

L. L. Graelle

## AN INTERVIEW WITH MALCOLM COWLEY

### Introductory Note

POET, LITERARY HISTORIAN, CRITIC, AND EDITOR, Malcolm Cowley was there "during the good time that was the Twenties". *There was Paris*, and Cowley was a charter member of the Lost Generation, that exclusive group of literary Americans consisting of Ezra Pound, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Morley Callaghan, Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, and Hart Crane. After, like Hemingway, serving a hitch driving ambulances and munition trucks in France during World War I, he settled in among the expatriates to write poetry during that time which produced Dada and Surrealism and was to be a vintage period for American letters. Later in his volume of reminiscences, *Exiles Return*, he was to document these experiences. It has been called "The most vivacious of all accounts of literary life during the fabulous 1920's. It offers an intimate portrait of the era that produced a renaissance in American fiction and poetry."

When Cowley returned to the United States he became book critic for the *New Republic* (from 1929 to 1940), and he has been literary adviser to the Viking Press since 1948. He has continued to produce essays and books with the understanding he has absorbed in observing literary movements and personalities for four decades.

The interview was to take place in the quiet oak-panelled bar of the Harvard Club in midtown Manhattan. The atmosphere was that of an earlier period, perhaps Mr. Cowley's 1920's, and seemingly as a reminder of that fact all the electrical outlets were DC, and we could not plug in our recorder. As a result we had to move to an upstairs smoking room where we finally found an AC outlet next to another instrument of this decade—the air conditioner.

Q: Do you think the practice of criticism is opposed to the literary impulse?

A: No, except at one point. To specify, every writer is partly critic and partly creative writer. I hate the word "creative" but there's nothing else to use—unless we say "combinatory," on the principle that every new thing in the arts is a

combination of familiar elements. From another point of view, every writer is partly speaker and partly audience. The inner audience is the critical side of him, and writing or reading too much criticism at a given moment may strengthen the audience to such a degree that it shouts down the speaker before he can open his mouth. The inner speaker, the silent voice, is the creative or combinatory side of his talent. When I work with beginning writers, I try to tell them to write first and revise later. Sometimes I also tell them that, if they want to be novelists, they should defer taking courses that involve the close and critical reading of contemporary masterpieces.

Q: So you think an overly critical faculty can harm a new writer.

A: Obviously the ideal writer would have a maximum of critical ability, and a maximum of creative ability. I'm merely referring to the possibility that at some early stage in a writer's career, the critical side might develop too fast and might override the other side.

Q: You have said—"instead of dealing critically with the critical critics of criticism, I have preferred to be a critic of poems and novels, or at most a literary historian". . . .

A: I will stand on that point. I should think that the criticism of criticism of criticism becomes a reflexive activity carried on in a small closed room.

Q: Does this imply a condemnation of the academic critics?

A: No, the academic critic is very good in his place and is sometimes brilliant or illuminating. But sometimes he forgets what the problems of a professional writer are. I'm especially disturbed by this idea that the intentions of a writer should never be taken into account, because that is practically a "free pass" for the critic to go anywhere he wants to go and sometimes very far from the work itself.

Q: You have also castigated the New Critics in a recent article—but don't they do exactly what you advocate—criticize the poems and novels themselves, directly?

A: I didn't castigate all the New Critics. I think some of them have done extremely interesting work. But some of them have tried to erect criticism into an autonomous activity, of which works of art are merely the "field" . . . and when they read a work it's like an official in Washington going out into the "field" which he rather despises. In some of the critics one observes a tendency to treat the author as if he were a patient stretched out on a couch, and the critic a psychoanalyst.

Q: Do you think that this is a mistaken application of scientism?

A: Scientism in this case is a developed interest in Freud and Jung, especially Jung . . . and once again I'm not attacking Freud or Jung. I'm just attacking the misuse of their work.

Q: Do you think that a lot of good critical ideas get lost in terminology, in the gobbledygook style of expression? Because so many critics nowadays get carried away with their pet terminologies?

A: No, because ideas have to be expressed in words, and if the words are essentially meaningless, it means that the ideas themselves are also meaningless. I should think, for example, that a good deal of the recent criticism of Faulkner has been essentially meaningless because it has gone up into the air as if in a non-dirigible free-floating balloon.

Q: At the time—in the 20's—did you find that knowing writers personally—Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Pound, Hart Crane—had any influence or effect on your writing criticism of their works?

A: Essentially it must have had an influence, because into criticism goes everything that you know about the author, but some of the best critical writing I have done has been about Faulkner, whom I didn't meet until after the essays were written. But it goes into your work, everything goes into your work . . . but knowing an author is not at all essential.

Q: Yes, your work on Faulkner, your introduction to *The Portable Faulkner*, did much to bring Faulkner into prominence after a decline of his popularity and of course critics began to re-evaluate his merit.

A: Well, that happened because *The Portable* was published at the right time. There was a situation with Faulkner that hadn't existed with any other author. There were a great many novelists and critics who deeply appreciated Faulkner, but the public at large had been told that he was only a master of Southern gothic horrors and "a Sax Rohmer for the sophisticated", as Granville Hicks called him at that time. When *The Portable* was published it gave the people who admired Faulkner a chance to review a selection of his work and to make their own statements too, so that *The Portable* was a key that unlocked a great deal of Faulkner criticism. It was an event in Faulkner's literary career because at the time I did *The Portable* his work was completely out of print.

Q: Do you think that sort of reprint and paperback publishing influences the literary situation to a great extent?

A: Much more than when I wrote a book called *The Literary Situation*. The new factor that *The Literary Situation* was written too soon for me to consider is the so-called quality paperbacks—the more expensive paperbacks sold in bookstores instead of on the newsstand. These have been the means of keeping in print almost any book for which there is a sale of, let us say, a thousand copies a year. And that means that a great many books are always in print and therefore *alive* at present

that wouldn't have been in print before. It's a great comfort to an author to have his books continue selling through the years.

Q: To get back to your contact with the authors of the 20's, did your association with them give you any insights into the creative process?

A: Perhaps I got an insight through having lived through many of the same experiences, which meant that I could judge more readily the values that the author was trying to enforce in his work. For example, I was born the year before Hemingway and was also the son of a doctor. Where he had gone to Michigan in the summer, I went to central Pennsylvania and regarded that wild countryside as my real home. And then we both went to Paris in the same year, and although at that time I did not know Hemingway intimately, it seemed to me that the people he put into his stories, the language he used, everything was familiar to me and part of my own background.

Q: How do you think the writers today match up to those of the 20's?

A: I think there is a very interesting group of writers today . . . very interesting. And I think a new situation has come to the fore . . . a new generation is moving into influence . . . literature is strikingly different from what it was in the hands of the generation of the 1920's. I would say we're going to see a very lively period for the next few years. Saul Bellow, for example, is bringing out an important novel called *Herzog* this fall. John Cheever is an admirable writer who's been critically neglected for years and years because his stories were published in the *New Yorker*. The critics have a slight mistrust of people who write stories for the *New Yorker*. The fact that these were very different from the usual *New Yorker* stories didn't dawn upon them until Cheever published *The Wapshot Chronicle* and *The Wapshot Scandal*.

Q: Yes, and with writers like Ken Kesey, J. P. Donleavy, William Burroughs, Thomas Berger, along with a great many others, there seems to be a literary boom, if you can call it that, in the last few years.

A: Oh, yes. Partly owing to the immense growth in college attendance. After all, although not every college student is a reader, a great many of them are, so that the reading and the writing population have both increased vastly in number in the last few years.

Q: Do you think literary taste has gone up as well?

A: It has become more sophisticated. Whether it's better or not is always the question, but readers have more knowledge, more points of reference. Of course, when you run into a man who has read a great many authors, you have to stop and think that there are a great many others he hasn't read. There's a limit to the amount

of reading that anyone can do, and as a new author is admitted into the canon of those who have to be read, then some older author is quietly evicted.

Q: A few years back you wrote about and described three myths or mythologies in the American experience: the frontier or country myth of man against nature; the myths that arose during the great industrialization and urbanization of the U.S.—man against society; and lastly, man no longer coping with the frontier or with defining society but with himself. The last, you said, was still undefined and in the making. Do you think it has defined itself more clearly since then?

A: The three are not so much, in that sense, mythologies as three emotional backgrounds for everybody, three conflicts with which all American literature has some sort of connection. The last *has* defined itself more clearly. A good deal more clearly. The present conflict treated in fiction is also that of the individual, against some faceless bureaucracy, as in *Catch-22*, or of the inner struggles of a man in search of his own identity, as in *The Adventures of Augie March*; or of a man faced by some psychological difficulty or moral scruple—and I'm thinking here of the adolescent in *The Catcher in the Rye*. These are very different themes from man against nature and man against society of the older novels.

Q: What do you think of the type of hero who is not the anti-hero found in *Augie March*, in *Catch-22* and in *The Catcher in the Rye*, but a hero with a great knowledge of the bureaucracy, great knowledge of the society he lives in and its complexities, but not the sophisticated hero of old—because he does *not accept* the society and, let us say, function within it but does use it and uses his knowledge to use it, but rejects its principles. I am thinking of the hero of Donleavy's book *The Ginger Man*, of Kesey's book *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, of Ellison's hero in *Invisible Man*.

A: Yes, there is a different type of hero in all those books. Augie March is more in search of an identity, and the Ginger Man already has an identity. He's more in rebellion. That's more his problem and seems to bother all the current novelists—of how to create or assert an identity for oneself against all the social pressures on the individual. The great change from the 1930's is that nobody any longer believes in his duty or ability in any manner whatever to reshape or alter conditions. Heroes like these accept conditions, and they use what the French used to call *Système D* during the First World War. "D" stood for *dé brouillard*, that is, for being able to get yourself out of it . . . get yourself out of trouble . . . or how to "wangle", which is the term the English used. And that can be applied to the Ginger Man.

Q: Do you think this is a negative type of morality?

A: That's a very hard question because you'd have to argue what "negative"

is and what "morality" is. Do you mean anti-morality, amorality, immorality, or a new morality growing up against the old one?

Q: Well, in Hemingway, for instance, the hero—although at odds with society, and living according to his own standards—is much more divorced from society than most modern heroes who are also at odds with it.

A: It's true that some things have changed. There is more of an individual rebellion against society at the present time in novels . . . or not so much rebellion. Couldn't we sometimes, although it sounds less appealing, just call it complaint or whining against society? It used to be for a while that everything was mother's fault; that was the theme of hundreds and hundreds of novels. Now it's all society's fault, the establishment's fault, the fault of "squares" or the fault of "the way things are". And sometimes it's a great relief to read again the exploits of a Hemingway hero, who, when something goes wrong, says "It was my fault".

Q: And yet in some ways Hemingway maintains an innocence that is absent from many of the contemporary novels we were discussing.

A: Do you know, anything written twenty years ago always seems innocent. It doesn't matter what the age is. To the 1930's the 1920's seemed innocent. To the 1950's, the 1930's seemed innocent. And very soon the 1950's are going to seem innocent. I can already sense new moods growing up. I'm not sure that the negativism of the last ten or fifteen years isn't going to give way to new illusions pretty soon. A sign of that is the growing interest in the 1930's at present. Another sign, of course, is the number of beats and beards and sandals who go off to work for the cause of racial integration.

Q: In another of your books you wrote about the revolt against the genteel tradition in American literature during the early part of the century. We have come a long way since then with Henry Miller, Wm. Burroughs and the like, and almost anything goes. Now, this certainly is a loss of innocence. Do you think this is a good trend?

A: Of course my own conservative instincts would say no, especially to the use of a great stream of foul language because here were all these words which had an awful power because there were places where they couldn't be used. When an author finally first said "damn" in print or first said "hell", "damn" and "hell" had power. But now there is not a single word in the language that has any of the awful and mysterious power that the four-letter words used to have. The result is that certain resources of language are being lost. When an author says, "blank, blank, blank, blank," filling in the blanks with four-letter words in succession, then those words become no longer awful in their power but simply boring.

Extending this from language to acts, I suspect that the lack of sexual inhibitions in fiction has led to some terribly boring novels. When you think that Samuel Richardson could write a seven-volume novel about a seduction! Today seductions have become so commonplace in novels that authors can scarcely use them to fill a paragraph. That's a whole subject resource of novelists that has gone out the window, and others are going with it, so I'm not sure that the greater liberty is always an advantage.

I was reading today a review in the *New Statesman* about a volume of erotic poetry. The reviewer pointed out that actually the erotic poetry of the Victorian period, using respectable language, was more interesting, because it was more titillating, than the outright bawdy poetry collected in this volume.

Q: But isn't this progressing familiarity with words and acts inevitable because of the super-sophistication in the U.S. today?

A: I don't know whether anything is inevitable any longer. All I know is that our super-sophistication will seem like innocence in 1980, by the same rule that I mentioned before. They will say "The 1960's, when people *innocently* believed that sex would solve everything." Now things were much worse in the Victorian era. I couldn't have lived then. But actually the existence of inhibitions makes it easier for writers to produce strong effects: literature doesn't flourish best in a sexual Utopia or any other kind of Utopia. The very curious thing to me is that almost every ethnic group produces its first great work when it is rising out of an underprivileged into a privileged position. There has to be that feeling of "We are oppressed. I am speaking for all my people; we are going to strike back at the oppressors." If I wanted a recipe for making an author a genius at the present time, I would suggest a black skin.

Q: Would you then predict that Negro literature will be the dominant literature of the next few years?

A: I don't know, but I do know that there is a wonderful opportunity at this moment for Negro writers because of the emotional pressure under which they work.

Q: In an affluent society like the U.S., what type of literature will we end up with when all oppressed groups have been eliminated?

A: I don't think we shall ever have an absence of oppressed groups. I think the way society is constituted there will be always injustice against some group.

Q: I'm thinking of the evolution of so large a middle class of so powerful a body of similar beings that almost any minority would be ignored.

A: Yes, it's hard to visualize that situation imaginatively. What worries me is the urbanization of culture. What worries me is that literature in the past was

usually produced by people who had some sort of feeling for the soil out of which things came. The generation of the 1920's was almost the last in which the authors, most of them, had a fairly close connection with the soil, even ones that you don't think of as having that connection. Allen Tate . . . Hemingway . . . Faulkner, who prided himself on being a farmer . . . Thomas Wolfe from the North Carolina mountains—they could all talk crops or they knew something about them. Many of them were gardeners or at least they knew how to get along in the countryside. Now this has changed. The new literature is an urban literature, and I wonder if something hasn't gone out of writing with the change of emphasis from vegetables to psychosis.

Q: Do you think, aside from the urbanization of literature, that there is any unifying factor, any thematic preoccupation that writers today share?

A: What there is for better or worse is a search for identity, a search for a self that can be asserted against social pressures. That's what's going on at the present time. In some writers: almost gaily—as for example in *The Ginger Man* or in Saul Bellow. In some cases angrily, in some cases rather whiningly—"Poor me, I can't find my own nature, won't you please pity me"—and out comes a novel. Outside of that—sex plays a great part in today's fiction. One could say it always did, but I mean that in the number of pages devoted to it. The search for the perfect orgasm has become a theme used more frequently than the search for the perfect heroine was used in Victorian times.

Q: Does that show the transitory state of our lives today—limiting our range of endeavour to the single orgasm as opposed to wife, a lifelong companion?

A: Well, you could say the transitory state of humanity on this earth.

Q: True, but it's the degree of the state of transitoriness. I don't know if it's nostalgia without any reality behind it—but one can imagine a less hectic time, a time when goals were larger than the next orgasm.

A: Everyone over fifty looks back to childhood when the days were much longer. So that produces a backward turn. Of course I've got to the stage where I think the United States was a much nicer place to live in when I was a boy than it is now; I drive on super-highways but I hate super-highways. I think the whole tendency is to make it easier and easier to drive by car from one parking lot to another parking lot without seeing anything in between. As a matter of fact, anyone who wants to live again in an earlier American age has only to visit some farming sections of English Canada. Prince Edward Island, where I spent some time, seemed almost exactly like central Pennsylvania in 1910—where I spent my boyhood. There you find the feeling of space and freedom, the lack of "No Trespass" signs, the



greater self-reliance—but also the uglier, less comfortable houses, the briefer schooling, and the abundant but monotonous food, with everything fried or baked. When I was in Prince Edward Island they still had schooners tied up at the docks in all the little fishing villages. I really loved the island, but was driven away by indigestion.

Q: In spite of our super-highways, it seems to me that literature in the U.S. is certainly more vital than literature in England, for instance, where their novelists seem to be dealing in social protest—a theme exhausted here in the 30's.

A: I think it's too soon to pass a judgment on that. Literature here is lively at the present time. In England you do get a resurgence of the social novels of the 1930's. Much, much more than here. Perhaps we'll get that here, too. Many Negro novelists of today are writing novels much like the proletarian novels of the 1930's.

Q: Do you feel that there are certain themes which are basic to the American experience even though a body of writing in a given period might ignore or evade them?

A: I don't know. That is hard to say. One thing that I can say is that the U.S. has produced very few good social novels, in the course of our whole literature. That is to say novels of social observation, recording novels. And not only have we produced fewer of these and more authors of romances, as Hawthorne made that distinction, but when a social novelist appears in this country—even when he's a good one like James Gould Cozzens—he is likely to be widely condemned by critics who are more in favour of the intense and imaginative works.

Q: Yes, that's true, and even a social novelist like Dos Passos uses an expressionistic and imaginative style.

A: Well, Dos Passos is not exactly the type of novelist I was thinking of. He has been a novelist of social protest more than a novelist of social manners, more than a recording novelist—or as it's sometimes called, an institutional novelist because so many of them study institutions, like foundations, colleges, churches, the legal profession, and so on. There aren't many novelists of this sort in the U.S., and generally speaking, they're not as good or serious about their work as the imaginative romancers. When they are good, and serious about their work, like Cozzens, for example, they're likely to be widely condemned by critics, who cling more to the Hawthorne tradition in the novel than to the Trollope tradition.

Q: Could that be perhaps because social mores aren't very stable in America and change is such a great factor that it is bound to be confusing and lead, as you have pointed out, to a search for identity?

A: That may be. Yes, I would think because of that it would be harder to write *any* type of novel, not only a social novel, in the U.S. than in England.