as if" philosophy and, as mentioned in Chapter II, identifies it with Vaihinger, who states that men form ideas or constructs which

constitutes merely the frame in which man encloses the treasure of reality in order that he may manipulate [italics mine] it better....Without their aid we could admittedly not deal with the world, nor would we be able to act, they are, in fact a necessary evil.³

It is these dynamic illusions that allow Cabell's heroes, in spite of their moments of doubt and misgiving, to strive forward if not joyously at least hopefully.

An Existentialistic, deterministic world view is thus softened by a melioristic view of humanity. It may be noted that others--for example, Thomas Hardy--have used a melioristic determinism as the basis for fiction, and certainly in Hardy's case the results were usually anything but comic. The dynamic illusions are thus a major factor in preventing Cabell's heroes from sinking into the slough of despondency and despair that mires so many "heroes" of today's fiction. To Cabell's heroes, as to our present-day protagonists, reason says that man is an accident, a chance arrangement of molecules clinging to a tiny sphere but, in the words of John Charteris

²James Branch Cabell, Beyond Life (New York, 1930), p. 52.

³Philip Wheelwright, The Way of Philosophy (New York, 1960), p. 139.

Behold the miracle--still I believe life to be a personal transaction between myself and Omnipotence; I believe that what I do is somehow of importance; and I believe that I am on a journey toward some very public triumph....Even today I believe in this dynamic illusion.⁴

This dynamic illusion of importance, this incorrigible hard core of egotism, sustains Cabell's characters. Manuel follows after his own desires, although he finds his life increasingly hedged with obligations. The Fellowship of the Silver Stallion can see the benefit of the Cult of the Redeemer for men want to believe it true, although it is absurd. Jurgen can believe that he is "a monstrous clever fellow" and that ideal love and justice can be attained, although evidence points to the contrary. Florian can still hold to his ideal of womanhood, though it crumbles in his hands. Even Hamlet, in that thoroughly disillusioned story, can muse upon the necessity of honor for success and self-respect even though his insane insistence upon it has cost him much and will cost him his life. For they are all sustained by the idea of what ought to be, although it isn't.

Thus Cabell may be seen to occupy a unique place in American literature. Far from being merely a curious anachronism of the 20's, Cabell was not a luxuriantly overgrown dead-end in fiction, but rather served as a harbinger of the current black comedy. Indeed, in many ways present day practitioners of the art have far to go to equal his mastery of the genre, for Cabell after his initial

⁴Cabell, Beyond Life, p. 51.

apprenticeship became with Figures of Earth a mature artist, secure in his technique and in his sense of continuity with the past, a benefit of his classical education accorded few present writers. This feeling of continuity, of participation in and observation of the cosmic comedy of mankind's successes and failures, led Cabell, in spite of his cynicism and mockery, to exhibit a kind of humanism, a conviction (like that of Faulkner) that through the very absurdity of his dreams and playing, Man shows that he can and will survive. The making of myths is essential, for the dreamer transcends mortality.

"For man alone of animals plays the ape to his dreams."⁵ And he is led onward, toward an ambiguous goal, perhaps, but movement is the essence of life. Cabell uses the metaphor of an Author revising his work when he writes in Beyond Life that he imagines that we are part of an unfinished world, since man as he now exists could hardly be the product of a Creator one could heartily revere. We are becoming something unpredictable, and we are sustained by the instinctive knowledge that it will be better.

Thus Cabell wrests comedy from what could be tragedy. Through the device of his imaginary country, mythical beasts, and remote time, he achieves the proper distance for the reader to obtain a god-like perspective for Cabell's gentle mockery of man and his foibles. Through this displacement, the reader sees Cabell's

⁵Ibid., p. 356.

satire of man's absurdity and his dreams as something remote and not threatening, until he perceives that man really hasn't changed that much; that now, as in Poictesme "Life...is full of discomfiting ironies, but they are rarely a cause for weeping."⁶ Cabell can look into the abyss and laugh, for he knows that although man would shudder in horror were he to look down, his eyes are fixed on his goal, and its reality is of no concern as long as it sustains man on his journey to his uncertain destiny.

⁶Wilson, p. 141.

APPENDIX

Books by James Branch Cabell

The Eagle's Shadow (1904) Doubleday, Page & Co.

The Line of Love (1905) Harper & Brothers.

Gallantry (1907) Harper & Brothers.

The Cords of Vanity (1909) Doubleday, Page & Co.

Chivalry (1909) Harper & Brothers.

The Soul of Melicent (reissued as Domnei) (1913) Frederick A. Stokes & Co.

The Rivet in Grandfather's Neck (1915) Robert M. McBride & Co.

The Certain Hour (1916) Robert M. McBride & Co.

From the Hidden Way (1916) Robert M. McBride & Co.

The Cream of the Jest (1917) Robert M. McBride & Co.

Beyond Life (1919) Robert M. McBride & Co.

Jurgen (1919) Robert M. McBride & Co.

The Judging of Jurgen (1920) The Bookfellows.

Figures of Earth (1921) Robert M. McBride & Co.

The Jewel Merchants (1921) Robert M. McBride & Co.

Joseph Hergesheimer (1921) The Bookfellows.

The Lineage of Lichfield (1922) Robert M. McBride & Co.

The High Place (1923) Robert M. McBride & Co.

Straws and Prayer-Books (1924) Robert M. McBride & Co.

The Silver Stallion (1926) Robert M. McBride & Co.

The Music from Behind the Moon (1926) The John Day Co.

Something About Eve (1927) Robert M. McBride & Co.

- Ballades from the Hidden Way (1928) Crosby Gaige
- The White Robe (1928) Robert M. McBride & Co.
- The Way of Ecben (1929) Robert M. McBride & Co.
- Sonnets from Antan (1929) The Fountain Press.
- Townsend of Lichfield (1930) Robert M. McBride & Co.
- Some of Us (1930) Robert M. McBride & Co.
- Between Dawn and Sunrise (with John Macy) (1930) Robert M. McBride & Co.
- These Restless Heads (1932) Robert M. McBride & Co.
- Special Delivery (1933) Robert M. McBride & Co.
- Smirt (1934) Robert M. McBride & Co.
- Ladies and Gentlemen (1934) Robert M. McBride & Co.
- Smith (1935) Robert M. McBride & Co.
- Preface to the Past (1936) Robert M. McBride & Co.
- Smire (1937) Doubleday, Doran & Co.
- The Nightmare Has Triplets (1937) Doubleday, Doran & Co.
- Of Ellen Glasgow, An Inscribed Portrait (with Ellen Glasgow) (1938) Maverick Press.
- The King Was in His Counting House (1938) Farrar & Rinehart.
- Hamlet Had an Uncle (1940) Farrar & Rinehart.
- The First Gentleman of America (1942) Farrar & Rinehart.
- The St. Johns (with A. J. Hanna) (1943) Farrar & Rinehart.
- There Were Two Pirates (1946) Farrar, Straus and Co.
- Let Me Lie (1947) Farrar, Straus and Co.
- The Witch-Woman (1948) Farrar, Straus and Co.
- The Devil's Own Dear Son (1949) Farrar, Straus and Co.

Quiet Please (1952) University of Florida Press.

As I Remember It (1955) The McBride Co.

Branchiana (1907) Privately Printed.

Branch of Abingdon (1911) Privately Printed.

The Majors and Their Marriages (1915) Privately Printed.

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