

esting stage direction—clearly reflected in the film itself. As the bishop's pathetic, bedridden aunt lifts her hand with great effort and lays it on the hot paraffin lamp, an action which leads to her horrible death, Bergman writes as follows:

There is no counsel for the defense, who, orally or in writing, has a mind to plead Elsa Bergius's cause. She is repulsive, she is rotting, a parasite, a monster. Her part will soon be played out. She is a loaf that hasn't risen in the world's batch and it is no use wasting pity on such an utter failure.

So amid all the loving, and caring, and joyful hedonism, a poor invalid burns to death. But we must "waste no pity" on such a repulsive creature because she hasn't risen in the world's batch, because her part is played out, because she is a failure.

Now the reader will have noticed that, having mentioned Bergman's youthful fascination with Hitler's Germany at the beginning of this essay, I dropped it during my dis-

cussion of his major films on God, death, mortality, and the human condition. When he left God for Freud and psychology it did not seem relevant. But now that he has changed sides and gone over to "love," hedonism, and all that, and decided there is a real enemy again (curiously enough, the same God-ridden people he once professed to admire), I find myself thinking again of the freely confessed political enthusiasms of Bergman's youth. There were at that time many young men in Germany who thought "parasites" and "failures" were totally unworthy of human pity, and these young men wore death's heads on their caps and marched to the orders of Heinrich Himmler. Think on't.

AN intelligent critic, David Brudnoy, has made a respectable case that *Fanny and Alexander* is a comedy. And I certainly agree with him to the extent that if you are to enjoy the film at all you must find it comic. But Bergman himself tells us that the movie is a "decla-

ration of love for life." And, particularly since it doesn't make me laugh much, and is filled with such preachy and mawkish speeches, I am inclined to think that this is what Bergman feels the film really is. Which compels me, for my part, to state that I do not for one second believe in this joyful, loving Ekdahl family. I do not believe Uncle Gustav Adolf's wife is delightfully amused at his persistent adultery. I don't believe the lame servant-mistress is generously embraced by the family. I don't believe Helena Ekdahl's late husband became lifelong friends with her Jewish lover. I don't believe in the Jewish lover. I want to know what he ate at Christmas. I don't believe one word of this "love" glup that runs from one end of the film to the other. When Ingmar Bergman talked to me of God and death I respected him despite his past political sympathies. But now that he's prattling on about love, and gentle smiles, and fruit trees in bloom, I think something in him has snapped.

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## Fiction

### Cozzens Repossessed

Joseph Epstein

"IN WHAT century did he live?" I asked the graduate student in literature to whom I mentioned that I had been reading the novels of James Gould Cozzens. "In what century do you?" I was tempted to reply, but I didn't. I didn't, because to do so, along with being mean-spirited, would also have been unfair. After all, in the his-

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tory of modern American literary reputations, James Gould Cozzens's has provided one of the fastest disappearing acts of the past fifty years. In a few decades Cozzens has gone from a Book-of-the-Month Club main selection and *Time* cover subject to the misty never-never land—never in print, never taught in universities—of such faded literary figures as James Branch Cabell, Zona Gale, and Joseph Hergesheimer. It has happened before, but never, I think, quite so quickly as in the case of James Gould Cozzens.

Various are the reasons a novelist can fall out of fashion and favor. First among them is that he was overrated in the first place, and that the natural readjustment of initial enthusiasm has a dampening, even deadly, effect. Then again it may be that his work speaks only to the time in which he wrote it—such, for example, seems to me the case with Sinclair Lewis. Or our author may write altogether too plainly, providing few of those enticing difficulties in interpretation and opportunities for classroom demonstration that seem to

set flowing the salivary glands of certain academics. Or he may have no powerful champions among the critical establishment. Or, as with the later John Dos Passos, his politics may go against the grain of his age. Or, for a combination of the above reasons (excluding the first), he may not capture the fancy of the intellectual class, which may hold his very popularity against him; this for a great many years was a serious problem for Charles Dickens. The more one adduces reasons for the fall in literary reputation, the more does it seem extraordinary that any literary reputations below that of Tolstoy endure at all.

But with James Gould Cozzens, even though a number of the reasons I have noted apply, the chief cause of the fall of his literary reputation can be found with real precision. Like an eclipse of the moon, it can even be dated. It occurred in January 1958, when COMMENTARY published an essay by Dwight Macdonald entitled "By Cozzens Possessed." To say that this essay was an attack is not to begin to catch the flavor of it. It was a toasting, a roasting, a pasting, a lambasting, a drawing and quartering—well, you have to imagine a death by broad-ax and tweezers. Not since the St. Valentine's Day Massacre has there been so efficient a piece of work. I for one was put off by it from reading Cozzens for a full quarter of a century.

Since Dwight Macdonald's attack, Cozzens has had his small band of followers—a little Cozzens club of sorts. But no powerhouse critics have been among its members. Nor has the pendulum of literary fashion swung back enough to allow Cozzens a second reading. For years now he has been categorized in clichés: he is a novelist who speaks for power and privilege; his work resembles that of Louis Auchincloss; he is admired only by conservatives of the *National Review* stripe. This, then, is where things stand.

Now a biography of Cozzens written by Matthew J. Bruccoli\* has appeared. Himself a long-standing member of the Cozzens club, Professor Bruccoli earlier produced a

book entitled *Just Representations: A James Gould Cozzens Reader*, but his biography is no more likely to alter Cozzens's reputation than his anthology did. Although often just in its judgments, and sympathetic to its subject, Bruccoli's book sorely wants artfulness. Jeffrey Hart, reviewing it in the *National Review*, suggests that Bruccoli, because he combines criticism and biography, resembles Samuel Johnson; he does so, I fear, to the extent that I resemble Magic Johnson. Bruccoli works all too quickly, is too slapdash. In mid-career he has already written and edited more than thirty books. Like that dopey joke about how do you feed a nine-hundred-pound gorilla, to which the answer is, very carefully, so to the question of how Professor Bruccoli produces so many books, the answer is, not very carefully. Which is a roundabout way of saying that *James Gould Cozzens: A Life Apart* is very far from being the exemplary work of the literary biographer's art that was needed in this case.

It was needed for two reasons. First, Cozzens was a born writer who published his first novel at the age of twenty and who, as is true of nearly all born writers, can hardly be said to have had a real life away from his desk. To be sure, he had parents, went to schools, had love affairs, married, served in the army; but his writing, and how he came to write the books he did, are the essential things. Especially are they essential in the case of Cozzens, who, as I shall attempt to show, was a writer of stark, really quite dark views. How such a writer came to see the world and its workings as he did is the crucial question. Here, alas, Professor Bruccoli stands fairly mute. Instead, for the most part, he tells us that Cozzens wrote first one novel, then another; how these books were received by critics and reviewers; and what their sales figures were. He greatly appreciates Cozzens, but can only offer respect where intellectual penetration is wanted. Possibly, as a character in *By Love Possessed* claims, "None of us, perhaps, knows any of us very well." But this is a possibility no biographer can even for a moment entertain.

The second reason an exemplary biography was required, at least if it were to succeed in helping to resuscitate Cozzens's reputation, is that Cozzens himself presents an enormous biographical problem. This is that he apparently was not a lovely man. Certainly he offers a distinct difficulty for the eulogist. Of the love of the laughter of children, of ardor for good causes, of kindness toward contemporaries, to reverse the old eulogistic pattern, James Gould Cozzens showed none. For a simple Cozzensian sentiment, allow me to quote Professor Bruccoli, who writes: "Dogs, he commented, were a satisfactory substitute for children, providing ample cause for worry without promising filial ingratitude." But such misanthropy, in Professor Bruccoli's pages, isn't understood—it is merely reported.

"I WOULD like to be able to boast that this biography is a labor of friendship," Bruccoli begins his biography. "But James Gould Cozzens claimed he had no friends. I honored him, and he endured me." His father died when he was sixteen, and the two great figures in Cozzens's life were his mother, who in a dotting way was devoted to him, and his wife, Bernice Baumgarten, an important literary agent with the firm of Brandt & Brandt and the one critic whose advice he valued. Otherwise he was by and large friendless, and only small exaggeration need be found in his answer, at age thirty-nine, to a questionnaire sent him by the editors of the reference work, *Twentieth Century Authors*:

My social preference is to be left alone, and people have always seemed willing, even eager, to gratify my inclination. I am more or less illiberal, and strongly antipathetic to all political and artistic movements. I was brought up an Episcopalian, and where I live the landed gentry are Republican. I do not understand music, I am little interested in art, and the theater seems tiresome to me. My literary preferences are for writers who take the trouble to write well. This necessarily ex-

\* *James Gould Cozzens: A Life Apart*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 343 pp., \$15.95.

cludes most of my contemporaries and I think I would do well to skip the presumptuous business of listing the three or four who strike me as good. I like Shakespeare and Swift and Steele and Gibbon and Jane Austen and Hazlitt.

If Bruccoli's biography has negligible standing as a work of art, it does nonetheless provide its subject a valuable service. This is to free Cozzens from the black cloud of bigotry under which, in a reigning liberal political atmosphere, his name has fallen. In his novels, make no mistake about it, minority groups do not come in for a gentle ride. Of the Irish Catholics, for example, a judge in *By Love Possessed* remarks:

Seventy years ago—and even thirty years ago, the number of people still around whose attitude had been formed seventy years ago was great enough to make them a majority—the term “Irish Catholic,” at least to this community, meant the base and obscure vulgar. Few had anything that could be called education. Their mostly low standards of living—all they could afford—resulted in objectionable habits and manners. Politically, they were a troublesome mass vote at the disposal of their own highly purchaseable politicians. Religiously, they seemed to be the willing dupes of their priests, of a superstition to the Protestant mind corrupt and alien. . . .

In the middle of the same novel, the lawyer Julius Penrose, whose highly neurotic wife is contemplating conversion to Catholicism, launches an attack on the Church in which he sets out its attractions to the guilt-ridden and misguided. Is this Cozzens talking, ventriloqually, through his character? Difficult to say. But what can be said is that Julius Penrose's feelings about the Catholic Church are thoroughly consistent with his belief that it is part of the difficulty of being human to live with uncertainty and with many mysteries unsolved.

Another character in *By Love Possessed* refers to “typical Jewish lawyer tricks.” The tricks turn out not to be tricks at all, yet, again, it is perfectly consistent that the character thinks as he does—just

as it is consistent that yet another character, told of this bit of name-calling, responds: “My personal observation is that Jews behave as well as other people; and you can trust them just as far—which isn't saying much.” Cozzens was too realistic a novelist not to use material of this kind, too intelligent to pretend that anti-minority feeling was not a part of the small-town New England life about which he frequently wrote, and too interesting a writer to be disqualified for his having done so. In his defense, after having read Bruccoli's biography, one can say that Cozzens had a fine impartiality, having no love for any particular group, his own included. As for the Jews, that oldest of old arguments will have to serve: his best friend, his only friend in fact, his wife, was a Jew.

As it stands, then, readers who come to Matthew Bruccoli's biography of James Gould Cozzens are likely to depart as they arrived: either convinced of Cozzens's genius or convinced of his meanness. It could, of course, have been worse. A psychologically minded biographer would have found in the work of Cozzens meat and drink and a full trolley of sweets for dessert. For example, sex, though never abundant in his novels, almost always carries with it the pleasure of an iced drink in a blizzard; it is unfailingly a reminder of humankind's biological limitations. For this reason, sex in a Cozzens novel often comes to seem the mating of beasts—more frequently a low than a high point in the conduct of human affairs.

No novelist has the full range of literary weapons in his arsenal, and Cozzens is not an exception. Although he has wit, which is displayed in his formulations and in the merciless observations on life made by his intelligent characters, he is otherwise fairly humorless. Lyricism, similarly, is foreign to him. He has an anti-intellectual bias, and the one character in all his works against whom he takes out after unstintingly is an intellectual, a writer for little magazines, serving as a public-relations officer in the army in *Guard of Honor*. His case against intellectuals is based

on their love of theory in a world where there are too many variables for any human mind or theory to take proper account of. Things, in Cozzens's novels, are as they are and must be dealt with as such—conditions and not theories interest him. Cozzens, like George Orwell, has a certain talent for facing unpleasant facts; unlike Orwell, he seems almost to relish unpleasant facts; and those unpleasant facts that give him the most pleasure are the ones that knock the pins out from under theories of human behavior.

The more impressive of Cozzens's novels fall well outside the mainstream of modernist fiction. He does not go in for wild invention. In a mature James Gould Cozzens novel a cause has effects, effects ignite further causes, which in turn light up other effects. If you happen to believe that this is how life works—as, it happens, I do—then James Gould Cozzens may be for you. If you don't, then perhaps you would do better to consider the problems of modern reading in the novels of Italo Calvino or set off on a tour of ancient Egypt with Norman Mailer.

I SPOKE of a mature James Gould Cozzens novel, for there are also less mature and even immature James Gould Cozzens novels. Among the latter are the first four novels he wrote, between the ages of twenty and twenty-eight, and of which he himself spoke slightly. I have not read these novels, but to judge from the passages quoted in Bruccoli's biography, they richly possess the most prominent mark of the too-soon-published young novelist: lush overwriting in the service of extreme self-indulgence. Excluding these first four novels, Cozzens wrote nine others that he cared sufficiently about to want to see remain in print. If one reads them in the order in which they were written, as I have recently done, a novelistic career unfolds before one, in all its interesting missteps, backsteps, and final striding forward. It also demonstrates that James Gould Cozzens, this lonely figure with his dark views, achieved something very impressive.

One could not, I think, have

foretold how impressive it would be from the first of these nine novels, *S.S. San Pedro* (1931). This is a slight book about a large event—the sinking of an ocean liner that ships water and eventually goes under during a furious storm. Though no great shakes, the novel—novella really, since it runs to only 85 pages in my paperback edition—is obviously the work of a serious writer. In a bit of puffery written for the *Book-of-the-Month Club News* Christopher Morley spoke of “the beautiful crispness and decision of [Cozzens’s] prose.” “Beautiful,” I don’t know; “crispness,” maybe; but “decision,” a word I have not seen before used to describe prose, seems to me very good. For all its shortcomings, this novel by a man in his late twenties is written with decision—a word I read to mean disciplined authority.

If *S.S. San Pedro* is thin and a bit awkward, Cozzens’s next novel, *The Last Adam* (1933), like a young man coming into his maturity, is both more filled-out and more confident. The crisis at the center of *The Last Adam* is a typhoid epidemic, which may or may not have broken out because of the incompetence of the town’s physician and health officer, George Bull, a country doctor filled with prejudice and strong opinion who knows that life’s major datum is death:

Discouragement, to feel death’s certainty; exasperation, to know the fatuousness of resisting such an adversary—what was the use of temporary evasions or difficult little remedies when death simply came back and came back until it won?—moved him more than any personal dread of extinction, or compassion for those stricken. The stricken, beyond help, were beyond needing help. During the last forty years, fully a hundred human beings had actually died while he watched. He couldn’t recall one who gave signs of minding much; they were too sick or too badly hurt to care. If they were conscious enough to know that they were alive, pain blurred their view; they saw no good anywhere. They were not given peace to regret a lost future; they were beyond desiring anything. In its melancholy way, the flesh, mangled mortality, took tender care of its own.

But before setting up the central crisis in the novel, Cozzens provides a portrait of the town of New Winton in the full range of its social classes, its local politics, its pretensions. This supposed novelist of power and privilege is very hard on the Bannings, one of the town’s upper-crust families; and easily the most admirable character in the book is a telephone operator named May Topping, whose husband has been paralyzed by a hunting accident and who herself faces life with stoical acceptance. The crisis of the novel is resolved not because right is on Dr. Bull’s side—we never learn whether it is or isn’t—but because Henry Harris, the town’s political power, sees the resolution of the issue in Dr. Bull’s favor as a useful way of infuriating Mrs. Banning, which it gives him pleasure to do. The novel closes on a note of somewhat forced affirmation, a paean to the vitality and survival powers of Dr. Bull by a woman who has been sleeping with him for years and whose closing words of half-graduating admiration are: “The old bastard!”

Written by a man of thirty, this is a work of considerable artistic coolness: objective, neatly distanced, socially perspicacious. If a comparison is wanted, I should say that *The Last Adam* is Sinclair Lewis without the malice. Because the malice—“See what swine these small-town people are!”—is missing, *The Last Adam* can still be read today with genuine interest, while the novels of Sinclair Lewis can only be read for historical interest.

*Castaway* (1934), Cozzens’s next novel, is intended as a modern *Robinson Crusoe*. Instead of stranding his chief character on an island, Cozzens places “Mr. Lecky”—he is never referred to otherwise—in a deserted modern department store. We are never told how he got in, or why the store is deserted. What we are presented with is Mr. Lecky’s paranoia and his painfully inept attempts at survival. He builds a fort composed of furniture in front of the men’s room, he equips himself with rifles and ammunition from the sporting-goods department, he dresses himself from men’s ready-to-wear, he eats canned

hams, biscuits, and preserves from the food department. A false man Friday shows up, whom Mr. Lecky kills with savage incompetence at close range with a shotgun.

The descriptions are powerful in their precision, but what is *Castaway* about? Is it an allegory of man’s essential loneliness? Is it about man’s technological ineptitude? His unfitness for the modern world? I don’t think we can quite know, for the allegory is not clearly realized. Yet the critics were generally pleased, citing *Castaway* as very Kafkaesque, which ticked off Cozzens who hadn’t ever read Kafka. Nearly twenty-five years later, Irving Howe, speaking for the modernist lobby in American criticism, wrote an attack on Cozzens in which he nonetheless had kind words for *Castaway*, going on to regret that after it Cozzens “becomes a quite conventional novelist, either uninterested in or unable to use the 20th-century advances in technique.” (Interestingly, *Castaway* was perhaps alone among Cozzens’s novels to be taught in American universities. The reason for this is not far to seek. All those obscurities, all those unresolved difficulties—such things fill classroom hours.)

In fact, Cozzens did return to “conventional” literary techniques in his next novel, *Men and Brethren* (1936), which is about a crowded day and a half in the life of an Episcopal priest. Ernest Cudlipp, who is vicar of a Manhattan church, is a no-nonsense Christian for whom the niceties of doctrine are of no great interest: “You either have the capacity to apprehend the great spiritual truths, which are universal and invariable, or you haven’t.” Ernie Cudlipp is less a saver than a patcher of souls. He arranges an abortion for a parishioner who has become pregnant in an adulterous affair; he attempts to soothe a fellow priest defrocked for making homosexual advances to the young; he permits a death-bed conversion to Catholicism of a woman dying of cancer. He is a man over whose eyes no wool can be pulled. He knows about human depravity, about the worm of human malice, and about just how far sweet reason, noble disinterestedness, and the assumption of good will can

take one in defeating either. Yet he also knows that "sometimes people will be amazingly kind, amazingly generous, if they possibly can." He tells a friend, a woman who is without religion, "Suppose I were to say that it isn't especially desirable for you to be happy—in the sense of having things suit you, instead of spending your life trying to arrange things to suit someone else."

Certain qualities that will mark Cozzens's major fiction begin to emerge in *Men and Brethren*. The respect for work, for one: of the defrocked priest, cut off from his profession, Ernie Cudlipp thinks, "He had nothing left, he stood for nothing, he was nothing." For another, there is the preference for dealing with day-to-day reality—"Realists," Cudlipp thinks, "are the only people who get things done"—over the penchant for the theoretical. The observations in this novel are very sharp. "As far as Ernest could judge, the really valuable thing which Doctor [Karl] Barth did seem to offer was a conception of religious truth which allowed modern-minded young priests like Wilber to recover that sustaining, snobbish ease of mental superiority, loved long since, but, fifty or sixty years ago, lost to the clergy for a while." If the novel has a flaw, it is its lack of density. Things happen too fast; more—in the way of detail, of accounts of motivation, of completion of character—is wanted. Yet in the career of James Gould Cozzens *Men and Brethren* marks a true step forward.

ONE step forward—one step back. *Ask Me Tomorrow* (1940) is Cozzens's one attempt at an autobiographical novel, and it is a sad botch. It is based on a season in Europe in which Cozzens served as the tutor for the son of a rich American family. The Cozzens character, Francis Ellery, is an unpleasant young man filled with himself, and of no great interest to anyone else, who becomes entangled in his own youthful thoughts: "Recoiling in disgust from human beings, you had to recoil, in another disgust, from your own recoiling. . . ." In his attack on Cozzens, Irving Howe noted: "He is not much concerned with the idea of the self,

and he certainly does not share the exalted valuation most modern novelists place upon its inviolability." This is true enough, and yet one wonders if Cozzens wasn't correct to turn away from the modern novelists' preoccupation with the self. By now, of course, our novelists have given us a bellyful of the self. One thinks here of all those Mailer, Styron, Roth, and Bellow novels in which the hero, modestly disguised and made to seem on the whole winning, is so obviously Mailer, Styron, Roth, or Bellow. One wonders, indeed, if the time hasn't come to shelve the self. After *Ask Me Tomorrow* Cozzens did, and never returned to it.

WITH *The Just and The Unjust* (1942), Cozzens entered onto his major phase. This novel, whose time span is a week, centers around a murder trial in Childerstown, the seat of a New England county. Its principal character is Abner Coates, a man six years out of Harvard Law School, an assistant district attorney, and the son and grandson of county judges. Its method is one Cozzens will use in his next two novels: an event takes place in a limited time frame, but the book regularly weaves back into the past through flashback, amply mixing action and observation. A portrait is provided of a town and its institutions, in their full social and professional texture. In this instance the trial of two men for murdering a drug dealer is the event, but the underlying question is what Abner Coates will do with his life. It is an interesting question chiefly because in Abner Coates Cozzens has created an interesting young man.

Abner Coates may not know what to do with his life, but he does reasonably well know himself. He knows, for example, that he doesn't have a first-rate legal mind, having been taught this lesson in law school by a classmate who showed him what a top-quality legal mind really is: "What he did not know, what Paul Bonbright, among others, showed him, was that those abilities of his that got him, without distinction but also without much exertion, through all previous lessons and examinations,

were not first-rate abilities handicapped by laziness, but second-rate, by no degree of effort or assiduity to be made the equal of abilities like Bonbright's."

The question of what to do with his life presses upon Abner Coates when, during the week of the murder trial, he is offered a place on the county ballot for district attorney by the local political boss. He wants the job, even needs it, since he plans to marry and will require additional income, yet the political boss is a man he instinctively dislikes and to whom he is extremely wary of becoming beholden. Now in the truly conventional American novel we know how this problem would be resolved. Our hero would, after much agonizing, retain what he thinks of as his integrity, turn down the offer, and perhaps go into legal-aid work where he will uphold the rights of the downtrodden. Not, however, in Cozzens.

The trial grinds on. A very strong sense emerges of how the law in its daily operations works which I, for one, find fascinating. Irving Howe, for another, finds this same quality, as reflected in *By Love Possessed*, tiresome and all too American. ("The American respect for technology becomes in Cozzens an unconcealed admiration for the man who uses his mind for precise utilitarian ends and who is impatient with other ideas about the value of thought." Whose thought? That of literary critics, no doubt.) Throughout the book flows a stream of observations that, whether one agrees with them or not, are of a kind that need to be confronted. Abner, for example, thinks: "Criminals might be victims of circumstances in the sense that few of them ever had a fair chance; but it was a mistake to forget that the only 'fair chance' they ever wanted was a chance for easy money." Or, as the current district attorney remarks to Abner: "Theory is where you want to go; practice is how you're going to get there."

In the end the murderers, who are guilty, get off with a sentence of second-degree murder, having been shown misplaced mercy by a jury that failed to understand the requirements of the law. This,

though, is how it goes; justice is no exact science. Abner accepts the place on the ballot to run for district attorney. ("Resist this horrid nonsense," says Father Cudlipp in *Men and Brethren*, "about being true to yourself.") He will worry about his personal integrity when the occasion arises. Meanwhile, he will get on with a job of serious work. As his father, now half-paralyzed after a stroke and on the rim of death, tells Abner in the novel's closing passage:

"... In the present, every day is a miracle. The world gets up in the morning and is fed and goes to work, and in the evening it comes home and is fed again and perhaps has a little amusement and goes to sleep. To make that possible, so much has to be done by so many people that, on the face of it, it is impossible. Well, every day we do it; and every day, come hell, come high water, we're going to have to go on doing it as well as we can."

"So it seems," said Abner.

"Yes, so it seems," said Judge Coates, "and so it is, and so it will be! And that's where you come in. That's all we want of you."

Abner said, "What do you want of me?"

"We just want you to do the impossible," Judge Coates said.

Somewhere between *Ask Me Tomorrow* and *The Just and The Unjust*, Cozzens's work, it seems to me, acquired that quality essential to the best novelists yet perhaps not finally altogether to be understood. The quality I have in mind is gravity. Gravity is not a question to which contemporary literary criticism often addresses itself. Among living writers, I would say Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn has it; so, when they are writing well, do V.S. Naipaul and Saul Bellow and I.B. Singer. John Updike and Gabriel García Márquez do not, and Norman Mailer never will. Gravity derives from a serious literary mind, unencumbered by the clichés of the day, at work on serious matters.

*Guard of Honor* (1948), the novel for which Cozzens won the Pulitzer Prize, has gravity in just this sense. It takes place during three days on an Army Air Force base in Florida

during World War II. It is about what nowadays would be called "crisis management." One crisis occurs in the novel over segregation on the base, as does another crisis connected with civilian relations, and a final crisis has to do with the drowning of paratroopers during a field exercise owing to incompetence. This is a novel with a cast of roughly fifty important characters. A work of more than six-hundred pages, it has a plot too intricate to summarize. Suffice it to say that the book gives us a most convincing portrayal of the way a large institution is run, filled with detailed knowledge about a vast range of military jobs and human types.

Much of the action in *Guard of Honor* takes place among field- and general-grade officers. Now a bird colonel or a major general, especially if he is a regular army officer, is, as every college graduate knows, a fascist. Cozzens, who wasn't a college graduate, apparently came away from his time in the army without knowing this. Even though he much disliked being in the army, what he did come away with was reinforcement of his view that, as Colonel Ross, the novel's main intelligence, puts it: "A man must stand up and do the best he can with what there is." Men who know their job and do it are the men Cozzens admires.

There is also a running gunfire against intellectuals in *Guard of Honor*. "Few ideas," one character reflects, "could be abstract enough to be unqualified by the company they kept." Another says: "If there are differences of opinion, I think most of them are differences that always arise between those who have to deal with fact, and those who are free to deal with theories." And, finally, another character, a magazine editor in civilian life, though no great lover of the military and its ways, feels himself

... obliged to admire a simple, unlimited integrity that accepted as the law of nature such elevated concepts as the Military Academy's Duty-Honor-Country, convinced that those were the only solid goods; that everyone knew what the words meant.

They needed no gloss—indeed

it probably never crossed General Beal's mind that they could be glossed, that books had been written to show that Country was a delusive projection of the individual's ego; and that there were men who considered it a part of intelligence to admit that Honor was a hypocritical social sanction protecting the position of a ruling class; or that Duty was self-interest as it appeared when sanctions like Honor had fantastically distorted it. In his simplicity, General Beal, apprised of such intellectual views, would probably retort by begging the question; what the hell kind of person thought things like that?

BUT the intellectuals finally got their own back at Cozzens when he published *By Love Possessed* (1957). I do not mean to imply a vendetta—intellectuals waiting in hallways for nine years. It was merely that almost everything Cozzens's work stood for went against the grain of the ideal type of the intellectual. As an example of that ideal type made flesh, one can hardly do better than the late Dwight Macdonald—a man with a perfectly matched set of radical-intellectual political and literary opinions and a devastating wit into the bargain—and perhaps now is the time to look at his roundhouse attack on *By Love Possessed*.

First, however, a bit of background must be supplied. Even though Cozzens had won a Pulitzer Prize, no earlier novel of his had scored a true success, either commercial or critical. With *By Love Possessed*, he had hit the bestseller gong, and hit it with a sledgehammer. The novel was weeks and weeks atop the bestseller list, a movie sale and a *Reader's Digest* condensation had been made, a *Time* cover story done, and critics both provincial and metropolitan had lined up to praise the novel. In other words, Cozzens was ready to be savaged.

Here it must be said that *By Love Possessed* is not Cozzens's best performance. It is an extremely ambitious novel, and too much of the ambition goes into its style. The novel attempts to be a comprehensive account of the various permutations of love—from adolescent lust to the complexities of marital

love to the love of parents for their children to the pure love of a sister for her brother—and how in these various forms love wreaks havoc on any plans to get through life with order and reason as one's guiding principles. Dealing with a universal theme, Cozzens thought to forge a universal style. In the attempt to bring this off, he often twisted his syntax, worked in quotations from great authors, and trotted out a Latinized vocabulary of often arcane words.

The effect is all too frequently an air of pomposity and portentousness. To what extent this ruins the novel—it certainly doesn't improve it—is another question. The late Alexander Gerschenkron, an economic historian who also adjudicated the dispute between Edmund Wilson and Vladimir Nabokov over translating Pushkin, once told me that, in Russian, many of Dostoevsky's novels are so wretchedly written as to be very nearly unreadable. Gerschenkron did not go on to say that he failed to read them. But if your sensibilities are so fine that stylistic lapses put you irretrievably off, then many a passage in *By Love Possessed* will seem to you like downing a Pepsi with a meal at Lutèce. And yet the concern with style can, it seems to me, be carried too far. Dwight Macdonald was fond of quoting Buffon's old maxim, "The style is the message," but Macdonald's message, as near as I can make it out, came to no more than that it is better to have a nice style.

THERE is no want of style in Dwight Macdonald's attack on *By Love Possessed*. Still, it seems to me one of those essays in which one's pleasure will be destroyed if one actually reads the author being discussed. Macdonald begins by mentioning the enormousness—to him, the enormity—of the success of Cozzens's novel. He then cites examples of the praise the book has received, finding quotations that go especially gushy. They were even, it turns out, nuts about it in the provinces. If you know the intellectual signals, by now you ought to know that there is already a great deal to be suspicious about.

But when Macdonald comes to

speaking of the novel itself, something rather odd happens. If one has read it oneself, one begins to realize that Macdonald either did not read it very carefully or that he came to it blinded if not by malice then by the passion for polemic. He informs us that Arthur Winner, Jr., the novel's principal character, is a prig—and, worse, that Cozzens doesn't know he is a prig, which is the greatest sign of ineptitude in a novelist. But Macdonald is quite mistaken here. Arthur Winner, Jr. is indeed a prig but a prig by intention. It is the whole point of Cozzens's novel to show that Arthur Winner, try as he may, cannot live his life in the kind of order that a morally priggish man would wish. Through the action of the novel Arthur Winner is reminded of one of his sons, now dead, who was a kind of bad seed, whom no amount of teaching, no amount of punishment, could straighten out. Later in the novel he is made to realize that an adulterous affair he had with the wife of a friend was known about all along to this friend—and in this there is further humiliation, further destruction of priggishness.

Macdonald goes on to say that Cozzens's "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." He then cites two samples, one from an aging lawyer named Noah Tuttle and another from a physician named Reggie Shaw. The samples are brutal, true, but what Macdonald doesn't tell his readers is that the lawyer is on the edge of senility and the physician, having seen so much that is horrendous in life, has lapsed into alcoholism. "No reason is given for any of these onslaughts," Macdonald writes, "aside from the fact that all three recipients are women; this seems to be Cozzens's idea of manly straight-from-the-shoulder talk. Curious." It is curious, all right. It makes one wonder: was Dwight Macdonald asleep at the wheel, or instead concentrating on running someone over?

After scoring blows against Cozzens for anti-Semitism, anti-Negro sentiment (there are, in the current

phrase, Tomish characters in the novel), and anti-feminism, Macdonald finds two reasons that account for the success of the novel. It succeeded with the critics because there was "a general feeling that Cozzens had hitherto been neglected and that he 'had it coming to him,'" to which there is perhaps some truth. And it succeeded with the public because "it is the latest episode in The Middlebrow Counter-Revolution." Middlebrow—Macdonald's vocabulary knew no more dampening phrase than this one. The way Macdonald saw it was that Cozzens's work was part of "The Novel of Resignation." He was resigned to taking life as it was; he was hopelessly given to "maturity." There was no idealism in Cozzens, no radical thrust to argue with and change life. In this he had caught the spirit of the age. Similarly, Irving Howe, while conceding that Cozzens had been consistent in his vision over the years, noted that "It is the weary *Zeitgeist* that has finally limped round to him." And, more explicitly political than Macdonald in his attack, Howe concluded: "And, indeed, a civilization that finds its symbolic embodiment in Dwight David Eisenhower and its practical guide in John Foster Dulles has been well prepared for receiving the fruits of the Philosophy of Limit. It is a civilization that, in its naked and graceless undelusion, deserves as its laureate James Gould Cozzens—Novelist of the Republic."

Now here is an interesting piece of damnation. Cozzens has created a novel—indeed a body of work—that requires attack because it fits in with the spirit of the age, which is perceived to be loathsome. On these same grounds it makes a certain amount of sense to knock off *War and Peace* until we have world disarmament and pack away *Moby Dick* until we have finally managed to save the whale.

Macdonald and Howe may have disliked Cozzens's style but what they really hated was what they took to be his message—or, to use the grander term, his vision. They read him as a novelist in support of the status quo, surely no good thing to be. He reminded readers of human limitation when what Americans

needed to be reminded of was human possibility. His novels, with their insistence on the role played in life by illness, bad luck, poor character, biological urgings, death, were, when you got right down to it, not only anti-liberal but in the profoundest sense counterrevolutionary. In these purely political terms, Macdonald and Howe were probably right.

BUT I do not want to make *By Love Possessed* sound all message, all vision. In fact, if cumbersome in style, it is, nonetheless a most carefully constructed work of fiction. (Even Howe allowed that Cozzens was a "craftsman.") The concatenation of character and event is persuasively worked out with an intricacy and fine discrimination that could only have been achieved by a high literary intelligence. Cozzens realizes his vision not through preaching but through plot. This vision is compelling because he has taken great pains to get his facts straight, because he makes his characters complex yet clear, and describes experience with a richness and unpredictability that show a minute fidelity to life. As Arthur Winner, Jr.'s law partner says in *By Love Possessed*, "Happiness, Jonathan Swift admonishes me, is a perpetual possession of being well-deceived." The burden of Cozzens's major fiction is to undeceive us.

If Cozzens resembles any major American figure, it is Justice Holmes. Like Holmes, Cozzens did not wish to blink unpleasant facts about human nature. Like Holmes, Cozzens admired the strength of the puritanical tradition while remaining himself agnostic. Like Holmes again, Cozzens felt that all lies, even lies for the putative good of humanity, were still lies. In the middle of *By Love Possessed*, a black man comes to Arthur Winner, Jr., to tell him he has a bad heart con-

dition and would like Winner to write his will for him. When Winner asks how he is feeling at present, he says he is rather like the man in the cartoon who has fallen from the skyscraper and who, when passing a window from which people look out at him in shock, announces, "All right so far." There is a joke Justice Holmes would have adored. He would also have had no difficulty understanding another character in *By Love Possessed* who says that "Freedom is the knowledge of necessity."

IN HIS biography Professor Bruccoli writes: "In the eyes of the Left Cozzens was the spokesman for the enemy. Indeed, he was the enemy." There can be little question that Macdonald's essay, backed up by that of Howe, brought down Cozzens's reputation—and brought it down hard. The hyenas having done their work, the maggots now crept in. The signal had gone out; it was now understood to be OK to have at James Gould Cozzens. And have at Cozzens's next two books, a collection of stories entitled *Children and Others* and a thin novel of his late years called *Morning Noon and Night*, everyone did. He was now known as the novelist with bad style and bad politics. He was the spokesman for the ruling class, the novelist of power and privilege. Clichés, like bad news, travel fast.

When a young critic to whom Cozzens had been friendly warned Cozzens that he had just written an attack on his social conservatism in the *New York Times Book Review*, Cozzens responded that he intended no social or political message in his fiction:

My only aim and interest is to try to present as exactly as I can people and events as they appear to me. When young, I admit that I imagined such painstaking dispassion, and concern for simple

truth, could displease nobody. Of course I know now that, to all who have things to sell or the emotional need to write for or against things, such an attitude's simply infuriating.

It was the wrong age, Cozzens came to learn, for writing about things as one saw them.

AS RECOUNTED in Matthew Bruccoli's pages, James Gould Cozzens's last years were wretchedly sad. His wife died before he did; he stopped writing, he even stopped reading ("no longer writing," he noted, in a comment only a writer would understand, "Why read?"). Cancer of the spine claimed him ten days before he was seventy-five. Before he died he wrote to his publisher, William Jovanovich, "In clear fact work of mine's all out of season." He was right. The anthology of his writing and critical appreciations that Professor Bruccoli put together in 1978 sold a total of 2,488 copies in cloth and paper. No serious reevaluation of Cozzens's work, which this book was intended to stir, ever came about.

In a more just world, James Gould Cozzens would be accorded a volume in the Library of America, the recently established series of American classics for a general audience. It would include his novels *The Just and the Unjust*, *Guard of Honor*, and, yes, *By Love Possessed*. But although two volumes have already been published of the work of Jack London, and others are no doubt in preparation for Sinclair Lewis and (the early) John Dos Passos, I doubt very much if the present editors and their advisers plan to include Cozzens. The injustice here is, or ought to be, obvious. Yet I suspect Cozzens would not be much surprised; about injustice, in literary criticism and in much else besides, he knew a very great deal.

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