

Metamorphosis and Place

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Edited by

Joshua Parker, Lucie Tunkrova
and Mohamed Bakari

CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS

P U B L I S H I N G

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This book first published 2009

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-1104-1, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-1104-0

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INTRODUCTION

JOSHUA PARKER

If this volume's theme initially strikes readers as vague, its title's two terms should not. "Metamorphosis" derives from *metá*: "with," denoting "sharing, joint action, pursuit, quest, (and especially) change," and *morphos*: "shape" (Hoad). Juxtaposed with "place," it suggests that different places share characteristics in terms of shape. It also suggests changes in one's own perceptions of a place, or even that, in certain places, we ourselves are changed along with our shifting viewpoints. Place is, after all, simply space charged with human value (Tuan), and if we, as humans and scholars, tend to carry our own values with us, projecting them onto the spaces in which we find ourselves, we also gather and absorb values from the places we inhabit. We change places and are changed by them. This volume hopes to shape the joint action of describing some of those changes.

With critical calls for a post-national or transnational study of culture and literature (Kristeva), one might argue that the only barriers to academics' focusing more systematically on setting, or, indeed, to establishing schools for the study of novels set in mountains, films set in prairies, or poetry dedicated to deserts, are our own language barriers. Claims that we are moving into an era of post-nationalism are perhaps premature. Yet in a sense, we live in a "borderless" world, if for no other reason than that we carry mapping skills from our original cultural geographies with us as we travel. "Perhaps every textual construction of place implies [...] a mapping or symbolic re-presentation of an interior terrain," writes J. Gerald Kennedy (6). Place, like metaphor, is a means of coming to terms not only with the Other, but with the projected changing, questing, pursuing forms of the self. Personal identity, like national, regional, cultural, or disciplinary identity, superimposes its own ideas of geography onto whatever land an author, poet, photographer, songwriter or video game player is dropped into. One travels, wrote Claude Lévi-Strauss, to find away from home something whose presence at home is no longer recognizable. One's own identity is thus sometimes more clearly

mapped abroad. The very outlines and contours of one's own psyche are drawn in one's descriptions of an Other which one temporarily inhabits.

Place, Michel de Certeau writes, involves the order in which "elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence. [...] It implies an indication of stability" (117). Writing on the metamorphoses of a concept whose hallmark is stability was the task set for this volume's authors, who have graciously agreed to coexist in its pages. This collection brings together an eloquent group of scholars from a broad range of disciplines (literary and cultural studies, history, political science, architecture, anthropology, art and art history, communication, sociology, medieval studies, lexicography, comparative literature, linguistics, psychiatry and theoretical psychoanalysis), each situated differently with respect to the questions raised by our title's two terms. Their essays proceed from papers presented at the second annual conference on literary and cultural studies, hosted by the English Language and Literature Department of Fatih University in Istanbul, a city that has already undergone numerous metamorphoses in these two years since the conference's presenters met in May 2007.

The conference's interdisciplinary scope explored a wide spectrum of questions. While personal, regional, and national identities may be constructed in terms of place, what happens to a place as personal or societal values and identities change? How do our values change as places themselves are transformed? These questions can be asked of almost any discipline, whether one is taking a photograph, mapping a literary topography, tracing linguistic change in a geographic region or outlining language's importance to our conception of a political territory, building a place of worship on a physical plot of land, constructing it from words on a page, or on a screen with computer software.

Few places are ever uniquely our own. We share them. To project one's own cultural (or disciplinary) markers onto a landscape which is already hardly blank, but full of others' meanings—to know that geographic points stabilizing one's own identity serve, on their reverse side, to support an entirely different set of meanings for others—is an act de Certeau calls a tactic. While attempting to combine the perspectives of various and diverse disciplines is perhaps symptomatic of a certain fantasy of a utopic integration of disciplinary approaches, each of the articles here manages, quite thoughtfully and in its own right, to shed light on how place is both transforming and transformed. Area studies, proposes Hans Kuijper, is only truly interdisciplinary when communication between participants in cooperation from different disciplines allows them to "change their ways of thinking and develop a new one (by politely

challenging, and actively listening to, each other)” (215). This is the metamorphosis for which this volume hopes to provide a platform.

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THE LEGACY OF ARTHUR RAPER

LOUIS MAZZARI

Arthur Raper, born at the turn of the twentieth century, was a white, southern farmboy who helped begin the Civil Rights Movement through his study of the roots of lynching during the Great Depression and his research into the South's complex and debilitating race relations. Much of his work was accomplished under the auspices of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal and the Atlanta-based Commission on Interracial Cooperation.

Raper wrote a great deal about the South, and his writing—from books called trailblazing by the *New York Times* to his articles published in small-town newspapers—was read by common white folk as well as northern black leaders, by both social scientists and labor activists, and his research was cited in *Life* magazine and in the Supreme Court's decision on *Brown v. Board of Education*, the landmark case that ended the legal segregation of American schools. His work inspired many white southerners to speak out against racial bigotry—and it definitely infuriated more than a few of their fellows.

Raper was certainly no novelist or craftsman of fiction. But as a good documentarian, he became an accomplished storyteller with an eye for some detail or offhand comment that opened onto the dynamics of a social scene or situation. Along with his books, he now-and-then published detailed observations or parables in magazines and journals that illuminated the way racial etiquette entwined with economics in small southern towns. The best of these observations is "Buy White," published while he was researching *Sharecroppers All*, a critique of the South's racial and social caste system. "Buy White" furrows a seldom-plowed field by combining the imagination and detail of short fiction with the eye for social patterns that marks a good sociological study. Over and over, throughout his life, Raper was drawn to trace out the subtleties of Jim Crow in his books and in his day-to-day exchanges, at his typewriter, and in the barber chair.

“Buy White” by Arthur Raper

About three years ago, I went into a shop to get my monthly hair cut. As the clipped hair fell loosely on the white cloth, we talked about all sorts of things—politics, the weather, the movement of country dwellers to town, and the growing soup lines. Mr. Brown, a close friend of mine, chanced to pass by the window.

In studied casualness, the barber inquired, ‘Who cuts Mr. Brown’s hair?’

I knew that a Negro barber at Herndon’s on Peachtree Street did his work, and I merely commented, ‘Well, somebody does better by him than I give you the change to do by me. Why, he gets a haircut every week or ten days.’

‘Well, he must have a good barber.’

‘Yes, his head always looks nice.’

‘I’ve noticed how well his head looks all the time, and I said to myself, ‘Now that man has a good barber, and he stays with him.’

‘He tells me that he has been using the same barber since he came to Atlanta ten years ago.’

‘Well, I surely don’t blame him.’

‘I think,’ finally answering the question asked me, ‘that Mr. Brown has his barber work done in Herndon’s shop.’

‘Some years ago,’ continued the barber, ‘I had a customer who came to me for shaves, massages, and shampoos. I shaved him every day, and massaged and shampooed him every week, but I never cut his hair. Finally one day I said, ‘Mr. Smith, I don’t want to pry into your business at all, but I notice that you always have a good haircut.’

‘Mr. Smith said, ‘Yes, I have been going to a Negro barber at Herndon’s for twenty-three years.’

‘And I said: ‘Well, you always have a good haircut.’

Then, one Saturday afternoon when Mr. Smith came in and was sitting down in the chair I said, ‘Well, you have had another one of these good haircuts. It surely is a good one.’ And I went on about massaging him, and told him about a friend of mine who liked steaks. I told him there were places all over town where you could buy and eat steaks, good steaks—places on Peachtree run by white people, and that people who bought steaks there helped these white people maintain a decent standard of living.’ . . .

By this time the barber was dusting powder on my neck, and as I got out of the chair he chuckled and said, ‘You know, I’ve been cutting Mr.

Smith's hair ever since. That was three years ago; he never had realized before that a white man ought to trade with white people.'

As I left the shop I realized the barber must have told me the story in the hope that I, too, would understand that white people ought to trade with white people and that I would influence my friend Mr. Brown to come to him or some other white barber.

A few decades ago practically all the barbers in Atlanta were Negroes. From year to year they have lost their trade to white barbers. The same thing has occurred in many other fields, and has recently extended to that of such menial tasks as bellhops in Atlanta hotels and curb waiters at the leading roadside stands. The Negro has been shorn of many of his erstwhile economic opportunities, in some instances by organized threats, in others by the shrinkage of jobs, and in still others by methods similar to that utilized by the white barber who used to cut my hair every month.

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“TRANSMUTED BY TIME’S HANDLING”:
METAMORPHOSIS
IN JAMES BRANCH CABELL’S *JURGEN*

ELŻBIETA FOELLER-PITUCH

Abstract

In *Jurgen* (1919) the once famous and now neglected Virginian writer James Branch Cabell has created a modernist fantasy of satiric metamorphoses to ironically expose the human longing for order and meaning, revealed in the ideals of love, heroism, and religion. The novel eloquently expresses post-World War I disillusionment, but in a comic and parodic vein which looks forward to the postmodernist fabulists of the 1960s and 1970s. In Cabell’s hands the novel morphs into an elaborate medley of classical myths, Russian folklore, Arthurian romance, and medieval dream vision. The traditional folktale form, however, is undermined by Cabell’s parody of Frazerian and Freudian theories, as well as his twentieth-century attitudes of sardonic disenchantment. The protagonist, a hen-pecked pawnbroker and erstwhile poet, Jurgen, is a reluctant Odysseus and Faust figure, a trickster hero who receives the gift of youth, while retaining the consciousness of a 40-year-old. His metamorphosis from middle-aged bourgeois to youthful knight is marked by a year-long quest that takes him out of his medieval European homeland and into mythical realms. Transforming himself into a Duke, then Prince, King, Emperor, and Pope, Jurgen moves through a variety of literary spaces— medieval romance, Arthurian legend, Frazerian fertility lore, classical myth, and finally versions of the Christian hell and heaven. Cabell’s narrative subverts the traditional role of the hero, as the rejuvenated Jurgen, a jaunty figure and self-proclaimed “monstrous clever fellow,” finds he cannot sustain the demands and possibilities of his youthful body in juxtaposition with his world-weary, aging mind. *Jurgen* is a commentary on art and life from the perspective of middle age. It is a *Bildungsroman à rebours*, an education in how to accept maturity, with its waning of possibilities and loss of illusions. The novel deploys a

remarkable range of metamorphoses of time and place so as to reveal our tendency towards superimposing meaningful patterns on existence; in this way *Jurgen* allows us to both laugh at our capacity for self-delusion and celebrate our creative urges. Metamorphosis is shown to be the primary principle of life—we are all “transmuted by time’s handling” and so are the spaces we inhabit, both outside us and, most importantly, within our minds.

The novel *Jurgen: A Comedy of Justice* (1919) enjoyed a *succès de scandale* in 1920 when it was suppressed (in its third edition) for alleged obscenity. In 1922, after a lengthy and much-publicized trial, a New York judge decided that the novel was not “lewd, lascivious, indecent, obscene and disgusting,” and that indeed it had “unusual literary merit” (quoted in Rubin 278). As a result James Branch Cabell, a Virginian writer based in Richmond and a good friend of Ellen Glasgow, became a popular author with an intellectual following during the Twenties, only to fade back into obscurity in the Thirties, when the Great Depression changed the mood of the country. He was still valued by a small, faithful band of aficionados, including the science fiction writer Robert Heinlein (Patterson). A literary periodical devoted to Cabell’s staggering oeuvre of over 50 published works came out somewhat irregularly between 1968 and 1996 under the title *Kalki: Studies in James Branch Cabell*. However, to a larger literary public as well as to most literary scholars Cabell is practically terra incognita, though he merits reading for his urbane and witty writing.

Jurgen addresses in fantasy form, as Hemingway’s and Fitzgerald’s works did in a more realistic mode, the world view of the years following World War I and its attendant disillusionment, loss of stable values, and longing for “a good time.” A cautionary tale about the illusions of youth and the disappointments of middle age, it presents us with a metamorphosis of the self from age to youth and back again, revealing throughout “the vivid sense of Time as the great ironist and destroyer” (Davis 90). His hero is both a reluctant Odysseus and a hesitant Faust figure. Cabell’s settings are places of the mind, literary locations, mental constructs. And so Cabell excludes any mention of the American South, but presents a thinly veiled satire of the United States as the conquering kingdom of Philistia that spreads mediocre conformity, utilitarian attitudes, and anti-literary bias. The author counters these Philistine tendencies by combining his formidable erudition with a wryly ironic look at the universal human condition of aging. He constructs an elaborate parody of a medieval quest romance that comments on human nature and its dependence on illusions. As Desmond Tarrant sums it up: “Cabell uses

everything that the imagination of previous ages has created, from ancient classical mythologies to the chivalric romances of the France of Chrétien de Troyes and the England of *Gawain and the Green Knight*; Arthurian legend and the universe of Milton meet with the fairy land of Spencer and the voluptuous nights of the Orient" (135). The traditional form, however, is belied by the twentieth-century attitudes underlying it—disillusionment and a wry tolerance for all beliefs as equally invalid, but necessary to man's psychic comfort. In *Jurgen* Cabell has created a modernist fantasy of satiric metamorphoses of time, place, and person to ironically expose the human longing for order and meaning, revealed in the ideals of love, heroism, and religion. Not unlike T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and even more so James Joyce, Cabell looks to the past and uses fragments of the past to create literary work for the present. His novel eloquently expresses post-World War I disillusionment, but in a comic and parodic vein which looks forward to the postmodernist fabulists of the 1960s and 1970s.

In Cabell's hands the novel morphs into an elaborate medley of classical myths, Russian folklore, Arthurian romance, and medieval dream vision, ironically flavored by parodic treatment of Frazerian and Freudian theories, as well as twentieth-century attitudes of urbanely ironic disenchantment. This is a fantasy world several times removed, for Cabell introduces his story as a traditional tale told in an imaginary land. "It is a tale which they narrate in Poictesme, saying: In the old days lived a pawnbroker named Jurgen ..." (3). And in this tale the protagonist finds himself undergoing adventures in fantastic locations contrasted to the normalcy of his imaginary medieval European homeland. Jurgen undergoes a metamorphosis from middle-aged bourgeois to youthful knight who finds himself on a year-long quest that takes him through a series of transformed spaces and times. At the end his travels are placed under erasure ("sous rature," to use Derrida's phrase) by being "unimagined" by Koshchei the Deathless, Creator of this world: "For now I have never begun, and now there is no word of truth in anything which you remember of the year just past. Now none of these things has ever happened" (319). However, these "non-events" form the bulk of the novel, thus bringing up questions about the nature of memory and illusion, as well as art and its fictionality.

Jurgen is a middle-aged, henpecked pawnbroker and erstwhile poet who speaks courteously of and then to the Devil and in reward finds that his termagent wife, Dame Lisa, has disappeared. The novel chronicles his reluctant Odyssey to find her. In the process he receives the ambiguously symbolic shirt of Nessus and the gift of youth, while retaining the experience of a forty-year-old; and so he finds himself in the enviable

position of uniting both sides of the French proverb: "Si jeunesse savait, si vieillesse pouvait," a saying no doubt Cabell was quite familiar with, since he taught French at the College of William and Mary as an undergraduate there. This combination of old and young Jurgen moves through a fantasy world (or Freudian dream world) in the guise of a conquering hero, involved mainly in sexual exploits, related in amusing *double entendre*. During the solstices he advances up the feudal hierarchy as self-proclaimed Duke, Prince, King, Emperor, and finally Pope. Like a Frazerian vegetation god he exercises his virility as the seasons revolve. Pretending to be a Duke, he is the lover of the legendary Guinevere, while as Prince he marries the Lady of the Lake, Anaitis, described as "a vegetation myth of doubtful origin connected with the moon" (137). At the autumn equinox he must leave Anaitis, compelled by the Master Philologist who considers him a solar hero (a clear satire on Max Müller's school of solar mythology that was in vogue at the beginning of the twentieth century). Jurgen moves to the classically inclined mythical island of Leukê and introducing himself as King of Eubonia he marries a dryad and lives close to Pseudopolis, an ideal city ruled by the masculine and feminine ideals of Achilles and Helen. When Pseudopolis is destroyed by Philistia, a satirical version of conformist and practical American society that turns everything grey and unheroic, Jurgen descends into Hell. Presenting himself as an Emperor he marries a vampire and consorts with Satan's wife. Hell turns out to be a Dantesque construct of his father's mind, while Heaven has been created expressly to uphold Jurgen's grandmother's staunch faith in the Book of Revelation, as Jurgen finds out when he ascends to Heaven as Pope and even for a brief moment sits on God's throne. Jurgen's quest, in other words, takes him through the main cultural influences of Western civilization, from prehistoric fertility rites through the world of classical antiquity and the Age of Chivalry to Christianity, with stress on religious, heroic, and romantic ideals.

It is the jaunty masculine figure of Jurgen that makes this a comic story, for Cabell's cynical and ultimately mediocre middle-aged pawnbroker in the body of a youth subverts the traditional role of the hero and conventional notions of masculinity. Jurgen is an anti-heroic trickster figure, moving onwards and upwards thanks to his cunning and his sexual exploits, rather than heroic deeds of valor. In addition, his masculine powers must be covert, because of the peculiar shadow that follows him and reports back to the Great Goddess, who demands unremitting chastity. Nonetheless, Jurgen manages to trick most of the females he encounters, including manifestations of the Great Goddess, and so thinks of himself as

“a monstrous clever fellow” (14), a phrase often repeated throughout the narrative.

Jurgen moves through the world of myth and legend unsurprised by its exotic and metamorphic nature, succeeding on the whole in reducing it to the commonplace and domestic, thus generating bathetic humor. A typical example is Jurgen’s complaint to Anaitis about her “family” of various mythological creatures:

I cannot congratulate you upon your kindred, for I do not get on at all well with your patchwork combinations, that are one-third man and the other two-thirds a vulgar fraction of bull or hawk or goat or serpent or jackal or what not ... Besides, they have no conversation. They merely bellow or low or gibber or purr, according to their respective incarnations—about unspeakable mysteries and monstrous pleasures until I am driven to the verge of virtue by their imbecility. (143, 145)

This is quintessential Cabell—the exotic mating with a goddess figure reduced to cosy domesticity, the literal treatment of mythical figures, and the inversion of accepted social conventions (virtue induced by talk of unspeakable pleasures). When Anaitis waxes jealous of her guests, Jurgen playfully scolds her:

My darling, pray consider! Be reasonable about it. Your feminine guests at present are Sekhmet in the form of a lioness, Io incarnated as a cow, Hakt as a frog, Derceto as a sturgeon, and—ah, yes!—Thoueris as a hippopotamus. I leave it to your sense of justice, dear Anaitis, if of ladies with such tastes in dress a lovely myth like you can be reasonably jealous. (145)

Cabell points out the fictionality of humanity’s beliefs and the importance of language in formulating them, hence the stress on wordplay, puns, verbal jokes, elaborate interplay of signifiers. What we are left with as readers is the memory of exuberant verbal constructs of fantastic realms, based on various myths and their prolific commentators, such as Frazer, Müller, and Freud.

Let us concentrate on three such realms, to see how Cabell creates and transforms them: the garden between dawn and sunrise, Hell and Heaven. We are forewarned that Jurgen is setting out on a satanic or mythical quest when, after following instructions to remove the cross around his neck, he follows an apparition of his wife into an ominous cave on Walpurga’s Eve (the eve of May Day), the traditional night of witches’ sabbaths, which immediately alerts us to Jurgen as a Faustian figure. There he enters pagan realms and promptly meets a centaur, who takes him to the garden

between dawn and sunrise, where dwell the illusions of first love. The centaur explains at the outset that "this garden does not exist, and never did exist, in what men humorously called real life; so that of course only imaginary creatures such as I can enter it" (9). Jurgen reaches the magical garden by riding the centaur as he overtakes the setting sun. There, he meets his first love and relives his illusions about her. First loves live in this mythical realm inhabited by centaurs, Amazons, and other creatures of fantasy, because they are imaginary, the creations of our own minds, ordinary people transformed by love into illusions of perfection.

The centaur mentions that they are going "over the grave of a dream and through the malice of time" (10). And indeed the whole of Jurgen's journey serves to convey to him to what extent his dreams have died and just how maliciously and inevitably time had dealt with him by slowly transforming an eager and idealistic boy in the throes of his first love affair to a tired and cynical petty shopkeeper with barely any pretensions of being a poet left to him. The "malice of time" enacts a deadening metamorphosis on us all. The garden between dawn and sunrise is the place of transitory illusions of first youth and it morphs into a desolate landscape each morning after dawn, paralleling the growing loss of hopes and dreams as we age. It is entirely a place of the mind.

As are all the settings that Jurgen's quest takes him through. The land of Cockaigne, for instance, is a hybrid fantasy place, mixing medieval folktale with Asian fertility rites as expounded in *The Golden Bough* and peopled by the human-animal combination gods of the ancient Mediterranean, particularly Egypt and Asia Minor. Our hero is ousted from it by the power of language, for the Master Philologist has the last word here and can force transmutations to other mythical places. Max Müller and Sir James Frazer are the patron saints of Jurgen's journey from medieval folklore, through fertility myths to classical Greco-Roman mythology, on to Christian Hell and Heaven. All these imaginary constructs undergo transformations as we read and both fulfill and refute our expectations. Marina Warner, in her fascinating 2001 Clarendon lectures on *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds*, focuses on Hieronymus Bosch's triptych, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (ca.1504) with its post-Ovidian combinations of humans, birds, and vegetation. Warner argues that such exuberant hybridities were stimulated by the mingling of Old World and New in the European discovery of the Americas. One can discern a certain parallel between this painting and Cabell's novel, for the outer wings acting as shutters depict the "Creation of the World," which when opened display "The Garden of Earthly Delights" as the central panel, flanked by "The Garden of Eden" and

“Hell.” Cabell’s garden between dawn and sunrise represents the Edenic state, with each boy and girl a new Adam and Eve, the land of Cockaigne forms a garden of earthly, particularly sexual, delights, while Hell is the place par excellence of metamorphoses, as Warner points out in her comment: “in the Christian Heaven, nothing is mutable, whereas in hell, everything combines and recombines in terrible amalgams, compounds, breeding hybrids, monsters—and mutants” (36). It is a testimony to the fertility of the human imagination and the mind’s attraction to and dread of hybridity.

In Cabell’s Hell, Grandfather Satan, a hybrid creature like an oldish man covered in gray fur, with stag’s horns and a squirrel’s tail, informs Jurgen of the curious origins of Hell: “how he, and all the domain and all the infernal hierarchies he ruled, had been created extempore by Koshchei, to humour the pride of Jurgen’s forefathers” (226). Hell is the creation of Jurgen’s father, who is so proud and conscious of his sins that he demands extra service from the exhausted devils who cannot keep up with Coth’s ideas of torment. Even the lovely vampire Florimel that Jurgen weds may well be an idea that Jurgen provokes his father into conjuring up in his imagination during their acrimonious talk in Hell. The reason Koshchei the Deathless has created Hell and Heaven is to humor and honor the two human traits he cannot possess—pride and love. Heaven is inspired by Steinvor, Jurgen’s grandmother, her faith in the Book of Revelation and the power of her love for her family. Thanks to this love, as full of illusions as that of the couples in the garden between dawn and sunrise, Steinvor has installed in Heaven the boy she remembers Jurgen to have been. The youthfully old Jurgen meets this lad as he enters Heaven. “And Jurgen talked with the boy that he had once been, and stood face to face with all that Jurgen had been and was not any longer. And this was the one happening which befell Jurgen that the writer of the tale lacked heart to tell of” (259). In Heaven Jurgen talks to the God of his grandmother and even briefly sits on God’s throne, but realizes that he cannot stay in a place in which he does not believe. St. Peter lets him out through a side door. “‘For thus,’ St. Peter said, ‘you may return without loss of time to your own illusions’” (271).

In the end Jurgen finds he must return to his old illusions, his old home, and his old life, all of which he finds more comfortable than the mythic and chivalrous quest he has been propelled into. A reluctant Faust who strikes a reverse bargain with the Devil for a return to mediocrity, he renounces his youthfulness and the three beauties Koshchei tempts him with—Guinevere, Anaitis, and Helen, symbols of faith, desire, and vision—in order to return to a quiet life with his scolding wife, a

diminished Odysseus figure who thankfully returns home to his shrewish Penelope, unable to sustain heroic ideals any longer. Offered Queen Helen, Jurgen worships a moment at her feet and then declines, sadly confessing to Koshchei that he no longer desires perfection. "For I am transmuted by time's handling! I shudder at the thought of living day-in and day-out with my vision!" (305). Cabell's narrative subverts the traditional role of the hero, as the rejuvenated Jurgen finds he cannot sustain the demands and possibilities of his youthful body in juxtaposition with his world-weary, aging mind. *Jurgen* is a commentary on art and life from the perspective of middle age, where the poignant and comic coexist, offering ironic distance and surprising insights, particularly about the impossibility of recapturing youthful hopes and ambitions. Made up of a variety of unrealistic materials, mythical and magical, the novel refutes the charge of escapism by painting with great fidelity the movement from youth to middle age and the impossibility of recapturing youthful illusions and hopes. By using such a wide spectrum of traditional materials that transform and morph one into another Cabell is able to create a feeling of history and myth pressing down on his protagonist, a sense of *longue durée* that weighs heavy on Jurgen and gives him reason to long for home, a comfortable if unexciting place.

Cabell has created here a *Bildungsroman à rebours*, I would argue, an education in how to accept maturity, with its waning of possibilities and loss of illusions. Godshalk has rightly pointed out, in the context of *Life of Manuel*, that Cabell's novels are "cynical works that rely on the tension between the real and the mythic for their vitality. [...] The life of their designs relies on the disjunction we all feel between our desires and our actual accomplishments, between our beliefs and our deeds" (121). In *Jurgen* Cabell deploys a remarkable range of metamorphoses of time and place so as to reveal our tendency towards superimposing meaningful patterns on existence; in this way he allows us to both laugh at our capacity for self-delusion and celebrate our creative urges. Metamorphosis here is the primary principle of life—we are all "transmuted by time's handling" and so are the spaces we inhabit, both outside us and, most importantly, within the precincts of our minds.

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PLACES IN METAMORPHOSIS AND REPRESENTATIONS OF AGING IN BRAZIL

GUIA GRIN DERBERT

Abstract

This paper discusses the metamorphosis of identities created by new images of aging and gerontological discourse in a Brazilian context. The central argument is that these images and discourses transform old age into a problem of individual neglect, a problem of failed consumers who were unable to adopt lifestyles and forms of consumption capable of assuring their well-being. Three intertwined social processes give a special configuration to this sense of the place of the aging other in Brazil: 1) new patterns of retirement that include an ever younger segment of the population among the retired people, 2) the creation of a series of new stages that separate adult life from old age such as “middle age,” “third age,” and “active retirement,” 3) new body technologies that transform Brazil into one of the leading countries as far as esthetic plastic surgery is concerned. A variety of Brazilian textual and ethnographic materials are examined to explore local disjunction of class and gender related to these social processes: gerontological literature produced by the Brazilian Gerontological Society, representations of aging and practices carried out by professionals and participants in recreational and educational programs for the third age, and images of aging in the media.

“Bad moods and depression, common among the elderly, are the consequences, not the causes of a badly-run life.”

“The important thing is to prevent. The geriatrician is not a doctor who specializes in treating worn-out old people. [...] Actually, the leading edge in geriatrics is prevention, which involves some basic recommendations. A positive attitude towards life, for example, is essential.”

“Another important tip is doing exercise. [...] Keeping fit reduces the degeneration of the neurotransmitters, responsible for directing information through the nervous system, and reduces the risk of mental disorders such as schizophrenia.”

“Miracles, however, do not exist. [...] a good doctor is going to recommend exercise and regular cholesterol exams, not vitamins [...] since youth in capsules has not been invented yet, and probably never will be. This means that whoever wants to enjoy old age is going to have to work at it.”

These are excerpts from interviews with Brazil’s best-known geriatricians for a report published in a popular Brazilian magazine (*Globo Ciência*, no. 30, 2002). They illustrate the central argument of this essay on the metamorphosis time operates on the aging body: old age is transformed into a problem of failed consumers that were unable to adopt lifestyles and forms of consumption capable of assuring their youth.

Brazil is a country in which the cult of beauty, youth, and sensuality has historically been considered the most prominent cultural characteristic along the axes of race, class, and ethnicity. This extreme emphasis on youth has as its corollary a premature aging of the population. Since the eighteenth century, travelers and historians have contrasted the beauty and sensuality of the young women with what Gilberto Freyre, one of the first Brazilian anthropologists, called the “negligence of body of our matrons above the age of eighteen” (Cited in Freyre 363-64).

In 1777, in her *Letters from the Islands of Teneriff, Brazil, the Cape of Good Hope and the East Indies*, Mrs. Kindersley commented that the elite women in Brazil “look[ed] old very early in life,” and quickly lost the delicacy and charm that had characterized them. Mrs. Maria Graham, in her *Journal of a Voyage to Brazil and Residence there during the years 1821, 1822, 1823*, was more vehement when she observed that elite women in the northeastern state of Bahia became “almost indecently slovenly after very early youth.” Similarly, in discussing Rio de Janeiro in the first decades of the nineteenth century, John Luccock said that among elite women, at eighteen they are already matrons, having attained complete maturity: “After twenty a decline. They become fat and flabby, develop a double chin, turn pale, or else they dry and wither [...] they grow more ugly, with down on their faces and with the air of a man or of a virago” (Cited in Freyre 363-364).

Premature aging was also a characteristic of Brazilian men. Kidder and Fletcher described elite young men, in the second half of the nineteenth century, in the following terms:

He is made a little old man before he is twelve years of age, - having his stiff black silk-hat, standing collar, and cane; and in the city he walks along as if everybody were looking at him, and as if he were encased in corsets. He does not run, or jump, or trundle hoop, or throw stones as boys in Europe and North America (Cited in Freyre 404).

Until the middle of the twentieth century, aging was an essentially private question, involving the family, individual planning, or charitable organizations. Other than the military, very few institutions could guarantee a retirement pension for their employees.

As of the 1980s, international organizations like the United Nations played an active role in developing new approaches to aging in different countries. These organizations pressured national governments to promote specific public policies about their older populations and created criteria for evaluating the results.¹ This global orientation rearticulated the meanings given to the most advanced stage of life in different cultural contexts.

In Brazil, the metamorphosis of old age from a private concern into a field of political practices preceded these initiatives on a global scale and became most evident in the debates on retirement pension levels and the policies for financing them. In the 1930s retirement was transformed into a right of the urban worker and was granted in relation to the years worked (25 years for women, and 30 years for men) and not by chronological age.² For this reason, the age of retirees today is relatively premature; in 2001, more than half of the 23 million Brazilian retirees were under 50 years of age.

In the 1980s, the right to retirement was extended to rural workers and it was only in the 1990s that the right to retirement was made universal in the sense that the equivalent of one minimum monthly salary was granted to all Brazilians 70 years of age and older without other resources for survival.³ The disparity in retirement wages and pensions of employees from different occupational sectors – such as judges or members of congress, who may receive benefits exceeding one hundred minimum

¹ For the United Nation Conference on Aging see Cohen.

² Retirement pensions are paid by the state in exchange for a monthly contribution made by the worker and his or her company. The predominant model in Brazil is what is conventionally called the German Bismark model in which the retirement pension system is organized on an occupational basis.

³ Wages are set according to multiples of the federally mandated monthly minimum salary, such that someone might express their earnings in terms of making three minimum salaries per month, or ten, or forty. This measure is also the basis for retirement benefits.

salaries from the state – is a pressing issue in current political debates about social and economic injustices in Brazilian society. In spite of being a country with large expanses of land, 180 million inhabitants and the eighth largest economy in the world, Brazil has one of the highest indices of social inequality, where about 29% of the population lives on less than US\$1.00 per day.

It is in this context of premature aging and retirement that another type of metamorphosis of old age takes place. This essay discusses the way in which the “third age” operates as a way of resurrection and celebration of life and as such erases old age from Brazilian social concerns. To explore the set of signifying practices this category articulates, I describe the arenas of ethical dilemmas shaped by different actors interested in designing a positive experience of aging: gerontologists, organizations for the third age, and the media.

The new generation of Brazilian gerontologists enthusiastically combats images of old age as a period of physical decline and absence of social roles. Inspired by international gerontology, they emphasize the advantages brought by aging and were active in promoting organizations where a successful aging experience can be shared. These recreational spaces linked to both governmental and non-governmental organizations include different types of programmed activities such as senior citizen centers, open schools for the “best age,” and universities for the third age. The initial goal of these initiatives was to bring together people over 70 years of age; instead, they mobilize mostly women in their 50s or 60s who are interested in making aging a radically different experience from that of women in previous generations. These recreational groups are spaces for enthusiastically refuting old age by transforming the third age into an opportunity to discover new identities, carry out projects abandoned in earlier stages of life, and establish more rewarding relationships with people in their or in other age groups.

The interaction between experts, organizations for the third age, and the media allows healthy people with autonomy and sufficient income to experience a more gratifying aging process, which offers these young old people opportunities to renew their bodies, identities, and self-image. In this sense, contemporary Brazil appears to be quite distant from that place in which matrons become “almost indecently slovenly after very early youth” (Graham).

Nevertheless, this commitment to positive aging conceals the specific problems of old age. The loss of cognitive abilities and physical and emotional control – abilities that in democratic societies are fundamental for the recognition of the individual as an autonomous person capable of

fully exercising the rights of citizenship – are seen as the result of transgressions committed by individuals against their own bodies and health. In a country that combines blatant social hierarchies with a consumer culture, old age is transformed into a problem of failed consumers who have been unable to choose goods and services that may forestall aging. Old age may thus vanish once again from the range of wider Brazilian social concerns.

The Uses of the Third Age

The third age is an expression which was recently introduced and quickly absorbed into the Brazilian vocabulary.⁴ Its current use among researchers interested in the study of aging does not make reference to a precise chronological age, but instead is a term for referring to older people that has not yet acquired a disparaging connotation. The invention of the third age is understood by authors such as Guillemard (1986) and Lenoir (1979) as the result of the universalization of the right to retirement pension guaranteeing that the last stage of life would correspond to remunerated inactivity. Since the 1970s, the elderly – seen as the most underprivileged sector of European society in the 1940s and 1950s – could no longer be considered a segment of the population that is deprived of economic resources. The third age is not synonymous with decay, poverty, and illness, but is instead seen as a time to enjoy activities while free from the constraints of professional life.

In Brazil, the universalization of retirement and old age pensions guarantees the elderly economic conditions not afforded to the population in other age groups, especially among youths. Studies have shown that the average income of those over 60 years of age is greater than that of those under 30 years of age, and that in families which include elderly people, 52% of the family income comes from their income. In these families, 49% were headed by an elderly person and had children living in the same household (Camarano 1999). Thus research on dependence between generations challenges the idea that the elderly are a burden for the family. On the contrary, the presence of a retiree in a home is one of the reasons for a lower rate of poverty; in other words, poverty among the younger

⁴ The expression originated in France in the 1970s with the creation of the *Universités du Troisième Age*, and was then incorporated into British vocabulary with the creation of the Universities of the Third Age in Cambridge, England, in the summer of 1981 (Laslett).

generations would be two percentage points greater if the elderly person lived in a separate home (Barros et al. 1999).

The privileged position of the elderly in relation to the other segments of the population revealed by the quantitative data should not mislead us with regard to the gross differences in income within this segment of the population, but these data show that in all classes the elderly enjoy greater consumer power than youths.

Premature retirement and the fact that retirement does not mark the transition of individuals into old age establish a peculiar relation with the way in which a series of intermediate stages of adult life are created, such as “middle age,” the “third age,” and “active retirement.” These new stages of adult life are not perceived as mature interludes that precede old age, but are propitious moments to realize dreams deferred in other stages of life and to enthusiastically combat aging symptoms.

Dona Lázara, a 62-year-old seamstress who participated in a recreational group for the third age doing dance, singing, and yoga can be considered an icon of the way these new images of aging are promoted when she made the following comment:

My big transformation began when my daughter gave me an unexpected gift: she signed me up for a course in body expression. I was 49 years old and had never worn shorts. In the first classes I felt ridiculous, old, awkward. I continued and my mind opened – it opened to the world. I lost weight and began to feel alive (*Claudia*).

The third age does not have as a reference a specific socio-economic stratum, it is, primarily, a call to action for those who feel prematurely aged to engage in a struggle against attitudes and behaviors stereotypically related to old age.

In Brazil, a new language actively deconstructs age as a relevant marker for behavior and lifestyle. This deconstruction is certainly fed by consumer society's conceptions of the body and health. According to Featherstone,

Consumer culture latches onto the prevalent self-preservationist conception of the body, which encourages the individual to adopt instrumental strategies to combat the deterioration and decay, (applauded too by the state bureaucracy who seek to reduce health costs by educating the public against body neglect) and combines it with the notion that the body is a vehicle of pleasure and self-expression (170).

The view that the body is entirely moldable and that its imperfections are neither natural nor immutable is radicalized in a context in which the

cults of beauty and sensuality are set against the premature aging of the population.

A new market of goods and services emerges in which flaccidity, wrinkles, and even dissatisfaction and sadness are transformed into indicators of some sort of moral lassitude that should be treated with the help of the cosmetics industry, physical exercise, and the motivational activities offered through the recreational centers for the third age.

The growing interest in Brazilian society for rejuvenation technologies casts these new images of aging into sharp relief. According to the Brazilian Society of Plastic Surgery, in the year 2000 Brazil was the country in which the greatest number of plastic surgeries for aesthetic purposes was performed. Nearly 350,000 people underwent at least one aesthetic surgery, a number equivalent to 207 out of every 100,000 inhabitants of the country. For the same year, the United States, the historical leader in this ranking, registered a rate of 185 individuals who underwent aesthetic surgery for every 100,000 inhabitants.

The struggle against aging is the main reason given for aesthetic plastic surgery, followed by the desire to correct physical imperfections because of their psychological burden, and finally an interest in the sculpting of bodies. These data show that this kind of surgical intervention is not the exclusive privilege of small economic elites, but is also sought by members of the middle classes. It is mostly women who invest in this type of surgery, but men underwent 30% of the total number of aesthetic plastic surgeries carried out in 2000, while 13% of the total number was conducted on minors under the age of 18 (*"Brasil, império do bisturi"*).

The plastic surgery market reaches ever lower income levels in the population. By parceling the payments for surgery, which may be extended over as much as a 24-month period, these interventions are no longer the privilege of the most wealthy. The plastic surgeon Pitanguy, for example, is so popular in the country that he was the theme of a samba song during *Carnaval* of 1999.⁵ Accordingly, exercise gym centers are part of the landscape of the poorest neighborhoods in large Brazilian cities.⁶ In an analysis of body fitness among the inhabitants of Rio de Janeiro, anthropologist Goldenberg asserted that "there are no fat or ugly people, only lazy people."

The transformation of the most advanced life stages into privileged moments for self-realization, the fact that most elderly in all social classes tend to have greater resources for consumption, and the self-preserving

⁵ "In the universe of beauty," Master Pitanguy – Carnival song, by the Rio de Janeiro samba school Caprichosos de Pilares.

⁶ On gyms in Rio de Janeiro, see Malysse.