

# MALCOLM COWLEY: Portrait of a Stalinist Intellectual

## The Saga of the Literary Cop Who Patrols the New Republic Beat for Stalin

By FELIX MORROW

An analysis is long overdue of the type of mind which the Communist Party has drawn to itself from the middle class intelligentsia. The latest and most shocking example of the product of this mind is the attack on Leon Trotsky, in the April 8 issue of the New Republic, by its literary editor, Malcolm Cowley.

Mr. Cowley has for some years been covertly stacking the cards against "Trotskyism" in his columns. Now, at last, he has openly played his hand. In what pretends to be a review of Leon Trotsky's "My Life"—six years after its publication—Cowley delivers himself of a personal diatribe; nothing more venomous in tone, false in fact, and confused in thought, has been published against "Trotskyism" outside the official Communist Party press.

The significance of his "review" does not lie in the actual influence Mr. Cowley exerts among intellectuals. Cowley interests us, rather, as an illustration of the type of mind which has espoused Stalinism. He himself is undoubtedly unconscious of what he represents; for, as we shall see the character of his talents and the specific set of his emotions, as well as the quality of his mind, render him constitutionally incapable of understanding the implications of the political phrases he uses and the position in which they place him.

### The Lost Generation

Mr. Cowley has called himself a member of the "lost generation" (the phrase is Gertrude Stein's). The lost generation consisted of that specific group of post-war intellectuals who were unable to integrate themselves in relation to their social environment. They could read no pattern into the war and its aftermath of imperialism, revolution and counter-revolution; and they sought to escape from what they could not understand. It is even too flattering to imply that they sought to understand and could not; their course was rather a purely emotional refusal to come to grips with the life around them.

They regarded politics as a mystery or a bore. The American scene was something to run away from, if you had the money. They sat around, these literary people—the word "intellectual" implies a training and discipline which they did not have—in the European capitals, and the great post-war mass movements swept by their café tables and the Cowleys had not the faintest inkling of what it all meant. They looked upon individuals who concerned themselves with social problems or actively participated in the class struggle as a species of cultural barbarian. Those were the heroic days of the Communist International: the alternative destinies of Europe were poised on the edge of a knife; all who had eyes could see that the future of humanity, of culture, was with the masses. But to the Cowleys "the masses" were an object of distaste.

### The Bohemian Life

The "civilized" life for these "intellectuals" consisted in the organization of esoteric literary cults with a ritual of gin, fornication and dandified rowdiness, which permitted the freest personal "expression" to everyone. Every lad had his own coterie and its own catchwords of the moment. After a brief period of sterile excitement these coteries would dissolve in a quest for new and more striking literary mannerisms. Everything was at a premium—except ideas.

The one member of the "lost generation" who really possessed creative talent of a high order, Ernest Hemingway, was the minnesinger, the immortalizer of the group. "The Sun Also Rises" was an unforgettable portrayal of their feverish bohemianism, their complete lack of social or personal responsibility, their utter disintegration and hopelessness. In "A Farewell to Arms," Hemingway explicitly stated, through the mouth of his chief character, the lost generation's distrust of abstract ideas and contempt for thought. Hemingway himself made great literature out of the chaos about him. Creative writers and artists are never lost. But the group of which Cowley is representative substituted dramatic symbols, through conspicuous forms of public exhibitionism, to get the assurance that they, too, counted in the world. They possessed no creative talent; and their headless gyrations helped them to avoid the realization of this sad truth about themselves.

When the European currencies were finally stabilized and these literary *Valtaehweine* (as the Germans bitterly named those who fattened on the unfavorable rate of exchange) regretfully returned to America, they transplanted their cliques and brawls and gin-parties. Their American period was perhaps even uglier and tawdrier than

their European stay. Europe had been for them a Roman Holiday; in America they made a habitual routine out of their petty vices. By 1928 they had pretty well exhausted their febrile ingenuity and were thrashing about for new literary mannerisms.

### The New Urge

The depression came close on the heels of this search for new styles to conquer, and further accentuated the bankruptcy of their old literary schools. The antics of the "lost generation" ceased to be amusing even to themselves and their friends. The grim realities of hunger, unemployment and pervasive economic insecurity crowded out of attention the petty feuds and monkeyshines of speakeasy bohemia, Parisian expatriates and "art for art's sake." Generous advances from publishers, good fees from magazines and lecture bureaus came to an end for many of them; not a few faced actual economic need. In the post-war years, they had caroused, unseeing and uncomprehending, among starving multitudes in the European capitals. Now, however, hunger and insecurity were striking themselves or their friends. Their psychological compulsion to find refuge and emotional security in a world which had collapsed around their ears was intensified a hundred-fold. But their new orientation, like the old, was hectic and unreflective, and equally exhibitionistic.

It became fashionable to "take positions"—a word won not by study or reflection, but suggested by the dramatic possibilities of the situation and by what literary friend or foe was doing. Some became Catholic. Some became Babbitarian Humanists or Southern Agrarians. Some became "Communists." Some became Communist because others had become Humanist, and vice-versa.

Gorham B. Munson, whose career so closely parallels Cowley's, and with whom Cowley and his friends so frequently found themselves in critical and even in physical combat, is a case in point. After passing through all the coteries of literary Bohemia, the depression brought him to Irving Babbitt's reactionary Humanism and, finally, to the Social Credit Utopia of Major Douglas.

### Malcolm Comes to...

#### Stalin

Cowley was among those who proceeded to avow Communism. They did not know what it was but they had a notion that on the political scene it corresponded to what surrealism represented on the literary scene. It was extreme. It broke with everything. It simplified things and made possible dramatic gestures which cost very little. It had a liturgy whose rhetoric left something to be desired, but which did have some fine, strong words like "class struggle," "proletariat," and "revolution." It was at least as authoritarian as the Humanism and Catholicism of their literary foes, thus providing them with the emotional refuge they sought. Yet it was much more exciting. A close friend of Cowley, Kenneth Burke, has explicitly formulated this rhetorical and religious approach to Communism in many recent articles.

The Cowleys were genuinely surprised when the Communist Party, with little following among workers and at that time none among the stylized intellectuals, greeted them with enthusiasm, and instead of giving them a political education and teaching them a little mental discipline, used them as window-dressing for phony united fronts. Communism came to the Cowleys with the suddenness of religious conversion; and like all new converts to a gospel, their zealotry was in inverse proportion to their knowledge. This was amusingly evident in their reactions to Lovestones, Socialists, and those who were defending Trotsky against the malicious slanders of the Stalinists. The Cowleys did not know what it was all about, but they were irritated whenever serious differences arose. If only, they grumbled smugly, these eternal quibbles would let up! They read little of Marxist literature and understood less. Some leaders of the Communist Party had at the outset entertained the fear that these intellectuals would try to function as intellectuals, i.e., think. They were soon reassured; it became clear that their whole past had failed to prepare the Cowleys for such a function; only the most rigorous retraining could have transformed even the best of them; but the Communist Party would not and could not give them such a training.

### Love at First Sight

Moreover, to their ignorance and unwillingness to learn, was added the fact that Cowley and people like him feared nothing more than being thrust into the outer dark-

ness by those who were the official guardians of salvation by faith in Stalin and his works. Nor was it only fear; there was also affinity. These "intellectuals" knew what it was to assume an attitude and to refuse to defend it except by excommunication, exhortation and blows; they had conducted their literary struggles on that level. The irrationalism and bombast of Stalinism struck a responsive chord in the Cowleys, and they nestled comfortably and uncomprehendingly in the bosom of the Stalinist Church. They did not understand "the theory of social-fascism," but defended it. They did not understand what the "united front from below" meant, but they were sure that it was a fine thing. They did not understand the implications of "socialism in one country," but what was good enough for the Daily Worker was good enough for them. If this seems exaggerated, one has only to turn to one of Mr. Cowley's literary efforts as proof.

### Cowley Spills the Beans

At the time of Hitler's coming to power, the Stalinists were privately saying that there had been no chance of a German revolution, that if there were a slight chance it was not worth taking because it would disturb the status quo and lead to a European war which would interfere with the Five Year Plan. Publicly, of course, the Stalinists were shouting that the revolution was on the order of the day, that Hitler would not last the next month, that already the masses were girding to smash him, etc., etc. The real line was for private distribution only. Cowley showed how little he understood by blunderingly giving away the real line (New Republic, April 12, 1933):

"Trotsky's alternative policy, with its continual threat of war [i.e., shattering of status quo] would be justified only in case there was an imminent chance of proletarian revolution somewhere in the West. Can it be reasonably expected?"

No, said Cowley. And in the same piece he gave one of the baldest (because unconscious) statements of the Stalinist "theory" of revolution. The American proletariat is weak, said Cowley. "But the chief obstacle to a revolution in this country is not the weakness of the proletariat; it is rather the strength of the middle class." How, then, win the middle class? The classic Marxist answer is that a powerfully organized and determined proletariat will draw to itself all those elements of the middle classes which have similar economic interests with the proletariat and which functionally and culturally stand to gain under socialism. The struggle to win the middle classes begins with the organization of the proletariat. Not so for Stalinism and Cowley: "the only thing that can turn us aside from that steep path into the sea (Fascism) is the influence on the middle classes of the Russian experiment, the success of 'socialism in one country.'" "The only thing!" Never was Stalinism stated more baldly—or indeed, stupidly; for to put it in such terms gives the whole show away.

### Criticism a Crime

If painting Russia as a paradise is the way to stop Fascism and make the revolution, any criticism of the Stalinist bureaucracy becomes a crime. The distinction between hostile bourgeois criticism and revolutionary Marxist criticism of Stalinism is a distinction which the Cowleys are incapable of making. Any statement of doubt or criticism, they greet with bitter resentment. Unable to defend what they believe, they turn upon dissenting views with fierce impatience. They have lived too long without serious thought about social and political problems; they want only the luxurious emotional security they have won by their new allegiance; the labor of thinking is too high a price to pay for the truth.

Note what happened when the line of the Communist Party changed and all the earlier dogmas except the infallibility of Stalin were thrown into the discard. Without sopping so much as to draw a breath, or change their tone, or give any reasons, the Cowleys continued their chorus of amens to the pronouncements of Browder and Hathaway. Instead of the "dictatorship of the proletariat," the cry now became "the People's Front"—all the people, including Republicans and Democrats, not to speak of yesterday's Social-Fascists. The somersault was not unlike those of their literary past, when the slogans of "objectivism" followed the slogans of "expressionism" without very much concern for meaning or consistency.

It is only in relation to the foregoing background that Cowley's type and its significance can be understood. This background has accentuated his personal characteris-

tics as a literary critic. The qualities he has displayed in fulfilling his post as literary editor mark a violent break with the previous literary tradition of the New Republic. Compare him with his predecessors. Francis Hackett was noteworthy because of his disciplined imagination and genial warmth. Philip Littell had a certain dry acerbity and intellectual incisiveness which one could enjoy without accepting his judgments. Edmund Wilson was always distinguished for the lucidity and sympathetic plausibility with which he rendered the visions of the great artists of our day.

### Cowley as a Thinker

In other words, Cowley has made a theory of criticism out of his incapacity to think. Or if he thinks, he thinks (so to speak) with his guts. Like most viscerally-minded people, he is baffled by ideas and arguments. Unable to respond on the same level, his responses became blocked and he is overwhelmed with a sense of frustration which can only be lifted by some violent release of energy. In his Left Bank literary days, he could break this frustration by a blow or a fight or, as he has confessed, by threatening to beat the head off a hostile critic like Ernest Boyd. But in print, the violent release of energy by which he breaks the impotence produced by argument is accomplished through abuse or denunciation or their equivalent in innuendo. Most often this means that when Cowley must review a book of ideas, he will write about its author. If he can deliver some thwacking slaps at the author, or the author's grandfather, he feels he has delivered himself of his critical obligations. Lately, he talks about the author's class, without even attempting to establish an organic connection between the ideas and the class.

### Discovering Trotsky

His review of Mehring's Marx, according to Cowley, brought a query from a reader who wanted to know why, if Marx was great because of the things recounted about him by Cowley, Trotsky was not entitled to the same kind of homage. This, says Cowley, led him to read Trotsky's "My Life" and to "review" it in the New Republic of April 8.

### Towards an "Understanding" of Marx

It is significant of Cowley's mentality—and of his purpose—that he does not refer to the voluminous political writings of Trotsky which have appeared in the six years since "My Life" was published. The malicious dishonesty of his piece on Trotsky does not obscure Cowley's specious pretense of objectivity. He says he found his reader's letter "perturbing" and therefore "set myself the task of reading and reporting on Trotsky's 'My Life.'" Thus, he seeks to evoke the atmosphere of an unprejudiced judge, who is sifting the evidence in order to come to a fair decision. This piece of chicanery on Cowley's part is not fortuitous; it is a necessary part of the job he wants to do on Trotsky.

is that Marx and not any of his contemporaries is the intellectual leader of the working class. Cowley probably does not know why. He cannot run the risk of attempting to say why, for fear of pulling a howler. What, then, does he do? He graciously praises Marx; praises him for having written poetry when he was a very young man, and for having read Aeschylus (and in Greek!); praises him for being a great lover, a Romantic rebel, a persecuted soul; praises Frau Marx, too, for being a devoted wife. Thrashing about for some way to connect Marx with what he (Cowley) knows, Cowley hits upon the notion of pronouncing Marx to be "the spiritual contemporary of Baudelaire and Flaubert." In his blundering way, Cowley has picked out two men who represent in different ways the precise antithesis to Marx. The revolution of 1848, which brought Marx to revolutionary maturity, left Baudelaire an embittered reactionary. Flaubert cultivated a philosophy of personal isolation and the cult of literature for its own sake; he became one of the gods of the Left Bank pantheon of Cowley's post-war years. Another analogy of Cowley's is worth noting because of its perfect ineptitude. After the defeat of the revolution of 1848, he likens Marx to Lucifer proclaiming to his followers, "All is not lost; the unconquerable Will," etc. At that moment, in actual fact, Marx was belaboring those emigres who were exalting the Will and thus confounding their desires with the state of actual affairs. One could go on like this from sentence to sentence; for Cowley cannot write a line even about the personal details of Marx's life which does not cry for correction. Not a word has he to say, however, about Marx's ideas. Marx's metaphors? Yes. But the sense of the metaphors? Cowley finds no room for that, in the longest review of the season. Reading Cowley's review, in fact, one would get the impression that "The Life of Marx" was a series of dramatic actions by a romantic man of letters. That Marx was a revolutionist is mentioned only once, and then with an enger, as if that was the least significant aspect of his thought and life. "He was above all a revolutionary" as ten thousand people have quoted from Engels' address at the grave. "One is a revolutionary for Cowley, presumably, by temperament—something like being a poet. Ideas have nothing to do with it."

### Everything Goes

Cowley cannot, however, adopt his masters' methods against Trotsky, in the pages of the New Republic. First, because the liberalistic tradition still formally retains the doctrine that discussion of differences should be conducted on a rational basis. Second, because to attempt in liberal circles to assert that Trotsky is a counter-revolutionary would only provoke howls of laughter. The liberal (who is also a bourgeois) has a pretty clear picture of what the class lines are. He knows that Trotsky is a revolutionist and blood and bone of the proletariat. It is for this reason, indeed, that so many liberals feel more friendly to Stalin than to Trotsky; Stalin, apostle of the international status quo, is closer to them politically. Cowley can scarcely attempt to peddle the usual Stalinist balderdash about Trotsky; for a bourgeois-liberal audience, he requires a different kind of clap-trap.

### Character Assassination

The usual Stalinist methods are certainly not too low for Cowley. He uses them himself, he solidarizes himself with them, outside the pages of the New Republic. The murder and imprisonment of Bolshevik-Leninists in the Soviet Union does not stir him from his complacency. He has never been known to object to thuggery used against "Trotskyites" in America. After the ill-famed Madison Square Garden affair, when John Dos Passes and other writers addressed a letter to the Communist Party protesting against the physical onslaught on the Socialist meeting, Cowley refused to sign the letter or to make any protest. As a member of the editorial board of the Book Union, Cowley countenanced the publication of Barbusse's "Stalin," a combination of fantastic adulation of Stalin and character-assassination of Trotsky that is so repulsive, that even the more sophisticated Stalinists are embarrassed by it. Only a few weeks ago, before the collapse of the Stalinist slander that Trotsky was hawking this slander around in literary circles. This is the measure of Cowley. The only reason he does not write as he talks, is that he can't get away with it in the New Republic, and that his usefulness to the Stalinists at this stage lies in "adding" his "outside" voice to theirs. In a pinch, Cowley will even deny that he is a Communist—meaning that he does not carry a membership card. He is more useful without one.

### Character Assassination

Cowley comes on-stage, therefore, with his neutral make-up, on, and regretfully reports that Trotsky's autobiography is a "disappointing book." Why? There then follows an essay portraying a vain peacock, indeed a megalomaniac, a poseur and ham actor—whose name is Trotsky. This approach is calculated to reach an audience of liberals, who have not the information or Marxist standpoint with which to detect Cowley's nimble finger-work.

### Character Assassination

The attack on a man's character is one which, if plausible, makes a deep impression on liberals. The reason for this is simple enough. In bourgeois politics, the political differences between opposing groups are generally insignificant; and the liberal, is sophisticated enough to realize this fact. His choice in politics narrows down, therefore, to "choosing the best men." And since he will not draw the necessary consequences, the liberal continues to look for men of character even after it has become abundantly evident that his yesterday's choice may be a fine man but must carry out his class role. These considerations make the question of personality profoundly important to the liberal. That is why American capitalist politics is so largely a campaign of character assassination. And that is why Cowley chose this device with which to attack Trotsky.

### Character Assassination

But to Marxists, Cowley's "portrait" of Trotsky is not only a slander against Trotsky himself but, much more important, it is a slander against the very founda-

### Character Assassination

tions of revolutionary theory. If what Cowley says about Trotsky were true, then we would have to radically revise our conceptions of the revolutionary process.

### Character Assassination

Revolutionists hold a very realistic view of the nature of revolutionary leadership. We view democratic control as compatible with the fullest authority in the hands of chosen leaders, and revolutionary advance as only possible when the leaders actually lead the rank and file. It is our contention that so long as democratic control remains alive in the revolutionary party, that party will tend to put its best leadership forward. The revolutionary struggle demands the best leadership available. Under capitalist democracy and fascism, puppets may rule—the leading strings are pulled from behind. But the revolutionary struggle, a struggle conducted by the vanguard of the proletariat, can be waged successfully only under outstanding leadership.

### Character Assassination

The demands made upon revolutionary leaders in the hour of the conquest for power are truly awe-inspiring. To be able to estimate the epoch, the year, the day, almost the hour at which to strike; to drive through the party an acceptance of that estimate; to weaken the opposing forces by every possible method before coming to a test of armed strength; to rally the myriad masses for that test, which lasts not one day or one battle but years of civil war and intervention; to lay the foundations of the workers' state even before the enemy is entirely vanquished; in the midst of civil war to call together the vanguard of the world proletariat and organize the assault on all the citadels of capitalism throughout the world—such were the tasks of the Bolshevik leadership from 1917 to 1923. These tasks could have used supermen; fortunately there were geniuses to do them, men who were intellectual giants and lion-hearted, men selfless enough so that they could be transformed into the embodiment of the historical process. Who was Trotsky? In those heroic six years "Lenin-Trotsky" was the synonym of the revolutionary movement. According to Cowley the man entrusted with these gigantic responsibilities, second only to Lenin's, was a peacock and a mountebank. Is this not the ugliest libel on the revolutionary movement?

### Character Assassination

With some people, it is more important to watch their fingers than listen to their arguments," Trotsky once said. Cowley is an example in point. His "portrait" of Trotsky is built up by downright misrepresentation of what Trotsky says. We can take space only for a few choice examples.

### Character Assassination

"In effect, this book is unjust to Trotsky and makes him seem smaller than life. In effect, it reduces his tragedy to the dimensions of a personal quarrel. This is partly the result of a story that he brings forward to explain his fall from power. It seems that when he was a second-year student in an Odessa high school, the boys 'gave a concert' to an unpopular teacher. A dozen of them were caught and punished, but Trotsky, the bright student, was not suspected. A particularly stupid and disagreeable boy named Danilov was so jealous of his intellectual prestige and so angry at his going scot-free that he accused him of being responsible for the whole affair—and the bright student was expelled, even though several friends came to his defense. 'Such,' Trotsky says, 'was the first political test I underwent.' He believes that the pattern established in Odessa was repeated all through his life, and that Stalin, whom he calls 'the outstanding mediocrity in the Party,' played the same ignoble role as Danilov. Other Bolsheviks helped Stalin because they were becoming self-satisfied Philistines and were made uncomfortable by Trotsky's revolutionary virtue. . . . But most people accept a different explanation of his fall, and one that makes him seem more important. Trotsky originated and refused to abandon the idea of the permanent revolution. . . ." (My emphasis.)

### Character Assassination

The interested reader will not realize the enormity of Cowley's dishonesty in the above paragraph unless he compares the phrases emphasized with those portions of Trotsky's book which they purport to deal with. Trotsky's book, though couched in the form of an autobiography, gives a great deal of space to the struggle between Leninism and the post-revolutionary reaction and its expression in the theory of "socialism in one country." So much so, indeed, that Trotsky finds it necessary to explain this in the Foreword:

### Character Assassination

"I have dealt in especial detail with the second period of the Soviet revolution, the beginning of . . ." (Continued on Page 3)