

“Ma Mère, I have lost my faith”: Mary McCarthy’s Seattle

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We go back and back forever. We go back, all of us, to the very beginning. We cannot understand all the traits we have inherited. Sometimes we can be strangers to ourselves.

--V.S. Naipaul, *A Way in the World*--

I. Introduction: A Remembrance of Things Past

In 1986, a native of the Pacific Northwest long resident in the East wrote to Mary McCarthy congratulating her on her recently published memoir of growing up in Seattle in the 1920s. The writer, a retired professor, then shared one of his own memories:

In the fall of 1929, I stood at the top of Meany Hall steps, a gawky and terrified –almost-seventeen-year old from a logging town, envying the students swarming around, *all* of whom were smartly dressed, sophisticated, and immensely popular. One tall girl, the magnetic center of a group, I gathered by eavesdropping was not entering the University of Washington, but going East to school. Years later, when I read about you, my mind dredged up the memory that that girl had been identified by someone as “Mary McCarthy.” I even remembered the face.

McCarthy, who always warmed to correspondents with memories of her Northwest years, but who knew well the difference between memory and historical fact, checked the record and replied that the incident must have taken place in June of 1929, when she went to Meany Hall on the university campus to sit for her College Boards for Vassar.¹

Every writer -- that is every good writer -- is ineluctably the product of a certain time and place. In McCarthy's case, the time was the 1920s. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., who knew McCarthy well, writes confidently in his own memoir, "Mary was a child of the Twenties, inheriting the rebel spirit, the aesthetic concerns, the satiric bent, the revolt against puritanism, the delight in iconoclasm, the faith in drink and sex and personal freedom."² Yet for many in the American cultural community Mary is less easy to locate in terms of place. Her friends among the New York Intellectuals of the 1930s and later tended to see her as some kind of all-American type from "out there" -- those wide empty spaces, that *terra incognita*, beyond the Hudson. Meanwhile, in the Northwest, Mary McCarthy was viewed as the classic example of someone who had "left" -- that ultimate geographical betrayal, in the regional consciousness. Yet Mary always viewed herself as quintessentially Northwestern, someone with deep roots in the past of a distinctive region shaped by a particular history, religion, and culture. And some of her best writing drew upon Northwest material for its inspiration, setting, and content. The work for which she will long be remembered, *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* (1957) is inconceivable apart from the world of Northwest religion and culture of the 1920s; and her haunting, elegiac, late Northwest memoir, *How I Grew* (1987) cannot be understood apart from a certain landscape.

Of course the relation between a writer and her world -- the interior landscape as well as the physical one-- is reciprocal. Through McCarthy's Northwest writings we are offered privileged access to a lost Northwest, a Northwest of the imagination that can be found in no other place.

II. Mary McCarthy in Brief

Mary Therese McCarthy (1912-1989) was a writer and critic of exceptional ambition and range and was arguably the most influential female literary intellectual of twentieth century America. Though sometimes compared to France's Simone de Beauvoir, the two in fact did not get along -- Mary was a person of intense dislikes as well as warm personal friendships -- and Mary's real talent lay not in European philosophy or belles lettres but in general literary criticism. After graduating Phi Beta Kappa from Vassar in 1933, she quickly established a reputation as a keen critical mind by writing book reviews for the *New Republic* and the *Nation*. By the mid-1930s she was sufficiently respected to publish a series of scathing attacks on the mediocrity of book reviewing in the United States, cutting down each of the major, widely-circulated review media one by one in what she later described as a *succès de scandale*. This early notoriety marked the beginning of her eventual reputation as "the lady with the switchblade," and even, less charitably, "our leading bitch intellectual." Her standards were high, even perfectionist. Her literary model was the Roman satirist Juvenal. Norman Mailer later compared her, not without sarcasm, to the American cultural community's Joan of Arc. Yet Mary's championing of high culture was one of the qualities that brought her to the attention of the 1930s intellectual circle we now call the New York Intellectuals.³

Another prerequisite for membership in this coterie -- which included William Phillips, Dwight McDonald, Philip Rahv, and other male figures less well-known today than Mary McCarthy -- was a very particular leftist orientation in politics. Here, too, Mary had respectable, if not exactly stellar, qualifications. Though raised in a

Republican home, Mary, as a birthright Catholic, had supported Al Smith in the 1928 presidential election, and at Vassar she had been “radicalized” by reading John Dos Passos’s *The 42nd Parallel* (1931), the first in that then-progressive author’s immensely powerful *U.S.A* trilogy. As a result she “never thought much of Franklin Roosevelt” and his New Deal to save capitalism. Coming down from Vassar to New York, she instinctively gravitated toward the radical democratic socialist left, sympathizing with Trotsky and his concept of “permanent revolution,” and despising Stalin and the intellectual hacks (as she saw it) of the American Communist Party. While never an essentially political person, Mary read Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* with evident approval and each May Day joined with her comrades-in-arms from the *Partisan Review*, a small but critically influential left-wing review, to bellow out the radical anthem which concludes, “The Socialist Internationale/ Shall be the Human Race.”⁴

At the *Partisan Review*, which she helped to rescue from the Soviet Communism of the John Reed Clubs and reorient toward democratic socialism, she wrote more of her now-famous book reviews and theater reviews (Mary always had a flair for the dramatic) and solidified ties -- some of them egregiously carnal -- with what was fast becoming the country’s leading intellectual circle, and would long remain so. By the mid-1930s she was comfortably ensconced in this elite group. As one of the New York Intellectuals remarked of Mary with astonishment in his memoir, “To enter a man’s world and to hold one’s own there -- intellectually and sexually!”⁵

To write about Mary McCarthy without mentioning sex is like writing about Napoleon and neglecting to mention power. Though no Colette, much less an Anais Nin,

Mary was the first American woman writer to touch on sex with any degree of candor. Through four marriages, dozens of affairs, and what she later frankly characterized as a “career of crime,” Mary acquired the material for a long string of short stories, published mostly in the 1940s and 1950s, and later collected into books. It was sex, in fact, that launched her on the fiction tangent of her writing career, by landing her in bed one drunken evening with Edmund Wilson, author of *Axel’s Castle* (that magisterial study of European modernist literature) and a pre-eminent man of letters some years her senior, whom she proceeded to marry, in 1937 -- and who, in turn, locked Mary in a room until she produced the manuscript for a novel. This was not a happy marriage, but the result of her literary incarceration was published in 1942 as *The Company She Keeps*. It received excellent reviews for its sharp eye and shimmering style. Of its collected stories, still well worth reading, “Portrait of the Intellectual as a Yale Man” satirizes the values of the Eastern liberal establishment, “Ghostly Father, I Confess” neatly skewers orthodox Freudian psychoanalysis, but the sex appeal lies in “The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt.” Here we read of a female book reviewer for the New York publication *The Liberal*, happily affianced but always up for adventure, sitting in the club car of a transcontinental train on her way home to the Northwest; at length she picks up a steel executive from Cleveland, and, though it might seem somewhat inconsistent with editorial policy, enjoys a night of casual sex with him in his Pullman compartment.⁶

The theme of sexual frankness—deftly turning the double standard into a literary advantage for the woman writer-- worked well for Mary throughout the 1940s and 1950s, when her short stories appeared frequently in the *New Yorker*, providing her with a steady income which she had never realized from the *Nation* or *Partisan Review*. In one of her

New Yorker stories from the 1950s, later included in her 1963 best-seller *The Group*, a Vassar girl -- scandal of scandals -- visits her gynecologist to be fitted for a diaphragm, then styled a "pessary." Though doubtless liberating to many readers in the *New Yorker* magazine subculture, to the highbrow literary and intellectual community some of Mary's sexual incunabula seemed juvenile and downright exhibitionist. At length Mary told all, including the names of her various lovers, and, in some cases, distinguishing characteristics of their private parts. She even listed the club memberships of "the man in the Brooks Brothers shirt." In the nineteen fifties the name Mary McCarthy was practically synonymous with sex. In Philip Roth's *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959), an adolescent girl about to make love to her boyfriend replies to his question "You've done this before?" with the virginally reassuring "No . . . I've read Mary McCarthy." In 1955, when the art connoisseur Bernard Berenson, by then a frail little man of ninety, came up from his Florentine villa I Tatti to meet Mary in Venice, he took her by the arm and said, "Tell me—did you bring your pessary?"⁷

As the fifties broadened into the sixties, Mary and her fellow New York Intellectuals encountered a paradoxical cultural situation. On the one hand, they had become the undisputed establishment, with their circle expanding to encompass the recently-established *New York Review of Books* and extending outwards to the trans-Atlantic intelligentsia. Mary spent much of her time in Europe, married a foreign service officer attached to the O.E.C.D in Paris, and took up residence in an elegant apartment in the sixth *arrondissement*, where she immediately established herself as *doyenne* of the American expatriate community (Mary always positioned herself at the center of some elite group). Yet for Mary and the New York Intellectuals the sixties were also the

beginning of the end. Their particular blend of modernism, with its emphasis on high culture, socialist politics, and sexual liberation no longer seemed avant-garde. In the turmoil of that time, high culture was progressively dethroned by mass culture, traditional socialism seemed intellectually severe and even fusty compared to the “new politics” based on drugs and rock-and-roll concert-demonstrations, and the sexual freedom of the individual rolled into the mass movement known as the Sexual Revolution.

Mary and the others wrote political books on Vietnam and Watergate and impassioned articles for the *New York Review*, but when this sea-change in culture had run its course, the New York Intellectuals had suffered a radical decline in influence and status. By the mid-1970s the old humanistically-educated intelligentsia was being replaced by a new crowd of well-connected Washington journalists (Mary once wrote, “Today journalists are not considered intellectuals”), neoconservative think-tankers, policy intellectuals, law professors in drag, and a swarm of specialized, university-based experts. The old ideal of the “free-swimming” intellectual, and of a free-standing literary intelligentsia whose function it was to criticize the world, now seemed hopelessly passé. If Mary and the New York Intellectuals continue to haunt us and fascinate us, it is precisely for this reason: they were the last of the Mohicans of the old American radical intellectual tribe. We shall not see their likes again.⁸

Quite apart from the influence of her circle, however, there remains the question of Mary McCarthy’s permanent achievement as a writer and of her role in American literature. Of the twenty-eight books published before her death in 1989, only one, *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, her 1957 memoir of growing up Catholic in the Pacific Northwest and her loss of religious belief, is considered a minor classic. McCarthy also

wrote two stylistically brilliant, irresistibly evocative volumes of literary travel in Italy: *Venice Observed* (1956), which can be read with profit alongside Ruskin, and *The Stones of Florence* (1959), a worthy cicerone to supplement Burckhardt. Of the book on Florence, the famed photographer Imogen Cunningham wrote Mary, "I shall never go there, as I could never see as much, and might become envious."⁹ As for her novels, from *The Company She Keeps* (1942) to *The Groves of Academe* (1952) and beyond, these can be read as an adventurous, episodic autobiography but retain their permanent interest as an extended comedy of manners satirizing the values, and exposing the shallowness, of the educated, liberal, upper-middle classes of mid-twentieth century America: the very audience for which Mary wrote in the commodity-laden pages of the *New Yorker*.

Finally there is her late coming-of-age memoir of Seattle in the twenties, *How I Grew* (1987), the first in a projected three-volume series on her intellectual development, and the only one completed and published before her death in 1989. Though it covers much of the same ground as *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* and has a similar but more mature and considered preoccupation with religion, the book is personally franker and more revealing. Looking back on the Northwest of the twenties, *How I Grew* is also less interior than most of McCarthy's writing--more focused outward on a region, and a city, just then coming of age, bursting with excitement and adolescent energy. If there is a neglected classic of Northwest literature, this, surely, is it.