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JOSEPH
HERGESHEIMER

AN ESSAY IN
INTERPRETATION

JONES / CABELL



Joseph Hergesheimer

An Essay in Interpretation



Joseph Hergesheimer

An Essay in Interpretation

By

James Branch Cabell

"And we dreamed a dream in one night, I and he: we dreamed each man according to the interpretation of his dream."



CHICAGO
THE BOOKFELLOWS
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To
JOSEPH HERGESHEIMER

with friendship and large admiration
as goes the past, and with
cordial faith in what
is to come.

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ONE

SO say they, speak they, and tell they the tale, in "literary gossip," that Joseph Hergesheimer "wrote" for a long while before an iota of his typing was transmuted into "author's proof." And the tale tells how for fourteen years he could find nowhere any magazine editor to whose present needs a Hergesheimer story was quite suited.

It is my belief that in approaching Mr. Hergesheimer's work one should bear constantly in mind those fourteen years, for to me they appear, not uncuriously, to have shaped and colored every book he has thus far published.

The actual merit of the writing done during that period of "unavailability" is — here, at least — irrelevant. It is not the point of the fable that he high-heartedly wrote a story to which, when completed, his unbiased judgment could not quite honestly deny such deference as is due to a literary masterpiece; and which, through some odd error, was rejected by a magazine that every month was publishing vastly inferior stories; and which was later declined by another magazine, and by a host of magazines, with a dispiriting bland unanimity not unsuggestive of editorial conspiracy. Meanwhile — of course — he had written another tale, which was much better than the first, and which proved to be an equally faithful chaperon of return postage. So story followed story, each dreeing the same weird. . .

And he used to wait for the postman, no doubt, and to note from afar that it was a large envelope; and would open the damned thing with a faint hope that perhaps they just wanted some slight changes made; and would find only the neat, impersonal, and civilly patronizing death-warrant of hope. So Joseph Hergesheimer kept on with his foolishness, without any gleam of success, or even (they report) any word of encour-

agement. And doubtless his relatives said the customary things. . .

Yet none of these circumstances, either, is the point of the apologue, because in all save one detail the comedy has been abraded into pointlessness by over-constant repetition; and is, of course, being futilely performed at this moment in one prefers not to reflect how many thousand homes. The leading rôle, though, is too unprofitable and irksome for any quite sane person to persist in enacting it for fourteen years. This Joseph Hergesheimer did: and that is the fable's significant point.

TWO

UES, it is the boy's illogical pertinacity that is the fable's point, because it so plausibly explains why nearly all the men in Mr. Hergesheimer's books are hag-ridden by one or another sole desire which spurs them toward a definite goal at every instant of their mimic lives. These men but variously reflect, I take it, that younger Hergesheimer's "will to write," that unconquerable will. To Mr. Hergesheimer, even today, it probably seems natural that a man's whole living should be devoted to the attaining of one desire quite clearly perceived, because his own life has been thus dedicated. The more shrewd mass of practical persons that go about in flesh are otherwise; and comfortably fritter through the day, with no larger objective at any time in mind than the catching of a car, the rounding off of a business transaction, the keeping of an engagement for luncheon, and the vesperal attendance to some unmental form of recreation, with one small interest displacing another in endless succession, until bedtime arrives and the undertaker tucks them in.

It explains to me the Hergesheimer women, too, those troublingly ornamental odalisques. They are fine costly toys, tricked out in curious tissues: and, waiting for the strong male's leisure, they smile cryptically. They will divert him by and by, when the day's work is dispatched, maintaining their own thoughts inviolate, even in the instant of comminglement wherein the strongest man abates reserve: but their moment is not daylit, for the Hergesheimer women are all-incongruous with what is done during office hours, nor are they to be valued then. Sometimes they are embodied ideals, to be sure, remotely prized as symbols or else grasped as trophies to commemorate the nearing of the goal: but for the most part they rank candidly as avocational interests. I find nowhere in Joseph Hergesheimer's stories

any record of intimacy and confidence between a man and a woman. . . . And this too, I think, reflects that all-important formative fourteen years wherein, whatever may have been Mr. Hergesheimer's conduct of his relatively unimportant physical life, his fundamental concernments were pursued in a realm, of necessity, uninhabited by women. Indeed, no woman can with real content permit the man whom she proprietorially cherishes to traffic in this queer lonely realm, and she cannot but secretly regard his visits thereto as a personal slight. So the creative literary artist is (when luckiest) at silent feud with his women, because the two are perpetually irritated by the failure of their joint effort to ignore the fact that she ranks necessarily as an avocational interest.

THREE

WHAT, though, was the precise goal of the fourteen years of visually unproductive "writing"? Those earlier stories have never been printed, so that one perforce advances on a bridge of guesswork. But certainly, in all that is to-day accessible of Mr. Hergesheimer's creative feats — with one exception duly noted hereinafter — there is a patent negligence, and indeed an ostentatious avoidance, of any aiming toward popularity. That during the fourteen years young Hergesheimer labored toward the applause and cheques of a "best seller," is to the considerate inconceivable. Nor could that well have been a motive strong enough to sustain him thus long, since the maker of reading-matter, like any other tradesman, has need of quick returns where the artist battens on immediate rejections.

No, Mr. Hergesheimer's monomania, one estimates, was then, just as it seems to be to-day, to write for his own delectation — in large part because he could not help it, and in part with the hope of, somehow and some day, obtaining an audience with the same or, at any rate, a kindred sense of beauty. . . This, to be sure, is always a vain aspiration. That which, in effusions such as this, we loosely talk about as "beauty" probably does not exist as a vital thing save here and there in the thoughts of not too many and not to be too seriously taken persons. In life, rather frequently, one appears to catch a glimpse of something of the sort just around the corner or over the way, but it is rarely, and perhaps never, actually at hand. Sometimes, of course, one seems about to incorporate the elusive thing into one's daily living; and, striving, finds the attempt a grasping at an opalescent bubble, with the same small shock, the same disrupting disillusionment.

"Beauty," thus, is by the judicious conceded to be an unem-

bodiable thought, not even quite to be grasped by the mind ; and certainly never nicely nor with any self-content to be communicated via the pages of a book, wherein are preserved, at best, the faded petals and the flattened crumbling stalks of what seemed lovely once to somebody who is as dead as are these desiccated relics of his ardor and of his disputable taste.

In brief, it may be granted — and by Mr. Hergesheimer most cheerfully of all persons — that during these fourteen years Mr. Hergesheimer was attempting the preposterously impossible.

FOUR

NOW, to my thinking, there is something curiously similar to that unreasonable endeavor to be found in all the Hergesheimer novels. Here always I find portrayed, with an insistency and a reiteration to which I seem to detect a queer analogue in the writings of Christopher Marlowe, men laboring toward the unattainable, and a high questing foiled. No one of the five novels varies from this formula.

Anthony Ball, of *The Lay Anthony*, strives toward the beauty of chastity — not morally concerned one way or the other, but resolute to preserve his physical purity for the sake of a girl whose body, he finds at last, has long ago been ravished by worms. Again there is in *Mountain Blood* no hint of moral-mongering — for Mr. Hergesheimer is no more concerned with moral values than is the Decalogue — when Gordon Makimmon toils toward the beauty of atonement, to die in all a broken man, with his high goal yet gleaming on the horizon untouched. The three black Pennys flounder toward the beauty of a defiant carnal passion, which through the generations scorches and defiles, and burns out futilely by and by, leaving only slag where the aspiring lovely fire was. And through the formal garden ways of *Java Head* pass feverishly at least five persons who struggle (and fretfully know their failure to be foredoomed) toward the capturing of one or another evincement of beauty, with the resultant bodily demolition of three of them and the spiritual maiming of the others.

That which one, for whatever reason, finds most beautiful must be sought; it is a goal which one seeks futilely, and with discomfort and peril, but which one seeks inevitably: such is the "plot" of these four novels. Such is also, as I need hardly say, the "plot" of the aforementioned fourteen years wherein

not anything tangible was achieved except the consuming of youth and postage. . .

Nor does the dénouement differ, either, in any of these novels: the postman comes with the plethoric envelope which signals from afar that the result of much high-hearted striving is not quite suited to the present needs of this world's editor; and sometimes the postman is Age, but more often he is Death.

FIVE

NOW the fifth, and incomparably the finest and loveliest, of the Hergesheimer novels is *Linda Condon*, which renders self-confessedly a story of "the old service of beauty, of the old gesture toward the stars" — "here never to be won, never to be realized" — of the service which "only beauty knows and possesses" . . . For *Linda Condon* is to be valued less as the life-history of a woman than as the depiction — curt, incisive, and yet pitying — of a shrine that, however transiently, was hallowed.

At the exacting workaday pursuit of being a human being this Linda fails, fails chilled and wistful. She has, like more of us than dare proclaim the defect, no talent whatever for heart-felt living, so that most persons seem but to pass grayly upon the horizon of her consciousness, like unintelligible wraiths gesticulating, — and always remaining somehow disjunct and not gravely important, — the while that all the needs and obligations of one's corporal life must be discharged with an ever-present sense of their queer triviality. Toward nobody, neither toward Linda Condon's mother nor lover, nor husband, nor children, may she, the real Linda, quite entertain any sense of actual attachment, far less of intimacy. . .

Meanwhile she has her loveliness, not of character or mind, but a loan of surpassing physical beauty. And to Linda Condon her own bright moving carcass becomes a thing to be tended and preserved religiously, because beauty is divine, and she herself is estimable, if at all, as the fane which beauty briefly inhabits. . . And by and by, under time's handling, her comeliness is shriveled, and her lovers are turned to valueless dust: but first, has Linda's lost young beauty been the buried sculptor's inspiration, and it has been perpetuated in everlasting bronze. The perfection of Linda Condon's youth is never to perish, and

is not ever to be dulled by old age or corrupted in death. She comprehends this as she passes out of the story, a faded, desolate and insignificant bit of rubbish, contented to know that the one thing which really meant much to her is, as if by a miracle, preserved inviolate. The statue remains, the immutable child of Linda's comeliness and Pleydon's genius, the deathless offspring of transitory things.

Beauty is divine; a power superior and even elfinly inimical to all human moralities and rules of thumb, and a divinity which must unflinchingly be served: that, in this book as always, is Mr. Hergesheimer's text. For this is the divinity which he, too, serves unflinchingly, with strangely cadenced evocations, in striving to write perfectly of beautiful happenings.

It is an ideal here approached even more nobly than in the preceding Hergesheimer books. Nowhere has Joseph Hergesheimer found an arena more nicely suited to the exercise of his most exquisite powers than in this modern tale of *domnei*, — of the worship of woman's beauty as, upon the whole, Heaven's finest sample of artistic self-expression, and as, in consequence, the most adequate revelation of God; and as such a symbol, therefore, a thing to be revered above all else that visibly exists, even by its temporary possessor. That last is Mr. Hergesheimer's especial refinement upon a tenet sufficiently venerable to have been nodded over by Troy's gray-bearded councillors when Helen's skirts were rustling by, — and a refinement, too, which would have been repudiated by Helen herself, who, if one may trust to Euripides' report of her sentiments, was inclined less elevatedly to regard her own personal appearance, as a disaster-provoking nuisance.

Well, and to Linda, also, was beauty a nuisance — “a bitter and luxurious god,” that implacably required to be honored with sacrifices of common joys and ties and ruddy interests, but was

none the less divine. Sustained by this sole knowledge, Linda Hallet passes out of the story, when youth is over, regarding not very seriously that which is human and ephemeral, even as embodied in her lovers and her children, nor in herself, but rather always turning grave blue eyes toward that which is divine; passes, at once the abandoned sanctuary, the priestess, the postulant, and the martyr, of that beauty to which fools had once referred as "hers"; passes not as the wreckage of a toy but as an outworn instrument which has helped to further the proud labor of a god; and passes, as all must pass, without any sure comprehension of achievement, but with content. That, really, is *The Happy End*. . .

WHICH reminds me that for the most part I am rattling very old bones. Those seemingly unfruitful fourteen years are to-day at one with those other fourteen years which brought an elder Joseph into Egyptian publicity. Mr. Hergesheimer has "arrived": his books have found their proper and appreciative audience; whereas his short stories are purchased, and probably read, along with the encomiums of ready-made clothing and safety razors, by the I forget how many million buyers of the world's most popular magazine. . .

Now, here, I think, one finds stark provocations of uneasiness. I speak with diffidence, and am not entirely swayed, I believe, by the natural inclination of every writer to backbite his fellow craftsman. In any event, dismissing *Gold and Iron* (after some reflection) with unqualified applause, I take up *The Happy End*; and of the seven stories contained therein six seem to me to display a cornerstone of eminently "popular" psychology, ranging from the as yet sacrosanct belief that all Germans are perfectly horrid people, to the axiom that the quiet and unrespected youngest brother is invariably the one to exterminate the family enemies, and duly including the sentiment that noble hearts very often beat under ragged shirts. And I am made uneasy to see these uplifting faiths—these literary baking-powders more properly adapted to the Horrible Trites and the Gluepot Stews among reading-matter confectioners—thus utilized by a Joseph Hergesheimer.

I am made uneasy because I reason in this way: when Mr. Hergesheimer consciously is writing a short story to be printed next to advertising matter in some justly popular periodical, Mr. Hergesheimer, being rational and human, cannot but think of the subscribers to that popular periodical. I forget, I repeat, how many millions of them have been duly attested upon affi-

davit to exist, but certainly not many thousands of our fellow citizens can regard Mr. Hergesheimer at his best and purest with anything save bewildered abhorrence. So he must compromise, — subconsciously, I believe, — and must adapt his methods to the idiosyncrasies and limitations of his audience, very much as he probably refrains from addressing his cook in the heightened and consummated English of *San Cristóbal de la Habana*.

The danger is not that Joseph Hergesheimer will lower his ideals, nor in anything alter what he wishes to communicate; but is the fact that he must attempt to transmit these things into the vernacular and into the orbits of thought of his enormous audience, with the immaculate motive of making his ideas comprehensible. He cannot, being rational and human, but by and by be tempted yet further to endeavor — as he has flagrantly endeavored in the tale called *Tol'able David* — to convey his wayside apprehensions of life via some such always acceptable vehicle as the prehistoric fairy-tale cliché of the scorned and ultimately victorious third champion. This is with a vengeance the pouring of new wine into a usage-battered and always brazen cup which spoils the brew. . . .

Six of these stories, then, are beautifully written moral tales: although, to be sure, there is an alleviating seventh, in *The Flower of Spain*, which is a well-nigh perfect and a profoundly immoral work of art. I therefore put aside this volume with discomfort. . . .

But I suspect that here the axiomatic mutual jealousy of all authors should be discounted. As an "outsider" in letters, I cannot be expected quite to view with equanimity the recent installation of Mr. Hergesheimer in the National Institute of Arts and Letters, that august body wherein the other representatives of creative literature are such approved masters as

Mr. Nelson Lloyd and Mr. Robert W. Chambers and Mr. L. Frank Tooker. At this port, with appropriate ceremony, has the skipper of *The Happy End* "arrived." The fact has been formally recognized, by our most "solid" cultural element, that in artistic achievement Joseph Hergesheimer has but fifty living superiors, and only a hundred and ninety-nine equals at this moment resident in the United States: and I, who have not been tendered any such accolade, cannot but be aware of human twinges when Mr. Hergesheimer as a matter of course accepts this distinction.

So it is quite conceivably the impurest sort of envy and low-mindedness which causes me here to suspect alarming symptoms. I, in any event, put aside *The Happy End* with very real discomfort; and turn to the reflection that Mr. Hergesheimer has since written *Linda Condon*, which discomforts me quite as poignantly by exposing to me my poverty in phrases sufficiently noble to apply to this wholly admirable book.

SEVEN

YET Mr. Hergesheimer, even in the least worthy of his magazine stories, writes really well. The phrase has an inadequate ring: but when you have applied it without any grave reservation to Mr. Tarkington and Mr. Hergesheimer, and have given Mrs. Wharton a deservedly high rating for as many merits as seem possible to a woman writer, of what other American novelists can this pardonably be said by anybody save their publishers? No: the remainder of us, whatever and however weighty may be our other merits, can manage, in this matter of sheer writing, to select and arrange our adjectives and verbs and other literary ingredients acceptably enough every now and then: and that is the utmost which honesty can assert.

But Mr. Hergesheimer always writes really well, once you have licensed his queer (and quite inexcusable) habit of so constantly interjecting proper names to explain to whom his, Hergesheimer's, pronoun refers. . . . Perhaps I here drift too remotely into technicalities, and tend to substitute for a consideration of architecture a treatise upon brick-making. Even so, I cannot but note in this place how discriminatingly Mr. Hergesheimer avoids the hurdles most commonly taken with strained leaps by the "stylist," through Mr. Hergesheimer's parsimony in the employment of similes; and how inexplicably he renders "anything from a chimneypot to the shoulders of a duchess" by — somehow — communicating the exact appearance of the thing described without evading the whole issue by telling you it is like something else.

EIGHT

NOW this non-employment of time-approved devices seems even the more remarkable when you consider how intensely Joseph Hergesheimer realizes the sensuous world of his characters and, in particular, the optic world. He is the most insistently superficial of all writers known to me, in his emphasis upon shapes and textures and pigments.

His people are rendered from complexion to coat-tail buttons, and the reader is given precisely the creasing of each forehead and the pleating of their under-linen. Mr. Hergesheimer's books contain whole warehousefuls of the most carefully finished furniture in literature; and at quaint bric-à-brac he has no English equal. It is all visioned, moreover, very minutely. Joseph Hergesheimer makes you observe his chairs and panelings and wall-papers and window-curtains with an abnormal scrutiny. The scenery and the weather, too, are "done" quite as painstakingly, but these are indigenous to ordinary novels.

Now of course, like virtually every other practise of "realism," this is untrue to life: nobody does in living regard adjacent objects as attentively as the reader of a Hergesheimer story is compelled to note them. For one, I cannot quite ignore this fact, even when I read with most delight: and I sometimes wonder if Mr. Hergesheimer premeditatedly sits down to study an andiron or a fan for literary use, or whether his personal existence is actually given over to this concentration upon externals and inanimate things. But he was once a painter; and large residuals of the put-by art survive.

All this results, of course, in a "style" to which the reader is never quite oblivious. The Hergesheimer dramas — dramas wherein each of the players has a slight touch of fever — are enacted, with a refining hint of remoteness, behind the pellucid crystal of this "style," which sharpens outlines, and makes

colors more telling than they appear to everyday observation, and brings out unsuspected details (seen now for the first time by the reader, with a pleasurable shock of delight), and just noticeably glazes all.

The Hergesheimerian panorama is, if I may plagiarize, a little truer than truth: and to turn from actual life to Joseph Hergesheimer's pages arouses a sensation somewhat akin to that sustained by a myopic person when he puts on spectacles. . .

And thus is a quite inoffensive tropic town foredoomed to be a perennial source of disappointment to all tourists who have previously read *San Cristóbal de la Habana*, — that multi-colored sorcerous volume, with which we have here no immediate concern, — and who, being magic-haunted, will over-rashly bring to bear upon a duly incorporated city, thriftily engaged in the tobacco and liquor-business, their eyes unre-enforced.

NINE

SUCH, then, are this artist's materials: in a world of extraordinary vividness a drama of high questing foiled, a tragedy of beauty sought, with many blunders but single-mindedly, by monomaniacs, — in fine, a performance suggestively allied, in its essentials, to the smaller-scaled and un-audenced drama of the young man with the percipient eyes of a painter, who throughout fourteen years was striving to visualize in words his vision of beauty, and who was striving to communicate that vision, and who — the tastes of the average man being that queer slovenly aggregation which makes the popular periodical popular, and the ostensible leaders of men being regular subscribers to the slatternly driveling host — was striving in vain.

These things are but the raw materials, I repeat, — the bricks and mortar and the scantlings, — for, of course, there is in Joseph Hergesheimer's books far more than plot or thought, or even "style": there is that indescribable transfiguring element which is magic.

When Linda Condon came to look closely at Pleydon's statue, you may remember, she noted in chief the statue's haunting eyes, and marveled to find them "nothing but shadows over two depressions." Very much the equivalent of that is the utmost to which one can lay a crude finger in appraising Mr. Hergesheimer's books. They are like other books in that they contain nothing more prodigious than words from the nearest dictionary put together upon quite ordinary paper. . . . But the eyes of Pleydon's statue — you may remember, too — for all that they were only indentations in wet clay, "gazed fixed and aspiring into a hidden dream perfectly created by his desire." And viewing the statue, you were conscious of that dream, not of wet clay: and you were moved by the dream's

loveliness as it was communicated, incommunicably, by Pleydon's art.

Now, at its purest, the art of the real Hergesheimer, the fundamental and essential thing about Joseph Hergesheimer, is just that intangible magic which he ascribes to his fictitious Pleydon. And the dream that Joseph Hergesheimer, too, has perfectly created by his desire, and seeks to communicate in well-nigh every line he has thus far published, I take to be "the old gesture toward the stars . . . a faith spiritual, because, here, it is never to be won, never to be realized."

It is, I think, the "gesture" of the materially unproductive fourteen years: and its logic, either then or now, is clearly indefensible. Still, one agrees with Cyrano, *Mais quel geste!* and one is conscious of "a warm indiscriminate thrill about the heart" and of a treacherous sympathy, which abhors reason. . . . Yes, one is conscious of a most beguiling sympathy, that urges one already to invest blind. Faith in what is to come very soon, but stays as yet unrevealed, — in *The Bright Shawl*, and in the retempered *Steel*, and in *Cythera*, and even more particularly in *The Meeker Ritual*, which promises, to me at least, to reveal upon completion an especial prodigality of perturbing magics.

IT is through distrust of this beguiling sympathy that I have spoken throughout with self-restraint, and have hedged so often with "I think" and "I believe" and "it seems to me," and have niggled over Hergesheimerian faults that are certainly tiny and possibly non-existent: because of my private suspicion that all my private notions about Joseph Hergesheimer are probably incorrect. To me, I confess, he appears a phenomenon a little too soul-satisfying to be entirely credible.

Pure reason does not brevet it as humanly possible that the Hergesheimer I privately find in the pages of the Hergesheimer books should flourish in any land wherein the self-respecting author is usually restricted to choose between becoming the butt or the buttress of mediocrity: so that I cautiously refrain from quite believing in this Joseph Hergesheimer as a physical manifestation in actual trousers. . . . Indeed, his corporeal existence cannot well be conceded except upon the hypothesis that America has produced, and is even nourishing, a literary artist who may endure in the first rank. Which is absurd, of course, and a contention not to be supported this side of Bedlam, and, none the less, is my firm private belief to-day.

None the less, also, must I to-day speak with very self-conscious self-restraint, because for the judicious any more thorough-going dicta are checked by the probability, and the ardent hope, that Mr. Hergesheimer's work is barely begun. Nobody born of a generation which has witnessed the beginnings and the æsthetic endings of Mr. Hewlett and Mr. Le Gallienne would be so rash as to predict the upshot of any author's career with no ampler data to "go on" than the initial chapters, however fine. Rather must it perforce content me to believe that the Joseph Hergesheimer who has made head against the fourteen years of neglect and apparent failure, without ever arrang-

ing any very serious compromise with human dunderheadedness and self-complacency, is now in train to weather unarithmetical decades of public success by virtue of the same wholesome egoism. And I can see besetting him just one lean danger, — a feline peril that hunts subtly, with sheathed claws and amicable purrings, — in the circumstance that the well-meaning Philistia which yesterday was Mr. Hergesheimer's adversary, so far as it noted him at all, will be henceforward affording him quite sensible and friendly and sincere advice.

Well, the results should, at the worst, be interesting.

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