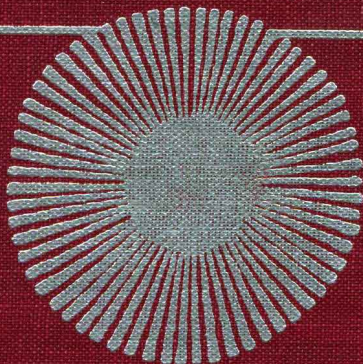

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TWENTIETH-
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AMERICAN LITERATURE

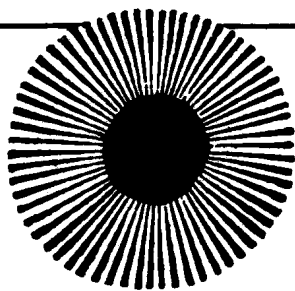
Volume 2

C-E

HAROLD BLOOM

General Editor

The
CHELSEA HOUSE LIBRARY
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**TWENTIETH-CENTURY
AMERICAN LITERATURE**

Volume 2

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HAROLD BLOOM

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ABBREVIATIONS

AA	AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGIST	Nwk	NEWSWEEK
AL	AMERICAN LITERATURE	NY	NEW YORKER
AM	AMERICAN MERCURY	NYHT	NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE BOOKS
AnR	ANTIOCH REVIEW	NYRB	NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS
APR	AMERICAN POETRY REVIEW	NYT	NEW YORK TIMES
At	ATLANTIC MONTHLY	NYTBR	NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW
B&B	BOOKS & BOOKMEN	NYTM	NEW YORK TIMES MAGAZINE
BF	BOOK FORUM	Parn	PARNASSUS: POETRY IN REVIEW
Bkm	BOOKMAN (NEW YORK)	PKDSN	PHILIP K. DICK SOCIETY NEWSLETTER
CE	COLLEGE ENGLISH	PLL	PAPERS ON LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE
CL	CANADIAN LITERATURE	PR	PARTISAN REVIEW
Cmty	COMMENTARY	PSch	PRAIRIE SCHOONER
CoL	CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE	QQ	QUEEN'S QUARTERLY
Com	COMMONWEAL	RS	ROLLING STONE
Cosm	COSMOPOLITAN	SAQ	SOUTH ATLANTIC QUARTERLY
CP	CONCERNING POETRY	SEP	SATURDAY EVENING POST
CR	CHICAGO REVIEW	SFC	SF COMMENTARY
CrC	CRYPT OF CTHULHU	SFS	SCIENCE-FICTION STUDIES
Crt	CRITIQUE	SLJ	SOUTHERN LITERARY JOURNAL
CW	CATHOLIC WORLD	SM	STUDIA MYSTICA
EJ	ENGLISH JOURNAL	SOM	SOME OTHER MAGAZINE
Enc	ENCOUNTER	SoR	SOUTHERN REVIEW
Extrp	EXTRAPOLATION	Spec	SPECTATOR
Fndtn	FOUNDATION	SR	SATURDAY REVIEW
GR	GEORGIA REVIEW	STL	SUNDAY TIMES (LONDON)
HdR	HUDSON REVIEW	SwR	SEWANEE REVIEW
Hum	HUMANIST	SWR	SOUTHWEST REVIEW
Intzn	INTERZONE	TLS	TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT
KR	KENYON REVIEW	TR	TAMARACK REVIEW
LFQ	LITERATURE/FILM QUARTERLY	TSLL	TEXAS STUDIES IN LITERATURE AND LANGUAGE
LitM	THE LITTLE MAGAZINE	TZ	TWILIGHT ZONE
LJ	LIBRARY JOURNAL	VLS	VOICE LITERARY SUPPLEMENT
LoR	LONDON REVIEW	VQR	VIRGINIA QUARTERLY REVIEW
LT	LISTENER	WAL	WESTERN AMERICAN LITERATURE
MFS	MODERN FICTION STUDIES	WPBW	WASHINGTON POST BOOK WORLD
MR	MASSACHUSETTS REVIEW	WR	WESTERN REVIEW
NA	NATION AND ATHENAEUM	WS	WESTERN SPEECH
NaR	NATIONAL REVIEW	WSCL	WISCONSIN STUDIES IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE (later CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE)
NAR	NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW	YR	YALE REVIEW
NL	NEW LEADER		
NR	NEW REPUBLIC		
NS	NEW STATESMAN		

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JAMES BRANCH CABELL

1879–1958

James Branch Cabell was born in Richmond, Virginia, on April 14, 1879, to an old and distinguished Virginia family. He attended The College of William and Mary from 1894 to 1898, teaching Greek and French there while still an undergraduate. After graduating he spent several years as a newspaper reporter in New York and Richmond, then a decade as a genealogical researcher in England. While there he wrote *The Eagle's Shadow* (1904), the first of more than forty books.

Cabell returned to the United States in 1911, and dismayed his family by working in a West Virginia coal mine for two years. In 1913 he married Rebecca Priscilla Bradley Shepherd, a widow with five children; and began his eighteen-volume series, *The Biography of the Life of Manuel*, a racy phantasmagoria set largely in the imaginary country of Poictesme. Cabell labored in obscurity until *Jurgen* (1920) was seized by the New York Society for the Prevention of Vice. The ensuing obscenity trial, which resulted in an acquittal, made Cabell a celebrity.

During the 1920's Cabell ran something of a literary salon in his Richmond home, playing host to H. L. Mencken and other luminaries. He wrote several volumes of poetry, as well as a play, *The Jewel Merchants* (1921), while continuing to produce novels at a prolific rate. In his spare time, he researched genealogies for the Virginia aristocracy, and from 1932 to 1935 was co-editor of the *American Spectator*. By then his star had begun to fade, a reaction to the extravagance with which he had been praised.

After completing the *Biography*, Cabell dropped his first name, writing briefly as "Branch Cabell." He was at work on one of five subsequent trilogies in 1949 when his wife died; he married Margaret Freeman the following year. His autobiography, *As I Remember It*, appeared in 1955. James Branch Cabell died in Richmond on May 5, 1958. He had one child by his first marriage.

Personal

Cary and I spent the month of May at the Colonial Inn, beside the old Courthouse and the Courthouse green, which was golden with buttercups. Staying with us at the Inn were several famous gossips of the "best families," and every evening the news of the day would be imparted to us in the shelter of the Inn's "private parlor." For, strangely, I, who so seldom happen anywhere, from the world to a literary party, at the exact right moment, had arrived when the ancient sleepy village of Williamsburg was involved in what it would have called a turmoil, and the distinguished College of William and Mary was split in two by the first scandal in its history. Moreover, to make matters worse, the scandal was of that peculiar nature which, in the nineteenth century, before Oscar Wilde and our recent postwar fiction had made it a household word, relied entirely upon innuendo and parenthesis for distribution.

What had happened, as I gathered, however inaccurately, from the cheerful gossips, was simply this. The leading middle-aged intellectual of the village, or so I was told, had exercised a pernicious influence over some of the students, and the faculty of the College, uniting with certain people of importance, had banished him forever from Williamsburg. But, instead of stopping here, they had attempted to root out and exterminate every trace of the scandal, and condemned, without proper investigation, every student who had even a literary association with the supreme offender. A number of students, and a number may include any figure, would be dismissed from the College because they had been seen in unfavorable company. Among them—I am relating merely what I was told—was the most brilliant youth in the student body. His name was James Branch Cabell, and he was to receive his diploma in the spring. Hearing this, his mother had come from Richmond with an attorney, and in the end the College had been obliged to withdraw its charges. Mrs. Cabell, who had been a beauty in her youth, was now staying at the Inn, and the attorney, after a

triumphant dismissal of the case, had left town a few hours before I arrived. But there was not a shred of evidence to connect James in any way with the scandal, or with the Author of Evil. There was, indeed, not anything more compromising than a shared preference for *belles-lettres*.

... More from shyness than from intellectual exclusiveness, James was drawn into a small circle; yet he had not been intimate enough with this circle to have it tighten in his defense. For weeks before the Commencement, he lived utterly alone in his College center, and the acquaintances he passed in the street had fallen into an abstracted habit of sky-gazing. In those weeks my sister and I longed to approach him, but we were doubtful whether he would wish to be spoken to by persons he did not remember. Every afternoon he would sit, alone, on the porch of a tavern across the street, while Cary and I were reading on the porch of the Inn. Then, at last, one afternoon we did walk across the green to the tavern porch, and I recall still how grave, inscrutable and disdainful he appeared, while groups of students and citizens of the town passed by in the street. He had, even then, that air of legendary remoteness, as if he lived in a perpetual escape from actuality. I was young enough to feel that he was a romantic figure, innocent but persecuted, and I admired his aristocratic detachment, the fine, thin modeling of his features, and the enigmatic quality of his expression. There was, too, even a flash of envy in my heart as I watched him. What was an unjust passing scandal compared to the permanent burden of deafness? Silly people might avoid him, but at least he did not have to wear out his nerves pretending that he heard all they were saying.

When we called to him, he rose and came down to the street, and we stood talking about trivial matters. The words in our minds were never spoken; but that was the moment, I think, when our lifelong friendship began. . . .

Surely one of the peculiar habits of circumstances is the way they follow, in their eternal recurrence, a single course. If an event happens once in a life, it may be depended upon to

repeat later its general design. A misadventure in love will be constantly renewed, not in subtle variations, but in a similar pattern. A heart once broken appears to be forever looking for trouble of the same nature. And so, though James was leading a blameless life, absorbed in work, he was selected to become, yet again, a victim of gossip. But the world has always disliked its victims who suffer in a proud silence. Vocal martyrs have been longest remembered in history. It may have been James's unlikeness to others that exasperated the furies, or it may have been his inviolable restraint. Or, again, it may have been the slow vengeance life reserves for those who refuse to surrender their innermost sanctuaries. . . .

As the years went by, I heard that he was interested in the legends of chivalry and of genealogy. Then, presently, I heard of other interests which were quite as legendary, though less literary, in character. "I have even been credited with murder, but I was not the philanthropist who committed it," James wrote, to my unending delight, in *Special Delivery*. For a man was killed, on a dark night, in Richmond, and, for no better reason than close kinship, and the finding of the body on the pavement in front of the Cabells' house, James was promptly, though secretly, "credited with murder." The news was whispered to me, one morning in the autumn of 1901, or so I recall, and I scoffed, in reply, "Why, that is ridiculous!"

"I know. He wouldn't hurt a moth," my informant rejoined, with true Southern logic, "and, anyway, nobody blames him." For, among the best families, there was a generous code relating to justifiable homicide. "They say the man was leading a most immoral life, and, besides, he was James's cousin. I hear the family are trying to hush it up. I don't mean James's family. I suppose they haven't heard that he is suspected."

For some weeks there was vehement public excitement. A Pinkerton detective, I was told, came down from New York; and then abruptly, in the midst of the gossip, silence smothered the mystery while it was still unsolved. Nobody blamed James, though most people believed he had been the private avenger of public morality. At last, however, the truth was reluctantly divulged, and for the second time, it was proved, James had been used as a vicarious sacrifice. It was revealed that the erring cousin had been struck down, in front of the Cabells' house, by the brother of a country girl who had been seduced. Morality was avenged, for it was generally thought that the family of the seducer had benevolently aided the slayer to escape.

But this was divulged, accurately or inaccurately, years later, and during all those years James was living as a hermit, burning his kerosene lamp in patience, and sleeping in his third-story room until sunset. When, presently, he married the woman who was designed to be his wife, his manner of living changed abruptly; and, at last, after long failure, with the fortunate suppression of *Jurgen*, he was elevated to a prominent, if insecure, seat among the indecorous literary gods of the postwar decade.

When Hugh Walpole made his first visit to America, before too much prosperity had changed disarming youth into pompous middle age, I asked James to go with us on a picnic, to Williamsburg. He had not been to the College of William and Mary since the day he received his diploma, and he was greeted, with enthusiasm, as the long-missing heir of the College.

That was a day to remember, and, just for this once, James dropped his pose of detachment, and appeared only very moderately histrionic. We laughed and talked, and unpacked our lunch basket under the crumbling, ivy-covered wall of an old graveyard. . . . —ELLEN GLASGOW, "James Branch Cabell," *The Woman Within*, 1954, pp. 130–36

General

Nor is it easy to resist the temptation to say, at the outset, that Mr. Cabell is already a classic if any American novelist of this century is. The shifts of taste from age to age may now depress and now exalt the credit of the famous *Jurgen*, but so have they done during the past five generations with *Tristram Shandy*, another masterpiece frequently baited by the sort of censor who dreads wit unless it picks its topics with caution. Both by its wit and by its beauty, *Jurgen* is entitled to survive. Moreover, it is far from being its author's only claim to eminence. Certain of his admirers debate among themselves whether *Figures of Earth* is not profounder than *Jurgen*, or *The High Place* more artfully narrated, or *Domnei* lovelier. *Chivalry* was a particular favorite of Mark Twain, who kept it at his bedside. And these are but five of the fifteen Cabell books which stand closely linked together in the careful scheme according to which they are all arranged. Even though, as is inevitable, two or three of them will outlive the others, the entire fifteen must be taken into account.

There they stand, graceful and compact, devoted to the record of beautiful happenings in a language which never falls below a high level of perfection. They deal with a world which at first may seem extraordinarily remote from the concerns of most recent fiction. That world, however, the invented medieval province of Poictesme, speedily grows familiar to any imagination which ventures into it without undue prejudice, for it has its own logic, as well as its own history and geography. Human life is there as vain a thing as in Ecclesiastes, but it abounds in the dramas of aspiration and desire by which the thread of existence is carried on. Only through the gate of irony, indeed, may this imagined universe be entered. Solemn souls will miss the gate and fumble along an impenetrable wall. But less solemn spirits, passing blithely through the gate, find one of the most exquisite worlds in fiction. It is full of magnificent adventures, high speeches, chivalrous and gallant personages. The landscapes are of agreeable proportions, with smooth lawns and fragrant orchards, with forests and mountains ripe with color. The costumes and the interiors are scrupulously considered, that they may all be beautiful, or at least significant. The cross roads of history meet in this world, and space no less than time comes to a focus there. Yet nothing tawdry or sprawling has been admitted. All is order and art. While there is plenty of satire, it rarely concerns itself with temporary matters. There is learning, but it lays no serious burden upon the stories; there are opinions, but they waste little time in wrangling over controverted issues. Whoever reads these books and comprehends the scheme which now binds them into unity, will feel that Mr. Cabell, like another Adam, has found his Eden, has dressed and tended it, has populated and civilized it, and has made it the home of valor and beauty and wit.—CARL VAN DOREN, "Cabell Minor," *James Branch Cabell*, 1925, pp. 4–6

Nearly everything that can be said against Mr. Cabell's work has been said consummately—by Mr. Cabell. Madoc's songs are described by the best-thought-of connoisseurs as "essentially hollow and deficient in . . . red blood." Miramon's personal taste in art is said to favor "the richly romantic sweetened with nonsense and spiced with the tabooed." Bulmer tells Townsend that he is sadly passé: "That pose is of the Beardsley period and went out many magazines ago." Of Horvendile it is said that "he very irritatingly poses as a superior person, that he is labored beyond endurance, that he smells of the lamp, that his art is dull and tarnished and trivial and intolerable."

Moreover, Cabell is repetitive. Again and again, he gives us two basic situations: "the encounter of two persons between whom love has existed, and who speak together, as they believe, for the last occasion in their lives," and the meeting with a former self. Jurgen's standing "face to face with all that Jurgen had been and was not any longer" was the one adventure which his biographer "lacked heart to tell of."

That Mr. Cabell's virtues are those of a spontaneous, youthful exuberance it would be foolish to claim. His is a matured, celebrated romanticism. He has combined all known mythologies and invented his own; unless you have a specialist's knowledge of the field, you will never know how much is scholarship and how much invention; neither can you be sure whether a queer-looking name is an anagram which you must solve to get the point of the episode in which it figures—whether, indeed, the whole episode has a profound inner meaning, or whether the surface beauty (or, as the case may be, the surface hilarity) is supposed to be enough. At its best, Cabell's syncretism is capable of the superbly imaginative roll call of the poets in *Something about Eve* and of the later, more elaborate portrayal of Nero, Villon, Tannhäuser, and others, later in the same book. On the other hand, it may produce nothing better than the pseudo-bibliography at the end of *Domnei*.

A more serious criticism is suggested by Charteris when he declares that *Beyond Life* is "an apology for romance by a man who believes that romance is dead beyond resurrection." Of Alfgar in *The Way of Ecken* it is remarked that "This man attempts to preserve the sentiments of Ecken without any of the belief which begot them. This man yet kneels before an altar which his own folly has dishonored, and he yet clings to that god in whom he retains no faith."

Mr. Mencken catches a glimpse of the difficulty here when he remarks of *The High Place* that romance seems to have come to flower in a bloom that poisoned itself. And Howard Pyle, who was a great man in his way, saw the same thing much more clearly, from another angle, when, in 1907, he dealt young Cabell's career a body blow by refusing to illustrate any more of his stories for *Harper's Magazine* on the ground that they were "neither exactly true to history nor exactly fanciful."

Mr. Cabell's is a highly complex temperament, and his gallantry has often got in the way of his chivalry. But basically he accepts the universe (though with many grimaces), and there has never been any serious doubt where his heart lies. Like Jurgen, he lacks "the requisite credulity to become a free-thinking materialist." A child of the Golden Age might well feel that he is hostile to romance or even that he is irreligious. We, surely, ought to know better. And the service he performed for imaginative literature, and for faith itself, when he carried their banners, at a slightly cocky angle, through the Dark Night of the materialistic, complacent, self-satisfied 'twenties, has never received anything like the recognition it deserves.

As for the ups and downs of Cabell's reputation, it is fortunate that literary questions are not settled by majorities. There are more good books dead than alive, and the only reason why we do not know what song the sirens sang is that nobody cared enough about it to write it down.

The sirens' songs are forgotten already, and Poictesme may in time join the lost Atlantis. But, for a little while yet, I think that it may provide a number of us with a welcome refuge from the Brave New World. Though there may be much, first and last, for which we have to forgive James Branch Cabell, he is still a unique and incomparable figure in American literature. As long as one copy of his books survives in the

world, he will remind us that the wind bloweth where it listeth, that the artist is not subject to regimentation. He will never be the voice of a "party" or of a "movement"; he will never speak for anything smaller or more limited than the human spirit itself.—EDWARD WAGENKNECHT, "James Branch Cabell: The Anatomy of Romanticism," *Cavalcade of the American Novel*, 1952, pp. 349–53

I do not know how many people will feel a special sense of loss at the death of James Branch Cabell. His old friends and admirers certainly will, but since the twenties he seems to have had few new readers. I myself rather scorned him in the twenties and came to be interested in him only much later. I published two years ago a long article about his work, so I shall not go over that ground again. But I may add that, since writing that article, the more I have thought about *Figures of Earth*—and its sequel *The Silver Stallion*—the more remarkable they have come to seem. Looking back, one can now understand the abrupt fluctuations of Cabell's fame. He began, in the early nineteen hundreds, as a writer of romantic short stories for the respectable magazines, but he put into them a tinge of irony which prevented them from being popular. He then gradually developed an ironic vein which gets its first clear and bold statement in *Jurgen*, published on the eve of the twenties, when its criticism of old-fashioned religion and nineteenth-century morality made it particularly welcome to the young. The book was gay as well as naughty, and the reader found it exhilarating to identify himself with the hero. But when *Jurgen* was followed by *Manuel*, this public was disappointed. It was not prepared for anything at once so bitter and with so little apparent bearing on contemporary life. Published when Cabell was forty-two, the chronicle of Manuel the Redeemer was not a book for the young nor was it a book in the mood of the twenties. The story of the ambitious man of action who is cowardly, malignant and treacherous and who does not even enjoy very much what his crimes and double-dealing have won him, but who is rapidly, after his death, transformed into a great leader, a public benefactor and a saint, has the fatal disadvantage for a novel that the reader finds no inducement to identify himself with its central figure. Yet I am now not sure that this merciless chronicle in which all the values are negative save the naked human will, is not one of the best things of its kind in literature—on a plane, perhaps, with Flaubert and Swift.

The theme in Cabell's writings which I have always found it most difficult to sympathize with is that of his persistent nostalgia for the ideal beautiful women of his adolescent imaginings. Yet this has its historical interest as a survival of the romantic and chivalrous dream that so dominated the Southern mind. The whole philosophy of Cabell, in fact, of the dream's being preferable to reality, is deeply involved with the history of the South. And his bitterness is the bitterness of the South at having had this dream proved a fiction, and then somehow having had still to live on it. The dignity of his life and work was also the dignity of the South in continuing to maintain its attitude. His career commands special respect by reason of the courage and consistency with which he pursued his course. In a period particularly unfavorable for any high standard of excellence, he developed a style that was sure to annoy, a point of view that was sure to outrage the readers of his own generation; then later, when his vogue with the young had lapsed, he continued for decades producing books that not only made no bid to recapture his audience but, becoming, as it were, more and more solipsistic, were calculated to discourage his publishers. I imagine that his steadfastness and self-respect will be more conspicuous to the future—in the history of our

literature, which exhibits so many examples of acquiescence in mediocrity, of disaster and diversion of purpose—than it has recently been to us. In the meantime, his preciousness, so much out of fashion now, ought not to interfere with the recognition of his skill as a writer; nor the occasional coyness of his ribaldry disguise from us the mordancy of his restless inquiry into the meaning of his own life, the life of the defeated South and the processes of human history.—EDMUND WILSON, "James Branch Cabell: 1879–1958" (1958), *The Bit between My Teeth*, 1965, pp. 322–25

VERNON LOUIS PARRINGTON

From "The Incomparable Mr. Cabell" (1921)

Main Currents of American Thought:

The Beginnings of Critical Realism

in America 1869–1920

1930, pp. 335–42

THE successive volumes of James Branch Cabell have provided the tribe of critical Jeffries with a rich vein of diversion. They have recognized no closed season in their full-lunged pursuit of the strange heirs of Mr. Cabell's invention, and such Homeric absurdities of comment have been flung at him, that he is in a fair way to become our classic example of the fatuousness of contemporary estimates. As whimsical as Bernard Shaw, as provocative as Chesterton, he is more incomprehensible than either to all readers who do not choose to like what they have not always liked. Professing to be a romancer, and defending the glory of romance with inimitable witchery of phrase, he writes no romance that lovers of convention can understand. The lovely fabrics of his tales of Poictesme are all shimmer and sheen, woven of magic and veiling mysteries, instead of the correct taffeta and grosgrain; and the brilliant stuff of his tales of gallantry is fashioned of wit and poetry, instead of the customary wigs and sword play. Those to whom romance suggests *When Knighthood Was in Flower*, will find only obscurities and coarseness in *Figures of Earth* (1921) and *Jurgen* (1919, *enl. ed.* 1921); and those who delight in the stage rufflings of *Monsieur Beaucaire*, will discover only a libertine in *The Cords of Vanity* (1909, *rev. ed.* 1920). And if the reader boggles at such tales what can he hope to make of that strange, ironical whimsy, *The Cream of the Jest* (1917, *rev. ed.* 1922)? One needs to walk warily in dealing with Mr. Cabell, or the jest of which he is such a master will turn sardonically upon the critic. In all his thinking vague hinterlands lie behind the commonplace, cryptic meanings lurk behind the obvious; and the credulous, easy-going reader finds himself puzzled, and at last floundering quite hopelessly in a land of bogs and marsh-lights. And yet was ever another writer born to us Americans so insistent upon being understood? He has elaborated his views of life and art at length, and repeated them in successive volumes over nearly a score of years; and finally in what may have been a mood of sheer disgust at the stupidity of those who buy books, he reëlaborated his philosophy and wrote it out in good set terms within the covers of a single volume. *Beyond Life* is an essay altogether remarkable for its haunting beauty of phrase, its honest agnosticism, its brooding irony. It is enough to turn one cynic to consider that so noble a book should have called forth from a reputable gentleman, presumably of good taste and sound judgment, the comment that it "contains cheap and shallow pessimistic observations on human limitations."

That *Beyond Life* (1919), with other of Mr. Cabell's books,

contains "observations on the limitations of human nature," is quite obvious; for Mr. Cabell deals in comedy, and what is to become of comedy if it shall not observe those limitations and laugh at them? That it is even pessimistic may likewise be argued with some plausibility; but to assert that it is cheap and shallow is preposterous. An inquisitive mind, deeply concerned with ultimate values, cannot be cheap and shallow. And yet the fault of such widespread misinterpretation may lie in part at Mr. Cabell's own doorstep. An inveterate jester, his sallies often carry implications far beyond the obvious; his strange whimsies spring from depths of thought and emotion beyond the understanding of the careless. His attitude towards life is an odd mixture of the modern and the medieval: there is a medieval simplicity and frankness, a naïve wonder at the mystery that underlies the common, an incorrigible idealism; and this medieval attitude is drenched in modern agnosticism. He passes easily from a broad Chaucerian humor that laughs frankly at the relations of men and women, to a mystical idealization of those relations; and the problem of reconciling the humor and the ideal becomes a serious business with him. He hates the cant and dishonesty of our *bourgeois* existence, and he refuses to take seriously the host of petty concerns that most of us are very serious about. If he were less the artist he would join the disaffected and turn to rend this foolish world; but the spirit of comedy saves him and he contents himself with a jest. But the Cabellian jest uncovers depths of meditation that reveal the philosopher and the poet. In his own large meaning of the word Mr. Cabell is an economist. He is greatly dissatisfied with the "futile body-wasting," which under the "dynamic illusion known as common sense" passes for life, and is concerned to discover what abiding increment a man may get from his body during its brief existence as an entity. His mind is haunted with a sense of realities that lie beneath the surface appearances, and that insist on trickling from his pen in strange comments. It is a careless reader who is deceived or put off the scent by his whimsical vocabulary, who insists on conventional meanings for words which Mr. Cabell chooses to use otherwise than conventional persons use them. Romance and realism—words with which he plays constantly and upon which he hangs his philosophy—do not signify the spurious romance of childish minds, or the shoddy realism of practical minds. If one must insist upon translating his vocabulary into ordinary terms, let us understand that to Mr. Cabell romance and realism mean idealism and conventionalism; and to the profound distinction between these two attitudes towards life, he dedicates his work. . . .

It is because he is terrified at the meanness of what practical men call reality, that Mr. Cabell turns away from it to find the true life in dreams. Not only are they pleasanter, they are more useful; they are all that man has to aid him in the appalling task of getting himself out of the slime, that he may walk in green fields. We need to turn Prospero's words around—our dreams are such stuff as we are made on. They alone are real and salutary, for amid all their ramblings they seem dimly to suggest some end; amidst their rank egoisms they seem to foreshadow a purpose: and may not that end and purpose be the eventual creation of a life for man that shall be worthy of his dreams? It is illogical to assume that man can pull himself up by his own bootstraps, but how else shall he pull himself up? Is not man the inveterate romancer somehow blindly creating a noble romance of man? "To what does the whole business tend?" he asks at the conclusion of *Beyond Life*, "—why, how in heaven's name should I know? We can but be content to note that all goes forward, toward something. . . . It may be that we are nocturnal creatures perturbed by

rumors of a dawn which comes inevitably, as prologue to a day wherein we and our children have no part whatever. It may be that when our arboreal propositus descended from his palm tree and began to walk upright about the earth, his progeny were forthwith committed to a journey in which today is only a way-station. Yet I prefer to take it that we are components of an unfinished world, and that we are but as seething atoms which ferment toward its making, if merely because man as he now exists can hardly be the finished product of any Creator whom one could very heartily revere. We are being made into something quite unpredictable, I imagine: and through the purging and the smelting, we are sustained by an instinctive knowledge that we are being made into something better. For this we know, quite incommunicably, and yet as surely as we know that we will have it thus. And it is this will that stirs in us to have the creatures of earth and the affairs of earth, not as they are, but 'as they ought to be,' which we call romance. But when we note how visibly it sways all life we perceive that we are talking about God." . . .

Now of all the dreams which lure men, the one universal and potent dream, Mr. Cabell asserts with Freudian understanding, is the woman dream. Its roots are deep in the ape-animal; it drives men inexorably, for upon it depends the very existence of the race. And therefore, a shrewd mother-nature has somehow transmuted its base materials into the very stuff of romance, commingling with it all high and generous impulses, making of it the loveliest dream that visits man's weak head. In consequence of which ironic transmutation this lovely dream "hoodwinks humanity through the dynamic illusion known as love, in order that humanity may endure, and the groans of a lover be perpetuated in the wails of an infant." Considered in one light this is the very "cream of the jest" that nature perpetrates upon man; but considered in another light, does it not turn out to be the supreme jest which man has perpetrated upon nature? For once he has been taught the alphabet of romance, through the crude necessity of race preservation, he has gone far in his studies, and turned romancer on a great scale. From this raw material of biological sex-love he has woven the fabrics of his religion, of his art, of his idealism; he has dipped it in gleaming dyes, twisted it to quaint patterns, fashioned from it lovely robes to cover what is ugly. It is the wellspring and source of all romance.

Through this open door of woman-worship Mr. Cabell chooses to enter his world of deeper realities. "There is in every human being that which demands communion with something more fine and potent than itself," and this something more fine and potent he seeks in the woman of his dreams. It was so when the world was young, and it will be so as long as there is youth left in the world. In early times this object of adoration was the witch-woman, the Circes and Calypsos of ancient tales; later it became the lady-mistress of chivalric ideals; today it is the dream maiden whom the young man woos but never finds in marriage, and not finding her is impelled to turn to the ever-young and ever-lovely Helens and Ettarres of old romance. A good half of Mr. Cabell's work is given over to this curious celebration of woman-worship. It is elaborated in *Domnei* (1920), in *Jurgen*, in *Figures of Earth*. In the strange tales of the land of Poictesme the drama flows from the balking and thwarting of this woman quest by the Dame Niafers and Dame Lisas of the commonplace world, to man's undoing. Nevertheless "the long, high, fruitless questing does not ever end, but, rather, is temporarily remitted for the society of Dame Niafer and of Dame Lisa. For . . . one perceives that, even in remote Poictesme, those aging nympholepts, Dom Manuel and Jurgen—they also—were heartened to endure the

privileges of happily married persons by a sure faith, discreetly left unvoiced, that these hard-won, fond, wearisome, and implacable wives were, after all, just temporary makeshifts. By and by would Freydis and Helen return, at their own season."—For the dream persists in the very face of present fact, and in this lies man's hope. "In youth all men that live have been converts if but in transitory allegiance, to that religion of the world's youth—to the creed of *domnei*, or woman-worship." Now it is "the very essence of *domnei*, that the woman one loves is providentially set between the lover's apprehension and God, as the mobile and vital image and corporeal reminder of Heaven, as a quick symbol of beauty and holiness, of purity and perfection. In her the lover views all qualities which can be comprehended by merely human faculties." "If but in honor, his heart stays bound to his first and only real love, that woman of whom he never tires. Her coming is not yet. He can but wait, sustained by his sure faith . . . that some day her glory will be apparent, and he will enter gladly into her secret kingdom, and will find her kisses all that in youth he foreknew to be not impossible. . . . And meanwhile this prescience, somehow, informs all art . . . and makes it to him a vital thing. . . . And there seems to be no beauty in the world save those stray hints of her, whose ultimate revelation is not yet. . . . And it is very often through desire to express his faith in this withheld perfection, of which he has been conscious in broken glimpses from afar, that he turns artist. . . . For every art is a confession of faith in that which is not yet."

ARVIN R. WELLS

From "The World-View"

Jesting Moses: A Study in Cabellian Comedy

1962, pp. 10-23

It is precisely in his professed inability to find any moral order—or, in fact, any order at all—in the universe that Cabell breaks with eighteenth century thought and reveals his essential affinities with twentieth century thought. The structure of the universe, Cabell contends, is from a human point of view irrational and therefore incomprehensible. Even if there is some pattern in it, even if the laws which man imagines he finds operating in it are working toward some end, neither the pattern nor the end is knowable. Insofar as man can be aware of the universe, he is aware merely of a gratuitous repetition of the most stupendous pyrotechnics. "All about us flows and gyrates unceasingly the material universe—an endless inconceivable jumble of rotatory blazing gas and frozen spheres and detonating comets, where through spins earth like a frail midge."¹

In this cosmic perspective man's position in the universe appears purely fortuitous and parasitic. He is a scarcely perceptible vortex in the general flux of the life force which seems itself an intruder in the universe, "like a bird striving to nest in a limitless engine, insanely building among moving wheels and cogs and pistons and pulley-belts, whose moving toward their proper and intended purposes inevitably sweeps away each nest before completion."² Moreover, so far as man can discover there is no intelligent force in the universe to which he can appeal, no substantial grounds for his dreams and ideals, all of which are infected with illusion. Even in relation to the life force of which he is a momentary expression, his function seems to be merely that of transmission and perpetuation. This view is implicit in most of Cabell's works and is more or less fully stated in *Beyond Life*. It is important, however, to

remember that Cabell has tried to maintain a consistently skeptical attitude toward all questions of metaphysics and cosmology. He talks in his own person about the role of the artist and about the life and psychology of man in this world, but significantly he rarely discusses metaphysical questions without first assuming a mask. The most explicit statements of the cosmic view are either attributed to the whimsical, disillusioned, and rhetorical John Charteris or projected through the minds of other characters.

Such a view is not unfamiliar even in its detail. It lurks behind, and occasionally becomes explicit in, the writings of Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser, and Robinson Jeffers. It is a vision conjured up out of the fundamental assumptions of philosophical naturalism and colored with the appropriate emotion. It is, in general, the vision of reality with which thinking man in the twentieth century has had to come to terms, and a vision which Cabell apparently shares with the naturalists against whom he fulminates at some length and with whom he has often been contrasted. The Dreiser-Cabell antithesis early became a cliché of literary criticism.

Cabell's quarrel with the naturalists does not, in fact, involve the truth or falsehood of their philosophical assumptions. In *Some of Us* he takes pains to give even Dreiser his due. Though the tone is no doubt patronizing, he does express respect for the integrity of Dreiser's vision.³ However, from Cabell's point of view, philosophical naturalism is probably only one more elaborate fiction among many others. This, of course, does not prevent the naturalistic vision of reality from serving effectively as the background of his thought and feeling. It has behind it the accumulative weight of science and of history; it is pervasive in the intellectual atmosphere of the twentieth century and therefore has first claim upon the minds of those who in the twentieth century turn their attention to the nature of the universe. Cabell's antipathy to literary naturalism, however, is real enough, and it arises out of his concern for the consequences of such a viewpoint: the impoverishment of life through the arbitrary restriction of the play of the imagination. In *The Cream of the Jest* Felix Kennaston discovers that the only truly tragic subject is the wholesale destruction of human dreams,⁴ and a logical corollary of this discovery, which, though Cabell never states it, is implicit in all of his writings, is the belief that for man the worst possible fate would be the loss of his ability to believe in the constructions of his own imagination. Such a loss disturbs the old age of Manuel, and the threat of it pursues most of the other characters, all of whom ultimately evade it by one means or another.

All of this is to say that while Cabell shares some of the underlying assumptions of the naturalists, he declines to accept their conclusions. He declines to consider man either as merely a transmitter of the life force or as merely a social phenomenon. Moreover, while he grants that humanistic values and ideals are not rooted in reality, that they are illusions or fictions, he declines to give them up; he declines to give up the world of the imagination in favor of "a surrender of life" which leads at one extreme to the primitivistic worship of force and at the other to the complacent acceptance of things as they are. . . .

Cabell sought . . . a compromise between idealism and naturalism. The solution which he found allies him with those who, in Joseph Wood Krutch's words, "have argued that the way of salvation lay in a sort of ironic belief, in a determination to act as though one still believed the things that were once held true."⁵ Among those who have argued this way Krutch lists, "Bertrand Russell in his popular essay, 'A Free Man's

Worship,' Unamuno and Santayana, *passim* throughout their works," and of course, he might have added Hans Vaihinger. Within this group Cabell's strongest affinities are with Vaihinger and, particularly, with Santayana. Cabell shares neither the simple stoicism recommended in Russell's essay nor the tragic vision of Unamuno, but the parallels between Cabell's thought and that of Vaihinger and Santayana are surprisingly numerous and fundamental. Vaihinger, Santayana, and Cabell are basically agreed that, "Intellectual morality demands of us that in the sphere of reality we shall not cling to vague possibilities, but shall always prefer the greater probability (i.e. in this case, the assumption that there is no 'life after death,' and in general no divine 'world government,'—no moral world order anywhere)." They agree too that, "It is an error to suppose that an absolute truth, an absolute criterion of knowledge and behavior, can be discovered. The higher aspects of life are based upon noble delusions." They do not, however, for this reason repudiate the higher aspects of life; for them the "value of reality is reversed. . . . The ideal, the unreal is the most valuable."⁶ . . .

The world-view presented (here) is clearly the product of 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. Skepticism, of course, cannot be absolute; even though the skeptic in theory holds everything in question, animal faith persists within him, and consequently, except when engaged in a deliberate act of criticism, the skeptic, like all men, accepts his world as it appears to him, morally and dramatically. Yet, skepticism does nonetheless destroy the power of conscious belief, and while skeptical minds such as those of Cabell, Vaihinger, and Santayana may be aware that men need their ideals and myths (metaphysical and ethical fictions), they cannot themselves know the satisfaction of believing in these ideals and myths. For them there must be some other solution, some way of approaching the world of the ideal other than that opened by irrational belief.

The attitude which Santayana has called modernism is one such approach: "Modernism is an ambiguous and unstable thing. It is the love of all Christianity in those who perceive that it is all a fable. It is the historic attachment to his church of a Catholic who has discovered that he is a pagan."⁷ It is, in other words, a delicate equilibrium wrought by the intellect which allows one simultaneously to perceive that ideals and religious concepts are from a scientific point of view merely fabulous, and yet to value them for their poetic power, that is, their power of evocation and harmonization and their power to make us by anticipation citizens of a better world. . . .

There is, however, another possible approach to the ideal, which is perhaps merely a refinement upon modernism. For Santayana this is the way of the philosopher; for Cabell it is the way of the creative artist in the moment of creation. It involves assuming what Santayana calls a spiritual point of view; that is, assuming an attitude of detachment, "an ironic emancipation from the world and a contempt for it in favor of an 'imaginative play with the non-existent,' a free roaming among whatever essences may swim into the spirit's ken."⁸ This concept closely parallels Cabell's concept of the artist who views life from an abnormal height, who in the moment of creation "is uplift a great way beyond mankind: he regards that lesser race with affability, with divine derision, and with complete understanding, in the while that he embalms, forever, his pick of them in the miraculous spicery of his picked words."⁹ Moreover, the artist, according to Cabell, in the act of creation is engaged in "playing with ideas"; it isn't belief or disbelief in these ideas

which primarily concerns him, but rather their aesthetic possibilities. Thus, his activity is, in Santayana's sense of the word, "spiritual." Cabell argues along with Santayana that the artist in his labors is "irresponsible, technical and visionary," but the upshot of the artist's play is that he seconds the work of the demiurge, and thus, "The human maker of fiction furnishes yet other alcoves, whether with beautiful or shocking ideas, with many fancy-clutching toys that may divert the traveller's mind from dwelling on the tedium of the journey and on the ambiguity of its end."¹⁰ In this way the writer makes it possible for the reader to join him temporarily in the "life of the spirit." . . .

To summarize Cabell's world-view briefly—man is "just a very gullible consciousness existing among inexplicable mysteries."¹¹ Nowhere does he touch permanence or immutability; nowhere does he come into direct contact with reality. But insofar as he can guess, with the aid of his reason and his science, the nature of reality, he finds it uncongenial. He finds himself in a universe devoid of moral or rational order, a universe which gives no support to his idealized concept of himself or of his place in the scheme of things and affords no opportunity for the realization of his dreams and aspirations. The ideal goals which he pursues and the world of moral and aesthetic values in which he believes he lives, all these in the perspective of this half-guessed-at reality, prove to be illusions. These illusions, however, are not entirely free-floating fantasies. They are rooted in animal passion and in animal necessity; they are surreptitiously controlled and utilized by the primitive psyche which persists beneath rationality and which is concerned only with the pursuit of its prey, the avoidance of its enemies, and the continuity and propagation of its own existence.

Thus, man lives perforce in two worlds: an ideal world of

illusion and a real world. He is, however, protected by his dullness, his innate insensitivity, and by his vanity from ever becoming fully aware of his true condition; and he shows a kind of instinctive wisdom in clinging with irrational tenacity to his groundless beliefs. For these at least are necessary to his sanity and at most make it possible for him to live by anticipation in a better world. Though they lead to contradiction and failure, they do temporarily give direction and purpose to life and do bring momentarily to fruition the finest potential of human nature.

For these reasons even the disillusioned skeptic is wise to make a conscious commitment to the myths and illusions of mankind. Above and beyond this it is possible from time to time and for a short while to join the artist in his free play with ideas, to accept the experience which the artist has prepared for us as a means of exploring the aesthetic possibilities of these ideas.

Notes

1. *Beyond Life* (Storisende ed., 1927–30), pp. 38–39.
2. *The Cream of the Jest* (Storisende ed., 1927–30), p. 139.
3. *Some of Us* (New York: McBride, 1930), pp. 84–85.
4. P. 127.
5. *The Modern Temper* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1929), p. 21.
6. *Vaihinger, The Philosophy of "As If,"* tr. C. K. Ogden (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1924), pp. 44, 84, 330.
7. *The Winds of Doctrine* (New York: Scribner's, 1913), p. 49.
8. Milton K. Munitz, *The Moral Philosophy of Santayana* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939), p. vi.
9. *These Restless Heads* (New York: The Literary Guild, 1932), p. 163.
10. Santayana, *Platonism and the Spiritual Life* (New York: Scribner's, 1927), p. 40; Cabell, *Straws and Prayer-Books* (Storisende ed., 1927–30), pp. 26–27, 175–202.
11. *Beyond Life*, p. 267.

JAMES M. CAIN

1892–1977

James Mallahan Cain was born on July 1, 1892, in Annapolis, Maryland. His father was president of Washington College, where Cain earned a B.A. in 1910 and an M.A. in 1917. In between, he served in France during World War I. Cain reported for Baltimore newspapers from 1917 to 1923, then—after a year teaching journalism at St. John's College in Annapolis—wrote editorials for the *New York World* from 1924 to 1931. In each city he gained a mentor who encouraged him to write: H. L. Mencken in Baltimore and Walter Lippmann in New York.

Cain's first book was *Our Government*, a collection of *World* essays published in 1930; the following year he moved to Los Angeles, where he wrote screenplays (including *Algiers*, 1938) and, in 1934, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. This terrifically popular "hard-boiled" novel introduced what were to be Cain's trademarks: terse first-person narration and a tight plot involving sex, money, and violence. The story has been filmed four times, was adapted for the stage by Cain, and most recently has become an opera. Albert Camus credited it as an important influence on his work, notably *The Stranger*.

Once Cain had found his voice, he became a prolific novelist. Books such as *Serenade* (1937), *Mildred Pierce* (1941), *Double Indemnity* (1943), and *The Butterfly* (1947) managed to please both readers and critics. The screen adaptations of Cain's books were the vanguard of a new film genre, *film noir*—a cinematic equivalent to hard-boiled fiction. In the early 1940's, at the height of his popularity, Cain attempted to organize a writers' union, to be called "The American Authors Authority," but the project eventually failed.

Cain moved back to Maryland in 1947 after marrying his fourth wife. He continued to write,

varying his formula to include historical novels such as *Past All Dishonor* (1946), but his fame gradually slipped away. Although the Mystery Writers of America honored him with their Grand Master Award, many of his books went out of print. A revival of interest in Cain's work followed his death in University Park, Maryland, on October 27, 1977.

Personal

Every so often a writer turns up who forces us to revalue our notions of the realistic manner, for, no less than reality itself, it is relative and inconstant, depending on the period, the fashion, the point of view. There is the feeling of realism, of intense realism, in James M. Cain's work, and yet he cannot be compared to such diverse types of realists as Zola, Ibsen, Sandburg, Dreiser, or Hemingway. It is the hard-boiled manner that has been heralded for some time, and is now upon us. It is the manner that James T. Farrell has been attempting in an inadequate way, that Dashiell Hammett has stumbled on, even that Tiffany Thayer has used to his own deplorable ends. But Cain is to be compared to none of these, for where Farrell loses the strands of his story, Cain rushes forward like a hound on a hot scent; where Hammett's people act tough mostly out of boredom, Cain's are toughness itself; and where Thayer achieves his sensationalism by gaudy overstatement, Cain achieves his by the most telling sort of understatement. In short, Cain has developed the hard-boiled manner as a perfect instrument of narration. . . .

Cain is an old newspaper man who learned his reporting well, so well that he makes Hemingway look like a lexicographer and Caldwell like a sob sister at her first eviction. He would be an asset to the tabloids, because he leaves lots of space for pictures. His story (*The Postman Always Rings Twice*) is a third as long as most novels, and its success is due entirely to one quality: Cain can get down to the primary impulses of greed and sex in fewer words than any writer we know of. He has exorcised all the inhibitions; there is a minimum of reason, of complexity, of what we commonly call civilization, between an impulse and its gratification. In the broadest sense he is no asset as yet to American literature, for he adds nothing in breadth, but only in intensity, to our consciousness of life. But we want to see more of his work.—HAROLD STRAUSS, "A Six-Minute Egg," *NYTBR*, Feb. 18, 1934, p. 8

The hero of the typical Cain novel is a good-looking down-and-outer, who leads the life of a vagrant and rogue. He invariably falls under the domination—usually to his ruin—of a vulgar and determined woman from whom he finds it impossible to escape. In the novels of (Horace) McCoy and (Richard) Hallas, he holds our sympathy through his essential innocence; but in the novels of Cain himself, the situation is not so simple. Cain's heroes are capable of extraordinary exploits, but they are always treading the edge of a precipice. They are doomed, like the heroes of Hemingway: they will eventually fall off the precipice. But whereas in Hemingway's stories, it is simply that these brave and decent men have had a dirty deal from life, the hero of a novel by Cain is an individual of mixed unstable character, who carries his precipice with him like Pascal.

His fate is thus forecast from the beginning; but in the meantime he has fabulous adventures—samples, as it were, from a *Thousand and One Nights* of the screwy Pacific Coast: there is jungle lust in roadside lunch-rooms, family motor-trips that end in murder, careers catastrophically broken by the vagaries of bisexual personality, the fracas created by a Mexican Indian introduced among the phonies of Hollywood.

All these writers are also preëminently the poets of the tabloid murder. Cain himself is particularly ingenious at

tracing from their first beginnings the tangle that gradually tightens around the necks of the people involved in one of those bizarre and brutal crimes that figure in the American papers; even at showing—in *Serenade*, at any rate—the larger tangles of social interest which these deadly little knots represent. Such a subject might provide a great novel: in *An American Tragedy*, such a subject did. But as we follow, in a novel by Mr. Cain, the development of one of his plots, we find ourselves more and more disconcerted by knocking up—to the destruction of illusion—against the blank and hard planes and angles of something we know all too well: the damned old conventions of Hollywood. Here is the Hollywood gag—the echo of the murdered man's voice that is given back by the mountains after he himself is dead, and the party in *Serenade*, in which the heroine stabs the villain under cover of acting out a bull-fight; the punctual Hollywood coincidence—the popping-up of the music-loving sea-captain, who is the *deus ex machina* of *Serenade*; the Hollywood reversal of fortune—the singer who loses his voice and then gets it back again, becoming famous and rich in a sequence that lasts five minutes.

Mr. Cain is actually a writer for the studios (as are also, or have also been, Mr. Hallas and Mr. McCoy). These novels are produced in his off-time; and they are a kind of Devil's parody of the movies. Mr. Cain is the *âme damnée* of Hollywood. All the things that the Catholic censorship has excluded: sex, debauchery, unpunished crime, and sacrilege against the Catholic Church—Mr. Cain has let all these loose, with a gusto as of pent-up ferocity that the reader cannot but share. What a pity that it is impossible for such a writer to create and produce his own pictures!

In the meantime, *Serenade* is a definite improvement on *The Postman*. It, too, has its trashy aspect, its movie foreshortened and its too-well oiled action; but it establishes a surer illusion. *The Postman* was always in danger of becoming unintentionally funny. Yet even here brilliant moments of insight redeemed the unconscious burlesque; and there is enough of the real poet in Cain—both in writing and in imagination—to make one hope for something better than either.—EDMUND WILSON, "James M. Cain" (1940), *The Boys in the Back Room*, 1941, pp. 12–14

Cain writes of people who are cruel, violent, self-centered, and who have a minimum of awareness. In his world there is neither good nor bad and there is little love. The values of these people are very crude, and they are described in such a way that no concept of experience worthy of the name can be implied to the author. People commit adultery and the wicked are not always punished. If the wicked are punished it is purely fortuitous: punishment is the result of the needs of the story and not of the stern hand of Providence or of the pitiless forging of a chain of necessities. This, plus the element of violence, frequently unmotivated, deceives careless readers: they consider Cain to be a serious writer.

Serious American writers, such as Theodore Dreiser, have written tragedies in the spirit of the high level of literary culture which has come down to us from the Greeks. Contrasted with such work is the cheap escape fiction, the best-seller, and the plot short story. A body of readers who do not want the plot short-short story and the saccharine best-sellers has now developed. It seems to me that this type of writing is so patently

false that in a hard, cynical, urban world of atomized people it seems merely funny—unintentionally funny. Slowly but surely, the old type of saccharine best-seller is being driven from the market. There can be very few new Gene Stratton-Porters.

Most of today's best-sellers are demonstrably different from the best-sellers of thirty or forty years ago. Naïve virgins, good housewives happily performing their role, love without hormones—these ingredients of the old best-seller are rapidly declining in sales value. Writers like Cain stand between the work of a serious and tragic character which has been fathered in America by such men as Dreiser and the work derived from the more-or-less-forgotten writings of Robert W. Chambers, Gene Stratton-Porter, or Harold Bell Wright. And in this in-between, neither-fish-nor-fowl literary medium, James M. Cain has become the master. He is a literary thrill-producer who profits by the reaction against the sentimentality of other years and, at the same time, gains from the prestige of more serious and exploratory writing. Thus James M. Cain is not an insignificant or unimportant American literary phenomenon. He has helped to perfect a form which can properly be termed movietone realism.

And herein lies an irony which should be pointed out. James M. Cain is an old newspaperman, a former contributor to *The American Mercury*, a writer whose background is intimately associated with the 1920's. The sophisticated attitude of *The American Mercury* of the Twenties remains in his writing. In *Mildred Pierce*, Veda is a caricature of a flapper of the Twenties who describes bourgeois people as peasants. If one reads Cain's book *Our Government* one is transported back to a significant mood of the Twenties. But Cain has not grown by developing from the positive sides of Mencken and of *The American Mercury*. At that time Mencken was a major voice in America agitating for serious realistic fiction; at the same time that he played such a role in advancing Dreiser, that he welcomed Sherwood Anderson and others, he attacked and parodied the books of Chambers, Winston Churchill, and similar authors, and cast on these books the brand of ridicule they deserved. In doing this he helped to open channels for the more serious writer and contributed toward the creation of a better taste for literature among more serious and literate people, especially younger people. Mencken thus played a real role in helping to direct writers toward exploring the nature of experience in America. I think it not unfair to say that writing like Cain's exploits rather than explores the material of life in America.

Cain really comes out of the Twenties. The taste for reality exists in him. But to it he has added lessons learned from Hollywood. The James M. Cain who wrote about a government elected by yokels and middle-class "peasants" is now the thrill-producing movietone realist who shocks these yokels and the sons and daughters of these yokels with novels of adultery, murder, cynicism, and violence. In the Twenties Cain's opinions on government implied that the people deserved the government they got—that the American middle-class yokel deserved a Calvin Coolidge. These same yokels deserve the realist they now have and that realist deserves his audience.—JAMES T. FARRELL, "Cain's Movietone Realism" (1946), *Literature and Morality*, 1947, pp. 84–86

JAMES M. CAIN

From "Preface" to *The Butterfly*

1947, pp. ix–xiii

I belong to no school, hard-boiled or otherwise, and I believe these so-called schools exist mainly in the imagination of critics, and have little correspondence in reality anywhere else. Young writers often imitate some older writer that they fancy, as for example I did when I used to exchange with my brother *You Know Me Al* letters, except that instead of baseball players we had the sergeants of 1918. We gave wonderful imitations of Lardner, and some traces of them, for any who care to look, can be seen in my book *Our Government*, the first sketch of which was written for the *American Mercury* in 1924. Yet if he can write a book at all, a writer cannot do it by peeping over his shoulder at somebody else, any more than a woman can have a baby by watching some other woman have one. It is a genital process, and all of its stages are intra-abdominal; it is sealed off in such fashion that outside "influences" are almost impossible. Schools don't help the novelist, but they do help the critic; using as mucilage the simplifications that the school hypothesis affords him, he can paste labels wherever convenience is served by pasting labels, and although I have read less than twenty pages of Mr. Dashiell Hammett in my whole life, Mr. Clifton Fadiman can refer to my hammett-and-tongs style and make things easy for himself. If, then, I may make a plea on behalf of all writers of fiction, I say to these strange surrogates for God, with their illusion of "critical judgment" and their conviction of the definitive verity of their wackiest brainstorm: You're really being a little naïve, you know. We don't do it that way. We don't say to ourselves that some lucky fellow did it a certain way, so we'll do it that way too, and cut in on the sugar. We have to do it our own way, each for himself, or there isn't any sugar.

I owe no debt, beyond the pleasure his books have given me, to Mr. Ernest Hemingway, though if I did I think I should admit it, as I have admitted various other debts, mainly in the realm of theory, that were real and important, and still are. Just what it is I am supposed to have got from him I have never quite made out, though I am sure it can hardly be in the realm of content, for it would be hard to imagine two men, in this respect, more dissimilar. He writes of God's eternal mayhem against Man, a theme he works into great, classic cathedrals, but one I should be helpless to make use of. I, so far as I can sense the pattern of my mind, write of the wish that comes true, for some reason a terrifying concept, at least to my imagination. Of course, the wish must really have terror in it; just wanting a drink wouldn't quite be enough. I think my stories have some quality of the opening of a forbidden box, and that it is this, rather than violence, sex, or any of the things usually cited by way of explanation, that gives them the drive so often noted. Their appeal is first to the mind, and the reader is carried along as much by his own realization that the characters cannot have this particular wish and survive, and his curiosity to see what happens to them, as by the effect on him of incident, dialogue, or character. Thus, if I do any glancing, it is toward Pandora, the first woman, a conceit that pleases me, somehow, and often helps my thinking.

Nor do I see any similarity in manner, beyond the circumstance that each of us has an excellent ear, and each of us shudders at the least hint of the highfalutin, the pompous, or the literary. We have people talk as they do talk, and as some of them are of a low station in life, no doubt they often say

things in a similar way. But here again the systems are different. He uses four-letter words (that is, those dealing with bodily function); I have never written one. We each pass up a great deal of what our ear brings us, particularly as to pronunciation, which I never indicate, unless the character is a foreigner and I have to give his dialect, or a simplified version of it, else have him pale and colorless. We are quite exact about the conventions we offer the reader, and accept Mark Twain's dictum that it must be made clear, in first-personal narrative, whether the character is writing or talking, all small points being adjusted to conform. We each cut down to a minimum the *he-saids* and *she-replied-laughinglys*, though I carry this somewhat further than he does, for I use the minimum number it is possible to use and be clear, as a rule permitting myself only a *he-said* to begin a patch of dialogue, with no others in between. For, when I started my *Postman Always Rings Twice*, *he says* and *she says* seemed to be Chambers's limit in this direction, which looked a bit monotonous. And then I thought: Well, why all this *saying*? With quotes around it, would they be gargling it? And so, if I may make a plea to my fellow fiction-writers, I should like to say: It is about time this convention, this dreary flub-dub that lies within the talent of any magazine secretary, was dropped overboard and forgotten. If Jake is to warn Harold, "an ominous glint appearing in his eye," it would be a great deal smoother and more entertaining to the reader, though I grant you nothing like so easy, to slip a little, not too much of course, but just the right subtle amount, of ominous glint in the speech.

I grant, of course, that even such resemblances between Mr. Hemingway and myself do make for a certain leanness in each of us, as a result of all this skinning out of literary blubber, and might be taken, by those accustomed to thinking in terms of schools, as evidence I had in some part walked in his footsteps. Unfortunately for this theory, however, although I didn't write my first novel until 1933, when he was ten years on his way as a novelist, I am actually six years and twenty-one days older than he is, and had done a mountain of writing, in newspapers and magazines, including dialogue sketches, short stories, and one performed play, before he appeared on the scene at all. My short story "Pastorale," which you are probably encountering in current reprint, was written in 1927, though I first read him when *Men without Women* appeared in 1928. Yet the style is pretty much my style today. Before leaving the subject, I may say that although for convenience of expression I have thrown what appears to be a very chummy "we" around his neck, I intend no familiarity and claim no equality. This, as I well know, is a Matterhorn of literature, while my small morality tale is at best a foothill. But small though it be, it is as good as I know how to make it, and I take some satisfaction in the fact that it is made well enough to reap some of the rewards mainly reserved for the small fable: It translates, so that it is known all over the world; its point is easily remembered, so that it passes easily from mouth to mouth and so lives on from year to year; I don't lack for at least as much recognition as I deserve, which is a fortunate situation to be in. But it does strike me as a very odd notion that in setting out to make it good I would do the one thing certain to make it bad.

JOYCE CAROL OATES

From "Man under Sentence of Death:

The Novels of James M. Cain"

Tough Guy Writers of the Thirties, ed. David Madden

1968, pp. 118-24

Let us consider *Postman* as an example of Cain's craftsmanship at its finest. In this novel everything is slick and professional; even the unintentional comedy ("I kissed her. . . . It was like being in church.") is somehow just right, perfect. This is precisely what Frank Chambers would think and he would express it in just that way, knowing none of the uses of rhetoric or the ways by which conceits of passionate and spiritual love are devised. Chambers comes out of nowhere, is thrown off a hay truck and wanders to the roadside sandwich joint that is "like a million others in California." The novel's beginning is far superior to the beginning contrived for the famous movie made from it, since it says nearly nothing, promises little, and emphasizes the accidental nature of everything in Frank Chambers' world. The movie contrives to make the hero a recognizable citizen, definitely not a bum, well-dressed and actually in search of work—while Cain's Chambers responds not at all to the offer of work, though he needs money, but only to Cora. That he is a bum, "no good," worthless, is insisted upon and accepted by Chambers himself.

The colloquial, compressed style, the common man's halfway cynical objectivity, make the reader feel that this is a man whose opinion can be trusted. He is no pretentious intellectual; he doesn't waste time describing nature or even people. He doesn't bother with a psychological background. Food is important to such a person, so we get a catalogue of the seven items Frank will have for breakfast. The woman appears as a mirage, less detailed than the breakfast, a blurred picture of Woman: "Then I saw her. . . . Except for the shape, she really wasn't any raving beauty, but she had a sulky look to her, and her lips stuck out in a way that made me want to mash them in for her." Later on, uncharacteristically talkative, Frank assures Cora that she doesn't look "Mex": "You're small, and got nice white skin, and your hair is soft and curly, even if it is black." Cain structures the scene around Frank's obvious interest in Cora and Cora's defensive attitude about being married to a Greek, which is the crack in her sulky demeanor that lets Frank and the reader know that she will be vulnerable. At dinner Frank can "smell her" and her presence excites him so that he vomits up everything he has eaten: about the most concise way of letting the reader know that this is serious business, since food itself is serious enough. This running-together of sexual desire and nausea is factually preposterous, but as a sensational device it works so well that few readers would ever pause to criticize it. (Nor would they criticize the love-making at the scene of the murder, which is just as unlikely for two normal people.) There is nothing tentative about Frank's assessment of the initial situation, and Cain manipulates his audience into accepting whatever Frank says as the truth.

The undercurrent of gratuitous violence in this novel has more to do with the sex-obsession than with the actual murder. And, as I remarked earlier, there seems to be no necessary relationship between this violence and the pragmatic, calculated violence that ends in the Greek's death. One does not lead into the other, as it would in a superior work—*Light in August*, for instance. Cain's lovers respond to each other at

once in the most animalistic of ways: "I took her in my arms and mashed my mouth up against hers. . . . 'Bite me! Bite me!' I bit her. I sunk my teeth into her lips so deep I could feel the blood spurt into my mouth." A few days later he sees Cora by herself and "swung my fist up against her leg so hard it nearly knocked her over." This is without provocation indeed; nothing comes before it or after it; it is a kind of act of love in itself. Cora, understanding perfectly, snarls "like a cougar. I liked her like that." But the infantile quality of their relationship can have its tender side as well, equally simple-minded: "You like blueberry pie?" "I don't know. Yeah. I guess so." "I'll make you some." Women are associated with food, whether they bake pies like Cora and Mildred Pierce or offer their own bodies, like Juana, to whom Sharp says, "I know now, my whole life comes from there."

Frank and Cora are representative of a competitive society that has bypassed them, but they are not informed of its spiritual values. There is no question of their being "immoral" since, within the confines of their world, no morality exists. When they are dragged out of their particular world and confronted with superior, intelligent people—their lawyer, for instance—they recognize without surprise the same lust for power and indifference toward human life. (Their lawyer even makes a present of the \$10,000 insurance money to the murderers, and never flinches or shows the slightest sign of disapproval toward what they have done.) All this is in line with popular sentiment: the sense of universal corruption, the sly, knowing low-brow familiarity with the evil in all men, which is the precise corollary (and, indeed, sustained by the same audience) of the idea that everyone is really good. Brutality and sentimentality are closely related; the vulgar degrade all notable qualities, especially that of subtlety. What is not exaggerated will be passed by.

Amoral though the lovers are, they do develop a sense of responsibility for their crime and for each other which arouses in them unexpected feelings of guilt. "That's all it takes," Huff says in *Double Indemnity*, "one drop of fear, to curdle love into hate." Genuine moral responsibilities are developed in Cain, particularly in *Serenade* and *The Butterfly*. But the moral commitments are always temporary, varying with the emotions of the characters, and by no means can they be depended upon. (Kady of *The Butterfly* is warm and loving on one page, depraved on another, sympathetic on another, and finally murderous.) Only within a certain emotional radius do relationships exist; Cain's people have one set of values for each individual occasion, each person with whom they are involved. Out of the murder plot of *Double Indemnity* arises a legitimate, selfless love in Huff that is unusual in Cain. More often, as in *Postman*, an initial love-relationship is intensified and expressed in violence of one kind or another.

Cain's fast-moving narrative is sometimes so economical, so oblique and knowing, that one feels the reader must participate as a kind of writer himself. He must, at least, be reading between the lines; because there is such barrenness everywhere, he is forced into the position of imagining what is not given. For instance, the beginning of chapter 6 deals with Frank's attempt at poolhall hustling: "I made shots that Hoppe couldn't make. . . . He never made a shot that Blind Tom . . . couldn't have made. He miscued, he got himself all tangled up on position . . . he never even called a bank shot. And when I walked out of there, he had my \$250 and a \$3 watch. . . . Oh, I was good all right. The only trouble was I wasn't quite good enough." Here, Cain is relying upon his audience to anticipate the outcome of the hustling, so that the narration itself is only a kind of summary, almost an allusion.

Edmund Wilson and others have remarked upon the contrived quality of the murder scene, where the dead man's high note (the Greek has been singing) is echoed back from the mountains after his death. But the line between Hollywood gimmick and surrealistic touch is fairly thin—note the skillful use of the cat motif in the novel, a cinematic technique as well, but one that seems to work. Cora is described as a "cougar" and defines herself, a little hesitantly, as a "hellcat" (that is, a woman prepared to murder for love); the first murder attempt is endangered by the presence of a policeman who notices a cat climbing up the ladder to the window of the bathroom, and it is this cat's stepping on a fuse box that thwarts the murder attempt and saves the murderers, this time. Frank and the policeman later find the cat "laying on its back with all four feet in the air"—a Hollywood cat, surely, perhaps even a cartoon cat.

After the murder is successfully committed, the lovers fall into the inevitable period of accusations and misery. Just as they were attracted to each other through a kind of sexual tropism, so at the first sign of trouble they are willing to betray each other, and the memory of their traitorous behavior haunts them. There is no tenderness in their love, but only a kind of preposterous violence: Cora is imaged as the "great grandmother of every whore in the world," an incredibly foolish metaphor until one remembers who has said it. Gradually, Cora emerges as the stronger figure. It is she, like Mildred Pierce of the later novel, who wants to do something substantial, to go into business by adding a beer garden to the restaurant. Cain's men usually want a kind of infantile freedom, but the women seem to gravitate toward permanent and conventional patterns of behavior. The cat motif comes in again in the peculiar episode in which Frank goes with a girl puma-trainer down to Mexico. There is a brief cryptic conversation about big cats.

"What's an outlaw?"

"He'd kill you."

"Wouldn't they all?"

"They might, but an outlaw does anyway. If it was people, he would be a crazy person. It comes from being bred in captivity. These cats you see, they look like cats, but they're really cat lunatics."

If the cat lunatics are symbols for the lunatic people, it is not really Cora who is cat-like so much as it is Frank, whose recklessness finally results in her death. The colloquial style keeps leading one to think that Frank is a kind of American innocent, an older Huckleberry Finn whose very stupidity prevents him from being evil. When he thinks, at the Greek's funeral, "I got to blubbering while they were letting him down. Singing those hymns will do it every time, and specially when it's about a guy you like as well as I liked the Greek," it is possible that Cain is being ironic, but that's doubtful; Frank is so simple that he becomes ambiguous! Cain intends a kind of ritualistic cleansing when Frank and Cora, now married, go swimming. Frank says, "and with my ears ringing and that weight on my back and chest, it seemed to me that all the devilment, and meanness, and shiftlessness, and no-account stuff in my life had been pressed out and washed off, and I was all ready to start out with her again clean, and do like she said, have a new life." But his good intentions are thwarted when he passes a truck and has an accident which is fatal to Cora—but apparently doesn't injure Frank.

The plot is a reversal of *The Stranger*, in which a man is found guilty of a crime because of his prior unnatural behavior toward his mother. In *Postman* Frank is found guilty and declared a mad dog not for the original murder, which he did commit, but for the alleged murder of Cora, which was an