The Lost Correspondence of Malcolm Cowley and Ernest Hemingway:

"a fairy tale trying to have an orgasm."

The recent publication of *The Long Voyage: Selected Letters of Malcolm Cowley* is a reminder that a substantial part of the lengthy correspondence between Cowley and Ernest Hemingway (1948-52) has been lost to scholars and readers. In 2004 the Maurice Neville collection of 71 letters between Hemingway and Cowley was sold at auction to an unknown buyer who is now keeping them in an unknown location. Many years prior to that sale, McMaster University Professor James D. Brasch (now retired) read the entire collection, made a presentation to the Hemingway Society about it which he subsequently published, and, as his correspondence with Cowley, Scribner, Cowley's son and others reveals, tried for over a decade to bring the letters to publication. Michael Reynolds had access to the correspondence while researching the final volume of his Hemingway biography; Reynolds does not quote any of the letters but mines them for biographical details. Since then, to my knowledge, there has been no access. Hans Bak, editor of *The Long Voyage*, includes eight letters or parts thereof from Cowley to Hemingway; all eight of these letters are in the JFK collection. Bak confirmed in an email exchange with me that he had no access to the now lost collection. Cowley, in a personal letter to Brasch, comments that the carbons of his letters to Hemingway were in the Neville collection while "most of the originals" were donated to the JFK library's collection. In actual fact, the JFK library has only 15 typed, signed letters from Cowley to Hemingway; there are only two letters from Hemingway to Cowley at the JFK, also reprinted in Carlos Baker's *Selected Letters*. The bulk of Cowley's letters, along with forty-one letters from Hemingway to Cowley, were in the Neville collection and are now unavailable for scholarly research. We can only hope that the Hemingway Letters Project has access to Hemingway's letters to Cowley for inclusion in the volume covering 1948-1952. (pause)

All is not lost! When Brasch read the complete correspondence between Cowley and Hemingway in the early 1980s, the owner, Neville, allowed him not only to quote the letters for his

article, “Invention from Knowledge,” but also to read selections into a tape recorder. Neville also allowed Brasch to take the audio-tapes back to McMaster in order to type up the contents. In part paraphrase, in part lengthy quotation, the resulting transcriptions are reasonably coherent and make for fascinating reading. In the absence of the originals, these transcriptions are the next best thing. Brasch in his article highlighted the recurrent topic of “invention from knowledge” emerging from the dialogue between Cowley and Hemingway, while Bak in his brief introduction of Cowley’s letters to Hemingway describes the tone of their correspondence as “strained.” Although Hemingway’s concerns about biographical articles and biographical details in critical books about him are clearly expressed, as are his fears of any revelation of his wartime activities, the overall tone of the letters is pleasant and humorous as the men discuss writing and writers, especially Faulkner and Fitzgerald. There is much discussion about writing as a craft, as to be expected, and Hemingway’s loneliness for someone to talk to about *métier* is evident. Cowley filled a void in Hemingway’s literary life at that time. Ultimately, they share their joy of writing. Cowley remarks that writing “gets harder all the time” (21), and, while agreeing, Hemingway asserts, “I love to write” (31) and “I love to live” (14). As Cowley himself repeated in his letters to Brasch, the publication of this dynamic correspondence is “important for the world.” Possessing the nearest facsimile of this rich correspondence, I propose today to present its highlights and to demonstrate the benefit of reading both sides of the dialogue to discover its hidden dimensions, in a way not possible for most of the published Hemingway letters. I have endeavored to quote as much as possible from letters not already available through the JFK or Newberry collection.

Brasch’s presentation to the Hemingway conference in the early 80s and his subsequent article perceived that the Hemingway-Cowley correspondence “focuses on two major issues: ‘invention’ and concern for biography as it affects ‘invention.’” (p. 64) Brasch saw in the exchange of letters Hemingway explaining his theory of “invention,” which entails imagining characters and plots not just from personal experience but also from knowledge gleaned from other people’s

experiences as well as from his own extensive reading, in order to invent something that is, in his words from an August 1952 letter, "made, not described, so that afterwards the reader will have had the experience, not seen it or heard about it." (142) Earlier in the correspondence (June 10, 1949), Hemingway expressed his concern to Cowley that critical attention on biographical details, often incorrect, would affect his memory of personal events and, hence, his ability to invent truly: "it is very bad for the man involved and could be extremely bad for his writing if he ever started to think of himself as a character rather than simply someone trying to write a story as well as he can." (52) As Brasch succinctly puts it, "The more [Hemingway] read about himself, the less he knew about himself."

At the beginning of his article Brasch alludes to other topics pursued in the correspondence: postwar British and American poetry and fiction, the Korean War, Senator McCarthy, the editing of manuscripts. Despite his busy reading and writing regimen, his fishing adventures and his wide-ranging friendships, Hemingway was "lonely for literary conversation" (Brasch, p. 64). (See EH to MC: 3, 5, 123.) And "literary conversation" was just what Hemingway and Cowley provided for each other through these letters. It is a shame that others, Hemingway colleagues and critics, cannot read this material and delve into its rich insights. An overview of the letters reveals a pattern, a flow, as each letter begins with reference to the previous, thus picking up the conversation where it left off, even after several months, but often the letters are answered within days of each other. They begin with Cowley's questions for the article he is writing for LIFE magazine and Hemingway's answers and concerns; then the discussion moves to Young's upcoming book on Hemingway for which Cowley has given editorial advice; and finally the primary topic of conversation is Hemingway's current Big Sea novel and the eventual publication of OMS. Publication of Hemingway's letters is invaluable, of course, but without the other side of this particular conversation, ranging as it does over a four-year period, much insight and import from the dialogue are lost. I will highlight briefly the personal, the political and the professional.

On the personal level: at the end of a long letter, Nov. 3, 1951, Cowley comments on Pauline Hemingway's sudden death (92): "I didn't write you about Pauline, didn't feel that I had the right . . . What I know was that she was a good and loyal friend of yours and none of us can stand losing such friends. I felt bad for you and especially for the boys." Five days later on Nov. 8, Hemingway responds:

> Thank you for what you wrote about Pauline. It was all more complicated than . . . [biographers] will ever know and the letters have been burned as provided in Pauline's will . . . Since Pauline's death there has been hardly a day without some sort of problem connected with it and the children or their interests. I don't know if you have ever been mixed up in the problem of death in connection with a wealthy family. You need to go into the third circle of hell before you meet even the minor characters. After that further descents are comparatively easy. Best always, Malcolm. Please excuse me when I sound bitter. Today I am bitter. (96-7)

Cowley responds on Nov. 14, "you sound not only bitter but positively misanthropic. Honestly, there are some nice people in the world. I married one of them and so did you . . . you've been lucky in your children too." (98) On Nov. 20 (MY birthday,btw—I was 5 years old!) Hemingway pens two lines: "Sorry about the positively misanthropic. Maybe if you knew the score you would not have written that. Best always. Ernest." (99a) Earlier in the correspondence (July 19, 1951), Cowley had offered similar condolences regarding Hemingway's mother (79b):

> I was sorry to read about your mother's death. The obituary made her sound like a woman of very determined character like someone who would try to impose her will on the family, but losing one's mother is always something heavy and sad no matter how far away she has been in life—the parent stood there like buffers and bulwarks between us and the future and after they're gone we're left standing out in the bow taking all the waves—not that we didn't take them before but now there's not even an imaginary screen. I'm getting god damn solemn and I'd better stop.

Hemingway responds on July 24 (81), "Thanks for writing me about my mother. There's nothing I can write which will do anything good about that. She was old and no more useful in life, and death came to her easily at the end and as a kindness." In other letters, the two men share affectionate news of their sons, Cowley, it seems from these transcriptions, at greater length than Hemingway.

On a political note: Hemingway writes a lengthy letter dated Aug. 25, 1948 which consists mostly of his personal reactions and observations about war (26-27): "Afterwards in Germany it was bad, [he says] but not too god-damn bad, not as bad as the first war, I don't think. The Schnee Eifel was not as bad as the Somme from what I heard from guys who were in the Somme business. Hurtgen was probably as bad as Gettysburgh. . . . it was the last real fight except for the Bulge fight which was really a hell of a battle. But most of this last war made sense while the first one made little sense to me." Acknowledging Cowley's review of Oscar Williams' *War Poets,* Hemingway comments on Sept. 3, 1945,

> none of the poets who wrote in that anthology had any idea of what it was like. Not how we felt I think and I've read no poetry that had anything to do with it so far. I had odd jobs and some interesting work through '42-'43 and early spring of '44. All hush, hush etc. . . . After the war it is very hard to write or even to give a goddamn about anything but have had that before and know it will clear up like everything else. I know you should care about this and that and how important the other is but you feel 'O, fuck that' and you are glad to live for a while and let the water run back into the well. The trouble is that it is awfully dull not to have anybody you can talk to about writing. (4-5)

In a lengthy letter (10a-15) dated April 9, 1948, he talks of the Rambouillet affair, and contradicts himself on the same page: "About me carrying arms. This is a touchy business. I will not admit it since I denied it . . . under interrogation . . . So do not ask me to admit it." Then, a paragraph later, he says, "Actually when I was armed . . . " (11) Hemingway is concerned that Cowley will reveal too much about his secret service, covert work in Cuba: "I rely on you <u>absolutely</u> not to use this or permit LIFE to use it while I am alive . . . Any mention of this would do me great harm." (12) He concludes the discussion saying, "I hated war but I had a certain talent from some aspects of it as Buck [Lanham] may have told you or maybe I hadn't any such talent and just imagined it. But I truly never gave a shit on any given day whether I died or not although I love to live and I could impart this feeling to other people." (14) In a letter dated July 11, 1948, available at the JFK, Cowley seeks clarification about Hemingway's war wounds, and apparently, according to the transcript's summary, Hemingway is upset by all the questions, but then says finally, "Why don't

you just say truthfully 'He was severely wounded at *Fassalta di Piave* two weeks before his nineteenth birthday. He was awarded [the Silver Medal for Military Valor] *La Medala d'Argento Valori Militaria,* second highest Italian military direction. You got the gold one if you were dead or *denuncio*. And the [Military Cross] *Croix per merito de Guerra* (probably misspelled)" (21a) and then he trails off into humorous asides about the theft of his medals, sounding a little like Mike Campbell in *The Sun Also Rises*. As I said, this excerpt was part of Brasch's summary of a letter; the original letter would reveal the full extent to which Hemingway was upset with Cowley's questions. In contrast to Hemingway's repeated insistence on the separation of his personal experiences from the invention of his characters, Hemingway conflates himself and Nick Adams in a discussion about war wounds, which extends over several letters:

> In the first war I now see I was hurt very badly, in the body, mind and spirit and also morally . . . The true gen is I was hurt all the way through and I was really spooked at the end. 'Big Two-Hearted River' is the story about a man who is home from the war, but the war is not mentioned. When I got off the train for that trip at Seney which is sort of a whistle stop, I can remember the brakeman saying to the engineer, 'Hold her up! There's a cripple and he needs time to get his stuff down," and I had never thought of myself as a cripple, but since I heard I was, I stopped being one that day and from then on I got my stuff down fast and asking favours from nobody. But I was still hurt very badly in that story. (25a-26)

As you can see, the political material in the letters, mostly about war, cannot be easily separated from Hemingway's personal reflections or from his creative uses of those wartime experiences.

The exchanges between Cowley and Hemingway about their profession are instructive, as Brasch illustrated, but is more extensive than could fit within the scope of his article. Seeking to reassure Hemingway regarding the publication of Young's critical book, Cowley asserts "a book on your work is needed [to] help your permanent reputation as a writer" (63d), but Hemingway responds that he is "resolved to have no biography written about me during my lifetime" (66) and "I want no one stealing from my barn nor from my property, [then adding in his handwriting] nor fouling it up" (68). Cowley comments that "Young thinks you are writing autobiography" (69), causing Hemingway to blast against the interference of biography hunters: "I want to write . . . a

memoir of our times." (73) A major topic of the Hemingway-Cowley dialogue concerns the burgeoning critical books on Hemingway and Hemingway's apprehension of mistaken biographical details, their misuse in interpretations of his work and their effect on his memory.

An apt illustration of the mix of the personal and the professional, of interest to me as an Anglican priest, is contained in the Hemingway letter of May 29, 1952. In response to Cowley's concern that his comments about Roman Catholicism might have offended Hemingway (128), Hemingway assures him that he "will [never] go for a holy," (129) and goes on to list good priests he has known. Don Francisco in Torcello (Venice), Italy, "always treated me wonderfully and we would talk late every night." Out in Ketchum, Idaho, "the priest was one of my three best friends . . . I bought the roof for the church there." (130) Don Andre, "our parish priest here [in Cuba] used to tell people that he was my spiritual manager but that he could never win with me except at the races." Finally, before Hemingway "was leaving to go to Spain [to] the war, the parish priest in Key West gave me something that would ensure my protection by the Jesuit order." Hemingway then comments that "no one of these priests that I mentioned have [*sic*] ever tried to influence me in any way politically, nor in what I write," but knowing them was instrumental in his creation of the priests in his fiction: "I just tried to invent from what I know and when people are good and are Catholics, I try to invent them as straight as the ones that I have known." (131) He concludes the essay on Catholicism by saying, "If you see any signs of my running as a holy in this book, remember the boy praying in the bombardment on the *Piave* from *In Our Time*, and the priest in *Farewell to Arms* and "The Gambler and the nun and the radio" and the kid on the hill at the end with Sordo and Lieutenant Borindo in the same book." Hemingway draws a distinction between priests he has known in his life and the characters in his writing, and more importantly suggests references to "the holy" are used to ironic effect in his fiction.

All of these topics and others are fascinating to read in the transcripts in my possession, but we need scholarly access to the originals in order to clarify specific words and phrases. In the letter

of August 1952, for example, Hemingway seems to write that it's "hard not to talk *métier* when I have no one to talk it with" (149), but Brasch in his article on the letters uses the word "matter." Métier vs matter: there is a huge difference in meaning. In the Hemingway letter of Feb. 10, 1949 the transcript reads, "I act dumb to make people lead." (42a) Lead? Time constraints forced Brasch to summarize the contents of several letters with very brief statements. Four letters over Christmas 1948 and New Year's 1949 (38a-39a), three from Hemingway, one from Cowley, about his current reading, his attitude to historian Bernard Devoto, editorial changes to the LIFE article and Hemingway's worries of "grave trouble" over the article's references to his Cuban war activities, are only briefly summarized. Finally there is great fun and no little quandary in the letter from which I take my sub-title, unfortunately omitted from the conference program: a letter in spring of 1948 (17) reviews Nathan Asche's book *The Gallery,* saying it is "like a fairy tale trying to have an orgasm but never quite coming." It is a wonderfully humorous dismissal of the novel, but even here, we can't be positive which writer made the comment. The paragraph stands alone on page 17 of the oral transcriptions, preceded by p. 16a, the start of a letter by Cowley to Hemingway in May '48, but on the verso of page 17 is 17a, the start of a letter by Hemingway to Cowley in June '48. Brasch's page numbering throughout the transcriptions isn't consistent to confidently identify which author came up with that phrase. It sounds to me like Hemingway, but we need the originals to confirm authorship--my personal fairy tale.

There are some beautiful passages of writing to share with the world. In a letter dated April 9, 1948, (14-15) Hemingway writes,

> All my life since I grew up I have been a man and a writer and it is so much easier to be a good man than a good writer. You take refuge in one sometimes and neglect the other. Yet I believe that you gain something that is more valuable than anything can ever be from some things. Just as you were made happy and in some ways more whole on the best because you were not seasick in the storm that made you remember when you were a boy at the Chemin de Dames and other places. I think there is a steady renewal of immortality through storms, attacks, landings on beaches where the landing is opposed, flying when there are problems and many other things which are all awful and horrible and hateful to those who are not

> suited to them . . . but it is an enobling thing to those who are suited for them and have luck so that they can survive them. (14-15)

Then, in an ironic counterpoint to the lyricism, added in Hemingway's handwriting, the comment, "They also sometimes have the opposite effect and make you mean as snake-shit." (15) Hemingway closes that letter with a tribute to Mary: "Mary wants to write something about me sometime and I think it would be a good idea because I never loved anybody more than I loved her and because I wrote her every day from Hurtgen forest, every night rather, or most nights anyway, because writing to her was my fatherland, while the Krauts were in theirs and fighting so wonderfully to defend it and while I never re-read them, I think the letters are probably all right because it was a serious time." This reference to Mary leads to the one letter from her to Cowley in the collection in which Mary cautions Cowley against undertaking a biography of Hemingway. After a friendly but frosty beginning, the letter becomes lyrical and evocative, as she explains that Cowley doesn't know enough about Hemingway to write a biography about him:

> To do that really you must save his life and he your life. You must walk with wind and snow and sleet storming at your ears and eyes across uncounted miles on many days after duck or pheasant; you must observe him buoyant and happy at the wheel of the *Pilar* on the Gulf Stream without a public for which he must make considerations; you should know him in bed in Paris, animated and gay and staying awake figuring out wisely in his head what he must do the next day to get himself around the Krauts or the Third Army police to reach his own people; you must see him with his children. . . . Malcolm, I am not trying to move in on your orbit truly, it keeps me busy just being fourth wife. But I know that even having all facts and dates, you can reach diligently into a human being and still not learn even the comparative truth, and I object to your writing a book with less than that. (41-42)

The Hemingways' personal reflections in the letters to Cowley are frequently expressed with striking imagery and lyrical phrasing.

This is especially true in the last letter in the series when Hemingway writes about the craft of OMS. Most of the material in this letter about OMS has been quoted by Brasch, 5.5 pages of it, but not all of that letter of 11 pages. To read Hemingway's commentary on his novel in the context of the entire letter is very revealing as Hemingway explains his process of invention and his hopes for the book: "I've tried to take the emotion with action and the mystery about rhetoric, tried to get

from prose which you can get from poetry, but how do you know you do it for anyone beside yourself, until people have read it. Then people began to read it and I saw it did something to everybody. Now you like it and I don't have to think about it anymore." (146) The material about OMS is broken up in the letter by 3.5 pages of personal matters—about other books on the sea that he was working on, the heat, rabbits rampaging the gardens, about Cowley's son and his own son Bumby, on drinking, on Mary's writing and her re-reading of OMS, so moved that "she got gooseflesh again and so excited she couldn't eat." (145) Hemingway has given his final word to Cowley not only on the topic of editing but also on the process that created OMS. Hemingway extends his appreciation for Cowley's positive reception and understanding of what Hemingway was attempting in OMS: "if Malcolm doesn't like [OMS, he writes] then I am crazy and might as well go out of business." (146)

Cowley in a letter to Brasch speaks of the correspondence with Hemingway ending with a Christmas card in 1952: "It was a good place to stop," he says. Certainly the Christmas card, coming as it does at the end of the entire correspondence, acts as a benign farewell, almost a benediction: "Good, good luck," Hemingway writes. If the Hemingway Letters Project can gain access to the Neville collection and can publish Hemingway's lost letters to Cowley, it will be "good, good luck" for Hemingway studies. Hans Bak is here in Chicago doing research to complete his definitive biography on Cowley, *The Formative Years*. Perhaps in the process of research and writing, Bak will learn where those missing letters are and be able to add reference to them in his thorough examination of Cowley's life and letters. However, publication of all the letters between the two writers would be so much better, for it is in the cut and thrust of dialogue, the gentle exchanges of the conversation between Malcolm Cowley and Ernest Hemingway, that the true gen emerges.