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James Branch Cabell's Jurgen : fulfillment and paradox

Elizabeth Witham Loving

JAMES BRANCH CABELL'S JURGEN: FULFILLMENT AND PARADOX

By

ELIZABETH WHITHAM LOVING

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ABSTRACT

James Branch Cabell's controversial, Jurgen, is the novel that propelled him into fame. Suppressed as pornography only months after its publication, Jurgen drew attention from many areas. While Cabell's peers protested the suppression and praised the novel as a masterpiece, other readers were only interested in the forbidden "racy" language.

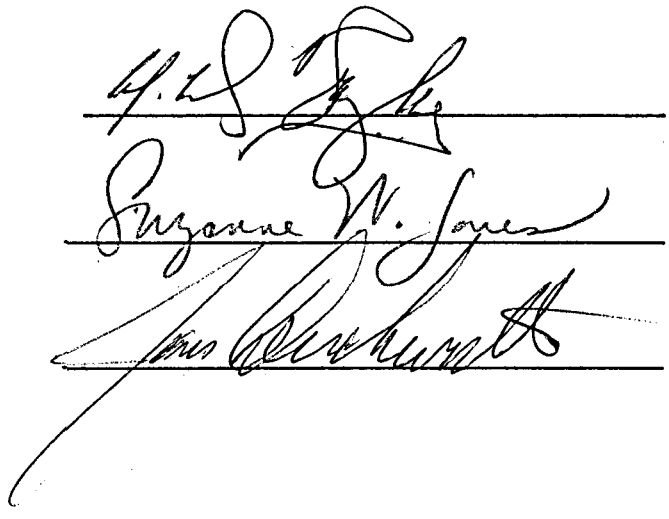
Unfortunately, it was for the second reason that Jurgen became the most widely read of Cabell's works. The general public was not interested in his talent as a writer, but it was interested in a scandalous book. The novel's suppression received so much publicity, that everyone wanted to read it. This was a monumental problem in the development of Cabell's career as a writer because all of his subsequent was compared to Jurgen as was much of his previous work. People who had never read Cabell before began to read his earlier novels expecting them to be as risque Jurgen.

The public was disappointed in what it found, and the critics, while they appreciated some of the later work, could not remove Jurgen from their minds. This novel overshadowed everything Cabell tried to do right up until his death, thirty-eight years later. Thus, while

representing a personal triumph of sorts, Jurgen ultimately became an impediment to Cabell's career, diverting attention and critical acclaim from his more ambitious literary achievments. Jurgen stands alone as both fulfillment and paradox.

APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have read this thesis and find that, in scope and quality, it satisfies the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.



INTRODUCTION

In a study on James Branch Cabell, Desmond Tarrant writes that he believes Cabell's novel Jurgen (1919) to be the result of a change in the author's view of the world. He says that "like the Fielding of Tom Jones, which Fielding wrote at the age of forty-two after purging himself of the venom in Jonathan Wilde, Cabell could look down from his eminence of urbanity and laugh at what he saw" (Tarrant 131). Tarrant saw a parallel between Fielding and Cabell because both writers had reached middle age and had realized the futility of continually lashing out at a world that did not seem to care.

Like Tarrant, many writers and critics have singled out Cabell's Jurgen as the outstanding achievement in his large body of work. The unfortunate truth, however, is that Jurgen was not the best of Cabell's novels, nor was it terribly representative of his long and prolific career. Because it received so much attention, however, it became the best known of his novels. This was a monumental problem in the development of Cabell's career as a writer because all of his subsequent work was

compared to Jurgen as was much of his previous work. People who had never read Cabell before suddenly became interested in his early work hoping it would be as "racy" as Jurgen.

The public was disappointed in what it found, and the critics, while they appreciated some of the later work, could not put Jurgen out of their minds. Jurgen overshadowed everything else Cabell tried to do right up until his death, some thirty-eight years later, when interviewers were still more interested in Jurgen than in any of his other works. Thus, while representing a personal triumph of sorts, Jurgen also became an impediment to Cabell's career, diverting attention and critical acclaim from his more ambitious literary achievements. Thus, Jurgen stands alone as both fulfillment and paradox.

Unlike earlier novels such as The Cords of Vanity (1909) and The Rivet in Grandfather's Neck (1915), Cabell's Jurgen is not a disguised account of incidents in his own life, but is instead an imaginative and self-contained tale based upon legends of ancient heroes, gods and goddesses. The story of Jurgen takes place in Cabell's mythical kingdom of Poictesme, a realm that he

invented, based loosely and in part on his home town, Richmond, Virginia, an idea which William Faulkner would later borrow when he created his own fictional Yoknapatawpha.

Jurgen, the medieval pawnbroker, is dissatisfied with his life. He longs for adventure and recognition and believes he could have been someone important if the conventions of his society had not prevented him from following his youthful dreams. He has not had the advantages in life that he thinks he deserves which is a primary distinguishing factor between Jurgen and the protagonists in many of Cabell's previous novels. Before Jurgen, Cabell had written primarily about people from his own station in life: individuals representing old money and the upper class. Although Jurgen wishes he could be a member of that social class into which Cabell placed his other characters, his creator had made other plans for him. With mystically restored youth, Jurgen wanders through time meeting many famous people and seducing many women. His journey introduces him to romantic heroes, beautiful princesses, gods, godesses, even Satan and Saint Peter. Surely from this variety Jurgen should have been able to find what he needed for

fullfillment. He could search the globe for "that which he desire[d]" and Cabell would give him every opportunity to find it.

Because of the rhetorical/fictional structure of Jurgen, Cabell was able to use his writing talent in a variety of ways. Since Jurgen himself travels through so many different places and times, his adventures can be outrageously foreign to a twentieth-century reader without making the tale unbelievable. Cabell's use of satire and wit bring these adventures home to the reader through the modernistic descriptions and dialogue. The passage that takes place in Hell is a particularly good example of Cabell's tongue-in-cheek sense of dark humor. Jurgen has just been reunited with his father, Coth, who is condemned to eternal burning, and Coth tells Jurgen:

> "I went astray with women, with I do not know how many women."
>
> Jurgen shook his head. "This is very shocking news for a son to receive, and you can imagine my feelings. None the less, sir, that was fifty years ago, and nobody is bothering over it now."
>
> "You jackanapes, I tell you that I swore and

> stole and forged and burned four houses and broke the Sabbath..."
>
> "Yes, sir," said Jurgen: "but, still, what does it matter if you did?"
>
> "Oh, take away this son of mine!" cried Coth: "for he is his mother all over again; and though I was the vilest sinner that ever lived, I have not deserved to be plagued twice with such silly questions. And I demand that you loitering devils bring me more fuel" (Jurgen 260).

This passage and others like it are the reason Cabell was praised for his skill in writing this novel, but the sort of sarcasm seen here was the cause of much of the criticism he received. Early twentieth-century American Christians did not take the idea of eternal damnation lightly and, therefore, did not approve of Mr. Cabell's lighthearted description of Hell. This sort of disapproval would continue, but much larger problems would face Jurgen in the months to follow. The following chapters trace those events leading up to the creation of Jurgen, the problems the novel faced and endured, and their immediate and ultimate effects on the career of James Branch Cabell.

CHAPTER ONE

James Branch Cabell (1879-1957) was born and raised in Richmond, Virginia, the ultra-conservative former capital of the Confederacy. He was very quiet and shy as a child, the result, most likely, of over-protective parents who tried to shelter him from the realities of the world. Young Cabell was, however, an excellent student, a fact which enabled him to enter the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, at the age of fifteen. Perhaps if his childhood had prepared him better for life away from home, Cabell's years at William and Mary would have been happier. As it was, he was not readily accepted by the other students, probably for several reasons. He was at least three years younger than most of his fellow students; he was smarter than many of them; and he was one of the few students raised in a relatively large city. All of these factors contributed to Cabell's social problems in Williamsburg, but nothing seemed to threaten his academic success.

By the time Cabell was a senior at William and Mary other students had accepted him and even included him in

their social activities. However, during his years as an outcast, he had befriended the college librarian, Charles Coleman. Although their relationship was purely Platonic, there were rumors that Cabell and Coleman were involved in a homosexual affair. The rumors were completely unfounded and Cabell was very bitter about this incident, the first of several scandals which would eventually prejudice his public reputation and create a permanent gap between him and society that would have a notable effect on his work.

This outlook on life was not noticeably reflected in the way Cabell presented himself publicly. He tried to put the William and Mary incident behind him and he took a newspaper job with the Richmond Times Dispatch, a postion which gave him the experience he needed to secure a job with the New York Herald a year later. After two years in New York he returned to his childhood home and resumed his newspaper work there. It was upon Cabell's return to Richmond that the second of the great scandals of his life occurred. He was furious to discover that his parents had separated because of an alleged affair between his mother and a distant cousin named John Scott. Young Cabell was accused of murdering Scott, whose body

was found outside Cabell's home shortly after his return to Richmond. Cabell was, once again, innocent and he was intensely angry and hurt by the false accusation.

Because of these two scandalous events which took place in his youth, Cabell's early work was full of barely disguised allusions to familiar people and incidents. In his second novel, The Rivet In Grandfather's Neck (1915), he described the John Scott murder in such a way that no one who was familiar with the case could mistake it for fiction. Cabell knew that Scott's brother had discovered the identity of the true murderer(s) and he demanded that the information be made public. Scott's brother refused and threatened Cabell with a libel suit if he attempted to disclose the information himself, so in retaliation, Cabell inserted the information in his novel using his own characters as the principals. He writes

> Scott Musgrave - a fourth cousin once removed of the Colonel, to be quite accurate - had in the preceding year seduced the daughter of a village doctor, a negligible "half-strainer", up country at Warren; and her two brothers, being irritated, picked this particular season

> to waylay Scott Musgrave in the street, as he headed home from the Commodore's Club, and forthwith to abolish Scott Musgrave after the primitive methods of their lower station in society (Rivet 15).

Since John Scott, himself, had resided at Warren in Albemarle County, and since it was commonly known that he had been imbibing at the Commonwealth Club on the evening of his death, there is little doubt about whom Cabell was writing.

In exorcising the demons of his past, Cabell also wrote about his mother. Since she was implicated in the alleged affair with John Scott, Cabell had to struggle with conflicting emotions where his mother was concerned. He loved her and he was proud of the way that she handled herself while the gossip spread about her, but he could not forget that she had brought about the dissolution of his family. Chivalry (1909) is a collection of short stories that Cabell dedicated to his mother. Its prologue contains an example of Cabell's pride in her:

> You alone, I think, of all persons living have learned, as you have settled by so many instances, to rise above morality in

> such testing, and unfailingly to merit by your conduct the plaudits and the adoration of our otherwise dissentient world. You have sat often in this same high chair of Chance; and in so doing have both graced and hallowed it (Chivalry 14).

It is interesting to note, however, that in The Cords of Vanity (1915) published the same year, both Stella Musgrave and Townsend's mother, two characters who strongly resemble Cabell's own mother, are killed.

By the time Cabell began working on çJurgenü, he had been both husband and father for several years. The anger and bitterness that ran so near to the surface in the young man had been subdued by age and maturity and the result was a completely different kind of novel. Although Jurgen is full of satire and sarcasm directed at the world in general, there is none of the very personal bitterness directed at the author's own surroundings that is found in the earlier novels. In Jurgen, Cabell does lash out at political and social conventions, but more than that, he toys with his readers by challenging the public and daring the critics to decipher the suggestive yet cleverly disguised séctions of pornography. With

great care, so as not to be crude, Cabell included these passages in order to recognize the importance of sex in the lives of men and women. He believed sex to be as full of "wonder, of occasional ecstasy, and, at times, of sheer magic" (Untermeyer 5) as any other aspect of human existence, and, therefore, equally deserving of attention in art and literature. Unfortunately, that kind of thinking was several decades ahead of its time, and Cabell's audience was not ready for such progressive thoughts.

CHAPTER TWO

For several months before and after its publication, çJurgenü was met with the highest praise from many respected writers and critics of the time. Joseph Hergesheimer, an acquaintance of Cabell's, wrote in a letter dated September 30, 1919, "Jurgen is a very strange and beautiful book: it is courageous, truer than truth, and made to a marvelous extent from your innate being" (Letters 133). H.L. Mencken also wrote of Jurgen saying, "It seems to me to be not only the best thing you have ever done yourself, but clearly the finest thing of its sort ever done in America" (Letters 145). These and other literary giants of the day believed that Jurgen would be a classic American volume of philosophy and fantasy, and that Cabell, himself, would be remembered forever as the master who created it.

Not everyone, however, found Jurgen to be so enchanting. According to Mencken, the predominant feeling in America at the time was one of patriotism and victory due primarily to the outcome of World War I. "Americana" was bigger than ever "and then slashing

through the thrilling chorus, came the harsh, discordant, mocking cackle of Jurgen" (Mencken 9). For example, Cabell wrote, "The religion of Hell is patriotism, and the government is an enlightened democracy" (Jurgen 277). This tongue-in-cheek attack on the American way was enough in itself to horrify many readers, but the worst was still to come.

Jurgen had been on bookstore shelves for less than four months when Cabell's editor, Guy Holt of Robert M. McBride and Co., received an indictment from the District Attorney's office of the County of New York. This indictment accused McBride and Guy Holt of conspiring to print and sell a "lewd, lascivious, indecent, obscene and disgusting book entitled Jurgen" (Letters 157). The New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, founded by Anthony Comstock, had learned of Jurgen through a reporter from the New York Tribune. This reporter noticed elements of what he considered to be pornography in the novel, and after reviewing Jurgen themselves, the "Comstocks", as the Society was sometimes called, agreed. The distribution of Jurgen was halted and all that could be done was to await the decision of the Grand Jury. Cabell, himself, appeared surprised at the accusations,

but he did not seem terribly upset. He wrote a letter to Guy Holt on January 17, 1920, commenting, "It is all very vexatious, but I protest I cannot find a sentence in the book that could not be read in Sunday School. Nor is there any reference anywhere to sexual matters, so far as I can detect" (Letters 159). This letter from Cabell raises some question as to how well he remembered what he had written or how candid he was being because, although much of what the Society for the Suppression of Vice considered to be pornographic clearly was not, there are those passages in the novel that rightfully would have raised some early twentieth-century eyebrows.

Cabell chose page 56, the first page cited as being obscene, as his example of how warped the Comstocks were in their findings. "And he drew the girl close to him" (Jurgen 56), is the nearest to anything lewd or lascivious that Cabell could find on that page. If, however, he had used another of the Comstock's chosen passages it might have been more difficult to prove his point. Pages 153-155 contain a description of the wedding ceremony held for Jurgen and the goddess Anaitis, and while there is no blatant sexual activity, the underlying meaning and the phallic symbolism are

impossible to ignore.

> Anaitis took salt and water from the child and mingled these. "Let the salt of the earth enable the thin fluid to assume the virtue of the teaming sea!"
>
> Then, kneeling, she touched the lance, and began to stroke it lovingly. To Jurgen she said: "Now may you be fervent of soul and body! May the endless serpent be your crown, and the fertile flame of the sun your strength" (Jurgen 154).

Another example is on page 238 in which Jurgen is giving Queen Dolores of Philistia a mathematics lesson:

> "Well, then, madame, it is first necessary to implant in you, by the force of example, a lively sense of the peculiar character, and virtues and properties, of each of the numbers upon which is based the whole science of Praxagorean mathematics. For in order to convince you thoroughly, we must start far down, at the beginning of all things."
>
> "I see," said the Queen, "or rather, in this darkness I cannot see at all, but I perceive your point. Your opening interests me: and you may go on." (Jurgen 238)

Any reader looking for hidden obscenities would have been well rewarded with the discovery of these passages, which is precisely what happened to the Comstocks.

The irony behind the suppression of Jurgen is that Cabell, who claimed complete innocence, was fully aware of what his novel contained and even boasted about his finesse in writing it. In a letter to Burton Rascoe, to whom the novel is dedicated, written June 21, 1919, three months before Jurgen's publication, Cabell had written, "During temporary possession of my uncle's library, I garnered stray bits of erudition from all sorts of rare improper books,... and shamelessly stuck them in the text. The book is now a jungle of phallic hints and references, which will shock nobody because nobody will understand them. But then I have a great many private jests here and there in my books: and someday may prepare a concordance" (Letters 121).

Cabell wrote that letter in confidence, and Rascoe not only honored that confidence, but he and other Cabell admirers actually began a protest against the suppression of Jurgen. Several of Cabell's colleagues, including Rascoe and Mencken, formed the Emergency Committee Organized to Protect Against the Suppression of James

Branch Cabell's Jurgen. This committee solicited letters and testimonials on behalf of the novel which they collected and sent to the District Attorney in New York. The committee also made a petition-like list and gathered names of those people who had not read the novel but who agreed in principle that the suppression of literature was wrong.

H.L. Mencken wrote one of his most scathing letters to the committee which accurately reflects the opinions of most of the other contributors:

> The laws under which such outrageous assaults upon decent books and decent authors are made were drawn up by the late Comstock to suit his private convenience, and are so worded that it is practically impossible for an accused publisher to make an effective defense.... Comstockery is a profitable business and those who live by it are without decency (The Committee 53-54).

Mencken did not mince words and because of his vehemence many well known writers of the time were equally eager to have their names added to the committee's list of supporters. Some of the more notable were F. Scott Fitzgerald, Sinclair Lewis, Ellen Glasgow, and Joseph

Hergesheimer.

The suppression of Jurgen lasted for several years and, ironically, only served to increase the novel's popularity. The few copies that were still in circulation were in great demand and brought very high prices because suddenly Jurgen had become the symbol of ultra-sophistication in the 1920's. Everyone from schoolgirls to surgeons wanted to read and uncover the forbidden language of the novel. Had Jurgen not received the publicity it did, it probably would not have been much more popular than Cabell's previous novels, which were all nominal successes. But people will always be curious about something that is prohibited, hence the incredible success of Jurgen. Decades later, Louis Untermeyer observed, in an address delivered to the first meeting of the associates of the James Branch Cabell Library of the Virginia Commonwealth University,

> An irony which Cabell himself was quick to appreciate was the singular case of Jurgen, a case in point as well as law. Although it is no more remarkable than most of the other books in the sixteen-volume saga which Cabell liked to call 'A Biography', a saga which concerned the picaresque

> Don Manuel and his adventurous descendents, Jurgen became almost as much Cabell's trademark as Mark Twain became Samuel Clemens'. People who never before had read anything of Cabell's - people who could not pronounce his name correctly - read and reread Jurgen (Untermeyer 7).

Although many of his colleagues fought endlessly to put a stop to the suppression of his novel, Cabell himself remained unusually quiet. One of the few public statements he made regarding the proceedings was an essay he submitted to the Emergency Committee. This essay, entitled "The Judging of Jurgen: Great Tumblebug States His Case for the Court of Philistia," is a parody of the situation in which Cabell substitutes a giant insect for the Comstocks and lets Jurgen, the character, take the place of Jurgen, the novel:

> Jurgen now looked more attentively at this queer creature; and he saw that the tumblebug was malodorous certainly, but at the bottom honest and well meaning; and that seemed to Jurgen the saddest thing he had found among the Philistines. For the tumblebug was sincere in his insane doings and all Philistia honored him sincerely, so that

there was nowhere any hope for this people.

Therefore, King Jurgen addressed himself to submit, as his need was, to the strange customs of the Philistines. "Now do you judge me fairly," cried Jurgen to his judges, "if there be any justice in this insane country. And if there be none, do you relegate me to limbo, or to any other place, so long as in that place this tumblebug is not omnipotent and sincere and insane."

And Jurgen waited.....(The Committee 63-64)

Cabell did not need to say anything more. This essay, which the Emergency Committee submitted to the County of New York, boldly expressed his feelings toward the Society for the Suppression of Vice and showed that, whatever his novel said, he thought its suppression was very wrong. So having said all he would say, Cabell, like Jurgen, waited. However, unlike his protagonist, who was relegated into limbo, Cabell won his trial. Jurgen was re-released for publication in 1922 and the battle was over. The damage that was done, however, would affect Cabell's career forever. As Mencken wrote:

> Who remembers that a New York Court decided that the Comstocks were fools? Not many. So Jurgen lives in the finishing-schools as a wicked book, and the fact that it is a noble work of art is half forgotten. Worse, it is often forgotten that Cabell has written many other books, and that some of them are even better. Such are the penalties that a moral Republic lays upon an artist....If he is not hot for virtue, it is assumed that he is in the service of sin" (Mencken, 11).

Cabell would look back on Jurgen as both the cause of the literary popularity he enjoyed and the obstacle that kept him from ever achieving that popularity again.

CHAPTER THREE

After the acquittal of Jurgen, Cabell, whose life had been wrapped up in the scandal over the novel, was again able to turn his thoughts entirely to his writing. He would produce many new novels. The immediate effect of the suppression of Jurgen, once it was over, was that it propelled Cabell into unexpected popularity, and his books were selling better than ever. This welcome notoriety, was, however, a primary factor in the decline in popularity he experienced in the decades following Jurgen with critics who considered him irrelevent in his later years and with the reading public who simply stopped reading Cabell altogether. Because çJurgenü had attracted so much attention, the later works, despite their superiority, could not compete with it for popularity.

In the early 1920's, though, people were not only interested in new work by Cabell, they were also anxious to read his largely ignored early work in hopes that it would contain the same risque language as Jurgen. Critics were also tempted to compare Cabell's previous

and subsequent work to Jurgen, a comparison that scholars and steadfast Cabell admirers claimed to be completely out of focus. Ernest Boyd, in an essay written for A Round Table in Poictesme: A Symposium, explains the problem with such a comparison saying, "[Jurgen] was that book which, for a variety of reasons not altogether literary, made James Branch Cabell famous, and those who then discovered him naturally looked in his previous and subsequent writings for those elements which pleased them in Jurgen"(Boyd 21). Boyd suggests that the only fair way to judge an author's work is to follow that work as it develops chronologically. By doing this one is able to identify a maturing style and to justify his preferences in "reference to [the author's] general evolution. So far as Cabell is concerned that was rendered difficult by the great notoriety of one book, which threw his entire achievement out of perspective" (Boyd 22). This is markedly clear when one examines the critical and public reception of The High Place (1923), published four years after Jurgen, and of The Cream of the Jest (1917), published two years prior. Both of these novels are similar in content to Jurgen and were therefore easy targets for comparison. Although many

people claimed they were better books than Jurgen, neither of them recieved any more public recognition than a few book reviews by insignificant critics, or perhaps some mention in a short book about Cabell written by one of the members of the mutual admiration society to which he and many prominent writers of his day belonged.

Joe Lee Davis writes that Cabell was definitely pleased with the attention Jurgen received, but that he was "irked by the complaints of reviewers that each work of fiction he wrote after Jurgen was either too much like it or fell too short of it, [and] he suspected that what eminence he had won was largely due to his notoriety as a 'sexy' writer whose shock was at once muffled and intensified by double-entendre, innuendo, anagram, and allegory" (Davis 2). Because Cabell suspected this to be the cause of Jurgen's success, in an attempt to increase sales, he included some of the racy language in parts of a few of his later works, but the effect was not the same, and those books met with only nominal success.

Cabell was acutely aware of the effect Jurgen had on his career, and at first he enjoyed his celebrity status. Fame and popularity are always a measure for success, but as time passed it became evident that Jurgen would not be

the stepping stone to immortality that Cabell had hoped it would be but, because of the unconventional circumstances of its public popularity, would instead be the climax of a career that would stagger along for another thirty years. When asked about Jurgen by an acquaintance in 1952, Cabell replied, "Jurgen is more than thirty years old, and so should be able to take care of himself.... At any rate, in common with the reading public at large, I have not thought about Jurgen for a long while" (Quiet Please xiii). He knew that the reading public at large had not only forgotten Jurgen, but it had also forgotten him.

While it may be true that Jurgen was no longer a popular novel in the 1950's, the fact remains that, even today, when James Branch Cabell is mentioned in literary circles it is usually in connection with Jurgen rather than any of his other novels. This fact was difficult for Cabell to accept because he and many of his colleagues believed his later work to be among his best. These later novels showed a new, softer and more mature side of Cabell. As the bitterness of his lost fame began to creep away he was able to write favorably about his long but ending career.

> I have endeavored vaingloriously to depict myself as being all that which I ought to be - in my present day lack of acclaim, I mean - as being a disgruntled and embittered person, a cantankerous babbler, an enraged, forever sneering, obscene egoist, and a self-conscious failure well sunk in age and ability....
>
> The great trouble, though,...has been that I, in brief, have enjoyed living. And still enjoy it... (Quiet Please, xxxv).

While these were some of the last words Cabell offered on the matters of çJurgenü and his declining popularity, that did not keep his many admirers from continuing the Cabell crusade. Referring to Cabell's later works, Joe Lee Davis observes, "The considerable body of writing Cabell did after the 'Biography'* also has a complexity of its own. The mind and art of the early work persist in it as diversely in touch as ever with the human and aesthetic past and present, but Cabell

*The Storisende Edition of the Works of James Branch Cabell, a 16-volume revision of his work tracing the lineage of Manuel the Redeemer, Jurgen's ancestor.

was willing to risk new soundings and directions to the very end" (Davis 147).

This sort of risk taking may have been the ultimate reason for the untimely decline of his career. If Cabell had continued to write novel after novel in the same mode as Jurgen, he might have remained at the top of the best seller list for decades. However, since he was not content to continue reproducing the same book, his audience could not depend on him to write what they wanted or expected to read.

The trilogy "The Nightmare Has Triplets," which consists of Smirt, Smith, and Smire, completed in 1937, was not an overwhelming success. Critics judged it irrelevent, finding Cabell's work lacking in substance and his manner offensive, and the reading public did not take to the nonsensical world he had created in these novels. Later readers and critics, however, have referred to the trilogy as "Cabell's Finnegans Wake" (Davis 132), high praise indeed from a literary society that has all but canonized James Joyce. Davis, one of Cabell's most ardent admirers admits, however, that there are good reasons why "The Nightmare Has Triplets" did not have the impact of Finnegans Wake. He writes:

> Joyce is writing in a difficult, experimental, nonsense language appropriate to his theme; Cabell's is a nonsense world, but his language offers few difficulties. His prose has an ease, flow, bounce, and clarity that make for rapid reading and quick communication of even his dizziest fancies....Cabell has contrived a breezy, episodic, duffelbaggish, mock-Freudian travesty well suited to his economist practice of salvaging pieces from his workshop (Davis 134).

In other words, the trilogy fell short of a lifetime masterpiece because it was too easy. Theoretically, a project of this magnitude could have achieved immortality, but it lacked the intricacy and innovation it needed to rekindle Cabell's spark in American literature.

While Fred T. Marsh of the New York Times and novelist Vardis Fisher were actively promoting and defending Cabell to the public, the critics were not kind. T.S. Matthews wrote in his review of Smirt in the New Republic that "Mr. Cabell is a snob, and an American snob is almost a traitor to his country" (Flora 67). George Stevens wrote for the Saturday Review of

Literature that "The principal new development revealed in 'Smirt' is the abandonment of the sexual symbolism of 'Jurgen' in favor of a more direct terminology...we can only determine that Branch Cabell is plagiarizing from James Branch Cabell" (Flora 67). Again, almost twenty years after Jurgen, the comparisons were still coming forth. By the time Smire (1937) was published, even Marsh could not defend it. He claimed that, although it was good, too much of a good thing is bad, and he thought the trilogy to be too much, saying the "urbanity was a little thin at times and the irony was a little shrill" (Marsh, "Branch Cabell Closes a Trilogy"). Marsh did not give up on Cabell, though, and he was again full of praise when he reviewed The First Gentleman of America (1942) which he thought to be one of Cabell's very best works. According to Joseph M. Flora, "Marsh probably did more than any of Cabell's reviewers to encourage serious and ongoing attention for Cabell. He seemed willing to read the work before him and not to go endlessly searching for another Jurgen" (Flora 68).

In one of his later novels, Ladies and Gentlemen (1934), Cabell actually uses the suppression of Jurgen in the opening of the book. The reasons for doing this

appear to be purely nostalgic, but one wonders if he was not trying to get just a little more mileage out of Jurgen. Cabell may not have liked where his popularity vested itself, but he was also a pragmatist who knew what would sell his books. He writes of the suppression of a fictional book within Ladies and Gentlemen saying, "Even at the time, the illogic of this seemed amusing. The upshot, at all events, was a collapse of the pious fraud, in due course, with no more harmful results than to advertise this particular book at the expense of its fellows, and handsomely to increase its sales..." (Ladies and Gentlemen 9) Perhaps he was trying to remind the public of who he was, but whatever his motive, the passage, full of pure Cabellian wit and satire, demonstrates that, while critics like Stevens and Matthews had written him off, his talent showed no indication of waning.

* Louis D. Rubin, Jr. has noted in his essay entitled "A Virginian in Poictesme" how the centennial of the birth of James Branch Cabell was all but ignored in his hometown. By 1979 Cabell was not thought of as anything more than "a phenomenon of the exotic cultural climate of

the 1920's" (Rubin 2) in Richmond and most other places. Cabell's popularity was never what he would have liked it to be in Richmond, however, and this was something that always disturbed him. Probably because of the local scandals that occurred in his younger days, Richmonders were not fans of Cabell and did not buy his books. Although he claimed to be perfectly content in his declining years with the outcome of his life, his writing still betrayed that old bitterness that he could not completely let go of. He wrote in 1952, that his books were never "spoken of in the same breath as were the ingenious Mr. So-and-So and the scholarly Dr. Somebody-or-Other....whensoever their ever-living genius was acclaimed by the exigious yet exigent 'reading public' of Virginia" (Quiet Please 12-13). Cabell resented the attitude of Virginians toward his work and, although he condemned them for not knowing good work when they saw it, Rubin maintains that "he would have preferred a little more local renown than was his fate" (Rubin 3) even from such a cultural vacuum as Richmond.

CHAPTER FOUR

Cabell's Jurgen must be considered as both the ultimate fulfillment of an extensive career and the ultimate paradox. It is the only one of Cabell's novels to obtain worldwide recognition, an achievement which in itself was fulfilling, but was only the first step the author wanted the novel to take. Cabell and his colleagues believed "that order and beauty can be promoted by good writing. They [had], as writers of the present era have not, a belief in style. They [were] confident that good writing is possible, that a personal style can be achieved--in short, that there is salvation for literate mankind" (Letters 290). In order to achieve this effect on the world through writing, however, a writer must enjoy a wide readership and this was the obvious goal of James Branch Cabell, the goal he achieved only once with Jurgen. The fulfillment of Jurgen's success, however, began to fade when the beauty and order of the novel were ignored by most and the novel as a whole was considered pornographic by others. Very few critics praised the novel solely for its workmanship.

The paradox, of course, lies in the fact that Jurgen, the ultimate fulfillment of the dream of great success, was to be the reason for continual frustration later in Cabell's career. Had there never been a Jurgen, he would not have had to battle against a reading public who condemned him for not reproducing it. However, if Cabell had never written Jurgen in the manner in which he did, then he might never have had any of the poplularity he enjoyed for the few years Jurgen occupied the minds of literary America. It is without question that Cabell posessed extraordinary literary talent, but that talent might never have been recognized by anyone other than his immediate colleagues had it not been for this novel which both catapulted and paralyzed his career.

The question of whether or not Jurgen is actually fulfillment or paradox is one that could be argued as long as the question about the chicken and the egg. A more relevant question now, more than thirty years after his death, is whether or not James Branch Cabell has been rendered completely obsolete by the passing of time. There are still those scholars who feel that Cabell had something to contribute to American literature and that he should not be passed over by today's students.

However, lamentably, the universal themes of romance and adventure and the eloquent satire which should make his work ageless and timeless have been forgotten, and Cabell has been left to lie quietly in anonymity among the masses of second-rate early twentieth-century writers.

The few people left who do think Cabell still deserves recognition, however, are stalwart in their persistence. Rubin writes optimistically that "Cabell's work, however select its circle of admirers, remains entirely alive. Very likely it will be read (assuming certain things about national, cultural, and linguistic survival that cannot be certified one way or the other) a hundred years hence as well" (Rubin 4). Davis, however, who does his share to keep Cabell alive, is not as optimistic as Rubin, and he offers several reasons for the decline of Cabell's popularity with the critics:

> The neo-humanists...disliked his aestheticism and his lubricity. The Marxists...damned him as an escapist, a reactionary, and a downright fraud...
>
> Southern 'new critics', although reviving the aesthetic judgement,...[were] cool toward Cabell's peculiar blend of neoclassical satire,

> romantic irony, and the kind of "modernism" associated with Shaw and Mencken. As for the "newer" or "myth critics," who ought to take an interest in a writer as concerned with myth as Cabell was from the outset, he has failed to draw them (Davis 2).

Davis offers these reasons, but then he condemns the critics for being short-sighted. He says that Cabell, himself, created his own downfall by identifying himself too closely with both the 1920's and the conservative ideals of Richmond, Virgina, but that such "conditioning influences need not lead to prejudgment of his total achievement before it has been systematically explored with all the points of view that are at one's critical command and that appear feasible in light of the texts" (Davis 3).

Writers and critics have offered scores of reasons for Cabell's decline, but the one constant is that Jurgen was the novel that threw his career out of perspective. While other factors certainly played a role in his decline, Jurgen kept Cabell from being able to progress at a normal rate and to grow increasingly more popular with time. Studying Cabell's career without studying

Jurgen gives the researcher a much truer perspective on its progression. Each novel was slightly more mature in style and content than the one before it, and they all contained Cabell's special blend of wit and satire. The Cream of the Jest (1917) and The High Place (1923) both received some well-deserved critical acclaim, but since they were released just before and just after Jurgen they were all but ignored by the public. Lloyd Morris was one of the few critics who did not find The High Place worthy of praise, but he still could not criticize the novel without referring to Jurgen. He wrote, in his review of the novel for the New York Herald Tribune Book Review in December 1923, that "In spite of qualities of wit and irony, 'The High Place' ultimately cloys. While reading it, one longs to "take a breath of fresh air and look at life...." Also, Cabell's "decorative obscenity is objectionable" (Lloyd, "Mr. Cabell Portrays an Ancestor of Jurgen"). J.B. Priestly wrote a more favorable review of The Cream of the Jest, but even though his review was positive it said little about the novel itself and instead compared it to Jurgen, calling it "a much better book than Jurgen" (Priestly, Review of The Cream of the Jest). Mencken would have disagreed

strongly with such a comparison of the two novels. He wrote of the protagonist of The Cream of the Jest, "Felix Kennaston, in The Eagle's Shadow and in The Cream of the Jest, is a Virginia gentleman of our own glorious day, and hence removed by infinitudes from Jurgen, Manuel and Florian, and the Dark Ages that they infested" (Mencken, 21). Mencken could, however, see certain similarities among the characters, calling them all "Cabellian Man."

Cabell continued to strive for excellence throughout his very long career. He did not let the public or the critics deter him from the task at hand. Writing books was his profession and in that profession he learned to accept or reject the opinions of the critics whatever they happened to be. He was not, however, above giving a little back to them when it suited his fancy. In Ladies and Gentlemen he writes:

> ...the American writer during the last thirty-three years, has been permitted,...to do the very best of which he was capable. And if-just now and then-that best happened, after all, not to be in every one of its features an earth-staggering masterpiece, this outcome may well have been...not so much the fault of

> America's cultural crassness as of its writer's failure to start life as a genius of the first order. Occasionally babies forget to do that (Ladies and Gentlemen 9).

Davis asks the question of Cabell's works, "How fraught are they with permanent human significance?" (Davis 147). Although it is tempting to say that they are full of permanent human significance, the true answer is that only time will tell. One thing is certain and that is that James Branch Cabell's art is very complex and should not be the victim of "pat" categorization. Davis warns, "The carpers who have imputed to him nothing more than an unduly prolonged and fecund preoccupation with flight, frippery, and fornication should forever hold their peace" (Davis 147). The Cabell question still exists and the answer is yet to come.

"And Jurgen waited....."

Elizabeth Whitham Loving, a native Virginian, completed her undergraduate studies at the University of Virginia in 1985. She was employed in the Richmond area for four years before entering the master's program at the University of Richmond in 1989. Upon completion of this program, she plans to pursue a career in the teaching field.

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