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# Dark Contract

Matthew J. Bruccoli: *James Gould Cozzens: A Life Apart*; Harcourt Brace Jovanovich; San Diego.

by Ronald Berman

Matthew Bruccoli is, perhaps, the leading biographer of modern American novelists. With this book he scores something of a triple, as it appeared soon after his acclaimed lives of Fitzgerald and O'Hara. Like his other works, it is exceptionally well-produced. It is a handsome book, with a full apparatus of notes and documents.

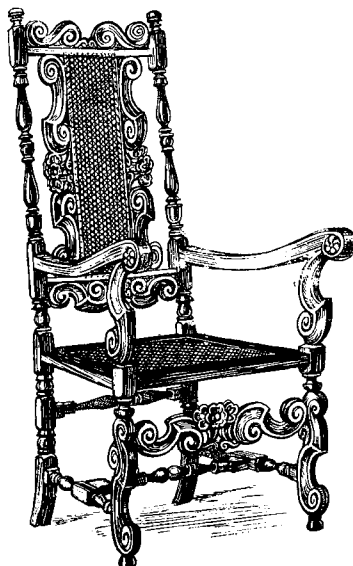
There is a difference between biography plain and simple and a critical life. Bruccoli writes critical lives. This one not only evaluates the novels but debates the critics. Bruccoli's virtues are many and splendid: he writes clearly, honestly, and with great intelligence. He has a phenomenal grasp of the methods: interviewing, doing the archival work, risking interpretation of the life and its connection to the novels. Even the photographs are a joy. But his work is not quite at the level of those who—I am thinking of Richard Ellmann, the biographer of Joyce, and Carlos Baker, the biographer of Hemingway—have managed to join literary criticism itself to life study. Bruccoli knows how to summarize criticism, how to debate it, how to show whether it is fair. But he does not himself deploy it. His book on Fitzgerald, *Some Sort of Epic Grandeur*, is first-rate, except that it says almost nothing of the work. Perhaps that should be put more precisely: the Fitzgerald book, like this book on Cozzens, does not interpret the text.

There are several kinds of trouble that James Gould Cozzens makes for readers. The first is that he does not like them. I do not mean by this that he was misan-

thropic, although he did lead a life literally apart from society. I mean that he did not like the regnant ideas of our time, the ideas by which we define ourselves. He had a Johnsonian sense of self and despised weakness, which he saw displayed in the universal, sentimental belief in our essential goodness. He loathed liberalism and he brought down upon himself its reaction to him. Here is a well-known contribution Cozzens once lightly made to a book about contemporary 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 theatre seems tiresome to me. My literary preferences are for writers who take the trouble to write well. This necessarily excludes some of my most lauded contemporaries.

He was an ironic man and had a sense of



humor, although perhaps not one of proportion. How much more wounding that paragraph is to the naked liberal than a dissertation on politics—it attacks what Cozzens disliked so intelligently, the whole web of “serious” culture. And what is left out—the almost obligatory oath of allegiance to the Social Duty of the Novelist—makes as many enemies as what is included. Cozzens never wrote his *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.

In a century of liberalism Cozzens was an unabashed conservative. Although he was in many ways like Edmund Wilson, he never tried to atone for his class or other advantages. Instead of trying to wash away his guilt he affirmed those values of the high middle class to which he belonged. His immersion in that class began when he was sent to Kent School, which seemed to have influenced him much more than his years at Harvard. But he fought Kent school as Joyce fought Clongowes Wood. Cozzens was very intelligent and alarmingly well-read. He saw himself in opposition to religious and moral authority; he made life hard on the masters. But he rebelled against the deficiencies of the high middle class before he defended its virtues.

It is important to note that Cozzens was both a conservative and rebel. And that he, like Pound, Hemingway, and countless others of his generation, went into exile. His exile took an outwardly uneventful form: at the age of 24, after writing several well-received novels, he married his literary agent, Sylvia Bernice Baumgarten. They were married for half an uneventful century, living always in some connection to but a long journey from New York. During this period (except for service in World War II) Cozzens lived in exurbia and wrote. His exile was like Faulkner's: living in communities that absorbed his attention, ignoring and despising the issues which agitated the café society of the mind.

This book and another Bruccoli pro-

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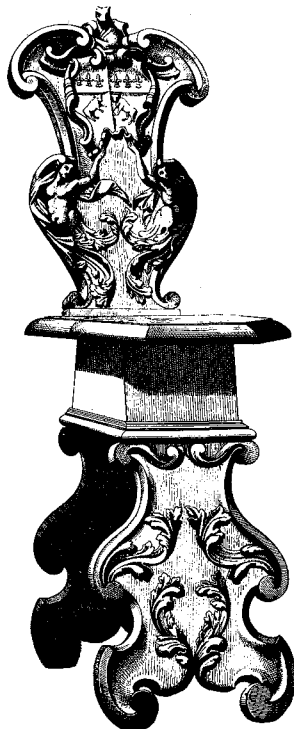
duction, *Just Representations: A James Gould Cozzens Reader*, indicate what Cozzens did when he seemed not to be doing anything. He observed life in courtrooms—which he attended—and restaurants, which he frequented. He selected his material from the flow around him. There are no bullfighters in Cozzens. Instead, he seems to create a social context which dates back to Jane Austen. Here is what Brucoli says about character and setting in *By Love Possessed* and other novels:

Because Cozzens insists on the hierarchical nature of society—a stratification based on character, ability, education, intelligence, and opportunity—he has been variously labeled a snob, an aristocrat, or a reactionary. Egalitarian-minded critics have objected to his equation of merit with breeding and education. (Cozzens never concerns himself with great wealth; his aristocracy is an upper-middle class aristocracy, in which vocation and character count more than money.) His admirable figures are men who have accepted the duties of their abilities and positions. They are what they do and how well they do it.

While I do agree, I don't know if "intelligence" is the proper term. The characters whom Cozzens embeds in moral predicaments are sometimes measurably less intelligent and even less imaginative than those they oppose. The Cozzens hero, unlike the 20th-century stereotype, is not a model of mind dominated by sensibility. The great set pieces of dialogue, like that between Arthur Winner and Julius Penrose about guilt and responsibility in *By Love Possessed*, indicate a kind of heroic innocence. It might be said that the Cozzens hero derives from the earlier period of the novel, for he is a figure like Rasselas or Emma, one who finds that experience is less intelligible than ideas.

The Cozzens antagonist tends to be an intellectual. Julius Penrose or a character like General Nichols in *Guard of Honor* seems at moments to become a

kind of fictive Pure Thought. They move with distressing ease beyond moral obstacles which remain in the way of the other. They see everything. But they don't have *something* some saving form of grim stupidity, that their students seem to have. It turns out that wars domestic



and foreign are won by a different kind of knowledge. It is no wonder that the critics hated Cozzens—not only does he actually want to win wars; he wants that to happen because we believe in them.

The question of belief for Cozzens himself is more than interesting. Brucoli notes several times that as Cozzens aged he became ever more convinced that not to be born was better than to have lived. He did not say that life was tragic or that it should be improved or reformed: it was better not to be born. Yet Cozzens lived a life of success and even of happiness. In his middle years his work was taken, often, by the Book-of-the-Month Club. He made a good deal of money and lived well. In early life, when he did not sell, he was supported by a wife who was beautiful, intelligent, and devoted to him.

It seems that life was kept away, in spite of these advantages, by writing, isolation, and drinking. And that Cozzens sincerely did believe that living was a kind of moral struggle.

Cozzens was not only affected by aging; even before sickness and false teeth and alcohol got to him he wrote, in 1964, "Demonstrably, the most dangerous thing anyone can ever do is to be born. You're making a contract, with no escape clause to die at the pleasure of the nature of things. Why do this?" The notebooks that Cozzens kept in the 1960's, and from which this passage was taken, are full of reflections on "the nature of things." Possibly there is some reason why a master of allusion should embed in his own lines those of Lucretius.

There are two passages that ought to be read in apposition. The first is from the notebooks, the second from a review of *By Love Possessed* by Irving Howe:

It seems to be the simple perhaps sad fact that our human nature makes it apparently impossible for anyone to really love anyone else.

It speaks to a society weary of ideals and dubious of hopes; it helps console people in their prosperous frustrations; it offers conservative wisdom in a moment of liberal twilight.

Howe added that Cozzens is a spokesman "for a civilization that finds its symbolic embodiment in Dwight David Eisenhower and its practical guide in John Foster Dulles." So much for the muses. But the minds of Eisenhower and Dulles consort oddly with what actually can be found in the novels. Throughout Cozzens's work there is something that extends the vision of conservatism and seems to elude that of liberalism. The life and the novels deal with an unwilling contract. As Cozzens sees it, life, or rather its relationships, must be created out of nothing. The remarkable thing about him then is that he was the *opposite* of confident, practical, and consoling. He may have been more like Kafka and Hemingway than like Eisenhower and Dulles.

When Cozzens summed up certain beliefs in his notebooks, he went to the poet who said that he wrote clear verse about dark things. To read the life of Cozzens and his fiction is to recognize them:

... when time's dominion shakes the  
body,

When limbs react with dull ungainliness,  
Then the mind limps, tongue is a  
babbler, mind  
Is palsied, all is failure, all is loss.  
So spirit's quality must dissolve like  
smoke  
Into the air aloft.

There are different kinds of moral meanings. Cozzens disliked his contract, but he kept it. □

## Making Hay with the Southern Sun

**Walter Taylor: *Faulkner's Search for a South*; University of Illinois Press; Urbana.**

**Thomas Wolfe: *Welcome to Our City: A Play in Ten Scenes*; Edited by Richard S. Kennedy; Louisiana State University Press; Baton Rouge.**

by Clyde Wilson

Posthumously, William Faulkner has achieved a celebrity that, if we take him at his word, he despised and eschewed, but which seems inseparable from modern commercial culture. Every second man in the street, who can't remember who is currently Vice-President, recognizes Faulkner's name as that of a famous writer. Every lumpen intellectual who once read *The Sound and the Fury* in a sophomore lit class feels qualified to "explain" Faulkner. Worse, Faulkner has become an industry. His home can be toured, at certain times, for a fee. Minor literati who met him once at lunch in New York or Hollywood can, with but slight embroidery, sell their recollections to the Sunday supplements. An academic press that publishes a book with Faulkner in the title will probably break even on library sales alone. Faulkner supports a whole scholarly phalanx, and there are undoubtedly people around who have made more money explicating and

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analyzing him than *he* ever made creating works of genius. (Admittedly, it is also true that several great scholars, who are perhaps as rare as great writers, have devoted careers to him, in both Europe and America.)

When a cultural phenomenon becomes as large as William Faulkner, liberals must be equipped to orient themselves to it. They must know what liberalism is supposed to say about the phenomenon, a process not unlike the way adolescents learn about Jordache jeans and members of fraternal orders acquire passwords and intricate handshakes. This need has created an entire school of literary criticism, of which *Faulkner's Search for a South* is an example.

The easiest tactic would be simply to postulate that Faulkner was a liberal. Aren't all wise and good men? Walter Taylor has taken a more honest, difficult, and sophisticated path. He admits that, after all, Faulkner was not a liberal. He flunked the ultimate litmus test—his attitudes toward Southern history and the race question never quite coincided with the attitudes decreed by liberal convention. But since these are the only possible attitudes for wise and good men, their absence in Faulkner presents an interesting phenomenon for scholarly description and explanation. Faulkner failed to find the South described by liberal convention. It is inadmissible that he may not have been looking for it. Therefore, that he did not find it is an interesting

"failure" to be accounted for.

Thus, the "failure" that Faulkner himself sometimes spoke about, which generally has been interpreted as a felt failure of artistic realization, has metamorphosed, for Taylor, into a "failure" to find the right South. He kept searching for it but could never quite find it, according to Taylor, because of his commitment to the condescending, paternalistic outlook that turn-of-the-century Mississippi "aristocrats" developed as a counterweight to the unabashed racism of the "poor whites." This commitment was all the more poignant and ambiguous because of Faulkner's family's dubious position within the "aristocracy." Taylor makes his case with considerable skill and enterprise. However, to too great a degree one has to be willing to be persuaded by speculative biographical evidence like the following:

[T]he Faulknors *would never know* whether they were Cavaliers or red-necks, and not knowing would affect them profoundly. . . . For thirteen-year-old Bill Faulkner, trying to understand the family heritage *must have been* frustrating. . . . As Faulkner grew older, he *must have* grown increasingly aware that Vardaman's victory [over the 'aristocrats' in Mississippi politics] was a pivotal event in his life. . . . To twenty-five-year-old Faulkner, on the threshold of his career as a novelist, the episode [a scandal involving a politician who was once his grandfather's law partner] *must have* spoken volumes [emphasis added].

The trouble is, those of us who are not liberals feel restricted to writing biography from documentary evidence and to criticizing literature from a text. Further, Taylor's interpretation works only if we accept a simplistic scenario of Southern history as a conflict between "aristocrats" and "poor whites." (Any of Faulkner's works which cannot be made to conform to this scenario, like *The Unvanquished* or *The Reivers*, must be dismissed as "a mire of paternalistic propaganda," or "smug nostalgia," or "a parrotlike re-