

BY COZZENS POSSESSED

A Review of Reviews

DWIGHT MACDONALD

THE most alarming literary news in years is the enormous success of James Gould Cozzens' *By Love Possessed*.* It sold 170,000 copies in the first six weeks of publication—more than all eleven of the author's previous novels put together. At this writing, it has been at the top of the best-seller lists for two months. Hollywood and the *Reader's Digest* have paid \$100,000 apiece for the privilege of wreaking their wills upon it. And the *New Yorker* published a cartoon—one matron to another: "I was looking forward to a few weeks of just doing nothing after Labor Day when along came James Gould Cozzens."

There's nothing new in all this—after all, *something* has to be the No. 1 Best-Seller at any given moment. What is new appears if one considers Grace Metalious' *Peyton Place*, which was at the top for a full year, before *By Love Possessed* displaced it. *Peyton Place* is a familiar kind of best-seller, a pedestrian job, an artifact rather than a work of art (putting it mildly) that owes its popularity to nothing more subtle than a remarkably heavy charge of Sex; perhaps its best-known predecessor is *Forever Amber*, fabricated a decade ago by another notably untalented lady. But Cozzens is not of the company of Kathleen Winsor, Edna Ferber, Daphne Du Maurier, Lloyd C. Douglas, and other such humble, though well-paid, artisans. Nor can he be "placed" at the middle level of best-sellerdom, that of writers like Herman Wouk, John Hersey, and Irwin Shaw, nor even (perhaps) on the empyrean heights occupied by Marquand and Stein-

beck. He is a "serious" writer, and never more serious than in this book. That so uncompromising a work, written in prose of an artificiality and complexity that approaches the impenetrable—indeed often achieves it—that this should have become what the publishers gloatingly call "a runaway best-seller" is something new. How do those matrons cope with it, I wonder. Perhaps their very innocence in literary matters is a help—an Australian aboriginal would probably find *Riders of the Purple Sage* as hard to read as *The Golden Bowl*.

The requirements of the mass market explain a good deal of bad writing today. But Cozzens here isn't writing down, he is obviously giving it the works: *By Love Possessed* is his bid for immortality. It is Literature or it is nothing. Unfortunately none of the reviewers has seriously considered the second alternative. The book is not only a best-seller, it is a *succès d'estime*. Such reviews, such enthusiasm, such unanimity, such nonsense! The only really hostile review I have been able to find was by William Buckley, Jr., of all people, in his *National Review*. Granted that he was somewhat motivated by a non-literary consideration—the book is lengthily anti-Catholic—still I thought his deflation skillful and just.

Looking through Alice Payne Hackett's *Sixty Years of Best Sellers*, I find among the top ten novels between 1935 and 1955 just seven that I would call in any way "serious," namely: Wolfe's *Of Time and the River* (1935), Huxley's *Eyeless in Gaza* (1936), Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* (1937), Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1941), Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), and James Jones's *From Here to Eternity* (1951). About one every three years, with a significant falling off in the last decade. It is a slim harvest, in both

ACCORDING TO DWIGHT MACDONALD, the phenomenal success of James Gould Cozzens' *By Love Possessed* indicates a new trend in American middlebrow culture. Mr. Macdonald is a *New Yorker* staff writer. His latest book, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, was reviewed in the November COMMENTARY.

*Harcourt, Brace, 570 pp., \$5.00.

quantity and quality, but the difference between the least of these and *By Love Possessed* is the difference between a work of art on some level and to some extent achieved, and one that falls below any reasonable literary criterion. Yet the reviewers almost to a man behaved as if they were possessed. This sincere enthusiasm for a mediocre work is more damaging to literary standards than any amount of cynical ballyhoo. One can guard against the Philistines outside the gates. It is when they get into the Ivory Tower that they are dangerous.*

THERE seems little doubt that *By Love Possessed* has been selling on the strength of the reviews. (Word-of-mouth comment has probably worked the other way; I've found only two people who liked it, and the most common reply is: "I couldn't read it.") All the commercially important journals reviewed it prominently and enthusiastically. The *Sunday Times* and *Herald Tribune* book sections gave it front-page reviews, by Malcolm Cowley ("one of the country's truly distinguished novelists") and Jessamyn West ("Rich, Wise, Major Novel of Love"). *Time* put Cozzens on the cover—Herman Wouk was there a year or two ago—and pronounced *By Love Possessed* "the best American novel in years." Orville Prescott in the *Times* thought it "magnificent," Edward Weeks in the *Atlantic* found it "wise and compassionate," and Whitney Balliett in the *Saturday Review* divined in it "the delicate and subtle tension between action and thought that is the essence of balanced fiction."

The most extraordinary performances were those of Brendan Gill in the *New Yorker* and John Fischer in *Harper's*. The former praised it in terms that might have been thought a trifle excessive if he had been writing about *War and Peace*: "a masterpiece . . . the author's masterpiece . . . almost anybody's masterpiece . . . supremely satisfying . . . an immense achievement . . . spellbinding . . . masterpiece." The mood is lyrical, stammering with heartfelt emotion: "No American novelist of the twentieth century has attempted more than Mr. Cozzens attempts in the course of this

long and bold and delicate book, which, despite its length, one reads through at headlong speed and is then angry with oneself for having reached the end so precipitately."

Mr. Fischer was more coherent but equally emphatic. Speaking from "the Editor's Easy Chair," as *Harper's* quaintly styles it, he headed his piece: "NOMINATION FOR A NOBEL PRIZE," and he meant it. For one slip or another—sentimentality, neuroticism, subjectivism, sloppy plot construction, or habitual use of "characters who are in one way or another in revolt against society"—he faults all the other competitors (the habitual-use-of-deleterious-characters rap alone disposes of Faulkner, Hemingway, Steinbeck, Algren, Mailer, Capote, Bellow, Jones, Paul Bowles, and Tennessee Williams) until finally James Gould Cozzens stands out in superb isolation, a monument of normality, decency, and craftsmanship.†

The provincial reviewers followed their leaders: "COZZENS PENS ENDURING TALE" (*Cleveland News*), "ONE OF THE GREAT NOVELS OF THE PRESENT CENTURY" (*San Francisco Call-Bulletin*), "finest American novel I have read in many a year" (Bernardine Kiely in the *Ladies' Home Journal*), "COZZENS WRITES ABSORBING STORY IN EXCELLENT AND PROFOUND NOVEL" (Alice Dixon Bond in the *Boston Herald*; her column is called "The Case for Books"—is there an adjacent feature, "The Case Against Books"?). Leslie Hanscom in the *New York World-Telegram*—there are provincials in big cities, too—was impressed by Cozzens' "awesome scrupulosity as an artist." Mr. Hanscom's scrupulosity as a critic inspires

†Actually, even according to Mr. Fischer's absurd standards, Cozzens doesn't deserve this eminence. He is not "a classic mind operating in a romantic period" nor does his novel run counter to "the Gothic extravagance of current fiction"; as I shall show, his mind lacks clarity, control, and form—the typical classic virtues—and his prose is as Gothic as Harkness Memorial Quadrangle (also as unaesthetic). As for the alleged normality of his characters—"ordinary people, living ordinary lives, in ordinary circumstances" with whom the reader "can identify himself as he never can with the characters of an Algren or a Mailer"—they are normal only on the surface; once this is broken through, they are as neurotic and fantastic in their behavior as other current fictional people. The chief difference is that their creator often doesn't realize it.

*A similar case of demoniacal possession took place in London in 1956 apropos of Colin Wilson's *The Outsider*.

little awe; "Hemingway and Faulkner, move over!" he summed up. The frankest of the provincials was Carl Victor Little in the *Houston Press*: "The *N.Y. Times*, *Saturday Review* and other publications have taken out of the ivory tower the most accomplished critics available to join in the hallelujahs. So about all I can do is ditto the dithyrambs."

The literary quarterlies have not yet been heard from, but the liberal weeklies have. They didn't exactly ditto the dithyrambs, except for Granville Hicks in the *New Leader*: ". . . a novel to which talk of greatness is not irrelevant." But they didn't exactly veto them, either. Howard Nemerov in the *Nation*, Sarel Eimerl in the *New Republic*, and Richard Ellmann in the *Reporter* were all critical but respectful.

Mr. Nemerov's review I thought especially interesting. He was much alive to the use of the novel by the middlebrow reviewers as a stick to beat the highbrows, but, like Ellmann and Eimerl, not at all alive to what seems to me the chief defect of a very defective novel: the atrocious style. My first thought was that this is odd because Nemerov is a poet. My second was that perhaps that's the trouble. Our taste may have been corrupted not only by mass culture but also by its opposite—as we learned in old Doctor Engels' dialectical kindergarten, opposites are first cousins—the anything-goes subjective style which some of our painters and poets have evolved as a protest against, and an escape from, mass culture. After all, *By Love Possessed* is not much harder to read than most contemporary poetry.

PERHAPS we should now take a look at what Cozzens has to say in *By Love Possessed*, and how he says it. The normative hero is Arthur Winner, a reputable, middle-aged lawyer and family man who is exposed, during the two days and nights covered by the action, to a variety of unsettling experiences, which stimulate in him some even more unnerving memories. Winner is presented as a good man—kind, reasonable, sensitive, decent—and so he is taken by the reviewers: "The grandest moral vision in all Cozzens' work—a passionately good, passionately religious, yet wholly secular man, whose very failures are only bad dreams" (Balliett), "intelligent, successful, tolerant

. . . the quintessence of our best qualities" (Gill). I'm unwilling to go farther than the *Kansas City Star*: "thoroughly honest, genteel, devoted to his work, and conscientious." Passion seems to me just what is most obviously missing in Arthur Winner; he's about as passionate as a bowl of oatmeal.

He is, in fact, a prig. His responses to the many appeals made to him in the course of the story—he's always on top, handing down advice and help, a great temptation to prig-gishness—while decent enough in form ("genteel") are in reality ungenerous and self-protective. To a Catholic lady who tries to justify her faith: "Where there are differences in religion, I think it generally wiser not to discuss them." To a seduced girl's father, who has flourished a gun: "Be very careful! Return the gun; and meanwhile, show it to no one else. Don't take it out of your pocket; and don't consider pointing it. Pointing a weapon is a separate indictable offense, and would get you an additional fine, and an additional jail term." To his teen-age daughter, who wants to go dancing: "A real gone band? I believe I grasp your meaning. Clearly a good place to know. Where is it?" "Oh, it's called the Old Timbers Tavern. It's down toward Mechanicsville, not far." "Yes; I've heard of it. And I'm afraid, whatever the reputed quality of the band, I must ask you not to go there." "Oh, Father!" That he is right in each case, that the Catholic lady is addlewitted, that the father is a fool and a braggart, that the Old Timbers Tavern is in fact no place for a young girl to go—all this is beside the point. A prig is one who delights in demonstrating his superiority on small occasions, and it is precisely when he has a good case that he rises to the depths of prigocity.

Although Winner behaves like a prig, he is not meant to be one, if only because the main theme of the novel, the moral testing and education of a good man, would then collapse, and the philosophical tragedy that Cozzens has tried to write would have to be recast in a satiric if not a downright farcical mode. Here as elsewhere, the author is guilty of the unforgivable novelistic sin: he is unaware of the real nature of his characters, that is, the words and actions he gives them lead the reader to other conclusions than those intended by the author.

His characters often speak brutally, for

example, not because they are supposed to be brutes, but because their creator apparently thinks this is the way men talk. An elderly lawyer, civilly asked by a client to make some changes in the investing of her trust fund, replies: "You're getting senile, Maud. Try not to be more of a fool than you can help." A doctor, presented as a gentleman, meets the wife of a friend at a party, and, no dialogue or motivation given before, opens up: "What's your trouble, baby? Or can I guess? . . . Tell Pappy how many periods you've missed. . . . You know as well as I do you're one of those girls who only has to look at him to get herself knocked up." She leaves the room "indignantly" (the adverb implies she's a mite touchy) and he turns to Clarissa, Winner's wife:

"I knew it as soon as I looked at her. Sure. One night she thinks: Too much trouble to get up; the hell with it! You two ought to trade apparatus. Then everybody'd be happy."

Clarissa said: "Reg, you're not being very funny—"

"That's right. I don't feel very funny. Sometimes you get your bellyful of women—their goddam notions; their goddam talk-talk-talk; their goddam sacks of tripes!"

No reason is given for any of these onslaughts, aside from the fact that all three recipients are women; this seems to be Cozzens' idea of manly straight-from-the-shoulder talk. Curious. Curious, too, Winner's pooh-poohing attitude when he is appealed to by the feminine victims.

For Winner, too, is something of a brute, without his creator suspecting it. There is, for example, that odd business on page 428 when Mrs. Pratt, after her silly, hysterical religiosity has beaten vainly for some thirty pages against the rock of Winner's Episcopalian rectitude (Mrs. Pratt is a Roman Catholic), is finally checkmated. She has to go to the bathroom. For reasons obscure to me, this is presented as the decisive proof of hypocrisy: "At fact's surely unkindest prank of all, Arthur Winner must protest, generously indignant." ("Meanly delighted" would be more accurate.) For a page, Winner ruminates on his antagonist's discomfiture, concluding: "But how in the world of fancy did you put delightfully the human circumstance whose undressed substance was that Celia, Celia, Celia shits—or even that Mrs. Pratt most urgently requires to

piss?" Methinks the gentleman doth protest too much, and methinks that Swift's allusion to Celia's necessity was positively healthy compared to Cozzens-Winner's resort to scatology to win an argument.

THIS leads us, in a way, to sex. The crucial episode, the one that more than any other shakes Winner's faith in himself and in the uprightness of his life, is something that happened years before the action begins and that keeps coming back into his mind: his affair with Marjorie, the wife of his close friend and law partner, Julius Penrose. On the day after his first wife's death, Marjorie—another silly, hysterical woman—comes to the house and in a rush of emotion offers herself to him. He is about to take her, on his wife's bed, when the phone rings. That time he is literally saved by the bell, but later, one summer when Penrose is away, they do have a frantic affair. At no time is love or even lust involved: "Far from coveting his neighbor's wife, he rather disliked her, found her more unattractive than not." The only reason given for Winner's reaction to Marjorie is that she was there. Like that mountain climber. Or as Marjorie's remorselessly philosophical husband puts it in his pidgin (or shall we say turkey) English: "I venture to assert that when the gadfly's sting is fairly driven in, when this indefeasible urge of the flesh presses them, few men of normal potency prove able to refrain their feet from that path." But then (a) why hasn't Winner had dozens of such affairs instead of only this one—and for that matter, why was Marjorie able to seduce him only that one summer?; and (b) granted that some men do indeed so behave, why Winner? Does an Episcopalian lawyer, a rational, decent family man with no more and no different sexual urges than the normal ones, act like a dead-end kid? Cozzens insists that the best of us do so behave, but if we do, then we aren't the best. There might be some individual quirk in Winner to explain it, but it is not given; on the contrary, Cozzens' point is precisely Winner's lack of such quirks—"few men of normal potency prove able to refrain their feet from that path." This is neither realistic nor imaginative. It is the shocked revulsion of the adolescent who discovers that papa and mama do it.

The formula for a best-seller now includes

a minimum of "outspoken" descriptions of sexual activities, and *By Love Possessed* doesn't skimp here. Its inventory includes rape, seduction, marital and extra-marital intercourse, with touches of sadism, lesbianism, onanism, and homosexuality. *By Sex Possessed* would be a more accurate title. There is very little love, which the author presents as at best a confusing and chancey business, to be patiently endured, like the weather. The provincials, for some reason, get the point here much better than their urban leaders did. The *Chattanooga Times* wonderfully summed up the theme as "the situation of rational man beset by passion," adding: "Cozzens regards each form of love as a threat to Arthur Winner's power to reason, to his ability to live life with meaning." It's too bad this acuteness in diagnosis was not accompanied by equal skill in evaluation; Cozzens' notion of love was accepted as valid; but it isn't, since love, even passion, is not an extraneous monkey wrench thrown into the machinery of life, but rather a prime mover which may burst everything apart but which must function if there is to be any motion at all. This is, at any rate, how the makers of our literature, from Homer to Tolstoy, Proust, and James, have treated the theme; Cozzens' efficiency-expert approach (*Gumming Up the Works*) is echt-American but creatively impoverishing.

"The readers didn't go much for Cozzens," observed the *Detroit Times*, "until he wrote something with some sex in it." This cynicism is not wholly justified. The literary prestige conferred by the reviewers was, I think, the chief factor. One of the consumer's goods to which every American feels he has a right in this age of plenty is Culture, and *By Love Possessed* on the living-room table is a symbol of the owner's exercise of this right. Granted that the reviews may have led many proprietors of living-room tables to think they could combine business with pleasure, so to speak, word must have gotten around fairly soon that the sexual passages were unrewarding.

For even the sex is meager—perhaps the real title should be *By Reason Possessed*. I have the impression that Cozzens is as suspicious of sex as of love. Most of the sexual encounters he conscientiously describes are either fatuous (Winner and his first bride), sordid (Ralph and Veronica), or disgusting

(Winner and Marjorie). Far worse—from a sales viewpoint—they are written in his customary turgid and inexpressive style. Take for example the two pages (264-65) on Winner's love-making with his second wife, the most concrete description of the sexual act in the book and also the only place where sex is presented as one might say positively. This passage sounds partly like a tongue-tied Dr. Johnson: "the disposings of accustomed practice, the preparations of purpose and consent, the familiar mute motions of furtherance." But mostly like a *Fortune* description of an industrial process: "thrilling thuds of his heart . . . moist manipulative reception . . . the mutual heat of pumped bloods . . . the thoroughgoing, deepening, widening work of their connection; and his then no less than hers, the tempo slowed in concert to engineer a tremulous joint containment and continuance . . . the deep muscle groups, come to their vertex, were in a flash convulsed."*

THE reviewers think of Cozzens, as he does himself, as a cool, logical, unsentimental, and implacably deep thinker. "Every character and event is bathed in the glow of a reflective intelligence," puffs *Time*, while Brendan Gill huffs: "The Cozzens intellect, which is of exceptional breadth and toughness, coolly directs the Cozzens heart." In reality, Cozzens is not so much cool as inhibited, not so much unsentimental as frightened by feeling; he is not logical at all, and his mind is shallow and muddy rather than clear and deep. I think Julius Penrose may fairly be taken as Cozzens' beau ideal of an intellectual, as Winner is his notion of a good man. If Penrose is meant to be taken ironically, if his pompous philosophizings are supposed to be burlesques, then the novel collapses at its center—leaving aside the fact they would be tedious as parodies—since it is Penrose who throughout the book guides Winner toward the solution of his problems. There's a Penrose in Homer, but he's not confused with Ulysses. His name is Nestor.

The reviewers, of course, were impressed by this club bore: "a dark, supernal intelli-

*"The passages having to do with physical love have a surprising lyric power."—Jessamyn West in the *N.Y. Herald Tribune*.

gence" (Balliett), "one of the most compelling [what *does* that critical standby mean, I wonder] and memorable figures in recent writing" (Jessamyn West), "the scalded mind of the archskeptic . . . a corrosive nonstop monologist with a tongue like a poisoned dart" (*Time*). The intellectual climax—more accurately, anti-climax—of the book is a thirty-page conversation between Penrose and Winner—at their club, appropriately enough—about life and love. It reminds me of two grunt-and-groan wrestlers heaving their ponderous bulks around without ever getting a grip on each other. "How could she like these things [sadistic acts by her first husband]?" Penrose rhetorically asks at one point, immediately continuing in the strange patois of Cozzensville: "My considered answer: Marjorie, though all unknowing, could! She could see such a punishment as condign. She had to submit, because in an anguished way, she craved to have done to her what she was persuaded she deserved to have done to her." Having got off this bit of kindergarten Freudianism: "He gazed an instant at Arthur Winner. 'You find this far-fetched?' he said. 'Yes, we who are so normal are reluctant to entertain such ideas.'" Ideas are always entertained in Cozzensville, though they are not always entertaining. After fifteen more lines of elaboration, Penrose again fears he has outstripped his audience: "You consider this too complicated?" To which Winner, manfully: "Perhaps not. But I've often wondered how far anyone can see into what goes on in someone else. I've read somewhere that it would pose the acutest head to draw forth and discover what is lodged in the heart." Now where could he have read *that*?

It is interesting to note that Penrose and Winner, the two "point-of-view" characters, are lawyers, and that the processes of the law occupy a considerable amount of the book. The reviewers marvel that Cozzens has been able to master so much legal know-how, but I think there is more to it than that. We Americans have always had a weakness for the law. Its objectivity reassures our skittish dread of emotion and its emphasis on The Facts suits our pragmatic temper. But above all the law is our substitute for philosophy, which makes us almost as nervous as emotion does. Its complicated,

precise formulae have the external qualities of theoretical thinking, lacking only the most essential one—they don't illuminate reality, since what is "given" is not the conditions of life but merely a narrow convention. Dickens, Tolstoy, and other novelists have written law-court scenes showing that truth is too small a fish to be caught in the law's coarse meshes. But to Cozzens a trial is reality while emotional, disorderly life is the illusion. He delights in the tedious complications of lawyer's talk, the sort of thing one skips in reading the court record of even the most sensational trials. On page 344 a clergyman incautiously asks Winner about the property rights of churches in Pennsylvania. "The difference is technical," Winner begins with gusto, and three pages later is still expatiating.

This fascination with the law is perhaps a clue to Cozzens' defects as a novelist. It explains the peculiar aridity of his prose, its needless qualifications, its clumsiness, its defensive qualifications (a lawyer qualifies negatively—so he can't be caught out later; but a novelist qualifies positively—to make his meaning not safer but clearer). And his sensibility is lawyer-like in its lack of both form and feeling, its peculiar combination of a brutal domineering pragmatism ("Just stick to the facts, please!") with abstract fancywork, a kind of Victorian jigsaw decoration that hides more than it reveals. I, too, think the law is interesting, but as an intellectual discipline, like mathematics or crossword puzzles. I feel Cozzens uses it as a defense against emotion ("sentimentality"). Confusing it with philosophy, he makes it bear too heavy a load, so that reality is distorted and even the law's own qualities are destroyed, its logic and precision blurred, its technical elegance coarsened. There's too much emotion in his law and too much law in his emotion.

THE three earlier Cozzens novels I've read, *The Last Adam*, *The Just and the Unjust*, and *Guard of Honor*, were written in a straightforward if commonplace style. But here Cozzens has tried to write Literature, to develop a complicated individual style, to convey deeper meanings than he has up to now attempted. Slimly endowed as either thinker or stylist, he has succeeded only in fuzzing it up, inverting the syntax, dragging

in Latin-root polysyllables. Stylistically, *By Love Possessed* is a neo-Victorian cakewalk.* A cakewalk by a singularly awkward contestant. Confusing laboriousness with profundity, the reviewers have for the most part not detected the imposture.

There is some evidence, if one reads closely and also between the lines, that some of the reviewers had their doubts. But they adopted various strategies for muffling them. Messrs. Gill, Fischer, and Balliett, while applauding the style in general, refrained from quoting anything. The last-named, after praising the "compact, baked, fastidious sentences" went into a long, worried paragraph which inferred the opposite. "The unbending intricacies of thought . . . seem to send his sentences into impossible log-jams," he wrote, which is like saying of a girl, "She doesn't seem pretty." Jessamyn West warned, "You may come away with a certain feeling of tiredness," and left it at that. Malcolm Cowley managed to imply the book is a masterpiece without actually saying so—the publishers couldn't extract a single quote. With that cooniness he used to deploy in the 30's when he was confronted with an important work that was on the right (that is, the "left") side but was pretty terrible, Cowley, here also confronted with a conflict between his taste and his sense of the *Zeitgeist*, managed to praise with faint damns. One magisterial sentence, in particular, may be recommended to all ambitious young book reviewers: "His style used to be as clear as a mountain brook; now it has become a little weed-grown and murky, like the brook when it wanders through a meadow." A meadowy brook is pretty *too*—it shows the mature Cozzens now feels, in Cowley's words, that "life is more complicated than he once believed."

A favorite reviewer's gambit was that Cozzens' prose may be involved but so is James's. "One drawback is the style," *Time* admitted, "which is frosted with parenthetical clauses, humpbacked syntax, Jamesian involutions, Faulknerian meanderings." I am myself no foe of the parenthesis, nor do I mind a little syntactical humping at times,

*"CAKEWALK—a form of entertainment among American Negroes in which a prize of a cake was given for the most accomplished steps and figures."—WEBSTER.

but I feel this comparison is absurd. James's involutions are (a) necessary to precisely discriminate his meaning; (b) solid parts of the architecture of the sentence; and (c) controlled by a fine ear for euphony. Faulkner does meander, but there is emotional force, descriptive richness behind his wanderings. They both use words that are not only in the dictionary but also in the living language, and use them in conversational rhythms. Their style is complex because they are saying something complicated, not, as with Cozzens, because they cannot make words do what they want them to do.

But the main burden of the reviewers was not doubt but affirmation. In reading their praise of Cozzens' prose, I had an uneasy feeling that perhaps we were working with different texts.

"Every sentence has been hammered, filed and tested until it bears precisely the weight it was designed to carry, and does it with clarity and grace," wrote John Fischer. The sentences have been hammered all right:

Recollected with detachment, these self-concocted quandaries, these piffing dilemmas that young love could invent for itself were comic—too much ado about nothing much! Arthur Winner Junior was entangled laughably in his still-juvenile illogicalities and inconsistencies. Absurdly set on working contradictories and incompatibles, he showed how the world was indeed a comedy for those who think. By his unripe, all-or-nothing-at-all views, he was bound to be self-confounded. By the ridiculous impracticalness of his aspirations, he was inescapably that figure of fun whose lofty professions go with quite other performances. The high endeavor's very moments of true predominance guaranteed the little joke-on-them to follow.

This is not a Horrible Example—we shall have some later—but a typical, run-of-the-mill Cozzens paragraph, chosen at random. It seems to me about as bad as prose can get—what sensitive or even merely competent novelist would write a phrase like "the ridiculous impracticalness of his aspirations"?

"Mr. Cozzens is a master of dialogue," wrote Orville Prescott. On the contrary, he has no ear for speech at all. "You answer well, Arthur!" says one matron. "But, to my very point!" And another: "They're all, or almost all, down at the boathouse, swim-

ming, Arthur." A practicing lawyer, not supposed to be either pompous or balmy, uses the following expressions during a chat: "I merit the reproof no doubt. . . . My unbecoming boasting you must lay to my sad disability. . . . I'm now in a fettle fine. . . . Our colloquy was brief." In short, Cozzens' people tend to talk like Cozzens. They're out for that cake, too.

"He has always written with complete clarity," wrote Granville Hicks, "but here, without forsaking clarity and correctness, he achieves great eloquence and even poetic power." On the contrary, malphony exfoliates, as our author might put it. As:

The succussive, earthquake-like throwing-over of a counted-on years-old stable state of things had opened fissures. Through one of them, Arthur Winner stared a giddy, horrifying moment down unplumbed, nameless abysses in himself. He might later deny the cognition, put thoughts of the undiscovered country away, seek to lose the memory; yet the heart's mute halt at every occasional, accidental recollection of those gulfs admitted their existence, confessed his fearful close shave.

"Succussive" is cake-walking, since it means "violently shaking . . . as of earthquakes" and so merely duplicates the next word; a good writer wouldn't use four hyphenated expressions in a row; he would also avoid the "occasional, accidental" rhyme, and the reference to unplumbed abysses; he would ask himself what a mute halt is (as versus a noisy halt?); and he would sense that "close shave" is stylistically an anticlimax to so solemnly elevated a passage. It's all very puzzling. Here's Richard Ellmann of Northwestern University, who has been perceptive about Joyce's prose, finding *By Love Possessed* "so pleasant to read," while I find almost every sentence grates.*

*As: "Thinking last night of Ralph's 'Joanie,' those Moores, all unsuspecting; whose 'shame' or 'disgrace' of the same kind (if more decent in degree) stood accomplished, waiting merely to be discovered to them, Arthur Winner had felt able to pre-figure, following the first horrified anger, the distraught recriminations, the general fury of family woe, a bitter necessary acceptance." I find such prose almost impossible to read, partly because of an inexpressive, clumsy use of words, partly because the thought is both abstract and unclear, but chiefly because the rhythms are all wrong. Instead of carrying one forward, they drop one flat, and one must begin anew with each phrase. An artist creates a world,

"Its author has become the most technically accomplished American novelist alive," wrote Whitney Balliett. Let us say rather: the least technically accomplished. To list a few defects of style:

(1) *Melodramatics*. "Deaf as yesterday to all representations of right, he purposed further perfidy, once more pawning his honor to obtain his lust. Deaf as yesterday to all remonstrances of reason, he purposed to sell himself over again to buy venery's disappearing dross." (Haven't seen "dross" in print since *East Lynne*.)

(2) *Confucius Say*. A queer strangled sententiousness often seizes upon our author. "In real life, effects of such disappointment are observed to be unending." "The resolve to rise permitted no intermissions; ambition was never sated." Like shot in game or sand in clams, such gritty nuggets are strewn through the book to set on edge the teeth of the reader—though not, apparently, of the reviewer.

(3) *Pointless Inversion*. As Wolcott Gibbs once wrote of *Time*: "Backward ran sentences till reeled the mind." Examples: "Unintelligible to them would be the law." "Owned and operated by Noah's father was a busy grist mill." "Behind these slowminded peerings of sullen anxiety did dumb unreasonable surges of love swell." "For that night, untied Hope still her virgin knot will keep." The last is interesting. He must mean "tied," since the "still" implies a possible later change, and a virgin knot, once untied, must ever remain so. I think the "un-" was added automatically, because Cozzens makes a dead style even deader by an obsessive use of negative constructions, often doubled, as: "unkilled," "unhasty," "not-unhelped," "not-uneducated," "not-unmoving," "a not-unsturdy frame," "a not-unhandsome profile." May we take it the profile is handsome, the frame sturdy, or do they exist in some limbo betwixt and between?

(4) *Toujours le Mot Injuste*. If there's an inexpressive word, Cozzens will find it. He specially favors: (a) five-dollar words where five-centers would do; (b) pedantic Latinisms, strange beasts that are usually kept behind the zoo bars of Webster's Unabridged.

bit added to bit; each addition of Cozzens destroys what has gone before.

(a) Multisonous, incommutable, phantasmogenesis (having to do with the origin of dreams), stupefacients (narcotics), encasement ("snug encasement of his neck" for "tight collar"), explicative ("one of his characteristically explicative observations"), solemnization ("wedding" becomes "the solemnization's scene"), eventuated ("acts of eventuated guilt," a phrase undecipherable even with the Unabridged), and condign ("condign punishment"—means "deserved p.").

(b) I must admit that reading Cozzens has enriched my vocabulary, or, more accurately, added to it. My favorite, on the whole, is "presbyopic," which of course means "long-sighted because of old age." I also like the sound of "viridity" and "mucid," though it's disappointing to learn they mean simply "greenness" and "slimy." But I see no reason for such grotesques as qualmish, scrutinous, vulnerary ("wound-healing"), pudency, revulsively, and vellications, which is Latin for twitchings.

Perhaps the supreme triumph of Late Cozzenesque occurs on page 128, where, agonizedly entailed in the entracement of a bridegroom's mazed tergiversations, as our author might put it, he manages twice to use the phrase "piacular pollution." The second time is specially impressive: "That concept of piacular pollution, much diminished as the idea of undressing Hope was entertained, received, with the autoptic fact of the undressed Hope, its *coup de grace*." "Autoptic" is simple—an adjective made from "autopsy" or "personal inspection." "Piacular" is more complicated. It means either (a) "of the nature of an expiation; expiatory," or (b) "requiring expiation." If it's (a), then the pollution is an expiation, an atonement for some sin, which is absurd since the pollution itself is a sin; but if it's (b), we are presented, by inference, with the interesting notion of a pollution that does not require expiation, that is, a so-to-speak pure pollution.

Cozzens' style is a throwback to the palmiest days of 19th-century rhetoric, when a big Latin-root word was considered more elegant than a small Anglo-Saxon word. The long, patient uphill struggle of the last fifty years to bring the diction and rhythms of prose closer to those of the spoken language might never have existed

so far as Cozzens is concerned. He doesn't even revert to the *central* tradition (Scott, Cooper, Bulwer-Lytton) but rather to the eccentric mode of the half-rebels against it (Carlyle, Meredith), who broke up the orderly platoons of gold-laced Latinisms into whimsically arranged squads, uniformed with equal artificiality but marching every which way as the author's wayward spirit moved them. Carlyle and Meredith are even less readable today than Scott and Cooper, whose prose at least inherited from the 18th century some structural backbone.

That a contemporary writer should spend eight years fabricating a pastiche in the manner of George Meredith could only happen in America, where isolation produces oddity. The American novelist is sustained and disciplined by neither a literary tradition nor an intellectual community. He doesn't see other writers much; he probably doesn't live in New York, which like Paris and London unfortunately has almost a monopoly of the national cultural life, because the pace is too fast, the daily life too ugly, the interruptions too great; and even if he does, there are no cafés or pubs where he can foregather with his colleagues; he doesn't read the literary press, which anyway is much less developed than in London or Paris; he normally thinks of himself as a non-intellectual, even an anti-intellectual (Faulkner, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Lewis, Anderson). It is a pattern of cultural isolation that brings out a writer's eccentric, even his grotesque side.

IN THE case of Cozzens, things have gone about as far as they can. At his country place in Lambertville, New Jersey, he leads a life compared to which Thoreau's on Walden Pond was gregarious. "I am a hermit and I have no friends," he understates. According to *Time*, "Years elapse between dinner guests" and he hasn't been to a play, a concert, or an art gallery in twenty years. (He did go to a movie in 1940). To those who wonder how he can write novels when he has so little contact with people, he says: "The thing you have to know about is yourself; you are people." But he seems signally lacking in self-knowledge. He fancies himself as a stylist, for instance. "My own literary preferences are for writers who write well," he says, pleas-

antly adding: "This necessarily excludes most of my contemporaries." The level of his taste may be inferred from the fact that he sneers at Faulkner ("falsifies life for dramatic effect"), Hemingway ("under the rough exterior, he's just a great big bleeding heart"), and Lewis ("a crypto-sentimentalist"), but admires—W. Somerset Maugham.

He is similarly deceived about himself. He thinks he is a true-blue conservative of the old school: "I am more or less illiberal and strongly antipathetic to all political and social movements. I was brought up an Episcopalian, and where I live, the landed gentry are Republican." He is proud of his Tory ancestors, who had to flee to Canada during the Revolution: "To tell the truth, I feel I'm better than other people." But this statement itself seems to me not that of an aristocrat, who would take it for granted, but rather of an uneasy *arriviste*. Nor does illiberalism make a conservative, as we learned in the days of McCarthy. Cozzens, like some of his sympathetically intended heroes—Dr. Bull in *The Last Adam* is an example—goes in for Plain Speaking, but it comes out somehow a little bumptious and unpleasant: "I like anybody if he's a nice guy, but I've never met many Negroes who were nice guys." His notion of a nice-guy Negro is Alfred Revere in *By Love Possessed*, the colored verger of the local Episcopalian church, which is otherwise Whites Only. Tactfully, Mr. Revere always takes Communion last: "The good, the just man had consideration for others. By delaying he took care that members of the congregation need never hesitate to receive the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ because a cup from which a Negro had drunk contained it." This is not ironical, it is perfectly serious, and is followed by a page of contorted dialectic about God's love.

Years ago Cozzens married Bernice Baumgarten, a well-known literary agent. Although apparently it is a successful marriage, his remarks to the press about it have been rather boorish, even for him: "I suppose sex entered into it. After all, what's a woman for? . . . Mother almost died when I married a Jew, but later when she saw I was being decently cared for, she realized that it was the best thing that could have happened to me." Up to *By Love Possessed*, Cozzens was largely supported by his wife.

"It could have been a humiliating situation, but I guess I had a certain native conceit [those Tory ancestors] and felt that her time was well spent," he says with his usual delicacy. Perhaps Cozzens is as inept with the spoken as with the written word. Probably he didn't mean to define quite so narrowly and explicitly his wife's role in his life, just as probably the slick, pushing, crafty Jewish lawyer, Mr. Woolf—he has even had the nerve to turn Episcopalian, to Winner's contemptuous amusement—is not meant to stand for Jews in general, any more than the odious Mrs. Pratt is meant to stand for all Catholics. One only wishes that Cozzens' mouthpiece weren't quite so explicit: "Glimpsing Mr. Woolf's face in the mirror again, Arthur Winner could see his lips form a smile, deprecatory, intentionally ingratiating. Was something there of the patient shrug, something of the bated breath and whispering humbleness? . . . Did you forget at your peril the ancient grudge that might be fed if Mr. Woolf could catch you once upon the hip?"

How did it happen? Why did such a book impress the reviewers? We know whodunit, but what was the motive? Like other crimes, this one was a product of Conditions. The failure of literary judgment and of simple common sense shown in *l'affaire Cozzens* indicates a general lowering of standards. If this were all, if our reviewers just didn't know any better, then one would have to conclude we had quite lost our bearings. Luckily, there were other factors. It is disturbing it could have happened at all: *By Love Possessed* is the Sputnik-Vanguard of the literary world. But there were also specific reasons for the reviewers' misjudgment, some of them also rather disturbing but at least limited in their implications.

The two most important, I think, were related: a general feeling that Cozzens had hitherto been neglected and that he "had it coming to him." And consequently a willingness, indeed an eagerness to take at face value his novel's pretensions. It is difficult for American reviewers to resist a long, ambitious novel; they are betrayed by the American admiration of size and scope, also by the American sense of good fellowship; they find it hard to say to the author,

after all his work: "Sorry, but it's terrible." In Cozzens' case, it would have been especially hard because he had been writing serious novels for thirty years without ever having had a major success, either popular or *d'estime*. It was now or never. The second alternative would have meant that a lifetime of hard work in a good cause had ended in failure, which would have been un-American. So it had to be now.

The other factor in the book's success is historical. It is the latest episode in The Middlebrow Counter-Revolution. In the 20's and 30's, the avant-garde intellectuals had it pretty much their way. In 1940, the counter-revolution was launched with Archibald MacLeish's essay, "The Irresponsibles," and Van Wyck Brooks's Hunter College talk, "On Literature Today," followed a year later by his "Primary Literature and Coterie Literature." The Brooks-MacLeish thesis was that the avant-garde had lost contact with the normal life of humanity and had become frozen in an attitude of destructive superiority; the moral consequences were perversity and snobbishness, the cultural consequences were negativism, eccentricity, and solipsism.* The thesis was launched at the right moment. By 1940 the avant-garde had run out of gas—unfortunately no rear-guard filling stations have been opened up, either—while the country had become engaged in a world struggle for survival that made any radically dissident, skeptical attitude a luxury. Both conditions still persist, and so the counter-revolution has been on ever since.

Perhaps the first to see Cozzens as a rallying point was the late Bernard De Voto, who had a wonderfully acute instinct in these matters. De Voto was Cozzens' Ezra Pound. "He is not a literary man, he

*Brooks and MacLeish assumed it was good for writers to identify themselves with their society, which in turn assumed the society was good. If it wasn't, then the avant-garde was justified in isolating itself. Empirically, this would seem to be the case—at least most of the memorable art in every field produced between about 1890 and 1930 was done by artists like Joyce, Eliot, Picasso, Stravinsky, and others who had rejected bourgeois society. But there's no space to argue the question here. Those interested might look at my "Kulturbolshevismus—the Brooks-MacLeish Thesis" in *Partisan Review*, November-December 1941, reprinted in *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* (1957).

is a writer," he observed, a little obscurely but I see what he means. "There are a handful like him in every age. Later on it turns out they were the ones who wrote that age's literature." The wheel has comically come full circle: it used to be those odd, isolated, brilliant writers who were *in advance* of their times—the Stendhals, the Melvilles, the Joyces, and Rimbauds—who later on were discovered to be "the ones who wrote that age's literature"; but now it is the sober, conscientious plodders, who have a hard time just keeping up with the procession, whose true worth is temporarily obscured by their modish avant-garde competitors. This note is struck by the reviewers of *By Love Possessed*. "Critics and the kind of readers who start fashionable cults have been markedly cool toward him," writes Gill, while John Fischer complains that Cozzens, unlike "some other novelists of stature," has hitherto been denied "the reverence—indeed the adulation—of the magisterial critics whose encyclicals appear in the literary quarterlies and academic journals. Aside from a Pulitzer Prize in 1949, no such laurels have lighted on Cozzens' head, and the fashionable critics have passed him by in contemptuous silence."

A highbrow conspiracy of paranoiac dimensions, it seems, is behind it all. Cozzens just won't play our game. "It may be that his refusal to become a public figure—no TV or P.E.N. appearances, no commencement addresses at Sarah Lawrence, no night-club pronouncements recorded by Leonard Lyons—has put them [us] off. By devoting himself to writing, he has made himself invisible to the world of letters." So, Mr. Gill.

And Mr. Fischer: "Even his private life is, for a writer, unconventional. He attends no cocktail parties, makes no speeches, signs no manifestoes, writes no reviews, appears on no television shows, scratches no backs, shuns women's clubs . . . Few people in the so-called literary world have ever set eyes on him." But doesn't all this precisely describe Faulkner and Hemingway when they were making their reputations? Is the P.E.N. Club—have I ever met a member?—so powerful? Did Fitzgerald sign any manifestoes? Are we highbrows really so impressed by TV appearances, talks be-

fore women's clubs, mention in gossip columns? Could it be simply that Cozzens really isn't very good?

Another hypothesis was advanced by *Time*: "The interior decorators of U.S. letters—the little-magazine critics whose favorite furniture is the pigeonhole—find that Cozzens fits no recent fictional compartments, and usually pretend that he does not exist." But there is, in fact, a recent pigeonhole for Cozzens: the Novel of Resignation. *By Love Possessed* is, philosophically, an inversion, almost a parody of a kind of story Tolstoy and other 19th-century Russian novelists used to tell: of a successful, self-satisfied hero who is led by experiences in "extreme situations" to see how artificial his life has been and who then rejects the conventional world and either dies or begins a new, more meaningful life. In the Novel of Resignation, the highest reach of enlightenment is to realize how awful the System is and yet to accept it *on its own terms*. Because otherwise there wouldn't be any System. Marquand invented the genre, Sloan Wilson carried it on in *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*, and Herman Wouk formulated it most unmistakably in *The Caine Mutiny*. Wouk's moral is that it is better to obey a lunatic, cowardly Captain Queeg, even if the result is disaster, than to follow the sensible advice of an officer of lower grade (who is pictured as a smooth-talking, destructive, cynical, irresponsible conniver—in short, an intellectual) and save the ship. Because otherwise there wouldn't be any U.S. navy. In short, the conventional world, the System, is confused with Life. And since Life is Like That, it is childish if not worse to insist on something better. This is typically American: either juvenile revolt or the immature acceptance of everything; there is no modulation, no development, merely the blank confrontation of untenable extremes; "maturity" means simply to replace wholesale revolt with wholesale acceptance.

IT IS as if Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyitch* ended with the hero, after his atrocious sufferings, concluding that, as a high official of the Court of Justice, it was in the nature of things that he should die horribly of cancer, and that he must

therefore bear his torment like a man for the good of the service. On the contrary, he is driven by his "extreme situation" to reject his whole past way of life. Only when he is finally able to give up "the claim that his life had been good" can he experience anything significant: love—the young servant's gentle care of him—and then death.

The ending of *By Love Possessed* strikes rather a different note. From Winner's climactic six-page interior monologue that ends the book we can take three formulations that sum it up: (1) "Freedom is the knowledge of necessity." (2) "We are not children. In this life we cannot have everything for ourselves we might like to have." (3) "Victory is not in reaching certainties or solving mysteries; victory is in making do with uncertainties, in supporting mysteries."

But what is the reality behind these unexceptionable bits of philosophy? It is that Winner, for complicated pragmatic-sentimental reasons, decides to cover up an embezzlement he has just discovered, an embezzlement of trust funds by his venerable law partner, Noah Tuttle, and that he has been eased of his guilt toward his other partner, Julius Penrose, about his old affair with Marjorie, Penrose's wife. In both cases, it is Penrose who gives him the line: exposing Tuttle would not only ruin Winner—who would be equally responsible for his partner's defalcations—but would also mean the disgrace of Tuttle, who is after all paying the money back slowly. As for Winner's liaison with Marjorie, Penrose has known about it all along and has never blamed Winner, considering that "indefeasible urge of the flesh." In fact, Penrose is actually obliged to Winner for *not* telling him: "I've always thanked you for . . . trying in every way to keep it from me."

In short, Ivan Ilyitch feels free because he is compelled to reject his past as "not the right thing," Arthur Winner because he is allowed to accept his past, is even thanked by his best friend for having concealed from him the fact that he had cuckolded him. The last words of the book are Winner's, as he returns home: "I'm here." It's all right, nothing has to be changed: "I have the strength, the strength to, to—to endure more miseries," thinks Winner, gratefully.