Introduction

James Gould Cozzens' position in contemporary American literature has long been anomalous. Although never a completely neglected writer, Cozzens attained wide popularity only after the publication of *By Love Possessed*. Then, during the past five years, he has often been both praised and condemned for the wrong reasons. Criticism of Cozzens' work, for the most part, is scattered in various book reviews and journals; there have been few systematic interpretations of Cozzens' eight novels, interpretations of a kind which might isolate and define the principal themes in the novelist's work. Cozzens' unique, unfashionable view of man, a view so thoroughly rational that it frequently assaults our traditional religious and political attitudes, has frequently not been treated as an important and integral element in his work. Cozzens' capacity for continuing development, his increasing command of complex literary techniques, and his deepening, and highly intellectualized, ability to dramatize the condition of man in the modern world have earned him increased respect among readers and critics; that he might be
a major contemporary writer is, however, an idea which has only recently begun to take shape. This tardiness is at least partly attributable to the fact that, in addition to his unorthodox social and ethical ideas, his mistrust of the emotions and his reliance upon the strength of the intellect have embodied tendencies which run counter to the mainstream of modern American literature. Yet the very unorthodoxy of Cozzens' attitudes and preferences, since these are the traits which have made him a genuinely distinctive and controversial literary figure, strengthen his significance.

Since Cozzens is in many ways the prototype of the *impersonal* writer, his major characters demand extensive analysis. Often of a highly reflective, and even intellectual, cast of mind, they convey a mature, difficult view of life which is represented as the hard-earned prerogative of experience, wisdom, and increasing age. Only by analyzing all the implications of the human situation in Cozzens' novels can one arrive at a critical ground from which it is safe to infer the novelist's ideas. These ideas, so far out of the central development of most modern thought, are exceptional in our day and are worth, even in Cozzens' minority report, a more clearly and firmly stated discussion than are the purely literary qualities in Cozzens' novels.

The necessity for an expanded analysis of these ideas and attitudes lies partially in the possibility that James Gould Cozzens is a major novelist who has produced at least three works equal to any published in recent years, and partially in the fact that there has been so little comprehensive study of his
work. The dramatic shift in critical attitudes which followed the publication of *By Love Possessed* would seem to reveal a belated awareness that America had been overlooking one of her finest writers, and would seem to reveal also a simultaneous recognition of the fact that Cozzens' values as a novelist had made him a more comfortable figure during the period in which he was relegated to the ranks of the more or less overlooked writers.

The peculiar excellences or distinctions of Cozzens' art, more than anything else, justify critical study, for these distinctions reveal a complicated and deliberate novelist at work. No other writer of our time has dared to make such an extreme commitment to reason; and this commitment has led Cozzens into an attitude toward man which dares to be condescending, anti-democratic, and altogether dispassionate. To the rational principle Cozzens has remained firmly loyal, although his growing mastery of the technical aspects of literature has allowed him to dramatize his vision of reality with more and more impact and meaning. At the same time, Cozzens has persisted in standing apart from the literary fashions of his time: he has worked consistently within the framework of the traditional English novel, and has (with one exception) rejected any attempt at experimentation. And appropriately enough, a large part of his current significance lies in his ability to expand beyond the capacity of anyone else in his generation the scope and quality of the traditional.