

## A Commemoration of James Gould Cozzens

**Just Representations: A James Gould Cozzens Reader**, edited by Matthew J. Bruccoli, *Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, and New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978.* xxxiii + 568 pp. \$14.95.

THIS ANTHOLOGY of Cozzens' writings, with a few critical essays by other people, was intended to celebrate the author's seventy-fifth birthday, but he died before that event, and the volume serves now to commemorate him. Cozzens deserves commemoration, both as the author of a number of distinguished novels and in compensation for the relative neglect of these novels for the past several decades.

The neglect is something Cozzens' defenders frequently complain of and into the causes of which they speculate. Bernard de Voto, writing in *Harper's* in 1949, contended that Cozzens' novels were so perfectly wrought that they "leave criticism practically nothing to do." I've never understood what "criticism" can mean in that statement. Perhaps George Garret, in an essay in *Just Representations*, is making the same point more clearly when he argues that Cozzens is little taught in college courses because the easiest works to teach "are those with obvious and interesting or entertaining secondary characteristics," rather than those, like Cozzens', that invite testing of "the tense and subtle relationship" that exists between fictional characters and real people. But is Cozzens' writing free of "secondary or decorative characteristics"? Frederick Bracher's essay in *Just Representations* suggests not. "Teachers," Mr. Garret writes, "are not interested in embracing difficulty"—by which he means, or should say, that most teachers are not themselves critics, but followers of criticism. When criticism revives Cozzens (if it does), teachers will teach him.

A more common and probably more accurate explanation of the neglect of Cozzens, and one

equally uncomplimentary to teachers and critics, is repeated in *Just Representations* by Matthew J. Bruccoli and Garret: that Cozzens' conservatism has made him an unfashionable writer. The reactionary politics of Eliot, Yeats, Joyce, and Pound have not made them unfashionable, perhaps because their other claims to greatness (no one would put Cozzens in their class) render political objections insignificant, perhaps also because conservatism does not so dominate their works as it does Cozzens'. At a time when literature has extolled the rebel, the outcast, the alienated, the victim of society—when, looking at society and social institutions, it sees hypocrisy, injustice, and repression—Cozzens does not. He defends social order, the traditional organization and institutions of society; he sees not only the inevitability but the rightness of social distinctions and privilege. The rich, he concedes, are not always wise or good, but he believes that status by and large stems from merit. The criminal, though he is perhaps in some sense always the victim of plain bad luck, suffers chiefly the bad luck of low intelligence, but he must be held, like all men, morally responsible for what he does. Cozzens regards the law that holds him so as the repository of human wisdom. Cozzens' protagonists, whom I take to be in general if not in all particulars his spokesmen, acknowledge privately the existence of flaws in social organization and the workings of the law, but many of these flaws—such as racial inequalities, that modern America has come to see as one of the greatest of social injustices—Cozzens' fiction is inclined to regard as something that comes about because human nature is what it is and as something, therefore, that the law can't do much about. Cozzens has only contempt for the reforming idealist. There aren't many liberals in his fiction, but there are contemptuous references to them, and the few who appear are mischief-makers.

I am conscious of the danger of attributing the opinions of an author's characters to the author himself, but Garret's statement, "I cannot honestly gauge or infer the politics of James Gould Cozzens," seems disingenuous to me. I wouldn't predict how Cozzens would vote on

every issue, but his general narrative posture from his first novel to his last is one that presents social order as good, rationalist idealism as foolish; common-sense empirical reason as the instrument of order, sentimentality and emotion as mischievous. These and the other beliefs I've described above may not be "political" as Garret intends the term, but they should at least support inferences as to what their holder's opinions would be. The point is unimportant, risky, and probably bad as criticism, but I'd hazard a small bet that the denunciation made by Henry Worthington in Cozzens' *Morning Noon and Night* of Franklin Roosevelt's "near-senile megalomania" that allowed him to be gulled by the "perfidities and duplicities of the Soviet regime" (the passage containing this quotation is not in *Just Representations*), as well as similar comments on modern social and intellectual developments, are Cozzens' own.

Whatever the causes for the neglect of interest in Cozzens, the neglect is undeserved. There are faults enough in his early novels to explain why he has omitted their titles from lists of his works published in the later volumes, but once he hit his stride in *S.S. San Pedro* (1930), every novel he wrote, with one or two exceptions, was better than its predecessor, however good that predecessor was. *The Last Adam*, *Men and Brethren*, and *The Just and the Unjust* are all fine novels, and they are surpassed by *Guard of Honor*, generally thought his best, and possibly *By Love Possessed*, his ambitious and certainly his most controversial.

When it appeared in 1957, *By Love Possessed* was attacked chiefly for the quality of its prose, which is rhetorical and ornate. In a review in the *New Yorker* in 1957, Brendan Gill called it Cozzens' masterpiece; in another, in *Commentary* in 1958, Dwight MacDonald castigated it. There are passages in the novel in which rhetorical figures are so piled upon one another that they seem to invite the kind of annotation given by commentators on Joyce to the "Aeolus" episode of *Ulysses*.<sup>\*</sup> As early as *Castaway* (1936), Cozzens' language begins to assume the ornate formalities that will culminate laboriously in *Morning Noon and Night*. In contrast, the prose of *The Last Adam* and

*Men and Brethren* is light, swift, and direct. *Guard of Honor* and *By Love Possessed* may be all in all Cozzens' best and most serious works, but *Men and Brethren*, in my view, is his most delightful. Though there are vivid characters all through his fiction, the central characters of the later novels seem occasionally lacking in vitality—as a result, perhaps, of the introspective, meditative tone that suffuses the later works. *Guard of Honor* and *By Love Possessed*, however, are remarkable in complexity of plotting and suspense. And though these and *Morning Noon and Night* rather too easily surrender moral obligation to "necessity," Cozzens is a discriminating moralist.

Of Cozzens' novels, *Just Representations* contains *Ask Me Tomorrow* complete and selections from *The Last Adam*, *Men and Brethren*, *The Just and the Unjust*, *Guard of Honor*, *By Love Possessed*, and *Morning Noon and Night*; it also contains three short stories and a selection of non-fiction prose. *Ask Me Tomorrow* is a good choice for several reasons: it is a good novel; its protagonist being a different sort of man from the protagonists of Cozzens' later and best-known works, it illustrates a less familiar phase of Cozzens' career; and, if any interest lies in the fact, it is by Cozzens' admission somewhat autobiographical. The stories too are good, though I would like to have had "Eyes to See," perhaps omitted because of its length. The novels are all from Cozzens' middle and late career—all, that is, among his best, except for *Morning Noon and Night*, a somewhat pretentious and digressive work. Better in its parts than as a whole, it lends itself to anthologizing, but readers should not take the excerpts from it as a reliable index of its general quality, as they may take the excerpts from the other novels.

The non-fiction pieces are a miscellany indeed: several autobiographical items; a foreword to an illustrated book on roses, two forewords to short works of Cozzens' own that were written years ago but only recently published; an essay on Kent School, Connecticut; a review of Oliver La Farge's *The Eagle and the Egg* (a history of the Air Transport Command in World War II), which must express some of the interests that moved Cozzens to write *Guard of*

*Honor*; and a piece from *The Bucks County Law Reporter* positioned to make a neat introduction to the excerpts from *The Just and the Unjust*. The volume also contains reproductions of Cozzens' corrected typescript pages of two passages of *By Love Possessed*.

Of the essays by others than Cozzens, two are general surveys of his life and writings, two are general appreciative essays, and three are critical essays—Gill's *New Yorker* review of *By Love Possessed*, Frederick Bracher's essay on Cozzens' style and techniques, and an imaginative comparison by Noel Perrin of some of Cozzens' characters to the dukes in Shakespeare's plays. One last word of praise. The pages of the volume are large. If the prices I have seen lately in books are typical, this is a pretty good buy as well as a good introduction to or sampling of Cozzens.

Reviewed By FRANCIS X. DUGGAN

\*See Stuart Gilbert, *James Joyce's Ulysses* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), pp. 194-198, and Don Gifford with Robert J. Seidman, *Notes for Joyce* (New York: P. Dutton & Company, 1974), pp. 519-525.

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## *Flat Europeaner*

**The Realists: Eight Portraits (Stendhal, Balzac, Dickens, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Galdos, Henry James, Proust),** by C. P. Snow, *New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1978. xiv + 336 pp. \$12.95.*

LORD SNOW IS THE HEIR of a genuine middlebrow tradition. His work can be read, and even F. R. Leavis seems to have managed to get through some of the fictions before pronouncing them worthless.

I got through *The Realists* with some speed. One of its subjects, Henry James, remarked of a novel by one of its heroes, Trollope, that it was inadequate to the first duty of a book of whatever kind, namely, to provoke to thought.

James too had slumbered gently "on to the end" of Trollope before saying so. This book is a long way below Trollope.

Lord Snow offers potted biographies of eight European novelists with critical comment interspersed. They are all "great" and "realists" (including Dickens and James). Snow is powerless to attach any sense to either term. Greatness—some finenesses of discrimination are offered—emerges as a sort of mark on the forehead of people who are otherwise, with one exception, depressingly like everyone else. Realism seems to be the omniscient narrator telling of the real social world with psychological insight. Why this defines these eight novelists and not others is obscure.

If the work has any driving force beyond the automatism of an elderly writer used to producing a quota of words, it is to be found in a preoccupation with the unusual "sex lives" of the novelists. Snow's attitude to sex is much like that of Felix Krull to the "great joy," plus a good deal of indecent curiosity. The work of the little-known Galdós is discussed without there transpiring any reason for Snow's interest. Galdós, however, according to Snow, had a little oddity in his orderly bachelor life. After a sober lunch with the two sisters who kept house for him he would make his way, every afternoon at two o'clock precisely, to a brothel or a cheap room in the slums where he could have a woman. Lord Snow does not seem to be titillated by this oddity, but does admire and offer as a good example the novelist's method of getting to know the lower classes. "They loved him" and "Galdós loved women and everything about them": an admirable cooperation, it seems, were it not for the financial straits his habits landed him in.

All the eight novelists are discussed with what one would call an obsessive interest in their sex-lives if Snow were capable of an obsession. The more sex the better, it seems, but preferably "cheerful" like Balzac's in his many affairs, rather than Tolstoy's marital unhappiness. Dostoevsky gets kind words, however, despite his having had only one affair outside his marriages. Mathilde is fairly solemnly rebuked for rejecting Stendhal's advances. "She thus deprived herself of some of the most bril-