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Books

An insight into the making of a great artist

Art History

American Letters: 1927-1947
By Jackson Pollock & Family
Polity, €25.20

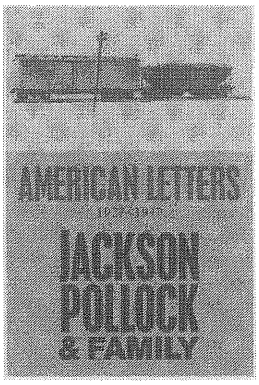
Reviewed by
Gerald Dawe

One of the best known anthologies of the mid-1960s was Al Alvarez's The New Poetry, published in cheap paperback editions by Penguin. The book introduced the great and tragically self-destructive generation of American poets, including John Berryman, Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, to a mass audience on this side of the Atlantic.

Of this group, three committed suicide while the fourth, Robert Lowell, was hounded by bouts of manic depression and drinking binges. The cover of that fabulous poetry book carried a reproduction of Jackson Pollock's Convergence.

I remember staring at the painting in sheer disbelief when I first saw it. Was this art, these squiggles and pulses of light and wild displays of chaotic colour? Pollock's 'drip' paintings scandalised and enthralled the art world in equal measure – as thrilling energetic vision and as anti-art, an irrational revoking of craft and representation.

It has been more than 60 years since Pollock's famous exhibition at the Betty Parsons Gallery, where some of his other masterpieces on display included Lavender Mist, Autumn Rhythm, Number 32. Pollock's reputation is now sealed as one of the liberators of the mid-century American imagination.



As critic Parker Tyler remarked of a Pollock show: "Jackson Pollock has put the labyrinth at an infinite and unreachable distance, a distance beyond the stars – a non-human distance. If one felt vertigo before Pollock's differentiations of space, then truly one would be lost. But we are safely looking at it, seeing it steadily and seeing it whole, from a point outside."

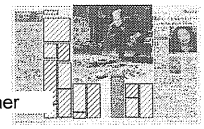
Only a few years after the Parsons exhibition, Pollock's life had become engulfed by alcohol. He would rage against himself and his much loved and talented wife, the painter Lee Krasner – and make incoherent late-night calls to his remaining friends.

Suicidal, Pollock died in a car crash in 1956 at the age of 44. A celebrity life had ripped apart his shy inner world, like many before him and since.

American Letters: 1927-1947 tells a different story, the background story of the Pollock family, and how their lives, witnessed in these letters, criss-crossed the North American continent. The correspondences between all the family members – Pollock's father, LeRoy McCoy, and mother, Stella MacClure, and his four brothers, including their wives – tell a great story of endurance and fortitude and the righteousness (in a positive sense) of civic-minded, work-based egalitarianism that had to fight for survival in the grim economic impoverishment of the 1930s.

The Pollocks had a common radical bond in social justice that veered at times towards communism. Much of their energies, however, were consumed by the sheer effort of getting by.

"We live in a two-bedroom defense housing unit," writes Frank, Jackson's older brother, in July 1944, "which is adequate. Maria [Frank's wife] has a garden of tomatoes, beets, carrots, lettuce, corn and chard. We live frugally, but get most of the essentials. Our social life is pretty nearly confined to our front room and an occa-



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sional trip to San Francisco 40 miles away. The war in Europe is on the road home. I've been trying to get over there these past several months. May make it yet."

American Letters: 1927-1947 shows just how varied the American dream really was (and is) for those born without the silver spoon. As Michael Leja writes in the introduction: "When Jackson, the youngest, was less than a year old, the family moved briefly to southern California, then to a farm in Phoenix for four years, and on to northern California, where they spent a year or two apiece in Chico, Janesville and Orland.

"In 1922 they moved back to Phoenix for two years, then to Riverside, California . . . in 1928 the family moved to Los Angeles, where Stella continued to live through the 1930s. Her husband, LeRoy, frequently took jobs on surveying and road construction crews that kept him away from home for long periods."

That their eldest son, Charles, moved to New York, set a pattern which Jackson would follow. And for all this mobility in search of work, there was little space for complaint or sentimentalising; though, when LeRoy died in 1933, one of his younger sons, Sanford, said: "His absence will leave a gap in our lives which can only be filled by our untiring efforts towards those cultural things which he, as a sensitive man, found so sordidly lacking in our civilisation."

American Letters is a great book because of the calm and humane way it reveals from the inside the struggle of ordinary, talented people to make their lives better and culturally enriched (and how we should never lose sight of that), but also because it highlights the world out of which a great artist such as Pollock was formed.

David Sylvester, the leading art critic and curator, remarked of a Pollock retrospective in Whitechapel Art Gallery in 1958 that "Pollock's handling of paint and organisation of colour is in fact as sure, as subtle, as magisterial as Matisse's or Bonnard's. What the exhibition had made me see is the serenity of his art."

Pollock said it simply enough: "A painting has a life of its own. I try to let it live."

Such a great pity, then, that his own life and success was so short-lived for those who knew and loved him, as this collection of letters dramatically reveals.

Gerald Dawe's poetry collections include Lake Geneva and Points West. His Conversations: Poets & Poetry will be published later this year

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