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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

Exile's Return (1934) is one of the volumes that cinched Cowley's reputation as the Boswell of the "Lost Generation" of writers and artists who flocked to Paris following World War I. More than just another catalog of anecdotes on the expatriate games of Stein, Hemingway, Joyce, etc., this documents the transition of American literature and culture during one of its greatest periods of change.

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About the Author

Malcolm Cowley (1898–1989) a leading literary figure of his time, wrote numerous books of literary criticism, essays, and poetry.

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Malcolm Cowley grew up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and interrupted his undergraduate career at Harvard to drive a camion during World War I. He moved to New York City in 1919 and worked as an editor of *The New Republic* from 1929 to 1940. He served as president of the National Institute of Arts and Letters from 1956 to 1959 and from 1962 to 1965 and was chancellor of the American Academy of Arts and Letters from 1966 to 1976. He wrote numerous books of literary criticism, essays, and poetry, and edited many collections and anthologies. Among his many awards and honors were the Gold Medal for Belles Lettres and Criticism from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters and the Hubbell Medal of the Modern Language Association for service to the study of American literature.

Donald W. Faulkner is the editor of Malcolm Cowley's *The Flower and the Leaf: A Contemporary Record of American Writing Since 1945* (1985) and *The Portable Malcolm Cowley* (1990). He has written extensively on Cowley for literary journals, and was a fellow at the Newberry Library in Chicago, where Cowley's papers are housed. Faulkner teaches literature and creative writing at Yale University.

EXILE'S RETURN

A LITERARY ODYSSEY OF THE 1920S

MALCOLM COWLEY

EDITED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
DONALD W. FAULKNER

Introduction

Among the chronicles, memoirs, and remembrances of the making of American literature in the 1920s, Malcolm Cowley's *Exile's Return* stands alone. Far from the "we put on boxing gloves and Ernest Hemingway broke my nose" recollections of that shaping period for a national literature, Cowley's work is "a narrative of ideas," as he subtitled the original edition of his book, published in 1934. Save for a handful of anecdotes, the book is not an accumulation of silvered memories, but a meditative exploration of the design and goals of literary culture.

It is a book written by a young man about a young time, and its extolling of a young generation's ability to cast off the baggage of its forebears and forge its own identity has quickened the hearts of generations of readers who have found resonance in its story. It continues to speak. Indeed, *Exile's Return* is not so much about Paris in the 1920s as it is about the exemplary revolt of one generation against its predecessors in the effort to establish itself.

Much later in his life—Cowley died in 1989 at age ninety after a distinguished career in American letters, the bulk of it spent shaping our estimations of American literature—he wrote of the preconditions he saw for both generational self-identification and generational revolt. First among them, he said, is “a sense of life, something that might be defined as an intricate web of perceptions, judgments, feelings, and aspirations shared by its members.” Next is the generation’s “thoroughness and even violence in setting aside parental or merely prevailing notions.” Then each generation needs to acknowledge its precursors—“madmen and outlaws,” as Cowley called them (borrowing F. Scott Fitzgerald’s phrase), who “give an intellectual structure to [the generation’s] own rebellion”—and must also witness or participate in “historic events,” which “furnish its members with a common fund of experience.” Finally, Cowley stipulated (once more echoing F. Scott Fitzgerald), the generation needs “its own leaders and spokesmen.” I hasten to add another element that Cowley perhaps took as a given: the group must feel in some fashion betrayed by both prevailing notions and historic events, in order, if only through alienation, to generate both the intricate web and the common fund of experience.

Although Cowley was speaking broadly, his prescriptions match the characterization early in *Exile's Return* of his own “lost generation.” Absent a vivid awareness of the generation’s precursors or spokesmen—they were to be identified presently—the preconditions Cowley later nominated were all present. Particularly powerful, as Cowley presents the making of exiles in *Exile's Return*, was the sense of betrayal. First, the lost generation was brought to alienation by its education: “It was uprooted,” Cowley writes, “schooled away and almost wrenched away from its attachment to any region or tradition.” This was education as deracination. As a young man, Cowley says, he was not being prepared for “citizenship” or a role in “the common life” of America, but was instead “exhorted to enter that international republic of learning whose traditions are those of Athens, Florence, Paris, Berlin, and Oxford.” The bitterness expressed in these statements is quite different from the hymn to childhood Cowley presents in the opening to his first chapter, as though there he is recalling home ground like Candide, who embarks upon a journey naïvely and with the best of intentions, only to be rudely shocked.

The protagonist of this journey’s story was not only Cowley, but an entire prewar literary generation. Trained for a world that existed largely in books, many of this generation volunteered before America’s entry into World War I for wartime service in a Europe that no longer existed. The slaughters at Chemin des Dames, the morass of Passchendaele, and the rout of the Italian army at Caporetto, among many other battles, profoundly altered this literary generation’s sense of both itself and the world. As Cowley puts it, “The generation belonged to a period of transition from values already fixed to values that had to be created.”

Moreover, upon returning to the States from the war, whose end was declared with the November 11, 1918, armistice, the uprooted found themselves exiles in their own land, spectators of a culture they had no hand in creating, and disenfranchised socially, economically, and politically. Boosterism, a new conformity, was dominant. After Sinclair Lewis’s social satire *Babbitt* appeared in 1922, “Babbitry” became the moniker for this pecuniary vision of repressive progress. Those whose values didn’t match the norm were suspect. The Ku Klux Klan had begun its northern migration, the Palmer raids had begun rounding up supposed radicals (including the soon-to-be-celebrated Sacco and Vanzetti), labor organizing efforts were trounced in Seattle and in the coal, rail, and steel industries, and the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution, instituting Prohibition, had been passed. Progress and power were praised, intellect and ideas were not. Cynically, after

disillusioning trips home where challenging work was not to be found, many of Cowley's ilk migrated to New York, particularly Greenwich Village, where they worked bad jobs, lived in coldwater flats, and generally refound each other. With a shared net of ideas—essentially, down with the hypocrisy of business and up with the sanctity of art—and a common rejection of contemporary values, they forged a bond. Cowley, thinking back to the war, calls it “the long furlough.” Given their bleak prospects, many of this lost generation began to think it might not be a bad idea simply to repack their bags, this time with civilian clothes, and head back to France, where the exchange rate favored the dollar and the culture confirmed the images their educations had fed them.

When in 1921 Harold Stearns, a young intellectual seven years Cowley's elder, decided to abandon America for Paris, his departure confirmed a vacuum suction of expatriation by American artists and writers to Europe. Stearns had written *America and the Young Intellectual*, and edited *Civilization in the United States*, a symposium comprising essays by thirty significant contributors whose findings about the nation echoed a remark of Gertrude Stein's on Oakland, California: “There is no there there.” (Cowley sums up the symposium's findings in a sentence: “Life in this country is joyless and colorless, universally standardized, tawdry, uncreative, given over to the worship of wealth and machinery.”) The exodus was self-appointed and far from permanent. The writers and artists who preceded and followed Stearns to Europe were less exiles than sojourners: away for a while, but never fully divesting themselves of their American identities.

As time has proven, the best of them, Hemingway, Dos Passos, Fitzgerald, e.e. cummings, among so many others, became remarkably productive during the decade that followed. Their achievements belied initial assessments of their worth. Reviewing *Exile's Return* in 1934, William Soskin said, “Nobody wrote great books in the last decade. Mr. Hemingway is growing dim. So are his colleagues.” Lewis Gannett, an influential reviewer (whose deprecatory remarks helped keep the book's paltry first-year sales, during the heart of the Depression, at 983 copies), had called the exiles nothing more than “a little group of serious thinking drunkards” who “felt there was something superb in starving for three days while waiting for papa's next check.” Their legendary intemperance notwithstanding, most of these writers had in fact burned their bridges to home and gotten by on odd jobs, goodwill, and wits.

In postwar Paris they escaped the “hypocrisy and repression” of America and found cheap living, laissez-faire standards of conduct, a sense of community (if at times only among themselves), and equally important, a feeling that they were living, creatively unfettered, at the cutting edge of art in the cultural center of the world. Cowley, whose ticket back to France in 1921 came in the form of an extended American Field Service fellowship earned for his volunteer service during the war, studied classical French literature, Racine in particular, but quickly became a keen observer of living intellectual heroes: a prewar generation of American writers who had expatriated earlier, among them Ezra Pound, who frantically fled his admirers and whose elegant *Mauberry* poems damned the war and its outcome; Gertrude Stein, who had dubbed herself as the doyenne of exiles; and T. S. Eliot, whose seminal poem *The Waste Land*, which appeared in 1922, confirmed the anomie of the lost generation. There were also non-American exiles, such as James Joyce, whose serial excerpts from *Ulysses*, and its full publication in 1922, though broadly heralded, were interdicted in England and America as prurient and scandalous.

Equally important to Cowley were the French writers on the scene: Marcel Proust, Paul Valéry, and the Dadaists. Proust, though he died in 1922, had left a literary legacy composed in bed in a cork-lined room, his *Remembrance of Things Past*. “The longest novel ever written,” it appeared in seven volumes across the remainder of the decade. The poet and thinker Paul Valéry, who praised form over content and detachment over action, had imposed on himself a twenty-year period of silence, which, Cowley writes, “impressed us even more than the high poems and the noble essays he had printed.” And finally, there were the nihilistic and iconoclastic Dadaists, among them Tristan Tzara and Louis Aragon, who befriended Cowley, and who regarded European culture, the very culture Cowley had left his own to embrace, as a culture imploding.

Independently and collectively these artists presented Cowley with a judgment: “Art is separate from life; the artist is independent of the world and superior to the lifelings.”

Cowley was, as he saw it, in the company of the high priests of art. Their ideas were as palpable as their presence in Parisian café society. One could, as Cowley did, attend Gertrude Stein’s salons, meet with Joyce in his apartment, talk of Shakespeare’s historical sources with Pound in the Hôtel Jacob, sit with Valéry on the park benches of the Tuilleries to question his ideas, attend and take part in Dadaist “happenings,” drink with Tzara or with fellow American exiles in Montparnasse cafés such as the Select, the Rotonde, or the Dôme, and even be praised for the “significant gesture” of punching the disreputable proprietor of the Rotonde. In Paris, Cowley inhabited a world that appreciated significant gestures.

In the chapters of *Exile’s Return* entitled “Paris Pilgrimages” and “The Death of Dada,” Cowley writes of this heady time, but he also plants the seeds of his discontent. Examining ideas rather than personalities, he finds that the idea of a priesthood in “the religion of art” both attracts and repulses him. If, in the interest of making art, the choices are to “shut oneself up in one’s own private world,” as Proust did, or to “leave the twentieth century behind,” as it seemed the exiles were doing—choices put forward by Edmund Wilson in his 1931 critical study, *Axel’s Castle* (wherein both choices result in artistic impotence—then, Cowley) feels, the frame of the argument is logically wrong, and “the religion of art imperceptibly merges into . . . a state of mind in which the artist deliberately fritters away his talents through contempt for the idiot-public that can never understand.”

Cowley and the other Paris sojourners of whom he wrote, some of whom stayed for weeks or months, others for years, always intended to return to native soil and never believed in their “deracination,” beyond what it taught them they could bring back from their exile: new insight into ways of shaping the ideas of that “idiot-public” of American values. Certainly Cowley thought of them as Americans, not as citizens of some “international republic of learning,” but as shapers of and contributors to an American culture, despite the prevailing belief that their native culture had no identity and was perilously unaware of its own future. Cowley came back earlier than many of his fellows, in 1923, and immediately found an America whose values were as inhospitable as Paris and the rest of Europe’s were welcoming. This was the America of Calvin Coolidge, whose business was business, an America that ignoring worldwide inflation, mortgaged its future on credit, and sang itself songs like “Yes, We Have No Bananas.”

The New York to which Cowley returned was “a city of anger,” and the mixture of idealism and cynicism he imported from his exile was sorely taxed by his failed attempts to continue publication of *Broom*, the little magazine he worked to edit with Matthew Josephson, a fellow expatriate. Although Cowley makes more of such defeats than their place in American literary history might merit, his examples—of post office censorship, of the homophobia of critics—amplify the disparity between the cultural, social, and political awareness of his fellow exiles and the American norm.

Two events finally solidified Cowley’s sense of the returned exiles as writers whose duty was to focus their literary efforts on American cultural subjects, and even further, on American political values. The first was the 1927 execution of Sacco and Vanzetti, two men held with questionable evidence on a murder charge in Massachusetts prisons since 1920. The event not only steeled intellectual opinion, it galvanized it. Sacco and Vanzetti were executed, and the returned exiles grieved in solidarity with the rest of the intellectual world, but only until the second event, in October 1929, when the stock market crashed, bringing down with it a whole construct of American values. For Cowley and for other exiles returned, the end of the 1920s in the United States was like the fall of a house of cards, expected, predicted, and confirming the hollowness of American beliefs.

While millions were put out of work by the market crash, Cowley’s luck turned. In the same month as the

crash he was hired as literary editor of *The New Republic*, replacing Edmund Wilson. And the magazine began to publish serially the chapters that would become *Exile's Return*.

* * *

Cowley intended *Exile's Return* to be not a document on American literature, but a part of American literature itself. Still, he was working in a new medium, one he largely generated as he supplied transitions, amplifications, and details to the essays he had published serially. Earlier models of autobiography, such as George Gissing's *New Grub Street* (1891) or Henry Adams's *The Education of Henry Adams* (1918), only began to approach what Cowley was attempting in *Exile's Return*, namely, a generational biography. The literary-critical efforts of Van Wyck Brooks, the seminal shaper of discourses on American writing in the teens and twenties, and of Edmund Wilson—whose narrative criticism, though profoundly different from Cowley's design, made use of biography—each affected Cowley's presentation of the aims of writers. (Indeed, Cowley's argument with Wilson's *Axel's Castle* is a pivot of *Exile's Return*.)

Valuable too were the efforts of Cowley's fellow exiles Ernest Hemingway, whose characters in *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) lived through "a period of violent change, when the influence of time seemed temporarily more important than that of class or locality," and John Dos Passos, "whose chief point of exception was to be a radical in the 1920s, when most of his friends were indifferent to politics, and to become increasingly conservative in the following decade, when many of his friends were becoming radical." Dos Passos's prose style in *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) and the *USA* trilogy (the first two volumes of which had appeared as Cowley was writing *Exile's Return*) enhanced Cowley's style of blending journalism, biography, and reflection into a form Cowley later called a "non-fiction novel," wherein fact, autobiography, and critical evaluation are woven into a storylike form. As Cowley said in a 1967 interview, *Exile's Return* was composed "rather deliberately in that form. . . . [A]lmost every good [biography] might be called a non-fiction novel, and through using the technique of fiction and drama, non-fiction has become a more sophisticated medium."

The form of *Exile's Return* eludes easy definition. It is by one turn a singular chronicle of the conditions, ideas, and experiences that shaped American writing in the twentieth century presented by one of its shapers, and by another a homage to Paris in the twenties as a fecund ground for creativity, and a castigation of New York at the same time as a "city of anger." Equally, it is an adventure story of youth in rebellion against outmoded values, and a meditation on the purpose, function, and service of art.

Among the less examined dimensions of *Exile's Return* are its stylistic achievements. One significant device Cowley employs is a narrative voice that continually shifts from an autobiographical *I* to a generational *we* (with a mix of narrative voices generally found in fiction tossed in: third-person omniscience, third-person limited omniscience, and direct address). Also noteworthy are his use of historical material journalistically recorded and his presentation of contemporaries and their ideas not by anecdotal remembrance but by the texts they wrote.

Beyond its prologue and a highly personal encomium to rural, or at least regional, childhood, *Exile's Return* begins with a narrative *we* that comes to dominate the book. Initially this *we* refers to Cowley's high school contemporaries in Pittsburgh: "At seventeen we were disillusioned and weary. In the middle of basketball, puppy love and discussions of life . . . we had come to question almost everything we were taught at home and in school." Two paragraphs later the voice becomes that of his lost generation compatriots: "Literature, our profession [weren't we in high school a moment ago?], was living in the shadow of its own great past. The symbols that had moved us [moved whom? one wants to ask], the great themes of love and death and parting, had been used and exhausted." And a paragraph later: "We were launching or drifting into the sea of letters with no fixed destination and without a pilot." Remarkably, across the spread of two pages in *Exile's*

Return, Cowley moves from puppy love and basketball to concerns that will dominate the literary lives of his generation. He writes so continually, and though in moments the method doesn't seem to work, in the end it does. Accreting to the autobiographical narrative's momentum the voice of a generalized *we*, Cowley provides a convincing perspective. Take, for example, his characterization of a futile meeting ending in frustration, with Hart Crane, Kenneth Burke, James Light, Hannah Josephson, and Glenway Wescott over problems with *Broom*: ". . . We plodded homeward, feeling like Napoleon's grenadiers on the retreat from Moscow." Some pages later a narrative *we* appears; in saying, "we had tried on Manhattan Island to re-create the atmosphere of intellectual excitement and moral indignation that had stimulated us in Paris among the Dadaists," Cowley neatly conflates the *we* assembled that night with an *us* not only of another time, but a *different us*, now generalized. There should be no readerly resentment of such narrative sleights-of-hand; these are the deft moves of a writer using fiction techniques in a nonfiction frame. Cowley has an uncanny ability in *Exile's Return* to present limited perspectives as exemplary and by so doing to embrace a larger readership: we assume Cowley's problems as both those of his generation and, as in a novelistic construct, of our own.

Add to this Cowley's occasional shifts into direct address, such as those in "The Long Furlough," where he brings his readers into his immediate context: "You woke at ten o'clock between soiled sheets in a borrowed apartment; the sun dripped over the edges of the green windowshade. . . . When the second pot of coffee was emptied a visitor would come, then another; you would borrow fifty-five cents for the cheapest bottle of sherry," and no matter the seeming profligacy of the moment, you're there, with the writer in that borrowed apartment, trying to figure the next step.

In terms of factual and historical material journalistically presented, Cowley does at times appear to owe a debt to Dos Passos. Take, for example, Cowley's précis of the monetary chaos surrounding exchange rates in post-World War I Europe:

Exchange! It happened that old Europe, the continent of immemorial standards, had lost them all: it had only prices, which changed from country to country, from village to village, it seemed from hour to hour. Tuesday in Hamburg you might buy a banquet for eight cents (or was it five?); Thursday in Paris you might buy twenty cigarettes for the price of a week's lodging in Vienna. You might gamble in Munich for high stakes, win half the fortune of a Czechoslovakian profiteer, then, if you could not spend your winnings for champagne and Picasso, you might give them the day after tomorrow to a beggar and not be thanked. Once in Berlin a man was about to pay ten marks for a box of matches when he stopped to look at the banknote in his hand. On it was written, "For these ten marks I sold my virtue." He wrote a long and virtuous story about it, was paid ten million marks, and bought his mistress a pair of artificial silk stockings.

This is a style of writing for which, as an end in itself, Dos Passos became famous, but which Cowley, in *Exile's Return*, cleverly uses as a documentary staging of his, and his generation's, immediate circumstance.

Finally, Cowley shapes his discussion of the lost generation's developing beliefs by examining the content of their writing rather than the legacy of their actions. His presentations of Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (published in 1929) and Dos Passos's *1919* (published in 1932), among numerous other examples, are placed chronologically with the events they recount rather than with events at the time of their publication, just as his extended exploration of Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*, which did not appear until 1933, is placed with Cowley's characterization of the closing of the 1920s. Similarly, discussions of Eliot, Joyce, the Dadaists, and Valéry, writers the exiles measured themselves by, are presented not in character portraits, but in terms (often harsh) of a theme their personalities represented in their works: a devotion to the priesthood of art, removed from action or everyday life. Of Eliot, Cowley writes, reacting to *The Waste Land's*

evocation of sterility and madness, “It was as if he were saying . . . that our age was prematurely senile and could not even find words of its own in which to bewail its impotence; that it was forever condemned to borrow and patch together the songs of dead poets.” Joyce is regarded via his books: “It seemed to us there was nothing mysterious in what he had accomplished. He had pride, contempt, ambition—and those were the qualities that continued to stand forth clearly from *Ulysses*. Here . . . was the pride of Stephen Dedalus that raised itself above the Dublin public . . . ; here was the author’s contempt for the world and for his readers—like a host being deliberately rude to his guests, he made no concession to their capacity for attention or their power of understanding; and here was an ambition willing to measure itself, not against any novelist of its age . . . but with . . . the archpoet of the European race.” With the Dadaists Cowley also notes an arrogant retreat into art: “Nothing is real or true except the individual pursuing his individual whims, the artist riding his hobbyhorse, his *dada*.” And, finally, of Valéry’s praise of priestly artistic genius: “It would be useless to put method into action. *To act*, for any individual of the first magnitude, is only an exercise, and one that may end by impoverishing the mind.”

It is that sense of priesthood that led Cowley to choose for the closure of his book a brief life of Harry Crosby, an ultimately inconsequential figure, a rich American expatriate aesthete whose suicide, six weeks after the stock market crash, ended what a later biographer called his “brief transit and violent eclipse.”* This, Cowley seems to say, is how the religion of art for its own sake ends, as it did for Edmund Wilson’s figures of Axel and Rimbaud in *Axel’s Castle*. Cowley wanted an object lesson that by its damning of artistic quietude—the religion of art—would ground a prescription for action. Crosby’s story, Cowley appropriately notes, “casts a retrospective light on the literary history of a whole decade.”

It is well known, and Cowley frequently avowed, that he intended to conclude his estimation of the twenties with the equally brief transit and violent eclipse of his far more talented friend, the poet Hart Crane, who ended his own tumultuous life in suicide by jumping overboard from a ship in the Caribbean in 1932. Even with the opportunity to rewrite his final chapter in 1951, however, Cowley held to the Crosby story and indeed expanded it. Although he added a remembrance of Crane (“The Roaring Boy,” which appears in chapter seven), the life and death of Harry Crosby, reconstructed from diaries provided to Cowley by Crosby’s widow, Caresse, proved more straightforwardly usable: “It happens that [Crosby’s] brief and not particularly distinguished literary life of seven years included practically all the themes I have been trying to develop”: specifically, Cowley writes, “the separation from home, the effects of service in the ambulance corps, the exile in France, then other themes, bohemianism, the religion of art, the escape from society, the effort to defend one’s individuality even at the cost of sterility and madness, then the final period of demoralization when the whole philosophical structure crumbled from within.” Cowley saved his painful and intimate story of Crane’s last days for *The Dream of the Golden Mountains*, a memoir of the thirties, which Cowley published in 1978.

* * *

Exile’s Return in its 1951 edition ends with a summation of the events and attitudes of the twenties. As the book closes, society is on the brink of bleak prospects and exhibits the sluggish awareness of one emerging, hungover, into sunlight after an all-night party. From Cowley’s perspective in 1951, there is the advantage that things worked out more or less okay. As in any good story, the storyteller—in this case both Cowley and the literary generation—has survived to tell the tale. “It was an easy, quick, adventurous age, good to be young in,” Cowley wrote, “and yet on coming out of it one felt a sense of relief.”

When Cowley initially completed the book, in 1934, he was in his middle thirties, speaking his own life and speaking for his generation. Such effort is logically the endeavor of one much older, tempered by ongoing life and perspective. And yet, as he reflected on autobiography in late age, he wrote, “Memoirs written in [young and] middle life deserve, and are likely to find, more readers, since the author has . . . accumulated a

richer store of memories. He may choose among them after reflection or he may simply probe his unconscious: Whatever lives there vividly will be what he needs, and perhaps what the world needs.”

Cowley’s revised 1951 edition of *Exile’s Return*, the text presented here, replaced the first edition’s prologue and epilogue with new material, but in the main was the effort of a writer polishing his prose, no doubt grateful, seventeen years later, that his estimations had been precise from the beginning.

The 1951 edition of *Exile’s Return* became steadily popular (especially among students and new bohemians) and was widely reviewed. One critic, Lloyd Morris, noted, “Mr. Cowley has painted the classic picture [of American writers in the 1920s], and it is not likely to be surpassed in authenticity, eloquence or beauty.” Cowley was astute in his design to republish the book. Whereas in 1934 he was trying to give voice to the developing American literary tradition and his place in it, by 1951 public awareness of that tradition and the roles Cowley and his contemporaries played in extending it had been established. His literary-critical essays on his fellow lost generation writers, and his thoroughgoing explorations of the American literary tradition and his generation’s part in it, all widely published in the late forties; the continued critical writings of Van Wyck Brooks and Edmund Wilson; work by F. O. Matthiessen and his generation of younger critics; a surfeit of Paris-in-the-twenties memoirs; and a public surge of interest in the work of Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and William Faulkner, gave weight to Ezra Pound’s theory that there was a “twenty-year lag” between the making of art and the public appreciation of it.

The year 1951 was a complicated but ultimately good time to reissue the book: Cowley’s American readership was caught up in a post—World War II estimation of itself as a culture, perhaps engaging in such self-assessment for the first time, and the question “What is American about America?” was frequently posed. One response to that question was McCarthyism, a devilish Cold War echo of twenties Boosterism and Babbitry. Cowley’s presentation of the literary lost generation’s explorations stood yet again as a counter to the prevailing norm, and inspired young readers. By 1951, the context of *Exile’s Return* had been broadly accepted, and the terms critics applied to it—such as “classic picture” and “authenticity”—seemed appropriate to Cowley’s estimation of what was now no longer the time of “a little group of serious thinking drunkards,” but a “pivotal period in American letters.” Notably, the writers who praised the 1951 edition of *Exile’s Return*—which has since gone through thirty printings—were, like the relatively few praising critics of the 1934 edition, people of Cowley’s own generation, or younger.*

Still, the book has a troubled closure, despite its 1951 epilogue, which faithfully executes the subtitle Cowley provided for the new edition: “A Literary Odyssey of the 1920s.” “The last stage of one adventure was, as always, the first stage of another,” Cowley writes in 1951. Even Ulysses’ odyssey found its way back to a purpose beyond reaching Ithaka.

The 1934 edition of the book ends rather differently, and thereby hangs a tale that dangles more than one way. In his 1934 epilogue to *Exile’s Return* (included with this edition as appendix A), Cowley offered a cause, social commitment, that might serve as a focus to return the exiles to America, a return that had already begun before the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti, and which was in spirit completed before the stock market crash of 1929. The original epilogue has long been considered by Cowley’s negative critics a suppressed radical tract, full of “workers of the world, unite” cant and orthodoxy. To a degree it is. But it is also tiresomely tame, full of turgid arguments from Kant and Schopenhauer and *The Communist Manifesto*. It is passionately sincere. Fraught with codified language (“Should artists take part in the class struggle?” it asks at one point), the 1934 epilogue exhibits writing largely unlike Cowley’s style elsewhere in *Exile’s Return*. Often it expresses poorly formed ideas in hasty writing. Remarkable, though, is the fact that once the superficiality, cant, and codification of class struggle are set aside, Cowley in his later years stuck to the same idealism enunciated in this “manifesto.” His major aim in the original epilogue was to enhance the idea that art has a social function. The artist’s true role, he says in a moment of clarity there, is to “first transform

the objects about him by connecting them with human emotions, by finding their purpose and direction, by making them understandable. He repeats the same process in the world at large,” Cowley continues, “by perceiving in it architectural and musical forms, unity and rhythm, by giving it a history, and chiefly by transfusing it with myth.”

It should come as no surprise that though Cowley abjured direct political discussion after the 1930s, he sought not simply “to celebrate American literature and to defend American writers as a community within the larger community,” as he once wrote, but “to arouse in Americans a sense of community and of common destinies on a deeper level than that of practical affairs so that it might make it possible for us to believe in ourselves as characters in the drama of American history.”

Cowley stopped writing transparently of class struggle and social radicalism after his disastrous flirtations with communism and Stalinism in the later 1930s; the wars of the haves and the have-nots became much more clear to him and his contemporaries in literature. They saw that revolutions effected by artists occur almost imperceptibly, and are secured in the space where artists have a free hand: not in the world of public policy and “politics” (that horribly negative word), but in the free space of the artist’s initial selection of subject and material. When the writer chooses his or her subject with a sense of “world” in mind, with a vision of society and culture to come of this effort (this effort of simply making a good story to be told, then heard, and then told again by others who have heard), then the process of making art enhances social change. All works of art, Cowley wrote in the 1934 epilogue, “teach us that life is bigger than life.” Our readerly contrast of ourselves with the characters, ideas, and even the author of a book read often spurs us to action, at times similar to those the book presents, at times opposing. The act echoes Cowley’s own readings of “the lives of the saints” of literary modernism.

What’s remarkable in Cowley’s life and work, beyond the revolutionary cant of the original epilogue to *Exile’s Return*, is that he kept his spirit and grew in wisdom beyond his often blind political fervor of the 1930s. Cowley always followed his reading. It could be that Hemingway led him out of cant with a literary estimation of social commitment in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, or it could have stemmed from elsewhere, perhaps from his reading of Emerson. But when Cowley started diving into Hemingway in the late thirties and early forties, and through him into Hawthorne and nineteenth-century American writing in general, then back into the twentieth century with the work of William Faulkner, he deepened his sense of American literature and found wisdom and solace in understanding the grander, if slower, effect of art on society and culture. He studied Hawthorne, Emerson, Whitman, and through them came to a comprehension of his own generation: Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and William Faulkner. These were people, among others, whose making of art had a prescriptive dimension, an incitement to social change. Cowley understood this—indeed his later productive insight into such writing essentially echoed the naïve and hopeful idealism of his 1934 epilogue. He reflected this understanding in his critical writings, enhancing its effect, for the rest of his life.*

What Cowley finally understood, and what I think gave him both solace and wisdom beyond his exile years, is that American literature is both subversive and actively directed to social change. Hawthorne is subversive, and so, naturally, are Emerson’s *Essays*, Whitman’s *Song of Myself*, and Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*. I think Cowley realized that the cant of the original *Exile’s Return* epilogue was hasty, cocksure, and ultimately blind. But what’s fascinating is that its very premises and projections were ultimately confirmed by Cowley’s study of the American literary tradition. Thus, when Cowley during the 1950s said of forthcoming generations of American writers, “They will be as different from those of the ‘Lost Generation’ as Hemingway and Faulkner were different from every American author who preceded them, though without ceasing to be in the tradition,” and “the tradition changes, but persists,” Cowley wasn’t confirming the integrity of the artist, he was confirming the condition of the artist as American. That condition, he would maintain, evolves from the strange but necessary circumstance of free choice, a freedom of choice of subject that, however, is always circumscribed by its ultimate direction: toward community, and its enhancement.

There is, as Cowley understood in later life with a solace and wisdom that transcended his twenties exile and his intellectualized sense of culture in the thirties, simply no other way to write American literature.

Suggestions for Further Reading

1. Works by Malcolm Cowley discussing or related to *Exile's Return*:

—*And I Worked at the Writer's Trade: Chapters of Literary History, 1918–1978*. New York: Viking, 1978. (See especially the chapters “‘And Jesse Begat . . .’: A Note on Literary Generations,” “—And I Worked at the Writer's Trade,” and “The 1930s: Faith and Works.”)

Blue Juniata: A Life. New York: Viking, 1985. (In this collection of Cowley's poetry, see especially the sections entitled “Blue Juniata,” “The Crooked Streets,” “Valuta,” and “The City of Anger.”)

Conversations with Malcolm Cowley. Edited by Thomas Daniel Young. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986. (See especially the Eisenberg, Herendeen and Parker, Stegner and Canzoneri, and Wood interviews.)

The Dream of the Golden Mountains: Remembering the 1930s. New York: Viking, 1978. (See especially pp. 220–30.)

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A Note on the Text

As noted in the Introduction, there were two editions of *Exile's Return*. The first appeared in June 1934 and was published by W. W. Norton and Company. The second, revised edition appeared in June 1951 and was published by Viking Press. (The U.K. publication of the 1951 revised edition, by Bodley Head, did not appear until 1961.)

The 1934 edition of *Exile's Return* was subtitled "A Narrative of Ideas." In 1951, the book's subtitle was "A Literary Odyssey of the 1920s." The 1934 edition bore no dedication, while the 1951 edition was dedicated to Muriel, Cowley's second wife, whom he married in 1932.

The 1934 edition contained seven chapters; the 1951 edition contained eight. The difference between the two editions is largely a matter of the organization of material.

The seventh and last chapter of the 1934 edition, entitled "No Escape," was broken into four subsections: "Connecticut Valley," "Political Interlude," "The Story of a Suicide," and "To Die at the Right Time." The seventh chapter of the 1951 edition, entitled "The Age of Islands," includes new material on Sacco and Vanzetti ("Charlestown Prison") and Hart Crane ("The Roaring Boy"), and some transitional material that did not appear in the 1934 edition. Five and a half pages at the beginning and three pages at the end of the 1934 chapter seven subsection "Political Interlude" were omitted in the 1951 edition; the rest of the subsection was absorbed into the 1951 chapter seven subsection "No Escape." The eighth chapter of the 1951 edition, "Echoes of a Suicide," essentially reorganized the material on Harry Crosby already presented in the 1934 edition.

Beyond this, the major differences between the two editions are the replacement of the 1934 epilogue, "Yesterday and Tomorrow" (which is appended to this edition), with the 1951 epilogue, "New Year's Eve" (some part of which appeared in the 1934 edition), the rewriting of the prologue, and the addition of the appendix entitled "Years of Birth."

The other revisions, though numerous, are matters of style. Occasionally, as with the expansion of the section "Historical Parallel," Cowley added a post—World War II perspective on the Soviet Union. In the main, Cowley's 1951 revisions were those of a writer honing his prose to sharpness.

Exile's Return

to Muriel

Prologue: The Lost Generation

This book is the story to 1930 of what used to be called the lost generation of American writers. It was Gertrude Stein who first applied the phrase to them. "You are all a lost generation," she said to Ernest Hemingway, and Hemingway used the remark as an inscription for his first novel. It was a good novel and became a craze—young men tried to get as imperturbably drunk as the hero, young women of good families took a succession of lovers in the same heartbroken fashion as the heroine, they all talked like Hemingway characters and the name was fixed. I don't think there was any self-pity in it. Scott Fitzgerald sometimes pitied himself, and with reason. Hart Crane used to say that he was "caught like a rat in a trap"; but neither Crane nor Fitzgerald talked about being part of a lost generation. Most of those who used the phrase about themselves were a little younger and knew they were boasting. They were like Kipling's gentlemen rankers out on a spree and they wanted to have it understood that they truly belonged "To the legion of the lost ones, to the cohort of the damned." Later they learned to speak the phrase apologetically, as if in quotation marks, and still later it was applied to other age groups, each of which was described in turn as being the real lost generation; none genuine without the trademark. In the beginning, however, when the phrase was applied to young writers born in the years around 1900, it was as useful as any half-accurate tag could be.

It was useful to older persons because they had been looking for words to express their uneasy feeling that postwar youth—"flaming youth"—had an outlook on life that was different from their own. Now they didn't have to be uneasy; they could read about the latest affront to social standards or to literary conventions and merely say, "That's the lost generation." But the phrase was also useful to the youngsters. They had grown up and gone to college during a period of rapid change when time in itself seemed more important than the influence of class or locality. Now at last they had a slogan that proclaimed their feeling of separation from older writers and of kinship with one another. In the slogan the noun was more important than the adjective. They might or might not be lost, the future would decide that point; but they had already had the common adventures and formed the common attitude that made it possible to describe them as a generation.

In that respect, as in the attitude itself, they were different from the writers who preceded them. Sectional and local influences were relatively more important during the years before 1900. Two New England writers born fifteen or twenty years apart—Emerson and Thoreau, for example—might bear more resemblance to each other than either bore to a Virginian or a New Yorker of his own age; compare Emerson and Poe, or Thoreau and Whitman. Literature was not yet centered in New York; indeed, it had no center on this side of the ocean. There was a Knickerbocker School, there was a Concord School, there was a Charleston School; later there would be a Hoosier School, a Chicago School. Men of every age belonged to the first three and might have belonged to the others, had these not been founded at a time when writers were drifting to the metropolis.

Publishing, like finance and the theater, was becoming centralized after 1900. Regional traditions were dying out; all regions were being transformed into a great unified market for motorcars and Ivory soap and ready-to-wear clothes. The process continued during the childhood of the new generation of writers. Whether they grew up in New England, the Midwest, the Southwest or on the Pacific Coast, their environment was almost the same; it was a little different in the Old South, which had kept some of its local manners but was losing them. The childhood of these writers was less affected by geography than it was by the financial situation of their parents, yet even that was fairly uniform. A few of the writers came from wealthy families, a very few from the slums. Most of them were the children of doctors, small lawyers, prosperous farmers or struggling businessmen—of families whose incomes in those days of cheaper living were between two thousand and perhaps eight thousand dollars a year. Since their playmates were also middle-class they had the illusion of belonging to a great classless society.

All but a handful were pupils in the public schools, where they studied the same textbooks, sang the same songs and revolted rather tamely against the same restrictions. At the colleges they attended, usually some distance from their homes, they were divested of their local peculiarities, taught to speak a standardized American English and introduced to the world of international learning. Soon they would be leaving for the army in France, where they would be subjected together to a sudden diversity of emotions: boredom, fear, excitement, pride, aloofness and curiosity. During the drab peacemaking at Versailles they would suffer from the same collapse of emotions. They would go back into civilian life almost as if they were soldiers on a long furlough.

Some of them would go to Greenwich Village to begin the long adventure of the 1920s. Only long afterward could the period be described, in Scott Fitzgerald's phrase, as "the greatest, gaudiest spree in history." At first it promised to be something quite different, a period of social and moral reaction. The Prohibition Amendment had gone into effect in January 1920, strikes were being broken all over the country, and meanwhile Greenwich Village was full of plain-clothes dicks from the Vice Squad and the Bomb Squad. I remember that many young women were arrested and charged with prostitution because the dicks had seen them smoking cigarettes in the street, and I remember that innocent tea-rooms were raided because they were thought to harbor dangerous Reds. Then Harding was elected, the Red scare was forgotten and, after a sharp recession in 1921, the country started out to make money; it was the new era of installment buying and

universal salesmanship. The young writers couldn't buy luxuries even on the installment plan. They didn't want to advertise or sell them or write stories in which salesmen were the romantic heroes. Feeling like aliens in the commercial world, they sailed for Europe as soon as they had money enough to pay for their steamer tickets.

Nor would this be the end of their adventures in common. Until they were thirty most of them would follow a geographical pattern of life, one that could be suggested briefly by the names of two cities and a state: New York, Paris, Connecticut. After leaving Greenwich Village they would live in Montparnasse (or its suburbs in Normandy and on the Riviera), and some of them would stay there year after year in what promised to be a permanent exile. Others would go back to New York, then settle in a Connecticut farmhouse with their books, a portable typewriter and the best intentions. Whether they were at home or abroad in 1929, most of them would have found a place in the literary world and would be earning a fairly steady income. The depression would be another common experience, almost as shattering as the war.

I am speaking of the young men and women who graduated from college, or might have graduated, between 1915, say, and 1922. They were never united into a single group or school. Instead they included several loosely defined and vaguely hostile groups, in addition to many individuals who differed with every group among their contemporaries; the fact is that all of them differed constantly with all the others. They all felt, however, a sharper sense of difference in regard to writers older than themselves who hadn't shared their adventures. It was as if the others had never undergone the same initiatory rites and had never been admitted to the same broad confraternity. In a strict sense the new writers formed what is known as a literary generation.

* * *

Their sense of being different has been expressed time and again in the books they wrote. Take, for example, the second paragraph of a story by Scott Fitzgerald, "The Scandal Detectives," in which he is describing an episode from his boyhood:

Some generations are close to those that succeed them; between others the gulf is infinite and unbridgeable. Mrs. Buckner—a woman of character, a member of Society in a large Middle Western city—carrying a pitcher of fruit lemonade through her own spacious back yard, was progressing across a hundred years. Her own thoughts would have been comprehensible to her great-grandmother; what was happening in a room above the stable would have been entirely unintelligible to them both. In what had once served as the coachman's sleeping apartment, her son and a friend were not behaving in a normal manner, but were, so to speak, experimenting in a void. They were making the first tentative combinations of the ideas and materials they found ready at their hands—ideas destined to become, in future years, first articulate, then startling and finally commonplace. At the moment she called up to them they were sitting with disarming quiet upon the still unhatched eggs of the mid-twentieth century.

Boys like Ripley Buckner and his friend—who was Scott Fitzgerald under another name—were born shortly before 1900. Since they were in their teens when the twentieth century was also in its teens, it is no wonder that they fell into the habit of identifying themselves with the century. They retained the habit until they—and the century—were well along in the thirties. As representatives of a new age they had a sense of being somehow unique; one catches an echo of it in the affectionate fashion in which Fitzgerald often used the phrase "my contemporaries." It seems to me now that the feeling was insufficiently grounded in fact and that Mrs. Buckner, for example, was closer to her son and his friend than the youngsters realized. Edith Wharton was of Mrs. Buckner's age and she could understand Fitzgerald perhaps better than he understood Mrs. Wharton. Going farther back, many young writers of the 1890s had also been in revolt and had tried to

introduce European standards of art and conduct into American literature; they too were a lost generation (and more tragically lost than their successors). The postwar writers, in their feeling that their experiences were unique, revealed their ignorance of the American past. On the other hand, the feeling was real in itself, however ill grounded, and it made them regard all other members of their own age group, whether artists or athletes or businessmen, as belonging to a sort of secret order, with songs and passwords, leagued in rebellion against the stuffy people who were misruling the world.

They were not a lost generation in the sense of being unfortunate or thwarted, like the young writers of the 1890s. The truth was that they had an easy time of it, even as compared with the writers who immediately preceded them. Dreiser, Anderson, Robinson, Masters and Sandburg were all in their forties before they were able to devote most of their time to writing; Sinclair Lewis was thirty-five before he made his first success with *Main Street*. It was different with the new group of writers. Largely as a result of what the older group had accomplished, their public was ready for them and they weren't forced to waste years working in a custom house, like Robinson, or writing advertising copy, like Anderson. At the age of twenty-four Fitzgerald was earning eighteen thousand dollars a year with his stories and novels. Hemingway, Wilder, Dos Passos and Louis Bromfield were internationally known novelists before they were thirty. They had a chance which the older men lacked to develop their craftsmanship in book after book; from the very first they were professionals.

Yet in spite of their opportunities and their achievements the generation deserved for a long time the adjective that Gertrude Stein had applied to it. The reasons aren't hard to find. It was lost, first of all, because it was uprooted, schooled away and almost wrenched away from its attachment to any region or tradition. It was lost because its training had prepared it for another world than existed after the war (and because the war prepared it only for travel and excitement). It was lost because it tried to live in exile. It was lost because it accepted no older guides to conduct and because it had formed a false picture of society and the writer's place in it. The generation belonged to a period of transition from values already fixed to values that had to be created. Its members began by writing for magazines with names like *transition*, *Broom* (to make a clean sweep of it), *1924*, *This Quarter* (existing in the pure present), *S 4 N*, *Secession*. They were seceding from the old and yet could adhere to nothing new; they groped their way toward another scheme of life, as yet undefined; in the midst of their doubts and uneasy gestures of defiance they felt homesick for the certainties of childhood. It was not by accident that their early books were almost all nostalgic, full of the wish to recapture some remembered thing. In Paris or Pamplona, writing, drinking, watching bullfights or making love, they continued to desire a Kentucky hill cabin, a farmhouse in Iowa or Wisconsin, the Michigan woods, the blue Juniata, a country they had "lost, ah, lost," as Thomas Wolfe kept saying; a home to which they couldn't go back.

I wrote this book almost twenty years ago. At the time I was trying to set down the story of the lost generation while its adventures were still fresh in my mind. I wanted to tell how it earned its name and tried to live up to it, then how it ceased to be lost, how, in a sense, it found itself. Since I had shared in many of the adventures I planned to tell a little of my own story, but only as illustration of what had happened to others. Essentially what I wanted to write was less a record of events than a narrative of ideas. But the ideas would be of a certain type: they were not the ones that people thought they held at the time or consciously expressed in books and book reviews; they were rather the ideas that half-unconsciously guided their actions, the ideas that they lived and wrote by. In other words I was trying to write something broader in scope than a literary history. Ideas or purposes of this nature are always connected with a general situation that is social and economic before becoming literary. They react on the situation that produced them, they conflict with one another and they end by affecting the lives of many who never regarded themselves as literary or artistic—for example, in the late 1920s there were people all over the country who had never been to New York and yet were acting and talking like Greenwich Villagers. Writers don't exist in a vacuum; they have masters and disciples and casual readers; in periods of change they are more sensitive and barometric than

the other professions. So, the story of the lost generation and its return from exile would be something else besides; it would help to suggest the story of the American educated classes, what some of them thought about in the boom days and how they reached the end of an era.

The book that was published in 1934 fell considerably short of those aims, and I am grateful to the Viking Press for giving me this opportunity to revise it. I hate to write and love to revise, and the first edition of *Exile's Return* gave me plenty of scope for practicing my favorite trade of revisionist. When I reread the book carefully for the first time in years, I realized how many gaps there were in the story. The chapter on Harry Crosby was one example; it had meaning in itself but I had failed to show its connection with the rest of the narrative. The intimate reason for that failure was clear enough, in 1951; I had written at length about the life of Harry Crosby, whom I scarcely knew, in order to avoid discussing the more recent death of Hart Crane, whom I knew so well that I still couldn't bear to write about him.

The whole conclusion of the book was out of scale with the beginning; and there were also the political opinions that intruded into the narrative. I had to explain to myself, before explaining to the reader, that the book was written in the trough of the depression, when there seemed to be an economic or political explanation for everything that happened to human beings. "The trough of the depression," I have just said, taking the first phrase that came into my mind; but actually the years 1933 and 1934 were a madly hopeful time when it seemed that great changes in the economic system were already under way. Russia in those days didn't impress us as a despotism or as the great antagonist in a struggle for world power; it was busy within its own boundaries trying to create what promised to be a happier future. "We are changing the world!" the Young Pioneers used to chant as they marched through the streets of Moscow. Here too it seemed that everybody was trying to change the world and create the future; it was the special pride and presumption of the period. We hadn't learned then—nor have most of our statesmen learned today—that human society is necessarily imperfect and may disappear from the earth unless it comes to accept what T. S. Eliot calls "the permanent conditions upon which God allows us to live upon this planet."

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Hans Diaz:

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