1998


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Document Type: Critical essay and Book Chapter

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In the following essay, Hazlett argues that Malcolm Cowley's Exile's Return pioneered a new form of autobiographical narrative that relied on generational theory, Marxism, and Emersoniansm.

In America, fervent generational self-consciousness first emerged among writers who were born between 1890 and 1905 and who came of age during and immediately after the Great War. Dubbed the "Lost Generation" by Gertrude Stein, they produced an extensive shelf of literature dealing with the experiences of young people as they entered history in the second and third decades of the new century. F. Scott Fitzgerald is perhaps the best known of these generational writers, not only for his short stories and novels, but also for his essays, later collected in The Crack-Up. Also contributing to the construction of that generation's now legendary identity were its numerous memoirs and reminiscences, including Vincent Sheean's Personal History (1934), Joseph Freeman's An American Testament: A Narrative of Rebels and Romantics (1936), Robert McAlmon's Being Geniuses Together (1938), Samuel Putnam's Paris Was Our Mistress (1947), Morley Callaghan's That Summer in Paris (1963), Ernest Hemingway's A Moveable Feast (1964), Lillian Hellman's An Unfinished Woman (1970), and John Glassco's Memoirs of Montparnasse (1970).

There is one book, however, that clearly stands apart from the others on this shelf: Malcolm Cowley's Exile's Return: A Narrative of Ideas. Published in 1934 just as enthusiasm for generationalist ideas was cresting, this book virtually invents a new autobiographical genre. When Cowley's contemporaries embraced the generational theme, they most often did so in order to show how their coming-of-age years influenced the development of their unique selves; like most conventional autobiographies, each of them focuses on the author's individual story. In Exile's Return, by contrast, Cowley adopts a narrative strategy that audaciously breaks with autobiographical tradition and the dominant American myth of individualism: he privileges a "we" over an "I" in a work primarily concerned with American selfhood. One need not search far to discover his reasons for doing this. A few years before writing his book, Cowley experienced a conversion to Marxism. He was not unique in that, of course, but it was precisely his sense of his typicality that most prepared Cowley for the writing of this book. Born in 1898, the son of a middle-class physician in Pittsburgh, Cowley had gone to
a normal "big-city high school" (Kenneth Burke was a classmate and friend) and later attended Harvard as an undergraduate. After that, his life followed a path that was, he thought, more or less like that of many of his contemporaries. Sheean's and Freeman's books even trace conversions to Marxism that are very similar to Cowley's. But Cowley's conversion, in combination with an interest in generalization and a familiarity with Emersonian culture criticism, predisposed him not only to place a critique of individualism at the heart of his generational plot, but also to incorporate it into his conception of the form.

In the prologue to his 1951 revision of *Exile's Return*, Cowley describes the book as "the story of the lost generation" written "while its adventures were still fresh in my mind." He then adds, "since I had shared in many of the adventures I planned to tell a little of my own story, but only as an illustration of what had happened to others." This modest description of his method drastically understates the importance of Cowley's personal story in the generational plot, for the first edition is, in fact, built around Cowley's entire life history from childhood up to the time during which he wrote the book. He includes chapters on his childhood, his high school and college years, his "exile" in Europe, his extended devotion to what he calls the "religion of art," his disillusionment with bohemian life, and his political conversion. These are the major elements of his own story, and they are also the major elements of the collective story he means to tell. For the story of the generation here begins, as he began, in a pastoral, Edenic America; it continues, as he continued, in a period of exile and bohemianism; and it concludes, as his own story concluded (at least temporarily), with repatriation and salvation via the political and historical insights of Marxism. The generational narrative is, in short, simply his own narrative writ large.

Because of this peculiar blend of autobiography and collective history, classifying this book has always struck me as an intriguing problem. In the past, critics have disposed of the book's genre by calling it a "literary memoir" or a "literary history." The publishers of the Viking Compass edition of 1956 list it simply as "biography." These generic labels were made somewhat more accurate by Cowley's 1951 revisions, which deleted a good bit of his "own story" and all of the first edition's enthusiastic Marxism. Cowley, of course, was not worrying about generic classification when he made his revisions--political paranoia was probably a more pressing motivation--but the editorial surgery he performed on the text clearly made it easier for autobiographical theorists to ignore what Cowley had accomplished in his 1934 book.

That *Exile's Return* is autobiography seems undeniable: it recounts a significant portion of the writer's life story, and it is a first-person retrospective construction of the writer's identity. It differs from most American autobiographies, however, in that the authorial identity constructed in it is collective and the first-person pronoun it uses is plural. Even as collective autobiography, it is rather odd, as can be seen by comparing it with other types of historical narrative that might also be termed collective autobiography. National, religious, and ethnic histories, for example, are types of collective autobiography when they are authored by persons within the group itself. In most such narratives, however, the writer stands apart from the group when narrating the major events of its past, and the writer's own experiences may or may not coincide with those that make up the collective's significant past. Indeed, such writers usually efface themselves altogether, thereby suppressing that which constitutes the autobiographical project--the (re)construction of the writer's identity. Historiography of the sort Cowley wrote differs from
these precisely because it ties collective identity directly to the individual experiences of the
author.

Cowley's generational self in *Exile's Return* is, to use Hayden White's term, an "emplotted"
one.\(^5\) That is, its meaning is ultimately determined by the kind of story in which it is embedded. White borrows his own breakdown of historiographical plot types from Northrop Frye's categories of romance, comedy, tragedy, and satire, but he concedes that other taxonomies are possible. Although one might call Cowley's plot a romance, it is most usefully classed as a conversion narrative, for both the proselytic and the quasi-religious intent of that originally Christian form underlie Cowley's secular narrative.

While the conversion plot structures the book as a whole, Cowley also makes use of subplots that underlie portions of the overall narrative and enrich its cultural resonances. There are three primary subplots, each provided by a theory of history and each concerned with particular metaphors of collectivity. The first of these theories, generationalism, focuses on a familial metaphor and provides a plot of historical progress based on conflicts between children and parents or between different age groups. As we saw in the last chapter, the "physiognomy" of self-conscious generations is determined, according to this theory, by the nature of their response to the parental worldview. The second, Emersonianism, focuses on the national metaphor and provides a plot driven by the young generation's search for authenticity of self and culture. The character of American youth, in this plot, is determined by their response to an ongoing national cultural crisis. Finally, Marxism functions in two ways in the text: it provides a subplot that narrates the decline and displacement of the bourgeois class by the ascendant working class, and it also provides the "faith" to which the overarching conversion plot turns. By embedding all three of these subplots—the generationalist, the Emersonian, and the Marxist—in an overarching conversion story, Cowley constructs a narrative that resonates with cultural and collective histories far beyond the experience of his own generation. The project involved a radical rethinking of generic boundaries and the elements of conventional autobiography. The resulting text, as we will see in the following chapters, established the profile of a new subgenre of life writing.

**Cowley and Earlier Generational Thought**

Although Cowley doesn't refer to specific generational theorists in *Exile's Return*, the ideas that they espoused were present everywhere in the culture of the period. As Cowley writes in the 1934 prologue:

> Everywhere after the War people were fumbling for a word to express their feeling that youth had a different outlook. The word wouldn't be found for many years; but long before Gertrude Stein made her famous remark, the young men to whom she was referring already had undergone the similar experiences and developed the similar attitude that made it possible to describe them as a literary generation.\(^7\)

There is, however, little doubt that he was familiar with the work of Randolph Bourne and at least some of the European generationalists. Until the war, Bourne had been a well-known contributing editor to the *New Republic*, the journal for which Cowley was working while he was writing *Exile's Return*, and Cowley does devote some attention in his book to the slightly older
Greenwich Village group to which Bourne belonged (76-84). Of the European writers mentioned in the previous chapter, the only one Cowley ever directly acknowledged was José Ortega y Gasset, but during the 1920s, when European generational theory was being formulated, Cowley was particularly attuned to transatlantic influences. In a later work, *And I Worked at the Writer's Trade*, Cowley devotes an entire chapter to a reconsideration of the generational idea that informed *Exile's Return* and gives a major share of his attention to Ortega's theory. One can, in fact, trace a good many of Cowley's generationalist assumptions in *Exile's Return* to Ortega's *El tema de nuestro tiempo*, which was published in America as *The Modern Theme* by the same company that one year later published Cowley's book. In his prologue, for example, Cowley constructs the general features of the "Lost Generation" and the place it occupied in the history of the twenties. Following Ortega, who asserted that every generation establishes its identity by either rejecting or accepting the legacy of its predecessors, Cowley asserts that his "generation belonged to a period of confused transition from values already fixed to values that had to be created. ... 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" (11). He also echoes Ortega's insistence that internecine antagonisms are characteristic of generational groups. His literary generation, he says, is not a group or a school: as a matter of fact they include several loosely defined groups that are not always friendly with one another, and many individuals who differ with every group among their contemporaries. Still, whatever their internal disagreements, they differ even more with writers older or younger than themselves, who have a different past behind them. (9-10)

Likewise, Cowley borrows from Ortega (and from Bourne) an idea that is the hallmark of his work on the writers who came of age during the 1920s: the idea that a generation's "common physiognomy" (Ortega) or "spiritual fabric" (Bourne) is determined by the particular slice of history it experiences in its youth. Cowley expresses the same idea when he explains the factors that set his generation apart from its predecessors: "They came to maturity during a period of violent change, when the influence of time seemed temporarily more important than that of class or locality" (7). Like many of his peers, Cowley responded ardently to generational ideas, and he was eager to catalogue those events and social changes that separated his generation from their parents. Earlier Americans, he says, had identified themselves regionally or by class, but those who came of age between 1915 and 1925 were marked by history itself. The Great War, increased social mobility, urbanization, and the standardization of culture, education, and language affected his peers with incredible rapidity and finality, snatching them forever out of the nineteenth-century world that remained their parents' spiritual home.

Cowley was also attracted to Ortega's and Bourne's notions of a generational elite, but he avoided representing his "elite" as particularly gifted leaders. Bourne, as we have seen, believed that the generational vanguard comprises those youths who live fully in consonance with the spirit of their times. These young politicos interpret the "tasks" assigned to each generation by the spirit of the age. Ortega similarly claimed that the generation is made up of a mass and an elite, the latter of whom are responsible for the "conduct" of the age. Cowley's elite, by contrast, is artistic, consisting of people whose personalities and work reflect the mood and style of their generation. They are, he writes, "more sensitive and barometric than members of other professions" (13); as "instruments" sensitive to--though often unconscious of--cultural and
historical pressures, these generational representatives are more likely to behave in extreme ways than the mass of their contemporaries. Indeed, the extremity of their actions is often, according to Cowley, the best indicator of the underlying condition of an outwardly prosperous and happy nation.

It is, in fact, this division of the generation into an elite and a mass that allows Cowley to write in the collective voice even though his book's plot derives largely from his own experiences. By identifying with a "barometric" elite, he grants himself the right to employ the plural first-person pronoun. His private and public experiences stand in for collective experience. What happens to "me" represents what happens to "us."

The differences between Cowley's and Ortega's views of the elite arise, in part, from the temporal perspective from which each writer views his generational experience. Since Ortega was first formulating his theory while actively seeking political power (El tema de nuestro tiempo was first published in 1923), it is not surprising that he endows his elite with special historical and political insight into the "tasks" of the age. For Ortega, generationalism is a causal theory of identity and of social change; the generation represents a new collective identity, and the characteristics of that new identity make social change inevitable. The agents of the change, logically, are those young intellectuals who most clearly understand generational tasks. Cowley's Exile's Return, in contrast, is largely retrospective. Since the "themes" that he and his friends had embraced during the 1920s had already proven less than vital by the time Cowley sat down to write about them, he was in no position to take the politics of youth as seriously as Ortega. "When reduced to terms of action," he writes in his epilogue, "the ideas that dominated the literary world of the 1920's ... [led to] unsatisfactory results" (294). For Cowley, therefore, generationalism is almost exclusively a theory of identity.

While Cowley's generationalism is hardly as political as Ortega's, Exile's Return is no less concerned with political questions. The first edition of the book, after all, is devoted to turning the political failure of his generation's youthful period into the basis of their political triumph as fully fledged adults. That triumph, however, is made possible not by generationalism, but by another theory of social evolution, Marxism. According to this theory, the agents of social progress are produced by class experiences rather than by generational experiences. As bourgeois artists, Cowley and his friends are excluded by Marxism from membership in the proletarian vanguard, a circumstance that forces him to invent new strategies by which to secure prestige for his group. One of those strategies is precisely to construct his artist friends as "barometers," for this role relieves them of the burden of having to possess political acumen while it retains for them some small degree of distance from a despised bourgeois culture. Another strategy, outlined with naive clarity in the book's epilogue, is simply to call upon his friends to abandon their natural affiliation with the bourgeoisie to align themselves with the new, rising class of "factory workers and poor farmers and people now looking for jobs" (301), and to offer their skills as writers to "the oppressed classes all over the world" (302).

For Ortega, the shift from the vital sensibility of one generation to another causes the most important changes in history. Cowley's generationalism stops well short of this. For him, generationalism allows one to depict the superficial aspects of one's collective identity. It enables him to describe the "look" of this identity--how it acts, what it talks about, what mannerisms it adopts, what issues it obsesses about. The events that follow the Wall Street crash of 1929,
however, demonstrate to Cowley that forces other than generational shifts are the real controlling factors in historical change. The crash reveals to him that the "influence of time" upon the "half-unconscious" attitudes of his generation was only "temporarily more important" (7) than the influence of those other, more deeply rooted, forces. Ultimately, this conviction leads Cowley to look for the sources of historical change in interpretations of the past that go beyond the immediate experience of the generation. He finds these interpretations in Emersonianism and Marxism. With the narrative tools provided by these two traditions, he constructs a historical context within which his collective conversion narrative makes sense.

**Generational Identity and the Emersonian Tradition**

In *Exile's Return*, Cowley's use of his personal narrative to construct generational identity is buttressed not only by generational theory and its belief that the central narratives of history are constructed around intergenerational conflicts, but also by the constructions of national identity suggested by Emersonian culture criticism. By the 1930s, that criticism had developed a rich tradition that included not only Emerson's work, but also the work of Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau, Horatio Greenough, Thorstein Veblen, Louis Sullivan, Van Wyck Brooks, Waldo Frank, and Randolph Bourne, to mention just a few. The America of this criticism suffered from a split consciousness, divided pathologically between the rhetoric of an artificial idealism and the reality of pragmatic materialism, between its highbrow and lowbrow cultures. America, according to the Emersonians, was driven by the greed of its business class, but it paid lip service to high culture by purchasing it from abroad, placing it in museums, and turning it over to the supervision of women. In short, America was still essentially a cultural colony of Europe, which produced the art that American businessmen, through the agency of their wives, consumed or put on display in their homes.

The plot that Cowley borrowed from this tradition is a simple one. In it, the youth of America, undernourished and unsupported by their own culture, develop ridiculous affectations, or go into exile, or fall into despair. Emerson himself offered the first suggestion of this plot in his famous speech "The American Scholar" (1837). "Young men of the fairest promise," he declared to the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Harvard,

> who begin life upon our shores, inflated by the mountain winds, shined upon by all the stars of God, find the earth below not in unison with these, but are hindered from action by the disgust which the principles on which business is managed inspire, and turn drudges, or die of disgust, some of them suicides. 7

In the Emersonian plot, American youth seeking a meaningful outlet for their creative and spiritual energies must either adopt a life of continual conflict with official, bourgeois America or embrace cultural exile. Most writers--in fact, just about every canonical writer in the nineteenth century--took this version of American realities seriously enough to opt for some form of exile. To leave America meant that one could make use of the more nurturing European environment, but it also meant cutting oneself off from one's homeland and childhood, the wellsprings of artistic inspiration. To many artists, however, such exile was preferable to living in America. In the long run, however, it mattered little whether they tried to accommodate themselves, fought back as voices of cultural opposition, or left to live and work elsewhere; the prognosis for their self-realization and productivity was a bleak one.
If one were looking for a specific literary antecedent to the Emersonian plot embedded in Exile's Return, a likely candidate might well be Randolph Bourne's thinly disguised autobiographical essay "History of a Literary Radical." This short work characterizes Bourne's generation and the condition of American culture by presenting the life story of a representative American, the "biography" of "my friend Miro." Although the narrative represents a slightly older group than Cowley's "cohort of the damned," the misguided quest for culture that Miro undertakes and the pattern of exile and repatriation that his life follows are very similar to the generational plot narrated in Cowley's autobiography. However, Bourne's construction of a generational portrait in an individualized, third-person narrative is rejected by Cowley, who simply embraces the first-person "we" and presents his collective voice directly.

Bourne's generational plot was implicit, however, in the work of most Emersonians of the period, and one can see evidence of their influence on Cowley's thinking throughout his book. Its first section, "Mansions in the Air," for example, narrates the generation's high school and university experiences, which Cowley sums up as a "long process of deracination" that forces him and his peers into their first spiritual exile. It is a story clearly informed by the Emersonian notion that an American education promulgates cultural values that are woefully unconnected to American life. In both high school and the university, Cowley writes, he was taught that all "art and ideas" were products manufactured under a European patent; all we could furnish toward them was raw talent, destined usually to be wasted. Everywhere, in every department of cultural life, Europe offered the models to imitate--in painting, composing, philosophy, folk music, folk drinking, the drama, sex, politics, national consciousness--indeed this country was not even a nation; it had no traditions except the fatal tradition of the pioneer.(105)

What he didn't learn in school, he says, was "the idea that culture was the outgrowth of a situation":

that an artisan knowing his tools and having the feel of his materials might be a cultured man; that a farmer among his animals and his fields, stopping his plow at the corner to meditate over death and life and the next year's crop, might have culture without even reading a newspaper. Essentially, we were taught to regard culture as something assumed like a suit of English clothes or an Oxford accent, a uniform that made us citizens of a privileged world.(35)

One can find these same complaints in any number of Emersonian writers, including Emerson himself, who implored his "American Scholar" to turn away from "the courtly muses of Europe" and to look to the near-at-hand--"the shop, the plough, and the ledger"--for his creative inspiration. Thoreau voices the complaint again in Walden (1854) when he inveighs against the disembodied studies of Harvard College students. Walt Whitman repeats it in Democratic Vistas (1871), protesting that the "sons and daughters of the New World, ignorant of its genius, [are] not yet inaugurating the native, the universal, and the near, still importing the distant, the partial, and the dead." Thorstein Veblen's 1899 essay "The Higher Education" argues with ironic loquacity that the university education of an American "gentleman of leisure" is a badge of economic status rather than anything of real use. Such students, he writes, are
currently expected to spend a certain number of years in acquiring this substantially useless information [classics and the "dead" languages], and its absence creates a presumption of hasty and precarious learning, as well as a vulgar practicality that is equally obnoxious to the conventional standards of sound scholarship and intellectual force.  

In the twentieth century, Bourne and his friend Van Wyck Brooks continued the Emersonian attack on American education. In his *America's Coming-of-Age* (1915), Brooks asks his readers to consider the education of the typical college student:

Suddenly confronted during four years with just this remote influence of ideals, out of which the intellectual structure has evaporated and which never possessed a social structure, will he not find them too vague, too intangible, too unprepared-for to be incorporated into his nature? Certainly ideals of this kind, in this way presented, in this way prepared for, cannot enrich life, because they are wanting in all the elements of personal contact.  

Likewise, Bourne's biography of an American "literary radical" describes the fatuity of the education provided by America's "culture ministers":

No doubt ever entered [Miro's] head that four years of Latin and three years of Greek, an hour a day, were the important preparation that he needed for his future as an American citizen. No doubt ever hurt him that the world into which he would pass would be a world where, as his teacher said, Latin and Greek were a solace to the aged, a quickener of taste, a refreshment after manual labor, and a clue to the general knowledge of all human things.

Cowley's borrowing from this critical tradition serves his generational autobiography in at least one important way: it allows him to infuse Gertrude Stein's characterization of his generation with something more than the ennui and devil-may-care morality that it conventionally carried. They are a "lost" generation in a very Emersonian sense--because they have been "schooled away" from an organic connection with America. By thus constructing a story in which generational and Emersonian issues overlap, Cowley is able to embed his generational plot in an ongoing story about national identity.

The Emersonians did, of course, have a reform program. They called for the creation of an organic, indigenous culture within America, and they pointed to the work of artists and writers who were actually engaged in such a project. The basis of this culture, according to Emerson himself, was to be a radical, even mystical, individualism. The only source of true culture, he argued, was a virulent self-reliance, a turning of the individual (and the culture) inward toward the solid nucleus of the self. As we will see, both aspects of this program were to play a role in the later stages of Cowley's generational plot. By that time, however, the call for an organic culture would be transformed and subsumed by Cowley's turn to Marxism, and the individualism upon which that culture was to be based would suffer a serious reversal of fortunes. Instead of serving as a talisman against bourgeois philistinism, individualism would be exposed as the mortal sin underlying that mode of culture.
Neither constructive nor critical Emersonianism, however, formed a part of the Lost Generation's consciousness as they were growing up, partly because it played no part in the high school or university humanities curriculum under which Cowley and his peers were educated. As a result, Cowley's peers are doomed, in his narrative, to repeat the generational plot outlined in Emerson's Harvard address three quarters of a century earlier. Like their nineteenth-century predecessors, they must live out the alienation, frustration, and despair that Emerson predicted as the inevitable consequences of American cultural conditions. Some of Cowley's peers will even "turn drudges, or die of disgust"; some, like Hart Crane and Harry Crosby, will be "suicides." In response to their alienation, Cowley's generation, as everyone knows, initially rejected the America dominated by philistinism, puritanism, and pioneerism, and took themselves off to Europe to devote themselves to the pursuit of an increasingly individualistic notion of "pure art." Nor were these exiles, in Cowley's narrative, composed merely of artists and writers, though these groups were certainly the most visible. The exiled included a much larger section of society--"architects, doctors, painters, bond salesmen, professors and their wives, all the more studious and impressionable section of middle-class youth" (215).

Eventually, however, the idea that they could save themselves through exile would prove delusory. They would eventually return to America, repatriating themselves and, in the process, reconstructing their ideas about who they were and what their role in society should be. This story of repatriation is in part the story of their movement toward the rediscovery of Emersonianism and cultural nationalism, but only partly. It would require the mediation of another theory of culture to make it happen.

**Generational Identity and Marxism**

Cowley may have made use of the Emersonian tradition when he constructed his collective identity in *Exile's Return*, but his Emersonianism, like his generationalism, was only partially embraced. In 1934, Cowley could see in neither of these theories a means of saving his generation (or America) from the downward spiral of cultural decadence and economic exploitation that had culminated in the stock market crash of 1929 and the Great Depression that immediately followed. For this task, Cowley blended his Emersonian narrative with a Marxist one. In many respects, the two traditions mixed well. The Emersonian romanticization of the common laborer complemented the Marxist glorification of the proletariat; the Emersonian struggle against an "inorganic" culture stood shoulder to shoulder with the Marxist effort to expose capitalism's alienation of the worker from the products of his labor. The near interchangeability of Emersonian and Marxist language is apparent in all of these pairings, but the text clearly privileges the latter. In the midst of Cowley's Emersonian discussion of generational deracination, for example, he concludes that "our whole training was involuntarily directed ... toward making us homeless citizens, not so much of the world as of international capitalism" (29).

In Cowley's recreation of the generational self, both traditions--the Marxist and the Emersonian--are used not only to explain the American past, but also to show how the generation's destiny and identity would unfold in the future. Emersonianism, as I have shown, espoused the development of a national consciousness that would recognize the "artisan knowing his tools and having the feel of his materials" as an example of true culture. Like Emersonians, the American Marxists found their examples of virtue and "real" culture in the ordinary man, the worker, the farmer in
the field. In spite of its vulgarized appropriation by American entrepreneurial boosterism, true Emersonianism was critical of the materialistic, aggressive American businessman whose ideals were conquest and "millionairism." Marxism similarly criticized the social inequities resulting from the laissez-faire individualism of capitalism. Marxism may have been more concerned than Emersonianism with economic questions, and Marxism's European proponents may have been more convinced of the necessity of violent revolution to accomplish their aims, but Cowley and his fellow-traveling comrades in the League of Professional Groups (founded in 1932 to support the Communist Party ticket) clearly hoped that communism would establish a new culture based upon principles that were, in large part, Emersonian. When Cowley finally makes his political stance clear in the book's epilogue, a perceptive reader can see that American philistinism, the bogeyman of Emersonianism, has become identified in Cowley's hybrid ideology with Bourgeois-Capitalist Culture, the bogeyman of Marxism; and the Organic Culture promoted by the Emersonians has somehow metamorphosed into the ascendant Proletarian Culture.

This is not to say that Cowley's conflation of Marxism and Emersonianism is entirely balanced. *Exile's Return* clearly sees Marxism as the stronger of the two theories vying for the generation's allegiance. Emersonianism had had its chance to revitalize America, and though it was largely right in its critique of mainstream culture, it would take the "scientific" formulas of Marxism to work the final transformation. As Cowley's chronicle argues, neither Emersonianism nor Marxism had much currency among his generation in the 1920s, but it was the economic collapse of 1929, more than Emersonian disgust, that brought the exiles home from Europe at the end of the decade. Intellectuals looking for an explanation of the situation turned to Marx rather than to the followers of the Boston transcendentalist. Still, the Emersonian struggle was in some ways revitalized by the social climate that followed in the wake of the economic collapse and the subsequent movement of intellectuals toward the left, for that movement entailed just what Emerson had called for, a closer look at the common and the near-at-hand.

At the same time, the Emersonian struggle that pitted the American writer against mainstream society began to look very different from the point of view of the revitalized left. At least in these early years, leftists were more aggressive, more certain of their own potential for success, less entrenched in a defensive posture than their Emersonian forebears. In the Emersonian tradition, the work of making the culture "organic" was dependent upon the efforts of a few crankish writers--men in the mold of Henry David Thoreau and Thorstein Veblen--to convince the public that an indigenous American culture was preferable to a borrowed European one. It was a forlorn task, and the arduous efforts to sustain faith in its eventual success led to that peculiar combination of croaking and crowing (or doomsaying and boosterism) so characteristic of the rhetoric of books like Whitman's *Democratic Vistas* and Brooks's *America's Coming-of-Age*. Besides, Emersonians had a philosophical investment in the idea that the genius always lives in individualistic opposition to society; the actual success of their cultural program would have occasioned an embarrassing obviation of the very basis of their conception of the American writer. What the Marxist vision called for, by contrast, was an alliance between writers and society, or at least between writers and the working classes. Instead of sitting perennially on the outside, suffering from what Cowley characterizes as the "spectatorial attitude" (47), they would be invited to the dance, asked to participate in the construction of the new world.

Central to the Emersonian failure, from the Marxist point of view, was its radical individualism. It is central as well to the plot of Cowley's book, for the last seven of its eight sections trace the
consequences of his generation's adherence to a philosophy of individualism, both in art and in
life. Cowley's plot suggests, as I have shown, that the Lost Generation was "lost" in an
Emersonian sense, because they were schooled away from their connection to America. But from
his Marxist point of view, they were also lost precisely because of their Emersonianism, because
Emerson's radical individualism, once stripped of its doctrine of commonality, was ultimately a
philosophy of despair and isolation. The generational plot that takes Cowley's peers from the
American heartland to Paris, Pamplona, Berlin, and Greenwich Village, or from realism to
modernity, symbolism, dadaism, vorticism, and surrealism, is a plot that relentlessly pursues
the generation's demand for free expression and the working out of individual personality. It is a
plot of generational catastrophe, disintegration, decline.

In the thirties, however, Marxists like Cowley thought that things would change radically. They
confidently believed that they could undo the Emersonian opposition of writer and public by
reconstructing the worker as the voice of culture. Their optimism was also bolstered by the
apparent success of a humanistic socialism in the Soviet Union, which swelled the ranks of
American Marxists, not so much with new members for the Communist Party (though this was
the period of the Party's greatest numerical strength), but with significant numbers of
sympathizers. Besides, hadn't their historicist predictions already been largely confirmed by the
stock market crash? Buoyed by these affirmations of their ideas, American Marxists confidently
predicted an imminent victory for the proletarian class and its culture in America. The
concurrence of the vogue of Marxism and these first historical signs of an apparent communist
future gave writers like Cowley, who were writing in the "trough of the depression," an
exhilarating optimism. Writing about the period during which he composed *Exile's Return*, Cowley later reminisced,

The casting out of old identities; communion with the workers; life in a future world that
the workers would build in America as they were building it in Russia: all those religious
elements were present in the dream of those years. It made everything else seem
unimportant, including one's pride, one's comfort, one's personal success or failure, and
one's private relations.\(^7\)

What the Emersonians had failed to accomplish in one hundred years the Marxists and their
worker allies would bring about in short order.

This sense that his generation was witness to the passing of a torch also infuses Cowley's
construction of the idea of the Lost Generation. *Exile's Return* depicts the 1920s as the last years
of capitalist culture. The bourgeois generation that came of age in those years was, according to
Marxist prophecy, the last generation of an economic era that had lasted at least two hundred
years. The social and moral degeneracy that characterized his generation's behavior in the 1920s,
therefore, is partly intended to represent the final death throes of the bourgeois class. This
Marxist vision of an epochal shift is reduced, of course, to a mere change of social mood in
Cowley's 1951 revised edition, but readers of the first edition may also have difficulty
appreciating its significance, given our historical perspective. Fully understanding *Exile's Return*
depends upon recognizing the tremendous crack in history that Cowley perceived as
having taken place between 1929 and 1931. This was the historical tremor during which, as
Cowley then believed, capitalism, modernism, and individualism died. As he says in his
prologue, "the story of the Lost Generation and its return from exile is something else besides: it
is partly the story of a whole social class, how it became aware of itself and how it went marching toward the end of an era" (13).

In Cowley's narrative, however, being a member of the Lost Generation meant not only belonging to the last generation of the old bourgeois, individualist culture, but also, if one could but believe, belonging to the "found" generation, the first to see, and help to construct, the new proletarian age. His generation would be, in this vision, the first to realize the aspirations of the older Emersonian writers. During their years of exile, they had ignored the spirit of Emerson and had abandoned the task assigned to them by History. In exile, however, they learned to see themselves and America in a new light. Finally, the crash of 1929 forced them to return and "ally themselves with society." This return marked the end of their exile and the beginning of the recovery of what Cowley, in 1934, considered to be the real America.

The Structure of Generational Conversion

Generationalism, Emersonianism, and Marxism gave Cowley the historical and cultural paradigms with which to construct his generational plot and the identity that emerges from it, but they did not provide the over-all narrative structure of *Exile's Return*. There is some irony in this, since Cowley repeatedly lauded Marxism for its ability to offer the writer "a way to get hold both of distant events and those near at hand, and a solid framework on which to arrange them" (*Exile's Return*, 302). An explanation of the structure of his own book, however, is to be found not so much in Marxism as in Cowley's manner of embracing it, for he emplots his turn to Marxism as a conversion, and it is that older Christian plot, rather than Marxist dogma, that implicitly informs the book's structure, as well as its characterization techniques and tone. Cowley himself surely recognized this when he later acknowledged in *The Dream of the Golden Mountains* that his Marxism was, from the beginning, more religious than political in nature. Granted, his primary intention in making such an acknowledgment was not to describe the earlier book's structure, but to distance himself from a dogmatic Marxism that was, by the mid-1940s, threatening to ruin his career. Still, the conversion plot is unmistakably at the very center of the 1934 book, not because Cowley wants his readers to read his text as Christian but because he wants to borrow the familiar and powerfully affective religious structure to reinforce the impact of the Marxist narrative.

The first-person conversion plot typically narrates the self's passage through a series of stages on its way to redemption. Those stages include a descent into sin, an eventual dark night of the soul during which the self is convicted of its sinfulness, an infusion of redemptive grace and knowledge, repentance, and a final rebirth of a new self. I have expressed this plot in conventional Christian phrases (in Western literature, the form has most often been associated with Christianity), but in practice it matters not whether the conversion is to Christianity, Marxism, militant feminism, or some other totalizing worldview. The Marxist and feminist will employ, of course, different terms from those used by Christians. "Sinfulness" might be translated by the Marxist as "bourgeois decadence" and by the feminist as "patriarchy," and so forth. But if the convert is a true believer, the plot almost always follows the basic progression outlined above.

The first-person conversion plot not only provides a series of stages through which the self progresses, it also provides a specific narrative stance with regard to these stages. Such a
narrative is almost always related by a converted self that excoriates the unconverted self as it degenerates toward the converting illumination. The conversion plot requires that the stage during which the self descends into sin and the dark night of the soul be depicted as determined or brought about by superhuman forces, divine or historical, of which the unregenerate self is unaware. And finally, it requires that the narrating, converted self be portrayed as completely distinct from the earlier, unregenerate self. The unregenerate self does not develop into the regenerate self; the change is cataclysmic and radical. The old self is "shed"; it "dies," and the new self's emergence is conceived of as a "rebirth."

In Cowley's text, the conversion narrative is adumbrated by the inclusion of even older Christian plot patterns. One pattern that informs his narrative of generational development, for example, echoes typologically the Christian myth of expulsion from Eden and adds yet another layer of allusion to Cowley's use of the phrase "the Lost Generation." Thus, Cowley begins his narrative with a chapter entitled "Blue Juniata," which describes the generation's childhood. They grow up in various parts of the country, he writes, but whether it is the Schoharie Valley, the Appalachian Mountains, the Cumberland, middle Tennessee, northern Michigan, or the Wisconsin farmland, the locale is an Edenic one, a place "where they had once been part of the landscape and the life, part of a spectacle at which nobody looked on" (52). In their late teens, however, they are expelled from this site of childhood happiness, as we have seen, by the false knowledge proffered by American education and the irreversible forces of late capitalism. Thus begins the generation's long and unconscious decline into the 1920s, with its giddy flight to Europe and its social, artistic, and sexual excesses. In this period, Cowley and his writer friends adopt the "religion of art" and individual expression as a way of life. For Cowley, the "religion of art" is synonymous with modernism, both as a literary practice and as a way of viewing the world. It has a number of values or tendencies, which Cowley efficiently outlines as including the tendency toward aesthetic obscurity, the ideal of absolute art and pure poetry, individualism, relativism, disdain for the public, amoralism (but "animated by moral fervor"), adventurousness, and liberty (157-62). Above all else, the devotee of the religion of art must keep "moving on"; he must remain always on the cutting edge of aesthetic and moral experimentation. The religion also has "saints" such as Eliot, Joyce, and Proust, and "martyrs" such as Harry Crosby and Hart Crane, and every artist who subscribes to the principles of art for art's sake is a priest.

In Cowley's 1934 text, this rehearsal of the generation's journey through the 1920s is constructed with a clarity available only to the eye of the convert. It is a journey of decline. Once exiled, Cowley's generation becomes, as he wrote later, the "legion of the lost ones ... the cohort of the damned." His new Marxist faith allows him to see that to which he was once blind, that the religion of art, culminating in dadaism, is a false religion, wholly dependent upon the diseased individualism of the American political and economic system:

> The system that made these dead things possible, that produced the War and the after-War, that created the mood by which the religion of art was nourished, that uprooted artists and workers from their homes and financed the middle-class migration to Europe--the capitalist system itself was sick, was convulsively dying. (287-88)

This focus on the younger self's seduction by a corrupt capitalist system represents the main line of ideological attack in Cowley's collective autobiography, and the turning point of the downward-spiraling generational plot occurs, logically, in the conversion brought about by the
1929 stock market crash, which reveals that the "religion of art had failed when it tried to become an ideology and an ethics: as a way of life it was completely bankrupt" (286). The crash, according to Cowley, effectively crippled that art and the economic system that produced it. It provided the opportunity, also, for the members of the Lost Generation to find salvation in a new faith. They had come of age confident that salvation was to be sought only in the gratification of individual desire. The stock market crash, like a blinding light from Moscow, reeducated them and compelled them "to recognize the importance to themselves of all the things they had believed to be futile" (240-41).

In conversion narratives, the lives and experiences of acquaintances and friends must be reconstructed as illustrations of various points of doctrine in the writer's new faith. In Exile's Return, examples of this appear in almost every chapter. Cowley's dadaist friends exemplify, in both their art and way of life, the logical outcome of a capitalist, individualist ethic: "Dada, in art and life, was the extreme of individualism. It denied that there was any psychic basis common to all humanity. There was no emotion shared by all men, no law to which all were subject" (158). And Cowley himself, in the sections entitled "Case Record" and "Significant Gesture," is offered up as a kind of comic illustration of how these dadaist attitudes might express themselves in the punching of a cafe proprietor.

In Cowley's plot, each stage of the conversion narrative is embodied in particular representative figures. Throughout most of the text, as I have already claimed, Cowley himself is the primary representative figure. But the most dramatic instance of such representation is Cowley's account in two sections of the book's final chapter (242-88) of Harry Crosby, a minor poet whose life epitomizes the generational trajectory Cowley traces throughout the narrative, and whose suicide becomes the symbol of the generation's dark night and death of the soul. In Cowley's words, Crosby's life had a "quality that gave it logic and made it resemble a clear syllogism" (265). Crosby's "brief and not particularly distinguished literary life of seven years," writes Cowley, included practically all of the themes I have been trying to develop--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, just at the moment when bourgeois society was beginning to crumble after its greatest outpouring of luxuries, its longest debauch--all this is suggested in Harry Crosby's life.(243)

Crosby's suicide is portrayed, then, as a symbol of "the decay from within and the suicide of a whole order with which he had been identified" (284). Perhaps more important for the conversion plot, Crosby serves as the sacrificial goat whose death is required by the narrative form before the final Marxist rebirth of the generation can take place. Only through such a death of its unregenerate self is the generation able to emerge in the thirties with a new identity, regenerated and purified.

The way in which Crosby stands in for Cowley at this point exemplifies the way in which identity works generally in the narrative. What interests Cowley in his reconstruction of collective identity is not individuality, but typicality, so that one character can easily substitute for another or for the entire generation. The narrated pattern of Crosby's life is almost identical to
Cowley's up to 1929. At this crucial turning point in the narrative, just when the conversion plot demands a sacrificial offering, Cowley steps aside as generational representative and Crosby takes his place. Cowley later confessed (in the 1951 revision) that his account of Crosby's suicide allowed him unconsciously to avoid dealing with the suicide of another "HC," Hart Crane, a man to whom Cowley was very closely attached. But it seems much more likely that if an "unconscious" substitution occurred, it was one that was much closer to home. Besides the "themes" just quoted, Crosby and Cowley also had in common the same birth year, 1898; and surely the alliteration and assonance of their names would not have been lost on the poetically inclined Cowley. We will see in the next few chapters that authorial proxies, particularly proxies whose sacrificial deaths facilitate generational rejuvenation, are a common feature of this subgenre of autobiography.

By means of the spiritual death symbolized in the Crosby suicide, Cowley's generation would be the first, in his view, to experience a rebirth into the proletarian future. The primary exemplar of this collective conversion, however, is Cowley himself, who, in the book's "Epilogue: Yesterday and Tomorrow," renounces his identity as a devotee of the religion of art to become a proselyte for tendentious literature and proletarian culture. After the Crosby substitution, the epilogue regrounds the generational narrative in Cowley's own experience and delivers the message of his conversion to his readers. "Before ending this book," he says, "I ought to explain, at least in bare outline, the beliefs that underlie or emerge from my own story" (294). What follows is, indeed, an outline of Cowley's new program for an ideologically sound art. In a series of questions and answers, Cowley deals with the value and function of propagandistic art, the role of the artist in the class struggle, and the future of art and society. Now that the proletarian age has arrived, he says, bourgeois artists ought to abandon their natural class allegiance and throw in their lot with the workers. Such an alliance, Cowley claims,

can offer ... a sense of comradeship and participation in a historical process vastly bigger than the individual. It can offer an audience, not trained to appreciate the finer points of style or execution--that will come later--but larger and immeasurably more eager than the capitalist audience and quicker to grasp essentials. It can offer the strength of a new class.(302)

The apparent historic task of this newly born generational self is to help construct the promised land of the proletarian age, but it will also realize the older Emersonian ideal of an art that is the true "outgrowth of a situation." As a prophet of the new era, Cowley offers his own text as an example of how Marxism can provide an autobiographer with the tools to clarify and organize life, to explain the collective chaos that was the twenties, and to judge the religion of art that was the peculiar heresy of that age.

Readers familiar with the socialist realist aesthetic that enjoyed a certain vogue in the 1930s will immediately recognize the tendency of these suggestions. They are written in the accents of a convert, a man from whose eyes the capitalist scales have fallen, a man who can finally make plain the path of salvation to others.

The autobiographical accomplishment of Exile's Return has been made more visible, I think, in the light of recent feminist and African American rejections of the notion that the individualized self is the sine qua non of autobiography. In the context of these critical stances, Cowley's first
edition of *Exile's Return* offers an interesting case study. Cowley and his friends, a group of primarily white male writers, perceived themselves as members of a generation at odds with the dominant culture. As members of a new literary coterie within that generation, they also saw themselves as outside of the literary establishment. Cowley's project in *Exile's Return*, therefore, is threefold: to assert that his group is more representative of the generation than are other groups, to assert control over the discourse within which the generational plot is constructed, and to assure the group's access to the literary canon. Although his book also contains an explicit political intention (to facilitate the advent of a proletarian revolution), this intention seems to me secondary to his desire to gain access to cultural power for his own group. If the revolution is successful, Cowley wants his group to have power within it; if it is not, he wants his group to be positioned to vie for a place within the bourgeois literary tradition.

Because the generational autobiographer's own story is meant to serve synecdochically as the narrative that will ultimately define the collective identity of the author's peers, contemporary readers almost inevitably perceive such works as attempts to manipulate the discourse concerning which people and which issues are central to a culture's meaning. This holds true whether the autobiographer opts to represent the generation as a member of an elite vanguard or as a member of the typical mass. In either case, generational autobiographers claim that the significant issues and events of the age are those in which they and their group have been involved. Such works are, therefore, almost inevitably engaged in generational polemics, either explicitly or implicitly, from their very conception.

In Cowley's case, the political implications of his collective autobiography became apparent in its first reviews. Cowley later recalled that most of his original reviewers "said that [Exile's Return] was a trivial story, intermittently amusing, that dealt with unimportant persons. They deplored and derided my political enthusiasms, as might have been anticipated, but they objected at greater length to my notion that the men of the 1920's had special characteristics and that their adventures in Paris were a story worth telling." Bernard de Voto, in a review entitled "Exiles from Reality," vehemently attacked Cowley's assumption that he and his friends were representative of the times. "Exile's Return," he expostulated, is not a "history of a generation" but "the apologia of a coterie." Given readers' expectations of conventional autobiography, such a reaction was not very surprising. Traditionally, an autobiographer claiming to be "representative of his age" was expected to have had some influence on the course of history. De Voto offered as the "determinants of the actual generation" those "laboratory scientists and politicians [who were] ... the engineers of economic and social pressures." Besides, he said, most of Cowley's generation--he was himself only a year older than Cowley--did not share the feelings of alienation that characterized the Paris exiles: Cowley's account of the twenties "is altogether subjective and he continually mistakes the emotions of his friends as the structure of society."

De Voto's major problem with Cowley's book arose over their different ideas about how a person can be "representative." As de Voto's counterexamples indicate, he was employing the term according to nineteenth-century usage: one was representative if one stood out from the multitude, if one was a leader, if one influenced the course of history. His usage of the term reflects traditional autobiographical theory, whose founder, Georg Misch, claimed in *A History of Autobiography in Antiquity* (1907) that the "supreme example of the representative autobiographer is the eminent person who has himself played a part in the forming of the spirit of his time." Such representativeness is, according to Doris Sommer, metaphoric: it "assumes an
identity by substituting one (superior) signifier for another (I for we, leader for follower, Christ for faithful).” Of course, by this standard Cowley and his friends were not even remotely representative. But Cowley's usage of the term is radically different from that of traditional autobiographical theory. He did not see himself or his expatriate cronies as "movers and shakers," or even as people who had a very clear grasp of the issues and problems of their times. They were, as Cowley said in his prologue, distinguished only by a "barometric" (13) sensitivity to social change that was reflected in their behavior, attitudes, styles, and, occasionally, art. His representatives of the age are shaped by historical trends, which they inadvertently and unself-consciously express. As he explains, "the ideas that concern me here are the ones that half-unconsciously guided people's actions" (12). Like later generational autobiographers, Cowley attempts to depict the underlying historical forces that shape personality, rather than the outstanding personalities who shape history. Cowley's ideas about representativeness, in short, sprang from a notion that was essentially synecdochic and generational rather than metaphoric and individualist. He is the part that stands for the whole; his friends are the species that stands for the genus.26

Inevitably, Cowley's severest critics were either established men like de Voto who viewed him as an upstart, or men from the working class who felt that his bid for representativeness was based on class privilege. An example of the second group of critics was Karl Pretshold, a "Pittsburgh Socialist" who wrote an angry response to a chapter of Exile's Return that appeared in the New Republic prior to the publication of the book. Undoubtedly stung by this attack from the very group with which he was trying to forge an alliance, Cowley responded to Pretshold in the book itself. In a chapter entitled "The Other Side of the Tracks," Cowley answered the claim that Pretshold's experience as a worker was as representative of the twenties as Cowley's experience as a young middle-class writer. Cowley quotes at length from Pretshold's version of the period and grants that the workers' experiences did, in fact, represent "the sound beginning of a [proletarian] culture during the decade before the War." But while Cowley is willing to give Pretshold's class a voice in his narrative, he denies that voice any claim to representative status. Pretshold's article is "interesting in itself," says Cowley, and "it bears on my narrative," but "it describes an almost forgotten phase of American life." This phase was "shattered by the War and the anti-labor crusade that followed." Afterward, the working class, "except in statistics ... had ceased to exist. ... It was a class without a nervous system, a voice, a brain, almost without a purpose, except possibly to rise to the class above" (42-44). Presumably, the proletarian future would offer the Pretsholds of America, or their children, the representative status they presently lacked.

The assertion of a counter-identity by the groups represented by de Voto and Pretshold was, of course, unavoidable given the premises upon which the book was constructed. Unlike the individualist autobiographer who draws upon material to which he or she may have sole access, Cowley had depended upon material that was largely drawn from the public memory and was thus open to his contemporaries' scrutiny. And unlike an autobiographer who reconstructs an individuated past, the generational autobiographer challenges his contemporaries by claiming to define their identities as well as his or her own. It is not surprising, therefore, that persons with a generational or class perspective different from Cowley's would object to his claim to represent the age.27 Recognizing this, Cowley often qualifies his portrait, particularly in his last chapter
where he attempts to rectify his "partly distorted impression" (293) of the twenties by listing those aspects of the age that he has not included in his narrative.

In the traditional individualized autobiography that evolved out of the Romantic tradition, the self is conceived of as a unique essence that exists prior to language. Insofar as that self interacts with society, it does so to its own peril. Society corrupts the Romantic self, pries it away from its original relationship with nature and feelings, confuses it with social obligations and forms. The Romantic autobiographer, therefore, envisions his task as a very personal quest, doomed to at least partial failure, to rediscover and capture the original self in words. In such works, the type of negotiation Cowley undertakes with Pretshold about identity is unthinkable. A major characteristic of the collective generational autobiography, therefore, is that it highlights the negotiation process as an inherent part of self construction and undermines the Romantic notion that the individual alone has access to and authority over identity.

In spite of his willingness to negotiate, however, Cowley's book was premised on an audacious bid for representative status. That bid was authorized by Cowley's construction of himself and his peers as possessing a unique identity and role in history: they would be spectators at the death throes of capitalism, and they would usher in a new proletarian age. Since that age still lay in the future, Cowley's narrative was offered not only as a reconstruction of history, but also as a political tract designed to bring about a desired social reality: if enough people could see themselves in the version of the collective self he had created, perhaps they would adopt the whole narrative, including its upbeat prophetic finale.

That not everyone was willing to adopt Cowley's 1934 version of the collective self, even after his accommodation of Pretshold, was reflected in the book's initial unpopularity with both critics and the public. It sold only 983 copies during the first year after its publication. The public's reluctance to endorse the book arose partly from Cowley's enthusiastic Marxism. The later history of the book---its revision, republication, and favorable reception in 1951---attests to the susceptibility of Cowley's collective self to political and psychological pressures. Although the revised version seems less compelling to me as personal narrative, it remains of interest to autobiographical theorists because its expurgation of the author's former self construction highlights both the textuality and the negotiability of identity. Like Benjamin Franklin's vision of the autobiographical self as a revised edition of an already published text, Cowley's later edition of *Exile's Return* took advantage of the author's right "in a second edition to correct some faults of the first" and to "change some sinister Accidents and Events of it for others more favourable." Freud long ago compared the ego's repressions of unpleasant truths to the revision of a text that contains offensive passages. Cowley's revision of his generational narrative to make it more acceptable to himself and to his anticommunist readers is an excellent example of this analogy in literal operation for a collective self. It was the first edition, however, that established the principal narrative strategies of generational autobiography.

Notes

other magazine articles on the generational theme, see the section entitled "The Younger
251-93.

2. A good list of these memoirs can be found in McAlmon and the Lost Generation: A Self
"Biographical Repertory" (367-82), Knoll has compiled a partial list of lost generation
"members" and their works.

3. Unless otherwise noted, the text I am using is the first edition of Exile's Return: A Narrative of
Ideas (New York: Norton, 1934); subsequent references to this work will be to this edition. This
work differs considerably from its successor, the more widely read 1951 revised edition,
discussion of the differences, see my "Conversion, Revisionism, and Revision in Malcolm


5. Hayden White, Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century
Europe (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1973), 5-11, 93-97.

6. Malcolm Cowley,--And I Worked at the Writer's Trade: Chapters of Literary History, 1918-

7. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar," Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson: An


9. Emerson, 78.


Bourne, combined this analysis of American culture with an appeal to youth, whom he called the
"student class": "a class like this we must have, and there are, I think, many signs that such a
class is rapidly coming into existence. To begin with, the sudden contraction of the national
cultures of Europe during the War, owing to which many currents of thought, formerly shared by
all, have been withdrawn from circulation, has thrown us unexpectedly back upon ourselves.
How many drafts we have issued in the past upon European thought, unbalanced by an
investment of our own! The younger generation have come to feel this obligation acutely. At the
same time they have been taught to speak a certain language in common by the social
movements of the last 20 years" (Brooks, *Letters and Leadership* [New York: Huebsch, 1918], 124).

13. Bourne, 185-86.


16. For another explanation for this rhetorical style, see Sacvan Bercovitch's *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1978), which argues that American writers' vacillation between doomsaying and optimism grew out of the Puritan homiletic tradition of uttering prophetic warnings to a backsliding Elect.


18. For Cowley's retrospective treatment of the religious nature of his move toward the left, see the chapters entitled "Act of Conversion" and "Church on Earth" in *Dream of the Golden Mountains*, 31-50. The attempt to distance himself from dogmatic Marxism included not only the expurgation of Marxist assumptions from the revised edition of *Exile's Return*, but also the downplaying of all of the book's conversion features.


20. In the revised 1951 edition, Cowley says that at this point in the narrative "the author begins to disappear from his book" because his adventures began to be less "representative of what was happening to others" (207).

21. *Exile's Return* (1951), 11. Cowley's claim in the revised edition that he "had failed to show [the Crosby chapter's] connection with the rest of the [1934] narrative" (11) also seems odd. If anything, his revised edition, which excises central elements of the Marxist conversion narrative, damaged the narrative structure that justified the account of Crosby's suicide. This damage was compounded by his treatment of new "characters" in the revised version. In the 1934 edition, every character was shown in relation to a single generational identity and plot. In the 1951 revision, Cowley introduces new sections on Pound, Cummings, Dos Passos, and Hart Crane, but they have almost no connection at all to the book's original generational plot, and his treatment of them is consequently anecdotal rather than illustrative.


26. As we have already seen, Cowley's barometric metaphor also underlies one of the differences between his notion of the generational elite and that of theorists like Bourne and Ortega. The latter writers still identify the "elite" with the qualities called for by traditionalists like de Voto.

27. An analogous phenomenon can be found in the response of those who have shared an experience with an autobiographer and do not recognize their own experience in the other's description of it. See Lynn Z. Bloom, "Single-Experience Autobiographies," *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 3 (Fall 1987): 36-45.


31. In spite of Cowley's mortification by the response to the 1934 edition, he eventually went on to make his career as the self-appointed autobiographer of his generation. After his 1951 revision of *Exile's Return*, he continued the saga with *A Second Flowering: Works and Days of the Lost Generation* (New York: Viking, 1973); --*And I Worked at the Writers' Trade* (1978); and *The Dream of the Golden Mountains* (1980).

**Source Citation**
