

“Accidental Editor: How I wrote The Selected Correspondence of Kenneth Burke and Malcolm Cowley, and Why”

Paul Jay | Loyola University Chicago

On December 23rd, 1988, the following correction announcement appeared in The Chicago Tribune:

A listing of nominees for the National Book Critics Circle awards in the Dec. 19 Tribune failed to include Paul Jay, professor of English at Loyola University, as the editor of “The Selected Correspondence of Kenneth Burke and Malcolm Cowley, 1915-1981.” He was omitted on a list of nominees supplied by the Critics Circle.

What happened? One Sunday morning a couple of weeks earlier, my wife and I were sitting around drinking coffee and reading the New York Times when I came across an article about that year’s nominees for the National Book Critics Circle Awards. I always read these awards articles, but I don’t often find books I’ve written or edited appearing in them. This Sunday proved to be an exception. There in the biography category was The Selected Correspondence of Kenneth Burke and Malcolm Cowley: 1915-1981, which was nominated in the same category with the likes of Richard Ellman and Valerie Eliot. I was dumbfounded. I blurted out to my wife, “hey, I’ve been nominated for a National Book Critics Circle award.” Except maybe I hadn’t. For, when I looked more closely I noticed the official announcement did not include my name. While Richard Ellman had written Oscar Wilde, and Valerie Eliot had edited The Letters of T.S. Eliot, the

Burke/Cowley letters had not, apparently, been edited by anyone. The announcement from the Book Critics Circle simply read The Selected Correspondence of Kenneth Burke and Malcolm Cowley: 1915-1981 (Viking).

Of course I wrote to The Times, the Tribune, and the Book Critics Circle to get a correction. The Times and Tribune people dutifully published corrections, both blaming the Book Critics Circle for the mistake. The Books Critics Circle people apologized profusely and assured me that I *was* indeed included among the nominees, and that I was invited to attend the awards ceremony. That was nice to know. And, with both the Times and the Tribune publishing corrections, I figured may even have come out ahead, since the corrections may have gotten me more notice than the original announcements would have.

I tell this story because, in an inadvertent -- and amusing -- kind of way, it provides a way in to exploring some perennial questions about the relationship between authors, texts, editors, and editions. In what follows I put the omission in the larger context of my own experience editing the Burke/Cowley letters, reading it as the unconscious expression of a desire to erase the editor in the interests of getting to the text itself, free of any mediation or intervention.

One way to think about the kind of mediation I'm referring to is to consider, in the case of the Burke/Cowley correspondence, the difference between the *letters* and the *book*. The letters, obviously, are the documents Burke and Cowley wrote and they're what the reader is interested in. But The Selected Correspondence of Kenneth Burke and Malcolm Cowley is a book I authored. From this perspective the omission of my name as a nominee suggests the Book Critics Circle people were more interested in nominating Burke and Cowley and their letters than they were in nominating my book. The book, of course, contained their letters, but "contain" sends us in two different directions, for the word can mean both to *have or hold* something, or to *control or restrain* it. Emphasize the first meaning and you have the illusion of an unmediated text, emphasize the second and all kinds of problems begin to crop up.

Before we explore some of these problems, let's back up. How did a theorist come to edit the Burke/Cowley letters in the first place? It seems like an odd choice. To make a long story short, during my gypsy scholar years I ended up teaching for a year at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. As soon as I arrived I discovered that Kenneth Burke would be in residence for a few months during the winter semester, lecturing and meeting regularly with graduate students and faculty. If you want the extended story of how he and I bonded over theory and vodka in the wee hours at his place after those meetings, talk to me later at dinner. Suffice it to say we spent many, many hours

together talking about writers, reading, literary criticism, philosophy, and critical theory. In the weeks before it was time for him to return to his home in Weehawken, New Jersey, he began to talk to me about the extensive correspondence he and his childhood friend, Malcolm Cowley, had sustained since they were high school buddies in Pittsburgh. It turned out Cowley had been regularly proposing editors for a projected collection of their letters, but Burke had been consistently vetoing Cowley's choices because none of them knew anything much about theory. Cowley wanted a literary historian to edit the correspondence, but Burke remained ambivalent because none of them, he felt, would be able to understand his side of the correspondence. Then, all of a sudden, he got the crazy idea to propose to Cowley that I should edit the letters. It was a surprise move in what had become a kind of chess game.

Totally unqualified to undertake such a project, I said "sure!" Burke wrote to Cowley with the suggestion, and, predictably, Cowley balked. Why? Because I was a theorist. In one letter to Burke in their back-and-forth about why a theory person should – or should not -- edit the letters Cowley said I was the kind of academic who uses words like "problematize" and "privilege" as verbs. Having looked over my CV and my theoretical book on autobiography and subjectivity (Being in the Text: Self Representation from Wordsworth to Roland Barthes, 1984), he quite reasonably insisted I was unqualified for the job (and obliquely, that I'd come into it on Burke's side). But Burke persisted.

Luckily, the job I got the following spring was at the University of Connecticut, in Storrs,

and Cowley and his wife lived a couple of hours away in Sherman. When my wife and I drove from Atlanta to Storrs we stopped off for a few days at Burke's place, he and I plotted, and then after my wife and I arrived in Storrs we paid a visit to Cowley and his wife where somehow, over wine and sandwiches on a warm Connecticut afternoon I sealed the deal and he agreed to let me edit the letters.

Of course having gotten a job I was totally unqualified for, I had to learn how to be an editor. So, I put my theory work on the back burner and became buried in what is essentially the practical side of editing – finding and copying letters, transcribing handwriting, constructing chronologies, tracking down dates, researching what were pretty much empirical questions about people, places, dates and events, but also doing a lot detective work, piecing things together as best one can, and in this case, dealing with two living writers. I frankly do not recall spending much time thinking *theoretically* about what I was doing because I was overwhelmed by the sheerly practical – and largely unfamiliar -- demands related to the materials I was dealing with and the largely documentary questions I had to answer.

It wasn't until I had to make my selections for the edition that I started to realize I was beginning to *write* the book I was editing. And that's when the project became interesting to me as a theorist. Once I agreed to edit a selection of their correspondence

rather than the entire correspondence – which I argued I should do, and which would have run to many volumes destined to sit on library shelves unread – I began to give the selected correspondence the shape of a story, and an intellectual framework. I felt passionately about the literary quality of the letters, and I wanted people to read them. This meant I had to make choices that were compelling in literary, intellectual, dramatic, and narrative ways. But then I came to realize that over and above their historical value the correspondence was extraordinary for the way in which it documented the unfolding of a friendship. Once I got a hold of this idea it wouldn't let go. It meant I had what we like to call a *theme*, and I began to organize the dramatic structure of the book around it, foregrounding not just how the letters documented a friendship, but how the *writing* of the letters actually *constructed and sustained* that friendship.

This is where my own work as a theorist came to play a major role in the shaping of the book. This became especially clear to me when, preparing this talk, I looked back over the Preface to the Selected Correspondence, where the theoretical issues I'd written about in Being in the Text -- which included how subjectivity is not only represented in, but is constructed by, the act of self-representation-- seemed in retrospect to have been directing me in giving shape to the Burke/Cowley correspondence. Here is the key passage:

It is worth emphasizing here that these letters do not simply *record* a friendship, they provide the very context in which it develops and deepens. Far from being the passive record of a relationship, they constitute the active engagement of two developing personalities whose friendship is realized in and by the act of writing. Their letters dramatize the extent to which each writer's life has been given a kind of shape and logic through writing to one another. They share, analyze, hypothesize, sum up, respond, and accuse, all the while constructing for their lives and for each other's what becomes almost a thematic and narrative coherence. The correspondence contains a kind of unrelenting self-analysis and impassioned dialogue, the kind that can remind us how writing both shapes and sustains the very self who writes. As a composite exercise in self-analysis, the letters represent a kind of hybrid, a *double* autobiography, one in which two lives are recorded simultaneously. Burke and Cowley become so intertwined in this correspondence that the letters have the uncanny effect of recording a single life in an autobiography written by two subjects.

In this passage my work as a theorist and as an editor are clearly intersecting. In Being in the Text I argued for the *constitutive* nature of self-representation, how the very act of writing constructs both the self who writes and the self who is represented (my examples ran from Augustine's Confessions to Wordsworth's Prelude, Carlyle's Sartor

Resartus, Eliot's Four Quartets and Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes). Here, in the Preface to the Burke/Cowley letters I'm making essentially the same claim, yet *doubled* by my suggestion that the book is an "autobiography written by two subjects." And of course friendship didn't strike me as simply a "theme" in the letters, but something that was "realized in and by the act of writing" the letters. If in Being in the Text I had explored how subjectivity is shaped by the narrative construction of a life in the act of writing it, in editing the Burke/Cowley letters I was constructing the volume to emphasize how each man used their letters to develop what I called in the preface a "thematic and narrative coherence" for their own identities.

Being in the Text also argued for a relationship between self-representation and psychoanalysis, and I can see now how *that* framework help determined the shape of the Burke/Cowley correspondence as well. In claiming the letters constituted "a composite exercise in self-analysis," a kind of "double autobiography" in which each correspondent simultaneously wrote as both the subject of analysis and as the analysand, I was shaping the correspondence around the model of an extended psychoanalytic situation. These theoretical issues, lingering as they were from my theoretical work on autobiography and subjectivity, gave direction to the selections I made, and the narrative I constructed, in and for the Burke/Cowley correspondence. My own interests as a theorist helped drive my reading of the letters, which in turn helped to determine not only the shape, but the thematic framing of the

correspondence. For these reasons, of course, it fit neatly into the category of biography in the Book Critics Circle competition, for in my own way I was constructing not just an edition of correspondence, but a kind of dual biography of its subjects.

Theory, then, came into play a role in my editing of the correspondence not so much in terms of my thinking in theoretical terms about the *editorial process*, but in the sense that many of the choices I made about which letters to include, how to shape the book's narrative framework, and what subjects to emphasize, were in part determined by my *interests as a theorist*. For example, what seems like the mundane choice to split the correspondence into four historical periods was in fact the result of my desire to give the book a narrative form that would link story telling with analysis and the construction of subjectivity. I wrote in the preface that I made my editorial choices in the interests of "coherence and continuity," but of course coherence is always coherence *about something*, and continuity means making choices about what issues and episodes you want to string together in order to underscore the storylines and the issues you want to emphasize, and to a significant degree my choices were informed by my literary-critical work as a theorist.

Then of course, there was my desire to try to do justice to the complexity and importance of *Burke's work* as a theorist. This adds another dimension to the

9

relationship between theory and my particular approach to editing the correspondence. Theory is a subject *in* the letters. Burke uses his letters to Cowley to work out his theoretical ideas, and he gets thoughtful, often skeptical responses. Another editor might have played down all of the theorizing, fearing the general reader wouldn't be interested. Not me. I was determined to get as much of Burke's theoretical thinking into the book as I could. Burke, having gotten Cowley to choose a theorist as an editor, got someone editing the letters who was committed to making selections that focused careful attention on his theoretical work. One of my challenges of course, was to balance this kind of attention in a way that gave equal time to Cowley's work as an editor, social commentator, and literary historian. I was determined to do justice to Burke's theoretical work, but also to Cowley's side of the correspondence as well.

Conclusion

What I've been stressing so far, of course, is the mediating role I had preparing The Selected Correspondence of Kenneth Burke and Malcolm Cowley. Common sense would seem to suggest that it's the editor's responsibility in a job like this to *simply get out of the way* of the letters and let them speak for themselves, to let the letters be *transparent*. But the story I've been telling is about the *impossibility* of an editor constructing a transparent text. I never set out to distort or alter the correspondence in any way, to take sides, or skew the reader's attention in a particular way. Yet, thinking

back over the project for this talk, it seems to me that such things are inevitable, that the editor is always in a somewhat compromising position, situated, as he or she ultimately is, *between* the reader and the documents being edited. It might be nice to get the editor out of the way, but of course you don't have editions without editors.

This brings me back to the curious omission of my name from the Book Critics Circle award announcement. For me, the omission inadvertently calls attention to the anxiety we inevitably feel about the relationship between editors and authors, an anxiety about the *betweenness* I was just referring to. In that sense I read the omission as *symptomatic*, as a repression in the loosely psychoanalytic sense of the term. A repression of *what*? Of the realization that something akin to the Heisenberg uncertainty principle leaks into the editing of texts and the creation of editions, just like it leaks into nearly everything else we do. The observations, and the behavior, of the editor, even in the interest of *not* trying to affect the text he or she is editing, end up altering it. Indeed, strictly speaking, *the letters I read were not even the letters Burke and Cowley wrote*. The letters I read were partly a construct of my own reading, and so my reading of the correspondence -- and my work editing them -- put me between Burke and Cowley, *and* between the reader and the letters in the book. The erasure of my name had the inadvertent but quirkily appropriate effect of *simultaneously repressing and calling attention to* the mediating role of the editor. The fact that the

omission was in all likelihood inadvertent just makes it even more intriguing from a psychoanalytic perspective, for it unconsciously marks a kind of unacknowledged desire for transparency, for unmediated access to the text itself.

It also, finally, raises the question of *ownership*, of *whose* book a book like mine – or theirs -- is. As I was writing this talk I found I sometimes referred to The Selected Correspondence of Kenneth Burke and Malcolm Cowley as an edition, at other times as “the book,” and still other times as “*my* book.” An edition is a version, a book is an object, but “mine” signals ownership of the contents, a sense that a book is your creation and that you have a kind of intimate connection to it. But ownership, as well, implies *a certain taking of responsibility* – in that sense I have to own, *take responsibility for*, the book I edited, and so I may think of owning it in both senses of the word. One sense is *subjective and affective*, marking an emotional connection between oneself and the text, while the other has to do with the kind of editorial *responsibility* we always assume attaches to the decisions we make. Of course the question of ownership I’m raising is closely connected to my earlier discussion of how the editor inevitably gets between the text and the reader, how the edited text is inevitably a kind of *hybrid construction* – and of course, the more we see editions as hybrid, the more the question of ownership in both senses of the term I’ve been using it gets foregrounded. *I have absolutely nothing definitive to say in terms of resolving these issues*. Good theorist that I am, I’ve simply tried to raise a lot of questions. I can only leave you with the banal

observation that they're probably all *undecidable*. But undecidability is what keeps us in business, so we needn't worry about *that*.