

Arthur Moore Mizener

September 3, 1907 — February 11, 1988

Arthur Mizener was born in Erie, Pennsylvania, into the kind of small-town aristocracy often portrayed by a novelist he admired, James Gould Cozzens — a tight society, white, Protestant, and Republican, whose morals, manners, and taste were in the custody of families who had lived in Erie for several generations, or who at any rate were people of wealth and a proper education and demeanor. His parents were intelligent and personable; from his adored mother especially he acquired his aim to excel and his devotion to an old-fashioned concept of gentlemanly honor and decency. In his later life Mizener maintained a respect and affection for what he saw as admirable in such a society, yet broke away from its pettier standards and attitudes to become something of a political radical in his youth, a liberal Democrat in his maturity, and (as his friends know) remarkably free from religious or ethnic or class prejudices in his friendships, as well as in his social and literary values.

In his teens Mizener was sent to the Hill School, from where he chose to enter Princeton in 1926. There he became a member of the Tower Club and was at home in the society which, earlier in the 1920s, F. Scott Fitzgerald had idealized — one where good manners and intellectual or artistic or athletic achievement were almost equally prized. Although Mizener was an able athlete, he did not make a varsity team. What he did do with distinction was to study English literature in what was then one of the country's best departments. From Professors Root, Osgood, and others he learned to value the disciplines of literary scholarship and to revere the masterpieces of the past; from Professor Willard Thorpe he caught the excitement of discovering the bright new achievements in the literature of one's own time and place. He never forgot the day he wrote his mother of his sudden realization that by becoming a professor one could be paid to read and write about books for the rest of one's life.

By the time he received the B.A. "with highest honors" in 1930, his father had suffered economic reverses. It is not hard to guess how, deprived of an income, someone with Mizener's background would, despite a heavy heart, enroll in the Harvard Business School; nor would anyone who knew him be in any doubt about the lightness of heart with which, after only a single semester, as he himself put it, he crossed Memorial Bridge to the left bank of the Charles River and enrolled as a graduate student in English. In the spring of the following year, just before receiving his M.A. at Harvard, he was awarded a Proctor Fellowship at Princeton which would pay all his expenses for the next two years. Back at his alma mater, he received his Ph.D. on schedule, and in 1934 accepted an instructorship in English at Yale.

Despite his recognized success as a teacher and the quality of his published scholarship, Mizener was passed over for tenure at that time when Yale, like other universities, was in financial trouble. But the years in New Haven had been good ones. There he had met, courted, and married a senior at Vassar, Rosemary Paris. She had been born in Kenya of a Swiss plantation manager and an English mother, had gone to school in Switzerland and Hawaii as well as in America, and was a notably gracious woman who shared her husband's intellectual and literary enthusiasms, and often collaborated with him in his scholarly enterprises. While they were still in New Haven, their daughter Rosemary Moore Mizener was born. From Yale in 1940 Mizener went to Wells College in Aurora, where his only son was born and died in infancy; from Aurora, Arthur and Rosemary used their war-rationed gasoline to drive to Ithaca in order to use the Cornell library and to visit friends.

In 1945 Mizener became a professor and head of the English Department at Carleton College in Minnesota, and there spent the next seven years in building a distinguished department and in helping to revise the curriculum and to raise academic standards. He devoted some of his summers to teaching (with John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Delmore Schwartz, Philip Rahv, and other distinguished men of letters) in the Kenyon School of English. Mizener's writings were broad in their range and mode. He published in the established academic journals (*Modern Philology*, *Modern Language Notes*, *PMLA*), but also in the advanced critical journals of that time (the *Kenyon*, the *Southern*, and the *Sewanee Reviews*). His subjects ranged from Shakespeare, Marlowe, and Chaucer (his essay on the character Criseyde, in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, is something of a classic), to many contemporary poets and novelists, and even to the movies of his day. And it was while he lived in Northfield, Minnesota, forty miles from the birthplace of his subject in St. Paul, that Mizener published in 1951 *The Far Side of Paradise*, the first critical biography of F. Scott Fitzgerald. The book enjoyed great critical and popular success, initiated a strong and continuing revival of interest in Mizener's fellow-Princetonian, and did much to establish Fitzgerald, hitherto noted primarily as the laureate of the Jazz Age, as a serious moralist and major American novelist.

On the wave of the success of this book, Mizener received an invitation to succeed David Daiches as Professor of English at Cornell. He had attended or taught at three ancient universities, Princeton, Harvard, and Yale, but the youngest member of the Ivy League, Cornell, held a special appeal for him, and with typical self-deprecating candor, he was entirely open about that fact. In an interview at the time of his retirement in 1973 he told a reporter what he had said to some friends when he first came to Cornell, that it had taken him nearly fifteen years and two outright rejections to fulfil his desire to become a member of the faculty. When the long-awaited invitation from the English Department finally arrived, apologetically offering a salary of only \$6,000, Mizener in turn

apologized to the chairman, Francis Mineka, for having delayed his answer for two days, as a gesture of respect for the President of Carleton, and wrote:

"Anyhow, now I can say yes; *yes*." As for any deficiency in the salary, "I want to come to Cornell too much for this to affect my decision... It is the kind of climax to a career I have always looked forward to; that makes getting it almost too good to be true."

The Mizeners settled in their Cotswold-style stone house on Highland Road, which they purchased from the recently retired Nobel Laureate in Chemistry, Peter Debye, and where they entertained at their famed dinner parties colleagues, friends, students, and often, visiting literary luminaries. Mizener devoted to Cornell twenty-two years, the prime of his professional life. He was a popular teacher, who set high standards and was not easy to satisfy, yet was generous of his time and encouragement; his office door in Goldwin Smith was always open to passing students. For some years he taught the large undergraduate class in Shakespeare; but the course he was best known for was his year-long survey of twentieth-century poets and novelists, British and American; in his early career, when traditional courses ended with the late Victorians, he had been one of the first academics to lecture on poets such as Yeats, Pound, Eliot, and Hart Crane. Mizener had an old-fashioned loyalty, even piety, to his university, and a strong sense of what one owed to the institution and its students. Until within a year or two of retirement, he taught with unflagging enthusiasm a course in Freshman English. He carried a heavy load of graduate teaching, and was unusually helpful to young staff members in their early careers. He also served for many years on the Admissions Committee of the Arts College, to which work he brought great personal concern and years of experience as an examiner for the College Entrance Examination Board.

Both Arthur and Rosemary Mizener were totally committed to a literary life, a life devoted to books and the people who write them. Mizener never seemed to harbor doubts about the importance to one's life of a liberal education, or about the central place of literary study in that education. He believed that in university teaching, as in the other professions, pros were better than amateurs, and that professional English teachers and scholars should be masters of hard-earned knowledge and skills. What he most prized in works of literature was their power to convey (in the title of one of his books) "a sense of life," by which he meant the deeply imagined experiences of diverse human beings working and playing, loving and hating, thinking and talking, in a variety of human societies. He tried, in his deceptively casual, relaxed, and often anecdotal teaching, to open out to students the rich possibilities in experiencing literature, and his assurance that literary experience helps to shape and condition what one is. As one of his admiring students, now himself a distinguished professor of literature, has described his teaching, "Arthur

had a style and he valued it. The jauntiness, the good humor, the urbanity, the easy transitions to seriousness were all parts of a civility that was at one with his deepest convictions about how to make a life.”

Mizener's life outside Goldwin Smith was a rich one. “Avid” is the word for his concern with Cornell athletics. He had a strong feeling for the traditionalism of sports in the American college ethos, loved the ceremony and ritual as well as the physical contests, and was a familiar figure at football games (where for years he shared a box with a few fellow devotees), and at track meets, lacrosse and hockey games, and crew races. As often as they could the Mizeners went abroad, mainly to England, sometimes with the help of a Fulbright or Guggenheim fellowship or a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Mizener was also a prolific writer of letters; his correspondents included many well-known men and women of letters, as well as a host of friends and former students, to whom his letters, usually dashed off in spare moments, were full of high spirits and an ironic teasing, sometimes even a rough persiflage, that he used as a veiled expression of his esteem and affection.

One cannot do justice here to the work he wrote and published during the great years of Cornell: book reviews, articles, essays, public lectures (including a series in London for the BBC), and various books, above all his long biography of the novelist Ford Madox Ford. For this work he did years of devoted research, in the course of which he helped Cornell acquire permanently the major collections of Ford's papers and correspondence; the result was a remarkable account of the general literary life of Ford's time, as well as of the private life of his brilliant, important, and engaging, but also flawed protagonist. These achievements gained Mizener the first appointment to the Old Dominion Foundation Chair of English at Cornell, as well as an international reputation as a scholar and critic. When Mizener retired in 1974, he wrote to his chairman a characteristic letter proscribing any public ceremony on the occasion: “No doubt Rosemary told you, even at the risk of sounding tactless, that elaborate parties with speeches and toasts and all that embarrass me to the point of agony. No doubt this is a weakness, but there it is.”

In the course of his eighty years Mizener suffered wounding losses and disappointments that even his good friends never heard about from him; but essentially he was a happy man, leading the life he wanted to lead in the place he wanted to be. Even after his beloved wife died after a long illness, and while he himself was a victim of cardiovascular disease that limited his freedom and impaired his eyesight and memory, he continued to carry himself with uncomplaining dignity. Up to the day at which, a year before he died, he left Ithaca to go to a nursing home near his daughter in Rhode Island, he greeted friends who called on him in his little apartment on Miller Street with his usual heartiness and grace. Often they would find him sitting under a strong reading light, with the morning's *New York Times* scattered beside him, his forefinger holding his place in the worn copy of James Gould Cozzens' *Guard of Honor*, which he had been reading for months.

It will surprise even many who knew Mizener well that he was an author as well as scholar and critic of literature. One of his short stories won the Kenyon Review Award in 1946. He also wrote but left in manuscript a number of poems. One of these was read at his memorial service in Anabel Taylor Chapel; in it one hears the very idiom and inflection of his ordinary speaking voice as he contemplates, with his unillusioned honesty, the enigma of death in the midst of life.

FRAGMENT OF AN ENDLESS MEDITATION

And so one sits, hearing the high-pitched dignity
Of children at their game of life, watching
The leaves die in the Indian-summer sunshine
Once again. What do you make of this? What can
Anyone make of it? Here is life,
Wholly innocent; not simple or ignorant,
Not wanting deprivation, suffering, or pleasure,
Knowing these things, indeed, at their intensest.
But innocent; innocent as the child that loves
So well the garden Mistress Mary grows.
The little pig and Jesus. And here is death,
Perennial, repetitious, almost random,
The incongruous and even beautiful dying,
The endless decimation of summer lives,
Now still as loneliness where they are heaped
In the autumn afternoon's unsteady sunshine:
All this may very well surprise the leaves
But is surely an old story to the trees.
One sees the bodies piled like this in pictures,
And sometimes sees a vacant face or two,
The eyes staring, the mouth round and rigid
With the echo of a dying man's surprise.
These are merely a few of the countless millions
Of history, an old story, perennial, repetitious,
Almost random. What do you make of this?
What can anyone make of this?

Anthony Caputi, Scott Elledge, Alison Lurie, M.H. Abrams