

Kenneth S. Lynn

MALCOLM COWLEY FORGETS

Dear sweet old Malcolm, once, long ago, Stalin's
American literary executioner, now purges his past.

Almost 50 years ago, Malcolm Cowley remarked in regard to *Exile's Return*, his forthcoming memoir of the 1920s, that "There is always the temptation, in writing about your own past, to interpret the facts discreetly with the purpose of showing what a wholly likeable fellow you were." In *The Dream of the Golden Mountains*,* his recently published memoir of the 1930s, Cowley has succumbed to that temptation even more blatantly than he did in *Exile's Return*. Supposedly, the book is based on the articles and reviews he regularly contributed to the *New Republic* during the Depression years, but the image of himself he presents to us in *The Golden Mountains* is rather different from the man of the *New Republic* pieces. Although Cowley finally foreswore his political fellow traveling in 1940, he still has not acquired an adequate respect for historical truth. Just as he once ignored the patent falsity of the defendants' confessions at the Moscow purge trials in order to argue that the trials had been eminently just, so in *The Golden Mountains* he has not hesitated to consign unpleasant facts about what he said and did in the thirties to an Orwellian memory hole. Cowley is now in his eighties, and he has posterity very much in mind. If he has his way, history will not remember him as the man whom Eugene Lyons described in *The Red Decade* (1941) as "the Number One literary executioner for Stalin in America."

What the author of *The Golden Mountains* wants us to find most likeable about him is his honesty. One man is always representative of an age, he says of himself in the preface, "when he gives honest testimony about what he has felt and observed." On page 82, he recalls the nature of his literary ambitions in the thirties—"I

wanted to write honestly." On page 228, he reminds us that in *Exile's Return* "I had taken the risk of speaking candidly about my own life." But Cowley's campaign to persuade us of his honesty is not merely carried out by bald assertion. Through the details he chooses to emphasize about his personality, he also seeks to convince us that he is a man to be trusted. "And that author, that observer who is trying to be candid about himself," Cowley writes, "what sort of person was he in 1930?" From a Harvard man who had spent most of the 1920s in Europe, we might expect an answer emphasizing his cosmopolitanism. But, as Benjamin Franklin discovered long ago, a cosmopolite can often enhance his credibility by pretending to be a rustic, and this lesson has apparently not been lost on the author of *The Golden Mountains*. Without qualification, Cowley insists that

he was still a country boy after spending most of his life in cities; he had a farmer's blunt hands. . . . He never forgot that he came of people without pretensions, not quite members of the respectable middle class. He was slow of speech and had a farmer's large silences,



though he was not slow-witted; people were fooled sometimes.

Along with his trustworthiness, Cowley would have us admire his benignity. Other historians have stressed the combativeness of American intellectual life in the early 1930s, but Cowley remembers the battles of those days as "good fun," and he plunged into them, he says, with the exhilaration of a college halfback diving into a scrimmage. Only gradually did he realize that "real blows were being exchanged by others." Did this realization then cause Cowley himself to turn nasty? *The Golden Mountains* offers no evidence that it did. Thus Cowley repeatedly praises John Dos Passos and Edmund Wilson without ever once suggesting that his earlier opinions of these writers had sometimes been less than complimentary. And while he freely admits that William Phillips, Philip Rahv, James T. Farrell, and other leftists sometimes "bludgeoned or shillelagged me," as he ruefully says about Farrell's attacks, we get only the faintest sense of why they were so angry at him, and no sense at all that he ever replied to them in kind. In the confrontation he cites with Phillips and Rahv, for instance, Cowley asserts that, in the face of their comments, "not many [of which] were eulogistic," he was simply "amused and polite."

Yet while Cowley does not want us to fail to notice the contrast he alleges between his own manner and that of his critics, the principal business of his memoir is not to snipe at ancient adversaries. Indeed, more often than not Cowley is at pains to evade the issue of sectarian differences on the Left. Thus in his discussion of the Communist-front League of American Writers, the impression is created that anti-fascist intellectuals were indiscriminately welcomed into the organization and that no one was ever excluded or condemned for criticizing the Communist Party or the USSR, whereas the reverse was true. For the overriding purpose of *The Golden Mountains* is to rehabilitate the myth that the 1930s was an era of revolutionary brotherhood. What Cowley wants us to

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remember above all else about the thirties is that it was a time when hundreds of writers were caught up in a dream of a new social order—a dream of the golden mountains. “Our right fists raised in the Red Front salute,” says Cowley, we marched forward toward “a classless society.” The Soviet Union had “shown us the way.”

The vision of a marching band of brothers so dominates Cowley’s book that vitally important individuals frequently get lost in the shuffle, including, not least, the author. Repeatedly, the narrative “I” gives way to “we,” or “they,” or “the writers,” or “the members,” or “the delegates.” And as the decade progresses and the bickering of the brotherhood intensifies to the point where it can no longer be ignored, Cowley is still apt to speak of anonymous groupings rather than of specific people.

As for the Russian purges, . . . there would never be unanimity about them, except in respect to the general uneasiness they created among left-wing intellectuals. Even those who believed that the defendants were guilty of the crimes to which they confessed couldn’t help feeling that the evidence revealed a disheartening state of affairs in Russia. As one trial followed another, more and more persons rejected the confessions, and soon they would also reject the Communist Party. But there was no unanimity even among the rejecters.

This passage does not even make clear where Cowley himself stood on the issue of the purges, but it does make clear why the author of an ostensibly personal book should have found it convenient to speak as often as he does in an impersonal vein. What better way, after all, for Cowley to avoid taking responsibility for certain positions he once held than to hide himself in a crowd?

Readers who are eager to meet the historical Malcolm Cowley will have to turn from *The Golden Mountains* to the relevant volumes of the *New Republic*. But readers who are concerned with the more interesting question of how a man goes about creating a historical myth about himself will want to read memoir and magazine in conjunction. The first of the many discrepancies between the two involves an obscure writer named Ralph Borsodi. On page 6 of *The Golden Mountains*, Cowley genially recalls him as one of the many visitors who came to the offices of the *New Republic* in the early years of the Depression to describe their schemes for remaking America. Borsodi’s idea was to resettle millions of urban families on five-acre subsistence homesteads. The difficulty with the project, Cowley observes with wry good humor, is that it required capital, a part-time job in the city, and a cooperative wife like Mrs. Borsodi.

When we turn to Cowley’s assessment of Borsodi in the *New Republic*, we find a different point of view. The writer’s crackpot scheme did not strike Cowley as at all

funny, it infuriated him. With the sort of rhetorical overkill which at the end of the thirties would belatedly prompt Edmund Wilson to castigate him for practicing “Stalinist character assassination of the most reckless and libelous sort,” Cowley tore into the harmless crank as “a dangerous messiah.” The reason for his fury was that as a back-to-the-land enthusiast Borsodi regarded the Soviet Union’s titanic effort to industrialize as a terrible mistake. “He speaks with contempt and hatred,” said Cowley, his voice quivering with contempt and hatred, “of everything done in Russia.”

But of all the false impressions about himself that Cowley creates in *The Golden Mountains*, the most audacious is the proposition that he was fully committed to the Communist cause for only a few years. By 1935, he asserts, he had developed “doubts about what the party was doing in America and in Russia too.” His *New Republic* pieces, however, demonstrate a continuing and unqualified adoration of Stalin. On April 24, 1935, for instance, Cowley drew a sneering contrast between the socialist H.G. Wells’s Utopian fixation on the “golden future” and the Soviet dictator’s awesomely impressive concentration on the “iron present.” (If as a memoirist Cowley had been more true to the man he used to be, he would not have employed a golden metaphor in the title of his book, inasmuch as his imagination in

the thirties was actually enthralled by a baser metal.)

One week later, the *New Republic*’s literary editor celebrated May Day with a review of the Communist Anna Louise Strong’s *I Change Worlds*. With glowing approval, Cowley recapitulated Miss Strong’s account of a high-level conference held in Moscow on the problem of what to do about the *Moscow News*, a somewhat unsuccessful illustrated weekly for American engineers and tourists, of which Miss Strong was the managing editor. Among those present at the conference was Stalin. “Stalin did not frown or pound his fist on the table,” wrote Cowley, paraphrasing Miss Strong,

he gave no commands; he scarcely made suggestions. He merely listened, asked people what they wanted, what they thought, but his questions went straight to the heart of things. Suddenly all the difficulties had vanished. It was decided to transform *The Moscow News* into a bigger and livelier paper. . . . These were not Stalin’s orders. The decisions seemed to come from everybody and to express a common will. . . . [Thus was Miss Strong] given a sudden and lasting insight into the whole soviet system of administration. . . . A system like this—which Miss Strong describes more intelligently than any other writer on Russia—seems tyrannical to people on the outside, whereas, to those millions who help to formulate policies, it seems the most democratic system that ever existed.

On September 11, 1935, Cowley dis-



missed George Kitchin's *Prisoner of the OGPU* as one of the myriad anti-Soviet books currently being published because "Messrs. Hitler, Hearst and their allies" are "frantic" that Western labor movements will take heart from the Soviet experiment. "Liars are paid by them at the best space rates. Old manuscripts are taken out of trunks, dusted off, peppered with atrocities and published as the latest news from Moscow." The real news, according to Cowley, was that "Yes, thank you, our Russian neighbors are doing quite well." With some of their major industrial and agricultural problems at last out of the way, the Soviet leaders were now "turning their attention to minor products—flower beds, jazz bands, joy, light wines and the secret ballot."

Cowley's whitewash of legal murder in Moscow appeared on April 7, 1937, in a review of *The Case of the Anti-Soviet Trotskyite Center*, issued by the USSR's Commissariat of Justice. That the defendants had displayed a Dostoevskian eagerness to confess to the most outlandish crimes was an idea without merit, in Cowley's opinion. "The behavior of the prisoners on the witness stand . . . was certainly that of guilty men lacking popular support and ashamed of the deeds that had brought them there." Far from being Dostoevskian, their behavior was "normal under the circumstances." It was only "their actions before arrest that belong in a Dostoevsky novel." The confessions, Cowley reiterated, were "undoubtedly sincere." As for the indictment, the major part of it was "proved beyond much possibility of doubting it." A year later, in a review of another volume of stenographic evidence about another trial, Cowley again was impressed by the "enormous accumulation of evidence" against the defendants, and again was contemptuous of the forced-confession theory. "There were no Tibetan drugs, no subtle Chinese tortures." The real question, he opined, "is not why the conspirators pleaded guilty, but why they conspired."

During the remaining months of 1938, Cowley demonstrated his unwavering devotion to Stalinism with a defense of the political censorship of literature and a scathing critique of the anti-Stalinist *Partisan Review* which its editors quite

rightly termed "a malicious and politically motivated attack." Throughout 1939, Cowley still kept the faith, despite the announcement of the Nazi-Soviet Pact. Thus in October of that year he described Stalin's embrace of Hitler not as the final betrayal of a revolution but as the "experiment" of a realist. The most shameful exhibition, however, of what Cowley was prepared to do for Stalin in 1939 was his participation in the literary execution of John Dos Passos.

When the second volume of *U.S.A.* was published in 1932, Cowley had praised the book as "a landmark in American fiction"; Dos Passos' writing, he said had "conviction, power, and a sense of depth, of striking through surfaces to the real forces beneath them." The reviewer also had warm words for the third volume of the trilogy when it appeared in 1936. On February 9, 1938, Cowley again took space in the *New Republic* to express his admiration for *U.S.A.* Sixteen months later, however, he and a number of other reviewers came down on Dos Passos' latest book, *Adventures of a Young Man*, like the knife blades of a rank of guillotines. As James T. Farrell shortly thereafter pointed out in an indignant essay in the *American Mercury*, Dos Passos had been judged on political, not literary, grounds. Having become disillusioned with the Communist Party's cynical manipulation of causes and issues, Dos Passos had written a novel to say farewell to the Left. *Adventures of a Young Man* had both the strengths and the weaknesses of all of Dos Passos' social fiction. While its characters were half-baked, the narrative had power and conviction and it struck through surfaces to the real forces beneath them. But because the book was much too strongly anti-Communist for prevailing Popular-Front tastes, it was condemned as a weak and inferior work. Cowley and company's reception of the novel, said Farrell, "reads like a warning to writers not to stray off the reservation of the Stalinist-controlled League of American Writers."

The thirties, in W.H. Auden's phrase, was "a low dishonest decade." One of the representative men of that era was the literary editor of the *New Republic*, but unlike Whittaker Chambers and other erst-

while servants of tyranny, he has not sought to redeem himself by coming clean about his former activities. *The Golden Mountains* is a cover-up. To the multiple dishonesties of Cowley's career we must also add the leading reviews of this book, all of which have praised it for precisely the quality it most conspicuously lacks. In the *New Republic*, R.W.B. Lewis spoke of the "cogency" of the memoir. In the *New York Times*, Alfred Kazin saluted the author as an "honest writer." In the *Washington Post*, Daniel Aaron asserted that "among the memorialists of the 1930s, Malcolm Cowley is one of the most reliable and informative." Moreover, Aaron adds, Cowley has "never confused literary standards with political loyalties." The memoirist's "easy idiomatic prose," says Aaron, "perfectly conveys his air of speculative detachment."

What in the world could have possessed these reviewers to make such irresponsible statements? The case of R.W.B. Lewis can be quickly dismissed. He simply does not know what he is talking about. The dishonesty of his review of Cowley's book consists of a pretension to an expertise about American literary life in the 1930s that he does not possess. The cases of Kazin and Aaron, however, are more complicated. There can be no doubt that both men are familiar with every piece of journalism that Cowley ever published. They were certainly in a position, therefore, to detect the disingenuousness of *The Golden Mountains*.

But in order to expose Cowley, Kazin would have been obliged to acknowledge certain unflattering truths about his own reviewing in the thirties, and, as Kazin's autobiographies amply demonstrate, he has no taste for self-criticism. In Kazin's books, Hell is other people, never himself. He has savagely caricatured the chairman of the Amherst College English Department, for instance, in which Kazin taught for some years; but if Kazin knows that he himself sometimes failed as a teacher, he has not shared the knowledge with his readers. Praising Cowley's cover-up as the work of an honest writer was the act of a writer who has a cover-up of his own to maintain.

Aaron's comments about *The Golden Mountains* are, in my opinion, a reflection of a personal need to go on ingratiating



himself with the aging lions of the American Left. Twenty years ago, Aaron interviewed or corresponded with almost all of them in the process of writing a large book called *Writers on the Left*, and he apparently was so awed by the experience that he has never been able to criticize them. In a severely disapproving review of *Writers on the Left*, William Phillips of the *Partisan Review* called attention to Aaron's

failure to offer any sort of critical evaluation of the people he had written about. "Aaron's seeming lack of bias actually produces a biased view of the 30s," Phillips pointed out, "the bias coming from the assumption that something called the 'record' is identical with the history." Clearly troubled by Phillips's review, Aaron published a long and defensive essay a few years later in which he

announced that his attitude toward critical scholarship was the same as that of the ancient lady who owns the Aspern Papers in Henry James's story: "The truth is God's, it isn't man's; we had better leave it alone. Who can judge of it?—who can say?" If Malcolm Cowley says he has tried to write about the 1930s as candidly as he could, what right does a mere reviewer have to say that he has not? □

Jude Wanniski

REAGAN'S ADVICE SQUAD

Fourteen people who should lead the country—a missive to President Reagan.

Here it is, Wednesday morning, November 5, and the Republican Party is pinching itself, to make sure it isn't a dream. The GOP is in Fat City. Its presidential candidate, Ronald Reagan, had just won all 50 states, losing only the three electoral votes of the District of Columbia. The Congress is still in Democratic numerical control, but by the Republicans' picking up seven seats in the Senate and 47 seats in the House, Reagan has effective control for his legislative agenda.

Now, to put together a government, an executive staff, and a Cabinet. Washington is in a dither. For the last four years, Jimmy Carter has been the whole government, and each of the senior slots has been worth about as much as John Nance Garner's pitcher of warm spit. Reagan not only has a colossal mandate, which makes the idea of government service exciting again, but he has also made it clear that he expects to be a 9-to-5 president. He's not going to stick around to "wash the dishes," he says, which suggests that his team will be given a good deal of power and responsibility. So a lot of people want to come to Washington. This is not going to be an easy task.

To assist President-elect Reagan in the employment process, the Shadow Cabinet Committee has convened once again in a midtown Manhattan Italian restaurant to review its deliberations. The Committee is composed solely of men and women who

read *The American Spectator*. The official Reagan task force on the Cabinet, composed entirely of men who read *Business Week*, is also meeting, in Washington, D.C. The official group will suggest Big, Important names, perhaps recommending one another for choice assignments. Its list will lean heavily toward former employees of Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, which means no person under 50 years of age will be considered. This is the group that believes the Nixon-Ford administrations

would have been hugely successful if only the Watergate burglars had placed the tape vertically instead of horizontally.

Perhaps Richard Wilcke, president of the Council for a Competitive Economy, summed up the delusions of the official group best in his Council's August newsletter. "Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford were perceived by the business community as pro-business Presidents," he writes. "Yet they signed the bills that created the EPA, OSHA, National Highway Safety Administration, Consumer Product Safety Commission, Federal Energy Administration (now DOE), and others." Moreover,

both Presidents dramatically increased the size and scope of the Federal government. Nixon imposed peacetime wage and price controls; Ford extended controls on energy. Both proposed record budgets and deficits. While Reagan's commitment to free enterprise may be greater (I wouldn't know), I see many of the same advisers lining up to give him "fresh" economic advice that gave "bad advice" to Nixon and Ford.

This is why the Shadow Cabinet Committee formed in early August, beginning its meetings at an apartment on Central Park South. Eggheads, journalists, polemicists, and a smattering of radical-conservative (supply-side) businessmen are in attendance. The rules are simple. No member of the ad hoc SCC can be named for any post. And the people named cannot be consulted on whether or not they would even be interested. The exercise is theoretical, aimed at producing the best possible Reagan Cabinet. In subsequent meetings, and over the telephone grape-



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