
T. Adrian Lewis
Even when he was on good terms with him, Malcolm Cowley found it difficult composing a letter to Ernest Hemingway. Yet he always did his best to meet the challenge. At times, Cowley handled the notoriously temperamental writer with all the grace and skill of one of Hemingway’s favorite matadors. Had he not been their target, the verbal feints and tactical blandishments in Cowley’s letters might have impressed the man they were attempting to lull. “Writing too is a dangerous sport like bullfighting,” Cowley once reminded a critic (474), and a letter written to Hemingway heightened that sense of danger. Each one put a strain on Cowley’s epistolary resources. He would later confess that maintaining the correspondence cost him a great deal of effort. In 1966, five years after Hemingway’s suicide, Cowley explained to a friend that he “conducted a great correspondence with him till 1951, but he was getting mean and suspicious, and I found that writing him letters was taking too much out of me” (592). Cowley severed ties in 1951 after failing to convince an irate Hemingway that Philip Young, the first in a long line of biographers, was not going to tarnish the famous writer’s reputation.

Cowley’s own influential writing career spanned much of the 20th century, and for most of that time, he understood that his legacy would likely depend in some degree on the cultural longevity of writers like Hemingway. Many of his letters portray him intervening on the behalf of his more prominent Lost Generation contemporaries. Whenever a crisis arose around the reputation and reception of one of its members, Cowley rushed to their aid. In the new and admirable collection The Long Voyage: Selected Letters of Malcolm Cowley,
1915-1987, Hans Bak mounts a similar defense to fend off an obscurity that always seems to threaten figures like his subject.

A protean man of letters, Cowley simultaneously operated as an editor, critic, historian, translator, memoirist, and even a poet throughout his long tenure in the profession. Born in 1898 on the family farm in Belsano, Pennsylvania, Cowley spent most of his childhood in industrial Pittsburgh, some seventy miles away from the farm where he would pass many idyllic summers. He remained a commuter in some form throughout his life, not simply between both urban and rural locations, but also between places of frenzied intellectual and artistic activity, and quieter locales where he could judge its import and determine its influences. He claimed his humble mid-western beginnings made him feel “almost but not completely an outsider” (562), but he moved among literary elites all his life. Whether it was Harvard in the 1910s or Greenwich Village and Paris in the 1920s, he gained access to enough avant-garde in-crowds to keep his name in the publishing game well into 1980s. Although for every Paris and New York, there was luckily a Giverny and a Sherman, Connecticut where he could live, work, and reflect. Commuting between these central and remote locations allowed him to see how his personal history fit into the Lost Generation’s collective one of revolt. His passage to and from these centers of influence also imbued his writing with the sense of a highly influential generation moving through the turbulent 20th century, and of literary fortunes rising and falling as a result of it, including his own.

More than a mere “middleman” of American letters, then, Cowley could more accurately be described as the connective tissue that strengthened the bond between the various lives and accomplishments of his generation. He spent much of his career writing hybrid forms of literary history and criticism that would shape a unified conception for it. He was therefore a writer that might easily slip into the shadows of the very same light he cast on the achievement of others. “You are the real historian of the jazz age,” he deferentially admitted to F. Scott Fitzgerald in 1933, “I saw it only from beneath, as a member of the typewriting proletariat. But I’ve got a hell of a lot of things to say about it if I can get them said” (192). He did finally get them expressed a year later in Exile’s Return, a masterful iteration of generational and artistic rebellion. Time and again he would return to the subject, revising and lengthening Exile’s in 1951. As his generation’s narrator, he discovered his métier, but that word actually diminishes, more than defines, what he accomplished for figures like Fitzgerald, Faulkner, and Hemingway, to name only a few. His critical and biographical reappraisals of his generation kept their art mobile and durable in a century marred by war and characterized by radical political and social change. In a century also marked by an accelerated turnover in literary taste and fashion, their works would keep pace and endure. Many letters included in this selection testify to Cowley’s loyalty and magnanimity. He looked after and supported any writer who needed his help, but this was especially the case with writers from his own age group. Members of the Lost Generation would always remain easy to find on household bookshelves thanks in large part to his efforts, and Bak provides excellent examples to document exactly how Cowley made that possible.

The origins of his generation’s literary achievement obsessed Cowley. In not only Exile’s Return, but also in A Second Flowering, he traced its primary source to the impact of the
First World War on a group of young aspiring American writers born just before 1900. The war’s cataclysmic vortex ushered in the pervasive sense of loss that inevitably garnered the generation its moniker. For Cowley, though, the war contained as much luck as it did loss, at least for writers who, like himself, had joined volunteer American ambulance services before, or soon after, the United States declared war in April 1917. Their war experience, Cowley insisted, had “sharpened their enjoyment of life by the real or imagined nearness of death; then unexpectedly it was over before they had become truly disheartened” (A Second Flowering 235). Their proximity to death—their playful, even childlike infatuation with it—had fired their literary ambitions and had bred in them a desire for permanence in their art. The brevity of their war experience had likewise left them “with an unexpended store of nervous energy” to accomplish that feat (Cowley, Flowering 235).

With ambulances by then in short supply, Cowley served a brief stint driving a camion in the summer and fall of 1917. His experience nevertheless instilled a deep sense of communal feeling for other writers who went to war, or were imminently bound for it. In one letter he uses the stock phrase “brothers in arms” to lump them “in the same guerilla band, making forays against the establishment” (645). And so periodically during his career, Cowley felt duty-bound to resupply the gradual or sudden depletion of Lost Generation storehouses. If one of his “brother’s” spirits flagged, or their reputation diminished, or their works went out of print thanks to the “vast fickle public” (551), Cowley’s letters portray him reestablishing the supply lines back to an audience for their work. He had singlehandedly accomplished as much for William Faulkner in 1946. Yet those efforts could also sap his own seemingly inexhaustible reserves.

And that was the case with his unfortunate break with Hemingway in 1951. The correspondence simply cost him too much. As if his other roles were not enough to occupy him, that year saw Cowley now playing a sort of high-stakes literary negotiator in the standoff between Hemingway and his would-be biographer. In letters that would sadly close what Cowley considered a “beautiful friendship” (422), he attempted to close ranks around the beleaguered Hemingway. He also sought to establish a sense of trust by legitimizing their shared stake in a Lost Generation ethos engendered by the war:

We started from the same place, even if we have had very different experiences since we drove ambulances or camions in that other war that’s so far away now. I think that as a generation of writers we have done a good job, one of the best, and if each man has had his individual failings that’s something we can talk about among ourselves and let the twerps find out for themselves. (438-9)

Despite having served in a much different capacities during the war, Cowley adopts Hemingway’s famed bravado in this firm handshake of words. The latter had driven a Red Cross ambulance in Italy. His exploits of course became mythic after he fictionalized them in A Farewell to Arms in 1929. Cowley performed the less high-profile work of camion driver instead. Essentially a high risk war commuter, he carried munitions and supplies, not wounded soldiers. He delivered material that armed and protected them. He made their trench-bound lives more livable. This was necessary and important work, to be sure, but not the stuff of Hemingway novels. In a way, though, Cowley performed the same thankless, yet essential task for his generation long after the war was over. He practiced an extensive form of literary logistics throughout his life. The handling of literary supplies was no less culturally or even politically dangerous than their implementation, and they often brought Cowley within range of controversy and scandal. A cross section of letters from any of Bak’s
chapters will prove that. Even so, his support consistently helped the Lost Generation wage their own personal and professional wars for cultural relevance and for the staying power of their art.

Now a century since the First World War began, Bak’s project seems all the more timely. He has compiled and edited a lifetime’s worth of letters, where the war itself or figurations of it periodically emerge, for either points of emphasis, or clarifications, or more importantly, rallying cries for generational fidelity. Through his prodigious efforts, Bak has restored the once broken supply lines to letters long hidden away in libraries, in effect remobilizing them for a new century. He has chosen letters that highlight the relationships between the various roles Cowley operated in during his long writing career, and how each one played out against the broader backdrop of 20th century American literary and political history. He has not only meticulously edited the volume, he also provides compelling introductions to each chapter, along with effective transitional comments on Cowley’s career successes and setbacks. Thus, Bak operates his own careful logistical support for his subject’s immense contribution to American letters. He shows us that writers like Cowley who reside in the interstices of the canonical are often the most worthy of our consideration. In them we find writers who lived in history, and among the famous names they helped put and keep on reading lists. In them we discover writers who show us how canons come and go, who show us how the canonical had lives too, and how those lives are the foundation of their art. More than that, though, Bak gives readers a full-fleshed Cowley back at his typewriter, in thrall to a letter, and throughout this selection, he demonstrates that Cowley’s true genius lay between Lost Generation support and exegesis, between writing literary history and making a little bit of his own.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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