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Cabell's Mirrors
and
(incidentally) Pigeons

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Much has been written on Cabell's use of mirrors, and much undoubtedly remains to be said about this perplexing subject. But in considering the topic, we should remember that Cabell is not alone among the world's authors in using, and in emphasizing the use of mirrors. Lewis Carroll comes immediately to mind. Alice finds that her looking glass is "just like a bright silvery mist" and that she can enter through the mirror into "Looking -glass House." In his *Book of Imaginary Beings*, Jorge Borges recounts the Chinese myth "that goes back to the legendary times of the Yellow Emperor. In those days the world of mirrors and the world of men were not, as they are now, cut off from each other Both kingdoms, the specular and the human, lived in harmony; you could come and go through mirrors" (p.105). Abraham Merritt in his short story "*Through the Dragon*

Glass" (1917) unites the strains of Carroll and Chinese myth. His hero, Herndon, finds that the Dragon Mirror has the ability to grow "misty" until it is "nothing but a green haze" and that he can enter into an oriental mirror world of love and horror - - a world from which he does not return (*The Young Magicians*, ed. Lin Carter, p. 138). Working in another vein, Lawrence Durrell uses mirrors in the *Alexandria Quartet* to suggest the various planes of reality which reflect, refract, distort our vision of the "real" world. In a way, Durrell's mirrors symbolize his art. In his poem "Ars Poetica" in *Dreamtigers*, Borges writes: "At times in the afternoons a face, / Looks at us from the depths of a mirror; / Art must be like that mirror / That reveals to us this face of ours." Both Durrell and Borges employ the old idea that art is a mirror or reality. In his *Dictionary of Symbols*, J. E. Cirlot discusses the "diversity" of the mirror's "meaningful associations." Two of these associations are relevant in the present context. The mirror is "a symbol of the imagination" and hand-mirrors are specifically "emblems of truth." The mirror has a dual symbolic nature, suggesting both imagination and reality.

This brief survey of the diverse artistic uses of mirrors should immediately warn us from seeking a unique source for Cabell's looking glasses and from demanding a single interpretation of the mirror's meaning in Cabell's works. With a wealth of mirror legends before him, and with a wide personal knowledge of comparative mythology, Cabell was able to select various aspects of these legends and to create a complex symbol. When Cabell was subsequently asked to explain the secret or the meaning of his mirrors, he had no answer, for there is no single answer. He could only evade the question, and then in his next book complain of unsophisticated readers who seemed to miss the meaning of his work.

However, I would like to speculate about a possible source for one Cabell mirror. Recently J. W. Thomas has pointed out that Jurgen's Florimel comes from Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, Book III (probably the "false" Florimel who is much more likely to be a vampire), and it may also be suggested that Cabell's Garden between Dawn and Sunrise finds its source in Spenser's Temple of Venus (Book IV), where (Mark Rose writes) "multitudes of true lovers and friends take their decorous pleasures among the even ranks

of trees." It seems plausible to assume, then, that when Cabell was writing *Jurgen* he had Spenser's long poem on his mind. In *Jurgen*, Merlin possesses "a small mirror, about three inches square," and Jurgen looks "into the little mirror" (p. 125, Storisende Edition). It seems apparent from the conversation that follows, that Merlin's mirror allows him to see the truth about Jurgen. Spenser describes the power of Merlin's glass:

The great Magitian Merlin had deuiz'd,
By his deepe science, and hell-dreaded might,
A looking glasse

It vertue had, to shew in perfect sight,
What euer thing was in the world contaynd,
Betwixt the lowest earth and heauens hight,
So that it to the looker appertaynd
(*Faerie Queene*, III. ii. 18-19)

Thus, Jurgen is confronted, by means of this mirror, with the truth about himself and his dealings. The suggestion that Merlin made such a mirror comes from Spenser and ironically the mirror appears in that portion of the *Faerie Queene* which celebrates the virtue of Chastity.

But Jurgen's father Coth in *The Silver Stallion* meets with a similar looking glass in the hands of Yaotl. Coth is presented with the truth about Manuel when Yaotl sits "thinking and looking into the scrying-stone" (i.e. "a mirror surrounded by green and yellow and blue feathers" - p. 87, Storisende Edition). Yaotl's "thought" take "form very slowly as a gray smoke" and out of the gray smoke appears Manuel to explain the nature of things to Coth (p. 105). Admittedly the scene is quite different from the confrontation of Merlin and Jurgen, but both father and son are forced to face a certain reality which they would rather evade. The present scene with Yaotl also suggests that the mirror is connected with the imagination and with creativity. When Yaotl ends "thinking" and puts "aside the scrying-stone," Manuel disappears (p. 111). The mirror is indispensable to the recreation of Manuel.

The Mirror of Caer Omn (Romance) seems to be more akin to Carroll's and Merritt's; the mirror becomes "a warmish golden mist" (*Something About Eve*, Storisende Ed., p. 77). Through

this Mirror in the land of Dersam (Dreams), Gerald goes on a journey through the world of romance. Finally, when he is being trapped by Evarvan of the Mirror, he breaks the spell (the artistic spell of romance) by the "old runes of common-sense" (p. 97). He recites a list of hard and cold facts, and the illusions of Romance melt "back into the moonshine of the Sacred Mirror of Caer Omn" (p. 97). This mirror does not force Gerald to face reality as would the mirrors of Merlin and Yaotl.

Obviously, the mirror of Queen Freydis (the Mirror of the Hidden Children - *Something About Eve*, p. 11), is not the same as the Mirror of Caer Omn. The mirror of Queen Freydis must "be faced by those persons who venture into the goal of all the gods of men" (p. 11), i.e., Antan, yesteryear, which bears the suggestion of oblivion. Glaum warns Gerald, "I would not meddle with that mirror. Even in the land of Dersam, where a mirror is sacred, we do not desire any dealing with the Mirror of the Hidden Children and with those strange reflections which are unclouded by either good or evil" (p. 11, emphasis mine). Again we have returned to the mirror of reality which does not have the moral qualities known only to men, but which simply records in its fleeting way the ravages of time, our passage into Antan and oblivion. The Mirror of Romance is its direct opposite.

But in other places, the mirror carries the suggestion of shared knowledge. In the *Cream of the Jest* both the "personage" and the Prelate show Felix Kennaston their small hand - mirrors in much the same way that Merlin shows his mirror to Jurgen. Unfortunately for Kennaston, he seems unable to grasp the full meaning or meanings of the mirrors. His bewilderment is also ours and perhaps we should accept this effect as the one desired by Cabell. Reality is puzzling; Romance tries to order and give meaning to the chaos of Reality.

Cabell compounds our puzzlement about mirrors by adding the element of pigeons, often three pigeons. Of course, in Mexico where pigeons were undoubtedly not available, Yaotl decorated his mirror with colored feathers. In certain cases, the mirror seems to work only in the presence of pigeons; as when Jurgen prepares to regain his lost youth and when Gerald prepares to return home to Lichfield. Jurgen rejects the blue bird, which, as Conway Zirkle has recently pointed out, is the symbol of happiness, and accepts the pigeons. But what do the pigeons symbolize? In the *Cream*

of the *Jest*, Kennaston calls them the "birds of Venus" (Storisende Ed., p. 79), equating pigeons with doves. By extension, the pigeons take on the symbolism of Venus herself: beauty and love. In order to make the mirror function, these qualities must be present. In *Jurgen*, this symbolism seems possible, for Jurgen rejects, to begin, happiness in order to recapture the beauty and love of his youth (i.e., Dorothy). Sereda's mirror is in one way like the Mirror of Caer Omn, for it allows Jurgen to step through it into the romantic past. But in others, the mirror is a mirror of Lytreia in which the hero comes to see himself and to investigate the ideals he has held and their true worth. It is like Morvyth's mirror, a "gleaming and over-wise counselor" (*Silver Stallion*, Storisende Ed., p. 37).

My suggestion is, then, that the mirrors, in Cabell are complex symbols and that each must be examined in the immediate context of the narrative (and not simply as a part of a general motif). Further, I suggest that there are two kinds of mirror in Cabell's work: the mirror of art (Caer Omn) and the mirror of reality (Queen Freydis' mirror). In one, we step through the mirror into Lewis Carroll's world of dreams and romance; in the other, we see ourselves as a reflection of reality in our passage toward Antan and death. The mirrors reflect the duality of Cabell's Janus-faced world where man is continually caught between the reality and the dream.

CABELL in print

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BEYOND LIFE. Introduction by William L. Godshalk. Johnson Reprint Corp., New York. Boards, \$12.00

BEYOND LIFE. Scholarly Press, St. Clair Shores, Mich. Boards, \$14.50.

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CHIVALRY (1909 edition). Books for Libraries Press, Freeport, New York. Boards, \$8.00.