

Reviews

Hans Bak, ed. *The Long Voyage: Selected Letters of Malcolm Cowley, 1915-1987*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014. 848 pages. ISBN 978-0-674-05106-5.

The writer—the good writer—has imagination and uses it as part of his technical equipment. He has the power to broaden our imaginative scope; to make us feel, for example, that Frenchmen are not merely Frogs, or Italians Wops, or colored persons niggers; that all of us are part of a brotherhood that is bigger than national or racial boundaries
—Malcolm Cowley, June 1947

In 1983, looking back on his career, Malcolm Cowley made an attempt to list the different fields in which his efforts had been exerted: “I was—not always by turns—poet, critic, keeper of chronicles, literary historian and scholar, editor, and teacher.” He could change his working clothes “so long as it was all in the service of literature, the reading public, and the writers’ community.” Cowley loved literature and he admired writers; good writers. He believed in biography and felt that to understand the writer’s work, one must understand the writer and how social and personal changes affect that writer: “I try never to lose sight of the connection between books and life.” As early as 1922, he noted: “I came to regard my letters to you [Kenneth Burke] as a sort of record not of my life but of my intellectual life, which tacitly we regard as life.” Indeed, the lines are easily blurred. In this collection of selected letters, Hans Bak lives up to Cowley’s mantra and shows the connection between Malcolm Cowley’s life (1898-1989) and the books and texts he read, edited, and wrote from 1915 to 1987.

Reading Bak’s collection you are again reminded of how easily invaluable thoughts, ideas, perspectives, and writing at large today can disappear into the black vortex that is “Delete e-mail?” In fact, we should not just consider e-mail, but also include text messages and Facebook and Twitter posts. These days there have never been more channels for critics, artists, and writers to express themselves and with ease enter into dialogue—in

open or closed forums—with fellow critics and writers, friends and family, or readers and audiences. The art of letter writing is not necessarily dead; it is just challenged or filled with new possibilities, depending on where you stand. In his letters, Malcolm Cowley wanted to place things on record and make things permanent. Bak's collection of just some of Cowley's letters shows how important it is to preserve a writer's work—that being *all* the work, including letters and correspondence where some of the writer's finest work can often be found. Cowley's son, Robert, states that, "There are moments when I am convinced that the letters written by my father ... constitute his most noteworthy literary achievement."

In his preface, Bak notes that the aim of the collection is to shed light on Cowley's role "as an actor in and observer of American literary life and culture". Bak also accounts for the process of selecting the letters that would make up the collection, and he details where other pieces of Cowley's correspondence have been published or can be located.

For anyone interested in American literature—20th century fiction especially—there is plenty to be found in this collection. It is divided into ten sections, each of which covers a particular period of Cowley's life and work: from his early days at Harvard to his final letters from 2 years before his death in 1989. Each section opens with a brief overview of and introduction to the period, setting the stage and tying everything together nicely. There is also an expansive index, making it easy to navigate this book which spans 850 pages when you include notes, preface, and introduction. It can be read from cover to cover, or you can pick and choose depending on your interests. The fine foreword written by Malcolm Cowley's son, Robert, introduces and points to the hundreds of notes and letters. In it, he highlights his father's view of the river as a metaphor for life. *The Long Voyage* is indeed a fitting title for the collection.

Even if one is not intimately familiar with Cowley's life and work, or by default not interested in him as a person, his observations on American writing, society, and culture—both seen from America and from afar in France—are witty, provocative at times, and always full of insight. Cowley corresponded and worked with many of America's literary giants and influential players on the literary and cultural scene, and there is a copious amount of material for scholars and readers of Hemingway, Faulkner, and Kerouac, just to mention a few. Especially for readers interested in the fiction of The Lost Generation—late in his life Cowley labels the generation as "Lucky" rather than "Lost"—the collection is a treasure chest of

material. In general, Cowley's most interesting letters are to the authors who came to shape 20th century American fiction, the names of which are too many to list here. One of the best parts of the collection is the period spanning 1944-1949 ("The Mellon Years") where Cowley's focus is almost exclusively on literature.

Politics and literature make up the big two-hearted river flowing through Cowley's life and letters. Cowley became a "fellow traveler" of the Communist Party in the 1930s. While he was never a member of the party, he was certainly "deep pink" and did vote for Communists. He was also associated with the party, often against his will. The letters where Cowley explains and discusses his political views, in particular after leaving Communism behind, seem to be letters directed to himself rather than to friends and colleagues. In these letters, Cowley tries to reason with himself and come to terms with his views and the fact that his Communist past comes back to haunt him time and again. Writing in 1981, he says he had been "wrong about it" in the late 1930s and calls the period from 1937-1942 "the blackest of my life—not only in my public life, but in my private life as well." As early as 1938, he notes that he "ought to get out of politics and back to literature." The whole thing leaves him with a sense of guilt that endures, probably for the rest of his life. As someone approaching Cowley with a purely literary interest, it came as a surprise to me that his writing on Communism and politics makes up some of the most interesting and thought-provoking letters in the collection. Cowley's brush with Communism is pronounced in the first half of the collection; while it does come up every now and then, it is less of an issue in the letters of the second half.

Considering that the letters themselves take up 700 pages, it is inevitable that some letters are more interesting than others. There is more to life than politics and literature and while the two constitute the pillars of Cowley's letter writing, he also comments on other things, from mundane family matters to the state of the world. Throughout his life he was gravely concerned with how wars affect a country, a people, and a world. In 1949: "Paranoia is the disease of our times"; in 1965: "Being utterly convinced that that the human race is going to extinguish itself by poisoning the soil, the water, the air, possibly before it blows the world up ... Things are moving faster and faster – toward what, if not extinction?" However, many of the letters also ooze of Cowley's sense of humor. Serving as a volunteer camion driver in northern France in 1917, he writes to his parents: "I drove a car into a ditch yesterday, and it is still there. Otherwise I have been as happy as any well-

fed person.” [...] “Of course we all hope to get slightly wounded so that we can receive the *croix de guerre* ...”

Malcolm Cowley believed that literature served a purpose, even more so in a chaotic world of wars, hot and cold. He was predominantly dedicated to the writers he believed in and would champion anyone he felt deserved to be read by a wide audience. One of the best examples of Cowley’s influence is, of course, *The Portable Faulkner* (1946) which helped (re-) establish Faulkner. Cowley’s son calls it “one of the most esteemed pieces of editing in history of American publishing” and Faulkner himself called the job “splendid.” Cowley’s role in getting Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957) published should be highlighted as well. An entire section of the collection is dedicated to Kerouac and *On the Road*. Cowley was confident the novel would “stand for a long time as the honest record of another way of life.”

The first letter of the collection is to Cowley’s lifelong friend, Kenneth Burke. It ends: “I have run out of paper.” 70 years later, in another letter to Burke, Cowley states: “Nothing much remains except to put my papers in order.” Even if this collection only represents a fraction of Cowley’s output, it is more than enough to show why he is one of the most important figures of American literary history. Cowley was there; he saw it; he lived it; he helped shape it.

Michael Madsen

University of Southern Denmark

Željka Švrljuga, *Hysteria and Melancholy as Literary Style in the Works of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Kate Chopin, Zelda Fitzgerald, and Djuna Barnes*, with a foreword by Patrizia Lombardo. Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 2011. ISBN 9780773415171.

Hysteria and melancholy are depicted in countless literary works of fiction and elucidated and discussed in numerous academic texts—related to medicine and psychology as well as cultural history and literary studies. To some degree, the same may be said of the literary works “The Yellow Wallpaper” (Charlotte Perkins Gilman), *The Awakening* (Kate Chopin), *Save Me the Waltz* (Zelda Fitzgerald) and *Nightwood* (Djuna Barnes). They have all, with perhaps one exception, been favoured as subjects for literary analysis, not least among feminist-oriented researchers for whom hysteria in particular has been a central topic, and they have been linked with the oppressed