

Paris, in the little Left Bank restaurant he frequented; and I have a memory of him leaning on a grand piano in his flat on the rue de Vaugirard, spinning stories in a wheezing, war-damaged voice about things that never were—pleasantly delighting in his inventions.

Ford said that it was “the lonely buffaloes ploughing solitary furrows who produce the great truths of art.” He had watched Conrad and he had known Henry James. Though he believed in the truths of art, he had no wish to be a lonely buffalo. He preferred the gregariousness of the Closerie des Lilas, and he found Americans appreciated him more than his fellow-Englishmen, who tended to look askance at his tall tales and his marital difficulties. Ford had been a notable editor of two short-lived magazines, and he continued to befriend young writers, including Hemingway, who repaid the friendship with malicious caricature. Like Ezra Pound, Ford was loyal to the avant-garde. Some of the best letters are to Pound, whom he chides with a large-spirited cajolery for being quarrelsome.

During the Twenties, Ford came often to New York, where he was lionized, his books sold, and he ground out stuff for the magazines. One of the earliest “writers in residence”—at Olivet—he gave himself earnestly to his students, although American education appalled him. He died just before the new war, which he would have hated, for total war had nothing to do with chivalry and gallantry.

Ford’s interesting and observing mind, his “large carelessness,” as he himself admitted, are fully reflected in these fascinating letters. They make us eager for the promised biography by Arthur Mizener.

**FRASER YOUNG’S
LITERARY CRYPT NO. 1152**

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer No. 1152 will be found in the next issue.

AB CAD AEF GDH IDFH AJF ABEK
DLBM FDNB HAJGOF AEF GD
ABEK HD IDFB.

MJPAHBM

Answer to Literary Crypt No. 1151

*He that talketh what he knoweth will
also talk what he knoweth not.*

—BACON.

Philistine’s Pilgrimage

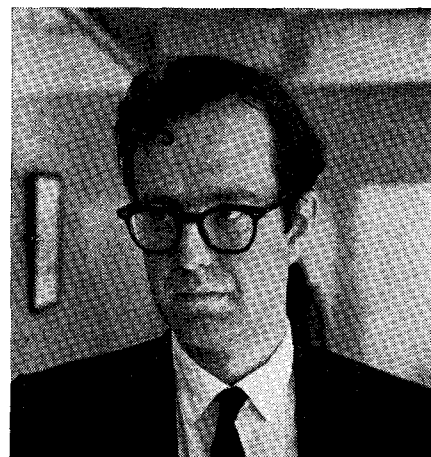
Square’s Progress, by Wilfrid Sheed (Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 309 pp. \$4.95), poses the question of whether we can lead lives of quiet desperation without going numb or hysterical. Emile Capouya teaches English and American literature at the New School in New York.

By EMILE CAPOUYA

HAS IT come to this: that we are beginning to regret the remnants of the bourgeois ethos? First there was Morris Philipson’s witty and pointed novel, *Bourgeois Anonymous* (SR, April 24), saying a kind word for convention. Now we have the triumphant rehabilitation, at the hands of Wilfrid Sheed, of a type perilously close to Mencken’s *boobus americanus*. Fred Cope, the hero of *Square’s Progress*, works at a job, reads newspapers, drinks beer, watches television, and acts in all other respects like a member of the army of mercenaries that, we are told, defends what God abandons and saves the sum of things for pay. The point is that neither Mr. Philipson nor Mr. Sheed is a Philistine. When the sum of things is doing nicely, we can deplore Fred Cope. But in these latter days we are more likely to say, Thank God for a man. Especially since in this case he is decent, and put upon.

For Fred’s cheerful resignation may make the world go round but it makes his wife jump out of her skin. If he is phlegmatic, she is choleric, with a dash of black bile. Alison—lovely name, that—is cultivated, sensitive, and adventurous. The dormitory-suburb of Bloodbury might be bearable to her if Fred would agree that it is unendurable. But no, he thinks it a decent enough place, and the neighbors decent people. And after one more uneventful party with those decent people, Alison has had it. She issues an ultimatum that he doesn’t quite catch:

“I don’t think I can take it any more, Fred. You’re not even listening now, are you?” She said the words in such a pleasant voice, and he was in such a fuzz by then, that he thought for a moment that things were all right again. “It’s not your fault, I know,” she said. Attababy, I knew she’d see it my way, arguments clear the air. Show me a couple that doesn’t argue and I’ll show you a . . . He remem-



—Newsweek.

**Wilfrid Sheed — does he
build better than he knows?**

bered trying to kiss her and mysteriously missing, and the light switching off and a period of unparalleled confusion ending suddenly in blackness and a cold shower and breakfast and milk and O. K., no need to go through all that.

Well, Alison is gone, leaving no address. After an orgy of newspaper-reading and television-watching, it becomes clear to Fred that freedom isn’t everything—he must find his wife. She thinks him unimaginative, imperturbable, and utterly predictable, does she? Then boldness is called for. He will quit his job and concentrate on hunting for her. That, and find quarters in the city, ultimately in Greenwich Village. Ultimately to meet a girl named Austin—but she is clearly an Alison-surrogate, as suggested by the cabalistic resemblance of names, and if Fred can’t have the original he doesn’t want the substitute.

THE original has gone home to mother, where anyone but Fred would have thought to look for her. This long while, she has been communing with the spirit of her rebellious brother, killed in the Korean War, and taking inventory of the intellectual excitement offered by her home town—a high-school beau and a venerable fake of a painter. The beau is married but willing to have an affair with her: she recoils like a seventy-five, demonstrating the limits of her adventurous disposition. The fake turns out to be a sincere fake. He means all those picture-postcard scenes. And he is a gentleman, with a sense of propriety that can be outraged by Alison to the

point where he tells her so. Failure on every front. Why doesn't that fool Fred show a sign of life?

Well, at the moment he is in the south of Spain, sojourning among artistic Americans, and in self-defense he has commenced painting. Thus far, whenever the possibility of getting together with a girl has presented itself (Alison hasn't been in any of the places where he's looked), something has gone wrong. The verdict has to be chastity by misadventure. One married lady, however, seems especially cordial—so much so that her husband is led to attempt suicide. It causes comment in their circle.

"I think trying to kill himself was the smartest thing he ever did. What do you say, Jack?"

"It doesn't mean a damn thing. He does it every year. Just to show that he's around."

Fred had never heard the group discussing a moral problem before and he was fascinated. They seemed to have criteria out of the *Arabian Nights*.

In any case, his own criteria—for he has some—are different enough to persuade him to give up exile and go home to suffer with his fellow citizens.

The story is slight enough, but the

sociology is most convincing. And Mr. Sheed is equipped with the style and wit to write a serious comedy of manners—serious in that it poses some important questions. Can we lead lives of quiet desperation without going slightly numb, like Fred, or indulging in hysterically romantic carping, like Alison? Is the desperation foreordained and inescapable? Mr. Sheed modestly limits himself to suggesting that, within the unsatisfactory framework, the square may yet make progress and the destructively sharp-edged sustain some humane blunting, for everybody's sake. Altogether too modest, I should say, if this novel were not as acute, high-spirited, and continuously amusing as it is. Mr. Sheed fulfills John Ciardi's definition of modern man as a creature of intellectual pessimism but glandular enthusiasm. His wit and verbal ingenuity have the odd effect of making Fred's cheerfully endured position as employee-commuter-householder-husband seem heartbreaking. Does the author build better than he knows, or is he simply a jump ahead of his readers? One way or the other, *Square's Progress* has more than enough moral heft to allow us to feel—and perhaps be—virtuous while we are taking our pleasure.

silence and to the vagotonic pallors of the mystes.

Now I, for one, had to dig pretty deep in the dictionary before I began to suspect what Gadda is saying here: that the complacent Italian citizens never scrutinized sufficiently the means by which Mussolini made the trains run on time.

Which brings us to "The Pastiche" as an anti-epic. Don Ciccio, in his futile attempt to find out who done it, is of course Gadda vainly seeking the sources of Fascism. They both reach the same conclusion: that you can never trace a momentous event to any single cause. The point is brought out clearly enough in the examination of Don Ciccio's psychology of crime discussed in the first chapter:

He sustained, among other things, that unforeseen catastrophes are never the consequence or the effect, if you prefer, of a single motive, of a cause singular; but they are rather like a whirlpool, a cyclonic point of depression in the consciousness of the world, towards which a whole multitude of converging causes have contributed.

This Fascism—far from being solely the work of "Lantern Jaw"—was a kind of stench, or poisonous distillation, which dripped from a chemical compound so long in forming and so complex that no one could ever have predicted what it would lead to.

The trouble with Gadda, though, is

The Dark Unconscious Causes

That Awful Mess on Via Merulana, by Carlo Emilio Gadda, translated from the Italian by William Weaver (Braziller. 388 pp. \$5.95), examines in the microcosm of a Roman whodunit, the complex nature of Fascism. Warrington Winters, a free-lance critic, teaches a course on the contemporary novel at the Polytechnic Institute of Brooklyn.

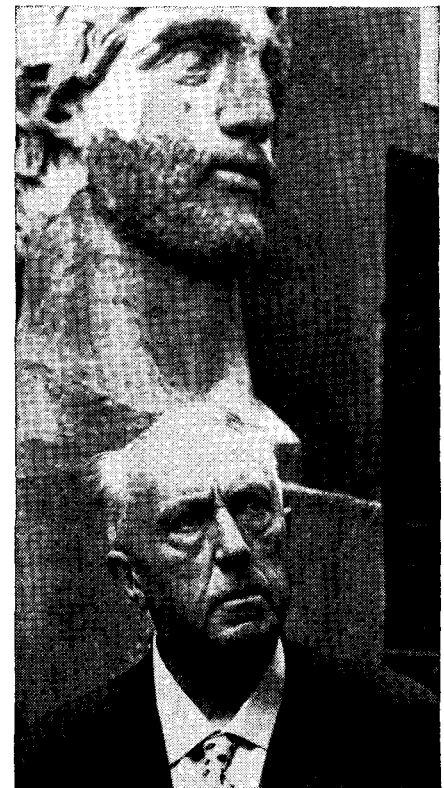
By WARRINGTON WINTERS

ONE OF the frightening events of our time is the emergence of the anti-hero and the anti-novel. And how about the anti-epic? I mean the poetic novel that depicts, out of thousandfold detail, not the birth of a nation but its fall. Carlo Emilio Gadda's *That Awful Mess on Via Merulana* (which Italians know as *Il Pasticciaccio*, or "The Pastiche") is an anti-epic. Although it first began periodical publication as early as 1946, this modern Italian classic has never appeared in English until now. The arrival of William Weaver's eloquent translation is therefore one of the important literary events of the year.

Superficially, "The Pastiche" is a kind of detective story. Back in 1927, in the space of a few days, two crimes are committed on the staid Via Merulana: armed robbery and rape-murder. Detective Don Ciccio (a junior edition of Inspector Maigret) goes to work with his cumbersome staff to expose the party or parties responsible. He fails.

To this thin tale Gadda hitches a stupendous cargo of people and things Roman, and, above all, truckloads of sheer language, ranging from Dante to the lowest speech of the gutter. Indeed language is at once the glory and the catastrophe of this work. How would you describe a flock of hens on a country railway track? Doubtless Maigret would simply note that the hens, no longer excited by trains, clucked sedately beside the tracks. But listen to Gadda:

The hens, as they did every day, had survived the drama: for years, now, the ex-pupils of Melpomene had arranged in an algolagniac, theatrified ritual, in a scene "for Nordic tourists" the most foreseeable and preventative breaches of their first and youthful error of clucking and squawking for a mere nothing in an hebephrenic crescendo: and they had adapted themselves, instead, in a carefully chosen poetics, to



Carlo Emilio Gadda—
"bumps to a stop."