

# **Self and Society in Mary McCarthy's Writing**

Marina Sagorje

Linacre College

University of Oxford

A thesis submitted for the degree of

*Doctor of Philosophy*

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# THESIS ABSTRACT: SELF AND SOCIETY IN MARY MCCARTHY'S WRITING

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My thesis analyses the oeuvre of the American writer Mary McCarthy (1912-1989), with the focus on the figure of the outsider looking in. McCarthy uses outsider figures in her texts as prisms through which distinctive historical moments as well as problems of gender, race and religion are studied against the backdrop of the changing climate of the American “red” 1930s, the anxious ’50s, and the late ’60s torn by the Vietnam war. Examples of McCarthy’s recurring protagonists are the New York Bohemian girl of the ’30s in the predominantly male world marred by the Great Depression, the Jewish character stereotyped as the Other by the poorly hidden anti-Semitism of the American society of the early 1940s, and the orphan child exposed to adult cruelty, who finds her only solace in the Catholic religion. Their position of being outsiders who live in a society not their own by birthright, is shown to be crucial for their acquisition and knowledge of truth, and links insight to marginality, which is reinforced by McCarthy’s technique of ironically detached observation, the “cold eye” of her prose. McCarthy herself appears as an outsider character throughout her writing, both as the historical figure and as the protagonist of her autobiographies. Her self-image, shaped by her orphaned childhood and her youth as a Bohemian girl among leftist intellectuals, is subject to conflicting impulses of confession and concealment. McCarthy’s wide use of autobiographical details in her fiction and elements of fiction in her autobiographies led most critics to study her work from a chiefly biographical point of view. My own approach to Mary McCarthy’s writing takes their findings into consideration, and includes the analysis of the historical, political, and social contexts of McCarthy’s texts, as well as the intertextual dialogue with a few select writings by McCarthy’s contemporaries such as Philip Roth and Sylvia Plath.



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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THE THESIS

BJ: *The Bell Jar*, by Sylvia Plath (1963)

CL: *A Charmed Life*, by Mary McCarthy (1955)

CSK: *The Company She Keeps*, by Mary McCarthy (1942)

GA: *The Groves of Academe*, by Mary McCarthy (1952)

HIG: *How I Grew*, by Mary McCarthy (1987)

MCG: *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, by Mary McCarthy (1957)

PFI: *Pictures From an Institution*, by Randall Jarrell (1954)

TG: *The Group*, by Mary McCarthy (1963)

TO: *The Oasis*, by Mary McCarthy (1949)



## INTRODUCTION TO SELF AND SOCIETY IN MARY MCCARTHY'S WRITING

McCarthy was feared and revered in the smart, tight, testy, and frequently backstabbing world of midcentury literary quarterlies and political reviews. Her critical assessments of theater and literature were scathing, and no one was too high to be brought low. Arthur Miller, J. D. Salinger, and Tennessee Williams – the greats of the day – all came in for vivisection, McCarthy's own Theater of Cruelty on the page. ("Torn animals," poet Randall Jarrell wrote of a character based on McCarthy, "were removed at sunset from that smile.") Her early novels read like moral chess matches where everyone is a pawn. And her memoirs, well, one thinks of brutal honesty dressed in beautiful scansion, Latinate sentences of classical balance and offhand wit in which nothing is sacred and no one is spared, not even the author herself. There was never anything "ladylike" about Mary McCarthy's writing. She struck fear in the hearts of male colleagues, many of whom she took to bed *without* trembling or pearls.<sup>1</sup>

This introduction of Mary McCarthy, written by Laura Jacobs for *Vanity Fair* in colourful journalistic prose not prone to subtleties, sums up the essentials of McCarthy's reputation as a writer and public figure. The "smart" and "frequently backstabbing world" is the milieu of New York Intellectuals of the 1930s, who were the young author's clique; the vivisection of "the greats of the day" is her theatre criticism which was the start of her literary career; the "brutal honesty" of her early fiction such as her literary debut *The Company She Keeps*, prompted William Carlos Williams to write the following to Simon and Schuster Publishers, who had sent him a copy of the novel:

You see how seriously I'm taking this. The thing really cuts, right across the cornea, with the now traditional razor edge. And always, the girl finds that the eyeball is only a sack of humors and the pupil of the eye is just a hole.<sup>2</sup>

The eye was to come up again eight years later in McCarthy's collection of short stories *Cast a Cold Eye* (a line from William Butler Yeats' epitaph), its title becoming

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<sup>1</sup> Laura Jacobs, "Vassar Unzipped," *Vanity Fair*, July 2013, 90.

<sup>2</sup> William Carlos Williams, letter to Simon and Schuster Publishers, 6 May 1942, Mary McCarthy Papers, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries, box 95.

inseparable from any critique on her style of writing from then on.<sup>3</sup> William Carlos Williams' focus on the eye is not a coincidence – mentioning the “now traditional razor edge,” Williams situates McCarthy's debut in the context of documentarist literature of the 1930s, with the camera as its prime symbol and the camera eye (the cold eye) perceived as “the time's equivalent of ideal truth.”<sup>4</sup>

American documentarism started “as an oppositional movement under the auspices of radical magazines such as the *New Masses* in the twenties.”<sup>5</sup> Social documentary, which was institutionalized under the New Deal, became widely popular amidst the *Proletkult* of the “red” thirties.<sup>6</sup> This genre famously treated the plight of sharecroppers in the American South and prairie tenant farmers who suffered during the Dust Bowl and Great Depression. Erskine Caldwell's and Margaret Bourke-White's *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937), a graphic portrayal of the American Southern underclass, as well as James Agee's and Walker Evans' *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), heralded as “a photographic and verbal record of the daily living (...) of an average white family of tenant farmers,” are considered representative works of the genre and period.<sup>7</sup> Both books consist of texts (by Caldwell and Agee) and photographic images (by Bourke-White and Evans) that appear on “an equal basis with words.”<sup>8</sup> In his “Preface,” Agee comments on his and Evans' method:

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<sup>3</sup> The epitaph on the gravestone of the Irish poet William Butler Yeats (1865-1939), taken from the last lines of his poem “Under Ben Bulbin,” reads: “Cast a cold Eye/ On Life, on Death./ Horseman, pass by!”

<sup>4</sup> William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (London/ New York/ Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 32.

<sup>5</sup> Keith Williams, “Post/Modern Documentary: Orwell, Agee and the New Reportage,” in: *Rewriting the Thirties: Modernism and After* (London and New York: Longman, 1997), 172.

<sup>6</sup> Stott, *Documentary Expression*, 92.

<sup>7</sup> James Agee, preface to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, by James Agee and Walker Evans, 1941 (London: Peter Owen, 1975), xvi.

<sup>8</sup> Alan Trachtenberg, foreword to *You Have Seen Their Faces*, by Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White, 1937 (Athens and London: Brown Thatcher Books, 1975), v.

The immediate instruments are two: the motionless camera and the printed word. The governing instrument – which is also one of the centers of the subject – is individual, anti-authoritative human consciousness.<sup>9</sup>

Agee's and Evans' collage of text and photographs "aspired to present things in themselves, with more than naturalistic authenticity," the writer aiming to be as "objective" as the camera.<sup>10</sup> Such a writer was Martha Gellhorn, already a prominent reporter in the '30s, and one of the "New Deal heroes (...) capturing the human side of relief in graphic phrases and anecdotes" for various magazines.<sup>11</sup> She referred to herself as " 'a walking tape recorder with eyes,' an image which encapsulates the idea of mechanical, emotionless, unmediated transcription."<sup>12</sup> Christopher Isherwood speaks of his role in his "Berlin Stories" (1938) in similar terms: "I am a camera with a shutter open, quite passive, recording."<sup>13</sup>

The subject matter of McCarthy's early fiction could not be farther away from social documentary, as she never had any taste for the *Proletkult* – she joined the anti-Communist movement, albeit somewhat unwittingly, as early as 1936.<sup>14</sup> When the Great Depression is mentioned, it occurs exclusively within the limits of McCarthy's own social class (upper middle), and her own geographical surroundings (New York City). Walker Evans, speaking of James Agee in 1936, explains why Agee chose to make a documentary of rural America:

He was in flight from New York magazine editorial offices, from Greenwich Village social-intellectual evenings, and especially from the whole world of high minded, well-bred, money-hued culture.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Agee, preface to *Let Us Now Praise*, xvi.

<sup>10</sup> Williams, "Post/Modern Documentary," 174.

<sup>11</sup> Stott, *Documentary Expression*, 77.

<sup>12</sup> Kate McLoughlin, *Martha Gellhorn: The War Writer in the Field and in the Text* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2007), 59.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Stott, *Documentary Expression*, 77.

<sup>14</sup> Mary McCarthy, "My Confession," 1953, in: *On the Contrary* (London/Melbourne/Toronto: Heinemann, 1962), 77.

<sup>15</sup> Evans, "James Agee in 1936," in: *Let Us Now Praise*, xi.

Mary McCarthy of the '30s was, arguably, the personification of everything that Agee fled from. The innumerable New York parties to raise money for the sharecroppers remained in her memory mainly as events where “[the drinks] were dispensed at a long, wet table; the liquor was dreadful; the glasses were small, and there was never enough ice.”<sup>16</sup> But when William Carlos Williams refers to the eye in its anatomic detail and points out the “traditional razor edge” of McCarthy’s early writing, he does so for a reason. Williams’ own technique of observation in his prose of the '30s is “not only specific and photographic, but also medical.”<sup>17</sup> Williams recognized in McCarthy’s *The Company She Keeps* a similar calm approach and a sobriety of style, an emphasis on precise and level headed sight that he himself considered of paramount importance for “the poet’s job.” In spite of the very different subject matter, this is the element which links McCarthy (and Williams) with the tradition of 1930s documentarism, as Williams’ allusion suggests.

Laura Jacobs’ article “Vassar Unzipped,” published in July 2013, is an attempt at a reevaluation of Mary McCarthy, the American author who was once called “the first lady of American letters.” For the 50-year-anniversary of the publication of *The Group*, McCarthy’s bestselling novel of 1963, Jacobs aimed at reintroducing the novel and its author to a broader and younger public who might have never heard that, with *The Group*, McCarthy “had done for the pessary what Herman Melville did for the whale.” In fact, the readers of today’s *Vanity Fair* might not even know what a “pessary” is.

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<sup>16</sup> McCarthy, “My Confession,” in: *On The Contrary*, 84.

<sup>17</sup> For example, in Williams’ short story “The Use of Force,” the narrator describes the behaviour of his little patient as follows: “The child was eating me up with her cold, steady eyes, and no expression to her face whatever.” “The child seems like a camera,” notes Christoph Ribbat, and concludes that the story condenses “into the intense image of the child’s ‘cold, steady eyes.’” Christoph Ribbat, “‘Information and Tenderness’: Williams, Photography, and ‘The Girl With a Pimple Face,’” in: *Rigor of Beauty. Essays in Commemoration of William Carlos Williams*, ed. Ian D. Copestake (Oxford/New York/Wien: Peter Lang, 2004), 182.

Laura Jacobs' piece, with its title alluding to the "zipless" sexual fantasy of Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* (1973), a woman's bestseller novel as emblematic for the seventies as *The Group* was for the sixties, is a move to bring a brilliant and once famous figure back into the public's eye. Its reliance more on details of McCarthy's glittering biography than on the analysis of her work is fairly typical of the approach to the writer, who despite her fame and rather long and industrious career, dropped out of the American literary canon for obscure reasons. Mary McCarthy (1912-1989) was a novelist, essayist, social and art critic. Already by the late 1930s, as the editor of and regular contributor to *Partisan Review*, McCarthy had established herself as a leading American woman intellectual. Her career as a writer of fiction started in 1942 with the publication of her first novel *The Company She Keeps*, which was critically acclaimed by such eminent figures of American literature as the poet William Carlos Williams and the novelist Vladimir Nabokov ("I have made all my students promise to read *The Company She Keeps*," Nabokov wrote to his friend Edmund Wilson).<sup>18</sup> In the next four decades, *The Company She Keeps* was followed by seven novels, numerous essays on art, literature and politics, three volumes of autobiography, reports from South and North Vietnam during the Vietnam war, as well as reports from the Captain Medina trial and the Watergate hearings.

McCarthy's prose until the late sixties was preoccupied with female protagonists who bore semi-autobiographical traits, and their lives in small communities – bohemian settlements and college campuses, for instance. McCarthy examines her protagonists' behaviour and moral motives with a candour that most reviewers found close to shocking – she was named a "heartless chronicler," with a "love of reality

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<sup>18</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, letter to Edmund Wilson, 6 May, 1942, in: *Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya: The Nabokov-Wilson Letters 1940-197*, ed. Simon Karlinsky (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 61.

that is larger than the love of self.”<sup>19</sup> “Her characteristic tone of voice is that of a self-righteous little girl lecturing her elders on matters that they have grown too morally soggy and mentally fatty to comprehend,” says John Aldridge, styling the adult author as the “self-righteous little girl” opposing a group of elders, at once a charming, but also an annoying and subversive figure.<sup>20</sup> “Mary McCarthy versus the rest of the world” is an irresistible motif that comes up in most of the criticism concerned with the woman writer. But her “characteristic tone of voice” was subject to change over the years. She accomplished the dramatization of the emotional complexity of her characters with the help of richly varying and multiple narrating voices. “In every novel from *The Groves of Academe* on, McCarthy has written not in her own voice, but from the point of view of others,” remarks Carol Gelderman.<sup>21</sup> *The Groves of Academe*, for example, a campus novel of 1952, set in the time of Joseph McCarthy, whose hunt for Communists permeated the atmosphere of American universities, is told from the viewpoint of a grotesquely unlikeable, paranoid and lying college professor, very much unlike a “self-righteous little girl.”

McCarthy’s diverse texts expose in their plots and settings the changing nuances of American society, as McCarthy was writing in the shifting landscapes of political and social contexts of the American twentieth century – the Great Depression and the political radicalism of the ’30s, the milder pre- and postwar ’40s, McCarthyism of the ’50s, the second wave feminism of the ’60s, the Vietnam and Watergate marked early ’70s. Her writing can be situated among the texts of far better known writers such as Sylvia Plath, whose *The Bell Jar* was published in the same year as *The Group* (and, in fact, also Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, which contributed to the start of

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<sup>19</sup> Chester E. Eisinger, *Fiction of the Forties* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 129, Irvin Stock, *Mary McCarthy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1968), 5.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Carol Gelderman, *Mary McCarthy: A Life* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1988), 169-170.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

the Second Wave of Feminism in the United States). There are various points of reference in McCarthy's work to texts of the influential American-Jewish writers such as Philip Roth, Bernard Malamud, Saul Bellow and Alfred Kazin, with whom she was personally acquainted and who (except Malamud) took a lively interest in her work.

Although McCarthy was a well established writer during her lifetime, she remains a relatively unexplored author nowadays. The striving to return her into the limelight of analysis, felt not only by Laura Jacobs, results in a series of mostly biographical studies. This tendency to analyse McCarthy's life and not her life's work is interesting in itself – McCarthy was not only a brilliant intellectual but also a strikingly beautiful woman, a galvanizing mixture – and produces entertaining reading, but it is also reductionist in its inability to sufficiently uncover McCarthy's literary legacy.

My motive in this project is similar to that of Laura Jacobs and McCarthy's biographers – it is the wish to reinstate and reassess Mary McCarthy as an important female American author, who contributes to the history of American literature in general and literature by women writers in particular (the question of McCarthy's reputation as an author and a public figure is illustrated throughout the thesis), and also to find, along the way, perhaps a partial answer to the question why McCarthy's position in the canon of American literature became almost invisible. My approach to McCarthy is informed by the rich biographical findings. My analysis of her literary and critical texts includes the historical, political, and social contexts of their production. Moving between the questions of the text and the questions of the context(s) should result, I hope, in multiple and new perspectives on the problems McCarthy's texts pose. Close reading and comparative analysis of McCarthy's writing and of the varied constellation of texts by her contemporaries interprets her fiction by means of a multi-layered vision as the product of an intertextual approach.

Regardless of her diversity, McCarthy always remained interested in one main topic – the position and the problems of an outsider, the “little girl” against “her elders,” as Aldridge put it. It is not a coincidence that McCarthy’s best-known collection of essays on literature, feminism and the political and social scene is called *On the Contrary*. The outsider as a leading figure and a consciously chosen part in McCarthy’s fiction and non-fiction is the centre, the key aspect of the present study. McCarthy’s narrators in her fiction and McCarthy herself as a writer and public person use the role of the outsider to watch the workings of society from the least possible distance, but never totally merge with the crowd, despite their minute knowledge of the society’s laws and manners. They try to uncover the moral truth behind people’s words and actions. Although there is never an open conflict between the watching individual – be it McCarthy’s protagonist or the narrator herself – and the society, to be an outsider, no matter how well masked in the group, seems crucial in acquiring this knowledge of truth.

McCarthy’s outsider figures are not marginalised because of their deviance – they do not deliberately break any social rules. On the contrary, they are extremely socially aware and class conscious, and do not seem to be outside of society at all, at least at first glance. Their common striving is to blend in, to belong. The girls of *The Group* try their best to find their proper place in a society marred by the Great Depression. McCarthy’s Jewish characters are thoroughly assimilated and mingle with Gentiles, the protagonists from small social networks – Martha Sinnott in a Bohemian village, and the “negative hero” Henry Mulcahy in “the groves of academe” – are interested in studying the structure of the social life they are surrounded by. Their primary outsider status comes not from the inside, not from their conscious wish to be different, but from the outside, formed by circumstances beyond their control such as race (Jews),

gender (girls), early orphanhood (McCarthy's autobiographical *I*). In fact, McCarthy's autobiographical *I* calls all of the markers of outsiderism found in McCarthy's figures her own. Laura Jacobs mentions this as well in her rapidly moving summary of the material that is the subject matter of McCarthy's autobiographies and early fiction:

A little girl with a gimlet eye, Mary was acutely aware of her new status – the outsider looking in – and she became well acquainted with the power games played by those on the inside. Her coming-of-age brought more of the same. As a Seattle girl of uncertain class (not to mention – and she didn't – a Jewish grandmother), she was an outsider at East Coast, upper-crust Vassar. As an Irish Catholic of bourgeois upbringing, she was an outsider among *Partisan Review*'s gang of first-generation Jews, even as she ruled from within as the magazine's theater critic and queen cobra, entrancing male colleagues while living with *P.R.*'s editor Philip Rahv. In fact, being "inside" only brought ambivalence. "A princess among the trolls" is how she came to characterize her position at *P.R.*, rather nastily, in her astonishing short story of 1941, "The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt."<sup>22</sup>

The protagonists' ways of dealing with their positions of outsiders include rejection (as in the narrator's perception of the Jewish host in in the short story "The Genial Host") and reinforcement, as in the self-perception of Margaret Sargent in *The Company She Keeps*, enjoying her status as the lonely Bohemian girl, or Henry Mulcahy in *The Groves of Academe*, or Mary McCarthy herself, as a figure of her own autobiographies. All of these characters go through the social moves without any major disturbances, aware of all the little laws and habits of the social groups which surround them, but most of them are not natural members of these groups, with a birthright to belong – their knowledge is studied, not inherited. The mechanisms of society, which always remains slightly alien to McCarthy's narrator, are studied as if under a magnifying glass. Marginality, in whichever form it appears in McCarthy's fiction, is always closely connected with insight. This manner of studying, of watching from the outside to gain insight might be responsible for the "cold eye" of

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<sup>22</sup> Jacobs, "Vassar Unzipped," 93.

McCarthy's prose. Inherent in the "cold eye," apart from its aloof recording of facts as a "camera eye," is satire and irony as means of distance and detachment. The cold eye of the outsider becomes also the judging eye, it is capable of changing roles, of turning those who brand the outsider as such into outsiders themselves.

The position of the outsider looking in is the crucial and the connecting element of central aspects in McCarthy's fiction, non-fiction, autobiography and biography. Her preoccupation with autobiography and displaced autobiography shaped her reputation as a writer and inspired a series of biographies constituting the bulk of the critical debate about her up to this day. Without them, McCarthy might not have had an afterlife at all, like her contemporary female authors Tess Slesinger or Hortense Calisher, whose works are discussed in the context of McCarthy's *The Company She Keeps*.<sup>23</sup> The thematic closeness between McCarthy's (especially early) fiction and autobiography was perceived to be so great that Robert Lowell mentioned Mary's newly released *Charmed Life* in a letter to their mutual friend Elizabeth Bishop in the following terms:

Have you read her last in which Mary (divorced and remarried) is seduced by Wilson (divorced and remarried) after a Wellfleet reading of Racine's *Bérénice*. In the last chapter Mary driving to Boston for an abortion is run into and killed by a red-headed Millay-like Cape poet driving on the wrong side of the road. Who can doubt that Mary really *lives* in her books. If she ever loses her mind, she'll never know which parts of her life she lived and which she wrote.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Tess Slesinger (1905-1945) was an American intellectual, writer and screenwriter. Married to Herbert Solow, the chief editor of *The Menorah Journal*, she was part of the intellectual circle around Lionel Trilling in New York. After her divorce from Solow, Slesinger went to Hollywood to write screenplays. "A crowded life indeed and far more than a footnote in American literature," remarks Elisabeth Hardwick in her "Introduction" to Slesinger's only novel, *The Unpossessed*, 1934 (New York: New York Review of Books, 2002), viii. Hortense Calisher (1911-2009) was an American writer of short stories and novels. Joyce Carol Oates lists her among the "forgotten, neglected" generation of writers, and finds Calisher to be "a strangely elusive presence." Joyce Carol Oates, "The Citizen Courior of Outer Space," review of *Mysteries of Motion*, by Hortense Calisher, *New York Times Book Review*, November 6, 1982, accessed September 14, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/1983/11/06/books/the-citizen-courior-in-outer-space.html?pagewanted=all>

<sup>24</sup> Robert Lowell, letter to Elizabeth Bishop, 29 Dec. 1955, in: *The Letters of Robert Lowell*, ed. Saskia Hamilton (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), 250.

The poet's remark is much more than gossip between friends. It names one of the key aspects of McCarthy's writing, one of the most complex at that – the relationship between fiction and autobiography. Lowell does not merely acknowledge the abundance of autobiographical detail in McCarthy's fiction. He puts her fiction and her "real" life on the same level, giving them the same weight and value, making them, for all terms practical, interchangeable. McCarthy's writing and her public life both show subversive qualities, and their intertwining creates an ambiguity that intrigued her acquaintances and her readers alike, and which seems to be the viable source for the production of her numerous biographies.

The first two appeared few years after the success of *The Group*, in 1966 and 1967. Barbara McKenzie's *Mary McCarthy* is the first attempt at a thorough analysis of McCarthy's work published until 1966, which goes beyond a review or an essay.<sup>25</sup> It ends with the travelogues *The Stones of Florence* and *Venice Observed*. Its central concern is "to find the key that works the fiction and essays of McCarthy (...) [as she] is a very personal writer in a very public way," hinting at the great number of autobiographical details in McCarthy's writing.<sup>26</sup> Barbara McKenzie groups McCarthy's novels and essays into eight chapters, striving to provide "the key" that may open up the texts for the reader. Her analysis is quite insightful, putting McCarthy's writing in the nexus of contemporary criticism, a document of the first attempt at a serious critical approach to McCarthy's then present oeuvre. Strangely, McKenzie's study went completely unnoticed by other critics – there is not a single review or comment on it to be found.

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<sup>25</sup> Barbara McKenzie, *Mary McCarthy* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1966).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, preface.

Doris Grumbach's biography, published only a year later, is an entirely different matter. The book, researched with the help of McCarthy herself, who provided Grumbach with detailed letters on dates and people and, most importantly, gave her extensive interviews which were taped, caused a scandal. The biography was received as "juicy dinner conversation," "trivia", and "dissection of personal lives" by reviewers of whom there were many, and McCarthy came to utterly regret her collaboration.<sup>27</sup> Doris Grumbach, a novelist herself, aptly called her work *The Company She Kept*, alluding to McCarthy's first novel, which was as sexually outspoken as the bestselling *The Group*. The book jacket of *The Company She Kept* sports a picture of daisies, just as the cover of the first editions of *The Group* did, pointing to Vassar's "daisy chain" tradition (a fest during which students carried a flower-wrought chain). McCarthy called *The Group* a record of the girls' "gossip and gamble," and Grumbach states in the introduction to her biography: "Ours is an age of gossip. In our time the public is far more interested in the writer than in the writer's products."<sup>28</sup> She then proceeds to point out that "biographical data has importance in McCarthy's case only if we do not stop with it."<sup>29</sup> However, the backtracking of personal life to explain McCarthy's fiction turns out to be persistent in Grumbach's work, a feature that provoked McCarthy's scorn.

Straight off, I don't like what you've done with me as a human being and with other human beings associated with me. (...) I confess that, reading certain passages of your text, I wished I *were* dead.

McCarthy wrote this to Grumbach in September 1966, having read the galleys of the book and found out that the tape conversations that she assumed were recorded for

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<sup>27</sup> For instance comment about "juicy dinner conversation" by Mordecai Richler, "Mr. & Mrs. Wilson," review of *The Company She Kept*, by Doris Grumbach, *Guardian*, September 15, 1967, 5.

<sup>28</sup> Doris Grumbach, *The Company She Kept: A Revealing Portrait of Mary McCarthy* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1967), 19.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

“the background,” now “astonishingly bec[a]me the foreground.”<sup>30</sup> McCarthy admits in the same letter: “Unfortunately, I am not discreet and I do not seem to ‘learn.’ I enjoy talking.” The main problem with Grumbach’s biography, apart from its aspiration to be a literary study and not a bio-critique, lies in the time of its publication. Most people McCarthy enjoyed talking about were very much alive and well at the time the book came out. Edmund Wilson, the prominent American literary critic and McCarthy’s second husband in a difficult and sometimes violent marriage, wrote to the publishers of *The Company She Kept*:

The important thing for Coward-McCann is not to let Miss Grumbach say that the inventions of Miss McCarthy’s fictions are literally true of me and her relations with me. (...) This is the kind of thing that really can’t be done till the parties are all dead and the documents at the biographer’s disposal.<sup>31</sup>

He sent a copy of this letter to McCarthy, adding below: “Dear Mary: I wonder if you have seen this book and approved it in its present form. If you haven’t seen it, I think, you should. The author is evidently an idiot.”<sup>32</sup> Besides the strong feelings Grumbach evoked in her subjects, and the fact that the parties concerned were very much alive in 1966, there is another main problem with the timing of *The Company She Kept*. By 1966, McCarthy had published only *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, an artful memoir of her childhood and youth. She was to write two further volumes of autobiography, *How I Grew* in 1987, and *Intellectual Memoirs*, published posthumously in 1992 – McCarthy planned to write more, but sadly her life ended before she was able to fully realise her plans. It seems that the autobiographical streak in her oeuvre was competing with biographical writing done by others decades before

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<sup>30</sup> Mary McCarthy, letter to Doris Grumbach, 26 Sep. 1966, Mary McCarthy Papers, Archives and Special Collection Library, Vassar College Libraries, f. 91.13.

<sup>31</sup> Edmund Wilson, letter to John J. Geoghegan, 24 Sep. 1966, Mary McCarthy Papers, Archives and Special Collection Library, Vassar College Libraries, f. 91.16.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

further autobiographical texts came into being. McCarthy explained why she objected to Grumbach's indiscretion about private biographical facts:

If I tell you, say, that I lost my virginity at the age of fourteen in a Marmon roadster, this remains at the level of a gossip column unless I tell you more. Which would be too long a story. Unless I were to tell it myself in writing. The bare fact itself is embarrassing; it is, precisely, naked. My biography has lost its specificity, as you recount it, it might as well be the life of Brigitte Bardot "as told to..." the lowdown. And the lowdown is low.<sup>33</sup>

McCarthy did indeed tell this long story in writing – it is the third chapter of *How I Grew*, a rather touching account of the first love of a precocious child for a very ordinary twenty-six-year old man whose best features were "the car, the pipe, whatever shoes and socks he wore." "It was his accessories that seduced me, as in an advertisement," she admits, making the story specific in a truly McCarthyan way (for there is the dissection of this man's letters – "I did not judge his letters even if I could not help noting some mistakes in spelling" – and the general characterization of him as "banal").<sup>34</sup>

Grumbach's biography got in the way of texts which were yet to come, and lacked the precision and the nuancing that was important to McCarthy and that only she herself could accomplish. Also, in the light of later biographies by Carol Gelderman and Carol Brightman, Grumbach appears to be more interested in secondary details than in central issues of McCarthy's prose. However, the very reception of its publication makes *The Company She Kept* valuable.

Irvin Stock's *Mary McCarthy*, published in the following year 1968, is a very slender volume of 45 pages. It focuses mainly on McCarthy's fiction and autobiographical works, and names the major characteristics of her themes and style –

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<sup>33</sup> McCarthy, letter to Doris Grumbach, 26 Sep. 1966.

<sup>34</sup> Mary McCarthy, *How I Grew* (Orlando/Austin/New York/San Diego/Toronto/London: Harcourt, Inc., 1987), 84, 71.

such as “the sprightliness and detachment of her prose,” the remarkable “honesty of self-exposure,” and “a love of reality that is greater than the love of self.”<sup>35</sup> Stock’s text is one of the few purely literary discussions of McCarthy, as it is primarily concerned with her writing and not her life, and defines the elements of her prose in terms that are taken up by many critics who followed.

Stock’s analysis of McCarthy’s writing is the last one inspired by the success of *The Group*. The ’70s went by without any new studies of McCarthy’s fiction. In 1981, *Mary McCarthy* by Willene Schaefer Hardy was published. It reminds one of Barbara McKenzie’s *Mary McCarthy*, for it gives a critical and balanced introduction to the eight novels – a definite number this time – by McCarthy, and discusses her essays in a separate chapter. Identifying the main themes of McCarthy’s writing, the study relies heavily on summarizing the plots and retelling parts of her novels, to an extent that caused one reviewer to say that this book is for people who “want to taste the flavour of McCarthy’s works without having to read them.”<sup>36</sup> In the conclusion to her last chapter, Hardy notices a worrying fact: “[McCarthy’s] novels are among the best of our time, but although they are hailed as events when they appear, they soon drop out of sight.”<sup>37</sup> Strangely, Hardy regards *The Oasis* and *The Groves of Academe* to be “well established as classics,” ignoring the impact of *The Group*, and the *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, especially important for auto/biographical discourse.

Seven years later, in 1988, the first full scale biography *Mary McCarthy: A Life* was published. Its research began in 1981, a year after McCarthy’s scandal with the playwright Lillian Hellman, when McCarthy said in a television show that “every

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<sup>35</sup> Irvin Stock, *Mary McCarthy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1968), 5-14.

<sup>36</sup> Cheri Davis-Langdell, review of *Mary McCarthy*, by Willene Schaefer Hardy, *Journal of American Studies* 17.2 (1983): 278.

<sup>37</sup> Willene Schaefer Hardy, *Mary McCarthy* (New York: Ungar, 1981), 197.

word Hellman wrote was a lie including *and* and *the*.” Hellman sued McCarthy for libel, which marked the beginning of McCarthy’s own hunting for auto/biographical truth. The author Carol Gelderman wrote the biography with the cooperation of McCarthy herself – the novelist helped to arrange interviews with her old friends and enemies (“It occurs to me that you probably ought to interview my enemies as well as my friends. I may have more enemies than I know, but I can suggest a few names”), and provided much background information for this exhaustively researched biography.<sup>38</sup> Unlike Doris Grumbach, Gelderman used the contact with her subject wisely, declaring that one of her primary aims was to “explore the discrepancy between the public image and the private person,” and acting as a referee rather than critic of McCarthy’s work. Interviews with many of McCarthy’s contemporaries and access to previously unavailable correspondence make this biography one of the important sources for research used in the present study.

Gelderman’s biography was surpassed only three years later by Carol Brightman’s immense work *Writing Dangerously: A Critical Biography of Mary McCarthy*. McCarthy died in 1989, when Brightman was still researching for the book, but she and McCarthy stayed in close contact until the very end of the writer’s life. Prior to this biography, Carol Brightman published numerous interviews with and articles on McCarthy. She is also the editor of the correspondence between McCarthy and the philosopher Hannah Arendt, which appeared under the title *Between Friends* in 1995. Brightman is probably the most influential and insightful McCarthy scholar to this date. *Writing Dangerously* offers information on McCarthy’s family history and background, her education, the networks of friends and intellectuals that were of great importance throughout McCarthy’s life. It also provides extensive historical, political

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<sup>38</sup> Mary McCarthy, letter to Carol Gelderman, 1 Aug. 1981, Mary McCarthy Papers, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries, f. 93.3.

and social contexts of the times. Carol Brightman wrote to McCarthy about her proposal for *Writing Dangerously*:

I want this to be the kind of book I like to read. (...) namely, one that reconstructs the historical ground out of which chance and choice conspire to fashion a life, and a life's work.<sup>39</sup>

Both the life and the life's work are equally in the foreground here, and *Writing Dangerously* can be used as a map for the research on McCarthy, since its vastness of information, presented in a delicate, scholarly manner, guides one well in most of the areas of interest in the context of the author's life and work.

Frances Kiernan's *Seeing Mary Plain* appeared in the year 2000. It is as voluminous as *Writing Dangerously*, but its aims are different. Kiernan worked for many years as an editor for *The New Yorker*, and her style of writing bears the mark of flamboyant journalese, with a tendency towards simplification, exaggeration and flatness. However, the great value of the book lies in its collection of long excerpts from interviews (Kiernan herself conducted over 200 interviews for this book), letters, and reviews, which make up the body of the text, and create a mosaic of different voices (many of the rare documents that I came across in the Vassar Archives and Special Collections Library are present in shortened form in Kiernan's biography).

Sabrina Fuchs Abrams' *Mary McCarthy: Gender, Politics, and the Postwar Intellectual* came out in 2004. Fuchs Abrams claims that her text is "the first book to closely examine Mary McCarthy as a fiction writer and a cultural critic."<sup>40</sup> In five chapters and 110 pages the text attempts to trace McCarthy's movements as an

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<sup>39</sup> Carol Brightman, "My Secret Sharer," in: *Twenty-Four Ways of Looking at Mary McCarthy*, eds. Eve Stwertka and Margo Viscusi (Westport, Connecticut/London: Greenwood Press, 1996), 170.

<sup>40</sup> Sabrina Fuchs Abrams, *Mary McCarthy: Gender, Politics, and the Postwar Intellectual* (New York/Washington D.C./Baltimore/Bern/Frankfurt am Main/Berlin/Brussels/Vienna/Oxford: Peter Lang, 2004), xi.

intellectual and embed her writing in socio-political contexts. It is a rather dry analytical overview, confined by its shortness, looking into the problems indicated by its title. It states that McCarthy offers “an effective model of the public intellectual who is at once engaged in and alienated from mainstream society.”<sup>41</sup> Fuchs Abrams’ conclusion is close to my own findings, although her focus is on McCarthy’s role in American social history among her fellow intellectuals, and not on McCarthy’s fiction itself.

Reuel K. Wilson’s memoir *To The Life of the Silver Harbour: Edmund Wilson and Mary McCarthy on Cape Cod* was published in 2008. The only son of Mary McCarthy and Edmund Wilson looks back on the summers he spent with his parents on Cape Cod. While McCarthy stayed there only few years, Wilson chose to live in Wellfleet until the end of his life in 1972. In Reuel Wilson’s memoir, it is Edmund Wilson’s figure, not McCarthy’s, which is given more weight and sympathy. The book offers an interesting look at McCarthy and Wilson from the point of view of the ultimate insider, their child. Memories of his boyhood – of pet dogs, chess games, and swimming – are interspersed with short discussions of the conflicting version of events as given by McCarthy’s and Wilson’s biographers, and little domestic scenes that show both McCarthy and Wilson from new, unexpected angles (Wilson, customarily characterized by McCarthy as “minotaur” and “monster,” appears in this memoir as a charming figure. Reuel describes how his father consoled Mary after she fell pregnant by a different man and had an abortion, and gave her a handmade valentine card “with a little poem urging her to respond to his warm love in this chilly season”).<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>42</sup> Reuel K. Wilson, *To The Life of the Silver Harbour. Edmund Wilson and Mary McCarthy on Cape Cod* (Hannover and London: University Press of New England, 2008), 54.

It is seductive to get lost in details such as these, as they make up the “juicy dinner conversation” about the private lives of public personae, or to look at the fiction with the attitude of the young Philip Rahv, the chief editor of *Partisan Review* who gave McCarthy a job there, thus helping to create her reputation as the avant-garde leftist intellectual, who used to ask “who’s in there?” about any short story that was submitted for publication in his magazine. McCarthy herself did not approve of Rahv’s approach:

What I really do is take real plums and put them in an imaginary cake. (...) If you’re interested in cake, you get rather annoyed with people saying what species the real plum was.<sup>43</sup>

McCarthy’s writing, though frequently treated as if it were a continuing roman-à-clef, can be considered as the “voice of the period,” or, in fact, different voices of different periods, depicting definite historical moments, alluding to complex areas which remain crucial for the understanding of how our culture and literature work, and which range from wide generic topics such as gender, race and religion, to issues of modern literary debates such as “thing theory,” auto/biographies and the impact of psychoanalysis on literature. The figure and point of view of the outsider is the prism through which these topics are studied and by which they are organised. In addition, situating McCarthy’s fiction in a selection of texts by her contemporary writers sets up a dialogue between them, enriched by the echoes and references that these texts share when considered together. Close reading unsheathes McCarthy’s stylistic means of playing with the reader’s expectations, such as her “cold eye” technique.

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<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Elisabeth Niebuhr, “The Art of Fiction XXVII: Mary McCarthy,” *Paris Review* 27 (1962): 93-94.

Mary McCarthy once said that she is “attracted to the small event.” Indeed, most of the issues of her fiction evolve from such “small” incidents as the ride on the train to get a divorce, a work contract that is not prolonged, a house party, a psychotherapy session. The short story is the most natural form of her prose – even the chapters of her novels are usually closed vignettes, many of them previously published as short stories in magazines. But the “small event” is also usually set up in a way that easily evokes the larger historical and cultural context for the attentive reader – the heroine on the train on her way to get a divorce is a ’30s Bohemian girl emanating urban loneliness, the elapsed work contract concerns a university professor who styles himself as a Communist during the McCarthy era, the house party of a Jewish host lays bare the anti-Semitic stereotypes common in the United States of the early ’40s, the session on a psychotherapist’s couch proves to be a parody of a Catholic confession and shows the impotence of psychoanalysis, which at the time of the story was considered omnipotent by most Americans of the upper-middle class.

In my thesis, which consists of five chapters, I analyse McCarthy’s fiction, focussing on outsider figures, to whom McCarthy seems to belong on different levels – as a historical figure, a young Catholic woman among Jewish men, or the American émigré in Paris, and as the protagonist of her autobiographical writing, the orphan child, the new student in a convent school, the middle class girl from the West in an Ivy League college on the East Coast. The outsider figures exist in McCarthy’s fiction throughout decades, transmitters of small events to large historical and social contexts, the counterweights to mainstream, sometimes examples of unsurpassable excellence, or figures of questionable morality at other times. Their marginality is often linked to insight, for most things are better seen from some distance. The intertextual dialogue with contemporary fictional characters by other authors provides

us with information McCarthy hinted at, but was not willing to fully disclose. In the background, McCarthy's consciously chosen role as an extraordinary, but outsider public figure emerges, and is mirrored by her ambivalent position in the canon of American literature.

Chapter one, "Mary McCarthy's Heroine – A Girl of the Thirties," examines the female protagonists of McCarthy's fiction, as they appear in *The Company She Keeps* (1942), *Cast a Cold Eye* (1950), *A Charmed Life* (1951) and *The Group* (1963). The girls share common traits with each other and with their author. Parts of the chapter serve as a short introduction to Mary McCarthy, who, to some extent, is one of her girl heroines herself. The girls are firmly situated in the "long red decade" of the 1930s, which is their perennial home even when the fiction they appear in is published in the early 1960s. Independent and courageous, but also somewhat insecure and scared of the future, they speak with what McCarthy had called "the voice of the period" – "young and earnest, cocksure and condescending," a voice also found in Tess Slesinger's novel of the '30s, *The Unpossessed*. The tone of the girls' description is coolly ironic, even when they are describing themselves. Neither victims nor role-models, McCarthy's heroines refuse to fit into any existing clichés and find themselves in a peculiarly isolated position. They elude the conventional classifications of literary heroines as "oppressed" or "liberated" women, and subvert readers' expectations of epiphanies and downfalls. Their standing out and standing apart is shown by McCarthy through the most intimate situation of involvement – the girl heroine remains distant even during the sexual act, where objects in the heroine's field of vision speak to the reader more than the protagonists' emotions. The focus shifts quickly from the bedroom to the birth control clinic, which is then scrutinised with even greater attention to detail than the previous scene of defloration.

Chapter two, “Objects of the ’50s – Morals and More,” further explores the topic of objects, lightly touched upon in the context of the heroine’s sexual act. The chapter primarily deals with Mary McCarthy’s two novels *The Groves of Academe* and *The Group*. Both novels convey the climate of the American 1950s – a curious mix of political anxiety and stolid bourgeoisie, the rise of consumerism together with the attempt to define oneself through the things one owns or longs to possess. Another aspect looked into in this chapter is the language of advertising and the character of the college girl (as the collective heroine of *The Group*) that makes a comparative analysis with Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* interesting. Objects play an important role in Mary McCarthy’s fiction, giving her prose a “distorting quality,” a “swerve and swoop” that shape a strange sort of reality. McCarthy’s love of exact detail – “a deep love of fact” as she called it – is one of the main character traits of Gertrude, a figure from Randall Jarrell’s campus novel *Pictures from an Institution*, who is a parody of Mary McCarthy. I compare Jarrell’s and McCarthy’s use of objects, pointing out that for McCarthy objects, though very prominent, have a problem of existing by themselves, unlike in the *nouveau roman*, fashionable in the ’60s. If objects ever get an identity of their own, as in Bill Brown’s “thing theory,” it is usually linked to the identity of their owner.<sup>44</sup> They are never free from inherent judgement, and serve as markers of acceptance or exclusion. But apart from these obvious functions of objects, the excessive attention they get in McCarthy’s prose makes them more than mere indices to characters – they might be able to transform human beings, shape reality and point out meaning that resides in small things.

Chapter three, “The Jewish Presence in Mary McCarthy’s Fiction,” analyses Jewish characters who, due to their race, appear with an inheritance of exclusion and

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<sup>44</sup> Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 17.

ostracism in society, but who are also examples of “borderline” outsiders, having the intimate knowledge only an insider can acquire, and a distance of inspection possible only for an outsider. The short stories “A Genial Host” from *The Company She Keeps* and “Ask Me No Questions ” from *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, as well as excerpts from *The Oasis*, are juxtaposed with texts by Philip Roth, Hortense Calisher, and Bernard Malamud in this chapter. McCarthy’s Jewish characters, mostly unpleasant and ridiculous, not only illustrate the accepted anti-Semitism of American society (and a “curious attitude” towards Jews by the partly Jewish Mary McCarthy), but also accuse the reader of the same attitude – the identities of these characters are constructed by partly internalized clichés imposed on them by society, styling them as the Other. This internalisation becomes visible in the details McCarthy’s Jewish figures share with Roth’s and Malamud’s protagonists. The artificiality of this make up is further illustrated by its idealised other side, in the topos of the *belle juive*, which Mary McCarthy exposes as an illusion in her memoir of her Jewish grandmother, and which I compare to Alfred Kazin’s memories of his cousin Sophie from his *Starting Out in the Thirties*.

Chapter four, “Thwarted Confessions – Mary McCarthy’s Autobiographies,” examines the subject of autobiographical writing, begun in the previous chapter in the context of the story of McCarthy’s grandmother. McCarthy’s autobiographical texts *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, *How I Grew* and *Intellectual Memoirs* were written with a considerable time gap between them, and yet they all deal with roughly the same period of McCarthy’s life: her youth and the beginnings of her intellectual career. One of the reasons for this recurring point of departure may lie in McCarthy’s Catholic upbringing, which encouraged her to scrutinize issues of guilt and the weight of the past with excessive care, as well as making the idea of knowing and uncovering

plain truth important. Another reason for these somewhat obsessive returns to the past may be the trauma which McCarthy experienced due to her parents' deaths, and which comes back to haunt McCarthy again and again in her repetitive autobiographies. Apart from that, McCarthy's self-representation, her construction of a series of personae creates the effect of a confession that simultaneously tries to undercut itself. Truth appears to be not a fact established once and for all, but subject to continuous scrutiny. The presence of fiction in autobiography, the question of confession and concealment, the confessional act closely linked to psychoanalysis are consistent problems in McCarthy's volumes of memoirs and in the last chapter of *The Company She Keeps*, "Ghostly Father I Confess," where the "ghostly father" is none other than the heroine's own psychotherapist.<sup>45</sup> Psychoanalysis, a "Jewish science," appears as something to which McCarthy's heroine is drawn because she senses that people who are outsiders as she is may be able to help her, but against which she also protests, longing to be "preserved in her disunity," the "disunity" appearing as the key to her character. The topic of autobiography in McCarthy's oeuvre has drawn recent critical attention, and texts by Paul John Eakin, Timothy Dow Adams and Janis Greve on this subject, together with excerpts from Freud's writings on psychotherapy as based upon narration, are used as points of departure and reference throughout the chapter.

Chapter five, "Beauty and Truth in Mary McCarthy's Political Journalism," is concerned with McCarthy's reports from South and North Vietnam (*Vietnam* and *Hanoi*), the following trial of Captain Medina (*Medina*), and McCarthy's penultimate novel *Birds of America*, the writing of which she interrupted for her trips to Vietnam. The particularities that are implied in the figure of the female war reporter become

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<sup>45</sup> Mary McCarthy, "Ghostly Father, I Confess," in: *The Company She Keeps*, 1942 (San Diego/New York/London: Harcourt, Inc., 2003), 249-304.

visible in various instances in *Vietnam* and *Hanoi*. McCarthy's war journalism is a shift from the personal scrutiny of her childhood memories to the political message protesting the war, a move from the idea of confession to the idea of witness.

McCarthy's approach to journalism is specific – instead of objective and detached reporting, McCarthy uses her travel experience to generate ideas that are already familiar to the attentive reader of her prose. In *Vietnam* as well as in *Birds of America* she mourns the loss of Nature and criticises the idea of progress, a key topic in her novel *The Group*. Her long lists of objects, which McCarthy endows with moral value finding truth in beauty, are present in her travelogues and, as some critics noticed, overly present in *Birds of America*. The political thus becomes very personal under McCarthy's pen. In the last part of the chapter, which focuses on McCarthy's *Medina*, I support her finding that the language used by the participants of war and court trials is usually inadequate and vague, by drawing from George Orwell's essay "Politics and the English Language," which McCarthy herself continued in her text "Language and Politics." Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and the impressions by Martha Gellhorn and Rebecca West from the Nuremberg trials show numerous parallels with McCarthy's *Medina*.

Mary McCarthy's novels and essays published after *The Group* could not repeat the success of her only bestseller. Furthermore, McCarthy felt she was losing her readership. Her personal biography and advancing age mirrored this – living as an émigré in Paris after her marriage to the diplomat James West made it more difficult to stay present in the eyes of the American public, and her throne as the "dark lady of American letters" was rattled by the young Susan Sontag, who was eagerly following in McCarthy's footsteps (she visited North Vietnam a short time after McCarthy and

was even staying in the same hotel).<sup>46</sup> The content of McCarthy's last novels changed from the candid adventures of semi-autobiographical heroines to philosophical questions of ethics and equality as well as the dynamics of group behaviour, somewhat reminiscent of *The Oasis*, her *conte philosophique* of 1949. Since the break from the personal was not successful, McCarthy turned from the political back to the really personal towards the end of her life, as she was writing autobiographical pieces, returning to the continuous scrutiny of her childhood and youth once more. Her childhood as an orphan and her youth as the Bohemian girl among the New York Intellectuals in the '30s seem to be the shaping factors of her identity, and although she pronounced the quest for self to be over with *The Group* at the latest, McCarthy could not stop her quest for truth – “to lay bare a moment of truth,” she went to places where this truth was hardest to obtain, in the half forgotten memories of her girlhood. The outsider position of the orphan child and the single girl among the men, which McCarthy continued to cultivate in her memoirs, seems to be connected to this quest for truth, as if only the insight of the outsider, the cold eye of someone looking from the outside in, would be able to see truth clearly enough.

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<sup>46</sup> Frances Kiernan, *Seeing Mary Plain* (New York: Norton, 2000), 594-595.

## CHAPTER ONE: MARY MCCARTHY'S HEROINE – A GIRL OF THE THIRTIES

### Introduction

There is always that heroine. I know. I would dearly love to get rid of her, to scrap her. She's always thinking about herself, she's partly observing and partly doubting herself, and this is rather the conventional heroine of the woman novelist. Women novelists incarnate that principle of doubt in this kind of heroine, and I'm so sick of her. (...) I always try to make her different from myself (...), but as soon as she begins questioning her motives and representing, let's say, the conscience, at that moment she's too close to me and I don't like her.<sup>1</sup>

In the interview conducted by Peter Duval Smith in 1963, McCarthy acknowledges an overpowering presence of the leading female character in her oeuvre. "That heroine" – a Bohemian young woman with a rather turbulent personal history – appeared in the writer's first work of fiction *The Company She Keeps* under the name of Margaret Sargent, and kept coming up in McCarthy's following short stories and novels either as a nameless "she" (or "you", or "I"), or under various names (the closest to the original being Martha Sinnott of the *Charmed Life*). The sexual adventures of the heroine, often based on the author's own experience, never failed to shock her early readers still decades removed from the "sexual revolution" of the 1960s, but the sober, ironic and distancing voice of McCarthy's narrative forbade any associations with frivolous literature.

Although *The Company She Keeps*, the first of the texts to be considered, was written in 1941, and *The Group*, the last, was finished in 1962, both of them deal with the "long decade," the "red decade" of the American "militant" 1930s. The left in the United States became a major cultural force in the thirties, emerging from the Russian

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Duval Smith, "Interview with Mary McCarthy," in: *Conversations With Mary McCarthy*, ed. Carol Gelderman (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), 59.

Revolution of 1917, and the American reality changed by the Great Depression.<sup>2</sup> The Great Depression was “the strongest marker of the decade,”<sup>3</sup> with its bonus marches and bread lines, which inspired the American left to hopeful talks about a “revolution.” But the three conditions for the uprising of the masses which led to the Russian Revolution, this paragon for the American left – the lost confidence in the ruling classes, bitter hostility to the existing order, and bold initiative on the part of the proletariat, as determined by Leon Trotsky – were never met in the United States, since most Americans felt the Depression as an individual, not a class experience of failure.<sup>4</sup> Left intellectuals, taken with the image of the Soviet republic as a “model of human brotherhood surrounded by a selfish and aggressive capitalist world,” and having chosen Marxism as their guiding philosophy, were still reluctant to join the Communist Party which was prone to rigid indoctrination.<sup>5</sup>

The young woman of McCarthy’s early works, along with her friends and foes, is an urban creature of the Great Depression, the radicalisation of political views, the flirtation with Stalinism and Trotskyism, when, especially among intellectuals, there was “a heady sense of involvement with every rebellion in the air, a spirit of literary crusading, the sense of a movement.”<sup>6</sup> McCarthy’s Bohemian girl, just like her author, is a member of a small, closely-knit circle of New York Intellectuals, a member of a well-defined group with its own rules of conduct. The New York Intellectuals of the ’30s consisted of young, mostly Jewish men, “urbane, steeped in modern literature and philosophy” – Philip Rahv, William Philipps, Dwight Macdonald and F.W. Dupee, to name a few closest to McCarthy. They were the “brilliant, college-bred

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Shulman, *The Power of Political Art* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 12.

<sup>3</sup> John Patrick Diggins, *The Rise and Fall of the American Left* (New York/London: Norton and Company, 1992), 1.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 149, 151.

<sup>6</sup> Alfred Kazin, *Starting Out in the Thirties* (Boston, Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1965), 11.

intelligentsia of the Depression” (with the exception of Philip Rahv, who was a famous autodidact).<sup>7</sup>

Mary McCarthy started her public literary life right after her graduation from Vassar College in 1933. She was writing literary reviews for the *Nation* when she met Philip Rahv, the senior editor of *Partisan Review*, a radical leftist magazine in 1936.<sup>8</sup> *Partisan Review* soon became the most influential magazine for intellectuals in and out of New York City, “the best literary magazine in America,” promoting Marxism in its politics, and Modernism in its art.<sup>9</sup> Marxism was of emotional value to the left intellectuals because it offered a sense of historical direction at a time when “all truths seemed relative and fragmentary,” told them that history was on their side. Apart from that, Marxism appealed to the mostly Jewish intellectuals who were at best second generation immigrants. Marked by their immigrant experience, they considered Marxism the most natural and inspiring radical ideology.<sup>10</sup> As for Modernism, the learned critics like Rahv and Philipps had no illusions about the value of the proletarian art propaganda that was printed in most leftist magazines at that time, and focused on the intellectually challenging avant-garde to appear in *Partisan Review* instead.<sup>11</sup>

McCarthy, taken by Rahv on board of *Partisan Review* as its fifth editor, began contributing to the magazine by writing theatre chronicles. The short pieces that she wrote “once a month, late at night, after the dishes were done” were “mostly

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<sup>7</sup> Diggins, *Rise and Fall*, 147.

<sup>8</sup> Carol Brightman, *Writing Dangerously: Mary McCarthy and Her World* (San Diego/ New York/London: Hartcourt Brace and Company, 1992), 128-129.

<sup>9</sup> William Barrett, *The Truants: Adventures Among Intellectuals* (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1982), 2.

<sup>10</sup> Diggins, *Rise and Fall*, 155.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

unfavourable” in the judgement of the plays discussed.<sup>12</sup> There are two striking features of McCarthy’s theatre criticism – one is her literary approach to plays, which demanded that they should be well written and that characters should be consistent, natural and organic (and found “a stage inhabited by apes with complexes” instead).<sup>13</sup> The second, inseparable from the first, is her fearlessness in dethroning the leading American playwrights highly popular at the time of her writing, and nowadays securely included in the canon of American literature. She calls Eugene O’Neill “a playwright who – to be frank – cannot write.”<sup>14</sup> About Arthur Miller she says that he “is not just lame; he is what textbooks and grammars call hazy; that is, he does not seem to know what he wants to express.”<sup>15</sup> This air of supreme authority emanating from a girl just out of college was the first stone to build McCarthy’s reputation as “our leading bitch intellectual.”<sup>16</sup>

Mary McCarthy as a fiction writer came into being almost a decade later, as a result of her confinement to a “little room” in 1941. McCarthy’s second husband Edmund Wilson, for whom she had left Rahv, put his young wife there because he believed she had a “talent for writing fiction.” “He didn’t literally lock the door,” Mary later recalled, “but he said ‘Stay in there!’ and I did. (...) And I found myself writing fiction to my great surprise.”<sup>17</sup> The fiction was highly autobiographical from the very start, a fact that caused McCarthy to lament her heroine’s closeness to her own self.

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<sup>12</sup> Mary McCarthy. “Introduction,” in: *Theatre Chronicles 1937-1942* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Company, 1963), x.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, xv.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, xvii.

<sup>16</sup> The title of Beverly Gross’ essay on Mary McCarthy is “Our Leading Bitch Intellectual,” in: *Twenty-four Ways of Looking at Mary McCarthy*, eds. Eve Stwertka and Margo Viscusi (Westwood Connecticut/London: Greenwood Press, 1996), 27-35.

<sup>17</sup> Elisabeth Stifton, “Mary McCarthy,” in: *Women Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews*, ed. George Plimpton (London: Penguin, 1989), 181.

McCarthy, in her conversation with Elisabeth Stifton, creates the image of the meek wife who takes her celebrity husband's orders to write. But this meek wife, as we know, produces a psychologically and sexually outspoken collection of short stories with an implied critique of this domineering husband, in fact refusing to meet her husband's as well as the public's expectations of the first literary attempt appropriate for the young wife of the respected and influential literary critic. The heroine of these short stories refuses to fit into any existing clichés of the absolutely free Bohemian girl or the oppressed woman in a man's world. The critically acclaimed writer McCarthy, who still exclaims years later that she started writing fiction *to her great surprise* (as if, were it not for *her husband*, she would have never been able to do it), uses this husband of hers for rather cruel portraits in several of her novels. Thriving on the attention of New York's prominent male intellectuals with whom she shares not only office space but sometimes also a bed, she creates fiction over decades where not only many of those intellectuals can recognize themselves with all their ticks and weaknesses, but whom the female author openly labels as "lame ducks."<sup>18</sup>

This boldness, recklessness even, with the ability to surprise and to write "against" the readers' expectations proves to be characteristic of McCarthy. In his *Boston Globe* review of *The Company She Keeps* William Abrahams exclaimed "[she] looks like a glamour girl, and writes like a man who has been around for a long time."<sup>19</sup>

McCarthy's talent of dissection never ceased to amaze, despite her reputation as a sharp and merciless theatre critic. This reputation, along with the clear-cut style of her

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<sup>18</sup> Mary McCarthy, *The Company She Keeps*, 1942 (San Diego/New York/ London: Harcourt Inc. 2003), 112. In all further references to this text the abbreviation CSK and the page number will appear immediately after the quotation.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Kiernan, *Seeing Mary Plain*, 186.

prose and the title of her second collection of short stories, *Cast a Cold Eye*, tempted most of the reviewers to describe her work with a vocabulary closely related to cold steel, thus invoking the image of the cold castrating woman.<sup>20</sup> Mary McCarthy herself, looking on her theatre criticism of the late thirties after twenty years, notes that her tone was but the “voice of the period”: “the voice of a young, earnest, pedantic, pontificating critic, being cocksure and condescending.” McCarthy admits that the sharpness of tone was also a defence mechanism – the small and weak *Partisan Review* had to compete against the “big magazines” such as *New Masses*: “the tone of naughty disdain (...) was, in part, a girl’s way of meeting this unequal situation.”<sup>21</sup>

The author had been congratulated on her “male mind” various times – maleness being the ultimate sign of quality, it seems. But the content of most of her novels still deals primarily with female protagonists and when *The Group* was published in 1963, it achieved its bestseller status partly because it was perceived by many as a “lady-book”; a fact on which Norman Mailer elaborated in his damning review. The *enfant terrible* of the literary scene, Mailer also had an account to settle with Mary McCarthy who wrote about his first celebrated novel *The Naked and the Dead* in 1948 that it was redolent of “ambition” as opposed to “talent.” Although Mailer and McCarthy were quite alike in their ability to turn people against themselves, Mailer’s aggression surpasses McCarthy’s criticism. His *Schadenfreude* is almost palpable when he thinks he exposes the superior Miss McCarthy as an author of pulp fiction:

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<sup>20</sup> The words mainly used are “scissors, swords, knives, stilettos, switch-blades,” as well as the adjectives such as “cold, heartless, clever, cerebral, cutting, acid, acidulous,” Beverly Gross, “Our Leading Bitch Intellectual,” in: *Twenty-Four Ways*, 28. Norman Mailer also says that McCarthy’s “eye sees with a knife’s edge” in “The Case Against McCarthy: A Review of *The Group*,” in: *Cannibals and Christians* (London: Deutsch, 1967), 138.

<sup>21</sup> McCarthy, *Theatre Chronicles*, vii-viii.

Yet it has happened to our Mary, our saint, our umpire, our lit arbiter, our broadsword, our Barrymore (Ethel), our Dame (dowager), our mistress (Head), our Joan of Arc, the only Joan of Arc to travel up and down our raddled literary world, our poor damp kingdom, her sword breathing fire (...).<sup>22</sup>

It is interesting how important (and enraging) McCarthy's elevated standing inside the circle of intellectuals seems to Mailer – his ironic exaggeration provides, nonetheless, a feeling for McCarthy's position. "Male mind" or not, McCarthy remained a woman in this literary world dominated by men, the access to which she gained, traditionally, through men – first Philip Rahv, then Edmund Wilson. Possibly Mailer (and others) would have been quite comfortable with her there, if she had remained the "lover/wife of" who wrote bits and pieces from time to time. But McCarthy also appeared "almost superhuman," as William Barrett remembers her, using imagery close to Mailer's fire-breathing sword, yet with far more admiration than bitterness:

I see her indeed in the image of a Valkyrie maiden, riding her steed into the circle, amid thunder and lightning, and out again, bearing the body of some dead hero across the saddle, herself unscathed, and headed promptly for her typewriter.<sup>23</sup>

One suspects that it is McCarthy's ability to remain "unscathed," expressed in her writing by a steady current of distancing, elusive irony, which added insult to Mailer's injury.

McCarthy's own subversive position inside the circle of New York Intellectuals is paralleled by her literary heroine. This chapter will analyze Mary McCarthy's heroine, the girl of the thirties, as an outsider, starting with Margaret Sargent in *The Company She Keeps* and ending with the collective heroine of *The Group*. The long decade of the radical '30s is not only the historical background for McCarthy's

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<sup>22</sup> Mailer, "The Case Against McCarthy," 133.

<sup>23</sup> Barrett, *The Truants*, 48.

heroine but also emphasizes the problem of the individual and the group – the importance of political and intellectual groups was a key phenomenon of these times (McCarthy's *The Group* of 1963 takes place in the '30s). This may explain why Mary McCarthy's situation as the woman writer inside a circle of male intellectuals could have been mirrored by Tess Slesinger (Slesinger was married to Herbert Solow, the chief editor of *The Menorah Journal*, and held a position similar to McCarthy's among intellectuals associated with the magazine). McCarthy's *The Company She Keeps* contains some parallels with Slesinger's *The Unpossessed*, as will be explored in the first part of this chapter. But McCarthy, although participating in the games played by her group, refused to take anything seriously – just like Margaret Sargent – thus preserving the distance between herself and the others. This attitude remained unforgivable even after two decades, as recollections of McCarthy's contemporaries such as Diana Trilling show.

If McCarthy's gender created the shifting sand underneath her feet in the circle of *Partisan Review*, her “male mind” did the same in feminist circles. McCarthy's literary heroines, her “girls” – Mary shared the category of “the single girl” with Helen Gurley Brown, chief editor of the *Cosmopolitan* – could serve neither as victims nor as role models, and their creator distanced herself unmistakably from any organized feminist movement.

I will cover a diverse range of reference to McCarthy's writing that will not be limited to utterances by the members of the *Partisan Review*, since I want to present a broader reception of the author's work. The quotations used are to be seen as separate pieces that together create the somewhat legendary image of McCarthy as “one of a kind,” the daring beautiful woman writer with a “male mind.”

In the first part, “Girls and Groups of the Thirties,” I will show that the heroine is always someone who stands out, often favourably, due to attractiveness and talent, but also unfavourably, because the very fact of being outside the norm, the group, can be seen as a disadvantage in a world where so much depends on group dynamics. This standing out is reinforced by the influence of theatre on the heroine’s psyche – the heroine sees herself as an actress on stage, performing for an audience, or, in a subtler way, she plays the exhibitionist and the others are voluntary or involuntary voyeurs. Here the tension between the single one (actress) and many others who form a group (audience), is present once again. The heroine’s tendency of standing apart from others, a certain aloofness detectable in all of McCarthy’s writing, can be seen not only in the most public spheres of her life and work, but also in the most private – in sex.

The second part of my chapter, “The Comedy of Sex” will examine McCarthy’s unusual treatment of sex, so ironic and explicit that it received some criticism from her literary (male) contemporaries. Here McCarthy’s heroine manages to stay an outsider to the sex act even when she is physically involved in it – her hunger for unadorned truth is stronger than her wish to belong. The pursuit of truth is expressed in the careful description of particulars – objects, which even during the most intimate moments take up more space in the text than the protagonists’ emotional motives. McCarthy’s detached, scientific gaze on sex makes it only logical that eventually (as in *The Group*) the focus is shifted from the bedroom to the birth control clinic.

In the last part of my chapter, “Honest Women In and Out of McCarthy’s Work,” I will show McCarthy’s version of the “honest woman” – the word is McCarthy’s and it is ironic on many levels. Her short story “Dottie Makes an Honest Woman of Herself” made McCarthy an icon for contraception of her generation, and was used by Philip

Roth, together with McCarthy's image as the daring woman writer, in his celebrated short story "Goodbye, Columbus." What starts as a hapless one night stand acquires a much bigger proportion when McCarthy raises questions of women's self-determination by giving a most detailed description of a birth control clinic and the limited access to it for unmarried women.

### **1. Girls and Groups of the Thirties**

"She could not bear to hurt her husband" is the beginning of "Cruel and Barbarous Treatment," the first of the six chapters or short stories of *The Company She Keeps* (CSK 3). The first sentence is to be taken with a pinch of salt, since it soon turns out that the young woman is able to observe the crisis of her marriage with the same objective attention she would pay to a clever melodrama. The narrative technique, with free indirect speech both in "Cruel and Barbarous Treatment" and "The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt," the almost exclusive use of the simple past in the text, along with the flat use of third person and pronouns, save the narrator and the reader from emotional involvement.

In both of the stories Margaret Sargent is essentially nameless – just a "she." Her name does appear in "Rogue's Gallery," the story between "Cruel and Barbarous Treatment" and "The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt." Narrated in the first person (the story is presented as an "extract from memoirs began by the heroine"), she is referred to by others as "Miss Sargent." "Rogue's Gallery" describes the (mis)adventures of Sargent's employer, the criminal owner of a gallery where he sells questionable antiques (CSK 25-77). By contrast with the first and third stories, the heroine is an observer, not a central character, thus the first person and the name are allowed here due to the nature of the events described – there is no need for additional cooling off. "Cruel and Barbarous Treatment," on the other hand, contains heartbreak

and betrayal, tears and scandal – and Margaret is responsible for everything. But with only the third person, and without a name, the stylisation and removal from a realist setting is easier.

Mary McCarthy's theatre criticism certainly had influenced her writing – she imported the theatre into her early fiction. Allusions to theatre run like a thread through this very short story – McCarthy's "she" of "Cruel and Barbarous Treatment" is proud of her "triumph of stage-management" during the "Public Appearances" with her "Young Man," who is actually a "bad actor" (CSK 5). The capitalisation of the most dramatic moments, such as "How Her Husband Would Take It," adds to the comic effect of a life acted out as if in a script, consisting of quite predictable situations of limited number (engagement, marriage, betrayal, confession, divorce, engagement). McCarthy's "she" herself is almost a blank, an actress trying on different masks: the Woman With a Secret, the *femme fatale* about to leave her husband for the Young Man, and finally, the Gay Divorcee on a Pullman train to Reno.

"The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt," which can be seen as a direct sequel to "Cruel and Barbarous Treatment," elaborates on the heroine's *emploi*:

She giggled like a soubrette. The giggle was quite out of character at the moment, but she had not been able to resist it. Besides, (...) it was these quick darts and turns, these flashing inconsistencies that gave her the peculiar, sweet-sour, highly volatile charm that was her *spécialité de la maison*. (CSK 99)

Margaret Sargent plays her predefined roles, being always conscious of the eyes set upon her – real or imaginary, they are the eyes of the audience looking at the stage.

The other's gaze raises the question to what extent voyeurism and exhibitionism are present in McCarthy's short story. The heroine's masks hide her and define her at

the same time, like the clothes of a stripper.<sup>24</sup> Her masks of the Woman With a Secret, the Gay Divorcee and others function as the cigarette holder or the fur that the professional stripper wears when she embodies the Vamp – even when the stripper is undressed at the end of the show, she remains the stereotyped vamp, a fixed element of the cabaret, and not a “real” naked woman.<sup>25</sup> The same can be said about Margaret: the stylized, stereotyped stages of her life and the roles she assumes erase the individual tragedy of failed relationships – it all becomes just a show, performed and seen many times.

If the heroine is the exhibitionist, who is the voyeur? The reader is certainly made into one, but his voyeurism is of a secondary nature – he is drawn into it by the text. The people surrounding Margaret, such as her husband, lover, and friends, resemble the reader in their function – they look upon Margaret’s show with the same passivity as the reader, since they too do not decide what is to be seen next. It is only Margaret who is able to do so. Thus she is not only the exhibitionist, but also the primary voyeur – her performance is, in the first place, set up for her eyes. The eyes of others only follow her own, inward gaze.

But the audience, the others witnessing her performances, do have a very important function – they literally are the society with whose approval the heroine is constantly concerned. One detects a strong consciousness of the social life and of the heroine’s relation to the social group in the short story, and, really, in all of Mary McCarthy’s fiction – most of her novels could hold the title of *The Group*, or *The Company She Keeps*. Going out to lunches and dinners with her Young Man, the girl of “Cruel and Barbarous Treatment” is hungry for appraisal of her refined taste: “I couldn’t really

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<sup>24</sup> Roland Barthes, “Striptease,” in: *Mythologies* (Paris: Éditions Du Seuil, 1970), 68-72.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

love a man,' she murmured to herself once, 'if everybody didn't think he was wonderful'" (CSK 9).

After she and the Young Man tell her husband about the affair, the "wronged" husband becomes more interesting for their social circle than the couple. Because of their confession, they are brought down to normalcy from their previously high standing as lovers engaged in a "forbidden romance": "She knew that they had suddenly dropped into a new pattern, that they were no longer the cynosure of a social group, but merely another couple with an evening to pass" (CSK 17). The girl's eventual loss of interest in the Young Man springs from this loss of interest in them both by the social group they belong to.

How can the group have such an impact on what should be a deeply personal matter? McCarthy's contemporary David Riesman published his *The Lonely Crowd* in 1948, a study dealing with the influence of groups on the modern individual.<sup>26</sup> In his work, Riesman does not consider people in their multi-faceted uniqueness, but is interested in the "social character, (...) that part of character which is shared among significant social groups and which (...) is the product of the experience of these groups."<sup>27</sup> He characterises the American individual of the twentieth century as an "other-directed person," somebody who is "sensitized to the expectations and preferences of others," showing "a greater resonance with others, a heightened self-consciousness about relations to people, and a widening of the circle of people with whom one wants to feel in touch."<sup>28</sup> Riesman's modern man/woman stands in contrast

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<sup>26</sup> David Riesman (with Nathan Glazer and Reuel Denny), *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv, 8.

to the social character of the nineteenth century, the “inner-directed” person whose inner compass of values outweighed the shifting demands of his/her environment.

McCarthy gives us the “other-directed person” par excellence – the sensitivity towards others is so greatly developed in McCarthy’s young woman that she devotes much of her time to thinking about the possible actions of others and her reaction to them long before they may occur; the last paragraph of “Cruel and Barbarous Treatment” (when the heroine boards a train to Reno for a divorce) describes the girl’s possible answers to the possible question of her destination (CSK 21). But what makes McCarthy’s heroine more than an illustration of Riesman’s “other-directed person” is the fact that despite her longing for the social group’s approval and the sensitivity that allows her to foresee and fulfil the needs of the group, she remains, essentially, an outsider. When other passengers watch her part with her Young Man, she feels under their “doting, not derisive” looks “to be humiliated and somehow vulgarized” (CSK 18). Here the other’s gaze is present again, and Margaret’s parting with her fiancé is turned by her own making into an exhibitionist’s scene performed to satisfy the voyeurs’ appetites – hence the humiliation.

However, the power of others is not made up by Margaret. The friends, the passengers, the men in the club car – there is always plural versus singular, and the sheer plurality of others renders them a strength the single “she” is unable to acquire no matter how cleverly she might act out her part or how much control she brings into her life by being her own voyeur. Being evaluated by a crowd, homogenous in its anonymity (for who are the passengers and men in the club car but the judging anonymous plural) makes her feel the humiliation that the power of many can impose on the weakness of one. This fear of not belonging, of being an outsider, is hidden among the slightly drunk dinners and amorous adventures of McCarthy’s heroine, and

is, absurd as it may sound, only heightened by the excellence of her social performance. Excellence itself cuts a person off from a group, as Riesman notes referring to successful gangsters who, at the peak of their success, are frightened to be cut down from their heights.<sup>29</sup> Keeping this in mind, the “unscathed” Mary McCarthy with her “sword breathing fire” (or rather her typewriter) looks less “superhuman” and more like a lonely figure who cannot achieve full acceptance in the group of the *Partisan Review* “boys” due to her gender and her talent.

When Chester E. Eisinger reviewed *The Company She Keeps* in his *Fiction of the Forties*, he found not only the obligatory “heartless chronicler” who “examines all with cold honesty” in McCarthy’s work, but also that “the most remarkable feature of those stories is that they are redolent of the thirties, they are dated.”<sup>30</sup> There are indeed many historical details in the texts – the possibility of obtaining a divorce in Reno alone, the Pullman train with its porters who served meals in the compartment and made up beds, the cost of a bath on the train (one dollar) and Margaret Sargent’s salary (ten dollars a week), as well as pieces of her wardrobe (stockings, garters), all point to the first decades of the twentieth century. More important, however, is the makeup of the heroine’s background – the man in the shirt starts a conversation with her about the advance copy of the novel she is reading, a book by “an obscure revolutionary novelist” (CSK 85), and labels her a Bohemian. The combination of Bohemia and an inclination to the political left probably evoked the strongest redolence of the thirties in Eisinger – the New York Intellectuals (to whom the fictional Margaret and the real Mary belong) emerged, almost as a class, during that

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>30</sup> Chester E. Eisinger, *Fiction of the Forties* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 129-130.

decade and sported “a literary radicalism (...) ideologically obligated to a mixture of Marxism, the Bohemianism of Greenwich Village and Soviet Bolshevism.”<sup>31</sup>

Margaret Sargent admits that her advance copy of the book by a revolutionary novelist is but a ploy to attract attention (CSK 84) – most of the intellectuals would never allow the thought that their ardent interest in radical politics during the decade was little more than a game played by grown-ups, good while it lasted, but inconsequential in the end. Diana Trilling disdainfully remembers how McCarthy participated in the panel discussion of the “radical thirties” at Columbia University in 1950:

Mary McCarthy’s contribution to the discussion was a light-minded romp through her fellow-travelling youth. She made the radicalism of the intellectuals the target of her sharp wit and allowed it no seriousness of purpose.<sup>32</sup>

But a real revolution was out of these intellectuals’ reach and out of their interest – they were much more “absorbed in parties, gossip and talk,” and all that McCarthy did, back in the ’30s and then in the ’50s of Trilling’s memoir, was to take the circle for what it was.<sup>33</sup> In this discussion twenty years later, McCarthy once again ends up standing outside the circle.

John Chamberlain, used by McCarthy for the physical portrait of her “Intellectual as a Yale Man” (the fiction of the short story, in which Margaret Sargent and Jim Barnett have an affair, brought some uncomfortable moments in the real life of the married John Chamberlain), wrote the following in the review of *The Company She Keeps* in *The New York Times* on May 16, 1942:

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<sup>31</sup> James Burkhardt Gilbert, *Writers and Partisans* (New York/London/Sydney: John Wiley, 1968), 90.

<sup>32</sup> Diana Trilling, *The Beginning of the Journey* (New York/San Diego/London: Hartcourt Brace, 1993), 97.

<sup>33</sup> Kazin, *Starting Out*, 159.

Several years ago Tess Slesinger wrote a memorable story of bohemian and radical New York. She called it *The Unpossessed* – meaning that its characters, unlike those of Dostoevsky, acted out of an inner sterility (...). In spite of Miss Slesinger's judgement, however, bohemian and radical New York still persists. Now, in *The Company She Keeps*, Mary McCarthy, the sharp-eyed wife of Edmund Wilson, has done *The Unpossessed* from a different angle.<sup>34</sup>

Tess Slesinger may seem like Mary McCarthy's uncanny double, belonging to the group of the *Menorah Journal*, a big cosmopolitan Jewish magazine. Elliot Cohen, the editor who influenced the *Menorah Journal* most during the late twenties and early thirties (and from whom Slesinger drew her professor Bruno Leonard of *The Unpossessed*) attracted a small group of Jewish Columbia students to the magazine and, even more so, to himself – members of this group included Lionel Trilling, Herbert Solow and Tess Slesinger.<sup>35</sup> Slesinger's novel has been characterized as a roman-à-clef about the group, depicting the unhappy marriage of Margaret and Miles Flinders.<sup>36</sup> The couple is based on Slesinger and Solow, and the “disorderly, self-appointed group: intellectuals, critical of society's arrangements and very critical of each other.”<sup>37</sup> Tess Slesinger wrote the novel after her break with Solow and the group, and is very clear about the hopelessly self-absorbed type of the intellectual dreaming about a “little magazine,” and engaging in love affairs without emotional warmth. Slesinger probably stepped on many feet, for Sidney Hook tries to dismiss her as a dumb female quite energetically:

She never understood a word about the political discussions that raged around her. (...) Her book shows that. There is no coherent presentation of any political idea in it(...). Tess could talk about Virginia Woolf, Jane Austen, some of the characters in Dostoyevski – not Ivan Karamazov – but the political isms were something her

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<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Kiernan, *Seeing Mary Plain*, 185.

<sup>35</sup> Alan M. Wald, *The New York Intellectuals* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 32-33.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>37</sup> Elizabeth Hardwick, introduction to *The Unpossessed*, by Tess Slesinger, 1934 (New York: New York Review of Books, 2002), vii.

“obsessed husband and his odd friends” were concerned about (...). She ended up hating them.<sup>38</sup>

Hook’s hurt feelings induced by Slesinger are a match for Diana Trilling’s scorn of McCarthy, and it is really the same topic that Hook and Diana Trilling are so upset about – the dismissal of politics as a masquerade. Both of them must at least suspect that there is some truth in Slesinger’s and McCarthy’s attitudes, for Sidney Hook and Diana Trilling are looking back on the thirties from the sixties and seventies – there had been no revolution after all, and capitalism was not as much as shaken in the United States. Apart from that, McCarthy’s relationship with leftist politics had indeed more to do with the scene and the people (men, in particular), and less with the ideology from the very start. “What attracted her to the Stalin-Trotsky war was not politics as such but the histrionic excitement it generated,” writes Paul Johnson in *Intellectuals*. “She later admitted she drifted into her political postures, often from the desire to show off or have fun. She was too critical to be a comrade in the thirties’ sense,” Johnson concludes.<sup>39</sup> In McCarthy’s short story “Portrait of the Intellectual as a Yale Man,” the attraction of Marxism/Communism is spoken of in personal, sexualised terms:

Naturally, for [Yale] boys (...) systems of thought had a certain wanton, outlawed attractiveness; and Marxism was to become for Jim’s generation what an actress had been for the youths of the Gilded Age. During the first years of the New Deal, there were many flirtations, many platonic friendships with the scarlet woman of the steppes. (CSK 172)

Hilton Kramer, notable for his harsh reviews, goes so far as to say: “McCarthy’s politics were like her sex life: promiscuous and unprincipled, more a question of

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<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Wald, *New York Intellectuals*, 40.

<sup>39</sup> Paul Johnson, *Intellectuals* (London: Orion Books, 1988), 260.

opportunity than of commitment and belief.”<sup>40</sup> In other words, Kramer accuses her of lack of ideology, a somewhat risible accusation which makes one suspect that Kramer’s concept of loyalty smacks of a rather Victorian set of moral values, favouring continuity over authenticity. Daniel Aaron lists McCarthy among the “‘renegade’ defenders of Trotsky,” implying McCarthy’s and others’ (those affiliated with the American Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky) criticism of Stalinism and their distancing from the Communist party.<sup>41</sup>

Slesinger’s novel resembles McCarthy’s *The Company She Keeps* in smaller detail. One chapter of *The Unpossessed*, “The Fast Express,” shows some parallels to “The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt.” McCarthy’s story describes how the now divorced Margaret Sargent – again just a “she” – for reasons inexplicable to herself sleeps with an older manager of a steel company (who is “plainly Out of the Question” (CSK 81)), while being on a Pullman train from New York to Sacramento. A short lived, awkward affair evolves from this. *The Unpossessed* also presents a young woman – Elisabeth – alone on her way west as well, though her “fast express” brings her from France to New York, from a broken engagement towards an unfulfilled old love for her cousin Bruno. The entire chapter consists of Elisabeth’s stream of consciousness, close to the free indirect speech of “The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt,” but instead of the distance characteristic of McCarthy, the reader is drawn deeply into Elisabeth’s inner monologue: “Chain drinker, chain smoker, chain lover, chain rover,”

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<sup>40</sup> Hilton Kramer, “Mary McCarthy and Company,” review of *Writing Dangerously*, by Carol Brightman, *New Criterion*, January 1993, 5.

<sup>41</sup> Daniel Aaron, *Writers on the Left*, 1961 (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 359, 443.

thinks the fiercely unhappy Elisabeth of herself, “on board of my fast express, my rollicking jittery fast express, my twentieth-century sex-express (...).”<sup>42</sup>

Like Margaret, Elisabeth spots a man willing to approach her in the club cabin:

Ah, stranger, I see you, at yon corner table, give me the glad eye, the sad eye, the mad eye – professional glad girl, hysterical sad girl, the old army game is beginning again. Hold off a bit, stranger. Where’s your technique?<sup>43</sup>

While McCarthy’s heroine, who ends up in the man’s berth after sharing a bottle of whisky, perceives the Great Salt Lake behind the train’s windows as “an interminable reminder of sterility, polygamy and waste” on the morning after (CSK 115),

Elisabeth, who rebuked her suitor with the words “If there’s anything I hate it’s whisky,” continues Margaret’s thoughts in the following lines:

Something’s the matter with sex these days, these twentieth-century rollicking days, either there’s too much or too little, anyway it’s too easy (free, not cheap, that’s a hot one!) sitting up, finding yourself in bed with a man you don’t like, and yet there you are both tired, both a little sick with too much intimacy.<sup>44</sup>

That type of the Bohemian intellectual girl who finds herself in strange beds without any feeling to supply her with a good reason for this behaviour can easily be seen as a product of the thirties. This sophisticated disillusionment could be the consequence of her coming of age in the Roaring Twenties, when she learned her freedom, and the Depression, when she learned her disappointment; not to mention the first wave of the feminist movement from which Elisabeth gets her refrain, “Why, I am an emancipated lady, Elisabeth, I play the game like a man, Elisabeth,” meaning the exact opposite.<sup>45</sup> The avant-garde writers and critics who were the company that both Elisabeth and Margaret kept, challenged middle-class values and expressed their

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<sup>42</sup> Slesinger, *The Unpossessed*, 137-138.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

radicalism in ways that were often incompatible with psychological well-being. The “rules” of the Bohemian community, promoting “free love” and viewing committed relationships as old hat, belonging to the despised bourgeois, put a heavy, and, in most cases, an alien weight on young women. Elisabeth’s bravado is a poor mask for her sadness – neither she nor the reader are fooled.

The ironic distance and playfulness of McCarthy’s heroine is a wholly different reaction. Unlike the bitter Elisabeth, McCarthy’s Margaret “doesn’t admit that men are in charge of the world and she doesn’t admit that she has done anything wrong.”<sup>46</sup> She is able to step outside her soul and take in the chaos with a truly amused look:

If the seduction (or whatever it was) could be reduced to its lowest denominator, could be seen in farcical terms, she could accept it, and even, wryly, enjoy it. The world of farce was a sort of moral underworld, a cheerful, well-lit hell where a Fall was only a prat-fall after all. (CSK 111)

The same ability to find somewhat savage irony in impossible situations is a character trait of the nameless unhappy wife of “The Weeds” in *Cast a Cold Eye*, who contemplates leaving her husband. The scene where she, “escaped” to a hotel, reads the Bible, parallels in its acute loneliness Edward Hopper’s painting *Hotel Room* (1931). But the woman’s earlier tone of refined sarcasm remains the tenor of the story:

How many women, she wondered, had poisoned their husbands, not for gain of another man, but out of sheer inability to leave them. (...) One regrets, but now it is too late; the matter is out of one’s hands. Murder is more civilized than divorce; the Victorians, as usual, were wiser.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Kiernan, *Seeing Mary Plain*, 188-189.

<sup>47</sup> Mary McCarthy, *Cast a Cold Eye*, 1950 (San Diego/New York/London: Harvest/HBJ, 1992), 10-11.

It seems as if William Carlos Williams had foreseen this very paragraph when he spoke of McCarthy's "plodding murderousness" after reading *The Company She Keeps*.<sup>48</sup>

McCarthy's heroine avoids victimization, unlike Slesinger's Elisabeth whose reproach to men is ever present. Herein lies the main difference between Slesinger and McCarthy. Slesinger's heroines – Margaret Flinders and Elisabeth Leonard – are sent into a hostile world without any defence. The world of McCarthy's heroine is not less hostile, but her eye for the comical and absurd makes it less frightening. It could be that this feature of McCarthy's girl is also the reason for her peculiar position in women's literature. It would seem more than plausible to place her work, with its emphasis on the woman as its central and recurring character, within the pre-feminist or feminist literary tradition. After all, a heroine who has to face social and sexual challenges in a man-dominated world fits perfectly into the popular theme of the oppressed woman. McCarthy actively protested against the backward image of femininity present in American culture after World War II. Her essay "Tyranny of the Orgasm" ridicules the assumption of Dr Marynia Farnham and Ferdinand Lundberg that a woman is less likely to lead a happy, or rather "normal," life and to experience orgasm if her educational level is higher than that of mere literacy, as expressed in their book *Modern Woman, The Lost Sex*. This pseudo-scientific belief that women can be happy only if they "return to the home and leave men's pursuits to men" was very popular in the early '50s.<sup>49</sup> McCarthy exposes the debility of this attitude by drawing up a summary of *Modern Woman* in twelve short paragraphs: "(K) About two-thirds of American women are unfit. (...) The 'fit' demonstrate their fitness by producing three children. (...) For the protection of these children, spinsters should be

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<sup>48</sup> Quoted in Brightman, *Writing Dangerously*, 207.

<sup>49</sup> Mary McCarthy, "Tyranny of the Orgasm," in: *On the Contrary*, 168.

barred from our schools, teaching posts being reserved for married women with at least one child. Bachelors should be punitively taxed. (L) Psychotherapy is recommended for the unfit. It is expensive.”<sup>50</sup>

But the characteristics of a McCarthy heroine have not attracted the attention they deserve: feminist critics show little interest in the author, as Morris Dickstein noted, because her heroine is “neither a victim nor a role model.”<sup>51</sup> One will search in vain for extensive reference to Mary McCarthy in collections of essays about women writers, especially if these collections were published during the Women’s Liberation Movement in the early ’70s. McCarthy is mentioned only once in the almost 400 pages strong book *Images of Women in Fiction. Feminist Perspectives* of 1973, although at least one of the categories of the essays collected there cries out for an analysis of McCarthy’s fiction – “Woman as Heroine.”<sup>52</sup>

McCarthy seems to be the perfect blind spot for those saying that “women in 20<sup>th</sup> century American literature seem pretty much limited to either Devourer/Bitches or Maiden/Victims,” that the only places reserved for a female writer and a female protagonist are the two storylines of “How She Fell in Love” and “How She Went Mad.”<sup>53</sup> Her heroine is complex and vulnerable enough not to be a devourer and/or bitch, and her ironic glance at herself prevents her from being a victim either. Her love affairs rarely involve being in love and are at best the background for her process of self-creation. Margaret Sargent and the others, with their experience of falls and prat-falls, and without any epiphanies deriving from that, cannot be used even as

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>51</sup> Morris Dickstein, “A Glimpse of Malice,” in: *Twenty-four Ways of Looking at Mary McCarthy*, 21.

<sup>52</sup> “Mary McCarthy’s *The Group* had caught the experience of college women who learn quickly enough to leave their ideals back in those ivy halls.” Florence Howe, “Feminism and Literature,” in: *Images of Women in Fiction*, ed. Susan Koppelman (Bowling Green Ohio: Bowling Green Popular Press, 1973), 259.

<sup>53</sup> Joanna Russ, “Why Women Can’t Write,” in: *Images of Women in Fiction*, 8-12.

negative examples, thus not fitting into any of the usual categories for female characters criticized by feminist scholars.

McCarthy introduces with her heroine the category of the “modern girl” – a working young woman with an inner freedom not taken for granted in the late thirties. She keeps writing about “girls” throughout the twenty years following her literary debut. While the girls of *The Group* and Margaret Sargent are indeed in their twenties, biological age is not a criterion for naming other McCarthy heroines “girls.” Jane Coe of *A Charmed Life* is described as “a big, tawny, ruminative girl, now thirty-eight.”<sup>54</sup> Some of the girls are married (Jane Coe, Martha Sinnott, Kay Petersen of *The Group*), and some of them have children (*The Group*’s Priss Hartshorn and Norine Schmittlapp). It seems as if McCarthy uses the term “girl” for heroines who avoid adulthood, or maturity – like Martha Sinnott who, thinking about love as “less a promise than a fact of life,” despairs: “If this (...) was ‘maturity’, she did not care for it; she would almost rather be dead” (CL 22).

McCarthy does not attempt to show the reader how the difficulties of being a woman in a hostile world can be overcome, but she lets her “girls” accuse society in subtle and subversive ways. Margaret Sargent could well be the girl whom Helen Gurley Brown uses as a positive example in her bestselling self-help book *Sex and the Single Girl* (first published in 1962, but drawing on the author’s experience of the forties and fifties), where Gurley Brown wants to reach “girls” most of whom are well over thirty and some of them even fifty (but here marital status and the absence of

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<sup>54</sup> Mary McCarthy, *A Charmed Life*, 1955 (San Diego/New York/London: Harvest/HBJ, 1992), 32. The page numbers to all further quotations from this work will appear with the abbreviation CL immediately after the quotation in the text.

children probably define the term).<sup>55</sup> McCarthy would probably agree with Gurley Brown's description of the "single girl":

She is engaging because she lives by her wits. (...) She has had to sharpen her personality (...) and the sharpening looks good. (...) Her choice of partners is endless and they seek *her*.<sup>56</sup>

Of course, these enticing attributes do not come for free. In fact, the bulk of Brown's book is a detailed and tedious manual of how to build them, or rather the perfect mask of them. McCarthy lifts this mask by letting the reader look through Margaret's eyes.

The insight of the marginal woman in male dominated society, showing the truth behind the mask of the vivacious, "modern" girl, comes as an unpleasant surprise to people who do not question the clichés of femininity because they "do not have to know any better."<sup>57</sup> By reading McCarthy, they are forced to know better. One may presume that William Carlos Williams sensed it, not willing to go into detail, yet unable to suppress the shudder evident in his comment about McCarthy's "plodding murderousness."

In fact, McCarthy not only exposes the modern girl's psyche when all masks are lifted. The next step in the striptease of the heroine is the way in which she has sex – and what sex, unadorned by romanticism, becomes for her.

## 2. The Comedy of Sex

Sexual scenes or detailed discussions of sexuality take up several pages in almost every one of McCarthy's novels. Along with the author's stormy biography, the description of sexual encounters has been responsible for McCarthy's reputation as a

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<sup>55</sup> Helen Gurley Brown, *Sex and the Single Girl*, 1962 (Fort Lee, New Jersey: Barricade Books, 2003), 262.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-7.

<sup>57</sup> David Riesman, *Individualism Reconsidered* (New York: The Free Press, 1954), 170-171.

sexually shocking writer. Just as her heroines share several common traits, so do the ways in which they make love, or rather are being made love to. Take the way such scenes and their context are presented in *A Charmed Life* and *The Group*.

The plot of *A Charmed Life* centres around the married couple John and Martha Sinnott, who move to New Leeds, an artists' colony of loose habits, and make an effort at living their lives contrary to the slovenly style of their bohemian neighbours. After a drunken party, Martha is seduced by her former husband Miles and is later killed in a car-crash on her way to the doctor to have an abortion.

The Sinnotts' last name ("sin-not") has a tell-tale quality much used and liked by McCarthy – a minor character in the novel is the timid, virginal painter Dolly Lamb, who is both a "doll" and a "lamb." McCarthy is interested in giving as many early signals as possible to make the reader perceive that Martha is a "good girl" with good taste: apart from her Biblical last name, Martha sports "very fair, straight hair done in a little knot" (CL 4), just like Polly Andrews, the only truly "good girl" of *The Group*, who is "one of those 'gentle ray of sunshine' girls (...) with almost flaxen hair, the color of pale straw or rough raw silk."<sup>58</sup> Polly puts her hair "low on her neck, in a (...) knot" (TG 267) as well. There is also a hint of a resemblance between the girls and Mary McCarthy herself: the "trademark" hairstyle of the author and the heroines is reinforced by Martha's character trait of questioning her own motives. Martha is exactly the kind of heroine who represents "conscience" and who is "too close" to McCarthy, as the writer herself remarked. Polly's fancy for Bonnie Prince Charlie is another trait she shares with her author.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Mary McCarthy, *The Group*, 1963 (San Diego/New York/London: Harcourt, 1989), 262. The page numbers to all further quotations from this work will appear with the abbreviation TG immediately after the quotation in the text.

<sup>59</sup> McCarthy, *How I Grew*, 134.

Sharp critics could see the link between Martha and Polly Andrews coming: at least, Robert Martin Adams called *A Charmed Life* in his "Fiction Chronicle" in the *Hudson Review* "an exercise in Pollyanna turned upside down. Pollyanna was always a dull little girl, even with her legs waving in the air."<sup>60</sup> The "glad girl" from Eleanor H. Porter's novel acquired an almost proverbial meaning in American culture, and McCarthy was certainly very well aware of the obvious connection between her characters and Pollyanna.

Martha and Polly are not only blond, they also share a fondness for making "pomanders out of oranges and cloves and sweet spices" (CL 253, TG 276). The malicious Libby of *The Group* calls this one of Polly's "few sepulchral joys" (TG 276). Norman Mailer biting remarks that "the real interplay of the novel exists between the characters and the objects which surround them until the faces are swimming in a cold lava of anality."<sup>61</sup> But objects are never just objects in McCarthy's work. Pomanders come up twice in very different novels, and not because McCarthy runs out of recipes.

The pomanders not only contribute to the richness of detail typical of McCarthy's texts, but function as most of her objects, especially those which tend to reappear in her writing, as metonyms. They stand for the "good girl," along with the ethical mind and the hair colour. They are another symbol of good taste, and good taste is just another hint that the person displaying it is herself essentially good. One can assume that the fair hair functions in Polly and Martha as a kind of a halo, suggesting the saintly nature of the girls. Norman Podhoretz has noticed that "the scepticism of [McCarthy] goes hand in hand with a sentimental belief in the possibility of

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<sup>60</sup> Robert Martin Adams, "Fiction Chronicle," *Hudson Review* 8.4 (1955): 631.

<sup>61</sup> Mailer, "A Case Against McCarthy", 140.

saintliness – that is, goodness that comes naturally, as though by Divine Grace. Most Mary McCarthy’s characters are bad, but, like the little girls in the nursery rhyme, when they are good, they are very good.”<sup>62</sup> One wonders what exactly Podhoretz must have meant calling most of McCarthy’s (female) characters “bad.” Since it was the sexual adventures of McCarthy’s “girls” that received most attention from critics, it seems likely that there is conservative moral judgement in Podhoretz’s utterance.

However, it is indeed difficult to associate Martha with a saint in the scene that takes place between her and her former husband Miles, “that horrible man” drawn from Edmund Wilson (CL 100):

He was making love to her on the Empire sofa in her parlor . (...) They made him think of a pair of wrestlers, heaving and gasping, while taking care to obey the rules. A string of beads she was wearing broke and clattered to the floor. “Sorry,” he muttered as he dove for her left breast. (CL 197-200)

This scene, told from Miles’ perspective (and severely shortened here: it takes seven pages in the novel), appeared to John Updike as “a sort of insouciant piece of date rape.”<sup>63</sup> “Insouciant” it certainly is, yet Martha herself would hardly call it a rape:

She could not deny that she has asked for it, if only by her imprudence. Yet when he had first landed on her, she had felt like laughing. She could not take it seriously. All the while she was struggling, she had been suppressing a smile, at his ridiculous searching for her zipper (he had never been able to find anything), at the blunt simplicity of his onset that took her consent for granted. Her chief worry, at first, had been that he would break the sofa. (CL 205)

Arthur Mizener complained in *Partisan Review* that in *A Charmed Life*, the characters’ attitudes are established only through telling as in an essay, and not through showing, and concludes that the novel “has all the deadly charm of Miss McCarthy’s glittering intelligence, but it hardly ever comes to that life which is

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<sup>62</sup> Norman Podhoretz, *Doings and Undoings: The Fifties and After in American Writing* (London: Rupert Hart Davis, 1965), 92.

<sup>63</sup> Quoted in Kiernan, *Seeing Mary Plain*, 375.

essential to a novel of this kind.”<sup>64</sup> When it does come to life, though, it happens in such scenes like those quoted above. “The scene where Miles seduces Martha (...) fairly dances off the page. Only when these formidable antagonists are shown ‘heaving and gasping’ in the dark do they come alive as characters,” says Carol Brightman.<sup>65</sup>

Before the “heaving and gasping,” Miles and Martha attend the reading of Racine’s play *Berenice*. All of New Leeds society is gathered there and McCarthy takes up the theatre as a means of characterization once again. During the reading of the play her characters engage in double role-playing: they read their assigned roles, and they comment on the play in ways according to the roles they have in New Leeds society: the virginal Dolly Lamb compares *Berenice* to a Jane Austen novel, the alcoholic vicomte remembers the play in Paris with Sarah Bernard, the host Warren Coe, always hungry for information, asks tedious questions (CL 170-196). The assumed “high culture” of the gathering is revealed as art-pretention – Miles and Martha, the only people able to understand the play, do not dwell on it for too long: “Warren had seldom such an interesting discussion, but he wished they would stay on the subject, instead of making fun of it” (CL 193). The reading, with its pseudo-intellectualism, is followed by the celebrated sex-scene and thus serves as a contrast to the “real thing” happening afterwards. This is foreshadowed by Jane Coe’s flippant remark about Titus and Berenice: “Oh, I bet they slept together!” (CL 173).

In McCarthy’s fiction, both the anecdotal and the serious – the moments of truth – are found in bed, in the sex scene. This is one of the reasons why her sex scenes work so well that everything else is bound to fade into the background. The anecdotal lies

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<sup>64</sup> Arthur Mizener, “Fiction Chronicle,” *Partisan Review* 23.1 (1956): 102.

<sup>65</sup> Brightman, *Writing Dangerously*, 245.

in the half shame-faced curiosity that is inseparable from sexual matters, and also in McCarthy's use of objects. The broken string of beads and the creaking Empire sofa give away more about Miles and Martha wrestling in the dark than a detailed description of their naked bodies and souls ever could. The small details carefully noticed during the lovemaking bring up the question of voyeurism once again – and again there is no one else to be found casting a cold eye but the characters themselves: it is Miles who notices the beads and apologizes, and Martha who worries that the sofa might break. Voyeurism and exhibitionism make up the two sides of the masquerade of desire.<sup>66</sup> In spite of the explicitness of her sex scenes, McCarthy's desire is not of a sexual nature, but lies in her quest for truth. To lay bare a "moment of truth," McCarthy strips the sexual encounter of any feelings of love and even of mere physical attraction (neither Bill Breen, the man in the shirt, nor Miles Murphy, "a fat, freckled fellow," cause a girl to lose her head), showing how awkward and absurd sex often can be.

The very fact of "coming alive as characters" during sex is extraordinary, for usually quite the opposite happens. Mary McCarthy points it out while writing about "Characters in Fiction," and considering the absence of memorable characters in the modern novel:

The retina is not the seat of character. Nor are the sexual organs, even though they differ from person to person. Making love, we are all more alike than we are when we are talking or acting. In the climax of the sexual act, moreover, we forget ourselves; that is commonly felt to be one of its recommendations. Sex annihilates identity, and the space given to sex in contemporary novels is an avowal of the absence of character.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Claudia Öhlschläger, *Unsägliche Lust des Schauens: Die Konstruktion der Geschlechter im voyeuristischen Text* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Rombach Verlag, 1996), 137.

<sup>67</sup> McCarthy, "Characters in Fiction," in: *On the Contrary*, 276.

Why does McCarthy say this? Writing the essay in 1961, she was more than aware that she herself had been viewed for decades as a writer whose “*spécialité de la maison*” was sex. In her fiction, the individual oddity of a character and a situation is displayed exactly through or during sex. Instead of passionate embraces what one gets are the silly bits and pieces of a reality that borders on nonsense: the safety pin in Margaret Sargent’s underpants and the garter she cannot find, her wave of sickness as a reaction to Bill Breen’s declaration of love, the beads and the sofa – they all make an erotic or sentimental perception of the encounter impossible. Polly Grabbe from the short story “The Cicerone” in *Cast a Cold Eye* keeps her illegal *lire* in her douche-bag and tells her friends how her lover “tossed the scapular he wore about his neck, and which hung down and interfered with his lovemaking, back again and again, lightly, flippantly, recklessly, over his thin shoulder.”<sup>68</sup>

These details of a strange reality in stark contrast to the lovemaking of the protagonists contribute to the absurd, sarcastic humour of sex à la McCarthy. In addition, there is the lack of attraction in McCarthy’s males that Norman Podhoretz noticed as well: “It is the most frequent recurring situation in Miss McCarthy’s work – the heroine never goes willingly to bed with a man; she always ‘finds herself’ in bed with someone she dislikes and often hates.”<sup>69</sup> McCarthy’s essay on the absence of character in modern literature is not only a rebuke to her fellow writers, but, primarily, a not-too-subtle hint that she herself is not part of them, writing differently, in fact belonging to the category of her admired writers of the nineteenth century.

Podhoretz goes on to say that “what we have in Margaret Sargent (and all the others who follow her, including Martha Sinnott) is a spectator of her own life, yet

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<sup>68</sup> McCarthy, *Cast a Cold Eye*, 125.

<sup>69</sup> Podhoretz, *Doings and Undoings*, 83.

somehow not a participant, essentially unaffected by her experience and hence not really responsible.”<sup>70</sup> But McCarthy’s girls think too much to be “essentially unaffected.” The ability to reflect on sensual experiences sets McCarthy’s female characters apart from those whose identities become annihilated during sex:

Even during sexual intercourse, the heroine does not stop *thinking*. In [McCarthy’s] fiction, shame and curiosity are nearly always found together, and in the same strange union we find self-condemnation and the determined pursuit of experience; introspective irony and flat daring action. She has written, from the woman’s point of view, the comedy of Sex. The coarse actions are described with an elaborate *verismo* of detail. (...) The heroine, in these encounters, feels a sense of piercing degradation, but it does not destroy her mind’s freedom to speculate; her rather baffling surrenders do not vanquish her sense of her conqueror’s weakness and absurdities.<sup>71</sup>

Elizabeth Hardwick, a close friend of McCarthy, says almost the same things as Podhoretz, but with an entirely different tenor. Where Podhoretz sees an inexplicable and annoying passivity or “unaffectedness,” Hardwick spots freedom and an enviable strength of character. The heroine who never stops thinking is also the one who notices safety-pins in underpants – it is as if she were always split in two, acting and observing, playing the roles of the exhibitionist and the voyeur at once.

The woman’s ability to remain somewhat aloof and reflective during the sexual act appears generally as unpleasant and exasperating to male readers and critics.

Although *The Company She Keeps* received much praise from such acclaimed writers as John Updike (“Like Hemingway, she began at the top of her form. (...) Those stories are so exhilarating in their freedom and their candor”), Vladimir Nabokov and even Norman Mailer, who admitted that *The Company She Keeps* was “a consummate

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Elizabeth Hardwick, “Mary McCarthy,” in: *A View of My Own: Essays* (London: Heinemann, 1964), 35.

piece of work,” many men felt a personal discomfort reading McCarthy’s texts.<sup>72</sup>

Alfred Kazin was willing to explicitly voice his dislike:

There was a contempt for men in Mary’s writing (...). Describing her heroine’s intercourse on the train, she says that she waited for the man to exhaust himself. It was as if she was not involved.<sup>73</sup>

This reaction is symptomatic of the general attitude the *Partisan Review* “boys” displayed towards Mary McCarthy, that “sharply handsome 28-year-old Vassar graduate,” as Kazin perceived her.<sup>74</sup> Philip Rahv’s girlfriend, assigned to do theatre criticism because she was once married to an actor and because theatre was not serious enough for those “men of the thirties” in charge of the intellectualist magazine, wrote a novel in which the “boys” suddenly sensed, in their male solidarity, contempt for themselves. This was more than they could take from a pretty girl of whose first work of fiction Vladimir Nabokov said that it was “a splendid thing, clever, poetic and new.”<sup>75</sup> They took it personally.

Saul Bellow recaptures his impression of “The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt” in the following words: “I remember reading the story and coming across those sentences that say in effect: She lay like a piece of white lamb on a sacrificial altar. ‘Bullshit,’ I said.”<sup>76</sup> Bellow’s angry reaction is not literary criticism. His words are an excerpt from the interview he gave Frances Kiernan, one of McCarthy’s biographers, and were probably calculated to offend. In this interview it seems impossible for Bellow to say anything about McCarthy that would be an evaluation of her writing –

<sup>72</sup> Kiernan, *Seeing Mary Plain*, 189.

<sup>73</sup> Quoted in Kiernan, *Seeing Mary Plain*, 181.

<sup>74</sup> Kazin, *Starting Out*, 155.

<sup>75</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya: the Nabokov-Wilson Letters*, ed. Simon Karlinsky (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 61.

<sup>76</sup> Quoted in Kiernan, *Seeing Mary Plain*, 181.

even when he mentions the texts of McCarthy's he has read, he ends up saying what he thinks about her as a woman:

I was interested in her. I had read "The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt" and some of the theatre criticism. I thought she was a most beautiful woman. But she was beautiful in a sort of enamelled way.<sup>77</sup>

Still, his anger about "The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt" is understandable, for what he thinks McCarthy is saying may appear unjustified in its extremeness. It is not the symbolic lamb, the sacrifice, that Bellow remembers, but a "piece" of lamb – a disturbing mixture of woman as purely sexual object (as in "piece of skirt") and butchered meat. In Bellow's rephrasing, the story ceases to be about casual sex on the train, suggesting objectification, mutilation and death instead. Perceiving Mary McCarthy primarily as a woman, Saul Bellow saw a general accusation of men in her writing and refused to be included in her criticism.

McCarthy actually wrote: "She helped him take off her dress and stretched herself out on the berth like a slab of white lamb on an altar" (CSK 114). Margaret Sargent actively contributes to the lovemaking by "helping" to take off her dress, and the phrase "she stretched herself out" is also more active and, therefore, more empowering than Bellow's simple "she lay." A slab can very well be a piece, but the closeness in the sentence to the words "white" and "altar" make the association with a "slab of marble," the stony top of the altar, much closer. There is more self-determination and self-possession in her words than in Bellow's retelling, but subversive yet again, McCarthy's text does not exclude his interpretation.

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 268.

### 3. Honest Women In and Out of McCarthy's Work

The girl who is “hard as nails” (or marble) in the eyes of some male critics gives way to another image of femininity in *The Group*. The eight girls of McCarthy's only best-selling novel are, despite their very different characters, a far cry from a Margaret Sargent or a Martha Sinnott – the catalogue style in which the novel was written imitates the cliché-ridden gossip and gabble of McCarthy's collective heroine, dismantling the “idea of progress” by which all of the girls are obsessed. The girls are caricatures of the different types of femininity that Mary McCarthy encountered during her years at Vassar.

Writing *The Group* in the fifties, McCarthy chose to write about the thirties. Next to the exciting social atmosphere of the thirties, rich in (unfulfilled) ideas and hopes and (fulfilled) romances and parties, the following two decades with their return to stodgy capitalism and domesticity appeared bleak. It seems as if the thirties were the main source for the making of McCarthy's self-image and the image of McCarthy's writing: when she met her fourth husband James West in 1959, who left his young wife and three children for Mary, he told her that she “reminded him of the thirties.”<sup>78</sup> Her preference for the decade in *The Group*, however, did not go without criticism:

What [the girls] do, how they think (...) might have been of greater interest if McCarthy had been able to write about them in the thirties, but by the sixties, their pursuit of independence, romance, jobs, had less thrust. (...) McCarthy was trapped by her own sense of the material: not daring enough for the sixties (...).<sup>79</sup>

The sixties could not have been a great influence on *The Group* even if she had wanted them to be, since almost all of its writing occurred in the fifties. Accusing McCarthy of being “not daring enough,” Frederick Karl had apparently forgotten that

<sup>78</sup> Brightman, *Writing Dangerously*, 439.

<sup>79</sup> Frederick R. Karl, *American Fictions 1940-1980* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1983), 357.

her novel was banned for obscenity in Ireland, Australia and Italy, thanks to the second and third chapters of *The Group*.<sup>80</sup> The chapters came out as a short story nine years before the publication of the novel, and had earned McCarthy the reputation of “having done for the pessary what Herman Melville did for the whale.”<sup>81</sup> Generations have derived their information about sex and contraception from the short story “Dottie Makes an Honest Woman of Herself,” which appeared in the *Partisan Review* in 1954.

The “honest woman” of the title is pure irony, since the story is about the naïve and romantic Dottie Renfrew, an upper-class girl and “still a virgin” at twenty three, who loses her virginity to the painter Dick Brown (“handsome as a piece of Roman statuary but somewhat battered and worn” (TG 63). The womaniser and alcoholic Dick is another example of McCarthy’s gallery of “good-for-nothing” men). “Get yourself a pessary” are the words with which Dick sees Dottie out of the door the next morning (the joke is the echo of Hamlet’s words to Ophelia – “Get thee to a nunnery”) (TG 58). It is the anatomically detailed description of their night together and Dottie’s visit to a doctor’s clinic to be fitted for a diaphragm that made the humorous comparison of *The Group* with *Moby Dick* possible.

Philip Roth used Mary McCarthy’s image as a sexually outspoken writer as well as the success of “Dottie Makes an Honest Woman of Herself” in his short story “Goodbye, Columbus,” which won him the National Book award in 1959. The love story of Neil, a college graduate from the lower middle-class, and Brenda, a girl from a wealthy Jewish family, comes to its turning point when Neil asks Brenda to get a diaphragm. To poor Dottie, Dick’s request did sound like “the language of love” (TG 59), because, in her view, “actions spoke louder than words, and (...) the fact

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<sup>80</sup> Brightman, *Writing Dangerously*, 486.

<sup>81</sup> Brock Brower, “Mary McCarthyism,” in: *Conversations with Mary McCarthy*, 30-45.

remained that he had sent her [to the doctor's office], to be wedded, as it were, by proxy, with the "ring" or diaphragm pessary that the woman doctor dispensed." She was sadly mistaken, but for Neil, this question *is* a surrogate for a proposal. Brenda is shocked when she hears Neil's suggestion:

"Neil, how do you think I'd feel lying to some doctor."  
 "You can go to Margaret Sanger, in New York. They don't ask any questions."  
 "You've done this before?"  
 "No," I said. "I just know. I read Mary McCarthy."  
 "That's exactly right. That's just what I'd feel like, somebody out of *her*."  
 "Don't be dramatic," I said.  
 "You're the one who is being dramatic. You think there would be something affairish about it, then. Last summer I went with this whore who I sent out to buy –"<sup>82</sup>

The next time that McCarthy's name appears in their dialogue is when Neil and Brenda book a hotel room. Brenda has put on a fake wedding ring – Dottie's naively romantic perception is thus satirized by Brenda's informed deceit. "Have you done this before?" – it is Neil's turn to ask. "I read Mary McCarthy," replies Brenda coldly.<sup>83</sup>

Brenda ends the relationship because her mother has found the diaphragm in her drawer, and Neil rightly suspects that she knowingly left it there as an act of sabotage. Since both of them have read Mary McCarthy, they should have learned that "the unmarried girl who lived with her family required a place to keep her pessary and her douche bag where her mother was not likely to find them while doing out the bureau drawers" (TG 68).

In her article "Inserting the Diaphragm In(to) Modern American Fiction," Beth Widmaier points out that "Margaret Sanger in New York" is probably the best known figure in the fight for birth control, and that birth control clinics, such as the one

<sup>82</sup> Philip Roth, "Goodbye, Columbus," in: *Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories*, 1964 (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 82.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

described by McCarthy in detail and mentioned by Roth, “were spreading across the nation during the 1930s.”<sup>84</sup> This fact justifies the setting of *The Group* in the thirties. However, the diaphragm was still one of the most widely used contraceptives in the 1950s and despite the two decades between the setting of *The Group* and “Goodbye, Columbus,” not much had changed – “in the 1930s and the 1950s, the female body is subject to moral codes that mandate marriage,” and, as the dialogue between Roth’s teenagers shows, “somebody out of *her*” (and, one suspects, Mary McCarthy herself) is still simply a “loose woman.”<sup>85</sup>

The married Kay Petersen of *The Group*, who accompanies Dottie to the birth control clinic, disapproves of her friend’s courage because she believes that “once a girl got a pessary, it cheapened her” (TG 41). “Even the practical Kay indicates that sex out of wedlock is acceptable as long as it is not technologically controlled,” notes Widmaier.<sup>86</sup> In these chapters of *The Group* McCarthy follows her old habit of divorcing sex from romance – not only does her choice for Dottie’s lover exclude any romantic fulfilment, but by shifting the focus from the bed to the clinic, she raises questions of power and control over the female body that go far beyond the broken heart of Dottie Renfrew.

## Conclusion

When McCarthy writes about sex, she does so out of her duty to display the truth as she sees it – and this truth is usually unpleasant. The “uncanny ladylike primness” of her style creates a discrepancy between the content of the text and its form.<sup>87</sup> The domineering presence of sexual scenes in her novels makes one think of the

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<sup>84</sup> Beth Widmaier Capo, “Inserting the Diaphragm In(to) Modern American Fiction: Mary McCarthy, Philip Roth, and the Literature of Contraception,” *The Journal of American Culture* 26.1 (2003): 113.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> McKenzie 176.

outrageously ambiguous position McCarthy creates in her writing. Carol Brightman notices this in her analysis of the scene between Miles and Martha:

The critic Eleanor Widmer is dead wrong to conclude that in her risqué fiction of the 1940s and '50s Mary McCarthy anticipated the sexual revolution of the '60s, when nothing was forbidden and anything could happen. McCarthy is the doyenne of pre-revolutionary sex; there is no fear of flying in her bedrooms, only of getting caught. For young readers today, there must be something kinky about these two has-beens 'heaving and gasping' on the couch, like a couple of adolescents listening for their parents at the door.<sup>88</sup>

In this quotation, Brightman lightly alludes to Erica Jong's famous novel *Fear of Flying*. Jong's heroine Isadora remembers how she, in her teens, used to look for women writers for help, as examples of women "who were *really* free":

The women writers, the women painters – most of them were shy, shrinking, schizoid. Timid in their lives and brave only in their art. Emily Dickinson, the Brontes, Virginia Woolf, Carson McCullers (...). What a group! Severe, suicidal, strange. Where was the female Chaucer? One lusty lady who had juice and joy and talent too? (...) Almost all of the women we admired most were spinsters or suicides.<sup>89</sup>

Mary McCarthy, neither a spinster nor a suicide, is not included in this group. Isadora is only ten years younger than Roth's Brenda and Neil, but apparently, she has not read Mary McCarthy, although the latter might be exactly this "lusty lady" who Isadora was so desperately seeking.

But McCarthy's tendency to sit on the fence and offer statements in interviews that stand in stark contrast to her work is probably one of the reasons why she fell out of the canon of feminist, or even just popular women writers. Mary McCarthy herself was anxious to point out that she did not consider herself a feminist, and that feminism was something she disapproved of: "I think, feminism is bad for women," she said in an interview with Carol Brightman: "I mean, it induces a very bad

<sup>88</sup> Brightman, *Writing Dangerously*, 246-247.

<sup>89</sup> Erica Jong, *Fear of Flying* (London: Mandarin Paperback, 1973), 109.

emotional state. (...) The self-pity, the shrillness and the greed. (...) And what else? I've never met an intellectual woman who was a feminist."<sup>90</sup> In the same interview, however, she tells how Edmund Wilson made her put her money into his bank account: "And, of course, I couldn't have signature power on his bank account. I had to ask him for a nickel to make a telephone call."<sup>91</sup>

This interview is a graphic example of the poses McCarthy occasionally strikes, one often feels, for the sake of entertainment, a good anecdote. But her undeniable aversion to feminism was dictated by the image that the Second Wave of feminism (unwillingly) promoted – the stereotype of the shrill angry feminist, whom Christopher Lasch characterised as "this female [who] cuts men to ribbons or swallows them whole," responsible for "the spectre of impotence that haunts contemporary imagination."<sup>92</sup> Imelda Whelehan notes how easily the radical feminism of the sixties and seventies repelled women – not only did the Second Wave feminists believe that "sex was something women needed to be liberated from," they also excluded all excellence and individuality from their movement, insisting on "structurelessness, where everyone is working to the one motive with one voice."<sup>93</sup> This could not have appealed at all to McCarthy, in whose life elitism and individual excellence (as well as sex) played a major part. One could also say that McCarthy just had bad luck with the timing – born in between the two waves of feminism, the first could matter to her only historically, and she seemed to be simply too old for the second.

However, McCarthy's *The Group* may serve as a vivid illustration of the advice to trust the tale, and not the teller. The teller, "with her usual contrariness," may be

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<sup>90</sup> Carol Brightman, "Mary, Still Contrary," in: *Conversations with Mary McCarthy*, 244.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York: Warner Books, 1979), 345.

<sup>93</sup> Imelda Whelehan, *The Feminist Bestseller* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 56-57.

“impatient and bored by the women’s liberation movement,” but her tale may be openly feminist.<sup>94</sup> Despite McCarthy’s personal statements, her novel highlights the primal aspects of women’s experience and identity formation. Sexual relations, marriage and divorce, abortion and contraception, mothering and the relations with one’s own mother are the main topics discussed in the novel. *The Group* also includes suicide and madness, powerful and steadily reappearing elements in the works of women writers, which fascinate feminist critics as aspects of their strange “coherence of themes and imagery.”<sup>95</sup> The awareness of women’s lives demonstrated in the novel falls into the tradition of liberal feminists such as Betty Friedan, especially because of its consciousness raising effect. Many themes raised in Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* are echoed in *The Group* – the disillusionment in marriage, the isolation in childbirth, the female identity crisis, to name a few. *The Group*’s “idea of progress,” with the girls’ desperate attempts to be up to date with the latest trends in marital relations, cooking, breastfeeding, making cocktails, etc., can be found in the opening lines of *The Feminine Mystique*:

(...) All the columns, books, and articles by experts telling women their role was to seek fulfilment as wives and mothers. (...) Experts told them how to catch a man and keep him, how to breastfeed children and handle their toilet training (...); how to buy a dishwasher, bake bread, cook gourmet snails (...).<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Elaine Showalter, “Progress in the Female Sphere – The Ship and The Group,” in: *A Jury of her Peers. American Women Writers from Anne Bradstreet to Annie Proulx* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), 429.

<sup>95</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic. The Woman Writer and the Literary Imagination*, 1979 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), xi. Elaine Showalter calls the recurring episodes of insanity in female literature “the mask of madness,” and states that it “appears with sad regularity in women’s books to the present day.” She lists McCarthy’s *The Group* among Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper,” and Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*. Elaine Showalter, “Killing the Angel in the House: The Autonomy of Women Writers,” *The Antioch Review* 50.1/2 (1992): 207-220.

<sup>96</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 1963 (New York/London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 15.

Such parallels “suggest that these ideas had been in circulation for some time before being developed into a more polished feminist critique,” states Imelda Whelehan.<sup>97</sup>

Elaine Showalter includes McCarthy in her literary history *A Jury of Her Peers: American Women Writers from Anne Bradstreet to Annie Proulx*, and places her within the American female tradition, belonging to the third, “female” phase of women’s writing, which turns to female experience as a source for an autonomous art.<sup>98</sup> Alan Nadel sees the girls of *The Group*, and especially their bodies (as in the case of Dottie’s fitting for a diaphragm and Priss’ breastfeeding) situated at the “intersection of conflicting social and clinical discourses,” and the novel itself as “a topography of women’s body parts, deployed across social and historical landscapes.”<sup>99</sup> Although the setting of the novel is distinctly that of the 1930s, the problems of female physical and economic autonomy, or rather lack of it, which are voiced in *The Group*, fall into the chorus of similar findings during the Second Wave of the 1960s, best illustrated in Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* and Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*.

The 1930s provided McCarthy with situations and characters she was to use through decades in her fiction. Her tendency to take “real plums and put them into an imaginary cake” did not come out of the blue, but was actually favoured by the inner group of the *Partisan Review*. Alfred Kazin remembers:

[They] did not favour imagination. ‘Who’s in it?’ I once heard the editor Philip Rahv ask a writer who submitted a story to him. The *Partisan Review* group were interested in the people around them to the point of ecstasy; in this world nothing interested them so much as the personalities of their friends. The ability to analyse a friend, a

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<sup>97</sup> Whelehan, *Feminist Bestseller*, 34.

<sup>98</sup> After the first, “feminine” phase, imitating the prevailing male tradition, and the second “feminist,” a “phase of protest”, the third phase is that of “self-discovery, a search for identity.” Showalter, *A Jury of her Peers*, xvii.

<sup>99</sup> Alan Wald, “Fiction and the Cold War,” in: *The Cambridge Companion to American Fiction After 1945*, ed. John N. Duvall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 175-176.

trend, a shift in the politico-personal balance of power, was for them the greatest possible sign of intellectual power.<sup>100</sup>

Mary McCarthy, the beautiful woman, the brilliant writer, did all that – sharply, recklessly, shockingly. Mixed messages and outrageous ambiguity were part of the charm in McCarthy’s writing and McCarthy’s self. Her intellectual and sexual power made her a force to be reckoned with, but, at the same time, isolated her from the group of male intellectuals, and, subsequently, from the groups of female/feminist writers and readers. She never complained about her position as the exceptional outsider:

If you’re an exception, things, rather than being more difficult, are actually easier. I don’t think there ever is a discrimination against exceptional people. It’s the average person who has to contend with discrimination. And exceptional people can always escape, even if it is only into their dreams.<sup>101</sup>

The cold eye that was so admired by readers and critics, is cast by McCarthy just as coldly on herself, as if she were observing herself from a great height. McCarthy’s curious kind of detachment in the view of her own life and, more importantly, in her writing, created unique images of women. Her heroines, always split into the observed and the observer, maintain a shrewd satirical gaze on themselves and on others. Marginality and insight seem to go hand in hand in McCarthy’s fiction, and the problem of the identity of marginal individuals – women, Jews, intellectuals in opposition to the state, and herself in her autobiographical writing – is always present in all of her texts.

McCarthy’s technique of observing her characters, through her cold eye, from the outside, with the ironic gaze that creates at once distance and protection, strongly

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<sup>100</sup> Kazin, *Starting Out*, 157.

<sup>101</sup> Quoted in Carole Corbeil, “The Unsinkable Mary McCarthy,” in: *Conversations with Mary McCarthy*, 231.

relies on the use of objects. In this chapter it has been noted that even during the most personal encounters, such as the sexual act, objects take up more space in a scene than the characters' emotions. The abundance of objects in *The Group* strikes one as essential in the novel structure and the shaping of characters. Sometimes objects signal what the inner qualities of a character may or may not be. They mark and define the boundaries of the social positions that McCarthy's characters hope to find themselves in, and are used to include or exclude the characters in or from certain groups. Objects also define and shape the reality of McCarthy's novels.

## CHAPTER TWO: OBJECTS OF THE '50S – MORALS AND MORE

### Introduction

Fair without and foul within has no charm for me. Nor the reverse, for that matter. (...) I cannot be interested in people whose inside contradicts their outside. Such people have neither essence nor existence.<sup>1</sup>

These harsh words are addressed by the young, beautiful and morally pure Russian instructor Domna Rejnev to Henry Mulcahy, her colleague. Mulcahy, the repulsive “middle-aged instructor of literature at Jocelyn College” (GA 3) is the plotting protagonist of McCarthy’s campus novel *The Groves of Academe*, and the author treats him mercilessly, dwelling on “the unwholesome whiteness of his long, pear-shaped body, (...) a porous complexion, bad teeth and occasional morning halitosis” (GA 6-7). The Irish literature instructor, ugly on the outside, turns to manipulation to prevent himself from being fired from the progressive college Jocelyn, and shamelessly exploits the *Zeitgeist* of the (Senator) McCarthy era – permeated by paranoia and a witch-hunt against Communists – by lying that he, Mulcahy, is a Communist himself and thus proving that his inside is just as ugly.

The late '40s and '50s in the United States were “the Age of Fear,” marked by the Cold War, the growing panic of Communist infiltration and loss of national security. The paranoia that gripped the country as a reaction to the “shocks of 1948” – espionage scandals such as the Alger Hiss Trial, the USSR’s possession of the atomic bomb, China’s “fall” to Communism – found its flagship figure in Senator Joseph McCarthy, who set up the machinery of blind accusation and the questioning of a great number of people called before congressional and state investigating

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<sup>1</sup> Mary McCarthy, *The Groves of Academe*, 1952 (San Diego/ New York/ London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), 200. All further references to this text will appear parenthetically immediately after the quotation, the title of the novel abbreviated to GA.

committees.<sup>2</sup> Almost twenty per cent of witnesses thus interrogated were college teachers and graduate students. McCarthyism was a process in two stages – “first, the objectionable groups and individuals were identified (...), then, they were punished, usually by being fired,” states Ellen W. Schrecker in her essay on the impact of the Joseph McCarthy era on academia.<sup>3</sup>

This facet of McCarthyism serves to set the plot of McCarthy’s campus novel, published in 1951, in motion. The general climate of the ’50s – a mix of political anxiety and stolid bourgeois values, the rise of consumerism together with the attempt to define oneself through the things one owns or longs to possess – is clearly detectable in both *The Groves of Academe* and *The Group*, McCarthy’s novels of the ’50s. But in *The Groves*, McCarthy uses the particular political situation of the decade also as a motivation and mechanism to get her main characters going, and to further explore the topics that are usually at the centre of McCarthy’s interest independent of current events.

Through her description of Domna and Henry, McCarthy expresses a view that is to be found in all of her work – her characters are inseparable from their surroundings, their looks, the furniture they buy, the food they eat, the clothes they put on their bodies. They are defined by the objects they choose to possess or to be around just as strongly (or, perhaps, even more strongly) as by their moral views and interests. However, McCarthy’s physical object world also goes beyond the (numerous) instances of characterization, and determines the shape of the reality her characters find themselves in. Since the “phenomenal particularity of the novel” reproduced by the novelist can never be as absolutely arbitrary as the details of the real world, the details the novelist chooses are bound have an aesthetic motive, apart from their

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas C. Reeves, introduction to *McCarthyism*, ed. Thomas C. Reeves (Malabar, Florida: Robert E. Krieger Publishing Company, 1989), 2.

<sup>3</sup> Ellen W. Schrecker, “The Two Stages of McCarthyism,” in: *McCarthyism*, 98.

function as a form of metonymy and synecdoche.<sup>4</sup> In McCarthy's case, the function of obtaining the suspension of disbelief (usually the first and simplest aim of the description of everyday objects), as well as the function of characterization are surpassed by a distinctive aesthetic effect. McCarthy herself admitted that the elaborate description of material details in her writing lead her readers to see the worlds she creates "with a sort of swerve and swoop," giving her texts a distorting quality.<sup>5</sup> The "swerve and swoop" takes place because of the intense scrutiny of the objects around the characters, and establishes a stronger focus on the physical determinants of the characters' lives than on their inner motives. Instead of creating a realist total picture of the world in the novel, the disproportionate attention to detail dissolves the familiar reality, breaks it up into fragments and assembles it anew.<sup>6</sup>

In their *The Meaning of Things*, the sociologists Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton note the role that material objects play in the very identity of the people who own them:

The role of objects in people's definition of who they are, of who they have been and who they wish to become is immense (...) Things embody goals, make skills manifest and shape the identity of their users. [Man's] self is to a large extent a reflection of things with which he interacts.<sup>7</sup>

McCarthy's eight girls of *The Group* are so intricately involved in the materialism around them that Norman Mailer, as noted previously, describes the collective protagonist swimming in the "cold lava of anality," considering their concerns as

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<sup>4</sup> David Lodge, *Language of Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, Columbia University Press, 1966), 45.

<sup>5</sup> Stifton, "Mary McCarthy," in: *Women Writers at Work*, 195.

<sup>6</sup> Bill Brown's view of the relationship between humans and objects in terms of his "thing theory," as well as Georg Lukács' critique of the reification of humans that threatens to obstruct the normal course of life will be mentioned throughout this chapter. Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003). Georg Lukács, *Geschichte und Klassenbewußtsein* (Berlin: Der Malik-Verlag, 1923).

<sup>7</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and The Self* (Connecticut/London/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), x-1.

“cultivated banalities.” He does acknowledge that McCarthy is willing to follow her girls “through their furniture and their recipes, she will give us lists of categories that no sociologist would ever dare.”<sup>8</sup> McCarthy’s intent of a mock-chronicle makes the sheer abundance of material details significant – Mailer did not have the sense for it, it seems – yet these very details serve her well, since they not only amuse the reader, but sculpt the fashion and modes of the ’30s and of the typical Vassar girl. Both the atmosphere of the ’30s and the type of the college girl are indeed a “reflection of things” that belong to them, or the things a reflection of the girls, for that matter.

On the other hand, if viewed benevolently, Mailer’s dissatisfaction may point to *The Group*’s concept as a *historical novel*, echoing Georg Lukács’ critique in “The Crisis of Bourgeois Realism.” In his analysis of Gustave Flaubert’s *Salammbô*, the nineteenth century French realist novel set in “the alien and distant, incomprehensible but picturesque, (...) cruel and exotic world of Carthage,” Lukács finds fault with Flaubert’s excessive descriptions, as did Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve before him.<sup>9</sup> The two critics agree that Flaubert’s “exact production of archaeological detail,” his “rare ruins,” “the dead environment of men,” overwhelm the portrayal of men themselves and fail to produce a picture of a totality of objects and people, psychology and history:

[Sainte-Beuve] criticizes the fact that, though all these details are correctly and brilliantly described in Flaubert, they do not add up as a whole, not even in relation to the dead objects. Flaubert describes doors, locks, etc., all the components of a house, but the architect who builds the whole is nowhere to be seen.(...) Flaubert (...) had become objectively untruthful and distorted the real proportions of life.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Mailer, “The Case Against McCarthy”, 137.

<sup>9</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, 1947, transl. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 186-189.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

Lukács' criticism of Flaubert's "rare ruins" resembles Mailer's "cold lava of anality" of the objects from the thirties, which swarm the novel of the fifties. Lukács' view of Flaubert's distortion of "the real proportion of life" parallels McCarthy's own findings of the "swerves and swoops" of her prose.

McCarthy's habit of characterization and moral judgement through objects makes it hardly surprising that the reader is thoroughly informed about *The Groves of Academe's* Domna Rejnev's "severe, beautiful, clear-cut profile, very pure ivory skin (...), her lips (...) a true natural pink or rose" (GA 37). McCarthy calls Domna's beauty "incorruptible" and reinforces her judgement through the description of Domna's "dark suits of rather heavy, good material (...): the European tailor-made" (GA 38). According to Csikszentmihalyi's and Rochberg-Halton's definition and Domna's own words, she is what she wants to be, her essence reflected in her existence – good, pure and of the Old World. In contrast with Domna Rejnev's inner and outer aristocracy stands Henry Mulcahy with "the droop of his trousers" and his purposeful saturation "in a sort of folkish traditional poverty of the lower middle class," (GA 7) and – most importantly – with an inner ugliness that matches his outer appearance. The technique of showing who of the characters deserves our sympathy and who does not is evident in choosing opposing pairs that can be found throughout several of McCarthy's novels: Domna and Henry in *Groves of Academe*, "the group" and Norine Schmittlapp in *The Group*, Martha Sinnott and Miles Murphy (or, indeed, the rest of the New Leeds bohemia) in *A Charmed Life*. In addition, the author's satirical eye favours the well-defined setting, akin to an ant farm with its glass walls and limited space.

*The Groves of Academe*, one of the first, if not the very first classical campus novel, provides the perfect stage for a closed world one can study under a magnifying

glass. Elaine Showalter, writing about campus or academic novels in her *Faculty Towers* (a deliberate pun on the well known television show about the dysfunctional hotel *Fawlty Towers*), gives a clear definition of the genre of the academic novel of the '50s and '60s, which McCarthy's *Groves* started:

In the 50s and 60s, the academic novel was, basically, Trollopian. The university was a small, enclosed space, but related to the larger society, affected by its values and problems, and even a model of its ideal state. The academic novel in midcentury confidently presented its dilemmas as microcosms; its political ethics, election campaigns, division between the humanities and the sciences.<sup>11</sup>

“The political ethics (...) as microcosms” are ridiculed in *The Groves*, turning Senator McCarthy's witch-hunt of communists upside down. McCarthy, who herself taught at the small progressive college Bard in 1945, also used the novel to criticize a way of education in which the students specialised early on in obscure topics (without the basics of a sturdy general education) and were often left to themselves. The poet Randall Jarrell published his comic academic novel *Pictures from an Institution* in 1952, a year later than McCarthy's *Groves of Academe*. Jarrell's deeply satirical account of campus life – once again of a progressive college – is a roman-à-clef, in which the writer in residence Gertrude is a barely disguised Mary McCarthy. Jarrell's novel, the timely pendant to her *Groves of Academe*, ridicules the objectivism of McCarthy's style of writing, and, most importantly, cements with its elaborate puns McCarthy's reputation among her critics and readers for decades to come.

*The Group* is not a campus novel, but it is tied to the genre by the prevailing presence of the eight college girls (or the collective Vassar girl) – the influence of Vassar lasting an entire decade after their actual graduation from college (hence the frequent references to the Vassar Alumni House where the girls stay throughout the novel). Published in 1963, *The Group* appeared in the same year as Sylvia Plath's *The*

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<sup>11</sup> Elaine Showalter, *Faculty Towers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 118.

*Bell Jar* – both texts can be considered as rite-of-passage novels and important signposts for Second Wave feminism. *The Bell Jar*, inseparable from Plath's tragic death shortly after its publication, acquired an iconic status for the Second Wave. Its protagonist, Esther Greenwood, is a member of an Ivy League progressive women's college (although the college is never named in the text, one can easily guess that it is Smith, the college Plath herself graduated from and taught at). On the verge of a psychological breakdown, Esther shows a heightened perceptiveness of the shrill world around her during her stay in New York, where she works for a girls' magazine modelled after *Mademoiselle*. The execution of the Rosenbergs (mentioned at the very beginning of the novel) and Esther's shocked reaction to it parallel not only the general state of fear of American society at that decade, but also foreshadow the heroine's mental illness.

Insecure and anxious about clothes, food, money, social standing and social role, Esther falls prey to the hectoring language of advertising, typical of the American 1950s. McCarthy's eight Vassar girls, though older and much more robust psychologically, are just as susceptible as Esther is to messages about what to wear, what to eat and how to live; their choices are made more difficult by both their high expectations and the Great Depression during which the events of *The Group* take place. The world of objects adds a new dimension to the existential dilemmas that the college girl protagonists face, it determines their surroundings and functions as a reflector or catalyst for their emotional states.

The extensive description of objects found in these novels, marked by the idea of the overwhelming materialist experience, functions as a distinctive trait of the national

character of the Western world in the twentieth century.<sup>12</sup> It can also be seen as a literary device extending the realist tradition to the experimental novel. This textual passion for things sometimes borders on the fetishizing of things, thus changing things from trivial objects to complex matters.<sup>13</sup> The transactions between characters and things in the texts form, to a large part, the characters' consciousness. Fetishism makes inanimate objects animate by projecting into things lives of their own, for things often turn out to be the source of the characters' animation.<sup>14</sup>

In the first part of this chapter, "Important Things," I will analyse Randall Jarrell's perception of Mary McCarthy as the lady novelist Gertrude, which forever melded the image of the literary character and the public opinion of the real writer and presented a satire on McCarthy's method of particularization. I will also compare Jarrell's and McCarthy's use of objects in their texts.

In the second part, "The Lady-Novels," I will discuss Norman Mailer's criticism of *The Group* that regards McCarthy's novel as a typical "lady-book" in the context of popular culture and advertising, that especially in the 1950s were closely connected to femininity. I will continue to explore the impact of popular culture also in terms of Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar*. Both *The Bell Jar* and *The Group* are concerned with problems in what McCarthy calls "the female sphere," elevating them to a level of social significance. In both novels, the disjunction between the Ivy League college

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<sup>12</sup> Douglas Mao writes the following about the word play "Goods/Gods" in the letter exchange between the poet H.D. and Sigmund Freud: "The air of satisfaction attending their exchange reminds us how naturally to the twentieth-century Westerner comes the idea that we live in an age of Goods amid which, and against which, the enlightened and the sensitive will struggle to secure their loftier Gods." Douglas Mao, *Solid Objects. Modernism and the Test of Production* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 4.

<sup>13</sup> Karl Marx's idea of "commodity fetishism" comes to mind here, especially in its aspect of replacing human relationships through the relationship with objects, the economic value of the objects eclipsed by the illusion of their intrinsic value. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Das Kapital*, 1885, in: *Werke*, Vol. 23, ed. Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus beim ZK der SED (Berlin/DDR: Dietz Verlag 1968), 85.

<sup>14</sup> Bill Brown notes this in his analysis of Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*: "For Carrie Meeber retail objects are no less animate (...) because they are the source of her own animation." Brown, *A Sense of Things*, 33.

promise and the biological and domestic reality is revealed in the overwrought inner lives of outwardly well-situated American women, or rather, college girls. The girls' biological and domestic reality is constructed through elaborately described details of their physical world. Especially the presence of advertising and magazines, the constant constituents of the "female sphere" and influential shapers of the girls' reality, will be of importance here. The cultural and historical background provided by the diptych of *The Bell Jar* and *The Group* helps to illuminate the existential problems of American women of the 1950s.

The third part, "Magazines and Other Things That Give Us Away," takes up the discussion of popular magazines now from McCarthy's point of view. McCarthy traces the distortion of reality in women's magazines to a desirable illusion through the selection of things. The girls of *The Group* illustrate the success and the failure of advertising by presenting the stamp of their social class achieved with the help of objects.

The fourth part of my chapter, "The Good and the Ugly," explains how McCarthy uses outward appearance as a marker for inner qualities, and claims that Communism or even leftism were considered as a sort of lifestyle by McCarthy that she did not approve of. The Hiss-Chambers case as the background source for her *Groves of Academe* provides a graphic demonstration for her technique of making the morally bad outwardly ugly as well. The notion of significant form as defined by Clive Bell as a topic of conversation in *The Group*, will also be addressed here.

Through objects, McCarthy shows the vulnerability of the social positions that her protagonists find themselves in or hope to acquire, their attempts and failures to form their identities. The preoccupation with questions of class and value signalled by objects in the social and historical context of the '50s, points to a position oscillating

between confidence and uncertainty, between belonging and not belonging, between the mainstream and outsiderism in a reality that is subject to change.

### 1. Important Things

Mary McCarthy's *The Groves of Academe* and Randall Jarrell's *Pictures from an Institution* are often mentioned together – David Lodge considers McCarthy's *Groves* to be “the first classic campus novel, quickly followed by Randall Jarrell's *Pictures from an Institution*.”<sup>15</sup> Merritt Moseley begins the chapter “Randall Jarrell, Mary McCarthy and the Fifties Liberalism” with the following words:

It is something of a commonplace to link Mary McCarthy's academic novel (...), the only academic novel among her many books of prose, and Randall Jarrell's *Pictures from an Institution* (1954), the only novel by this distinguished poet and critic. There are many telling linkages between the two, including the settings, the targets of satire, and certain important themes.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, one would be tempted to say the two novels could swap titles, yet Jarrell's novel, although published only a year after McCarthy's text and often reading like a different perspective on (almost) the same subject matter, lacks the political dimension that is part of the central conflict of McCarthy's *Groves*. Void of the McCarthyism intensely played with in McCarthy's text, *Pictures from an Institution* focuses on the faculty of a small college called Benton (but it could just as well be McCarthy's Jocelyn). The hilarious portrait of Mary McCarthy, which Jarrell created with the figure of Gertrude, is considered by Moseley as the “most important” linkage between the two novels.<sup>17</sup>

The poet Randall Jarrell, acclaimed by his contemporaries including Elizabeth Bishop, Edmund Wilson, William Carlos Williams and Robert Lowell, although

<sup>15</sup> David Lodge, “Nabokov and the Campus Novel,” *Cycnos* 24.1 (2008): n.pag., accessed September 16, 2014, <http://revel.unice.fr/cycnos/?id=1081>.

<sup>16</sup> Merritt Moseley, “Randall Jarrell, Mary McCarthy and the Fifties Liberalism,” in: *The Academic Novel: New and Classic Essays*, ed. Merritt Moseley (Chester: Chester Academic Press, 2007), 184.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

never achieving their fame, wrote *Pictures from an Institution* in 1951 (it was published three years later). It is fairly clear why he chose the university campus to be the setting for his only longer work of prose – he spent most of his not very long life teaching in various colleges (in 1951, when the novel was written, he was teaching at Princeton, lecturing on W.H. Auden). He found that writing prose was more rewarding than writing poetry:

Writing poetry is tremendously hard, and you just do the best you can. (...) Prose writing is like having been a dog catcher and being made a Senator. It's more elevating being a poet, but you get better treatment for the other.<sup>18</sup>

His text is a succession of several portraits of the faculty, “glittering phrases (...) so close together that one’s delighted appreciation of the first makes it difficult to recover in time to appreciate the second at its full worth,” remarked Orville Prescott in his review of Jarrell’s novel.<sup>19</sup> This too brings Jarrell’s style close to McCarthy’s writing which favoured the short story or the vignette form, only McCarthy’s witticisms are spaced more widely.

A large part of Jarrell’s *Pictures* is taken up by the depiction of the novelist Gertrude Johnson. Gertrude, who was meant to be a composite of several women writers with whom Jarrell was acquainted, has so many truly McCarthyan traits that all the others who might have influenced the character fade into the background. Gertrude’s books “did not murder to dissect, but dissected to murder,” writes Jarrell, and when she “patted someone on the head you could be sure that the head was about

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<sup>18</sup> Lewis Nichols, “Talk with Randall Jarrell,” *New York Times*, May 2, 1954, accessed July 29, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/books/99/08/01/specials/jarrell-talk.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Orville Prescott, “Pictures from an Institution by Randall Jarrell,” review of *Pictures from an Institution*, by Randall Jarrell, *New York Times*, May 5, 1954, accessed July 13, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/books/99/08/01/specials/jarrell-pictures.html>.

to appear, smoked, in her next novel.”<sup>20</sup> Most of Gertrude’s readers and critics “went on admiring her in the tones of butchers from Gopher Prairie admiring the Murderer of Düsseldorf; they could not mention that style without using the vocabulary of a salesman of kitchen knives” (PFI 40).

Although Jarrell’s description of Gertrude is a composite of jokes and humorous exaggerations (“Gertrude’s bark *was* her bite, and many a bite has lain awake all night longing to be Gertrude’s bark” (PFI 51)), the quotation above is indeed just a sharper version of reality. Norman Mailer did once say that “McCarthy’s eye sees with a knife’s edge.”<sup>21</sup> Other critics, writing about McCarthy’s work, frequently used words related to cold steel, such as “scissors, swords, knives, stilettos, switch-blades” as well as the adjectives “cold, heartless, clever, cerebral, cutting, acid, acidulous,” as Beverly Gross noticed in her essay “Our Leading Bitch Intellectual.”<sup>22</sup> Even Mary’s smile was once described in similar terms: “a subtle emanation of the mind: the poised cutting edge on one of the most knifelike female intelligences.”<sup>23</sup> It is remarkable to what extent the attempt to get at the core of McCarthy’s talent depends on the comparison with inanimate objects, with mechanical things that are used to cut and to stab.

Randall Jarrell did dilute the Mary McCarthy concentrate in his novel with details that mark complete opposites to McCarthy’s ways – his Gertrude is a plain woman (unlike the famously beautiful Mary), a terrible homemaker living in a bare and horrible flat, as well as a poor cook. The real McCarthy, on the other hand, took great pains to give her dwellings exquisite decorations and, habitually producing *haute cuisine* dinners, was called “the natural mistress of rich and delicious desserts” by her

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<sup>20</sup> Randall Jarrell, *Pictures from an Institution*, 1954 (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 32. All further references to the text will appear parenthetically after the quotation, the title of the novel abbreviated as PFI.

<sup>21</sup> Mailer, “The Case Against McCarthy”, 138.

<sup>22</sup> Gross, “Our Leading Bitch,” in *Twenty-Four Ways of Looking at Mary McCarthy*, 28.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Brightman, *Writing Dangerously*, 460.

third husband Bowden Broadwater.<sup>24</sup> But these differences did not distract anyone. Jarrell's aphorisms shaped and, as Carol Brightman put it, "memorialised" McCarthy's reputation.<sup>25</sup> Dick Cavett, the host of the television talk show where McCarthy accused Lillian Hellman of lies, remembers McCarthy's smile as "hilariously immortalized by Randall Jarrell's *Pictures from an Institution*: 'Torn animals were removed at sunset from that smile.'"<sup>26</sup> Reviewing McCarthy's memoir *How I Grew*, Richard Eder writes that "nobody – not even Randall Jarrell with the McCarthy character in his satire in college life – could be any harder" on McCarthy than McCarthy was on herself.<sup>27</sup> Jarrell did eventually admit that Gertrude and Mary were "the same general type," and that Mary's books "are alike."<sup>28</sup> McCarthy wrote to her biographer Carol Gelderman on the resemblance with Gertrude: "The only points in common that I was able to find were that Gertrude had a satirical way of writing and used local materials, so to speak."<sup>29</sup>

It is Jarrell's description of the particularism of fiction produced by Gertrude that makes her resemblance to McCarthy especially interesting for the discussion of the use of objects:

Gertrude was as all knowing as Time. All clichés, slogans, fashions, turns of speech, details of dress, disguises of affection, tunnels or by-passes of ideology lived in Gertrude. (...) She made her characters, held them, to the letter of the law. If one of Gertrude's heroines, running to snatch from the lips of her little daughter a half-emptied bottle of furniture polish, fell and tore her skirt, Gertrude knew the name of the dress maker who made the skirt – and it was the right name for a woman of that

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 268.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 460.

<sup>26</sup> Dick Cavett, "Lillian, Mary, and Me," *New Yorker*, December 16, 2012, accessed September 16, 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2002/12/16/lillian-mary-and-me>.

<sup>27</sup> Richard Eder, "How I Grew by Mary McCarthy," review of *How I Grew*, by Mary McCarthy, *Los Angeles Times*, May 10, 1987, accessed September 16, 2014, [http://articles.latimes.com/1987-05-10/books/bk-6443\\_1\\_mary-mccarthy](http://articles.latimes.com/1987-05-10/books/bk-6443_1_mary-mccarthy).

<sup>28</sup> Randall Jarrell, letter to Philip Rahv, Aug. 1953, in: *Randall Jarrell's Letters*, ed. Mary Jarrell (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1955), 383.

<sup>29</sup> Gelderman, *Mary McCarthy*, 139.

class at that date; she knew the brand of the furniture polish. (...) But how the child felt as it seized and drank the polish, how the mother felt as she caught the child to her breast – about such things as these, which have neither brand nor date, Gertrude was less knowing; would have said impatiently, “Everybody knows *that!*”(PFI 133)

Jarrell says that there is nothing behind this enumeration of brands of Gertrude’s heroines, that she is not only not interested in the spectre of their feelings, but also completely ignorant about it. The enumeration itself, however, may be enough, albeit for different purposes than conveying the characters’ emotional distress. In his description of Gertrude’s method, a satire of McCarthy’s, Jarrell isolates what appears to be the reason for McCarthy’s “swerve and swoop.” Shifting the focus from the emotional and physical drama of the mother and child to impassive objects makes the entire scene look distorted. There is a grain of truth in Gertrude’s exclamation “Everybody knows *that!*” – the horror of the mother and the torment of the child are implicitly present in the accident itself, unlike the brand of the furniture polish and the look of Mother’s skirt. But the question of how the brand and the skirt could be of any importance in this situation is more than legitimate. The resulting puzzlement of the reader may be part of the effect of fragmentation and distortion achieved by the focus shifted from the big drama to small objects.<sup>30</sup>

The extent to which McCarthy relies on physical objects in her writing is again visible in her introduction to Mary “Pokey” Prothero, the richest girl of *The Group*, riding in a taxi to Kay Petersen’s wedding:

A fat, cheerful New York society girl with big red cheeks and yellow hair (...). She was the problem child of the group, very rich and lazy, having to be coached in her subjects. (...) She herself, she proclaimed, hated being fitted for dresses, hated her

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<sup>30</sup> Naturally, McCarthy never wrote the scene about the furniture polish, but Jarrell’s satirical distillation of the writer’s method is indeed applicable to McCarthy’s own writing, often used for the effect of comedy. For example, when Kay Petersen of *The Group* is held in the psychiatric unit of the Payne Whitney Clinic because of her husband’s manipulations, one of the “terrible things” done there to her is the fact that the nurses had taken her belt away from her. “I can’t wear my dress without a belt,” she complains to Polly (TG 397).

coming out party, would hate her wedding, when she had it, which, as she said, was bound to happen since, thanks to Daddy's money, she had her pick of beaux. All these objections she had raised in the taxicab on the way down, in her grating society caw, till the taxi driver turned round at a stop light to look at her, fat and fair, in a blue faille suit with sables and a *lorgnon* of diamonds, which she raised to her weak sapphire eyes to peer at him (...). (TG 5-6)

At the first glance, the short passage conveys all there is to know about Pokey, and does so through the surface, through the superficial impression of the taxi driver – her standing in society, including its rituals (dress fittings, coming out party, better than average prospects of marriage), the typical look and sound of the very rich (“society caw,” sables and the diamond *lorgnon*). In Pokey's description, the objects meld with the subject and vice versa – yellow hair and big red cheeks turn into the proverbial “fat and fair,” and the closeness of the diamond *lorgnon* makes the blue eyes “sapphire.”

Beyond that, the opposing pair of the taxi driver and the rich society girl virtually bathed in luxury goods makes one think of Georg Lukács' idea of the reification of individuals in his *History and Class Consciousness*. Building on Karl Marx's *Capital*, Lukács views the problem of commodities as the central structural problem of the capitalist society in all its life forms.<sup>31</sup> In the capitalist society, human relations are expressed in the form of the exchange of commodities. People have value only when they appear as “the personifications of economic relationships as the bearers of which they encounter one another.”<sup>32</sup> This network of commodities masks the “essential structure” – the network of relations between men.<sup>33</sup> Eva L. Corredor states that, for Lukács, “the most alarming aspect of reification” lies in the fact that individuals fail

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<sup>31</sup> “Das Warenproblem [erscheint] als zentrales strukturelles Problem der kapitalistischen Gesellschaft in allen ihren Lebensäußerungen.” Georg Lukács, *Geschichte und Klassenbewußtsein* (Berlin: Der Malik-Verlag, 1923), 94.

<sup>32</sup> Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, Vol I (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1951), 90-91.

<sup>33</sup> Paul Connerton, “The Collective Historical Subject: Reflections on Lukács' History and Class Consciousness,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 25.2 (1974): 162-178.

to recognize the arbitrariness of their own exploitation in what appears for them the natural way of the world, but what is indeed a willed social-historical organization working for the interests of the very few:

The entrepreneur, the political or military master, or the head of an institution may succeed in using physical or intellectual labor within a scientifically established bureaucracy, a profitable technological environment, or a social or industrial mechanism, all of which appear legitimate and whose standardisations seem supported by law and society. In the process, human beings become metamorphosed into things, commodities, reified objects.<sup>34</sup>

Paul Connerton explains the reasons for the opaqueness of the capitalist social structure, for which the universal mode of commodity production is responsible, using the example of a pair of shoes that costs five pounds:

Now, that statement expresses a whole network of human, and historically variable, relationships, between the cattle-breeder, the farmer, his employees, the retail-dealer, the man who sells the shoes, and the final consumer. But none of this is visible. Most of these people do not know each other, and would indeed be astonished to hear of the existence of a tie which binds them together. And all of this is expressed in a single 'fact': that a pair of shoes costs five pounds. But this is not an isolated fact; it is the basic characteristic of capitalist society in which human relations are expressed in the form of relationships between things.<sup>35</sup>

If Connerton's shoe example is applied to the description of Pokey, there appears a vast network, or, indeed, various networks of relationships spanning across continents, tied to the commodities of which Pokey is the final consumer. The diamonds for her loignon were quite possibly mined somewhere in Africa, her sables are the produce of hunters in Russia, her dress the final product of the group effort of designers, seamstresses and salespeople in France and the United States. But since *The Group* would have been rightly considered a bourgeois novel by Lukács, all these complex networks remain veiled, opaque. Pokey is utterly oblivious of the idea that

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<sup>34</sup> Eva L. Corredor, introduction, to *Lukacs After Communism: Interviews with Contemporary Intellectuals*, ed. Eva L. Corredor (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 8.

<sup>35</sup> Connerton, "Collective Historical Subject", 166.

the language of money she emanates rests upon the labour of many different people. Only her reflection in the eyes of the taxi driver may faintly convey this fact.

In *A Sense of Things*, Bill Brown, the founder of “thing theory,” focuses on the meaning of things, dealing with the significance of objects in literature, springing from William Carlos Williams’s famous utterance “no ideas but in things.” He sees the things as an “effort to think with or through the physical object world, the effort to establish a genuine sense of the things that comprise the stage on which human action or thought, unfolds.”<sup>36</sup> Brown explores the relations between subjects and objects, and regards objects as having their own identity, fascination and repulsion. He quotes Fernand Leg er, who explained: “When you isolate a thing, you give it a personality.”<sup>37</sup> In McCarthy’s texts things, though usually well in the foreground, are never fully isolated, their identities always in the proximity of the identities of their owners, as is the case with the diamond loignon of Pokey Prothero.

Randall Jarrell’s vast quantities of objects in his *Pictures from the Institution* serve a different purpose. The list of things found in the house of the faculty members Florence and John Whittaker makes McCarthy’s use of objects seem rather sketchy in comparison:

Going to the Whittaker’s house was almost like going to the zoo. (...) Jeremy Bentham’s stuffed body would not have been ill at ease in their house. You went into a warm dark cozy morass or labyrinth or limbo of fire-dogs, dough-chests (full of old numbers of the *Journal of Social Psychology*), Delft pepper-mills, needle-point footstools, barometers, chesstables, candle-molds, Holbeins (their motto was, *If it isn’t a Holbein, it isn’t a picture* – and Dr. Whittaker himself looked like a Holbein of an aged  mile), quilts, counterpanes, comforters, throws, Afghans, stoles (that had got in among the others by mistake), hooked, knitted, quilted, tied, crocheted, and appliqu ed rugs (...). And there was weeping willow china, bone and luster and Belleek and beaded and bumped and brown-landscaped china, glass enough for a history of glass; the chair-legs (all the chairs were either *very* big, *very* little, or *very*

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<sup>36</sup> Brown, *Sense of Things*, 3.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

oddly shaped) wore ruffled pantaloons (...). Believe me, after the Whittakers', other houses looked pale. (...) The Whittakers were not like their house, and lived in it rather as modern man lives among the Ruins of the Cultures of the Past. (PFI 52-55)

“The Ruins of the Cultures of the Past” may remind one of Gustave Flaubert’s “rare ruins” in Carthage of third century B.C., as pictured in *Salammbô*. But the comic effect of Jarrell’s amassment of objects in the Whittaker house is evidently intentional. This excerpt from Jarrell’s *Pictures* works not unlike Ezra Pound’s “Studies in Contemporary Mentality,” where absurd lists of things from adverts are held together simply by rhythm, and already because of that are destined to get a few laughs from the reader.<sup>38</sup> The primary focus and charm of Jarrell’s passage lies in the surprisingly long chain of objects, in the rhythm and a certain breathlessness accompanying their enumeration, the alliterations that give the passage comical and poetic qualities. These details are much more in the foreground than the relation of the objects to the people who own them. Unlike Mary McCarthy’s, Jarrell’s objects fully acquire a life of their own.

## 2. The Lady-Novels

The two loudest and angriest reviews of McCarthy’s *The Group* were written by the two Normans – the already mentioned Mailer and Podhoretz. Both men accuse McCarthy of having written “a trivial lady writer’s novel,” and present McCarthy’s catalogues of objects as evidence for her “flatly written and incoherently structured book,” with its collective heroine smelling of the “communal odour [which] is a cross between *Ma Griffé* and contraceptive jelly.”<sup>39</sup> *The Group* was McCarthy’s only bestseller, and it seems as if Mailer disqualifies the novel on the ground of its very

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Mao, *Solid Objects*, 141.

<sup>39</sup> Mailer, “Case Against McCarthy”, 134-135.

popularity, for he begins the review with excerpts of praise *The Group* received. Yet for him, this praise comes from all the wrong sources:

Not since Elizabeth Janeway wrote *The Walsh Girls* has any lady-book been given praise by people such as these. (...) What has Mary done that she is now guilty of by association with the Boroffs and the Fullers and the Hicks?<sup>40</sup>

Using the term “lady-book” and associating McCarthy with popular female writers such as Elizabeth Janeway, Mailer places her text in the “low” league of mass culture and insinuates that “lady-books” cannot a priori have any literary merit. In her study of Sylvia Plath, Jacqueline Rose traces this attitude to the association of popular culture with femininity; “the attitude of hostility, dismissiveness or flippant mockery that [is] often [exhibited] towards popular writing by and for women, the tone that men often use toward women and popular culture alike.”<sup>41</sup>

Women’s status in America of the 1950s was problematic indeed – the first wave of feminism that brought women the right to vote subsided, as did the period of professional activity of women during the war years. Instead, new ideological forces, glamourizing housework and consumerism, helped to create the image of the domestic woman of the ’50s, which somewhat resembled the Victorian concept of the Angel in the House. Several historical and sociological factors were responsible for this development: after the World War II the United States experienced an economic boom that together with government programs like the GI Bill of Rights of 1944, in which Congress offered veterans low-interest rates for housing, increased the purchasing power of the majority of Americans and created suburbia.<sup>42</sup> The jobs that

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>41</sup> Jacqueline Rose, “Sadie Peregrine,” in: *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992), 167-168.

<sup>42</sup> Gary Cross, *An All Consuming Century: Why Commercialism Won in Modern America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 87.

during the war years were well managed by women, were taken over by the returning GIs, and women were expected to take over their new kitchens in their new suburban houses. There was also the more sinister aspect of the uprising Cold War and the “red fear” unleashed by Senator McCarthy that made American people hide in a wave of conformity.<sup>43</sup> The white picket fences with a pretty housewife in her shiny kitchen became a political statement – consumerism seemed to be an antipode and perhaps even an antidote to Communism.

Among the Mary McCarthy’s papers at the Vassar Special Collection Libraries, there is a folder with research material for her article “The Vassar Girl,” that is included in her collection of essays *On the Contrary*. A newspaper clipping from the *Fall River Herald News* of July 1<sup>st</sup>, 1949, titled “Preparation for Marriage,” quotes Sarah Branding, the new Vassar president:

A woman graduate of any college must be able to get along with men under any and all circumstances, whether in business or homemaking. (...) The value of a college education to women, as it is to men, is that it enables them to understand more about themselves (...), broadens their interests, and establishes their values on a mutual plane. The question of a career is scarcely involved at all.<sup>44</sup>

Although it is a little bewildering to read that a college education is being divorced from career plans, but is supposed to serve as a personal training of some sorts instead, there is at least some attempt to balance women and men and to mention business, albeit only once and in an oblique way. The excerpts from the “Alumnae Talk” of the *Vassar Magazine* that follow the article, paint a picture so grim that it reads like an clichéd summary of all the accusations that Betty Friedan was to collect in *The Feminine Mystique*:

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<sup>43</sup> David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Random House, 1972), 124.

<sup>44</sup> “Preparation for Marriage,” *Herald News*, July 1, 1949, Mary McCarthy Papers, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries, f.18.4.

A psychiatrist: We cannot compete with men. Women's contributions are different and should be different.

An anthropologist: From the start a woman must make the decision that home comes before the job. She is wife and mother first. If she accepts this, there will be no conflict.<sup>45</sup>

McCarthy does not directly focus on these things in her fiction – she draws the reader's attention to gender problems of the '50s in a slant way, as in her mock-chronicle *The Group*. The crippling role society gave to women in the '50s was made into the pivotal point of the writing by Sylvia Plath, especially in her only novel *The Bell Jar*. Two generations separate McCarthy and Plath. It seems that the two women writers were completely unaware of each other, in spite of having mutual literary friends, such as the poet Robert Lowell. There is no trace of any knowledge of McCarthy's writing in Plath's letters and journals, and vice versa.<sup>46</sup> Plath's and McCarthy's literary approach seems to parallel their lifestyles – Plath's scrutiny of the *I* and her reputation as a confessional poet stands in contrast to McCarthy's steady mode of detachment even in her autobiographical fiction and memoirs.<sup>47</sup> Instead of McCarthy's almost invisible narrator, who frequently steps back to make room for “acts of ventriloquism,” as in the gossip and gabble of the eight girls of *The Group*,

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<sup>45</sup> “About You and Your Family,” *Vassar Magazine*, n.d., Mary McCarthy Papers, Archives and Special Collection Library, Vassar College Libraries, f.18.4.

<sup>46</sup> Jeffrey Meyers believes that the last lines from Plath's poem “The Disquieting Muses” – “But no frown of mine/ Will betray the company I keep” – stem from McCarthy: ‘The final stanza compares the depressing painting to her mother's kingdom, which Plath, using the title of Mary McCarthy's volume of stories *The Company She Keeps* (1942), is forced to endure.’ It is more than disputable that McCarthy influenced Plath in this line, since “to keep company” is a common idiomatic expression in the English language. Apart from that there are neither thematic nor formal allusions to McCarthy's work in Plath's writing. Jeffrey Meyers, “Sylvia Plath. The Paintings in the Poems,” *Word & Image: A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry* 20.2 (2004): 119.

<sup>47</sup> McCarthy's version of the confessional trend in American literature is discussed in the next chapter of the thesis “Thwarted Confessions.” Michael Trask lucidly remarks on the paradox of McCarthy's writing: “Even at her most confessional she insists on posing as objective and detached. She represents a quite different tendency from postwar writers involved in the confessional mode of Robert Lowell, Allen Ginsberg, or Sylvia Plath. (...) Whereas the confessional poets are famous for having dramatized affect, McCarthy – even when her prose appears most revelatory – persistently dramatizes detachment.” Michael Trask, “In The Bathroom with Mary McCarthy: Theatricality, Deviance, and the Postwar Commitment to Realism,” *Criticism* 49.1 (2007): 13.

Plath's first person narrator in *The Bell Jar* and her lyrical *I* in *Ariel* offer a deeply private perspective. Her novel about the college girl Esther Greenwood who goes through a psychological breakdown, can be seen as a subtly veiled autobiographical *Bildungsroman* (interestingly, the same can be said of *The Group*, a novel rich with autobiographical references, depicting the girls' tragicomic process from college into adult life).

*The Bell Jar* deals with the impossibility of the acceptance of this limited role and the consequential conflict, its title being the very symbol of the glass ceiling under which many women were captured in the 1950s. These aspects of American society as well the excerpts from the Vassar archives illustrating this point are just as important for *The Group* as well. McCarthy's concept of the novel was "a woman's book" from the very beginning, as it says in her "Notes for Novel":

It would be a shame to lose the faddish side of the story, the fashions and clichés of love, architecture, child-rearing. To make it a *woman's book*, through and through, would be perhaps of the greatest interest (...).<sup>48</sup>

The abundance of objects that is one of the main features of *The Group* also stems from McCarthy's concept of the novel and is closely connected to the novel being "a woman's book through and through." In her notes "On the Writing of *The Group*" McCarthy says:

*The Group* took me eleven years to write. I started it in 1952 (...). It grew out of my preoccupation with what is now called the quality of life. It seemed to me that there was a great deterioration of standards – most noticeable in the women's sphere of housekeeping and childrearing – and that this was connected with a loss of feeling for reality in its simplest, homeliest forms. The source, as I saw it, was the idea of progress.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Mary McCarthy, "Notes for Novel," Mary McCarthy Papers, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries, f. 21.6.

<sup>49</sup> Mary McCarthy, "On the Writing of *The Group*," 1, Mary McCarthy Papers, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries, f. 21.8.

What McCarthy writes here is not a contradiction in terms despite its seeming controversy. Progress did replace the charwoman with the vacuum cleaner and the washing machine, and the cook with a wide assortment of canned foods. This process started in the 1920s and brought a significant change in the structure of the household labour force:

The disappearance of paid and unpaid servants (...) as household workers – and the imposition of the entire job on the housewife herself (...): the phenomenon itself is relatively easy to document. Before World War I, when illustrators in the women's magazines depicted women doing housework, the women were very often servants. When the lady of the house was drawn, she was often the person being served, or she was supervising the serving. (...) By the end of the 1920s the servants had disappeared from those illustrations; all those jobs were being done by housewives – elegantly manicured and coiffed, to be sure, but housewives nonetheless.<sup>50</sup>

The lady of the house became a jack-of-all-trades, responsible for various tasks that servants were doing for her mother before. The women of the middle class were made to feel this most acutely, and that is part of the reason why Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* focuses exclusively on this group. McCarthy's retrospective *The Group* shows the beginning of this development, the eight girls being the very first of the generation to plunge ahead into the "adventure" of autonomous housewifery.

McCarthy felt so sorry for them at times that she stopped writing her book:

By the time I got to the end of Chapter 3, I felt I was torturing those poor girls (...) and the thought of pursuing them for another twenty years, into middle-age – originally the novel was to end with the inauguration of Eisenhower – was too awful.<sup>51</sup>

The girls' enthusiastic approach to domesticity is symptomatic for the times' attempt to mask the emptiness of the housework drudgery with the illusion of glamour and

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<sup>50</sup> Ruth Schwartz Cowan, "The 'Industrial Revolution' in the Home: Household Technology and Social Change in the Twentieth Century," in: *Women's America: Refocusing the Past*, eds. Linda E. Kerber and Jane Sherron De Hart (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 378.

<sup>51</sup> McCarthy, "On the Writing of *The Group*," 2.

fulfilment, popularized in the advertisements of women's magazines. In her analysis of Sylvia Plath's poetry, Janice Markey perceives advertising as "a dangerously powerful force that degrades women."<sup>52</sup> Marsha Bryant, in her essay on Plath whom she sees as "literary culture's ultimate commodity," focuses on ads for kitchen appliances that could have been an inspiration for Plath's poetry. The dehumanizing commodity culture of the 1950s created ads swarming with fantasy creatures on boxes of brownie-mixes and bottles of detergent. The trolls and fairies in the advertisements were shown to help the housewife in magical ways.<sup>53</sup> Other popular ads of the era presented kitchen appliances with humanlike qualities, producing a somewhat schizophrenic melding of mechanical and human elements. In this "re-personalization of life through advertising (...) inanimate things c[a]me alive."<sup>54</sup> Small wonder then that McCarthy laments the "loss of feeling for reality in its simplest, homeliest forms" in her notes for *The Group*. The schizophrenic aesthetics of '50s advertising, as well as the cultural myth of so-called "labour-saving" appliances embody the very idea of progress which McCarthy sees responsible for the loss of reality.<sup>55</sup>

Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* presents, among other things, how the "adventure" of being a housewife turns into a trap for women, becoming a trigger for insanity. While the girls of *The Group* embrace the new trends in housekeeping and popular culture with the ardour of neophytes, Esther's approach to consumer culture addressed at women is more ambivalent. The objects that the college girl protagonist encounters

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<sup>52</sup> Janice Markey, *A Journey into the Red Eye: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath – A Critique* (London: the Women's Press Ltd., 1993), 63

<sup>53</sup> Marsha Bryant, "Plath, Domesticity and the Art of Advertising," *College Literature* 29.3, (2002): 20.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Here it is important to note that *The Group* is a product of the 1950s despite its historical setting in the 1930s. The problems of the "female sphere" have not changed much in these twenty years, as previously discussed in the context of female contraception in the first chapter of the thesis ("Honest Women In and Out of McCarthy's Work").

oscillate between being objects of desire and objects of revulsion.<sup>56</sup> The result for McCarthy's girls and Plath's protagonist is the same, however – both *The Group's* collective heroine and Esther Greenwood are crippled by the cultural norms of their times. The link between the foreshadowed catastrophe in *The Group*, which McCarthy could not bear to bring to the '50s, and the ripe misery of *The Bell Jar* is the most obvious feature that unites these two novels.

Elaine Showalter lists Plath and McCarthy one after the other in her essay “Killing the Angel in the House: the Autonomy of Women Writers.” She notes the bestseller status of *The Bell Jar* and *The Group*, and emphasises Esther's “total rejection of the feminine role” for which madness gives her a socially acceptable excuse, as well as *The Group's* underlying “anger and accuracy.” Women readers strongly responded to these features of McCarthy's novel, and its “anger and accuracy” were probably the aspects that ignited male critics such as Podhoretz and Mailer.<sup>57</sup> “*The Group* was interpreted as proof that higher education made women aggressive and neurotic,” concludes Showalter, a popular view of the 1950s, ridiculed by McCarthy in her essay “Tyranny of the Orgasm” a few years before *The Group* was published.<sup>58</sup>

Esther Greenwood's steady criticism of the role that was considered suitable for women of the '50s and that she constantly feels forced into, makes her discontent almost revolutionary – an act of subversion of the '50s ideology and its emphasis on consumerism and conformity. In her journals, Sylvia Plath notes that the “great fault

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<sup>56</sup> In the first lines of *The Bell Jar* Esther regrets buying “all those uncomfortable, expensive clothes, hanging limp as fish in [her] closet.” Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 1963 (New York: Harper Perennial, 1999), 2. In all further references to this text the abbreviation BJ and the page number will appear immediately after the quotation.

<sup>57</sup> Showalter, “Killing the Angel in the House,” 212.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

of America” lies in “its expectancy of conformity.”<sup>59</sup> Alan Nadel, in his analysis of *The Group*, sees the girls’ attempts to come to terms with various aspects of the female sphere informed by “the quintessential Cold War question: what is normal?”<sup>60</sup> Nadel (rightly) implies that living according to society’s norms was the goal that McCarthy’s girls were anxious to achieve. Plath herself was susceptible to society’s expectations, and was very much interested in being able to keep up the image of the 1950s perfect homemaker; so much so that at one point she was worried she was giving more attention to cooking than to writing:

I was getting worried about becoming too happily stodgily practical: instead of studying Locke, for instance, or writing – I go make an apple pie, or study the Joy of Cooking, reading it like a rare novel. Whoa, I said to myself. You will escape into domesticity & stifle yourself by falling headfirst into a bowl of cookie batter.<sup>61</sup>

Caroline J. Smith remembers the mugs of milk and plates of bread that Plath left for her small children before ending her life, and sees this as an indication that Plath, like Esther, “was haunted by the domestic behavioural models that she encountered in her own life.”<sup>62</sup> In *The Group*, the story of Kay’s and Harald’s marriage, marked by unemployment, alcoholism, unfaithfulness and abuse, can be read only between the lines of Kay’s stream of thought devoted to the planning of dinner.<sup>63</sup> Deborah Nelson

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<sup>59</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, ed. Karen Kukil (New York: Random House, 2000), 411.

<sup>60</sup> Nadel, “Fiction and the Cold War,” 175.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 269.

<sup>62</sup> Caroline J. Smith, “‘The Feeding of Young Women’: Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*, *Mademoiselle Magazine*, and the Domestic Ideal,” *College Literature* 37.4 (2010): 20.

<sup>63</sup> “And after rehearsals the show was going out of town to open, so that she would be alone for two weeks while Harald kept company with the dancers and the show girls – one of them was quite intelligent (Harald had found her backstage reading Katherine Mansfield) and had a house in Connecticut. So, naturally, Kay was glad when Harald tooted home (...) for dinner. (...) Harald did not realize what a rush it was for her, every day now, coming home from work at Mr. Macy’s and having to stop at Gristede’s for the groceries; Harald never had time any more to do the marketing in the morning. And, strange to say, ever since *she* had started doing it, it had been a bone of contention between them. He liked the A&P because it was cheaper, and she liked Gristede’s because they delivered and had fancy vegetables, (...) and she liked to read the cookbook and the food columns and always be trying something new.” (TG 96). This excerpt, told entirely from Kay’s perspective, implies Harald’s affair with a showgirl, his long absences, his reluctance to participate in the housework as

remarks in her “Plath, History and Politics” that Sylvia Plath meant *The Bell Jar* “to provide a template for a *generational* story,” and positioned Esther Greenwood “as a representative figure.”<sup>64</sup> This makes her a close relative to the girls of *The Group*, since their function in representing different types of femininity is key for McCarthy’s mock-chronicle.

In Esther’s overtly sensitized world inanimate objects become sources of menace or tools of control. *The Bell Jar* relies on objects to provide the distance necessary for the reader not to be choked by the extremes of Esther’s perception. Dresses, make-up, mirrors, the state of Esther’s hair (washed or unwashed), food, books, newspapers and even the amount of money in Esther’s purse are comments on her feelings. Her “size seven black patent leather shoes” turn out to be the recurrent, almost symbolical objects in crucial physical and emotional situations. Bought before her New York internship, they are Esther’s constant companions. When Esther regains consciousness after the food poisoning, the first thing she sees is the tip of her own shoe. Remembering her dead father and looking at the ocean, Esther longs for the shoes she left on the sand. Twice in the novel the shoes get filled up with blood, as if they were glass shoes and Esther Cinderella’s stepsister – the first time from the razor cuts Esther performs as a suicide practice, the second from a vaginal haemorrhage that is a consequence of Esther’s defloration. At the end of the novel, the shoes are still there, “cracked, but polished,” just like Esther’s patched-up psyche. Caroline J. Smith closes her essay on Plath with the image from the ending of *The Bell Jar*, in which Esther, heading for her exit interview, can only focus carefully “on her ‘stocking

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well as the couple’s frequent fights and Kay’s double work load. All these things are noted by Kay subconsciously; her devotion to cooking and delivering the meal to her husband in time is clearly in the foreground here.

<sup>64</sup> Deborah Nelson, “Plath, History and Politics,” in: *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*, ed. Jo Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 24.

seams,' 'black shoes,' and 'red wool suit' – the kind of clothes that would appear in advertisement from *Mademoiselle*.”<sup>65</sup> While the attention paid to her fashionable outfit suggests both Esther’s confusion and the undiminished impact of social norms, the shift from the “question marks” in Esther’s future to items of dress again creates the effect of a twisted reality, where objects are given disproportionate and somewhat obsessive importance. This is also an accurate observation for states of tiredness and psychological stress, which would correlate with Esther’s psychological state in the last chapter of the novel.

Edward Larrissy claims that Sylvia Plath “makes herself an object.” This goes further than highlighting the general objectification of woman that was common in the American 1950s. Larrissy refers to her poetry, especially to “Cut,” where Plath’s “schizoid detachment from the body” is expressed in the comparison of her own cut and bleeding thumb to an onion, a hat, a baboushka, her exposed flesh – “that red plush.”<sup>66</sup> The effect of this detachment – pain and shock are completely out of the picture here – is similar to the effect of distance the reader perceives in *The Bell Jar*, and it too is achieved through objectification. Larrissy notes that Plath’s poems “behave in an impersonal (...) manner,” and that Plath “imparts a relatively impersonal air even to self-referential statements.” Despite the deeply private topics that are typical of the genre of confessional poetry, Plath achieves the impersonal air by focusing on details close to, but outside the self. The things that the self owns serve as instruments of detachment.

*The Bell Jar* has been viewed by critics as inferior to Sylvia Plath’s poetry, especially to *Ariel*. When the novel was published in 1973 in the United States, a decade after Plath’s suicide and the publication of the critically acclaimed *Ariel*, the

<sup>65</sup> Smith, “Feeding of Young Women,” 21.

<sup>66</sup> Edward Larrissy, *Reading Twentieth-Century Poetry: The Language of Gender and Objects* (Oxford and Cambridge, Mass.: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 137-138.

tenor of the reviews stated that *The Bell Jar* was “a small novel, distinguished primarily by those occasional images which find their proper experience in the poems.”<sup>67</sup> Plath herself dismissed her only novel in one of her letters to her mother: “Forget about the novel and tell no one of it. It’s a pot boiler and just practice.”<sup>68</sup> It is not essential to determine how serious Plath was with this utterance, but the notion that a best-selling “potboiler,” a “lady-novel” by a lady-novelist concerned with “the female sphere,” is automatically void of intellectual and critical faculty, had been readily taken up. Janet Badia points out in her essay ““Dissatisfied, Family-Hating Shrews’: Women Readers and Sylvia Plath’s Literary Reception” that Irving Howe “transforms Plath from serious poet into glamour girl,” and likens the perception of Plath’s writing by women readers to consumption.<sup>69</sup> This may not be as crass as Mailer’s review of *The Group*, but the tendency to dismiss “the female sphere” is detectable nonetheless. *The Group*’s smell of *MaGriffe* and contraception jelly, the “Eggs Benedict and the dress with the white fichu,” the recipe at dinner and the commercial on the air – the elements Mailer called the “profound materiality of women” – are, for him, “the cold lava anality,” the “glop,” the “impacted mass.” His degrading of the complex relationship between the girl characters and the material objects, which is a major means of expression in *The Group*, equals the wilful degrading of the novel and its author. The “female sphere,” rooted in popular culture, is simply not sufficient for “a major novel” as Mailer perceived it.

Jacqueline Rose takes up the connection between popular culture and Sylvia Plath’s writing in her chapter “Sadie Peregrine” in *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*. She

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<sup>67</sup> Janet Badia, “*The Bell Jar* and Other Prose,” in: *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*, 71.

<sup>68</sup> Quoted in Steven Gould Axelrod, “The Poetry of Sylvia Plath,” in: *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*, 133.

<sup>69</sup> Janet Badia, ““Dissatisfied, Family-Hating Shrews’: Women Readers and Sylvia Plath’s Literary Reception,” *Literature Interpretation Theory* 19 (2008): 193.

claims that the strong link to popular culture can be found throughout Plath's poetry and cannot be confined only to *The Bell Jar*, the "pot boiler." Plath's poem "The Babysitters" mentions Philip Wylie's misogynist book *Generation of Vipers*, famous for the 1950s concept of "Momism," with its image of the American castrating middle class female. "By naming this book, Plath situates herself – or her memory of herself – firmly within the framework of popular culture," states Rose.<sup>70</sup> Whereas "The Babysitters" is the only poem by Plath that directly refers to "a book from the ambient culture," there are many less explicit references to popular culture in Plath's poetry. In "Daddy" the line "Every woman adores a fascist" alludes to the camp image of a Marlene Dietrich (or, rather, Marika Rokk).<sup>71</sup> In "Lady Lazarus," "the big strip tease" and the rhythm of an advertising jingle refer to the lowest elements of mass culture.<sup>72</sup> The "nonpoetic or anti-poetic sources" in Plath's writing make her "a hybrid, crossing over the boundaries of cultural difference with an extraordinary and almost transgressive ease."<sup>73</sup> This leads one to assume that Plath "was much at home with Wallace Stevens as she was with *Mademoiselle*."<sup>74</sup>

Mass culture, in Vance Packard's definition, evolves from mass-production processes and can be seen as a "debased form of High culture," fabricated by technicians hired by businessmen, with its audience as passive consumers. The choice that these consumers of mass culture have is only that of buying and not buying.<sup>75</sup> Advertising plays a key role in popular culture, for both the culture and advertising must follow the same rules. Plath's Esther Greenwood is taken into the world of commerce and advertising that together with her heightened sensitivity produces

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<sup>70</sup> Rose, *Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, 165.

<sup>71</sup> Sylvia Plath, *Ariel*, 1966 (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 49.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>73</sup> Nelson, *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*, 30.

<sup>74</sup> Rose, *Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, 167.

<sup>75</sup> Vance Packard, *The Status Seekers* (New York: David McKay Company, 1966), 150.

nightmarish and comical scenes in the novel. The act of ordering a drink becomes an illustration of the manipulation of consumer anxiety typical for mid-century advertising, with its emphasis on the necessity of the right performance.<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, the irony of the advertised “purity” of vodka unfolds in the question of sexual purity and impurity, present in the virginal Esther’s encounter with the experienced disc-jockey.

The presence of popular magazines is, besides advertising, the other steady reference to popular culture in *The Bell Jar*. During Esther’s psychological breakdown magazines and tabloids are the only things that she is able to read. This seems ironic, since it was her job at a popular young women’s magazine in New York that triggered her deep depression. Although the magazine’s name is never mentioned in Plath’s novel, there cannot be any doubt that it is, indeed, *Mademoiselle*, for Esther’s description of the program and herself in it reads like a version of an editorial from this magazine.<sup>77</sup> Caroline J. Smith points out that Plath’s novel “directly interacts with, and is informed by, publications such as *Mademoiselle*.” The “magazine for smart young women” provided its readers with mixed messages, subtly discouraging the young women from navigating into the world of serious careers and stressing the importance of domesticity instead; its articles focusing on various career

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<sup>76</sup> Sitting in a New York bar with her friend Doreen and a popular disc-jockey, the sheltered college girl Esther feels very much out of place: “Ordering drinks always floored me. I didn’t know whiskey from gin and never managed to get anything I really liked the taste of. (...) ‘I’ll have a vodka,’ I said. The man looked at me more closely. ‘With anything?’ ‘Just plain,’ I said. ‘I always have it plain.’ I thought I’d make a fool of myself by saying I’d have it with ice or soda or gin or anything. I’d seen a vodka ad once, just a glass full of vodka standing in the middle of a snowdrift in a blue light, and the vodka looked clear and pure as water, so I thought having vodka plain must be all right.” (BJ 10)

<sup>77</sup> Thrown into the whirlwind of the fashion and advertising industry, Esther senses the garishness and falseness of the popular magazines’ world, paralleled by its breathless, almost manic language, which she mimics in her story: “As prizes they gave us jobs in New York for a month, expenses paid, and piles and piles of free bonuses, like ballet tickets and passes to fashion shows and hair stylings at a famous expensive salon and chances to meet successful people in the field of our desire and advice about what to do with our particular complexions. (...) I realized we kept piling up these presents because it was as good as free advertising for the firms involved, but I couldn’t be cynical.” (BJ 3)

opportunities were interspersed with ads for the perfect housewife.<sup>78</sup> These conflicting guidelines for femininity mirrored the 1950s consumer culture. Esther's deep confusion verging on madness can be seen as a consequence of the impact of these guidelines. The necessity of the right performance, this time of femininity itself, is obscured by absurd expectations such as being a "food expert," "an expert on Chinese art" and "a brilliant professor" simultaneously, as ads aimed at women seemed to suggest.<sup>79</sup> The girls of *The Group* have internalised both the guidelines and the advertisements in their "gossip and gabble" – the names of just the right brand or product are inherent in their free indirect speech.

Interestingly, Esther Greenwood is initially eager to fully participate in the quest of becoming the model of a young woman according to the 1950s consumer culture. She appears to be the perfect *Mademoiselle* "Everygirl," being a scholarship student from a very modest home, bitterly remarking on the rich, well-travelled and bored girls at her New York hotel.<sup>80</sup> McCarthy expresses her attraction towards the life of the upper classes by admiring the Vassar girls – "The tall, dazzling girls, upperclassmen, in pale sweaters and skirts, impeccable, with pearls at their throats and stately walks, like goddesses" – and Plath's Esther does the same through anger and jealousy.<sup>81</sup>

Both Esther and Sylvia Plath were equally fascinated and repulsed by the popular magazines: "I will slave and slave until I break into those slicks," wrote Plath in her journals; "I shall have fulfilled a very long-time ambition if a story of mine ever makes the *Ladies Home Journal*."<sup>82</sup> Like Esther, Plath is unable to escape the

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<sup>78</sup> Smith, "Feeding of Young Women", 3-4.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>80</sup> "Girls like that make me sick. I'm so jealous I can't speak. Nineteen years, and I hadn't been out of New England except for this trip to New York." (BJ 4) Hearing about "pocketbook" covers made from the same material as dresses, Esther longs for this "marvellous, elaborate decadence that attract[s] [her] like a magnet" (BJ 5).

<sup>81</sup> McCarthy, "The Vassar Girl," in: *On the Contrary*, 197.

<sup>82</sup> Quoted in Rose, *Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, 170-172.

ideologies popularized through consumer culture. McCarthy's view of women's magazines and popular culture, on the other hand, is usually marked by a greater distance: it is either an objective or satirical evaluation without the emotional involvement characteristic of Plath.

### 3. Magazines and Other Things That Give Us Away

McCarthy's essay "Up the Ladder from *Charm* to *Vogue*," an analysis of women's magazines of the '50s, explores the different social groups that most popular magazines aimed at and affirms Packard's claim that "the editorial content of any magazine pretty much selects its audience."<sup>83</sup> The shrill emphasis put on food in the *Mademoiselle* illustrates for McCarthy the magazine's tendency to give to things more weight than they deserve, thus distorting reality:

In the *Mademoiselle* play world, everything is romp-diminutive or make-believe. (...) The ready mix cake "turns out *terrific*." (...) The strain of keeping up this bright deception is marked by the grotesquerie of adverbs ("Serve piping hot with a dish of wildly hot mustard nearby"), by the repeated exclamation point (...).<sup>84</sup>

Cooking skills, or in McCarthy's example, the "make-believe" of having them, go together with the cheap but pretentious dresses, "jewelry" that consists of glass, and the "fun" achievable from simple secretarial jobs, all presented with "a jerky, convulsive party smile."<sup>85</sup> A reader-surrogate named Joan, *Mademoiselle*'s "Everygirl," who is "continually photographed backstage at 'exciting' events, (...) meeting Maurice Evans in his dressing room," as described by McCarthy, embodies the magazine's principle of making the image of the simple girl glamorous.<sup>86</sup> In the '50s, *Mademoiselle* was aimed at readers from the lower middle class, below or

<sup>83</sup> Packard, *The Status Seekers*, 151.

<sup>84</sup> McCarthy, "Up the Ladder from *Charm* to *Vogue*," in: *On the Contrary*, 179-180.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

beyond college (high school students or secretaries), and all its contents were meant to cover up the shortness of money, taste, and sophistication, but somehow, even their “Everygirl” tended to look painfully immature and isolated on the plane or in Parisian street photographs.

In McCarthy’s analysis, *Mademoiselle* could not fool those who were accustomed to *Vogue*. High class fashions were far from *Mademoiselle*’s “junky” dresses, “with too many tucks, pleats, belts, and collars for the money.” Comparing *Mademoiselle* with the much classier *Seventeen*, McCarthy notes that the *Seventeen* reader’s “first grown-up jewelry is not an ‘important-looking’ chunk of glass but a modest gold safety pin or, if she is lucky and has an uncle who can give it to her for graduation, a simple gold wrist watch.”<sup>87</sup>

McCarthy’s girls of *The Group*, who are much closer to *Vogue* than to *Seventeen*, and far away from *Mademoiselle*, embody this idea of high quality simplicity. Helena’s jewelry box contains only “a set of moonstones, a cat’s-eye brooch, an amethyst pin and an Add-a-Pearl necklace that had been completed on her eighteenth birthday” (TG 132) (one must keep in mind that Helena’s family lives on “the income from their income,” and remains largely untouched by the Great Depression). Dottie, one of the “Boston Brahmin,” is described as a separate, highly bred species by the connoisseur Dick Brown:

You and your social friends have a finer functional adaptation. Full, low slung breasts fashioned to carry pearls and *boucle* sweaters and faggoting and tucked crepe de Chine blouses. Narrow waists. Tapering legs. (TG 24-25)

The description of the clothes typical of the class Dottie belongs to almost outweighs her physical features, which should have been more interesting for the womanizer Dick. In his ironical view, the physical traits are modelled to suit the high class

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 181.

fashion, and not vice versa. Dottie herself notices that Dick, despite his battered looks, must be “a gentleman,” from “his well-cut features and his good, if old, tweed suit” (TG 22). This notion of the Vassar girl as a superior species was so popular at the time of *The Group* that Norman Podhoretz started his criticism of the novel with his dismay about Kay and Harald’s modest wedding in the first chapter:

Any Vassar girl of the Class of ’33 who could so violate her true nature as to have a wedding like that was bound to jump out of a window sooner or later. The leopard ought to know better than to think he can change his spots.<sup>88</sup>

In fact, Podhoretz is not as wrong as he may seem – Lakey, the only emblematic Vassar girl of the group, does indeed suffer:

[Her] fine white Renaissance nostril was dented with a mark of pain. (...) To Elinor, this wedding was torture. Everything was so jaggedly ill-at-ease: Kay’s costume, Harald’s shoes and necktie, the bare altar (...) (TG 7)

(Podhoretz forgets that Kay herself is not from the same background as Lakey – she is from a middle-class family in the West, and thus somewhat of an arriviste among the mythical Vassar Girls.) McCarthy uses the nostril as the most visible symptom of suffering of a fine creature again when describing Domna Rejnev, with her “finely cut, mobile nostrils,” which “quivered during a banal conversation, as though, literally, seeking air” (GA 37).

Chapter Four of *The Group* can exist, as almost any chapter in this novel, as a separate little piece – about an unhappy “modern” marriage between two ambitious young people during the Great Depression. Harald loses his job and Kay worries about being able to move into “the Apartment” they now cannot afford – the capital letter emphasising its importance. Debates over real vs. evaporated cream as well as

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<sup>88</sup> Podhoretz, *Doings and Undoings*, 92.

butter vs. margarine add drama to the couple's conflicts about unemployment and infidelity (TG 90-109). These seemingly meaningless things like cream and butter, as well as the possibility of living in a fashionable apartment with a concierge in the building while lacking the money for it all, seem not so unimportant if one thinks that a certain selection of the right objects defines a certain social class. In the historical and cultural context of *The Group*, the small objects such as cream and butter acquire a signalling function, which imbues them with additional meaning. The authors of *The Meaning of Things* put objects among the most important elements of identity building:

Attitudes, behaviour and *household objects* form an ordered sign system that structures, and is structured by the selves of those who derive their identities from the same social class. (...) One's position in the social order is an integral part of who one is, thus the signs of status are important ingredients of the self.<sup>89</sup>

The Great Depression made the secure knowledge of one's position in the social order all the more difficult, it shifted the existing order and made the class division murky, uncertain, thus even reinforcing the influence of inanimate objects, for they were solid in the most literal sense. The American poet Robert Lowell, a close friend of McCarthy's, wrote to her after reading *The Group*:

I think you have done something I've always wanted to do, and never had the knowledge or slant to try – you show these cloistered, pastoral souls breaking on the real rocks of the times. What is troubling, shocking and hard to swallow about your story is realizing that we were so compact and ignorant, - dependable little machines made to mow the lawn, then suddenly turned out to clear the wilderness.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> My emphasis, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, *Meaning of Things*, 18.

<sup>90</sup> Robert Lowell, letter to Mary McCarthy, August 1963, Mary McCarthy Papers, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries, f. 209.9.

Lowell too expresses the cruelty of progress and modern history that robbed the once privileged of many of their privileges. In *The Group*, McCarthy looks at a “vanishing class,” Protestant, upper-middle, educated in an Ivy League college.

McCarthy’s Vassar girls, with the exception of Lakey, Pokey and Dottie, have to find their feet during interesting times, their Vassar background being, under these circumstances, more a liability than an asset (in spite of her education, Kay works as a trainee at Macy’s). Choosing the right things to surround themselves with, the girls get a (perhaps false) feeling of who they are or want to be. Thus it is only logical that the more sure a girl is of her place in society, the less gratification she needs from inanimate objects. Kay, being the Western outsider at the East Coast, is therefore highly dependent on her cocktails, new “fancy vegetables”, and “the Apartment,” with its Venetian blinds and a “darling little dressing room,” for they help her to define her very identity. Yet, as Bill Brown notes, there can be a slippage between “*having* (possessing a particular object) and *being* (the identification of one’s self with this object),” things becoming slightly human and humans slightly “thing like.”<sup>91</sup> Norman Podhoretz and Norman Mailer, raging in their reviews, suspected the girls of slipping into the latter, to become dissolved in *Ma Griffe* and “contraceptive jelly.” Lowell too compares people to “dependable little machines” – yet it seems that it is the very ambivalence of the girls’ positions, making them so dependent on objects and also somewhat object-like, which renders their lives as the most human of tragedies.

#### **4. The Good and the Ugly**

Domna Rejnev of *The Groves of Academe*, just like the girls of *The Group* and Martha Sinnot of *A Charmed Life*, belongs to the group of the privileged individuals

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<sup>91</sup> Brown, *Sense of Things*, 13.

in McCarthy's novels whose excellence is frequently emphasised with the help of objects. Domna's aristocratic origin is reflected in many small details, such as her European clothing and her secure taste in drinks (she prefers high quality, traditional drinks that match her high quality, traditional tailored clothes): "[she] liked to drink three little jiggers of neat whiskey before she ate her dinner," observes Henry Mulcahy (GA 39).

Mulcahy himself, on the other hand, fulfils the cliché that simplicity eats whereas sophistication drinks, as he likes to indulge in "a midnight 'spread,' candy bars, frosted cupcakes, nuts and pickles, second helpings of mashed potatoes" (GA 7), all this in the midst of the drying diapers, broken toys and potties of his four children. Mary McCarthy really does not like him. Although there are a few other characters – Maynard Hoar, the liberal college president who ends up resigning because of Mulcahy's lies, or Alma, the "repressed intellectual brainworker" who resigns as well – Henry Mulcahy and Domna Rejnev are singled out as the odd couple that bring most contrast in the novel, perfect antagonists in their little likes and habits, but more importantly, in their world perceptions as well.

Domna is a White Russian member of the aristocracy, while Mulcahy is not only a former fellow-traveller, but from the lower, Irish Catholic middle class. The young and well-dressed Russian instructor belongs to the formidable group of McCarthy's heroines with whom the author tends to identify or, at the very least, give some of her autobiographical traits (McCarthy did teach Russian literature at Bard and was famous for her expensive wardrobe) – Martha Sinnott, Lakey and Polly are the other elect few of the noble and beautiful. Mulcahy, on the other hand, is everything that

McCarthy herself is not: “I am not a paranoid, nor a liar, nor consumed with hatred, nor a man, for that matter,” she remarks in her essay “Characters in Fiction.”<sup>92</sup>

In this essay McCarthy writes that the modern novel lost the feature of recognizable, “real” characters, and the only back door left to bring “character” into modern fiction is “the individual, unmistakable voice.”<sup>93</sup> Hence her own acts of “ventriloquism,” as she called her technique of personal narration. In *The Groves of Academe*, Henry Mulcahy is the one in whose skin she is “raging,” (whereas *The Group* splits McCarthy’s heroine and her voice into eight parts). But of course McCarthy could not actually “make [her]self *be* Mulcahy,” no matter how brilliant and convincing his inner monologues actually are.<sup>94</sup> McCarthy the author, McCarthy the narrator is not on Mulcahy’s side – she does not forgive him his grained pale eyelashes, his complexion, his weight, and even the runny noses of his children, while dwelling on Domna’s fine nostrils and glossy hair every time she is mentioned. Mulcahy deserves this treatment, “launching a demagogic campaign for reappointment, claiming that he is being dismissed for having been a Communist and parading himself as the victim of a witch-hunt,” although his claim is “totally false,” since the termination of his contract is based solely on the neglect of his duties.<sup>95</sup>

In her essay “Characters in Fiction” McCarthy tells only a small part of the making of *The Groves of Academe*. The lecture she gave at the University of Montana in 1952 goes into much greater detail of the emergence of the novel. The question to McCarthy “How did you come to write it?” is all the more interesting, because her

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<sup>92</sup> McCarthy, “Characters in Fiction,” in: *On the Contrary*, 286.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 282.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 286.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 285.

answer reveals just how deeply steeped the idea for the novel was in the political atmosphere of the late '40s and the fear evoked by the McCarthy era:

What I can talk about (...) is the atmosphere out of which Mulcahy and his fellow-characters sprang. The book was first conceived in the fall of 1948, in the atmosphere of the Wallace campaign and the Hiss-Chambers case. The ambiguities of the Hiss-Chambers case combined with certain experience I had had teaching in progressive colleges to create in my mind the possibility of an upside-down political image, of a world where everything was perfectly regular but reversed.

In the Hiss-Chambers case, you had at least a very peculiar situation, where the unsavoury unkempt man was telling at least a partial truth and the clean-cut college-type was telling at least a partial lie. This antinomy between Hiss and Chambers fixed itself in my imagination, together with the idea of the lie, the justified lie, the lie that is regarded by the liar as an equivalent for a higher truth that coarser people will be too gross to understand. You will not find in *The Groves of Academe* any direct equivalents for Hiss and Chambers or any translation of this police-case into fictional terms. In the finished product it is all very different. But at the outset, when I was first thinking about it, I did see a vision of two opposite figures confronting each other: the unsavoury man from underground and the clean-cut, peppy liberal, in this case, the college president, photogenic Maynard Hoar. Here all outward resemblances to the Hiss case ceased, for Mulcahy, as I envisioned him further, became both Hiss and Chambers, the accuser and the accused, the liar and the truth-proclaimer, while the president, Maynard Hoar, became simply himself.<sup>96</sup>

There are two points that are important to note from this excerpt – the historical background of the Hiss-Chambers case and the attention paid to how the two men looked, the attention that is so typical of McCarthy's own perception throughout her *Groves of Academe*. Alger Hiss was a highly placed State Department official, who went to jail for perjury in January 1950, because a confessed Communist spy, Whittaker Chambers, proved to the jury's satisfaction that Hiss had once given him secret State Department documents.<sup>97</sup> The fascination with the outward appearance of the two men that is clearly audible in McCarthy's speech suggests that it is almost incredible how the "clean-cut college type" Hiss could be telling a partial lie, whereas the "unkempt, unsavoury man" Chambers was telling a partial truth. This tendency to

<sup>96</sup> Mary McCarthy, "Lecture on *Groves of Academe*, University of Montana 1952," Mary McCarthy Papers, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries, f. 8.13.

<sup>97</sup> Reeves, introduction to *McCarthyism*, 5.

link good looks with other superior qualities is well known to the people interested in the manipulation of public opinion. In *The Hidden Persuaders*, Vance Packard mentions that the careful selection of candidates is also common in “politics and industrial relations”: “The national chairman of a political party indicated his mechanising approach to the election of 1956 by talking of his candidates as products to sell.”<sup>98</sup> The Communist party in America also viewed its candidates as products:

The Communists had always found excellent pickings among Eagle Scouts and college debaters, and they had done tolerably well among persons with impeccable business and family connections. (...) Alger Hiss, a real Hi-Y sort, had been a debater, a track man, and the “best hand-shaker” in his class at Johns Hopkins.<sup>99</sup>

In *The Groves of Academe*, McCarthy got rid of the unnerving ambiguities present in the Alger Hiss case, and made her characters either beautiful or ugly on the inside *and* the outside.

Choosing a new, small and progressive college for the setting of her novel, McCarthy creates a world where the tragicomedy of Mulcahy’s ploy and the faculty’s reaction to it becomes possible in the first place. The college is a strange comfortable little world, especially for the faculty, none of whose members are expected to have a PhD. The less driven students roam about almost unattended under the cover of “individual instruction,” receiving little or none of the education classic formal colleges might have given them (GA 78-79). Jarrell’s *Pictures* is quite merciless with this kind of system and read like a satirical commentary on McCarthy’s more balanced description:

At Benton a few “produced” – works of scholarship, works of art in the summer; but most of them, after they had been at Benton for a while, produced Benton girls. And

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<sup>98</sup> Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders*, 13.

<sup>99</sup> Richard H. Rovere, *Senator Joe McCarthy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1959), 156.

Benton did not look down on these ‘mere educators’ (...). One teacher had last had something printed in a 1928 *Dial*; they respected him for that article, but they respected him more for having put away such things and gone on to where they were. (PFI 87)

One of the reasons why Mulcahy feels superior to the rest of the faculty is that he, unlike them, has got a PhD and some serious publications.

In this closed world, McCarthy turns the moral dilemma that many had to face during the sinister Joe McCarthy era inside out, possible in a place where “everything is perfectly regular but reversed” – the loyalty oaths, the problem of pure consciousness and betrayal, interrogations and lost positions, all so typical of the early ’50s. The American universities present a rather bad record for the McCarthy era, unlike Hollywood, where many accused actors and directors were brave enough to stand up against the House Un-American Activities Committee (Mary McCarthy noticed Arthur Miller’s bravery in her essay “Naming Names: The Arthur Miller Case,” despite her personal dislike for the playwright.<sup>100</sup> Miller refused to accept “the *principle* of betrayal as a norm of good citizenship,” of which McCarthy approved). But the universities published the “Rights and Responsibilities of Universities and Their Faculties,” a document that conceded to repressive political authority.<sup>101</sup> The Communist hunt seriously affected the universities, with the consequence that open criticism of the political status quo disappeared, teachers avoided controversial topics, Marxism was banished and its practitioners marginalized, and the students “became a silent generation.”<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> McCarthy, “Naming Names: The Arthur Miller Case,” in: *On the Contrary*, 147-152.

<sup>101</sup> Excerpt from *The Rights and Responsibilities of Universities and Their Faculties* (Princeton: Association of American University Professors, March 1953), quoted in *McCarthyism: The Great American Red Scare: A Documentary History*, ed. Albert Fried (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), 140.

<sup>102</sup> William F. Buckley and L. Brent Bozell, “McCarthy as Hero,” in: *McCarthyism: The Great American Red Scare*, 100.

Yet in the novel all these things characteristic of Joe McCarthy's "Communist hunt" happen to the wrong people in the wrong context. It turns out that the presumed Communist is not the hunted, but the hunter – his accusations of the college president Maynard Hoar consist of shameless aggression and blackmail:

[Mulcahy] literally shook his fist in Maynard's face, threatened to expose him to the A.A.U.P., and to every liberal magazine and newspaper in the country. He was going to write a sequel (...) that would reveal to the whole world the true story of a professional liberal: a story of personal molestation, spying, surveillance, corruption of students by faculty stool-pigeons. (GA 299)

The irony here is not only in the construction of lies that Mulcahy carefully builds up to get the faculty's support – his alleged Communism, the promise of tenure, and his wife's deadly illness – but also in the fact that the liberal faculty of an obscure progressive college is willing to support him. "No one in that liberal college stops to inquire whether he has really been a Communist because everyone is too preoccupied with defending his right to have been one and still remain the teacher," explains McCarthy.<sup>103</sup> The campus as a microcosm with its own well calculable laws can thus be efficiently used by somebody who knows how to make these laws work for him.

The morally and physically pure Domna is the one who enjoins the rest of the faculty to become Mulcahy's supporters. Although literally repulsed by Mulcahy, Domna tries to protect Henry out of sheer responsibility and a sense of duty. But when she gets behind Mulcahy's lies, her gaze becomes as merciless as McCarthy's own – at the disastrous dinner where Mulcahy's wife Cathy makes it obvious that she is not ill at all, and well informed about her husband's plans. After the dinner, with its unwholesome sandwiches, the Mulcahys' soiled carpet and the dirty clothes of their children, Domna finally reveals what she really thinks about her colleague:

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<sup>103</sup> McCarthy, "Characters in Fiction," in: *On the Contrary*, 285.

This arrogant Henry has the soul of a slave. No doubt this cringing soul reflects social conditions; one has only to look at Henry to imagine the matrix that formed him – poor heredity, hagiolatrous parents, a nasty and narrow environment, sweets, eyestrain, dental caries. (GA 213).

All the small unsavoury details about Henry come together like pieces in a puzzle, making his ugliness total. At this point it becomes clear why McCarthy chooses to dwell on the unattractive details of Mulcahy's appearance and surroundings. His political and social attitudes, just like the rest of other spectres of his life, lack beauty. Domna, on the other hand, has got plenty of beauty, morally as well as physically – only when she understands how much she has been fooled by Mulcahy, her features become tainted: "Tolstoy would say we're all fools!" she concludes.

McCarthy uses this rather obvious method of showing whose side the readers should be on fairly often – Martha Sinnott from *A Charmed Life* is a blonde version of the brunette Domna, with just as much attention paid to her porcelain skin and fine hair, whereas Martha's ex-husband Miles Murphy, as morally corrupt as Henry Mulcahy, shares the same "terrible freckled face" with him. The confrontation between little Helena Davison and the radical leftist Norine Schmittlapp in *The Group*, where the smart tidy Helena regards with disgust Norine's dirty apartment where she cheats on her husband and which sports every cliché inherent to the image of the radical left in the '30s – such as black walls and a dog named Nietzsche – is basically the same as the clash between Domna and Mulcahy, even in their political preferences. Despite her own closeness to Trotskyites in the '30s, McCarthy never came close enough to them to lose her critical distance, and expressed it in the careful recording of the leftists' poor tastes. In *The Group*, she satirizes the worship of this ideology and its expression in household objects (as in Norine's apartment), which are turned into "articles of belief," but have no more substance than Kay's and Harald's

Venetian blinds, for they too happen to be just the most fashionable items of the time.

Brenda Murphy states in her “Reassessment of Mary McCarthy’s *The Group*”:

Through [the] characters [of Norine and Putnam] McCarthy ridicules the opportunism and shallowness of people who embraced leftist politics in the thirties because it was ‘the thing,’ and left it just as easily when it was not, as Norine does at the end of the novel. (...) McCarthy’s ridicule of these specific elements of the social group she depicts amounts to an indictment of the progressive *Zeitgeist* of the thirties, with its worship of the new, the scientific, the technical, the bureaucratic, and the ideological and its degeneration of all the moral, the emotional, the aesthetic, and anything that evoked the past.<sup>104</sup>

The importance of the moral and the aesthetic are key elements in McCarthy’s oeuvre. McCarthy’s representation of left politics as a kind of ‘lifestyle,’ expressed in the objects surrounding their followers, does not mean that she is trying to reduce important political questions to simple décor. Firstly, she doubts that politics can really be important to the characters she satirizes. Secondly, her reaction to the Alger Hiss case shows that for her, even in acute political problems, the impression of somebody who is “clean-cut” versus somebody who is “unkempt,” is just as noticeable as the truth and the lies that these two people are telling. In “Artists in Uniform,” she carefully records her own outfit of green silks that “turn into their complementary reds” in the men’s eyes. Most importantly, décor itself is rarely ever simple, especially if the aesthetic is given as much weight as in McCarthy’s case.

The clash between Norine and Helena in Norine’s messy apartment is not so much about the ideology of Norine’s political beliefs, but about aesthetics and morals.

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<sup>104</sup> Brenda Murphy, “The Thirties, Public and Private: A Reassessment of Mary McCarthy’s *The Group*,” *Literature Interpretation Theory* 15.1 (2004): 98-99. In the first chapter of the thesis I state that McCarthy’s tendency to dismiss left politics as a masquerade is detectable in most of her work (“Girls and Groups of the Thirties”). McCarthy had a real aversion to Communism that is evident in her essay “Artists in Uniform”: defending Jews in a discussion with an anti-Semitic Colonel whom she met in a train car, she worries that the Colonel and his companion might mistake her for a Communist: “Though I did not give a fig for the men, I hated the idea, while a few years ago I should have counted it as a great joke. (...) If I was not fearful, I was at least uncomfortable in the supposition that anybody, anybody whatever, could think of me, precious me, as a Communist.” McCarthy, “Artists in Uniform,” in: *On the Contrary*, 61.

Norine, in defence of her “conceptual” apartment, remembers how the group at Vassar humiliated her in the argument about Cézanne’s apples, favouring the formalist approach to the painting instead of Norine’s own “mushy thoughts” about the “spirit of the apples” (TG 160). Clive Bell’s notion of “significant form,” together with Benedetto Croce’s idea of the primacy of the aesthetics as well as Leo Tolstoy’s definition of art as something that evokes feelings through the means of “movements, lines, colours, sounds, or forms expressed in words,” make up the argument of the girls debating that “the point of the Cézannes was the formal arrangement of shapes” (TG 160).<sup>105</sup> Norine, called “a bovine sentimentalist” by Lakey, starts to cry. It is absurd that Norine chooses to fight over Cézanne, as his example became paradigmatic for the formalist analysis. Clive Bell devotes an entire chapter to Cézanne’s influence:

At Aix-en-Provence came to him a revelation that has set a gulf between the nineteenth century and the twentieth: for, gazing at the familiar landscape, Cézanne came to understand it, not as a mode of light, nor yet as a player in the game of human life, but as an end in itself and an object of intense emotion. Every great artist has seen landscape as an end in itself—as pure form, that is to say; Cézanne has made a generation of artists feel that compared with its significance as an end in itself all else about a landscape is negligible. From that time forward Cézanne set himself to create forms that would express the emotion that he felt for what he had learnt to see. Science became as irrelevant as subject. Everything can be seen as pure form, and behind pure form lurks the mysterious significance that thrills to ecstasy. The rest of Cézanne's life is a continuous effort to capture and express the significance of form.<sup>106</sup>

William Carlos Williams also sees Cézanne as a powerful example of how art is determined by and works through form, a variation of his credo “no ideas but in things”:

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<sup>105</sup> “For a discussion of aesthetics, it need be agreed only that forms arranged and combined according to certain unknown and mysterious laws do move us in a particular way, and that it is the business of an artist so to combine and arrange them that they shall move us. These moving combinations and arrangements I have called, for the sake of convenience and for a reason that will appear later, ‘Significant Form.’” Clive Bell, *Art* (New York: Frederick A. Stockes Company Publishers, 1914), 3.

<sup>106</sup> Bell, “The Debt to Cézanne,” in: *Art*, 199.

I was tremendously involved with the appreciation of Cézanne. He was a designer. He put it down on the canvas so that there would be a meaning without saying anything at all. Just the relation of the parts to themselves. In considering a poem, I don't care whether it's finished or not, if it is put down with a good relation of the parts to themselves, it becomes a poem. And the meaning of the poem can be grasped by attention to the design. (...) The poet's job was to describe the meaning of the apple, (...) something more closely related to Cézanne who painted them.<sup>107</sup>

The visual presence of an object determines its meaning, the object's surface makes up its substance. Domna Rejnev tells Henry Mulcahy about people who claim to be "fair within" while being "foul without," but have, for her, "neither essence nor existence," thus transferring this principle to subjects as well. The "significance of form," even when divorced from the aesthetic qualities and applied blindly and primitively, as in Norine's case, does not lose its meaning. Instead of the "relevant statement" of the "radical simplification of living," the poorly kept apartment signifies the shallow impulses that animate Norine's life. Helena Davison, in her tirade of advice to Norine, repeatedly says: "I would try to be a good person" (TG 176). Although it is clear to McCarthy that beauty does not equal virtue, she finds great appeal in the idea that substance depends on form, and that form more often than not determines the substance.

## Conclusion

I (...) would like, more than anything else, to write like Tolstoy; I imagine that I still see something resembling the world Tolstoy saw. But my pen and my typewriter simply balks; it "sees" differently from me and records what to me, as a person, are distortions and angularities.<sup>108</sup>

As much coquetry as there may be in this remark about a wilful pen or typewriter, there is also more than just a grain of truth in McCarthy's laments. The "swerve and

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<sup>107</sup> William Carlos Williams, *A Recognizable Image. William Carlos Williams on Art and Artists*, ed. Bram Dijkstra (New York: New Directions Book, 1978), 3.

<sup>108</sup> McCarthy, "Characters in Fiction," in: *On the Contrary*, 275.

swoop” of McCarthy’s fiction is determined by and most visible in her careful recording of objects, a recording that is never arbitrary. The interplay between the characters and the objects which surround them is the core of not only *The Group*, but of most of McCarthy’s novels. This mode to give objects extravagant attention was in the air in the making of literature in the second half of the twentieth century. The *nouveau roman*, a genre of the French novel that achieved its heights of popularity with the works of Alain Robbe-Grillet (his screen play for the movie *Last Year at Marienbad* of 1960 is probably the most famous piece of the oeuvre), used the technique of expressing ideas, characters and moods through various objects with an absent narrator. The new French novel defied the three principles of the classical novel (present in the realist novel of the nineteenth century, for example): a continuity of narration, the avoidance of fragmentation, and no conflicting information in the description of one character. The reader of the *nouveau roman* quickly learns that the various details of the narration he is reading may not be connected to each other in any way.<sup>109</sup> But more interesting than this wilful fragmentation is the place that Robbe-Grillet gives to descriptions in the new novel. In his collections of essays *For a New Novel*, he warns the reader not to leave out any descriptions, because if s/he does so, s/he will come to the end of the novel too soon without having understood its content at all, believing that s/he had been looking at the frame but not realising s/he is looking at the picture:

(...) The place and the role of description have changed completely. (...) Description once served to situate the chief contours of a setting, then to cast light on some of its particularly revealing elements; it no longer mentions anything except insignificant objects, or objects which it is concerned to make so. It once claimed to reproduce a pre-existing reality; it now asserts its creative function. Finally, it once made us see things, now it seems to destroy them, as if its intention to discuss them aimed only at

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<sup>109</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, “Warum und für wen ich schreibe,” in: *Robbe-Grillet, zwischen Moderne und Postmoderne*, ed. and transl. Karl Alfred Blüher (Tübingen: Narr, 1992), 17-18.

blurring their contours, at making them incomprehensible, at causing them to disappear altogether.<sup>110</sup>

McCarthy's work may come close to the laborious descriptions of objects that create a parallel world in the genre of *nouveau roman*. Her tendency to write a succession of loosely connected vignettes as chapters for the novel (as is the case in *The Group*) resembles the idea of fragmentation. But despite her "swerves and swoops," the objects she focuses on are never fully divorced from the meaning of her narration, and are backed up by such anchors to reality as brand labels, thus always telling the reader the exact time in history. McCarthy herself was, although certainly aware of the *nouveau roman*, not very fond of it in general and of Robbe-Grillet's work in particular. She considered the style of the *nouveau roman* unnatural to the prose narrative, and simply not beautiful:

Novels nowadays never seem to start at the beginning of the story and go on to the end but plunge *in medias res* (...) and then move backward, through memory, till the character is finally abreast of his starting-point. Or you may have flashbacks within a flashback. These shifts, which we all resort to, present company included, are ugly no doubt because they are false to the nature of prose narrative, which can be pictured as a long string, and false too to the psychology of memory, which does not work the way novelists are pretending it does. (...) In France, the *nouveau roman* is using flashbacks too, though in a somewhat more arty way, borrowing from films, the zero point being reached by an amnesiac narrator.<sup>111</sup>

In a letter to her close friend Nicola Chiaromonte she remarked:

What I think of *Marienbad*: precious boring, literally, or precious boring, if you prefer. What I detest in it and think is truly decadent is the pretense to *profound* photography.<sup>112</sup>

<sup>110</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, "Time and Description in Fiction," in: *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction*, transl. Richard Howard (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1989), 147.

<sup>111</sup> Mary McCarthy, "Everybody's Childhood," in: *The Writing on the Wall and Other Literary Essays*, 1970 (San Diego/New York/London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 103.

<sup>112</sup> Mary McCarthy, letter to Nicola Chiaromonte, 15 Nov. 1963, Mary McCarthy Papers, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries, f.187.10.

The word “profound” in italics marks the key difference between her own work and Robbe-Grillet’s –McCarthy never attempted to write anything outside of the firm grip of realism that she admired in the nineteenth century writers like Balzac or Flaubert. Although appreciative of other experimental novels such as Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* and William Burrough’s *Naked Lunch*, McCarthy wrote fiction that stayed within the realist convention.<sup>113</sup> In one of the rare positive German reviews of *The Group*, Reinhard Baumgart, who was reviewing it for *Der Spiegel*, notes McCarthy’s principle of “non-involvement” in the girls’ mindless chatter that brings McCarthy’s novel in the vicinity of the *nouveau roman*. But Baumgart sees in the almost complete invisibility of McCarthy’s narrator a certain humanity of description, coolly amusing and always void of “the doctrinaire chic à la Robbe-Grillet.”<sup>114</sup> This invisibility is due to McCarthy’s “ventriloquist’s box,” a device she often felt trapped in: “I’ve never written in my own voice,” she admitted in an interview. But this also helped her escape experimental emptiness.

Objects such as clothes are “physically, socially, and psychologically close” to the self.<sup>115</sup> In McCarthy’s prose they function, among other things, as small extensions of the self. In the essay “Settling the Colonel’s Hash,” McCarthy is vexed by her readers’ questions as to how to decode the symbols of the lunch she and the anti-Semitic Colonel ate as described in her autobiographical piece “Artists in Uniform.” She replies:

The sandwich and the hash were our provisional, *ad hoc* symbols of ourselves. But in this sense all human actions are symbolic because they represent the person who does

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<sup>113</sup> Mary McCarthy, “Burroughs’ ‘Naked Lunch,’” review of *The Naked Lunch* by William S. Burroughs, *Encounter*, April 1963, Mary McCarthy, “The Bolt from The Blue,” review of *Pale Fire* by Vladimir Nabokov, *New Republic*, June 4, 1962.

<sup>114</sup> Reinhard Baumgart, “Hell, Gelassen, Heiter,” *Der Spiegel*, August 12, 1964, 69, Mary McCarthy Papers, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries, f. 23.9.

<sup>115</sup> Betsy Cullum-Swan and Peter K. Manning, “What is a T-shirt?” in: *The Socialness of Things: Essays on the Socio-Semiotics of Objects*, ed. Stephen Harold Riggins (Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1994), 429.

them. If the colonel had ordered a fruit salad with whipped cream, this too would have represented him in some way; given his other traits, it would have pointed to a complexity in his character that the hash did not suggest.<sup>116</sup>

The objects are fundamental for representation, they function as “physical sign vehicles” that convey various social attributes.<sup>117</sup> The “plate of involuted pink-and-white sandwiches in the shape of pinwheels that Cathy Mulcahy had got out of some fancy cookbook” (GA 192) to impress Domna, is an illustration of Vance Packard’s claim that “conceptions about what foods best serve as treats become more elaborate as you go down the social scale.”<sup>118</sup> But together with the dirty underpants hanging under the “best dress” of one of the Mulcahys’ children, the plate becomes also a powerful weapon for pushing Mulcahy further down in the reader’s estimation. In fact, these are the very “naked and shameful truths” that Randall Jarrell makes his Gertrude write entire novels about.

The little things always present in McCarthy’s texts or, indeed, in any modern novel, “are noticed or registered on the film of consciousness, exactly as they are at a funeral service or by a bored child in a church,” McCarthy herself remarked.<sup>119</sup> This effect of fragmentation and dissociation, common for situations of emotional stress as mentioned by McCarthy, reshapes reality by assembling it anew with details that have changed their proportion due to the excessive attention paid to them. McCarthy’s “distortions and angularities” are more than mere quirks of style; they are pointing at some larger picture. *The Groves of Academe* with all its remarks about Mulcahy’s and the faculty’s habits, clothes, and food, that together with lengthy discussions about inner-college matters seem to make up the entire novel, still manage to signal that

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<sup>116</sup> McCarthy, “Settling the Colonel’s Hash,” in: *On the Contrary*, 231.

<sup>117</sup> Cullum-Swan and Manning, “What is a T-Shirt?” in: *The Socialness of Things*, 429.

<sup>118</sup> Packard, *The Status Seekers*, 147.

<sup>119</sup> McCarthy, “Characters in Fiction,” in: *On the Contrary*, 279.

McCarthyism is not approved of, but neither is Communism. Even the beautiful Domna turns a little ugly when she allows her idealism turn her into Henry's helper.

What McCarthy always favours most is common sense, as shown in the dialogue between Helena and Norine in Norine's apartment. In this scene, Helena represents the voice of reason, which, for McCarthy, is equivalent to common sense. Common sense is usually understood as a set of beliefs shared by the majority of people. The bare fact of the majority does not seem to confer the epistemic authority that common sense could claim to possess. The Cambridge philosopher G.E. Moore argued that the authority of common sense is great, so great indeed that any attempt to overthrow it would be futile.<sup>120</sup> The source of the power of common sense can be located in two fields. One is experience. Common sense codifies, imperfectly and imprecisely, the continuous experience – not of an individual or of his contemporaries, but of the community as a whole. It is nothing less than “the lore of our fathers.”<sup>121</sup> In consulting common sense, a person in effect draws on an intellectual tradition. It is still there, because it has been shown to be in harmony with experience.<sup>122</sup> Next to experience, there is nature. Natural selection favoured those with the best chance of survival in the given environment. We inherit the body of our beliefs from those very survivors. What served them well should be able to serve us – unless, once again, the

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<sup>120</sup> An example of this argument would be: Here is my hand, and here is another. I know I have two hands, just as well as I know that my name is MS, and if you pretend to convince me otherwise, you will lose. Nothing can be more certain than the pronouncements of common sense. It is not, of course, that common sense judges every thing under the sun. There is not to be a consensus on the statements of science and mathematics. Yet, its verdict on the statements that *are* in its provenance is unassailable. See, e.g., G.E. Moore, *Some Main Problems of Philosophy* (London/New York: Macmillan, 1953), 12ff. A somewhat different argument is contained in C.S. Peirce's essay “Some Consequences of Four Incapacities.”

<sup>121</sup> For this expression see W.V. Quine, *The Ways of Paradox and Other Essays* (New York: Random House, 1966), 125.

<sup>122</sup> A time comes, repeatedly so, when certain elements of that tradition are to be discarded, as the boundaries of experience have been pushed further. And so, what people hitherto have judged commonsensical is no longer so. This, however, is no refutation of common sense as such, for those antiquated elements have to be replaced in a way acceptable to the rest of the body of common sense. Individual beliefs can be examined within the body of common sense, but we achieve it necessarily by accepting certain – very many – other commonsensical beliefs. Continuous revision of our beliefs, the very challenges to common sense are, in fact the loud affirmation of its authority.

environment has changed. But our adaptation to the new conditions can only be slow and gradual. It is necessarily so, since we perform it with the capacities, instincts, and beliefs handed down to us by our ancestors. To reject common sense wholesale is to imperil your very survival. McCarthy illustrates this in *The Group*, showing how the mindless endorsement of everything that happens to be “the thing,” the latest trend, the idea of progress divorced from the voice of reason, affects the lives her heroines. The frustration of the girls’ ambition, their unhappy personal lives and, eventually, Kay’s death may all be viewed as consequences of the girls’ rejection of common sense.

McCarthy uses the objects in her fiction to define her characters and the reality they inhabit. Objects help the characters belong to a certain group or class, or, on the contrary, ostracize them from society. McCarthy, the social observer with the cold eye, frequently turns to a group which has a long history of ostracism – Jewish protagonists are common in her fiction. With the help of the figure of the Jew, the details that make and break belonging to the “right” group and the making of one’s identity are further studied in the context of an official yet not obvious outsider, the social interloper who is inside society but is also always kept at a distance.

## CHAPTER THREE: THE JEWISH PRESENCE IN MARY MCCARTHY'S FICTION

### Introduction

“I myself had a curious attitude (...) in which the crudest anti-Semitism mingled with infatuation and with genuine tolerance and detachment” – this is how Mary McCarthy describes her position towards Jews in *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*.<sup>1</sup> The quotation is taken from the last short story in this collection of memoirs – “Ask Me No Questions” – which focuses on McCarthy’s problematic relationship with her Jewish grandmother Augusta Morgenstern Preston. A quarter Jewish herself (or, considering the matrilineal descent rules of the Halakha, just Jewish), McCarthy was well aware of her many Jewish relatives in Seattle where she was growing up. Later, in New York, the circle of intellectuals she was most closely engaged with professionally and privately was almost entirely Jewish. But McCarthy’s treatment of Jews in her fiction tells little of the easy course of acceptance and familiarity with Jewishness that her biography might have suggested. The “curious attitude” that she does not even attempt to explain, contains contradictory emotions, and in McCarthy’s case the oscillation between anti- and philo-Semitism, revulsion and desire, aggression and guilt, aversion from and protectiveness of Jews can be found throughout her fiction as well as in her memoirs. The question remains whether this “curious attitude” is McCarthy’s own feeling about Jews, or a literary tool for the satirical exposure of American anti-Semitism.

The figure of the Jew, a persistent element in McCarthy’s fiction, opens up another take on the problem of the outsider. The Jewish characters, presented through the anti-Semitic lens, become not only somewhat monstrous outsiders, but also occasionally

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<sup>1</sup> Mary McCarthy, *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, 1957 (San Diego/ New York/ London: Harcourt Inc., 1985), 211. In all further references to this text the abbreviation MCG and the page number will appear immediately after the quotation.

turn into agents for the exposure of anti-Semitism. The narrator – the onlooker who gives herself away by crude stereotyping – may become, in the reader’s judging eyes, the outsider instead of the described Jew.

The short story “The Genial Host” from *The Company She Keeps* offers the starkest example of McCarthy’s ambivalent treatment of Jews in her writing. Pflaumen, the “genial host,” is a collection of anti-Semitic clichés – he is wealthy, manipulating, a social climber and a busybody. Despite all that, the treatment of this character did not seem shocking to McCarthy’s contemporaries. John Chamberlain, for example, wrote in his *New York Times* review of *The Company She Keeps* that Pflaumen appeared to him as “a compound of living people,” without any further comment.<sup>2</sup>

“The Genial Host” was published in 1942, few years before the atrocities of the Holocaust became known to the American public. Before World War II, American anti-Semitism was not what most people were ashamed of – compared to the violent anti-Semitism in Europe, the American brand seemed rather “tame.”<sup>3</sup> In addition, American Jews themselves were able to lead comparatively sheltered lives, unlike their European relatives. At the time of World War II, over half of the American Jewish population were living in New York and Chicago, and being the largest single ethnic group in these cities allowed them to create a markedly insular atmosphere of Jewish life and language (in many households the language mainly spoken was Yiddish). However, American Jews also accepted prejudice and discrimination as part of their lives – some of them changed their names and had plastic surgery to look less “Jewish,” trying to avoid being branded “Jewish” right away. Alfred Kazin

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Kiernan, *Seeing Mary Plain*, 188.

<sup>3</sup> Deborah Dash Moore, “When Jews were GI’s,” in: *American Jewish Identity Politics*, ed. Deborah Dash Moore (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 27.

remembers in his *Starting out in the Thirties*, how V.F. Calverton (his real name was George Goetz), the German editor and founder of the *Modern Monthly*, never corrected people who assumed he was Jewish: “When people asked him straight out if he *was* Jewish, George would smile and never deny it; there was so much anti-Semitism in the air, (...) that he would not bear to add to it.”<sup>4</sup>

Unpleasant and comic Jews continued to appear in Mary McCarthy’s fiction after *The Company She Keeps*, albeit never again as crudely sketched as Pflaumen. *The Oasis*, published in 1949, a roman-à-clef about a group of intellectuals in whom the “*Partisan Review* boys” were easily recognized, sported the comical Jewish duo of Joe Lockman and Will Taub (a caricature of McCarthy’s former lover and *PR* editor Philip Rahv who, enraged by the novel, threatened McCarthy with a law suit). *Cast a Cold Eye*, which appeared a year later, includes the short story “The Friend of the Family,” about the unpopular (and unmistakably Gentile) Francis Cleary whom his acquaintances invite to their dinners to torture their spouses. McCarthy openly draws the reader’s attention to the idea that Cleary takes on the role of the Jew among anti-Semites: “the anti-Semite who asks a Jewish Francis Cleary (...) time after time to his house so that he may later express the most cruel and hair raising opinions without being accused of bias.”<sup>5</sup> Finally, there is McCarthy’s laborious pondering on Jews and (her own) anti-Semitism in “Ask me No Questions,” published in 1955 (McCarthy took up the theme of her relation to her Jewish roots again years later in her last memoirs *How I Grew* (1986) and *Intellectual Memoirs* (1992). Recording the “gossip and gabble” of her eight girls of *The Group* in 1963, the author was careful to include the casual anti-Semitic remarks which were frequent and socially accepted in the thirties.

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<sup>4</sup> Kazin, *Starting Out*, 63.

<sup>5</sup> Mary McCarthy, “The Friend of the Family,” in: *Cast a Cold Eye*, 65.

McCarthy's interest in the phenomenon of anti-Semitism, which somehow affected her own soul, is a complex matter. The Jewish presence in her fiction mirrors the controversial attitude of the American society towards Jews, and depicts a society which is not class free. Whether McCarthy writes about the wealthy lawyer Pflaumen in New York or remembers her own Jewish relatives in Seattle (some of whom belonged to the *Jewish* high society while others scraped the line of poverty), the background of them all remains the same nonetheless. All of them were immigrants or children of immigrants from Germany or Eastern Europe. Most of them had shown a talent for upward mobility; the New York Jewish intellectuals such as Will Taub (or the real life Philip Rahv) also had an air of being streetwise (Philip Rahv did sleep on park benches in New York in the first years of the Depression).<sup>6</sup>

But their heritage, their accents, and their looks differed in most cases from the image of the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant, society's favoured creature. Unlike those born into privilege, the immigrants and their children on the Lower Eastside, Brooklyn and Bronx had to find their own ways of succeeding in life. Elizabeth Pollet, the former wife of the American Jewish poet Delmore Schwartz (who belonged to the inner circle of the *Partisan Review*) described in her introduction to Delmore's journals the nuances that set people like Schwartz apart:

The immigrant experience is dynamic in American life, with psychological consequences that persist past the first generation. It breeds precariousness, fear, aggression and anger; but also excitement, adventure, the self-confidence and exaltation of success.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Mary McCarthy, obituary "Philip Rahv (1908-1973)," in: *Occasional Prose* (San Diego/New York/London: Hartcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 5.

<sup>7</sup> Elisabeth Pollet, introduction to *Portrait of Delmore: Journals and Notes of Delmore Schwartz 1939-1959*, ed. Elisabeth Pollet (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1986), x.

McCarthy herself was in the unique position of belonging both to the upper caste of the WASPs (due to her maternal grandfather Harold Preston, a prominent Seattle lawyer, in whose house she lived from the age of eleven until she enrolled in Vassar College), and to the driven class of the less privileged described by Elisabeth Pollet at the same time. Orphaned at the age of six and put into the care of cruel guardians, McCarthy and her brothers experienced the Cinderella story backwards, as told in “Yonder Peasant, Who is He?”:

We had not known what it was to have trays dumped summarily on our beds and no sugar and cream for our cereal, to take medicine in a gulp because someone could not be bothered to wait for us, to have our arms jerked into our sleeves and a comb ripped through our hair (...), to be told to sit up or lie down quick and no nonsense about it (...). It was time indeed that we learned that the world was no longer our oyster. (MCG 35-37)

McCarthy’s description of the chilling change from the beautiful loving home of her parents to the ugly house of her guardians should be seen in a wider context, as she herself stresses:

“Yonder Peasant” (...) is, primarily, an angry indictment of privilege for its treatment of the underprivileged (...). We orphan children were not responsible for being orphans, but we were treated as if we were and as if being orphans were a crime we had committed. Read *poor* for *orphan* throughout and you get a kind of allegory or broad social satire on the theme of wealth and poverty. (MCG 49)

Instead of “orphan” or “poor” one could also read “Jew,” since the very same mechanisms of accusation and discrimination described by McCarthy are put to work in the case of the Jew, “a man victimized by a world he never made.”<sup>8</sup> But after McCarthy was rescued by her Protestant grandfather from a life of drabness and cruelty, after her education first in a costly convent school, then in the cosy Annie Wright seminary, and, finally, at Vassar, the Ivy League college close to New York

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<sup>8</sup> John N. McDaniel, *The Fiction of Philip Roth* (Haddonfield, New Jersey: Haddonfield House, 1974), 39.

City, there were two things she chose not to dwell on – her orphanhood and the Jewish part of her family.

There is no doubt which part of her heritage McCarthy personally preferred, even if it meant, at certain times, being the only WASP among Jewish men. McCarthy's Margaret Sargent from whose point of view "The Genial Host" is told, makes no secret out of the fact that she is no one other than a social climber herself. Thus Margaret's hostility against Pflaumen is in some aspects nothing more than a hostile glance into a mirror.

Projection takes place in most cases of rejection – it is the recognizable traits of our own character that we dislike most in others. McCarthy's fiction that is to be discussed in this chapter is concerned with more than this known truth – the elements of covert anti-Semitism are not only a commentary on the dubious sides of character of the story's narrator. They are also symptoms of internal problems that can be found in the short stories by Jewish authors, published roughly at the same time or close to the time of *The Company She Keeps*, *The Oasis* and *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*.

Bernard Malamud's *The Magic Barrel* and Philip Roth's *Goodbye Columbus*, which appeared in 1950 and 1959 respectively, were the beginning of their authors' steep careers – both Malamud and Roth are considered the flagships of the American Jewish literature of the twentieth century, and the '50s are seen as the "golden age" of Jewish-American fiction. The collection of short stories *In the Absence of Angels* by the Jewish woman writer Hortense Calisher, published in 1951, may be lesser known, yet it echoes some aspects of McCarthy's *The Group* as well as the short stories by Roth and Malamud, especially illuminating the problem of "passing" as a Gentile.

Malamud and Roth brought widespread academic and public attention to the development of the Jewish-American novel. Roth's short story "Goodbye, Columbus," which kick-started his literary fame, is closely linked to McCarthy's *The Group*.<sup>9</sup> "Mary's effect on (...) Roth 's generation is that of someone who wrote about sex to someone who never did it before," remarked McCarthy's biographer Carol Brightman in a radio interview.<sup>10</sup> McCarthy may have been the doyenne of sex for Roth and his generation, but writing about the Jewish presence, McCarthy and Roth seem to draw from the same source on equal terms. The stereotypical icons that are found in Roth's, Malamud's, Calisher's and McCarthy's texts show a distinctive pattern of the mechanism which makes up both the image of the Other and the identity of the self. In the stories analysed in this chapter, there is a strong current of repeated images, most of them stemming from Jewish folklore *and* from the long history of Western anti-Semitism, which function as signals to the problems of inside Jewish identity and the prejudiced view of outside anti-Semites. The "Jewish blackness and sickness," the terms used to describe the Jewish body in all of the stories above, point to the ancient anti-Semitic view of the Jewish body as the diseased body. This disease must be overcome by (sometimes surgical) alteration of the body in order "to pass," to be perceived by the outer world as a Gentile, or, as was the case in early twentieth-century Zionism, as a *Muskeljude*. The "demonism of the Jew" – the product of prejudice originating from the Middle Ages – is also addressed in all the texts that will be discussed. The Jew as a demonic agent can be found in Roth's and Malamud's short stories in the character of a *schlamazl*, a half-saintly, half-demonic figure from Hassidic folklore. Otto Weininger's unscientific perception

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<sup>9</sup> See the detailed discussion of this in the first chapter of the thesis, "Honest Women in and out of McCarthy's Work."

<sup>10</sup> "Carol Brightman and Kevin McCarthy," hosted by Scott Simon, *Bookworm Weekend Edition Saturday*, KCRW, June 28, 1993, accessed August 12, 2015, <http://www.kcrw.com/news-culture/shows/bookworm/carol-brightman-and-kevin-mccarthy>.

of the Jew as a “creature of the third sex” will be mentioned as well, as it clearly influenced McCarthy’s description of her male Jewish characters. The way in which Jewish beauty is seen will also be of importance here – the tendency to replace distinct Jewish beauty with that of Italian classicism is present in McCarthy’s and Malamud’s texts. The image of *la belle juive* as opposed to the beautiful *shikse* will be discussed in the last part of the chapter.

It is all the more interesting to see how McCarthy takes her place among Jewish writers and plays with the same elements of the construction of Jewish stereotypes and Jewish identity as Malamud, Roth and Calisher. In Roth’s and Malamud’s short stories, the Jew is also often the source of embarrassment, aggression and guilt. He makes people around him uncomfortable, even if those people are Jews themselves. One would dearly love to be rid of him, because he is so different, so impossible to understand, so poor (or so disgustingly rich) and with such bad manners. He wants money and compassion. You cannot refuse him – because of guilt – and for this he is hated even more. But at the same time you cannot be wrong to think that the Jew is only a distant relative or an unnerving acquaintance – he is no one else but yourself. Or is he not?

In this chapter I will show how McCarthy stylizes her Jewish figures as ultimate outsiders, and how she simultaneously turns her fiction with seemingly anti-Semitic elements into something with a false bottom – in her problematic depiction of Jews, using an abundance of anti-Semitic stereotypes, McCarthy makes her reader not only a partner in the crime of anti-Semitism, but also accuses him of this crime at the same time. Her ironic voice laughs most often not with but at the reader who is tempted to take the crude stereotypes she is playing with at face value.

The texts by McCarthy discussed at most length here will be her short stories “A Genial Host” (from *The Company She Keeps*) and “Ask Me No Questions” (from *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*). “The Genial Host” will be presented here as the most garish example for McCarthy’s collection of Jewish stereotypes. The texts by Jewish writers such as Roth, Malamud and Calisher will serve as authoritative points of reference and sources for intertextual dialogue. Having been written roughly in the same time period as McCarthy’s short stories analysed here, they will also provide the historical and social background for McCarthy’s texts. By juxtaposing McCarthy’s short stories with texts by Philip Roth, Bernard Malamud and Hortense Calisher, I will show in which way the stereotypical images of the Jew are shared by these Jewish writers, and can be seen, to some extent, as part of Jewish identity. This in turn raises questions of Jewish self-perception and, in the eyes of some critics, Jewish self-hatred.

My analysis of McCarthy’s autobiographical short story “Ask Me No Questions” will explore the topos of the beautiful Jewess – *la belle juive* – that became widely popular in European art and literature in the end of the nineteenth century. Turning to now positive stereotypes of female Jewish beauty, McCarthy elevates her own grandmother to a symbolic figure who is well known to her but also completely unknown at the same time. Alfred Kazin, remembering his cousin Sophie from his memoirs *Starting Out in the Thirties*, repeats many of the elements that McCarthy uses to stage her grandmother as *la belle juive*, and shows together with McCarthy’s text the technique of positive stereotyping as a means of creating and overcoming the emotional distance to and from an enigmatic family member.

The texts to be analyzed present the figure of the Jew as the ultimate outsider who is defined by stereotyping and polarization. The Jew is at once weak and sickly, but

also capable of demonic strength and thus radiates danger; he is too visible, but often not visible enough for comfort; he is frighteningly strange, but somehow manages to become too familiar. He is presented as an almost inhuman creature, but is also able to awaken the deepest humanity. As these elements of alienation become internalized, they blur the line between inside and outside.

### **1. The Genial Host and the Stereotypes of the Jewish Body**

McCarthy's short story "The Genial Host" contains so many problematic details, especially in the depiction of the protagonist Pflaumen, a German-Jewish lawyer, to whose parties Margaret Sargent is invited time and again, that it is impossible to find a single analysis of it in the admittedly meagre existing criticism of McCarthy's fiction. Rhoda Nathan's essay "The Uses of Ambivalence: Mary McCarthy's Jewish Politics" – the only text out of the entire body of criticism to discuss the problem – focuses mostly on McCarthy's short story "A Friend of the Family" and her memoirs, not mentioning the short story that is most elaborate in the description of an unlikeable Jew.<sup>11</sup> "The Genial Host" alludes to so many old anti-Semitic ideas that it can be seen as a reservoir for stereotypical images of the Jew.

The story is a twenty-six page long description of the Jewish host's habits and the usual procedure of his parties – both the habits and the parties are much to Margaret Sargent's dislike. Its very beginning already carries a half-hidden reproach to the host: "When he telephoned to ask you to do something, he never said boldly, 'Can you come to dinner a week from Thursday?'" (CSK 137) Margaret's dislike of Pflaumen, as we learn from the ending of the story, is justified (he suggests, "in a true stage

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<sup>11</sup> Rhoda Nathan, "The Uses of Ambivalence: Mary McCarthy's Jewish Politics," in: *Twenty-Four Ways of Looking at Mary McCarthy*, 99-107.

whisper,” and as a revenge for Margaret’s unwillingness to reveal her romantic interest in one of Pflaumen’s guests, that Margaret is an alcoholic (CSK 160).

In this story, McCarthy chooses to write about Margaret Sargent in the second person. The reader is thus directly addressed, since s/he is the one reading the text which constantly speaks to a “you.” “‘You’ is personal and familiar; it is the word you use when talking to yourself,” explains McCarthy. “True, I can write ‘the word you use’ meaning ‘you-and-I’, reader.”<sup>12</sup> In “The Genial Host,” the reader becomes automatically drawn into the hostile attitude towards the “genial host” from the very start. The narrator’s voice, speaking to the “you” who is both Margaret Sargent and the reader, is, of course, also Margaret Sargent’s voice – as if a second Margaret were standing next to the one going to Pflaumen’s parties, sharply commenting on the events. But apart from that, there is also a small hectoring note in the voice of the narrator, an intonation of superiority. The narrator is not only Margaret Sargent watching Margaret Sargent; it is also the voice of a haughty WASP, disapproving of Margaret’s contact with the Jew Pflaumen. Thus, the narrator includes in her tone the prejudice of American bourgeois society. This voice is quite merciless, not only to Pflaumen, but more (and more importantly) to Margaret herself. “Sooner or later you would break with him, you knew. But not yet, not while you were so poor, so loverless, so lonely,” (CSK 163) is one of the last sentences of the story, reciting bitter facts that are surely known not only to Margaret but to most of the people she sees. In this mixture of Margaret’s inner thoughts and society’s negative attitude to such outsiders like Pflaumen and herself, the latter gives reason to the reader to distance themselves from the “you” and to question the narrative voice itself. McCarthy’s manipulation of her readers is subtle – seemingly drawing them in by the use of the

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<sup>12</sup> McCarthy, “Everybody’s Childhood,” in: *The Writing on the Wall and Other Literary Essays*, 105.

second person, she pushes them away by means of the haughty narrator and the satirical use of stereotypes, as will be shown below.

The genial host is supposed to be unpleasant in the smallest details, even in his name.<sup>13</sup> “Pflaumen” means “prune” in German, and McCarthy personally detested prunes – they were part of the “healthy diet” imposed on her and her brothers by their hated guardians.<sup>14</sup> In the first version of the short story Pflaumen is called “Fleisch,” meat in German, hinting at the savage nature of the much disliked host.<sup>15</sup>

Why did McCarthy make Pflaumen a Jew? The question is all the more interesting because Pflaumen is not an unlikeable person who also happens to be Jewish, but an unlikeable Jew, whose Jewishness McCarthy makes into one of his worst character flaws. Anti-Semitism is an ancient problem with a vast range of stereotypical images. Choosing a Jew as the negative protagonist of her short story, McCarthy satirically exposes the mechanisms of prejudice with the active use of various widely known visual stereotypes (i.e. her collection of anti-Semitic clichés).

Stereotypes per se do not need to be automatically harmful. Social psychology defines stereotypes according to three guidelines: first, stereotypes are aids to explanation, second, they are energy saving devices, and third, they are shared group beliefs.<sup>16</sup> The use of stereotypes is meant to help somebody orient herself quickly and easily in an unfamiliar situation. The stereotypes themselves are formed according to the views and norms that are accepted in the social groups that the onlooker belongs

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<sup>13</sup> McCarthy never named her characters arbitrarily (“Margaret Sargent” is a composite of McCarthy’s great-grandmothers’ names, hinting at the autobiographical closeness of the heroine to her author), using the rule of “nomen est omen” most of the time.

<sup>14</sup> “We had prunes every day for breakfast” (MCG 66).

<sup>15</sup> Mary McCarthy, “Draft of ‘The Genial Host,’” Mary McCarthy Papers, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries, f. 2.5.

<sup>16</sup> Vincent Y. Yzerbyt, Russel Spears, et. al., *Stereotypes as Explanation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 2.

to.<sup>17</sup> Thus stereotypes have a high recognition value, functioning as almost automatic images in our heads, and because of the distinctiveness of these images, they can be quite entertaining. These aspects explain the attractiveness of stereotypes for the majority of people, despite the fact that very often stereotypes become aids for misinformation rather than explanation. But for a sufficiently informed mind, stereotypes can also be “declined” and reversed, i.e. used and recognized as subversive elements, especially when the norms of the society, which formed the stereotype changed faster than the stereotype’s popularity. McCarthy uses stereotypes of Jews that stem from the Middle Ages, as following quotations will show – even while taking the American anti-Semitism of the ’30s into consideration, it is still quite improbable that her readers would have ever taken these stereotypes literally. Much more likely is that McCarthy planned to show the crude images as examples of the “decline of the type,” when “suspicion arises against collectively held ideas.”<sup>18</sup> Mireille Rosello’s *Declining the Stereotype* describes this practice as a form of control and questioning of the “devastating ideological power” of the stereotype. While paying attention to the formal characteristics of the stereotype, its “declining” involves “ironic repetitions, carefully framed quotations, distortions and puns.”<sup>19</sup> In “The Genial Host,” the vast collection of anti-Semitic clichés serves as a distortion and exaggeration, thus questioning and “declining” the stereotype of the unpleasant Jew, as will be shown below.

Here is an example of the vast playing field that the sheer abundance of clichés ridiculing Jews gives to McCarthy in her portrait of Pflaumen:

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Astrid Franke, *Keys to Controversies: Stereotypes in Modern American Novels* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 1999), 24.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Franke, *Keys*, 36.

How ill-suited he was, you thought, to his role of *élégant*! What a tireless struggle he must wage against his own physical nature! Looking at him, so black and broad and hairy, you saw that his well-kept person must appear to him like a settler's plot triumphantly defended against the invading wilderness. (...) You saw the lines his body ought to have followed; he had the regular's merchant's build; though he was not yet thirty-five, you looked for the crease in the waistcoat, but it was always just absent. (CSK 139-140)

The use of the verbs “to see” and “to look” (with the alternating meaning of “seeing” and “searching”), and also “must” and “ought,” exposes the narrator's willingness to see what is not there and the striving to shape Pflaumen's character according to the narrator's own imagination, and not to the objective reality which is not given to the reader.

The first adjective in the description of Pflaumen's appearance is “black.” The association of the Jewish body with blackness has a long history in the Western imagination. The black body is the sick body, the ugly body – the terms “black,” “Jewish,” “sick” and “ugly” were inseparable from the Middle Ages up to mid nineteenth century, and did not disappear in the twentieth.<sup>20</sup> Apparently, McCarthy must know what she is doing – choosing the crudest, most ancient clichés about Jews, it is not unlikely that she intends to use them as tools of satire, trusting her readers to be able to decipher them as such. Since satire strives to correct what is “out of proportion” in society, often using exaggeration to deflate, McCarthy's monstrous collection of clichés functions as precisely this exaggeration to show prejudice in all its irrationality.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Sander L. Gilman, “Die Rasse ist nicht schön,” in: *“Der scheinbare Jid”: Das Bild des “jüdischen Körpers” in Mythos und Ritual*, eds. Sander L. Gilman, Robert Jütte, Gabriele Kohlbauer-Fritz (Wien: Picus Verlag, 1999), 62.

<sup>21</sup> David Worcester quoted by Wendy Martin, “The Satire and Moral Vision of Mary McCarthy,” in: *Comic Relief: Humor in Contemporary American Literature*, ed. Sarah Blacher Cohen (Urbana/Chicago/London: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 188.

McCarthy trusted her readers to be able to see that the story of the genial host is told tongue in cheek, thus releasing her from the charge of anti-Semitism. Her Jewish readers were hurt, so it seems, much more by McCarthy's "disrespect" for men, than by any possible disrespect for Jews.<sup>22</sup> Although the almost entirely Jewish *Partisan Review*, McCarthy's sand box, declined to publish the story, it was not done on grounds of its probable anti-Semitic elements (Carol Brightman suggests that editor Philip Rahv, always wanting to know "who's in it", before publishing the story, was simply not interested in the characters).<sup>23</sup>

McCarthy's use of Jewish stereotypes, perhaps in subtler form than in "The Genial Host," remains present in her further work. McCarthy's portraits of Joe Lockman and Will Taub of *The Oasis* contain elements of the "Jewish" blackness and sickness. McCarthy describes Lockman as "a sad Jewish comedian, (...) *sick*, intelligent, unsure."<sup>24</sup> His main enemy, the scandalous leader of the "realist party" Will Taub has got "*dark features*" (TO 10, my italics). Mary's first recollections of her Jewish grandmother include the latter wearing *black* veils (MCG 198-201), and when she flings the veil back, her face looks "*dreadful*" (MCG 202).

As mentioned above, the use of stereotypes per se does not need to be a sign of a negative attitude toward the one who is being stereotyped. Especially in the questions of identity the use of stereotypes seems to be unavoidable. Cultural identity is usually regarded as socially constructed and learned, not simply found. In his study *The Other in Jewish Thought and History*, Laurence J. Silberstein states that the assumption of

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<sup>22</sup> See, for instance, Alfred Kazin's and Saul Bellow's reactions to McCarthy's "The Man in the Brooks Brother's Shirt," quoted in Frances Kiernan's *Seeing Mary Plain*, 181.

<sup>23</sup> Brightman, *Writing Dangerously*, 185.

<sup>24</sup> Mary McCarthy, *The Oasis*, 1949 (San Jose/New York/Lincoln/Shanghai: Author's Guild Backinprint.com, 1999), 3. My italics. In all further references to this text the abbreviation TO and the page number will appear immediately after the quotation.

the existence of categories, groups and essential elements that are considered unquestionably Jewish, is shared by the majority of sociologists and historians:

Like social scientists, historians presuppose the existence of an entity identified alternately as the Jewish people, the Jewish nation, or the Jewish community, the major parameters of which can be identified, isolated and described. Studies of Jewish history, like the social-scientific studies of contemporary Jewry, assume as given some essential group, body of thought, or set of cultural values and practices that are taken to be essentially “Jewish.” To speak of Judaism, the Jewish people, Jewish culture and Jewish society is, therefore, to speak of a coherent, identifiable entity.<sup>25</sup>

Stereotypes are certainly not the most nuanced and sensitive instruments for the definition of identity, all the more so when they are used by hostile outsiders. On the other hand, as Silberstein notes, “the process of identity formation is far from benign: any effort by a group to establish the parameters of its own identity entails the exclusion and silencing of the voices of others.”<sup>26</sup> The division between the Other and oneself, however, is not always clear – on the contrary, most of the time, the line of this division is blurred. Perhaps unsurprisingly, elements of description that can be considered as Jewish clichés turn out to be popular among Jewish writers themselves. Linda Nochlin, writing about Jewish identity, notes that “Jewish identity and the Jew of anti-Semitism are brought into being by the same representation trajectory,” i.e. negative and positive representations of the Jew are made through the same images.<sup>27</sup>

A leitmotif in Philip Roth’s short story “Eli, the Fanatic” (1959) is also *blackness* and *sickness* – the orthodox Jew who scares the assimilated suburbanites is perceived

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<sup>25</sup> Laurence J. Silberstein, introduction to *The Other in Jewish Thought and History: Constructions of Jewish Culture and Identity*, ed. Laurence J. Silberstein (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 3.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Linda Nochlin, “Starting with the Self: Jewish Identity and its Representation” in: *The Jew in the Text: Modernity and the Construction of Identity*, eds. Linda Nochlin and Tamar Garb (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 10.

as a “deep hollow of blackness.”<sup>28</sup> Roth illustrates the seemingly inseparable relation between Jewish blackness and sickness most dramatically – the story ends with the assimilated lawyer Eli, in the orthodox Jew’s black clothes, being forcibly drugged in a hospital.<sup>29</sup> The sickness of the Jew is also present in the brief description of Larry Fishbein, one of the minor character’s in Roth’s “Defender of the Faith” (1959): “He had a cadaverous face that collapsed inward from his cheekbone to his jaw, and when he smiled (...) revealed a mouthful of bad teeth;” “his long yellow face a dying light bulb.”<sup>30</sup> Shimon Sussman, a character from Bernard Malamud’s short story “The Last Mohican” unites blackness and sickness in his appearance, the indispensable attributes in the portrait of the stereotypical Jew: he is extremely thin – “give a skeleton a couple of pounds” – with “a high forehead (...) bronzed, his black hair thick behind small ears, the dark, close shaved beard tight on his face; his experienced nose was weighted at the tip, and the soft brown eyes, above all, *wanted*.”<sup>31</sup>

In these examples, the Jewish body is seen as one giant flaw, which one must battle like a disease. The closeness of sickness and Jewishness permeated older Jewish thinking as well – Zionists put great emphasis on physical exercise and health in their attempt to make “Muskeljuden” (“muscle-Jews”) out of the (imagined) weak and timid ghetto population.<sup>32</sup> Pflaumen’s athletic body and elegant clothes are, in this light, not an expression of personal vanity, but an attempt to cure his body from Jewishness – a failed attempt, as is evident from Margaret’s reaction. Her description of Pflaumen contains a double accusation – not only is Pflaumen “black and broad and hairy”, with “the regular’s merchant’s build”, the very stereotype image of the

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<sup>28</sup> Roth, “Eli, the Fanatic,” in: *Goodbye, Columbus*, 253.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 298.

<sup>30</sup> Roth, “Defender of the Faith,” in: *Goodbye, Columbus*, 169, 171.

<sup>31</sup> Bernard Malamud, “The Last Mohican,” in: *The Magic Barrel*, 1958 (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1975), 156.

<sup>32</sup> Rhoda Rosen, “Inszenierung des jüdischen Körpers,” in “*Der schejne Jid*”, 18.

stocky and swarthy Jew – his trying to make the cliché of the Jew inapplicable is more shameful for Margaret than letting “his physical nature” prevail. His success in *not* having the paunch and dressing fashionably is worse than the expected paunch itself, so the success turns into the failure to fulfil the stereotype (which is perceived as a personal letdown by the one who does the stereotyping).

Close to this way of thought lies the idea that the Jews’ struggle to overcome their sick bodies makes the Jewish body less authentic and therefore, even sicker. The French historian Anatole Leroy-Beaulieu wrote his “well-meaning” and widely popular study *Israel among the Nations: A Study of Jews and Anti-Semitism* in 1893, where he used the image of the ugly and sick Jewish body as a defence of the Jews, claiming that their presumably unaesthetic looks were merely the result of the Jews’ ghetto captivity.<sup>33</sup> Yet he views their attempts at assimilation and, therefore, the changing of their Jewish bodies, with nothing but opprobrium:

The more the Jew differs from us, the better – he may bring a little variety into the grey monotony of modern civilization. I object much more to the sons of Sem – as to those Orientals who copy our manners – , when they look too much like us and mimic us too well.<sup>34</sup>

“Anti-Semitism turned racist only on the fateful day, when, as a consequence of Emancipation, you could no longer pick Jews out of the crowd at first glance,” says Alain Finkielkraut in *The Imaginary Jew*.<sup>35</sup> The Other must make himself known as the Other with obvious, easily readable signs, so that “we” are able to feel comfortable identifying him as such – his wish to differ less from “us” is perceived as evil masquerade, an obstruction to the process of labeling. When the clothes and

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<sup>33</sup> Anatole Leroy-Beaulieu, *Die Juden und der Antisemitismus: Israel unter den Nationen*, transl. Carl von Vincenti (Wien: Verlag des “Freien Blattes,” 1893), 258. My translation.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Linda Nochlin: “Starting with the Self: Jewish Identity and Its Representation,” in: *The Jew in the Text*, 11.

manners of the Jews became indistinguishable from those of the Gentiles, the shapes of their noses and ears and the “typical” pronunciation came into focus.

Pflaumen’s attempt to look less Jewish is an expression of a mass phenomenon of the times. In the early twentieth century, for many Jewish people the problem of their visibility cried for desperate measures. So it was very common among Jewish men and women in Europe and America, to alter their noses in a surgical procedure. It became possible in the first decades of the twentieth century and continues to take place today even in Israel, where rhino-plastic surgery is still immensely popular. “Nostrility” was “the key visual stereotype of the Jew,” rendering him a “permanent visibility within society,” the race written clearly on the body.<sup>36</sup> Jacques Joseph, the first surgeon to perform such operations and to open a clinic for aesthetic surgery in Berlin, wrote in 1904, as part of his paper on nose reduction:

The patients were embarrassed and self-conscious in their dealings with their fellow men, often shy and unsociable, and had the urgent desire to become free and unconstrained. Several complained of sensitive drawbacks in the exercise of their professions. As executives they could hardly enforce their authority, in their business connections (as salesmen, for example) they often suffered material losses. (...) The operative nasal reduction (...) will also in the future restore the joy of living to many a wretched creature and, if his deformity has been hindering him in his career, it will allow him the full exercise of his aptitudes.<sup>37</sup>

So many had their noses altered that this surgery became a status symbol among wealthy Jews, even when the problem of acceptance ceased to be as acute as in Joseph’s note: Brenda Patimkin, the female protagonist of Philip Roth’s “Goodbye, Columbus,” avoids getting too close to the net while playing tennis for this very reason, admitting it to her soon-to-be-boyfriend Neil Klugman:

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<sup>36</sup> Sander L. Gilman, *Constructing Belonging: Aesthetic Surgery among Jews in Germany, America and Israel* (Leipzig: Leipziger Univerlag, 2009), 165.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Sander L. Gilman, “A French Frontier: Proust’s Nose,” in: *Jewish Frontiers: Essays on Bodies, Histories, and Identities* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 125-126.

“I’m afraid of my nose. I had it bobbed.”

“What?”

“I had my nose fixed.”

“What was the matter with it?”

“It was bumpy.”

“A lot?”

“No,” she said, “I was pretty. Now I’m prettier. My brother’s having his fixed in the fall.”

“Does he want to be prettier?”

She didn’t answer and walked ahead of me again.

“I don’t mean to sound facetious. I mean why’s he doing it?”

“He *wants* to... unless he becomes a gym teacher... but he won’t,” she said. “We all look like my father.”<sup>38</sup>

Mr Patimkin’s nose is not fixed:

There was a bump in it, all right; up at the bridge it seemed as though a small eight-sided diamond had been squeezed under the skin. I knew Mr. Patimkin would never bother to have that stone cut from his face, and yet, with joy and pride, no doubt, had paid to have Brenda’s diamond removed and dropped down some toilet in Fifth Avenue Hospital.<sup>39</sup>

Roth’s use of the metaphor that turns the “typically Jewish” bump on the bridge of the nose into “a diamond” goes further than the allusion of the Potemkin family to money. Seeing the resemblance of a piece of cartilage to the most precious gemstone, the narrator Neil perceives the bump as a precious piece of Jewishness itself that is being carelessly sent down the drain. Not unlike Neil, Carol Ockman perceives Jewishness as something visible, and views total assimilation as dangerous: “There is the possibility that Jewishness cannot be identified, is not recognizable. Inasmuch as assimilationist success entails the disappearance of Jewish or any other alternate identity, it too poses problems.”<sup>40</sup> Samuel Magoskes, a leading Yiddish journalist, accused Philip Roth of anti-Semitism and described *Goodbye, Columbus* as a

<sup>38</sup> Roth, “Goodbye, Columbus,” in: *Goodbye, Columbus*, 13.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>40</sup> Carol Ockman, “When is a Jewish Star Just a Star,” in: *The Jew in the Text*, 122.

“document redolent of Jewish self-hatred.”<sup>41</sup> Part of his (mistaken) opinion might lie in the fact that the anti-Semite and Jew use the same imagery in Jewish representation (discussing the Jewish nose seems to be inevitable for both sides). The rest is Roth’s version of the tradition of Jewish self-criticism and satire, something that is very common in the oeuvre of other Jewish writers like Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud, and achieves its satirical peak in Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969).<sup>42</sup>

The wish “to pass,” to become invisible as Jews to the public, made many Jewish people convert to Christianity and change their names. Norine Schmittlapp, the least popular member of *The Group*, is married to a Jewish man who went, it seems, through all possible processes of formal assimilation without much success:

His people changed the name from Rosenberg. (...) Freddy’s whole tribe converted. When they changed their name. He’s a confirmed Episcopalian. (...) The black sheep of the family became a Zionist and went to Palestine. They never mention his name. (...) Freddy’s parents were trying to pass. Like so many rich German Jews. They sent him to Choate and Princeton, where he had a searing experience with one of the clubs. When the club found out ‘Rogers’ was ‘Rosenberg’, he was asked to resign. (TG 432)

The wish of the outsider to become an insider makes him, when found out by people who belong to the inside, into more of an outsider, obliterating all his efforts to blend in with the group.

*The Group*’s concept as a mock-chronicle makes the novel at some points into a slightly exaggerated mirror of the times. It is easy to find almost the same details in the fiction of McCarthy’s contemporary writers. Hortense Calisher’s short story “One of the Chosen” focuses on a young Jewish man, Davy Spanner, who, in preparation for the reunion of his college class, sadly remembers the “odd characters” – a “spastic,” a “Negro,” a “Burmese princeling” – and is glad that “his family has

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Louis Harap, *Creative Awakening: The Jewish Presence in Twentieth Century American Literature 1900-1940s* (New York/Westport/London: Greenwood Press, 1987), 135.

<sup>42</sup> Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life they Found and Made* (New York/London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 595.

belonged among those lucky Jews, less rare than it was commonly realized, who had scarcely felt the flick of injustice.” He himself “had always the comfortable sense of acceptance.”<sup>43</sup> And yet, when he arrives, his fellow ex-student Anderson from a rich WASP family reveals to Spanner that he was not accepted to the best fraternity house because of his Jewishness: “All the others made such a God-damned stink about it.” The story ends on this “sharp slap of revelation,” reducing the golden boy to one of the freaks he recalled the night before his reunion, turning him into another character in this procession of outsiders.<sup>44</sup>

From Norine’s description, Freddy Rogers is almost as unlikable as Pflaumen (he is not fond of reading and cheats on her with their chamber maid). But the two decades that lie between “A Genial Host” and *The Group* considerably change the mode of presentation. If Margaret Sargent, McCarthy’s literary alter ego, presents us with Pflaumen in all his Jewish horror, it is the immensely stupid Norine who scatters clichés about her husband twenty years later (although the time of the events – the early 40s – is the same as in “A Genial Host”): “Freddy, as a Jew, instinctively adopts the matriarchal principle. (...) Bed’s very important to Freddy; he’s a sensualist, like Solomon. (...) Like so many rich Jews, he’s a snob.” (TG 443).

Calisher’s story as well as Norine’s portrait of her husband emphasize the problem of “passing,” of reducing the visibility of the Jew to Gentiles. It can be achieved in neither case – the Jew, even if he is not a recent poor immigrant from Eastern Europe but “upper crust”(TG 432), as is Norine’s husband, or displays a “fair-skinned, freckled, almost ‘mick’ exterior,” as does the college coxswain Davy Spanner,

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<sup>43</sup> Hortense Calisher, “One of the Chosen,” in: *In the Absence of Angels* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1951), 32-38.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 43-44.

remains Jewish, and therefore, inferior, just like Pflaumen.<sup>45</sup> Despite their attempts to blend in, they are still recognized and classified as Jews by Gentiles.

Bernard Malamud's story "The Lady of the Lake" (1958) tackles the problem of Jewish visibility from a different angle – it is an example of successful invisibility as a Jew, but here success turns out to be worse than failure, as the problem of insider-outsider is reversed. Henry Levin, resembling Pflaumen in his love of luxury and elegant clothes, travels to Italy "seeking romance."<sup>46</sup> He calls himself "Freeman," undoubtedly a conscious choice, and believes himself to have "met his fate" when he sees a beautiful young woman bathing. Thinking that the girl is the heiress of a rich aristocratic Italian family, and being aware of his own "background and certain other disadvantages," Freeman always answers Isabella's questions about whether he could be Jewish with a definite "no." It turns out that Isabella herself is from a poor Italian Jewish family, that she was a captive in Buchenwald, and, since she believes Freeman is not Jewish, she sees no future with him: "I treasure what I suffered for," she says, revealing a concentration camp tattoo on her breast.<sup>47</sup> The tragicomedy of the story lies in the fact that both Freeman and Isabella were not able to detect Jewishness in each other, the Jewishness that, for a change, would have been an asset rather than a liability. In Isabella's case it was literally stamped upon her body, yet inaccessible to Freeman's eyes. Here Jewishness is presented as something even more precious than Roth's eight-sided diamond whose loss Neil mourned, and here too it is carelessly cast away (by Freeman).

While too little Jewish visibility may be problematic in individual cases, too much visibility becomes the problem of entire communities. Roth's story "Eli, the Fanatic" illustrates the dismay the possibility of an Orthodox yeshiva generates in an

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>46</sup> Malamud, "The Lady of the Lake," in: *The Magic Barrel*, 106-133.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 132.

assimilated Jewish neighbourhood. “Someday it’s going to be a hundred little kids with little *yamalkahs* chanting their Hebrew lessons on Coach House Road, and then it’s not going to strike you funny,” complains a neighbour.<sup>48</sup> The Jew who tries to avoid being a Jew like Pflaumen, Freddy Rogers and Davy Spanner, still remains one in the eyes of others, and is criticized for his attempt to pass because it makes him less “authentic.” The Jew celebrating his Jewishness, on the other hand, is an eyesore.

In other words, the Jew must be named, or name himself, but not too loudly.

Margaret Sargent’s description of Pflaumen becomes darker the longer she ponders on him. His image ceases to be simply ridiculous:

But if you looked at him hard again, you realized that something else was being held in check (...) – something primitive and hungry and excessively endowed with animal vitality. Though it was true that his figure had a mercantile cast to it, in other ways he did not look like a German Jew, but like a member of some early barbarous tribe. (CSK 140-141)

Thus, out of the Jew who does not look Jewish enough (the clothes too elegant, the body too athletic), Pflaumen becomes the Other par excellence. It is also worth noticing that his being “hungry and excessively endowed with animal vitality” is an allusion to what Elisabeth Pollet called “the immigrant experience.” We do not know anything about Pflaumen’s family history – his social standing makes it unlikely that he or his parents saw Ellis Island. But the “psychological consequences that persist past the first generation” would be implied in the hunger and vitality that Margaret sees in Pflaumen, his “furnace of energy burning in him,” that makes “you” draw “back from the blast” (CSK 41). The successful lawyer would be bound to carry the legacy of all Jewish boys that Alexander Bloom identified as “psychological baggage” in his *Prodigal Sons*:

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<sup>48</sup> Roth, “Eli, the Fanatic,” in: *Goodbye, Columbus*, 256.

From an early age the expectation of a successful life beyond the bounds of the immigrant ghetto became one of the clear goals set for the young boys by their parents. The pressures of achievement for oneself and for one's parents became part of the psychological baggage they took with them.<sup>49</sup>

Pflaumen is guilty not only of being “black and broad and hairy,” but also of being a typical Jewish social climber, moving up from the ghetto into Manhattan. But in the quotation “member of (...) [a] barbarous tribe” Pflaumen is more than generally dislikeable – he is definitely frightening. If there was only the “German Jew” in Pflaumen, he would seem harmless in comparison – after all, German Jews were thought to be “the most assimilated of the European Jews, and the cultivated ones among them had been among the staunchest guardians and partisans of high German culture,” according to William Barrett, who was speaking of the German-Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt, Mary McCarthy's close friend.<sup>50</sup>

Margaret does not tell us what a German Jew is supposed to look like, apart from suggesting a “mercantile cast” to the figure. She presumes the reader must have their own internal stereotype, next to the image of the barbarous tribe member.

## 2. The Demanding Other, Or Can a Jew Be a Man?

Looking “hard” at Pflaumen, Margaret believes that she sees behind the familiar cliché of the Jewish merchant the cliché of the menacing dark Other. Asking for Margaret's coat, it seems that Pflaumen would also be able – in the tradition of Jewish merchants – to ask for a pound of Margaret's flesh.<sup>51</sup> Margaret's imagination goes as

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<sup>49</sup> Alexander Bloom, *Prodigal Sons: The New York Intellectuals and Their World* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 12.

<sup>50</sup> Barrett, *The Truants*, 103.

<sup>51</sup> “If you repay me not on such a day,/ (...) let the forfeit/ Be nominated for an equal pound/ Of your fair flesh, to be cut off and taken/ In what part of your body pleaseth me.” William Shakespeare, “The Merchant of Venice,” In: *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* (London: Bertelsmann, 1977), 212-13. Shakespeare created with his Shylock a figure which, despite the author's effort to combat the medieval stereotype of the Jew as demonic agent, evolved to be the very icon of the negative image of Jews.

far back as the medieval stereotype of the Jew as “demonic agent.”<sup>52</sup> This is a version of “that folk stereotype which regards Jews as the ‘archetypal other’, alien, unknowable and (...) suspect.”<sup>53</sup> However, Pflaumen does ask for Margaret’s flesh, albeit not literally:

The hawklike mouth was not deceptive, for he was a true bird of prey: he did not demand any of the trifles that serve as coin in the ordinary give-and-take of social intercourse; he wanted something bigger, he wanted part of your life. (CSK 161)

Sometimes it is difficult to bear in mind that the story is set around Margaret’s sporadic socializing with a man she does not like much for obvious and less obvious reasons. In her telling, the seriousness of her relationship with Pflaumen achieves almost existential heights. This is quite justified regarding the thing that Pflaumen seems to stand for – with all the physical clichés that exist about Jews since the Middle Ages and his miming the perfect Other, he is presented as that very “hated, feared, (...) ridiculed figure lurking on the fringes of the culture,” the quintessential Jew of anti-Semitic imagination.<sup>54</sup>

The strange, unpleasant, unwanted Jew who makes you uncomfortable and wants more than you can give him is, surprisingly, not a prerogative of anti-Semitic literature, but is often part of the fiction of Jewish writers. In Philip Roth’s short story “Defender of the Faith,” the obnoxious trainee Sheldon Grossbart pesters his sergeant Nathan Marx, who is the narrator of the story, with many requests to ease the burden of army service for himself and his two Jewish friends, Halpern and Fishbein. Scheming and lying, Grossbart manipulates Marx best with his claim that the sergeant

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<sup>52</sup> Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *Anti-Semitism* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: The History Press, 2002), 121.

<sup>53</sup> Harap, *Creative Awakening*, 63.

<sup>54</sup> Leslie Field, “Bernard Malamud and the Jewish Movement,” in: *The Fiction of Bernard Malamud*, eds. Richard Astro and Jackson J. Benson (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 1977), 103.

should “stop closing [his] heart to [his] own,” for he too is Jewish.<sup>55</sup> Bernard Malamud’s short story “The Last Mohican” (1958) touches upon a similar problem – when the art student Arthur Fidelman arrives in Rome, the first person he meets is the Jewish refugee Shimon Susskind. Susskind is wearing a shirt and knickerbockers, he is cold and he wants Fidelman’s suit. Fidelman is not a wealthy man, and not willing to give the stranger his suit, but Susskind persists: “You’re responsible. Because you are a man. Because you are a Jew, aren’t you?” (Susskind ends up stealing Fidelman’s first chapter and thus annulling a year’s work).<sup>56</sup>

Both Grossbart and Susskind not only annoy their counterparts, but, more importantly, succeed in planting the seeds of guilt into men who, at first glance, have nothing to feel guilty about. Hearing the news that the three Jewish boys will be shipped to the Pacific and thus into the war zone, Nathan Marx admits to himself: “The news shocked me, as though I were the father of Halpern, Fishbein, and Grossbart.”<sup>57</sup> At the end of the “Last Mohican” Fidelman brings his suit to Susskind’s poor room in the Jewish ghetto, and cries that “all is forgiven.”<sup>58</sup>

In McCarthy’s *The Oasis*, the Jewish Joe Lockman, “a diabetic businessman from Vermont,” plays the role of the annoying fool in the artists’ colony “Utopia,” whose other members are all artists and thinkers: “He intended to paint more, think more, and feel more than his co-colonists.” (TO 1) McCarthy’s first short introduction of Lockman already includes a cliché about Jews – he is “diabetic,” a distinctively “Jewish disease,” as was believed in the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>59</sup>

Lockman’s role as the guilt inducing element in the group is immediately given away

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<sup>55</sup> Roth, “Defender of the Faith,” in: *Goodbye, Columbus*, 189.

<sup>56</sup> Malamud, “The Last Mohican,” in: *The Magic Barrel*, 165.

<sup>57</sup> Roth, “Defender of the Faith,” in *Goodbye Columbus*, 193.

<sup>58</sup> Malamud, “The Last Mohican,” in: *The Magic Barrel*, 182.

<sup>59</sup> Gilman, “Private Knowledge: Jewish Illnesses and the Process of Identity Formation,” in: *Jewish Frontiers*, 157.

– “Joe had become a symbol; the colony had found in this stray bird of the cormorant capitalist species, attaching itself so incongruously to their fortunes, its indispensable *albatross*” (TO 8) – and the conflicts brought on by Lockman prove to be unimportant for the fate of the colony (the artist’ project fails because of their inability to fend off intruders – farmers picking the wild strawberries on their land).<sup>60</sup> Thus McCarthy does not pursue the story structure used by Roth and Malamud, where the character of the annoying Jew is central. Yet she puts a distinct emphasis on the element of guilt in her analysis of Pflaumen:

He could pity you, deplore you, denounce you, display you, be kind to you, be hurt by you, forgive you. (...) You stood to him in the relation of Man to God, embraced in an eternal neurotic mystery compounded out of His infinite goodness and your guilt. (CSK 145)

Malamud’s Shimon Susskind had been compared to the “wandering beggars and fools of Hasidic folklore” and characterized as “demonic as well as saintly.”<sup>61</sup> This can also be said about Roth’s rabbi Tsuref and the nameless Orthodox Jew from “Eli the Fanatic”, as well as (perhaps to a lesser extent) Grossbart. Susskind’s and Grossbart’s behaviour, obnoxious as it may be, make the men they pester discover their humanity, bring them “the ultimate recognition (...) of the humanity that [they] had long suppressed within [themselves],” as Philip Rahv said about Malamud’s fiction.<sup>62</sup> In this light, Margaret’s feelings seem an ironic commentary, for she turns her guilt towards Pflaumen into something that he is guilty of. Humanity could not be

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<sup>60</sup> In Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s poem “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” the sailor shoots an albatross – a symbol of the the Christian soul – and is punished by the crew who forces him to wear the dead albatross around his neck “instead of the cross.” Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner: Complete, Authoritative Texts of the 1798 and 1817 Versions*, ed. Paul H. Fry (Boston/New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1996) 35, 37.

<sup>61</sup> Robert Solotaroff, *Bernard Malamud: A Study of the Short Fiction* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989), 59.

<sup>62</sup> Quoted in Kathleen G. Ochshorn, *The Heart’s Essential Landscape: Bernard Malamud’s Hero* (New York/Bern/Frankfurt am Main/Paris: Peter Lang, 1990), 9.

further away. The ending of the story that brings proof that Pflaumen is indeed the nasty busybody of Margaret's perception is an example of the characteristic twist of the reader's expectations that is McCarthy's specialty.

Pflaumen's wish to get a "part of your life" permeates, in Margaret's view, most of his actions, even his selection of guests: he assigns to each of them a certain role, giving them "identity cards, just as a mother will assign personalities to each of her brood of children (...) and at the dinner table everyone was heady with a peculiar, almost lawless excitement, like dancers at a costume ball" (CSK 152). Watching Pflaumen and his party, Margaret comes to the conclusion "that the morality play was just a puppet show, that the other guests (...) were small, unreal figures" (CSK 154). If Pflaumen's guests are puppets, then he must be the puppet master, the one holding all the strings in his hands. Perhaps herein lies the greatest problem Margaret has with Pflaumen – for he is not only the puppet master or director, he is also an actor. And so is she. And Pflaumen outacts Margaret – it is his actions that hog the spotlight:

He held out his arms to help you with your coat, and what might have been an ordinary service became a tableau of politeness. Your hands shook, missing the buttons, for you felt that the coat was getting too much of the limelight. (CSK 141)

The better or most dedicated actor is the one who is in control of the situation, and Margaret's loss of control (albeit only of her coat) in the hands of Pflaumen is responsible for her suppressed anger. But together they are engaged in a double act – in fact, there is a co-dependency of which Margaret is well aware. Pflaumen provides the lonely, poor but proud and interesting Margaret (who, with her inner freedom, also shows the "awfully good taste" of a WASP that is unachievable for Pflaumen), with invitations to his parties where she can meet people, some of whom can give her a job, and some of whom can become her lovers. Inviting his guests according to plan,

so that each of them can represent sex or sports or motherhood (CSK 151), Pflaumen himself may be absent from their discussions, yet his role is in making the discussions themselves possible. With his guests, Pflaumen creates facets on which his self-image can glitter. Margaret, as one of the guests, is just one of these facets and not the centre of the universe, because it is Pflaumen's universe she enters each time when she attends his dinners – an experience quite unpalatable for the self-centered Bohemian girl. Competing (even unwillingly) with Pflaumen for the leading part, Margaret cannot help but feel the outrage that it is the “little Jew's” world she must act in, and not her own.

More importantly, Margaret makes the reader very much aware of the artificiality of Pflaumen's behaviour and, incidentally, her own. David Riesman, Jewish himself, devoted some part of his social study *Individualism Reconsidered* to Jews, as among “the less successful classes in our society.” He explains the necessity of role-playing for the man of the twentieth century with the following:

As for Jews, the relative security of a social role fixed by skill, family, age and sex has vanished. One must now show “one's stuff” in a competitive market, and one's stuff is one's “personality,” an externalized part of the self and not primarily one's matter-of-fact skill. In other words, it is not the genuine self that is put on the market in the race for success or even economic survival, but the “cosmetic” self, which is free of any aroma of personal, non-marketable idiosyncrasy.<sup>63</sup>

The “relative security” for Pflaumen would have manifested itself in the ways of the “regular merchant” with a family of his own had he lived a hundred years earlier. His “personality” as it is now, as well as Margaret's own that she puts on display, not only lost the “aroma (...) of non-marketable idiosyncrasy,” but acquired the stink of a bad performance.

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<sup>63</sup> Riesman, *Individualism Reconsidered*, 59.

Margaret calls her strange relationship with Pflaumen “an eternal *neurotic* mystery” (my italics), thus using vocabulary from psychoanalysis. Guilt in connection with Pflaumen the Jew and psychoanalysis may give a clue to the nature of Margaret’s anti-Semitism. Sigmund Freud saw anti-Semitism as a “paranoid projection of unconscious guilt feelings and of a deeper narcissistic illness.”<sup>64</sup>

Narcissism is the obsession with the self, or rather, the self-image. The role playing that Margaret and Pflaumen take such pains at is used for shaping the self image that is of great importance to both of them. They need each other as an audience, their narcissism being a social phenomenon that “marks the self’s most fundamental response to an image of otherness.”<sup>65</sup>

Another aspect that gets analyzed under Margaret’s intense gaze is Pflaumen’s sexuality, or rather lack of it. Pflaumen is sexually repellent despite his “carefully exercised body.” Margaret watches the host in conversation with one of his female guests and notices that the woman “was comfortable with Pflaumen; he took her hand and she let him hold it; he was one of her oldest friends” (CSK 158), something Margaret herself would have never allowed. She sees “something androgynous about Pflaumen, something not pansy, but psychically hermaphroditic that was always disconcerting [her]” (CSK 149). She elaborates on that in terms of Pflaumen’s Jewish heritage:

The Jewish paterfamilias was not the only figure that kept hovering behind your host’s well-padded shoulder; there was also a young girl, newly married to a man already coarse and comfortable, a young girl playing house all by herself (...). Most Jewish men were more feminine than Gentile men of similar social background. You had noticed this and had supposed, vaguely, that it was the mark matriarchy had left on them. (...) In most of the men, the masculine influence had, in the end, overridden or absorbed the feminine (...) But with Pflaumen it was not a question of survival of a

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<sup>64</sup> Quoted in Avner Falk, *Anti-Semitism: A History and Psychoanalysis of Contemporary Hatred* (Westport, Connecticut/London: Praeger Publishers, 2008), 82.

<sup>65</sup> Marshall W. Alcorn, *Narcissism and the Literary Libido* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1994), 16.

few traits. Two complete personalities had been preserved in him, as in a glacier. (CSK 150)

Speaking about Pflaumen's "hermaphroditic" persona, Margaret Sargent dives deep into the chest of anti-Semitic clichés once again. The assumption of Jewish "hermaphroditism" stems from the Middle Ages and continued until the early modern period. It came up again in the late nineteenth century as part of the "blood libel accusations."<sup>66</sup> It was not uncommon to think that Jewish men would menstruate, this idea being a part of a Christian tradition that considered the Jew "inherently, biologically different."<sup>67</sup> Anti-Semitic literature of the nineteenth century frequently presents the gender ambivalence of the Jews. There, the Jew is often male in the most extreme sense, a sexually obsessed predator, but just as often he is abnormal, soft, even menstruating. This blending of the male and the female in the literary presentation of Jews speaks of the fear that the Jew could be male as well as female, a being of the third sex.<sup>68</sup> Otto Weininger's outrageously unscientific *Sex and Character* (1903) achieved bestseller status in *fin-de-siècle* Europe because it united misogynist and anti-Semitic prejudices widely common in these times. The quack study assigned to Jewishness the chaotic and unconscious attributes of femininity, which endangered the desirable rational masculine consciousness.<sup>69</sup> The Bohemian girl Margaret Sargent, having read Krafft-Ebbing in college, was most certainly familiar with Weininger's text as well.

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<sup>66</sup> Sander Gilman gives evidence for this through references to Anatole Leroy-Beaulieu, *Israel chez les nations: les juifs et l'antisémitisme* (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1893), 166-167, and Daniel Chwolson, *Die Blutanklage und sonstige mittelalterliche Beschuldigungen der Juden: Eine historische Untersuchung nach den Quellen* (Frankfurt am Main: J.Kauffmann, 1901), 7, 207-10, "Notes on Chapter Seven," in: *Multiculturalism and the Jews* (New York/London: Routledge and Francis Group, 2006), 262.

<sup>67</sup> Sander L. Gilman, "Whose Body is it Anyway? Hermaphrodites, Gays and Jews in N.O. Body's Germany," in: *Multiculturalism and the Jews*, 123.

<sup>68</sup> Susannah Heschel, "Sind Juden Männer? Können Frauen jüdisch sein? Definitionen des männlichen und weiblichen Körpers," in: "*Der schejne Jid*," 86.

<sup>69</sup> Otto Weininger, *Sex and Character: An Investigation of Fundamental Principles*, 1903, transl. Ladislaus Löb (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005).

More than thirty years later, writing an obituary for her former lover and lifelong friend, the *Partisan Review* editor Philip Rahv, Mary McCarthy returned to the image of the Jewish man uniting in his personality the male and the female principle in her description of Rahv's character:

Those who knew him discovered, there were two persons in Rahv, but solidly married to each other in a long standing union – no quarrels. It would be simplifying to say that one was political, masculine and aggressive, one feminine, artistic, and dreamy, but those contrasts were part of it.<sup>70</sup>

McCarthy was not afraid of using Rahv in her fiction – *The Oasis* contains an accurate portrait of the picturesque New York Intellectual. Will Taub does not wear any disguise, the prototype Philip Rahv is most easily recognizable. Taub, just like Rahv, has an unsettling temperament:

“Idiots!” he thunderously proclaimed, pounding his fist on the coffee table. (...) The tip of his tongue fastened itself against his lower teeth, and the center broadened and protruded in a truly malignant fashion as he emitted another grating laugh, vainglorious and taunting. (TO 10-12)

But he unites this comical fierceness with “something shy and childlike in his nature,” that is the second of “the two persons” in his soul. Even his name, considering McCarthy's “nomen est omen” principle, mirrors this strange union – the first name speaks for itself, whereas his last name is close to the German word for “dove” (“Taube”). Being Jewish is almost a burden to him:

A kind of helplessness came over him when he became conscious of his Jewishness, a thing about himself which he was powerless to alter and which seemed to reduce him therefore to a curious dependency on the given. (TO 26)

His wife is not Jewish, from which he takes great comfort, trusting her and having “put his Jewishness into her Gentile hands” (TO 26) (pun intended). This dependency

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<sup>70</sup> McCarthy, “Philip Rahv,” in: *Occasional Prose*, 4.

on his wife, together with his helplessness towards being a Jew, emphasize the “shy and childlike,” and therefore, feminine side of his nature.

Taub may be drawn comically but he still receives much more sympathy from the author than Pflaumen. Despite the unity of the male and female principle that McCarthy detects in both of them, Pflaumen most certainly is not meant to be or even resemble Rahv. The “genial host” was primarily modeled after Robert Misch, “an advertising man who was secretary to the Wine and Food Society.”<sup>71</sup> Both the imaginary Pflaumen and the real Rahv were Jews. This is the only thing that unites these two so different men, but this is also evaluated differently by McCarthy – in Pflaumen, it is “disconcerting,” in Rahv rather endearing. The description of Pflaumen evokes Weininger’s absurd theories, while the words used for Rahv are a document of sincere love and friendship.

McCarthy does create a positive image of the Jew in “A Genial Host” as a foil for the negative Pflaumen. The Russian Jew Martin Erdman, an “instructor of law in Columbia” who, despite an unwritten rule, does not taste any of Pflaumen’s much praised wine (CSK 148) (and gets away with it because, unlike most of the guests, he is not acting), is an example of the interesting and sexually attractive Jew. His name “Erdman,” German for “man of the earth,” a variant of Adam – the first man whom God made from earth – hints at the nature of Margaret’s interest in him. With his “long, ironic smile” and a “strange, mocking, affectionate expression” (CSK 156) Margaret already sees him as her future lover.

McCarthy does not describe Erdman as carefully as she does Pflaumen, the only reference to his physical appearance is his “pure Italianate face” (CSK 148). Margaret is very well aware of Erdman’s Jewishness, she mentions “his poor Russian parents,

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<sup>71</sup> Brightman, *Writing Dangerously*, 129.

his studiousness, the Talmudic simplicity of his life” (CSK 149) as true assets. But she does not say that he has a Jewish face, although there can be no real difference between the (stereotyped) looks of an Italian and a Jew. Just as the “German Jew” in Pflaumen would have been “good” if the hairy host had had the decency to look like one, so it seems that Erdman’s classic “Italianate” features stand for refinement that is impossible for a Jew to attain – European culture is, once again, set above Jewish culture. The Jewish beauty that can only be expressed in terms of Italian classicism is also found in Malamud’s “The Lady of the Lake.” Freeman sees Isabella for the first time in the firm belief that she is the daughter of an Italian aristocratic family. Taking in “her large brown eyes,” her lips “cut as if from red flowers,” Freeman thinks that “her dark, sharp Italian face had that quality of beauty which holds the mark of history, the beauty of a people and civilization.”<sup>72</sup> This may all be true, albeit not about Italian civilization, but about the people and history that Freeman was too eager to cast aside. (Malamud, with his characteristic humour, does give a hint to the sharp reader of Isabella’s true origin: “Her nose was perhaps the one touch of imperfection that perfected the rest – a trifle long”<sup>73</sup>).

Margaret’s attraction to Erdman and her subsequent romanticizing of his Jewishness show that Margaret Sargent is, indeed, ambivalent towards Jews and uses Jewishness as a collection of clichés that acquire their positive or negative meaning depending on the person she applies them to. Pflaumen’s Semitism contracts repugnancy from his other character traits, whereas Erdman’s belonging to the Jewish people is, on the contrary, quite attractive. The same goes for the male and female principle that is “disconcerting” for the narrator in Pflaumen, but interesting in Taub and even endearing in Rahv. Jewishness in McCarthy’s fiction may be not a firmly

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<sup>72</sup> Malamud, “The Lady of the Lake,” in: *The Magic Barrel*, 113.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

defined aspect, but subject to change with the context, oscillating between the author's "crudest anti-Semitism" and "infatuation and genuine tolerance," as the stereotyped figure of the Jew itself oscillates between monstrosity and attractiveness, demonism and pathos.

### 3. Les Belles Juives – McCarthy's Grandmother and Kazin's Cousin

The appearance of a beautiful Jew like Martin Erdman is rare, for physical Jewish beauty is mostly a female prerogative. A beautiful Jewish man is, in Yiddish folklore, someone who studies the Torah with passion and devotes himself to his religious duties, his physical appearance being unimportant.<sup>74</sup> So is, for example, the future rabbi Leo Finkle, the protagonist in Bernard Malamud's story "The Magic Barrel" (1958), a very good catch for every girl whose photograph is in the barrel of Pynie Salzman, the marriage broker.<sup>75</sup>

Outside of Jewish culture the Jew is ugly by definition. The Jew is also male, he stands for Jewishness and Jews in general (his Jewishness not limited to religious aspects) – the American sign language, for instance, uses the movement of the hollow hand from the chin down (like stroking a beard) as the sign for "Jew."<sup>76</sup> The image of the Jewish woman, on the other hand, traditionally fulfils other functions in the Western imagination. The beautiful Jewess, *la belle juive*, became a topos in European literature and art. The dominantly erotic motif refers to the biblical figures of Salome, Esther, Judith or Rachel. Up to the late nineteenth century the beautiful Jewess was not only a bearer of physical beauty, but also (unlike her male counterpart) had a good heart and a pure soul (Rebecca in Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* and

<sup>74</sup> Sander L. Gilman, "Die Rasse ist nicht schön," in: "Der schejne Jid," 58.

<sup>75</sup> Malamud, "The Magic Barrel," in: *The Magic Barrel*, 195.

<sup>76</sup> Heschel, "Sind Juden Männer?" in: "Der schejne Jid," 87.

Jessica in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* are such examples). The increasing misogyny and fear of women's intellectual power at the turn of the century demonized the image of the beautiful Jewess – Gustav Klimt's painting "Judith," showing the biblical heroine half naked, with a lusty smile and half-closed eyes, is a fitting illustration of the image.<sup>77</sup>

Jean-Paul Sartre speaks in his *Anti-Semite and Jew* about the specific meaning that is implied in the expression "*la belle juive*":

There is a special sexual meaning in the words 'beautiful Jewess,' entirely different from 'beautiful Romanian', 'beautiful Greek', 'beautiful American.' The words convey a whiff of massacre and rape. The beautiful Jewess is the one whom the Cossacks drag through her burning village by her hair.<sup>78</sup>

The image of the beautiful Jewish woman consists not only of her sexual attractiveness, but also of the wish to annihilate her. It is a specifically Jewish phenomenon only to a certain extent, since women generated violence throughout history with no regard to their religion and ethnicity.

The beautiful *shikse* certainly fulfils the very same role for Jewish men as does *la belle juive* with her Oriental beauty for Gentiles: "But the *shikses*, ah, the *shikses* (...) the sight of their fresh cold blond hair spilling out of their kerchiefs and caps (...). How do they get so gorgeous, so healthy, so *blond*?" wonders Roth's Alexander Portnoy.<sup>79</sup> The *belle juive* and the *shikse* share a common mechanism of classification. The term "beautiful Jewess" seems to express a non-Jewish, non-female point of view (that of the one using the term), and classifies the person described as someone who is

<sup>77</sup> Gabriele Kohlbauer-Fritz, " 'La belle juive' und die 'schöne Schickse,' " in: "*Der schejne Jid*," 109-111.

<sup>78</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Betrachtungen zur Judenfrage. Psychoanalyse des Antisemitismus* (Zürich: Europa Verlag, 1948), 42-43 (my translation).

<sup>79</sup> Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint*, 1969 (London: Random House Vintage, 2005), 144-145.

alien and different to the speaker.<sup>80</sup> The very same happens with the term *shikse* – here the speaker’s point of view is Jewish and it is the shikse who is alien and different.

Mary McCarthy’s maternal grandmother Augusta Morgenstern Preston was Jewish and “the most beautiful woman in Seattle” (MCG 203). The chapter or short story “Ask Me No Questions” from McCarthy’s *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* deals with McCarthy remembering her grandmother. McCarthy’s way of seeing Augusta is very much like that of the speaker naming the *belle juive* – McCarthy perceives herself to be not Jewish, and describes her grandmother from a considerable distance (the distance is increased by the fact that the memories she writes about are those of a child, looking at the mysterious woman who is her grandmother). McCarthy’s choice of the details she remembers about Augusta suggests that Mary tries to come to terms with the two epithets that weighed most heavily in the others’ (and her own) perception of her grandmother – “Jewish” and “beautiful.” McCarthy questions both of them, wondering to what extent they could be lies.

Firstly, McCarthy, due to her own age, can only remember an elderly woman. *La belle juive* is, of course, young, because female beauty and female biological functions are so closely connected that, in most cases, age becomes an eliminating criterion for beauty. But even looking back on the past, with the age problem out of the question, McCarthy admits: “My grandmother does not appear beautiful to me in the few photographs that exist of her as a young woman” (MCG 203).

Despite the fact that her grandmother, though married to the Protestant lawyer (a typical WASP), had many Jewish relatives, including her sisters Rosie who was

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<sup>80</sup> Florian Krobb, *Die schöne Jüdin: Jüdische Frauengestalten in der deutschsprachigen Erzählliteratur vom 17. Jahrhundert bis zum Ersten Weltkrieg* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1993), 5.

“active in the temple” (MCG 206), and Eva who “hardly realized that the world contained persons who were not Jewish” (MCG 208), McCarthy admits that she herself “never used the word ‘Jewish’ in any connection when talking to her” (MCG 210). More than this – mentioning her grandmother’s maiden name, McCarthy continuously makes a spelling mistake, writing “Morganstern” (MCG 204) instead of “Morgenstern,” her version anglicizing the distinctly Jewish name. The right spelling of the name only comes up in the memoirs *How I Grew* and *Intellectual Memoirs* that were written decades later.

But McCarthy does describe her grandmother’s outward appearance in terms that can be recognized as “typically Jewish.” One of McCarthy’s early memories of her grandmother consists of the realization that “she was my grandmother, that she was Jewish, and dyed her hair” (MCG 202). “The last of these items was a canard,” McCarthy continues, as her grandmother’s hair stayed naturally very black and glossy until her death in her eighties. Hair is considered to be the most immediate and obvious Jewish attribute – strong, dark, curly hair is a part of the Jewish identity image/stereotype for women (for men, it would be the beard).<sup>81</sup>

Alfred Kazin’s memoirs *Starting out in the Thirties* contain, among his recollections of the start of his literary career, a touching image of his spinster cousin Sophie who lived with Kazin’s parents and whose presence left a strong impression on little Alfred. Like Augusta for Mary, cousin Sophie is an enigma of some sorts for Kazin, a riddle he tries to decipher many years after his closest encounters with her. Doing this, he turns to the same technique that McCarthy uses in remembering her grandmother – Kazin too stages Sophie as *la belle juive* in his memoir, despite the fact that Sophie is not beautiful : “She was certainly not pretty – her long face usually

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<sup>81</sup> Heschel, “Sind Juden Männer?” in: “*Der schejne Jid*,” 89.

looked sad or bitter.”<sup>82</sup> Apart from Sophie being not pretty enough to physically resemble *la belle juive*, Kazin himself is hardly suited to speak about someone as the “beautiful Jewess,” since he is Jewish himself and therefore his point of view lacks the distance usually needed to label a woman as a “beautiful Jewess.” But Kazin, just like McCarthy with her grandmother, was a child when Sophie was most present in his life – thus in his case the age gap serves as the necessary barrier that makes the application of the term possible. Like Augusta’s Jewishness, it is Sophie’s Russian heritage, her traditional clothes, and the Russian novels in her room that create the air of sensuality and exoticism for Kazin that outweighs Sophie’s physical shortcomings.

Both McCarthy and Kazin accentuate the physical details of their *belles juives*, and, unsurprisingly, these details are the same. So does most of Kazin’s portraiture of Sophie describe her black hair. Sophie’s hair is accompanied by other things that make up the image of her exotic mystery, like her clothes, her mandolin and her smell:

All my life I had seen her, with her long black hair which had never been cut, her embroidered Russian blouses and velvet skirts, against the rectangle room that smelled of musk, of patchouli. (...) Sophie standing in front of the great mirror in the kitchen, combing up her black, black hair, Sophie beating at the strings of that yellow-shining, deep-bosomed, narrow-waisted mandolin (...).<sup>83</sup>

Sophie’s long black hair becomes, in Kazin’s description, not only the symbol of the “beautiful Jewess,” but a symbol of feminine beauty itself – its presence is so overwhelming that it makes one forget Sophie’s long and bitter face. The beauty of Sophie’s hair is supported by allusions to softness (velvet skirts) and sweetness (smells of musk and patchouli). In fact, Sophie’s femininity is so strong that the

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<sup>82</sup> Kazin, *Starting Out*, 35.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 35-37.

mandolin in her hands repeats the curves of the female body. The mandolin is not accidental here – it is an exotic musical instrument that goes well with “the stereotype of the Jewish (or oriental) princess.” The stereotype often links Jewish women with women from Southern Europe, thus making the proximity of the mandolin, originating from Naples, plausible.<sup>84</sup>

McCarthy describes an early photograph of Augusta referring to the Biblical heroines that were the prototypes of *la belle juive*:

A Biblical Jewish face that might have belonged to the young Rachel when Jacob first saw her. Her ears were pierced, and in one photograph she is wearing a pair of round, button-style earrings that lend her, somehow, a Russian appearance; in another (...) her hair is caught in a big dark hair ribbon that gives her the air of a student. (MCG 203)

“Rachel,” “Russian,” “student” – with the face of the Biblical heroine come other Jewish markers such as an Eastern European background (from where the bulk of the Jewish immigrants originated, Kazin’s Sophie included), and “the air of a student,” an allusion to the “people of the Book,” as Jews are sometimes called. Once again, McCarthy makes use of stereotypes – positive ones this time, but stereotypes nonetheless. The expressions “Biblical Jewish face” and “Rachel when Jacob first saw her” are interchangeable with *la belle juive*. Just like “the beautiful Jewess,” the person thus described is not really described but simply named, since the stereotypical images included in the expressions already provoke a certain (pre)understanding in the reader.<sup>85</sup> Few further traits (the much discussed dark hair, for instance) suffice to categorize the figure and to associate her with all the other connotations of *la belle juive*. This sort of naming goes beyond the individual and describes a type, taking the

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<sup>84</sup> Kathleen Adler, “Sargent’s Portraits of the Wertheimer Family,” in: *The Jew in the Text*, 94. Adler’s essay examines the series of portraits of a wealthy Jewish family by John Singer Sargent. His painting *Almina Wertheimer* of 1908 is a parody of the stereotype of the Jewish princess. The painting depicts Almina holding a musical instrument, a *sarod* from North India, that resembles a mandolin.

<sup>85</sup> “Vorverständnis,” in Krobb, *Schöne Jüdin*, 11.

form of a “generalizing collective singular,” the favoured grammatical form of prejudice.<sup>86</sup> In McCarthy’s case, these clichés support the idea of her grandmother’s strangeness that cannot be explained other than by her Jewish heritage. Kazin, on the other hand, applies the term “beautiful Jewess” to his obscure cousin to stylize her from the pathetic old spinster to the alluring image of the *belle juive*.

McCarthy, wondering how little the young woman with a “gentle, open, serious mien” resembles the “sharp, jaunty woman” that she knew, goes on to say that “the young woman in the photographs looks as though she could be easily hurt” (MCG 204). This recalls Sartre’s definition of the “beautiful Jewess,” in which beauty goes hand in hand with the aggression against it. Recalling her grandmother’s anecdotes about her youth, McCarthy understands that these anecdotes had “a classic plot – the plot of a nightmare, really. (...) My grandmother is always helpless while some uncontrollable event unfolds before her eyes” (MCG 216). Augusta’s narratives, despite their good humour, do draw the classic picture of the damsel in distress, or rather, the beautiful Jewess who encounters some sort of menace. McCarthy adds that outside of her grandmother’s stories, in reality, “*she* was the disconcerting one (...). Most people, including all my friends, were afraid of her” (MCG 217). Despite its first impression, this remark does not speak against Augusta’s positioning as the beautiful Jewess, for irrational fear of *la belle juive* is a common companion of the topos.<sup>87</sup> Mary McCarthy, as a little girl, saw the hidden tragedy in her grandmother’s appearance:

If I had not known her, my imagination might have woven some story around her for school composition – the holocaust, at the very least, of all her nearest and dearest, her husband gone to prison, her children branded as traitors. But in fact, (...) she had

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>87</sup> Kohlbauer-Fritz, ‘La belle juive’ und die ‘schöne Schickse,’ in: “*Der schejne Jid*,” 112.

a husband, two sons (...), two sisters; a sister-in-law (...), a granddaughter (...), a cook, and an old gardener (...). She had nothing to complain of in life. (MCG 220-221)

The tragedy of Sophie's life – spinsterhood – was not hidden. On the contrary, it was openly presented to everyone who cared to see: “Loneliness had become her profession. It glowed in her like a passion,” remembers Kazin.<sup>88</sup>

It is already obvious that McCarthy, speaking of her grandmother, oscillates between the terms “Jewish” and “beautiful” and the terms “not Jewish” and “not beautiful.” As soon as she provides herself and the reader with information that would give one pair of adjectives more weight, she goes on doing the same for their opposite. So after all the terms from the repertoire of *la belle juive*, McCarthy says that “the first thing that would have struck an outsider about her in later years (...) was the oddity of her appearance. (...) The whole effect she made was that of an indescribable daring” (MCG 218). “It was partly the black hair, so improbably black and glossy,” McCarthy goes on. Remembering that black hair is the most powerful symbol of the Jewess, one may assume that the “effect of indescribable daring” was achieved by Augusta's Jewishness itself.

McCarthy cannot fully explain “the peculiarly florid impression” her grandmother made, but she makes it difficult for the reader to keep in mind that it is “the most beautiful woman in Seattle” who she is speaking about – for what McCarthy describes suggests the opposite. Yet she does admit that with the hours long everyday rituals in the large locked bathroom, her grandmother's body “was the cult object around which [McCarthy's] household revolved,” “bland, smooth and plump, cushioning in itself, close held – a secret” (MCG 225). Augusta's physical presence was so overwhelming that McCarthy remembers even the smallest details about it:

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<sup>88</sup> Kazin, *Starting Out*, 39.

No other woman has ever been known to me in such a wealth of fleshly, material detail; everything she touched became imbued for me with her presence, as though it were a relic. I still see her clothes, plumped to her shape, (...) which were permeated with the faint scents of powder and perfume, and the salty smell of her perspiration; she comes back to me in dress shields, in darned service-sheer stockings (for morning), in fagoting and hemstitching, in voile and batiste, in boucle and monkey fur, in lace, dyed ecru with tea. (MCG 226)

The catalogue consists of delicate things that simultaneously symbolize Augusta but are also tainted with her smell. Here the oscillation between pleasantness and unpleasantness – powder and perfume on the fine clothes that are accompanied by the smell of sweat – parallels McCarthy’s habit of distorting Augusta’s image of the “beautiful Jewess” by additional information such as her “florid appearance.”

Alfred Kazin is much kinder in remembering his cousin Sophie. Sophie’s body is a secret for him too, and like McCarthy, he tries to find clues to it in Sophie’s clothes, the objects that are closest to her body. Sophie’s personal things and herself seem to be almost interchangeable in Kazin’s perception:

I (...) could smell from her warm and fragrant flesh, as soon as she came near me, the musk and sandalwood, or could feel her presence again whenever I touched her velvet skirts on the hangers and the stiff crinkling surface of the Indian spread on her bed. (...) There was something about her long sweeping hair and the ungraspable scent of her body that was like the resistance of velvet, which retreats back in itself, in soft and recessive lines, after you have touched it. (...) How natural it had been to stand behind Sophie and to watch her combing her hair; or to steal into her room to smell the musk, the patchouli, the stingingly sweet face powder, the velvet skirts whose creases seemed still to mark the pressure of her body, the slips whose straps seemed just to have slipped off her shoulders.<sup>89</sup>

Kazin’s enchantment is that of a little boy during his first encounters with femininity. Sophie stands for all women that Kazin will love in the future:

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 36-37.

All that a man would experience in loving women – the moodiness, the dark excitement, the constant sense of being stretched to new possibilities of feeling – I first guessed at from being near Sophie.<sup>90</sup>

Thus, Sophie is the first woman for Kazin, his personal Lilith. Putting her into the category of *la belle juive* makes her very well known – as it is always the case with a popular stereotype – but also unknown at the same time, for we understand that her individuality cannot be satisfactorily explained by the clichéd image. The objects she surrounds herself with have the same function as the clothes of McCarthy's grandmother – they seem to be part of the beloved but distant person, they seem to give clues for solving this person's riddle, but are unable to actually do it.

Even with McCarthy's abundance of "fleshly, material detail" about Augusta, the question remains whether Augusta's garish appearance is just a masquerade. Is McCarthy's grandmother beautiful after all? Unlike Kazin, McCarthy does not give a definite answer – the title of the story works not only for Augusta who was reluctant to answer young Mary's questions. But the ending does provide information that causes a clear disbalance in the opposing pairs. McCarthy writes that she never saw her grandmother undressed, but "once, when she was in her seventies, I did catch a disturbing glimpse of her thighs, which were dazzling, not only in their whiteness and firmness but in the fineness of the skin's texture – closer to a delicate chiffon than to silk or satin," (MCG 226) she remembers. The secret of Augusta's body is thus partly revealed – it is indeed extraordinarily beautiful even in old age. This revelation takes place together with another one, which is much more important. McCarthy caught a glimpse of her grandmother's body when Augusta was writhing on her bed, howling hysterically after the news of her favourite sister's death:

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 39.

I wondered whether that fearful insensate noise had been classic Jewish mourning, going back to the waters of Babylon. Of one thing I was certain: my grandmother was more different from the rest of us than I could ever have conceived. (MCG 243)

So, in McCarthy's perception, her grandmother had been much more Jewish than she ever thought. Augusta's disturbing moan is echoed in Philip Roth's story "Eli, the Fanatic." There, the lawyer Eli listens to the moan that the Orthodox, black-clad Jew who lost all of his family in the Holocaust, makes:

What a moan! It could raise hair, stop hearts, water eyes. And it did all three to Eli, plus more. Some feeling crept into him for whose deepness he could find no word. It was strange. He listened – it did not hurt to hear this moan. But he wondered if it hurt to make it. And so, with only the stars to hear, he tried. And it did hurt.<sup>91</sup>

The moan, with its centuries old history of loss and mourning, is presented in both cases as the tragic essence of being Jewish – both Eli and McCarthy sense this. But while Roth's Eli experiences an unexpectedly strong closeness with the strange Orthodox Jew, McCarthy stays an outsider with her own grandmother, who, evidently, turned out to be much more Jewish and beautiful than McCarthy ever expected. Strangely, both beauty and Jewishness function as barriers in McCarthy's relationship with her grandmother – Augusta's beauty, demanding long rituals in the bathroom with all doors locked, induced a strong feeling of loneliness in the child Mary, and the Jewishness prevented a close attachment to the Catholic Mary who could not replace her grandmother's lost Jewish sister. Having arrived at the conclusion that her grandmother is indeed Jewish, McCarthy sadly realizes that Augusta "had never really cared for anyone but her sister; that was her secret" (MCG 243). Kazin's Sophie ends her life in silent madness – she dies in a mental asylum, shocked to muteness. Her Jewish moan is expressed through this horrible silence

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<sup>91</sup> Roth, "Eli, the Fanatic," in: *Goodbye, Columbus*, 281.

which in some sense, is louder than the physical moan. For Kazin, despite all his love, she remains as unreachable as Augusta for McCarthy.

In McCarthy's version, *la belle juive* is a mysterious, lonely human being who induces loneliness in others. Sympathy and even love for her are detectable in McCarthy's memoir, but true understanding and closeness (as in Eli's and, to a lesser extent, Alfred Kazin's case) are not achieved. Thus, Augusta Morgenstern Preston – *la belle juive* – remains the Other for her own granddaughter.

### Conclusion

McCarthy's use of Jewish stereotypical images in her fiction is a game of closeness and distance, of mimicking the anti-Semitic point of view only to turn against it. Her personal experience mirrors this – she was brought up in the WASP family of her grandparents, but with a Jewish grandmother (“I was unable to decide how Jewish my grandmother looked or didn't look,” Mary remembers, agonizing before the visit of her university friend to whom she had told nothing about her grandmother).<sup>92</sup> Mary attended various prestigious schools where being and speaking about a Jew was “an embarrassment,” (HIG 217) but one of her first best friends was the Jewish Ethel “Ted” Rosenberg. When Mary McCarthy went to New York after her Vassar education, she found herself in the midst of a circle of Jewish intellectuals, some of whom became her lovers. Yet she left the handsome and Jewish Philip Rahv, to be married to the old and unattractive Edmund Wilson – “Wilson, relatively speaking, was upper class. That was all there was to it,” admits McCarthy in the last volume of her memoirs.<sup>93</sup> The poet Elizabeth Bishop, who was at Vassar with Mary, used to answer questions about McCarthy, while in one of her bad moods, with the following:

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<sup>92</sup> McCarthy, *How I Grew*, 218. References to all further quotations from this novel will appear immediately after the quotation in parentheses, the title of the novel abbreviated as HIG.

<sup>93</sup> Mary McCarthy, *Intellectual Memoirs*, 1992 (San Diego/ New York/ London: Harvest, 1993), 105.

“Mary McCarthy? She’s an Irish Jew”. (HIG 229) McCarthy was certainly influenced by the anti-Semitism that was common in American society in the ’30s and ’40s. Though in milder form than in Europe and elsewhere, Jews “remained identifiably, or in [their] own feeling, an ethnic (...), kept from complete social participation in the dominant groups by subtle and not so subtle barriers.”<sup>94</sup> One of these barriers was class, even at the very top of society – remembering the coming out parties of a Jewish acquaintance (“thousands and thousands of dollars spent on glamour”), McCarthy is careful to add: “I was in high society, no question. The only thing was that it was *Jewish* high society.”<sup>95</sup>

McCarthy’s fiction makes one think that the author used to take stereotypes about Jews that were floating in the air, and play with them, creating an accurate mirror of the times she lived in, an excellent record of the accents she heard. That Jewish writers like Hortense Calisher, Philip Roth, and Bernard Malamud were using the same sources as McCarthy is evident from the many resemblances between their texts and McCarthy’s. All of them were telling “the story of the mutually modifying, reciprocal engagement with the (...) Other.”<sup>96</sup> The Other is used to form our sense of selves, our identity. Usually, we construct our identity in relation to others, against whom we define ourselves, albeit unconsciously.<sup>97</sup> Since we tend to reject most violently those traits that we suspect to have ourselves, the Other can easily turn into our Double. The most unlikeable Jewish characters discussed in this chapter turn out to engage with the protagonists in surprisingly close and insightful ways. The crude

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<sup>94</sup> Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, 284.

<sup>95</sup> McCarthy, *Intellectual Memoirs*, 216.

<sup>96</sup> Jonathan Freedman, *The Temple of Culture: Assimilation and Anti-Semitism in Literary Anglo-America* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 17.

<sup>97</sup> Silberstein, *Other in Jewish Thought*, 5.

stereotypes used to describe them are exposed as “psychological constructs,” a “set of associated beliefs” easily overturned.<sup>98</sup>

Elements of anti-Semitic clichés are found in the fiction of all the writers mentioned above. Most often, these elements perform the same function that Jonathan Freedman detected in Anthony Trollope’s writing: “Trollope’s seemingly anti-Semitic texts serve as both an exemplar of the structures of feeling that are circulating with and around him and a test of their imaginative and ideological consequences.”<sup>99</sup> McCarthy’s unique position, equally belonging and not belonging to both the WASPs and the Jews renders her with the insight of the outsider, which Isaac Rosenfeld described in the following terms: “Since modern life is so complex that no man can possess it in its entity, the outsider often finds himself the perfect insider.”<sup>100</sup> Only the “imaginative and ideological consequences” are a little more hidden in McCarthy’s stories than in these by Roth and Malamud – where the two Jewish writers lead their character (the reader) by hand towards humanity, McCarthy does not. The twist in her stories makes things more complicated than simple. Poor Pflaumen, dissected in the best anti-Semitic tradition at first, does not get any justice as a character by turning out to be a wonderful person – quite the opposite happens. But the protagonist Margaret Sargent gets dissected as well, for she resembles and needs Pflaumen. *La belle juive* in the face of McCarthy’s own grandmother remains an enameled beauty, aloof and strange, her elusive beauty appearing as an illusion, an artificial construct of imagination with the same mechanism that was used to search for Pflaumen’s outward monstrosity. McCarthy undercuts the reader’s expectations, but to be able to do so, she has to know what these are.

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<sup>98</sup> Yzerbyt, Spears, *Stereotypes*, 7.

<sup>99</sup> Freedman, *Temple of Culture*, 17.

<sup>100</sup> Quoted in Solotaroff, *Bernard Malamud*, 27.

In Philip Roth's "Defender of the Faith," Nathan Marx tiredly calls out the soldier who has been annoying him: "'Grossbart, why can't you be like the rest? Why do you have to stick out like a sore thumb?' 'Because I'm a Jew, Sergeant. I *am* different. Better, maybe not. But different,'" the young man replies.<sup>101</sup> McCarthy's texts which are richest with Jewish presence convey exactly that – without excessive sympathy perhaps, but also unsentimentally, with an knowledge only an insider can acquire, and a distance that is only possible for an outsider.

This chapter lightly touched on Mary McCarthy's autobiographical utterances to provide the background for her personal and literary attitude towards Jews. McCarthy's own Jewish roots, together with her Catholicism and, above all, her orphanhood, are some of the key elements that shape the problem of identity or self-identifying for McCarthy, a problem which continued to influence her writing until the very end of her life – her last text is a volume of memoirs. Her autobiographical texts play with the forms of (mock) Catholic confession and psychoanalytical sessions, which resemble each other in various ways and from which McCarthy tends to ironically distance herself, incapable of their total dismissal. Psychoanalysis as "the Jewish science," created by outsiders who acquired a better insight precisely because of their position, meshes in McCarthy's memoirs with her self-styling as the outsider figure of the orphan child, the one whose chain of recollection was broken by the death of her parents. McCarthy's autobiographies can be seen as multiple attempts to recover these lost fragments of her past.

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<sup>101</sup> Roth, "Defender of the Faith," in: *Goodbye, Columbus*, 188.

## CHAPTER FOUR: THWARTED CONFESSIONS – MARY MCCARTHY’S AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

### Introduction

Mary McCarthy produced several volumes of autobiography during her lifetime. Mary’s childhood and coming of age in the early thirties receives the greatest attention by the author throughout her oeuvre. Between McCarthy’s debut as a writer of fiction – her novel *The Company She Keeps*, published in 1942 – and her last written work, *Intellectual Memoirs*, published posthumously in 1992, there are three publications of autobiographical pieces: *Cast a Cold Eye* (1946), *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* (1957), and *How I Grew* (1987). *Cast a Cold Eye* and *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* are closely linked to each other, because the latter contains chapters (or short stories – how to classify them is never clear in McCarthy’s writing) previously published in *Cast a Cold Eye*, albeit in an altered version.

The chapters or short stories found in both *Cast a Cold Eye* and *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* deal with McCarthy’s early orphanhood – Mary’s parents died in the influenza epidemic of 1918, when she was only six years old, and she and her three younger brothers were placed in the care of two guardians, whose cruelty Mary later describes as “Dickensian” – and focus on her coming of age in various convent and boarding schools. Growing up as a devout Catholic, McCarthy lost her faith at the age of twelve, a consequence of her ploy to gain popularity at her new school. In the short story “C’est Le Premier Pas Qui Coûte,” she dwells on this incident and her lies about regaining her faith to please the worried nuns and priests of the convent school. In this light, the very title of her memoirs sounds ironic.

Despite McCarthy’s lapsed Catholicism, it is not far-fetched to consider her an American-Catholic writer. Stacey Lee Donohue places McCarthy among J. Farrell,

F.S. Fitzgerald, Eugene O'Neill and Flannery O'Connor in her essay "Reluctant Radical":

A particularly Irish brand of Catholicism hangs like a shroud. The humour is often dark, cruel, biting, and self-deprecating. There is usually a conflict between the flesh and the intellect. (...) Like Flannery O'Connor, McCarthy does not directly write about Catholics or the Church, but in her strong sense of morality, of punishment, of self-criticism, McCarthy's sensibilities are clearly Catholic-Irish.<sup>1</sup>

McCarthy's trademark, the "cold eye" fits the description of the dark sort of Irish-Catholic humour well (William Butler Yeats, from whose tombstone the "cold eye" stems, was, after all, Irish-Catholic himself). Self-criticism is also strongly present in McCarthy's oeuvre, especially in her autobiographical writing.

The concept of "Catholic guilt" and shame differs from the idea of "Jewish guilt" as part of McCarthy's (rejected) identity, which was discussed in the previous chapter. Behind Catholic self-criticism there is the idea of a close, "personal" relationship with God who will forgive any sin if the sinner is honest enough during his/her confession (shame and guilt evolve from failure or unwillingness of the sinner to do so). In Judaism, on the other hand, God is a rather abstract figure, and the concept of guilt is based on the collective responsibility for the entire Jewish people, and the latent fear that no matter how good a person is, something bad will happen to him/her nonetheless. The expression of Jewish guilt or shame is, in spite of its different motives, close to the expression of Catholic sentiments as described by Donohue, for it too consists of a "strong sense of (...) punishment" and heightened self-criticism.<sup>2</sup> For McCarthy as a lapsed Catholic, the "personal" God is absent, but the consequences of the relationship with Him remain.

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<sup>1</sup> Stacy Lee Donohue, "Reluctant Radical," in: *Twenty-four Ways of Looking at Mary McCarthy*, 90.

<sup>2</sup> These character traits are strongly present in the protagonist of Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*, for example.

Lies, as opposed to the absolute truth that McCarthy is eager to find in her writings, are a central theme of *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*. McCarthy admits that in her childhood and youth her “whole life was a lie, (...) from the beginning to end”: (...) If I was wilder than my family knew, I was far tamer than my friends could imagine, and with them too, as with my family, I was constantly making up stories” (MCG 173).

Therefore, it is all the more interesting to observe how the adult Mary McCarthy structures the text of her memoirs – the chapters are followed by italicized commentary in which the author tries to determine what really took place in her carefully constructed stories, and what was invented “to make a good story” (MCG, 164). The sections in italics at once dismantle the reader’s belief in the absolute factuality of what s/he has just read, but also mark the narrator as a conscientious seeker of truth, immersed in a painstaking hunt for facts in her own memory and the memory of others.

*Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* was widely acclaimed by contemporary reviewers, and it is usually named as among the most important texts by McCarthy. The reception of *How I Grew*, however, was much less welcoming. One of the reasons for this reaction could lie in the fact that thirty years later McCarthy chose to cover exactly the same ground as in *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* – the ground that she had previously explored for thirteen years. Once again the reader learns of McCarthy’s tales of orphanhood, of her life with the terrible guardians, her schools, her grandparents, her loss of faith and her loss of virginity. The only addition to this familiar spectrum is McCarthy’s time at Vassar and the wedding to her first husband, the actor Harald Johnsrud, but it is only a small extension of the topics previously analysed. In some of the reviews, McCarthy was accused of trivia and repetition.

McCarthy's *Intellectual Memoirs* was written a very short time after the publication of *How I Grew*. It is the direct sequel to the latter – McCarthy puts the years 1936 to 1938 at the centre of her narrative, so there is a gap of only three years between the last pages of *How I Grew* and the first of *Intellectual Memoirs*. Here, McCarthy talks about her first years in New York, about Philip Rahv who opened the doors of *Partisan Review* for her, and Edmund Wilson, for whom she left Rahv against her better knowledge (“I loved [Philip]. I did, and still do, vividly, as I write these words. (...) I never loved Wilson. (...) No, I did not want to marry him,” states McCarthy).<sup>3</sup> A slender volume, published posthumously and with an air of incompleteness about it, *Intellectual Memoirs* received little attention from critics.

Elizabeth Hardwick, McCarthy's close friend, writes in her foreword to *Intellectual Memoirs*:

I am not certain how many volumes she planned, but I had the idea she meant to go right down the line, inspecting the troops you might say, noting the slouches and the good soldiers and, of course, inspecting herself living in her time.<sup>4</sup>

Hardwick's metaphor, which depicts McCarthy as the strict general of her own life, once again emphasises her cold eye, the importance of unembellished truth in her fiction and nonfiction. Central to the main questions that will be raised in this chapter is the notion that truth is not a fact established once and for all, but is rather subject to continuous scrutiny. Unfortunately, Mary McCarthy died with only the first part of her intellectual memoirs written, and “the troops” she managed to “inspect” turned out to consist of an unexpectedly limited number of soldiers.

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<sup>3</sup> McCarthy, *Intellectual Memoirs*, 99-101.

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Hardwick, foreword to *Intellectual Memoirs*, by Mary McCarthy, viii.

This continuous scrutiny of truth may give some clues to the history of publications and the recurring content of McCarthy's memoirs and the limited area of inspection in her autobiographical writing. The idea seems plausible that McCarthy regarded her early development as the determining factor of her identity formation, and believed that exploring it in scrupulous fashion was of greater importance than a general overview of her life, which she never got to write down. Catholicism and lies play an important role in all of her memoirs – McCarthy the writer constructs McCarthy the narrator as someone who repents the childhood habit of problem lying by confessing the truth. But her confessions are never satisfactory, because memory and the very nature of biography writing do not exist without fictional constructions – as McCarthy shows in the italicized sections of her *Memories*. Moreover, since McCarthy is a lapsed Catholic, and there is always a part of truth that she never tells, her confessions, strictly speaking, are *bad confessions*. Timothy Dow Adams goes so far as to call *Memories* an “anti-confession”:

The book is deliberately written as a parody of confession in all of confession's senses. McCarthy's first autobiography is an anti-confession that mocks both the Catholic sacrament of penance and the confessional form of autobiography that grew out of it. Her major metaphor of self is the act of lying, the inability to make a proper confession.<sup>5</sup>

Adams' words sound harsh, although he is correct to call McCarthy's memoirs *bad* or *sacrilegious confessions*, if one considers the definition of the confession by the

Catholic Church:

A confession is said to be sacrilegious when a penitent conceals in bad faith one or more mortal sins, or the kind of sins he has committed, or the number of times he has

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<sup>5</sup> Timothy Dow Adams, *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 88.

committed them, or if he knows himself to be without genuine sorrow for one or more mortal sins.<sup>6</sup>

In 1215, the Roman Catholic Church made annual confession obligatory for all the faithful, and the institution of confession greatly influenced all Western culture “among those who opposed the practice as well as those who accepted it.”<sup>7</sup> Peter Brooks states in his study *Troubling Confessions. Speaking Guilt in Law and Literature*:

It seems fair to say that the requirement of confession declared by Lateran IV constitutes a revolution in the development of Western society and its members of the highest magnitude. What we are today – the entire conception of the self, its relation to its interiority and to others – is largely tributary to the confessional requirement. (...) The confessional mode is by now deeply implicated in our everyday morality.<sup>8</sup>

Here, Brooks rephrases Michel Foucault, who considers the confession as “one of the main rituals we rely on for the production of truth.”<sup>9</sup> Peter Brooks concurs with Foucault’s view of the Western society as “a singularly confessing society.” Michel Foucault sees in the act of confession within Christianity a moral responsibility, but this moral responsibility is primarily directed towards oneself:

Each person has the duty to know who he is, that is, to try to know what is happening inside him, to acknowledge faults, to recognize temptations, to locate desires. Everyone is obliged to disclose these things, everyone must bear public or private witness against oneself.<sup>10</sup>

Despite their decisive tone, Foucault’s words include uncertainties and haziness common to the problems of the autobiographical discourse. “*To try to know what is*

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Edward McKeever, “The Necessity of Confession for the Sacrament of Penance,” quoted in Dow Adams, *Telling Lies*, 96.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Brooks, *Troubling Confessions: Speaking Guilt in Law and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 90.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 101-102.

<sup>9</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge*, transl. Robert Hurley, 1976 (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 58.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Brooks, *Troubling Confessions*, 87.

happening inside him” is quite vague, as is the inclusion of the private in the act of confession (“public *or* private witness” – my emphasis). The inherent resistance of the confessant against the act of confession, against the authority imposed by the often imaginary confessor is lightly sketched in the tiny paths of evasion that “to try to know” and “private witness” offer. This resistance, along with the “epistemological difficulty,” supports Edgar Allen Poe’s idea that the “little book *My Heart Laid Bare*” by any writer would not only be a tremendous success, but also – and most importantly – an impossible task.

Confession is inseparable from issues of truth and untruth, of sin and forgiveness, repentance and guilt and, quite obviously, from the Roman Catholic Church. Truth and untruth, repentance and guilt explain McCarthy’s recurrent motif of childhood lies she could not avoid, and her tone of (amused) apology – for the murkiness of memory, for the childhood “sins” like a sip of water before Communion. Nonetheless, *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, especially when standing alone, is preoccupied with the reconstruction of truth. Its failure to eventually do so is involuntary, since the narrator’s memory contains lapses and distortions, and the parents who might have been able to correct and elaborate on the remembered childhood incidences are long dead. The events described in the *Memories* reappear with additional information in *How I Grew*.

This second volume of memoirs differs strongly from the first one, in spite of its focus on the same period of McCarthy’s life. It adds much more detail to the sketches of *Memories*, assuming the tone of a sincere narrative of the “classic form of autobiography,” without the artful construction of italicized commentary and the distinct form of the short story that mark the episodes of *Memories*. The tone of the *Memories* is often amused and ironic – McCarthy was only in her early thirties when

writing some of the chapters later to be included in *Memories*, and a few of the events she remembers were then only a little more than a decade away. The voice of the seventy-five-year-old McCarthy of *How I Grew* is, although never losing the typical McCarthyan dryness, much more sombre and, at times, sorrowful.

The main confession McCarthy makes in *How I Grew* is her ambivalent attitude towards Jews in the years of her youth that bordered on blatant anti-Semitism. Although this issue is briefly touched upon in *Memories*, McCarthy confesses only thirty years later of the persistence and gravity of her negative feelings towards a community that was part of her own family. Her detailed scrutinizing of her own possible anti-Semitism is another reason for the reserved critical reaction to *How I Grew* (this aspect of McCarthy's fiction has been discussed in my previous chapter and will be omitted here).

Prior to the stories of *Cast a Cold Eye* and *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, McCarthy gave a rather direct clue as to what sort of confessions awaited the reader in her autobiographical texts. The last chapter of her literary debut *The Company She Keeps*, "Ghostly Father, I Confess," centres on the psychoanalytical therapy sessions that Margaret Sargent, McCarthy's first literary heroine and alter ego, attends. The "ghostly father" of the story is nobody else but her psychotherapist, and Margaret's confessions are made not in a Catholic church, but on the psychotherapist's couch. Here, psychoanalysis functions as a substitute for religion –McCarthy, always extremely truthful to period details, speaks in this story with the psychoanalytical jargon intimately familiar to her first readers of the 1940s, due to the immense popularity of psychoanalysis in general and Freud's theories in particular in the United States of America at that time.

“Ghostly Father, I Confess” does not belong to the texts of Mary McCarthy that are discussed in terms of autobiography. But the short story is made up of almost the same elements that later appear in *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, and all of the chapters of *The Company* show distinct autobiographical traits, and can be seen as displaced autobiography.

The element of truth (or facts) seems to have a different weight when it comes to fiction and autobiography. Paul John Eakin notes this in the chapter on McCarthy from his study *Fictions in Autobiography*:

We readily accept the presence of autobiographical elements in fiction, and any reader with an interest in the life of an author takes pleasure in identifying them. (...) The presence of fiction in autobiography, on the other hand, tends to make us uneasy, for we instinctively feel that autobiography is – or ought to be – precisely not-fiction. (...) In those cases when we are forced to recognize that an autobiography is only fiction, we may feel cheated of the promised encounter with biographical reality.<sup>11</sup>

Apart from the italicized commentary in McCarthy’s memoir, where she allows the reader to take a close look at her creative process, there is no evidence of any fictitiousness in her writing. On the contrary, her concreteness of details, “the inquisitive, entranced observing that had something in it of the Goncourt brothers,” is present in all of her texts, even the fictional ones.<sup>12</sup>

In this chapter, I am interested in exploring McCarthy’s impulse towards confession and concealment, her constant revision and rewriting of the same period of time, her looking for something that was lost with her parents’ deaths – the “solidity of truth,” possibly. Becoming an orphan shaped Mary’s sense of identity – the fragility and freakishness that were the consequences of orphanhood are at once fought against and strengthened by her autobiographical texts. The “self-parenting”

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<sup>11</sup> Paul John Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985), 9-10.

<sup>12</sup> Hardwick, foreword to *Intellectual Memoirs*, xiv.

that these texts could provide is counterbalanced by McCarthy's choice to stay in the position of an outsider, with critical vision gained by being slightly outside the social group.

I will start with a short review of the larger essays by Paul John Eakin and Timothy Dow Adams on McCarthy's autobiographical writing. Hardly any other publication by Mary McCarthy (apart from her bestselling *The Group*) has drawn as much critical attention to itself as her volumes of autobiography, especially her *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*. Confessional writing seems to be at the root of this interest, and I agree with Peter Brooks who states that "confession has become in Western culture a crucial form of self-examination," and the "vehicle of the most authentic truth."<sup>13</sup> The concept of autobiographical truth as opposed to historical truth is illustrated in the details from McCarthy's short story "A Tin Butterfly" (in *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*.) Since the critical texts dealing with McCarthy's *Memories* were all written few years before the emergence of trauma theory, I will mention new possible nuances to the problems posed in these essays, as suggested by Cathy Caruth's work.

Then I will consider the issues of confession and outsiderism, found in such stories by McCarthy as "Ghostly Father, I Confess" (from *The Company She Keeps*), "Ask Me No Questions" (from *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*), "C.Y.E" (from *Cast a Cold Eye*), and "Names" (from *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*). In these stories, McCarthy's feeling that "there was something strange, abnormal in the way [she] was growing up," is simultaneously rejected and cultivated by means of thwarted confessions.

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<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Jo Gill, introduction to *Modern Confessional Writing: New Critical Essays*, ed. Jo Gill (London/New York: Routledge, 2006), 6.

In the last part of the chapter, I will focus on the resistance to confess in autobiography and show how it resembles the resistance in psychoanalysis (which took confession's place in an increasingly secular age). "Ghostly Father, I Confess" demonstrates Margaret Sargent's consciously strong resistance against her psychoanalyst, and mocks the popularity and seriousness of the psychoanalytical practice. McCarthy's rejection of psychoanalysis seems interesting in the light of the latter as a distinctly Jewish science (in the first half of the twentieth century in the United States), and McCarthy's own troubled relationship with (her own, hidden) Jewishness. Furthermore, the narrative truth of psychoanalysis appears to be close to the variations of autobiographical truth in memoirs. The traps and failures of memory and the construction of fictional elements to support a "good story" are found both in autobiographical writing and psychoanalytical practise. In spite of McCarthy's aversion to psychoanalysis, she and Sigmund Freud were using the same techniques, hinted at in "Ghostly Father."

### **1. *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood: Critical Interest and Signs of Trauma***

Paul John Eakin devotes the entire first chapter of his *Fictions in Autobiography* to the analysis of McCarthy's *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*. He sees McCarthy's recurrent topics in her autobiographical stories as "a series of deepening returns to the past," which accords with his view of autobiography in general, where truth "is not a fixed, but an evolving content of self-discovery and self-creation."<sup>14</sup> At first glance this may stand in contrast to McCarthy's own belief in "the solidity of truth." "I believe there is a truth, and that it's knowable," she said in a 1960s interview.<sup>15</sup> This deep interest in what is true in oneself and others was called an "obsession" by Mary

<sup>14</sup> Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography*, 3-37.

<sup>15</sup> Mary McCarthy in an interview with Elizabeth Niebuhr, quoted in Kiernan, *Seeing Mary Plain*, 497.

Ann Caws in her essay “A Single Truth, but Tell it Sharp.”<sup>16</sup> It permeates McCarthy’s entire work and not just her autobiographical writing and is partly responsible for her style with its detached irony and concreteness of details, as well as her ability to embarrass her readers (Dottie’s diaphragm in *The Group* and Margaret Sargent’s encounter with “The Man in the Brooks Brother’s Shirt” are two examples of McCarthy’s talent to make the reader squirm).<sup>17</sup> Her certainty that the single truth must be there, somewhere, may explain her tireless attempts to find it – hence the “deepening returns to the past.”

Paul John Eakin regards McCarthy’s story “A Tin Butterfly” from the *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* as “the most elaborately presented memory in her entire autobiography.”<sup>18</sup> “A Tin Butterfly” continues the story of her parents’ death and Mary’s and her brother’s instalment in that “jaundice-coloured house” under the care of Aunt Margaret and Uncle Myers (who many years later the old Mary found even amusing in “their capacity for being awful” (HIG 16)) begun in “Yonder Peasant, Who is He?” In “A Tin Butterfly,” McCarthy focuses on the incident of the loss of a toy which her despotic Uncle Myers gave to Mary’s youngest brother Sheridan, Uncle Myers’ favourite. The cheap tin butterfly, found in the box of Cracker Jacks, excited the children because it was the only personal toy received in a long time, and Sheridan was much envied. When the butterfly suddenly disappeared, it was Mary who was accused of stealing it, and when the toy was found, pinned on her place at the dinner table, she was severely beaten by both her aunt and her uncle. The beatings could not make Mary confess a sin she was not guilty of, and she remembers returning to her

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<sup>16</sup> Mary Ann Caws, “A Single Truth, but Tell It Sharp,” in: *Twenty-Four Ways of Looking at Mary McCarthy*, 137.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>18</sup> Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography*, 13.

bedroom “with a crazy sense of inner victory, like a saint’s” (MCG 18). The story closes with Preston’s confession that “he had seen Uncle Myers steal into the dining room from the den and lift the tablecloth, with the tin butterfly in his hand” (MCG 89).

This ending, so fitting, logical and elegant, is utterly dismantled in the italicized section that follows the story. There, McCarthy admits that the idea of Uncle Myers’ putting the butterfly at her place might have been suggested to her by her drama teacher at college, when Mary started to write a play (which she never finished) about the episode. (“I’ll bet your uncle did it!” her teacher might have said, but McCarthy cannot be certain even of that. “Was that what she said?” she wonders.) Furthermore, Mary’s brother Preston does not remember having seen Uncle Myers with the butterfly, nor can her other brother Kevin recall this denouement (MCG 82-83). And yet she concludes: “It may have been Uncle Myers after all. Even if no one saw him, he remains a suspect: he had motive and opportunity” (ibid.). Although McCarthy fails to produce any evidence for Myers’ deed, and, in fact, everything else speaks for the fictionalised ending, it still cannot be said that this ending is untrue.

Eakin regards McCarthy’s italics not as an opposition to the text in roman, but rather as its continuation, the distinction between the two found “between different phases of a single, autobiographical mode of discourse,” and perceives the text thus created “as an instrument to negotiate – and renegotiate – the terms of an individual’s psychological reality.”<sup>19</sup> Thus the texts in roman and in italics do not exclude each other in spite of their differing content, and cannot be divided into “truth” and “lies.” The different text versions present variations of possible past events, which should be

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<sup>19</sup> Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography*, 16, 36.

viewed together, as a whole. The diptych they build offers a more accurate picture of the truth than any part of the text by itself.

The writing process which McCarthy reconstructs in her italicized commentary, and her subsequent “mea culpa,” make for Eakin the most lucid image of autobiographical truth as an “evolving content” with “what we call fact and fiction being rather slippery variables in an intricate process of self-discovery.”<sup>20</sup> Here Eakin juxtaposes two concepts of truth – historical truth, with its clear distinction between fact and fiction (fact being true and fiction, necessarily, untrue), and autobiographical truth, in which the two categories of fact and fiction lose their distinctive meaning and quality. McCarthy admits in her italicized commentary to the *Memories*: “I arranged actual events as to make a ‘good story’ out of them. It is hard to overcome this temptation if you are in the habit of writing fiction; one does it automatically.”

“To make a good story” can also mean to make a better story, a more truthful story, even when some elements of it cannot be found in the historical record, as the ending of “A Tin Butterfly” shows. This kind of emerging truth can be found in discussions of postmodernist revisionist fiction. Brian McHale argues that there “history and fiction exchange places, history becoming fictional, and fiction becoming ‘the true story’.”<sup>21</sup> Peter Brooks, mentioning an episode from the *Confessions* by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, sees his text not as a “direct, simple, straightforward” act, but as “a discourse, whose relation to the truth takes the shape of the tangent since it involves fantasies and fictions that are both gratuitous (...) and predetermined (...) and are in some sense (according to the dictate of desire) truer than what we might

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Tracy Brain, “Dangerous Confessions: The Problem of Reading Sylvia Plath Biographically,” in: *Modern Confessional Writing*, 22.

normally consider the truth.”<sup>22</sup> Also, the concept of autobiographical truth is close to the narrative truth widely practised in psychoanalysis, which will be discussed in more detail later.

Timothy Dow Adams also discusses McCarthy’s *Memories of Catholic Girlhood* and *How I Grew* in the chapter “I Do Believe Her, Though I know She Lies,” of his *Telling Lies in American Autobiography*. It is evident from Adams’ choice of title for his book that the point he is trying to make is the direct opposite to Eakin’s idea of the autobiographical truth which includes both fact and fiction. On the contrary, Adams believes that untruthfulness in autobiography is deliberate: “Lying in autobiography is not just something that happens inevitably; rather, it is a highly strategic decision, especially on the part of literary autobiographers.” He claims that McCarthy uses her own “less than precise distinction between truth and what she calls half-truths to undercut (...) the confessional mode historically central to autobiography.”<sup>23</sup>

Adams brings up an important aspect of autobiographical writing – the “confessional mode” that in the case of *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* carries to some extent the original meaning of the religious confession, introduced and made obligatory by the Roman Catholic Church in 1215, where lying is a serious sin. But although McCarthy’s own childhood Catholicism, her frequent lies and the eventual loss of her faith are central topics of *Memories*, Adams’ general accusation of the deliberate lying in autobiographical writing is not quite justified. In the foreword to *Memories*, “To the Reader,” the first of the italicized sections of the text, McCarthy describes a common quirk of memory: “Where recollection is hazy (...) I remember *the substance* of an event, but not the details” (MCG 4). Furthermore, she presents many of her childhood memories as simultaneously true and untrue accounts –

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<sup>22</sup> Brooks, *Troubling Confessions*, 51.

<sup>23</sup> Dow Adams, introduction to *Telling Lies*, x.

remembering the time she spent with her father, she says: “I remember we heard a nightingale together, on the boulevard, near the Sacred Heart convent. But there are no nightingales in North America” (MCG 11).

Albert E. Stone, discussing the popularity of the autobiographical and confessional genre in American literature, and regarding McCarthy’s *Memories* along with Vladimir Nabokov’s *Speak, Memory*, as the ’50s forerunners for the peak of confessional writing of the 1960s, views her inaccuracies with a more benevolent eye:

McCarthy discussed family stories which upon closer inspection prove inaccurate or false. Autobiographical truth frequently includes false statements believed in by the actor self and others, which, if not subsequently dispelled, may still be believed by the author.<sup>24</sup>

The author McCarthy cannot believe in the presence of nightingales in North America, but her five-year-old actor self has no doubt about them, and prevents the adult McCarthy from dismissing the memory as false.

Stone’s view is based on Eakin’s findings, since he quotes extensively from him in his essay, but so does Adams in his *Lies*, yet his point remains contrary to Eakin’s concept. McCarthy’s different versions of the same events, which are “deepening returns to the past” for Eakin, are a demonstration of the “ease with which McCarthy slides between autobiographical fiction and fictionalised autobiography,” as well as “layers of misstatement, correction and further correction, the multitude of false episodes left as originally printed” for Adams.<sup>25</sup> Adams seems to accept only

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<sup>24</sup> Albert E. Stone, “Modern American Autobiography: Texts and Transactions,” in: *American Autobiography: Retrospect and Prospect*, ed. Paul John Eakin (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 107.

<sup>25</sup> Dow Adams, *Telling Lies*, 92, 100.

historical truth as the real truth, and watches with dismay how McCarthy “stuffs her account with historical facts” that turn out to be either unverifiable or invented.<sup>26</sup>

Unlike Paul John Eakin, who thinks of the autobiographer as somebody whose truthfulness and identity is steadily evolving throughout their writing in the constant search for self-knowledge, Timothy Dow Adams perceives McCarthy’s autobiographical texts as conscious attempts to keep separate selves, “a constant effort to create separate identities,” and to alternately present them to the reader.<sup>27</sup> Eakin also claims that “truth and identity in autobiography are plural.”<sup>28</sup> Yet he imagines a flowing series of identities, one evolving from its predecessor, like drawings in a book that if leafed through very quickly, together show a figure in movement. Adams’ view of separate identities, on the other hand, involves the idea of conflict and fragmentation. McCarthy herself admits in the introduction to the *Memories* that her orphanhood broke “the chain of recollection – the collective memory of a family” (MCG 5). No parents could tell her and her brothers whether their childhood recollections were right or imagined, or reconcile the “stubborn memory to the stubborn facts on record” (MCG 5). In McCarthy’s case no one was left to explain what sort of bird resembling a nightingale she listened to with her father, or why her father appeared with an armful of red roses and her mother exclaimed “Oh, Roy?” Was it because her father was a periodical drunk, as an uncle of McCarthy’s claimed? Was it because the family was so often in debt that sometimes there was no food for dinner, but Roy chose to spend money on roses? McCarthy is left with conflicting versions of the events of which none is satisfactory. The sense of blanks in her own past, present from early childhood on, led critics to believe that Mary McCarthy suffered from a “fragile sense of identity.”

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>28</sup> Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography*, 36.

Janis Greve claims in her essay “Orphanhood and Photo-Portraiture in Mary McCarthy’s *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*” that the autobiographical texts by McCarthy reveal “a persistent fear of self-obliteration.”<sup>29</sup> The early loss of her parents equals “a tragic theft of epistemological truth,” which McCarthy tries to counterbalance by her autobiographical writing.<sup>30</sup> But her memory lacks foundation, for no one can offer her “the correct version of history” – the parents as “fact-bearers” are dead.<sup>31</sup> However, Greve finds in McCarthy’s “aftertexts,” as she calls the italicized sections of the *Memories*, the replacement of the missing parents, achieved by McCarthy’s “referring *back* to the preceding written memory”:

In that backward looking glance, the linguistic memory becomes infused with authority – Mary gets to quote *herself* – and fills the gap of the missing parents. The memoir texts become both the primal Ur-text, and her text, to which McCarthy can always refer in an authorial gesture that forges an epistemological base, “secures” memory, and supplies self-parenting.<sup>32</sup>

This sense of authority is a typical human reaction – Richard Wollheim notes this in his essay “The Mind and The Mind’s Image of Itself”:

It has (...) been held to be a distinguishing feature of our reports of mental states that, when made autobiographically, or, more precisely, when made in the first person singular present tense, they are incorrigible or not subject to error.<sup>33</sup>

Greve is not interested in the discrimination between correctness and error in *Memories*, but looks at the entire text as a means of identity-creation for its author. Greve’s view resembles that of Paul John Eakin, who finds in the making of the

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<sup>29</sup> Janis Greve, “Orphanhood and Photo-Portraiture in Mary McCarthy’s *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*,” in: *American Women’s Autobiography: Fea(s)ts of Memory*, ed. Margo Culley (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 168.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>33</sup> Richard Wollheim, “The Mind and the Mind’s Image of Itself,” in: *On Art and the Mind: Essays and Lectures* (London: Allen Lane, 1973), 32.

autobiographical text “the answer to the search for self-knowledge.”<sup>34</sup> Yet, unfortunately, this possible answer does not resolve all questions. Greve compares McCarthy’s italics to a “critical frame” which she places around the preceding text, thus sealing it off from the inquiries of others.<sup>35</sup> Despite the powerful position that the self-referral gives to McCarthy, the “critical encapsulation” as a consequence does not protect her from, but rather enforces a constant sense of unsteadiness, of quicksand brought on by the unsolvable mysteries of McCarthy’s past. Therefore the question whether the replacement of Mary’s parents by her autobiographical texts can be at all successful remains open.

The “fear of self-obliteration” is not appeased by McCarthy’s making the self into her own parent, as Greve’s interpretation suggests, for the “critical frame” itself is made up of numerous expressions of uncertainty and the constant inability to present the final and unmistakable proof of the events described. In “A Tin Butterfly” it is remarkable that McCarthy chooses not to end the section in italics on the note that even if no witness could be found for Uncle Myers’ deed, his evil nature and motive should suffice for the assumption that it was he who took the butterfly, and placed it on Mary’s place. Instead, McCarthy goes on to note that Myers disappeared even from family photographs, “as if Uncle Myers himself had contrived to filch away the proof that he had existed corporeally” (MCG 85). There is an abundance of similar uncertainties even in the smallest details of McCarthy’s memories.

In “Ask Me No Questions,” the last chapter of the *Memories* and the only one without italics to follow, McCarthy mentions the disappearance of the little bulge in the carpet in Augusta Preston’s house – it hid a bell for the maid, and Mary and her brothers loved to play under the table and to press it when they came for a visit (at

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<sup>34</sup> Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography*, 27.

<sup>35</sup> Greve, “Orphanhood and Photo-Portraiture,” 183.

that time they were still living in Seattle with their parents). One time they could not find it, and McCarthy recalls:

I remember the strange, scary feeling this gave me, as though I had been dreaming or making up a story and there had never been any bulge or bell in the first place. (...) The mystery of its disappearance used to plague me, long after we had left Seattle, like some maddening puzzle. I would lie awake in my new bed, thinking about the bell and wishing I could be given another chance to look for it. (MCG 200)

She indeed did look for it when she returned to that house five years later, and had “a great joy, a vindication” of finding the bulge just in its right place. Timothy Dow Adams recalls this episode in his study of McCarthy’s autobiographical writing, and puts it in the line of other occurrences of bulges and fabrics and weaving patterns in her autobiographical prose – the bumps on the grandmother’s gloved hands made by rings, which “parallel” the bulge in the carpet, the other grandmother’s stories that “embroidered the bare tapestry” of the children’s lives, and even the mysterious fairy tale which Mary’s father was reading on the train to Minneapolis, the one about a little sister who had to knit shirts for her seven brothers turned into ravens.<sup>36</sup> In *How I Grew*, the death of McCarthy’s first lover is compared to a “little rip or tear in the fabric of [her] life” (HIG 86). “No matter how carefully [McCarthy] attempts to weave the facts, her fairy tale past always remains unravelled,” concludes Adams.<sup>37</sup> McCarthy perceives the rips and tears in the fabric of her life and the unravelling of memory as painful and worrying – as with the bulge in her grandmother’s carpet, her wish to find this unfinished fairy tale persuades her for years, for a lifetime really:

I would have given my immortal soul to know what happened then, but in all the books of fairy tales that have come my way since, I have not been able to find the

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<sup>36</sup> Dow Adams, *Telling Lies*, 109-111.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

story – only its first and second cousins, like “The Seven Ravens” and “The Six Swans.” (HIG 4)

But unlike her maternal grandmother’s house, the book vanished with the father who read from it. In fact, these episodes parallel the very act of McCarthy’s autobiographical writing. Candace Lang describes autobiography as a process of “reading one’s own past as one would a book.”<sup>38</sup> In McCarthy’s past some pages are torn out, or there is even a volume missing. The “strange, scary feeling” that results from the inexplicable loss of something which, in memory, was undoubtedly there, but which, upon closer inspection, eludes any proof of its existence, is a specific leitmotif of McCarthy’s memoirs. The repetitiveness of McCarthy’s autobiographical texts resembles the attempt to get “another chance to look for” the things lost, as little Mary wished to get another chance to look for the vanished bulge in the carpet.

Mary McCarthy’s motivation for what seems to be an endless process of revisions and returns cannot be fully solved. Sabrina Fuchs Abrams suggests in her *Mary McCarthy: Gender, Politics, and the Postwar Intellectual* that McCarthy used repetition for her own reassurance:

In *How I Grew*, McCarthy corrects herself as she goes along – “no, I mean this...,” “or was it that...” – creating a rambling or digressive effect. She also seeks to verify earlier stories by retelling them, as if mere repetition adds verification.<sup>39</sup>

Yet Fuchs Abrams’ explanation is not satisfactory, for McCarthy’s retelling is anything but “mere repetition” – in her autobiographies, McCarthy never tells quite the same story, her returns are always revisions with difference.

Serge Leclaire, in his essay “Unconscious Inscription: Another Memory,” describes an old photograph of the boy Cyril in his garden – how one can see the

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<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Jo Gill, “‘Your Story. My Story’: Confessional Writing and the Case of *Birthday Letters*,” in: *Modern Confessional Writing*, 73.

<sup>39</sup> Fuchs Abrams, *Mary McCarthy*, 15.

boy's hair and bright eyes, and a ball. But many years ago, when the photograph was taken, there was also the boy's father who is not in the photograph, the buzzing of insects and the bloom of brilliant flowers, which turned out as pale patches on the photograph. Yet Leclaire believes that in Cyril's memory, behind the conscious recollection, all these invisible details are there still, and can be retraced through the practice of psychoanalysis:

The practice of psychoanalysis forces us to recognize that *all* the recollections registered in what we commonly call memory always create, like Cyril's fragmentary representation, a limit or a screen, beyond which unfolds the scene of *another memory*. (...) We should stress that mnemonic inscription is only very selectively related to the actual event, that the traces are only fragmentary reflections of the experience. What has been recorded (...) constitutes a kind of abstract, set forth in a few selected strokes.<sup>40</sup>

While psychoanalysis and memory will be discussed in part 4 of this chapter in the context of McCarthy's short story "Ghostly Father, I Confess," this passage might give another clue to the question of McCarthy's repeated autobiographies. Did McCarthy try to add more strokes to her texts as "abstracts" with each of her returns? Was her technique an attempt to get behind the screen of the recorded memories through the constantly renewed process of writing?

Paul John Eakin, Timothy Dow Adams, Albert E. Stone, and Janis Greve wrote their analyses of McCarthy's *Memories* around 1990, concentrating on the aspects of telling the truth and telling lies, attempting to define the difference between historical truth and autobiographical truth, and its impact in the analysed texts. If written only few years later, their studies could have included additional nuances. The emergence of trauma theory in the early '90s might have suggested new ways of approaching

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<sup>40</sup> Serge Leclaire, "Unconscious Inscriptions: Another Memory," in: *Psychoanalysis, Creativity and Literature: A French-American Inquiry*, ed. Alan Roland (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 76.

central problems of McCarthy's autobiographies. Trauma theory, addressing issues of the past, of suffering and the self, and the representation of all of the above in the critical-theoretical way, gained influence and popularity after the publication of Cathy Caruth's edited collection *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) and her monograph *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996). In *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth states her indebtedness to Shoshana Felman's and Dori Laub's *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (1992).<sup>41</sup> In this text, Felman and Laub stress how trauma changes the modes of the relationship between history and narrative, a problem that Caruth takes up by asking questions about the "structure of experience."

Trauma, meaning "wound" in Greek, is defined by Caruth as "the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of reality or truth that is not otherwise available."<sup>42</sup> The wound of the trauma is an old wound, its story has "a delayed appearance and a belated address" – Caruth builds her definition of trauma on Sigmund Freud's findings in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, where he explains the mechanism of traumatic experience:

After severe shock of a mechanical nature, railway collision or other accident in which danger to life is involved, a condition may arise which has long been recognised and to which the name "traumatic neurosis" is attached. (...) In the traumatic neuroses there are two outstanding features which might serve as clues for further reflection: first that the chief causal factor might lie in the element of surprise, in the fright; and secondly, that an injury or wound sustained at the same time generally tended to prevent the appearance of neuroses.<sup>43</sup>

The wound that the sufferer of the "severe shock" bears from the accident is not of a physical nature – it affects the mind and not the body and, most importantly, it makes

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<sup>41</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), ix.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>43</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, transl. C.J.M. Hubback (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1924), 8-9.

itself known much later than the initial shock. The bad dreams that haunt the patient after the event, continually “take the patient back to the situation of his disaster, from which he awakens in renewed terror.”<sup>44</sup>

Caruth regards the story of trauma as “a narrative of a belated experience; an endless impact on a life.”<sup>45</sup> Her approach to texts that deal with the “experience of crisis” is informed by deconstruction and poststructuralism, as well as clinical work with survivors of traumatic events, many of whom were diagnosed with the Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, PTSD (a relatively new term, preceded by “railway spine” of the nineteenth and “shell shock” of the early twentieth century). The problem of referentiality is central for trauma theory, which derived in part from Paul de Man’s theory of signification.<sup>46</sup> The relation between reality and narrative, or between actuality and representation is marked, as trauma theory suggests, by an “absence of traces,” making trauma “an event without a witness.”<sup>47</sup> If something is recovered from trauma, it is not the memory of the event itself, but referentiality.<sup>48</sup> Stef Craps sums up the approach to texts suggested by trauma theory in the following:

According to Caruth, conjoining a psychoanalytic view of trauma with a deconstructive vigilance regarding the indeterminacies of representation in the analysis of texts that bear witness to traumatic histories can grant us a paradoxical mode of access to extreme events and experiences that defy understanding and representation. In this account, textual “undecidability” or “unreadability” comes to reflect the inaccessibility of trauma.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>45</sup> Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 6.

<sup>46</sup> Susannah Radstone, “Trauma Theory: Contexts, Politics, Ethics,” *Paragraph* 30.1 (2007): 10-12.

<sup>47</sup> Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 75.

<sup>48</sup> Radstone, “Trauma Theory,” 12.

<sup>49</sup> Stef Craps, “Beyond Eurocentrism: Trauma Theory in the Global Age,” in: *The Future of Trauma Theory*, eds. Gert Buelens, Sam Durrant, Robert Eaglestone (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 45.

The incomprehensibility of trauma, of the oscillation between the crisis of one's own death and one's own survival, lies, for Caruth, in the "absolute inability to know it," for what constitutes trauma is not so much the "reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known."<sup>50</sup>

McCarthy's autobiographies evolve around the early and unexpected death of her parents, as well as her subsequent survival in precarious circumstances. Both events are designated as traumatic. The remarkable repetition of McCarthy's returns to her childhood and youth, that "takes [her] back to the situation of [her] disaster," may be regarded as an illustration of Freud's definition of the "traumatic neurosis."<sup>51</sup> Trauma, as Ariela Freedman defines it, is the "paradigm for loss, an inassimilable and sudden loss which resists both reconciliation and interpretation."<sup>52</sup> Traumatic memories are, according to neuroscience, encoded in the brain "in a different way than ordinary memory."<sup>53</sup> Fragmentation, dissociation, and haunting repetition of the memory of traumatic experience that can present itself in nonverbal ways (such as images, smells, and bodily impressions) are the consequences of the special place that trauma can take in the sufferer's mind. Dominick LaCapra calls this state of things "fidelity to trauma," altering Freud's term "fixation," and points out that trauma can become "valorized or intensely cathected basis of identity."<sup>54</sup> McCarthy's autobiographical texts may seem as canonical examples of the story of trauma, of the wound that cries out long after the event had happened. McCarthy herself states that had it not been for the death of her parents, she herself would be "rather stout," "married to an Irish lawyer, and playing golf and bridge" (MCG 16), stressing the impact of orphanhood

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<sup>50</sup> Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 6.

<sup>51</sup> Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 9.

<sup>52</sup> Ariela Freedman, *Death, Men, and Modernism: Trauma and Narrative in British Fiction from Hardy to Woolf* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), 5.

<sup>53</sup> Radstone, "Trauma Theory," 13.

<sup>54</sup> Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 23.

on the forming of her identity – “self-identity may always come at the death of the other,” remarks Ariela Freedman in her monograph on death and trauma.<sup>55</sup> The form of *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, with its separate italicised sections, shows “recognized tropes of texts that deal with trauma,” considering its “doubleness” and “the use of meta-text.”<sup>56</sup> The fragmentation of memory is repeated in the fragmented text.

McCarthy’s narrative is haunted by the blanks and absences that she herself perceives as rips in the fabric of her existence. McCarthy’s relationship with her grandmother, as depicted in “Ask Me No Questions,” is bound to show signs of frustration and failure, since it is permeated with the absence of the dead mother for whom the grandmother is used as a stand in, a substitute.<sup>57</sup> The incomprehensibility of death is apparent in the story’s title. Almost all communication between Mary and Augusta is marked by closed doors and long absences, and suggests a constant re-enactment of the mother’s leaving, of her departure from life. The string of deaths of McCarthy’s first lovers, her first husband, and eventually, that of her grandfather – the one death that really matters – as depicted in *How I Grew*, not only leaves more rips in the fabric of McCarthy’s life, which are “not easily rewoven” (HIG 86), but can be viewed as a series of the literal returns to the event that constitutes her initial trauma, namely the loss of her parents.

Mary’s uncertainties and impossibilities in the recovered bits and pieces of the memories from her childhood – as in the example with the non-existent nightingales

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<sup>55</sup> Freedman, *Death, Men, Modernism*, 23.

<sup>56</sup> Robert Eaglestone, “Knowledge, ‘Afterwardness,’ and the Future of Trauma Theory,” in: *The Future of Trauma Theory*, 15.

<sup>57</sup> Discussed in more detail in the section “Sights and Spectacles” in this chapter.

in North America – remind one of Dori Laub’s episode from the Holocaust hearings, described in *Testimony*:

A woman (...) was relating her memories as an eyewitness of the Auschwitz uprising (...). “All of the sudden,” she said, “we saw four chimneys going up in flames, exploding. The flames shot into the sky, people were running. It was unbelievable.” (...) The testimony was not accurate, historians claimed. The number of chimneys was misrepresented. Historically, only one chimney was blown up, not all four. Since the memory of the testifying woman turned out to be, in this way, fallible, one could not accept – nor give credence to – her whole account of events. (...) A psychoanalyst who had been one of the interviewers of this woman profoundly disagreed. “The woman was testifying not to the number of chimneys blown up, but to something else, more radical, more crucial: the reality of an unimaginable occurrence. (...) She testified to the breakage of a framework. That was historical truth.”<sup>58</sup>

Laub admits that the disagreeing psychoanalyst was no one else but himself, and shows how narrative and actuality, representation and reality can actually speak of one truth, in spite of their apparent contradictions.<sup>59</sup> Unlike the Holocaust testimonies, which became emblematic for the traumatised Western humanity after World War II, McCarthy’s memories move within the small circle of her deeply private childhood tragedy, but they are crucial for her destiny in which we, her readers, cannot be uninterested. Her memories of the fairy tale time with her parents, challenged by the recollections of her adult relatives, may be as inaccurate as the number of chimneys from Laub’s example, yet the story they tell may still be true.<sup>60</sup> This, in fact, agrees with Paul John Eakin’s views of autobiographical truth. “Eakin (...) argues that ‘fictions’ – the stories that the individual constructs about his or her life and identity –

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<sup>58</sup> Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 59-60.

<sup>59</sup> Elaine Freedgood writes of the conflict between memory and historical truth: “Memory has a curious history in the discipline of history. In the professionalizing of history in the nineteenth century, memory was ejected from the practice of legitimate historiography as the kind of subjective stuff that one needed to avoid if one was going to get the past “right.” Ever since, memory and history tend to be opposed to one another: memory is an activity in which we all participate; history is the province of specialists.” Elaine Freedgood, “Some Thoughts on Trauma, Autobiography, and the Work of Collective Memory,” *Contemporary Psychoanalysis* 22.4 (2006): 652.

<sup>60</sup> “Uncle Harry’s derelict brother, Roy, is not the same person as my father. I simply do not recognize him.” (MCG 15).

are to be understood as the truth of that life or self,” states Laura Marcus in her extensive study on the theory of autobiography.<sup>61</sup>

Eakin, Dow Adams, Stone, and Greve are not the only ones who discuss McCarthy’s autobiographical texts, but even if they were alone, their focus on this subject would still be symptomatic of the attention to autobiographical writing in general, especially since the last half of the twentieth century. In McCarthy’s case it is all the more interesting, because the only popularity comparable to that of her autobiographical texts is the constant critical focus on her biography; as in the case of Sylvia Plath, the story of Mary McCarthy’s life seems to be a “force field, a nucleus of power that attracts everything, and prevents her (...) fiction from being read for [its] more important content.”<sup>62</sup> Her biography does not evoke a sense of utter tragedy, as do Sylvia Plath’s life story and writing – Mary’s tragedy of early orphanhood did not prevent McCarthy from developing into a diverse and mature writer, whose texts bristle with satire, and only very seldom show the traits of tragedy (as in *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, probably the only text by McCarthy without the typical distance created by irony). But in her autobiographical accounts McCarthy is obviously addressing something very important for autobiography in general, for these texts shaped her reputation as a writer – if it were not for them, she might not have had a literary afterlife at all. McCarthy’s constant searching for self-knowledge in her “deepening returns to the past” is, despite the elements of fictional construction which she readily admits, an illustration of the “more searching scrutiny of the inner life,” central to the genre of autobiography, as Lionel Trilling remarks:

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<sup>61</sup> Laura Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1994), 243.

<sup>62</sup> Tracy Brain, “Dangerous Confessions,” in: *Modern Confessional Writing*, 28.

[The] purpose [of autobiography is] to enforce upon the reader the conclusion that the writer cannot in any respect be false to any man, because he has been true to himself, as he was and is.<sup>63</sup>

The doubts that McCarthy expresses in her memoirs, her digressions and “rambling” only add credibility to her intention to fulfil Philippe Lejeune’s “autobiographical pact,” in which it is not necessary to commit to “some impossible historical exactitude but rather to the sincere effort to come to terms with and to understand his or her life.”<sup>64</sup>

In her famous essay “A Room of One’s Own,” Virginia Woolf calls the need to write autobiography an “impulse,” and implies that it is “a method of self-expression,” and not yet true art.<sup>65</sup> But this “impulse towards autobiography” can also be seen as the primary source of literary creativity. In this context, the proximity of autobiography to confession may be interesting, as the “urge to confess” may appear to the writer as the ultimate impulse to write:

The real mystery is that strange need. Why can’t we just hide it and shut up? Why do we have to blab? Why do human beings need to confess? Maybe, if you don’t have that secret confession, you don’t have a poem – don’t even have a story. Don’t have a writer.<sup>66</sup>

These are the words of Ted Hughes, one of the most important confessional poets, who wondered in this *Paris Review* interview why it is practically impossible for a writer to ignore this attraction towards confession in oneself. Hughes perceives confession not in moral terms, but exclusively in the terms of literature, regarding “that strange need” as the core of being a writer.

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<sup>63</sup> Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972), 23.

<sup>64</sup> Paul John Eakin, “Foreword,” in: Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, transl. Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), vii.

<sup>65</sup> “The impulse towards autobiography may be spent, women are beginning to use writing as an art, not as a method of self-expression.” Virginia Woolf, “A Room of One’s Own,” in: *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 7<sup>th</sup> Edition, Vol. 2, ed. M.H. Abrams (New York: London, 2000), 2195.

<sup>66</sup> Ted Hughes. “The Art of Poetry.” *The Paris Review* 134 (1995): n.pag., accessed June 23, 2014, <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1669/the-art-of-poetry-no-71-ted-hughes>.

Peter Brooks believes that the function of confession can also lie in its plea for love. The confessor expects forgiveness and acceptance from society, as a payment for his confession. On the other hand, refusing confession can be regarded as an act of subversion and sabotage in this context:

Confession of wrongdoing is considered fundamental to morality because it constitutes a verbal act of self-recognition as wrongdoer and hence provides the basis for rehabilitation. It is the precondition of the end of ostracism, renting into one's desired place in the human community. To refuse confession is to be obdurate, hard of heart, resistant to amendment. Refusal of a confession can be taken as a defiance of one's judges.<sup>67</sup>

Brooks' view of confession as a necessity for "the end of ostracism" and the opportunity to get "one's desired place in the human community" is all the more interesting, considering McCarthy's role of the outsider in society.

## **2. Sights and Spectacles**

McCarthy's childhood memoirs repeatedly focus on the strange position that she and her brothers acquired after the death of their parents. Orphanhood made the four children into outsiders, into ostracised creatures who often became spectacles of some sorts. There are recurrent details of the deteriorated looks of little Mary to be found in McCarthy's texts, as well as of the orphans' peculiar social position – visibly underfed and dressed in shabby clothes by their guardians, Mary and her brothers were still perceived by the neighbours as the grandchildren of very wealthy people, and, consequently, their miserable looks were thought to be an expression of the eccentric habits of the rich. To people who were unaware of this, the position of the poor orphan with rich relatives appeared as a lie. When Mary's brother Kevin ran away and was found and fed by a householder close to the orphan asylum that Kevin

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<sup>67</sup> Brooks, *Troubling Confessions*, 2.

was too shy to go into, the appearance of the luxury car Pierce-Arrow to get him “made the householder think Kevin a terrible fraud” (MCG 52).

McCarthy writes that becoming an orphan made the “elegant little girl,” with diamond rings and an “ermine neckpiece,” change into “a stringy, bowlegged child with glasses and braces on her teeth” (CSK 262-263). These quotations are taken not from the *Memories*, but from the short story “Ghostly Father, I Confess,” in McCarthy’s literary debut *The Company She Keeps*. In this short story Margaret Sargent tells her psychoanalyst about her orphaned childhood. Written almost a decade before the *Memories*, the story contains exactly the same details found at the beginning of “A Tin Butterfly”: “A merciful end had been put to a regimen of spoiling and coddling: (...) to diamond rings (imagine!), an ermine muff and neckpiece, furred hats and coats” (MCG 54). In “To the Reader” McCarthy points out the transformation that took place in the care of her guardians:

I had not been an especially pretty child, (...) but, between them, my guardians and my grandmother McCarthy turned me into such a scarecrow that I could not look at myself in the mirror without despair. The reader will see in the photographs that follow the transformation effected in me. It was not only the braces and the glasses but a general leanness and sallowness and lankness. (MCG 18)

McCarthy repeatedly focuses on the details of how the beloved little princess turned into the unwanted orphan, the little swan into the ugly duckling, how she became a strange nobody’s child, an outsider. At six, being the oldest of the four McCarthy children, Mary is the only one old enough “to remember” the lost parents, to acutely notice the change of the children’s lifestyles of the “spoiled” and loved children to the drabness that their guardians considered suitable for orphans. This memory of hers makes Mary special – because of the things she might remember better than her little brothers, she is allowed to stay longer than her brothers at her

grandparents' house. It is remarkable for the larger image of Mary McCarthy that even from this little group of four orphans, Mary still gets singled out and made into an outsider. She describes herself at that time as "a dangling, transitional creature, a frog becoming a tadpole, while my brothers, poor little polyps, were already well embedded in the structure of the new life" (MCG 38). The privilege is also a curse, for in her "roaming palely" around her "grandmother's living rooms," unsupervised, without anything to do, she regresses – it is the frog who turns into a tadpole, not vice versa.

The replacement of Mary's ermine muff and neckpiece, and the baby diamond rings by the ugly braces, glasses and an old beaver hat too big for her, is an outward sign of the significant change in status induced by orphanhood:

We became aware, even as we woke from our fevers, that everything, including ourselves, was different. We had shrunk, as it were, and faded, like the flannel pajamas we wore, which during these few weeks, had grown, doubtless from the disinfectant they were washed in, wretchedly thin and shabby. (MCG 36)

The four orphans become a little less human – in the beginning of *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, McCarthy depicts the scene of her three brothers and herself praying for their dead parents:

Our evening prayers were lengthened to include one of our parent's souls, and we were thought to make a pretty picture, all four of us in our pajamas with feet in them, kneeling in a neat line, our hands clasped before us, reciting the prayer for the dead. "Eternal rest grant unto them, oh Lord, and let the perpetual light shine upon them," our thin little voices cried, but this remembrancing, so pleasurable to our guardians, was only a chore to us (MCG 39).

The children are artificially arranged, and strange words are put into their mouths, just before shutting them "with the adhesive tape (...) to prevent mouth-breathing," (ibid.) Janis Greve remarks that the "McCarthy children discover themselves

frequently the centre of attention, but as freaks or curiosities, not particularly as human beings.”<sup>68</sup> More importantly, Greve notes that by writing the memoir, McCarthy gives the orphans their natural voice back instead of the words of the prayer enforced on them. In the context of Peter Brooks’ view of the confession as an act “of rehabilitation,” “the precondition to the end of ostracism,” the way back “to one’s desired place in the human community,” McCarthy’s memoirs, with their focus on the orphan’s position of the outsider, may appear as an attempt to end this ostracism and the diminished human value that is the consequence of orphanhood. However, the position of the outsider is not only enforced upon Mary or Margaret by outer circumstances, but also actively cultivated by her own self (or selves).

“I reject (...), I deny,” says Margaret Sargent to the memories of cruelty she had to endure as a child, the “whole pathos of the changeling, the orphan, the stepchild,” because it is “too apropos for acceptance” (CSK 263), too banal, too common. Margaret is loath to compare her biography to “this degenerated Victorian novel, where I am Jane Eyre or somebody in Dickens and Kipling” (ibid.). The kitsch image of the child Mary and her three brothers kneeling in their pyjamas “with feet in them,” belongs to the category that Margaret defies so energetically (in *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, the image of the Victorian novel comes up again – a compass, which Uncle Myers and Aunt Margaret used for navigation, being “at sea with four frightened little children”). Although McCarthy’s heroine rejects the image of the unhappy orphan, the repeated descriptions of the orphans’ Victorian misery – the horrible clothes, the dingy food, the beating with the razor-strap, the everyday mindless cruelty – suggest that this image is persistent and thus difficult to reject or deny. The simultaneous presentation and rejection are part of Margaret Sargent’s “bad

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<sup>68</sup> Greve, “Orphanhood and Photo-Portraiture” in: *American Women’s Autobiography*, 178.

confession” – Margaret’s inability to make a proper confession to her analyst disables any progress in her therapy and isolates her.

Mary McCarthy styles her own self as a freak on several occasions in her memoirs. In “Ask Me No Questions,” she creates a contradictory portrait of her grandmother, whom McCarthy herself seems to mirror several times. McCarthy’s presentation of her grandmother – a celebrated Seattle beauty – consists of distinctively freakish elements: the stress on “the striking oddity of her appearance” (MCG 217), the “peculiarly florid impression she made” (MCG 218), the grandmother’s dotted veils, her refusal to be photographed, her strange body as a “cult object around which [the] household revolved” (MCG 225), and above all, no reasonable explanation for the acute loneliness and isolation that was constantly radiating from her. Nonetheless McCarthy is careful to point out the things in which she grew to resemble her grandmother. The grandmother’s choosing apricots from a plate, a scene full of “mature sensuality” that frightened the young Mary and made her think of the *primal scene*, is balanced by McCarthy’s remark that as an adult she too is fond of apricots, and whenever she “chooses one from a plate,” she thinks of “her grandmother’s body – (...) a secret, like the flat brown seed of the apricot” (MCG 225). By constantly presenting her grandmother’s strangeness, McCarthy implies that she herself may have inherited this strangeness.

McCarthy’s imaginary picture of the afterlife includes her grandmother waiting for Mary in some sort of Limbo, “with folded arms and cold cream on her face.” Grandmother’s position at the top of the staircase makes her stand as if on a pedestal, as if indeed she were the figure of some sort of God, in front of whom one must pray for forgiveness and confess one’s sins. Yet Mary is unwilling to do so, and she herself seems to copy her grandmother’s preference for no questions:

(...) she used to wait in her pink quilted Japanese bathrobe or the green one with the dragons when I turned my key softly in the front door at two in the morning, with a lie, which I hoped not to need, trembling on my lips. (MCG 198)

Her grandmother's position on the top of the staircase, in the last chapter of the *Memories*, mirrors McCarthy's own standing on stairs as a little girl, shortly after her parents' death from influenza, described in the first chapter, "Yonder Peasant, Who Is He." As with her grandmother whom she imagines meeting in Limbo, this image is also permeated by death:

Those weeks (...) come back to me very obscurely, surrounded by blackness, like a mourning card: the dark well of the staircase, where I seem to have been endlessly loitering, waiting to see Mama when she would come home from the hospital, and then simply loitering with no purpose whatever. (MCG 38)

Not only death, but also lies are present in both of these images – the little Mary on the staircase has to come to terms with the lie that her parents are not dead, but gone "to get well in the hospital," whereas the grown Mary is herself willing to lie to her grandmother. Mary and her grandmother would be alike, almost interchangeable in their standing, were it not for the remaining difference in the question of power of the two. The child Mary who is lied to, and the grown Mary who lies herself, remain weak in both cases.

Paul John Eakin's interpretation of McCarthy's grandmother on top of the stairs casts her as an impenetrable idol, her cold cream as a "threatening mask" which hides her identity.<sup>69</sup> He finds that Mary is imitating her grandmother "through symbolic gestures," as though through them "she could become and hence possess what she seeks to know."<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography*, 50.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

What “Ask Me No Questions” proposes, however, with its juxtaposition of the grandmother’s story on Mary’s own history, is a more daring perspective on the mother-daughter axis in which the grandmother would function as a surrogate for Mary herself. She would be a Mary who consciously experienced the loss of Tess, a Mary who loved the mother and who was genuinely bereaved by her death, as opposed to the six-year-old girl for whom the event of loss was wrapped in a blackout of sickness and repression.<sup>71</sup>

Eakin sees the two women exchange roles in their relationship, which he calls “failed” because of their ultimate failure to communicate. One of the “symbolic gestures” of Mary’s imitation of her grandmother is her putting on her make-up, thus creating a mask of her own, or rather, an imitation of her grandmother’s mask. The grandmother’s identity remains a mystery that obviously cannot be uncovered by Mary by covering up her own face.

The most acute perception of her inner freakishness is found in McCarthy’s recollection of her days at boarding school. The short story “C.Y.E.,” from McCarthy’s second volume of fiction, *Cast a Cold Eye*, is partly repeated in the chapter “Names” of *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*. Two “popular girls” at Mary’s new school give her, the new pupil – pale and “ambitious,” wishing “to make friends with the most exciting and powerful girls” (CCE 202) – a nickname that she cannot decipher, “C.Y.E.” These three letters that can stand for anything cause Mary sleepless nights. But even before she hears the nickname, she suspects that “there was something about [her] that would inevitably appeal to these two strange girls” (CCE 206). Receiving the name, Mary feels as if some horrible secret about her was revealed to others, but which she could only guess at:

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 53.

My fault was nothing ordinary that you could do something about, like washing your ears. Plainly, it was something immanent and irremediable, a spiritual taint. And though I could not have told precisely what my wrongness consisted in, I felt its existence almost tangible during those nights, and that it had always been with me, even in the other school (...); I had always had it, a kind of miserable effluvium of the spirit that the ordinary sieves of report cards and weekly confessions had been powerless to catch. (CCE 208-209)

In this first version of the story, Mary feels this inner strangeness of hers, that subtly separates her from other girls, justified by the nickname. The discomfort that it causes her is not rooted in the evil intent of its inventors, but in some unknown and ugly truth, which remains concealed for Mary. In “Names,” her recollection of the effect of this nickname is different:

This name reduced all my pretensions and solidified my sense of *wrongness*. Just as I felt I was beginning to belong to the convent, it turned me into an outsider, since I was the only pupil who was not in the know. I liked the convent, but it did not like me, as people say of certain foods that disagree with them. (...) It was just that I did not fit into the convent pattern. (...) I was not bad; I did not consciously break the rules; and yet I could never, not even for a week, get a pink ribbon [for good behaviour]. It was the same case as with the hated name; the nuns, evidently, saw something about me that was invisible to me. (MCG 136)

Although the conclusion of the second quotation from “Names” is the same as the first one from “C.Y.E” – the others saw something in Mary that was invisible to her – there is a serious change in the tone of the telling. The agonising in “C.Y.E”, the frightened suspicion of something terrible deeply hidden inside her self, gives place to mature resignation in “Names.” In addition, there is a calm accusation of others, a distinct feeling of injustice – the *wrongness* is not something inherent in Mary, but in the behaviour of others, in the situation itself. But although one is tempted to believe that “Names” is a report of a mature, self-confident version of Mary who is now finally able to see the events in a different light – after all, there is more than a decade that passed between “C.Y.E.” and “Names” – further incidents prove that the troubling feeling of “something wrong” with herself never left McCarthy. In *How I*

*Grew*, her penultimate volume of memoirs, McCarthy remembers her performance at a school talent show – the comic monologue by a Canadian humourist she chose “brought the house down”:

If there was a prize, I won it. Then why does a clear recollection of that red-letter day, as if too painful, refuse to reach consciousness? I see several answers. First, they were laughing *at* me, rather than *with* me, or, as we used to say in boarding school, I was funny-peculiar, not funny-haha. (HIG 49)

She then ponders whether an act of plagiarism could have been responsible for her feelings of unease, or her “claque,” a group of supporters who she knew from her old school. Whatever the reason – McCarthy does not remember – the feeling of an inherent wrongness, even in an outwardly festive occasion, remains. As with the “hateful” name “C.Y.E.,” which, as her fellow pupils assured her, meant nothing evil but was rather a compliment (“clever young egg” is a version that McCarthy feels might be closest to the truth), this childhood memory stirs up old inexplicable feelings of guilt and shame. In constructing herself as a freakish element, a strange outsider, McCarthy tries to write this role off – literally, for the act of confessional autobiography writing should guarantee an end to ostracism, according to Brooks’ view. But by repeating and rewriting the same incidents McCarthy simultaneously suggests that she is indeed not telling all there is to tell, and thus reinforces her own feeling of strangeness and outsiderism by her own inability or unwillingness to find a clear solution to the mystery of her grandmother and of herself.

Paul John Eakin sees in McCarthy’s different versions of her past not only an artful construction, but also a psychological battle:

McCarthy’s practice of revisionist life history in “Names” reminds us that what is recalled is subject to the conscious shaping of the autobiographer. In both versions of the past autobiographical motivation remains elusive. ‘C.Y.E’ and ‘Names’ together

suggest that conflicting impulses of repression and confession govern McCarthy's autobiographical narrative.<sup>72</sup>

This duality between the urge to find self-knowledge and the wish to hide it is a common technique of autobiographical and confessional writing. Such texts often raise more questions than they can answer and present ways for the author of avoiding knowledge about him/herself, despite the primary intention of finding this knowledge.

Modern autobiography "is a form of meta-confession, motivated not simply by the need to tell all but by the desire to understand, confess and defend its own dynamics."<sup>73</sup> The italicised sections of *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* and McCarthy's variations of the same story as in the example of "Names" and "C.Y.E" (indeed, her practise of rewriting autobiography for decades) contain most of the problems which autobiographical texts harbour, unable or uninterested in resolving the practical questions they raise. The only answers to be found are between the lines, in the "nonconfessional" or "anti-confessional" places of the author's resistances. In "C.Y.E." and "Names" it is the gap between the highly nervous self-consciousness of "C.Y.E" (self-hate even, if one considers the ending of the story in which McCarthy wants to bully her former self) and the self-assurance of "Names," that points to resistance and self-censorship, to the "conflicting impulses of repression and confession" which Paul John Eakin finds in McCarthy's narrative.

### 3. The Talking Cure – a Jewish Science

The confessional act is closely linked to psychoanalysis. Peter Brooks states that for him, psychoanalysis is "the most elaborated (one might say, the most 'professionalized') form of modern secularized confession."<sup>74</sup> The philosopher Frank

<sup>72</sup> Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography*, 34.

<sup>73</sup> Gill, "'Your Story. My Story,'" in: *Modern Confessional Writing*, 68.

<sup>74</sup> Brooks, *Troubling Confessions*, 52-53.

Cioffi remarks that psychoanalysis is “a *testimonial* science,” based on the veracity of its founder.<sup>75</sup> Brooks mentions how at the very beginning of his studies, Sigmund Freud learned from his French colleagues that “hysteria should be looked for in *secrets d’alcove*” – the play of meanings of the French “alcove” points both to the bed, or the bedroom, but also to the “closed and protected space at Church confessions.”<sup>76</sup> Or, for that matter, the psychoanalyst’s office, which resembles the confessional in the closed and protected space it is also able to offer.

Psychoanalysis became extremely influential in the first half of the twentieth century in Europe and America. Sigmund Freud came on a lecture tour to America in 1909, the popularisation of psychoanalysis in mass magazines and books began as early as 1915 (the “talking cure” worked well with shell-shocked soldiers of the first World War), and by 1940 most members of the educated middle and upper middle classes were closely acquainted with psychoanalytical therapy.<sup>77</sup> Thus Mary McCarthy’s *The Company She Keeps*, which abundantly used Freud’s ideas and the language of psychoanalysis, found a well-informed readership in 1942, the year of its publication.

One is tempted to say that in the first six to seven decades of the twentieth century, many Europeans and Americans were willing to regard psychoanalysis as a substitute for religion, and the figure of Sigmund Freud could be seen by some as a competition with God. Alfred Kazin wrote the following in 1956: “No other system of thought in modern times, except the great religions, has been adopted by so many people as an

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<sup>75</sup> Quoted in Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen and Sonu Shamdasani, *The Freud Files: An Inquiry into the History of Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 191.

<sup>76</sup> Brooks, *Troubling Confessions*, 89.

<sup>77</sup> Nathan G. Hale, *The Rise and Crisis of Psychoanalysis in the United States: Freud and the Americans, 1917-1985* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 74-75.

explanation of human behaviour.”<sup>78</sup> This statement seems overblown if it is taken literally, but the parallel with “the great religions,” which Kazin draws, is not a coincidence. There are several aspects of psychoanalysis which make the latter resemble a religious movement, yet this resemblance should be treated metaphorically, not literally. On the surface, the system of psychoanalytical training, especially in its early and most popular days, resembled, beyond its wide impact on the masses, the system of religious organisations. This similarity was remarked upon by Hanns Sachs, a Berlin training analyst:

[Hanns Sachs] likened the probationary period of psychoanalytic training to an empirical equivalent of the Church’s novitiate. (...) Freud’s writings, with all their intrinsic richness, charm and insight, became quasi-scriptures.<sup>79</sup>

One of the possible explanations for the position of psychoanalysis as the “new faith” could be in the void created by assimilation and secularisation of the Western society in the twentieth century, that needed to be filled.

Freudian psychoanalysis, this new substitute for religion was, from its very beginning, marked as a specifically Jewish religion, or rather, the Jewish science, in spite of Freud’s determination not to make psychoanalysis seem as “a Jewish national affair.” Although Freud believed in “great differences between the Jewish and the Aryan spirit,” he also claimed that “there should be no distinct Aryan or Jewish science. Their result should be identical; only their presentation may vary.”<sup>80</sup> Yet despite Freud’s attempts to carefully separate psychoanalysis from religion and from Jewishness (*Judentum*), its origins remain deeply embedded in the secular Jewish

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<sup>78</sup> Quoted in Hale, *Rise and Crisis*, 3.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>80</sup> From Sigmund Freud’s letter to Sandor Ferenczi, June 1913, quoted in Jay Geller, *On Freud’s Jewish Body: Mitigating Circumcisions* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 4.

culture of the late nineteenth century.<sup>81</sup> Psychoanalysis was not only invented by a Jew, but also dominated by Jews (almost all of the psychoanalysts of Freud's inner circle were Jewish):

However atheistic these early psychoanalytical Jews were, they *could not but* pursue a way of looking at things which was "Jewish." What this "Jewishness" consisted in was not a religious perspective – not *Judaism* – but an approach to argument and interpretation established over centuries in which debates over the meanings of texts were the main expression of cultural achievement. The claim is therefore not just a sociological one, that Jews became psychoanalysts because they felt comfortable and familiar in this role, but also an argument about intellectual history: the *reason* they felt so comfortable was that the psychoanalytic worldview was so much like the Jewish one.<sup>82</sup>

Stephen Frosh's sociological and historical arguments give an interesting perspective on the possible reasons of Freud becoming the centre of Jewish self-identification for entire generations of secular Jews – the comfort of the familiar Jewish world welcomed not only the analysts but also most of the Jewish upper and middle class. Similarities with the principles of psychoanalysis can be found in religious aspects of Judaism as well – Richard L. Rubenstein finds Freud's belief that dreams are a key to the unconscious motivations of patients as illuminating in the interpretation of the rabbinic myths and legends of the Aggadah:

Myths and legends function in the life of the group as do dreams in the individual. (...) In dreams there is a tendency toward the concretization of abstract problems. A similar tendency is evident in rabbinic legend.<sup>83</sup>

Nathan G. Hale also notes that psychoanalysis was in the process of becoming a substitute for religion in an increasingly secularized society, in which "the physician,

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<sup>81</sup> Geller, *Freud's Jewish Body*, 3.

<sup>82</sup> Stephen Frosh, *Hate and the "Jewish Science": Anti-Semitism, Nazism, and Psychoanalysis* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 10-11.

<sup>83</sup> Richard L. Rubenstein, *The Religious Imagination: A Study in Psychoanalysis and Jewish Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), 25-28.

rather than the clergyman, became the adjudicator of personal and social problems.”<sup>84</sup>

The social and intellectual American elite, in particular, chose the psychoanalyst as the physician assuming the role of the clergyman:

The popular stereotypes of the analyst and the analytic process had been established before World War I: the uncanny analyst, who combined the qualities of a secular priest, uncondemning listener, and scientific soul-surgeon; the magical power of catharsis to dispel neuroses.<sup>85</sup>

McCarthy’s short story “Ghostly Father, I Confess,” the last chapter in *The Company She Keeps*, ironically reflects this state of affairs. Set in New York City, where by the early ’40s “everyone was going or had gone” to get analysed, it introduces the reader to the “ghostly father” who is not the Catholic priest one might expect, but the heroine’s psychoanalyst. The story, discussed in the following section, displays the possible links of confession to psychoanalysis, and religion as the primary source of the two. The “Jewish origin” of psychoanalysis also plays a significant role in the interpretation of the heroine’s behaviour, which mirrors McCarthy’s own uneasy relationship with Jewishness as a (hidden) part of her identity and is, besides the orphanhood, another marker for her outsiderism.

#### **4. “Ghostly Father, I Confess” – McCarthy and Psychoanalysis**

McCarthy’s “Ghostly Father, I Confess” is interesting not only as an example of displaced autobiography, nor as a typical literary product of the early American forties steeped into the doctrine of psychoanalysis, but as a vivid illustration of the link between psychoanalysis and confession, resistance and the writing of autobiography.

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<sup>84</sup> Hale, *Rise and Crisis*, 75.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

While writing *The Company She Keeps*, Mary McCarthy underwent psychoanalysis with Dr Richard L. Frank in New York. She was transferred to this rather obscure analyst by Edmund Wilson's therapist and friend, the Hungarian Dr Sandor Rado, one of the leading figures of the first generation of Freudian analysts and the director of the Institute for Psychoanalysis, organized in 1931.<sup>86</sup> It was Dr Rado who advised committing Mary to the psychiatric Payne-Whitney Clinic in New York in June 1938, when the young writer developed, as both Wilson and Rado agreed, "hysteri[a] of the classical kind. (...) Her pregnancy brought it on in acute form."<sup>87</sup> McCarthy's fictionalized version of this event is rather different: the incident in *The Group*, in which Kay Petersen gets committed to the insane asylum with a black eye given to her by her husband, excludes any signs of "hysteria of the classical kind."

McCarthy's sessions with Dr Frank, and later, after Dr Frank had been drafted, with Dr Abraham Kardiner, lasted four years.<sup>88</sup> Each one of the short stories or chapters of *The Company She Keeps* was written while McCarthy was being analysed. For herself she thought negatively about psychoanalysis, stating that she had "little use for its theories, its terminologies, or its insights."<sup>89</sup> "I don't believe in it. All the castration nonsense," admits Margaret Sargent frankly to Dr James (CSK 257). McCarthy believed that psychoanalysis "fostered in patients a most unattractive self-pity."<sup>90</sup> Despite her personal aversion to psychoanalysis, which she called "an absurd

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>87</sup> From Edmund Wilson's "Retrospective Note," quoted in Kiernan, *Seeing Mary Plain*, 153.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>89</sup> Quoted in Kiernan, *Seeing Mary Plain*, 43.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 230.

series of myths, ” McCarthy does use many of “its theories and terminologies” in “Ghostly Father.”<sup>91</sup>

The last chapter of *The Company She Keeps* begins with the Catholic prayer from which the title of the chapter stems. But instead of the priest’s glance that one would expect after such an introduction, there are the eyes of the psychoanalyst Dr James gleaming “benevolently behind glasses.” From the first pages on, there is little doubt that there are two experts on Freudian theories in Dr James’ office, the second one being his patient, Margaret Sargent. She knows all the right words, the key terms of psychoanalysis, and she uses them to play a sort of provocative intellectual tennis with her psychoanalyst. By “confessing” to Dr James her “custom-made” dream of going to “Eggshell College” – “the womb fantasy” (CSK 250), checking her “aggression against the analyst,” (CSK 252), and remembering another dream, of wearing pink pants in a restaurant – “one of these exposure dreams” (CKS 254), Margaret Sargent seems to be not only just as well informed as Dr James, but also several steps ahead of him. She throws Freudian jargon at her analyst, distancing herself from the unattractive role of the patient and diminishing the analyst’s authority.

Margaret’s satirical tone, the tone that dominates the story, for it is told in Margaret’s voice, resists and sabotages the demands of psychological depths. It is “more witty sparring than the baring of subconscious feelings.”<sup>92</sup> Resistance could not be more obvious. The timid and young Dr James is indeed inferior to witty, cynical Margaret, but interestingly, Dr James is also her very own choice. Margaret mentions the older “refugee analysts” – the first generation analysts who came to America from Austria and Germany – who “suffered from migraine, divorced their wives,

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Katie Roiphe, “Damn My Stream of Consciousness,” in: *Twenty-Four Ways of Looking at Mary McCarthy*, 131.

committed suicide, bullied their patients, quarrelled with their colleagues,” but could also heal her (CSK 286-287). She considers their peculiarity a merit, and thinks that they are well suited for their profession: “Psychoanalysis was one of those specialized walks of life, like the ballet or crime or the circus, in which a deformity is an asset” (CSK 286), yet she also believes they are dangerous for herself and thus avoids them. Margaret’s (and Mary’s) hint of the perception of her orphaned self as an outsider, a spectacle, is taken up here again, in the mentioned “deformity” in which she finds a form of kinship with the peculiar refugees. It is the alteration from the norm, or rather, from the ideal of the norm that appeals to Margaret, because she suspects something of the same sort in herself, and thus feels closer to the strange and deformed “refugee analysts” than to the perfect (and perfectly normal) Dr James.

Dr James is part of the mainstream, the streamlined WASP whom Margaret ridicules in her catalogue of his innocuous likes and dislikes (theatre and the movies, no dances or tennis (on account of his eyes), small feet of which he is proud (CSK 253). Margaret’s own position throughout all the stories of *The Company She Keeps* is marked by her simultaneous longing and reluctance to be *one of the crowd* – her partly natural, partly stylized outsiderism, with its origins in her orphanhood, is a foil to Dr James’ comfortable position in society for which he is slightly despised by Margaret.

The refugee analysts who appeal to Margaret with all their “deformities,” are also – McCarthy does not spell it out – Jewish. As discussed in the chapter “The Jewish Presence,” her Jewish characters, and her accent on the Jewish part of her ancestry in her autobiographies, are a means of presenting outsider figures with whom her heroine identifies. Their outsiderism is not of the obvious sort – McCarthy chooses outsiders who are able to see in, who are almost completely accepted, but not quite,

like herself who could pass for a WASP were it not for her orphanhood and her Jewish grandmother. Psychoanalysis in general, this Jewish science in a Gentile world, can easily be tied to the problem of outsiderism:

What arises is the question of *marginality*, of whether seeing things from the sides, looking awry (...) is a necessary condition for the emergence and influence of psychoanalysis. Could someone who was surrounded by the comfort of social acceptance, rather than subjected to the ambivalent love/loathe dynamic characteristic of anti-Semitism (...) have stood far enough outside that culture to offer the devastatingly ironic critique that Freud offered?<sup>93</sup>

Frosh's view of the insights that can be a consequence of being an outsider, "the critical vision that comes from being slightly outside the host culture," is a partial explanation for Margaret's hidden preference for the "refugee analysts."<sup>94</sup>

In *How I Grew* McCarthy ponders on the origins of the characters in her first written stories, and comes to the conclusion that the unlikeable, short and fat women and morally wicked men with Jewish names in her high school fiction must have stemmed from her Jewish relatives to whom she was not averse, while not much liking their appearance:

It almost looks as if my impulse to write had had some relation to a juvenile anti-Semitic bias, to an anger which had to be directed against the Jewish quarter of me that I half-tried to disavow – a project all the more tempting in that 'it' did not show. (HIG 102)

Jewishness appears to be not only the most problematic part of young McCarthy's identity, but also an important source for her writing. The anger against Mary's own "Jewish quarter," remembered in *How I Grew*, is similar to the anger against her younger self that McCarthy expresses in the last paragraph of "C.Y.E.":

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<sup>93</sup> Frosh, *Hate*, 13.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

I should like to make her a pie-bed, or drop a snake down her back, but unfortunately the convent discipline forbids such open brutality. I hate her, for she is my natural victim, and it is I who have given her the name, the shameful, inscrutable name that she will never, sleepless in her bed at night, be able to puzzle out. (CCE 212)

The unwillingness to accept an unwanted part of the self is, in her case, accompanied by a deep fascination for this very part: “C.Y.E.” haunts McCarthy for a decade before it is rewritten in “Names”; the Jewish grandmother, closing the *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, is presented simultaneously as a “garish figure” and the key to the secrets of McCarthy’s childhood. One can suspect that the old Jewish analysts, as well as psychoanalysis in general where “deformity is an asset,” hold the same fascination for Margaret Sargent as the examples above, a fascination mixed with aversion expressed in Margaret’s resistance against her therapy, and in her choice of Dr James, so clearly unsuited for the task.

Dr James is too weak to be Margaret’s confessor; she is the one who clearly wins in the power struggle with a successful resistance of which Dr James seems to have no idea – her “Eggshell College” dream contains the meaningful part which she hides from the analyst. This would not have worked with the refugee analysts, Margaret suspects. It is disclosed to the reader at the end of the story, when Margaret is already outside Dr James’ office and remembers “that she had not told him the end of the dream” (CSK 302). Margaret’s dream deals with her meeting an unattractive Nazi prisoner – “awkward, heavy featured, without charm” (ibid.) Shortly before they kiss, the plebeian looks of the prisoner turn into the romantic image of young Lord Byron: “His face changed, his hair became dark and wavy (...) his skin whitened, his thick flat nose refined itself, developed a handsome bridge” (CSK 303) – but the kiss is still “coarse” and “loutish,” for the man does not really change, but regains his unattractiveness as soon as Margaret opens her eyes. Margaret enjoys neither the kiss

nor the looks of the man in her dream, but she “want[s] him anyway” (ibid.) This connection of sexual pleasure with feelings of disgust is for Sigmund Freud a “mechanism of the diversion of affects,” and one of the major characteristics for a patient suffering from hysteria, thus supporting Margaret’s thesis of being a “Freudian classic.”<sup>95</sup> The dream helps Margaret see the precious “disunity” that is key to her character.

Margaret’s description of the Nazi prisoner itself is puzzling – it reads like racial typing, but in spite of this effect its details do not provide sufficient information. *The Company She Keeps* was published in 1942, a few years before the existence of the Nazi death camps became known in the United States. Nowadays, the reader would almost automatically expect the Nazi prisoner from Margaret’s dream to be a captive Jew – yet the light straight hair and “the thick flat nose” are closer to the Gentile – perhaps even Slavic – not the Semitic stereotype. The Semitic stereotype, on the other hand, can be found in the idealised version of the prisoner, when his hair turns dark and wavy and his nose “develops a handsome bridge.” The term “Nazi prisoner” itself is surprisingly inconclusive – it is impossible to tell whether it is a prisoner of the Nazis or a Nazi as prisoner. What is clear is Margaret’s troubled attraction – her oscillation between repulsion and attraction – to another outsider figure, her ambiguity similar to her (weaker) feelings for the “refugee analysts.”

McCarthy includes most of the major Freudian ideas in this short story – she mentions hysteria, castration anxiety, womb phantasy, “disunity” of the neurotic characters plagued by their discrepancy between reality and phantasy.<sup>96</sup> She also demonstrates resistance mechanisms, and above all, she places the revelation about

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<sup>95</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Bruchstück einer Hysterie-Analyse: Krankengeschichte der “Dora,”* 1905 (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1981), 31.

<sup>96</sup> “What they [the neurotic characters] long most intensely for in their phantasy, this they flee as soon as it steps up to them in reality; and they like to abandon themselves to their phantasies the most when they do not have to fear the realisation of these phantasies anymore.” Ibid., 105, my translation.

Margaret's character in the dream, the central focus of psychoanalysis. But this language of psychoanalysis is for the most part incorporated in her "comic mechanism."<sup>97</sup> Margaret's intellectual familiarity with Freudian terms is used as a satiric weapon against the seriousness of the session, and psychoanalysis itself. It does become more serious towards the end of the story, when Margaret starts to analyse herself, ending her story with *mea culpa* and thus closing the circle of the allusions of psychoanalysis and Catholic confession.

Margaret's attitude towards psychoanalysis is another product of her ambiguity, the disunity of her character. McCarthy shared her heroine's opinion on psychoanalysis, and it seems that she chose to write a story with such a strong emphasis on psychoanalytic treatment at a time when psychoanalysis was so fashionable, especially among New Yorkers, not only to produce a text which would "tell the time and the place," but also to plant, in Margaret's ambiguity and her ridicule of psychoanalysis, some subtle criticism. In a remark on the absence of any logical reason for her grandmother's bad character, McCarthy states in her *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*:

Luckily, I'm writing a memoir and not a work of fiction, and therefore I do not have to account for my grandmother's unpleasant character and look for the Oedipal fixation or the traumatic experience which would give her that clinical authenticity that is nowadays so desirable in literature. (MCG 33)

Here, McCarthy hints at the tendency of popular literature to mimic the practice of psychoanalysis, and to incorporate Freud's ideas in a starkly simplified form. Alfred Kazin's essay "The Language of Pundits" of 1962 addresses the problem of the "immense power and authority of psychoanalytical doctrines over contemporary

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<sup>97</sup> Roiphe, "Damn my Stream of Consciousness," in: *Twenty-Four Ways*, 131.

literature.”<sup>98</sup> Kazin laments the deterioration of literature when “so many psychoanalysts want to be writers [and] so many writers want to be analysts,” and, independently, echoes McCarthy’s remark on the dubious “clinical authenticity”:

There is something finally unbearable, the very opposite of what literature stands for, in the kind of metallic writing which now so often serves to ‘motivate’ a character in a novel.<sup>99</sup>

Kazin mentions Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and Vance Bourjaily’s *Confessions of a Spent Youth*, as well as John O’Hara’s *From The Terrace* as examples of flat self-analysis masquerading as autobiographical novels. Surprisingly, he also counts Mary McCarthy as one of the “offenders against art”:

The deterioration of language in contemporary fiction into the language of *pundits* is not often noticed by critics perhaps because the novelists have taken to writing like critics. But it is by no means the highbrow or intellectual novelist – like Mary McCarthy, who in a single story for *Partisan Review* is likely to produce so many deliberate symbols – who is the only offender against art.<sup>100</sup>

It would be most interesting to know which story by McCarthy Kazin had in mind, but “Ghostly Father, I Confess” fits the production of “deliberate symbols” rather well. Most of these symbols, however, are part of the comic mechanism that McCarthy uses to dismantle the authority of Dr James’ therapy, and thus are not to be taken seriously.

The strong mutual influence of psychoanalysis and literature, regardless of its effect on the quality of both, was noticed by Lionel Trilling in his essay “Freud and Literature”:

The Freudian psychology is the only systematic account of the human mind, that, in point of subtlety and complexity, of interest and tragic power, deserves to stand

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<sup>98</sup> Alfred Kazin, “The Language of Pundits,” in: *Freud: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Perry Meisel (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1981), 115.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 116.

beside the chaotic mass of psychological insights which literature has accumulated through the centuries.<sup>101</sup>

But even more illuminating than the insight into the human mind that psychology can provide almost as fully as literature, is the impact of the *story* as such in psychoanalytical practice:

Psychoanalysis is a science which is based upon narration, upon telling. Its principle of explanation consists in getting the story told – somehow, anyhow – in order to discover how it begins. It presumes that the tale that is told will yield counsel.<sup>102</sup>

“Getting the story told” is, in Lionel Trilling’s words, as important as McCarthy’s attempt to “make a good story” out of her memories.

In his writings, Sigmund Freud repeatedly points out that the patient’s reaction to the analyst’s questions is liable to many variations:

Patients are not able to give such [exact] reports about themselves. Although they can inform the doctor satisfyingly and fluently about the different phases of their lives, there is always a time in which their reports become shallow, with blanks and mysteries in them, and yet at another time you find yourself facing complete darkness, which cannot be lit up by any usable utterance.<sup>103</sup>

The analyst then constructs a coherent story out of the fragments he gets from the patient, filling in the blanks and lighting up the bits of darkness by his own interpretation – why Margaret is unwilling to let an untalented analyst do this work is clear. She is the one telling her own story, the fictional elements of constructions hiding in the fact that it is not a declared autobiography, but a fictional short-story with strong autobiographical details. “The story is true in substance, but the details

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<sup>101</sup> Lionel Trilling, “Freud and Literature,” in: *The Liberal Imagination* (Harmondsmith: Penguin Books, 1970), 47.

<sup>102</sup> Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 140.

<sup>103</sup> Freud, *Bruchstück einer Hysterie-Analyse*, 19.

have been invented or guessed at,” McCarthy concludes in the italicised part of the *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* (MCG 97).

Memory seems to work and fail in the same way when it is questioned by the autobiographer or the psychoanalyst. McCarthy’s recollection of standing on top of the staircase “surrounded by blackness” parallels the darkness that Freud complains of while speaking of his patients’ stories; Mary’s steady allusions of rips and tears in the fabric of her life, the loss of verifiable information for the things she cannot remember, ask for stitching and filling with constructions that she carefully traces in the italicised sections of *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* and the next layer of memories (and questions) voiced in *How I Grew*.

Both Mary McCarthy and Sigmund Freud compared themselves to archaeologists at some point. Autobiographical research as an act of constant searching leads McCarthy to this comparison:

As orphans, my brother Kevin and I have a burning interest in our past, which we try to reconstruct together, like amateur archaeologists, falling on every new scrap of evidence, trying to fit it in, questioning our relations, belabouring our own memories. (MCG 6)

Sigmund Freud wrote in his famous case history *Dora: Fragment of An Analysis*, an apology for his own reconstruction of Dora’s story, where he calls himself a “conscientious archaeologist,” who (re)constructs “the priceless though mutilated relics of antiquity.”<sup>104</sup> Towards the end of his life, Freud likened the “fragments of memories,” the various associations and the specific behaviour of his patients to the foundation of an ancient building, from which archaeologists “build up the walls.”<sup>105</sup> Characteristically, McCarthy compares herself and her brother Kevin to *amateur*

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<sup>104</sup> Quoted in Donald P. Spence: *Narrative Truth and Historical Truth: Meaning and Interpretation in Psychoanalysis* (New York: Norton, 1982), 160.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

archaeologists, expressing doubt in their abilities and the accuracy of their method. Freud, on the other hand, names himself a *conscientious* archaeologist and holds up the view of himself as the ultimate authority.

Psychoanalysis and autobiographical writing, different as they may be, both rely on memory, and the ways memory works and fails. The autobiographical act resembles the act of psychoanalysis, especially in the early perception of psychoanalysis as a clinical, “romantic science,” based on verbal communication, and as an act of “self-discovery, self-observation, and self-recognition.”<sup>106</sup> Sigmund Freud notes in a rather worried tone that his case histories seem to be more like literature than scientific work, that they “read like short stories.”<sup>107</sup> The success of Freud’s case histories such as “Dora” or “The Wolf Man” is indebted to the fact that they are “long, complex, and, above all, well written,” and Freud is “using all the narrative resources available to the fiction writer.”<sup>108</sup> He claims that these resources open a way for him to decipher the fragmented information from his patients.

The result of the psychoanalytical practice is a story that may not be historically true, but which nonetheless possesses a narrative truth that can be of great use and value to the patient:

As today psychoanalysts freely admit, in the end what matters in analysis is not so much the “historical truth” of the construction proposed by the analyst, but its “narrative truth,” that is, the fact that patients make use of it to rewrite their histories in a way that “makes sense” for them. In other words, it matters little that the construction is a fiction; it only matters that the patients accept and understand this position as *their* history and their truth.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Hale, *Rise and Crisis*, 130.

<sup>107</sup> Quoted in Borch-Jacobsen and Shamdasani, *The Freud Files*, 193.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

In direct comparison, it becomes clear that the psychoanalytical practice is relatively close to Paul John Eakin's concept of autobiographical truth, where the self is "the centre of all autobiographical narrative [and] a necessarily fictive structure."<sup>110</sup>

The important element of fiction is present here, and autobiographical truth, differing from historical truth in the constructed details that fill the gaps of memory (such as the question of who took the tin butterfly in McCarthy's story) holds the same weight and value as the narrative truth of psychoanalysis.

### **Conclusion**

"There was something strange, abnormal about my bringing up" is the first sentence of McCarthy's "Ask Me No Questions" – the reason for the strangeness and abnormality is found in the title of the short story. McCarthy's grandmother does not see any sense in Mary's questions:

(...) it puzzled her that anyone would want to find out more. "All those old things, Mary," she would say to me half grumpily. "Why do you keep asking me all those old things?" (MCG 204)

For Mary, the knowledge about her family history is essential, for it is with this knowledge that she attempts to "reconstruct herself," to repair the identity that was fractured by the death of her parents.<sup>111</sup> But her grandmother is a poor substitute for the lost mother – instead of getting answers from her, Mary must ask questions and provide the answers herself, she must become her own point of reference. Doing the work of an "amateur archaeologist," trying "to fit in" every "scrap of evidence," and fill the empty places of the mosaic with invention, McCarthy looks for the defining

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<sup>110</sup> Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography*, 3.

<sup>111</sup> Gordon O. Taylor, *Studies in Modern American Autobiography* (London & Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1983), 79.

relation between her past and present, for the key events which structured her identity formation.

Her three volumes of autobiography can be seen as repeated attempts to get into different layers of her past, the “series of deepening returns to the past,” the further chance to look for the vanished bulge in the carpet in her grandmother’s house, or the book of fairy tales that her father read from shortly before his death. Sabrina Fuchs Abrams interprets McCarthy’s constant “reworking” as an almost religious attempt to influence past events: “She seeks to control or conquer her past through repetition or retelling (like prayer?)”<sup>112</sup> Freud’s theory of the psychological fixation to trauma, which is partly taken up by the modern trauma theory, suggests that these repetitions can be viewed as the “impulse to obtain the mastery of the situation” one actually cannot control.<sup>113</sup> Freud illustrates it in the analysis of the “fort-da” game of his little grandson, who by throwing away and retrieving a wooden spool, imitated the control of his mother’s departure and return. Freudian theory in general is seen as “founded on the work of autobiography,” states Laura Marcus, and the structure of both autobiography and psychoanalysis makes one think of the two fields sharing the same arsenal of instruments.<sup>114</sup>

In addition, I tend to believe that McCarthy herself was more interested in finding the truth in terms of Philippe Lejeune’s autobiographical pact – not the absolute historical truth, which is impossible to reconstruct, as McCarthy has shown in the italicised sections of the *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, but a truth restricted to

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<sup>112</sup> Fuchs Abrams, *Mary McCarthy*, 26.

<sup>113</sup> Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 14.

<sup>114</sup> “There is a sense in which psychoanalysis is founded on the work of autobiography. Many of Freud’s most significant ‘discoveries’ were based on his own dreams, memories and reflections. These include the workings of screen memory (in which one memory ‘covers up’ another, more significant one, and which has such radical implications for autobiographical memory), the Oedipus complex, the repetition-compulsion.” Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses*, 82.

“*the possible*, (...) the truth such as it appears to [her], inasmuch as [she] can know it, making allowances for lapses of memory, errors, involuntary distortions, etc.”<sup>115</sup> In fact, McCarthy goes further – aware of the possible errors and distortions, she tries to hunt them down, to make them, when correction is futile or impossible, at least visible to the reader. Her view of these errors and lapses of memories changed with the years, as probably did her motives, hence the difference in her revisions.

In McCarthy’s memoirs, memory becomes a weapon against blanks and silence. The memory which is responsible for Mary’s outsiderism shortly after her parents’ death, is also responsible for the special treatment she receives from her otherwise careless guardians: “As if this memory of mine was a lawyer who represented me in court,” McCarthy remarks about the respect with which her otherwise inconsiderate relatives treated her ability “to remember” (MCG 38). The writing of autobiography with its conscious structuring of text, the making of the story, is – quite in the Freudian way of thought – another way to gain control over one’s life, even of past events when control was impossible – as in the memories of the cruelties little Mary had to endure from her guardians. “Because of the nature [of autobiography] as a ‘final say’, [autobiography] strives to wrest power away from the previously nondisputable words of [McCarthy’s] early life’s authority figures,” writes Janis Greve on McCarthy’s autobiographical writing, of her putting words back into the orphan’s mouth that was previously sealed shut with duct tape.<sup>116</sup>

But memory is not infallible, and the very act of writing involves elements of construction and invention, the conscious making up of a text and a self, or rather, plural selves, as Roland Barthes notes: “The one *who speaks* is not the one *who writes*

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<sup>115</sup> Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, 22.

<sup>116</sup> Greve, “Orphanhood and Photo-Portraiture,” in: *American Women’s Autobiography*, 171.

(in real life), and the one *who writes* is not the one *who is*.”<sup>117</sup> The evolving, autobiographical truth thus created may differ from the historical truth, and, like the identity in autobiography, may be plural.

McCarthy writes in her review of Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* (1945):

Of such people it is difficult to say whether their account is true or false (...) it is true in the sense that it did not happen to the narrator but that on the contrary the narrator happened to it.<sup>118</sup>

The narrator shapes and determines the account and not vice versa. Timothy Dow Adams aptly remarks that the same can be said about McCarthy’s writing. Indeed, her self-characterization is a distinctive feature not only in the previously discussed declared autobiographical writings, but also in her fictional or semi-fictional texts, which, as in the case of “Ghostly Father, I Confess,” can be seen as examples of displaced autobiography.

Paul John Eakin points out that “the challenge posed by autobiographical truth is in essence a matter of volition, of having the courage to utter it.”<sup>119</sup> Therefore, the autobiographical act as such is never an easy one, it involves courage and one must force oneself to do it. But such is also the nature of confession. The confessional tone typical of autobiographical writing is often challenged by McCarthy’s irony and the insight she gives the reader into her creative process, as in the case of the italicised sections of her *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*. The conflicting impulses of repression and confession, as well as resistance, are clearly demonstrated in the stories “C.Y.E.” and “Names,” the last version being a smoothed and shortened account of the first one, bristling with anxiety and unresolved conflict.

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<sup>117</sup> Quoted in Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography*, 27.

<sup>118</sup> Quoted in Dow Adams, *Telling Lies*, 108.

<sup>119</sup> Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography*, 5.

In “Ghostly Father, I Confess” McCarthy brings together the idea of Catholic confession replaced by the psychoanalytical session, displaced autobiography and resistance in psychoanalysis. The parallels between autobiography and psychoanalysis, the resemblance of autobiographical and narrative truth, and the reliance of both psychoanalysis and autobiography on words, on the shaping and the construction of a story, were evident to McCarthy, and yet she was critical of psychoanalysis and deeply interested in autobiography. McCarthy associated psychoanalysis with loss of control (but spent four years in therapy) – her heroine Margaret Sargent defies the Freudian character analysis by taking the matter into her own hands, yet she is also drawn to the interpretation of dreams and the old “refugee analysts.” Margaret’s strange dream of the Nazi prisoner and the dangerous attraction to the Jewish “refugee analysts,” on the background of psychoanalysis as the ultimate Jewish science, hint at an unresolved conflict with a hidden aspect of her identity, which is similar to the inexplicable anger directed at a younger self in McCarthy’s short story “C.Y.E.” In “Ask Me No Questions,” McCarthy gives an ambiguous expression of “the Jewish quarter” in her identity by depicting her grandmother as a mysterious and frightening figure, whom McCarthy nonetheless cannot help but imitate.

The period of her life that Mary McCarthy covered in her three declared autobiographical texts (and in a few more texts with elements of displaced autobiography) is limited – roughly twenty years, from six to twenty six. McCarthy was aware of her insistent returns to her youth: “I seem to be embarked on how I grew and grew and grew,” she used to say to her friend Elisabeth Hardwick.<sup>120</sup> Perhaps the work of the amateur archaeologist was most interesting there, where few documents

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<sup>120</sup> Hardwick, foreword to *Intellectual Memoirs*, by Mary McCarthy, vii.

survived and many pieces were missing, where memory was most often obstructed by blanks and darkness, but the impact of this difficult timespan of childhood and youth was acutely felt throughout McCarthy's lifetime.

McCarthy returned to the memoir genre ten years after the publication of her *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* (and another decade before writing *How I Grew* and *Intellectual Memoirs*), but in a context very different from the intimate quest for self of her autobiographies. During the Vietnam war, McCarthy visited Saigon and Hanoi as a war journalist. As a foreword to *The Seventeenth Degree*, which was to unite her pamphlets *Vietnam* and *Hanoi* under one cover, she wrote "How It Went," a record of her motives for going there, and of the toll her courage took on her marriage to James West. McCarthy's political journalism is a shift from the idea of confession to the idea of witness, from the individual to the collective trauma, a turning away from the endless interrogation of her own childhood to observation and the giving of evidence during a major national crisis. This change in ethical perspective is also detectable in McCarthy's novel *Birds of America*, which was written during the war in Vietnam and with which McCarthy ultimately abandoned her semi-autobiographical girl heroine of the 1930s.

## CHAPTER FIVE: BEAUTY AND TRUTH IN MARY MCCARTHY'S POLITICAL JOURNALISM

### Introduction

“Times are lousy and we should be closer to each other. The daily news are [sic] like being daily hit over the head.”<sup>1</sup> The philosopher Hannah Arendt wrote this in her letter to her close friend Mary McCarthy, in February 1968, when the United States of America was at war with Vietnam. This war was responsible for both the “lousy times” and “the daily news.”

The Vietnam war is a problematic chapter in American history because it was a long and messy war – unlike the involvement of the United States in World War II, the goals of the war in Vietnam were not at all clear, the losses were considerable, and the consequences of the war were economic crisis and a continuous wave of protests. Inflation and the rise of the unemployment rate, the Civil Rights movement, the Women’s Liberation movement, the student sit-ins and teach-ins, and the emergence of the hippie culture were all at some point connected to the war in Vietnam. Tom Shachtman, in his book *A Decade of Shocks*, as he calls the 1960s, perceives the Vietnam war as the “red thread” which runs through the entire decade up to the Watergate scandal in 1973, and which leaves the American people with a sense of profound disappointment. Shachtman quotes the American historian Henry Steele Commager summing up the losses of American society:

The loss of faith in the integrity of our government; the loss of confidence in the ability of the press and television to retain their independence, the erosion of the guarantees of the Bill of Rights and of the habit of taking those rights for granted.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt, letter to Mary McCarthy, February 9, 1968, in: *Between Friends: The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy 1949-1975*, ed. Carol Brightman (London: Secker and Warburg, 1995), 211.

<sup>2</sup> Tom Shachtman, *Decade of Shocks: Dallas to Watergate, 1963-1974* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1983), 195.

When the Vietnam war escalated to clear visibility in the mid-sixties (before that, American involvement in Vietnam was not that obvious to the broad public, although the war started as early as 1955) McCarthy was working on her penultimate novel, *Birds of America*. With *The Group*, published in 1963, she produced a bestselling novel: her collective heroine – “a heroine in eight parts” – was a great success among the readers, and the book was passed from hand to hand, “its spine broken in Chapter Two, in which the dull young virgin is serviced by a man who seems to have been trained by the people at Roto-Rooter,” as one witty reviewer remarked.<sup>3</sup> *The Group* is also the very last novel in which McCarthy’s girl heroine appears – the mocking treatment she receives is a clear sign that McCarthy is done with her girl of the thirties with all her semi-autobiographical traits.

The protagonist of *Birds of America* is Peter Levi, a half-Jewish nineteen-year-old boy, a student of philosophy and an ardent lover of Immanuel Kant, who leaves the idyllic New England town Rocky Port where he lives with his mother, a harpsichord player, to go for a year to Paris and study at the Sorbonne. The novel, criticising the mass-mediated culture with its modern convenience foods swamping the stores, and a general decline of the quality of everyday life in America and Europe, is, as Carol Brightman called it, “a catalogue of tastes”, or “catalogue of ideas” – McCarthy’s own tastes and ideas, that is:

In Peter Levi and his mother (...) Mary McCarthy has invested her own irrepressible longing for beauty, wisdom, love, justice; and it is in culture – not society, not politics, not even nature (...) – that these ideals are kept alive.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Peter S. Prescott, “Candide Without Voltaire,” review of *Birds of America*, by Mary McCarthy, *Newsweek*, May 24, 1971, 49.

<sup>4</sup> Brightman, *Writing Dangerously*, 530.

Hannah Arendt, to whom *Birds of America* is dedicated, also saw the novel as an expression of McCarthy's personality:

The discrepancy between public image and actual person is greater in your case than in any other I know of. And in this book it is your whole person that speaks as the author.<sup>5</sup>

However, Arendt sees the impact of culture differently from Carol Brightman.

Alluding to the last sentence of *Bird of America*, uttered by Immanuel Kant, an apparition in Peter's feverish dream – "Nature is dead, *mein Kind*," Arendt views nature and culture almost as a whole:

Culture is always cultivated nature – nature being tended and being taken care of by one of nature's products called man. If nature is dead, culture will die too, together with all the artefacts of our civilisation.<sup>6</sup>

McCarthy's public image, which Arendt finds strikingly different from her personality, is that of "our leading bitch-intellectual, so renowned for her cold-blooded hatchetwork on the pieties of the liberal mind" (the "bitch-intellectual" was coined by a reviewer of the Chicago Tribune – strangely, he did not mention McCarthy's *cold eye*).<sup>7</sup> This image was partly responsible for the disheartening reviews *Birds of America* received. As with *The Group*, McCarthy's sense for detail makes her ideas sometimes look like "Whitmanesque lists of foods, flowers, and other impedimenta of a lost domestic paradise. (...) One wonders at times if this is a novel or a course in domestic economics."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Hannah Arendt, letter to Mary McCarthy, 28 May 1971, in: *Between Friends*, 292.

<sup>6</sup> Mary McCarthy, *Birds of America*, 1971 (San Diego/New York/London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), 344.

<sup>7</sup> Hilton Kramer, "Mary McCarthy's Valentine to Fanny Farmer," review of *Birds of America*, by Mary McCarthy, *Chicago Tribune*, May 23, 1971, Section 9, 1. "Our Leading Bitch Intellectual" is also the title of the essay by Beverly Gross, included in the collection *Twenty-Four Ways of Looking at Mary McCarthy*, 27-35.

<sup>8</sup> Kramer, "McCarthy's Valentine," 1.

A more benevolent view of *Birds of America* may find it a novel about a young man's idealism, about the changes of society, about what it means to be a decent human being – all this against the background of the Jamesian topic of an American in Europe. But the recurrent “fact in fiction,” McCarthy's trademark to the same extent as her “cold eye,” gives some ground to the negative criticism of the review above:

[Peter's] mother had more illusions to shatter. (...) It was the storekeeper who delivered the blow. The village hardware store did not carry bean pots. (...) The only bean pot Peter was familiar with was pictured on a can. But he saw that for his mother this was a truly upsetting discovery, tantamount to finding that the American eagle was extinct.<sup>9</sup>

The vanished bean pots are, as it is usual with McCarthy's objects, more than simple bean pots – they are the symptom of the slowly disappearing “America, the Beautiful,” symbolised in turn by the American eagle, deliberately summoned to the bean pots. The pots and the eagle indicate the danger of the death of both culture and nature. In the context of McCarthy's use of objects, the “Whitmanesque lists” lose the drabness of a domestic economics course, and become the very expression of the “longing for beauty, love, justice,” in short, for the culture that McCarthy was afraid the United States were exchanging for the benefits of mass markets.

The title *Birds of America* alludes to picture books of American birds, such as the nineteenth century English book *The Birds of America* (1827-1838) by the painter and ornithologist John James Audubon (there is also a more recent *Birds of America*, first published in 1923 and edited by T. Gilbert Pearson). Audubon's *Birds* consists of his prints of the birds he found in the United States. Six of the birds from Audubon's collection are now extinct. During his travels through the United States to observe and

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<sup>9</sup> McCarthy, *Birds of America*, 37.

paint the animals, Audubon already noticed the deterioration of landscape and the destruction of wildlife brought on by the western expansion of the early nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup> McCarthy's *Birds of America*, "named after a vanishing species," opens with the sentence "In the Wild Life Sanctuary, the Great Horned Owl had died," stating the theme of the novel.<sup>11</sup> The loss of nature's variety and cultural goods, implied in the novel's title and its opening sentence, makes up McCarthy's "Whitmanesque lists" of things that for her stand for the thinning out of nature and culture in the modern post-atomic age.

McCarthy interrupted her writing of the novel twice, to go to South Vietnam in 1967, and, a year later, for a trip to Hanoi, the capital of Communist North Vietnam. One of the reasons for her taking such serious risks was the imaginary nineteen-year-old, her hero Peter Levi. Knowing that many real boys were dying at the time that she was working on the book, she could not help but abandon her "former self, the devoted handmaid of *belles lettres*."<sup>12</sup> Thus McCarthy became, for the weeks in Vietnam, a war journalist:

I felt I could not go on writing about a boy of that age and not do something myself about Vietnam; that the whole book would have been some sort of *trahison* if I had just sat on my bottom.<sup>13</sup>

McCarthy wrote six articles on Vietnam for the *New York Review of Books*, which were published under one cover as the pamphlet *Vietnam in 1967. Hanoi*, consisting of six chapters, also appeared in the *New York Review of Books* first, and was published in pamphlet form in 1968. Political journalism in this form was new terrain

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<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Gawthrop Riely, "John James Audubon's Tastes of America," *Gastronomica*, 11.2 (2011): 29.

<sup>11</sup> Helen Vendler, "Mary McCarthy Again Her New Heroine – Frozen Foods a New Villain," *New York Times*, May 16, 1971, Mary McCarthy Papers, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries, f. 45.2.

<sup>12</sup> Mary McCarthy, *The Seventeenth Degree* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974), 29.

<sup>13</sup> Jean-François Revel, "Miss McCarthy Explains," *New York Times*, May 16, 1971, Mary McCarthy Papers, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries, f.45.1.

for McCarthy who, apart from her works of fiction, had been writing art and literary criticism.

The link between *Birds of America* and McCarthy's Vietnam reports goes deeper than the mere fact that they were written at the same time. Just like *Birds of America*, with its lists of everything that McCarthy holds dear, Vietnam became a matter of passionate personal interest for her. "We have been so used to Miss McCarthy's intelligence as a surgical weapon purely that it is a shock to find it suddenly warmed by compassion and courage," exclaims a reviewer of *Vietnam*.<sup>14</sup>

Writing about the American presence in Vietnam, McCarthy scrutinises the very same details of everyday life – no bean pots this time, but Coca Cola cans – that mirror the social tenor of the country and the danger of the disappearance of culture, concerns very similar to those that she addresses in *Vietnam*. McCarthy was herself well aware of the connection between her novel, which does not explicitly deal with the war in Vietnam, and her reports. When Carol Brightman asked McCarthy why most of her characters are so unreal, McCarthy replied: "I would say that Peter Levi is more real in *Birds of America*. That's the one that's closest to the Hanoi experience, both in time and everything else."<sup>15</sup> Here McCarthy implies that her critique of the physical and moral corruption of the modern American society as well as its influence on Saigon, is a look from another angle at the problem of the "death of Nature" in *Birds of America*. This "death" is opposed to the idea of the utopian society which McCarthy believed to have glimpsed in *Hanoi*, and which haunts Peter's idealist consciousness in Paris.

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<sup>14</sup> Alistair Cooke, "Mary McCarthy in Vietnam," review of *Vietnam*, by Mary McCarthy, *Chicago Sunday Sun-Times*, September 24, 1967, 15, Mary McCarthy Papers, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries, f. 28.5.

<sup>15</sup> Carol Brightman, "Mary, Still Contrary," *Nation*, May 19, 1984, 612, Mary McCarthy Papers, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries, f. 45.2.

About two hundred books were written on the war in Vietnam.<sup>16</sup> The majority of the writers in question registered clear opposition.<sup>17</sup> Women writers like Susan Sontag and Martha Gellhorn also wrote pieces on Vietnam, but McCarthy managed to be among the first:

The reports of those trips, at the time, had a certain pioneering character: in South Vietnam only John Steinbeck and Martha Gellhorn, among American writers, had preceded me, and, in the North, I was the first American novelist to descend at Hanoi airport. Normally, the impressions of novelists, whatever their prejudices, are received with some curiosity, since novelists themselves are curious – in both senses – beings.<sup>18</sup>

Her claim “I was the first” is a significant motif in the tradition of war reportage. “To be there,” in the war zone, is essential for the war reporter, for it serves the “myth of authenticity, a myth that implies that only the eyewitness on the battlefield is granted the authority to talk about the war.”<sup>19</sup> Kate McLoughlin points out that “being there is coterminous with war recording,” and to witness and experience war “confers the authority to describe war.”<sup>20</sup> According to McLoughlin, “being there *first*” supplies the reporter with additional importance, his or her “first” becoming “the ‘peg’ or ‘frame’ for the news material, transforming the reporter into the story.”<sup>21</sup> Since the war itself and war reportage are designated areas of almost exclusive male presence and participation, the gender of the war reporter becomes an issue of a specific set of problems and of heightened attention if the reporter happens to be female. “Women

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<sup>16</sup> Brightman, *Writing Dangerously*, 555.

<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Mirsky, “The War in Vietnam: Authors Take Sides,” *New York Times Book Review*, November 26, 1967, 10-14, Mary McCarthy Papers, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries, f.28.5.

<sup>18</sup> Susan Sontag, *Trip to Hanoi* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), Martha Gellhorn, *The Face of War*, (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1988), McCarthy, *The Seventeenth Degree*, 5.

<sup>19</sup> Bettina Hoffman, “On the Battlefield and Home Front: American Women Write Their Lives on the Vietnam War,” in: *Arms and the Self: War, Military, and Autobiographical Writing*, ed. Alex Vernon (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 2005), 203.

<sup>20</sup> Kate McLoughlin, *Martha Gellhorn: The War Writer in the Field and in the Text* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2007), 95, 96.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 99-100.

are immediately singular when they enter the male-dominated war zone, but, as carriers of information about conflict, they cannot count on an easy reception,” remarks McLoughlin in *Authoring War*.<sup>22</sup>

With very few exceptions, women are excluded from the front and combat, and their participation behind the lines of combat is often evaluated as secondary, even regarding their literary contribution. Christina Triezenberg laments this state of things in her essay “Bridging the Distances,” which analyses the Vietnam poems of Sharon Grant, Denise Levertov and others:

Coming from all walks of life and drawing on wartime experiences that are as compelling as those of the combat soldiers with whom they frequently found themselves interacting, women writers of the Vietnam era (...) produced a wide range of poetic works (...), providing us with a window of into the perspectives of women, who, in many cases, witnessed the war firsthand but whose voices have been effectively silenced.<sup>23</sup>

Women’s writing about the war tends to be dismissed, partly due to the spatial segregation of men and women which is interpreted as a reduction of “women’s access to knowledge and therefore reinforce[s] their lower status.”<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, the woman present in the warzone (or rather, its outskirts), is predestined to stand out, especially if she is a war reporter – a profession at once imbued with masculinity, almost like that of the soldier, but also marked by a certain “glamour” inherent in the very position of the correspondent, who is “different” from the largely anonymous mass of the soldiers.<sup>25</sup> In her substantial study *Martha Gellhorn: The War*

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<sup>22</sup> Kate McLoughlin, *Authoring War. The Literary Representation of War from the Iliad to Iraq* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 32.

<sup>23</sup> Christina Triezenberg, “Bridging the Distances: Women Writers Exploring the Nightmare of Vietnam,” *Women’s Studies: An Inter-Disciplinary Journal* 44.5, (2015): 683.

<sup>24</sup> Daphne Spain, quoted in McLoughlin, *Martha Gellhorn*, 103.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

*Writer in the Field and in the Text*, Kate McLoughlin aptly summarizes the effect of the figure that Gellhorn projected in her role as a female war reporter:

The woman writer is at once itinerant, deracinated, fearless, needy, staunchly independent, patronised, glamorous, masculinised, flighty, pleased with her own daring, often low in self-esteem and coolly humorous. Above all, she is *noticed*: the cynosure of field and text. As such, she alters the course of war, if only by diverting attention. Her being there is more than a simple act of presence.<sup>26</sup>

It is not accidental that McCarthy mentions Martha Gellhorn, “the doyenne of twentieth-century war correspondence,” next to herself while speaking about “being there.” But unlike her status as an “American writer,” McCarthy does not additionally emphasize her special position as a *female* war reporter. However, there are a few instances in both *Vietnam* and *Hanoi* that illustrate the course of reportage traditional and typical of the female war reporter, such as the locations that McCarthy describes in her texts, that are clearly the outskirts of the war zone. Furthermore, being in the war zone and writing about war, McCarthy highlights her femininity on several occasions, albeit in an oblique way. She recaptures in “How it Went” what a difficult decision it has been to go to Saigon – she did refuse the first offer from the *New York Review of Books* in 1966, for fear that her husband would have to resign from his public service position.<sup>27</sup> The scene of the “great moment,” when McCarthy and her diplomat husband James West finally agreed that she should go to Vietnam, “brings out the schoolgirl in McCarthy,” remarks her biographer Carol Brightman with warm irony. “I cried for happiness. We held hands,” remembers McCarthy.<sup>28</sup> Thus, she simultaneously positions herself as an ardent political activist and a loving, romantic woman. Her discussion with U.S. Ambassador Charles Bohlen about Vietnam in April 1965 (McCarthy tried to persuade him “to get out” of Vietnam) is marked by

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>27</sup> Brightman, *Writing Dangerously*, 533.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Brightman, *Writing Dangerously*, 534.

the fact that her high heels sank into the gravel of the Ambassador's garden path, making her position "shaky" in more than one sense of the word.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, McCarthy is careful to point out that she arrived in Hanoi with eight suitcases, "wearing a Chanel suit."<sup>30</sup> Male journalists and politics who met her in Saigon puzzle over her strange appearance in fatigues. William Tuohy, the *Los Angeles Times* correspondent, remembers:

I had seen the book jacket photographs of this sort of mysterious, elegant, dark-haired lady of the night and then she turns up on the Continental Shelf in a kind of a costume – wearing what we used to call fatigues. She looked silly in fatigues. That's what you wear in the field. She didn't wear them to show off. I think she just didn't know what to wear. Yet she was marvellous when she started talking.<sup>31</sup>

It is notable how Tuohy draws the line between McCarthy and himself in the group of his probably exclusively male colleagues – it is "she" versus "us," "she" in a silly costume, unable to distinguish between "the field" where she does not belong to in the first place, and a hotel where this kind of dress is not appropriate. Opposite "her" are "we," i.e. the male correspondents, who are very well informed about such things. The male correspondents then note (not without satisfaction) that at some point, "she" was wearing Chanel again. The heightened attention to femininity that is emphasized by McCarthy's high heels and high fashion, as well as its sudden absence, as in the case of "fatigues" perceived as a risible masquerade by the onlookers, further illustrates the complex position and reception of the female war reporter. McCarthy's role as the female war reporter in Vietnam is also illuminatingly characterized by the very title of Arthur Schlesinger's review of *Vietnam*: "The Dove that Flies like a

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<sup>29</sup> Mary McCarthy, letter to Hannah Arendt, April 2, 1965, in: *Between Friends*, 179, Brightman, *Writing Dangerously*, 537.

<sup>30</sup> Brightman, *Writing Dangerously*, 541.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Kiernan, *Seeing Mary Plain*, 579.

Hawk.”<sup>32</sup> The juxtaposition of the symbol of feminine peaceful powers and the clear-sighted bird of prey conveys the mixture of contrasting meanings reminiscent of McLoughlin’s characterisation of the female war reporter.

McCarthy, the novelist turned war reporter, the curious being in both senses, presents in her reports from Vietnam a specific approach, which, though “warmed by compassion and courage,” is distinctly recognizable as her typical prose. McCarthy’s not so cold eye registers hungry children, the terrible conditions of the refugee camps, the falling bombs and the destroyed country well enough, but her lens focuses with special sharpness on the clothes people (both Vietnamese and Americans) are wearing, the restaurants of Saigon and the food they serve, the look of the bricks that Americans are teaching the Vietnamese to build, and many other details of this sort. McCarthy also carefully records the officialese used by Americans and by the Vietnam politicians, the language of war and court trials.

McCarthy’s attention to these details is not used for the purposes of realistic writing or simple decorum, but to state once again that beauty is truth and truth beauty, and that ugliness, in whatever form it occurs, is an indicator of moral wrongdoing. This is what connects her Vietnam reports with *Birds of America*, a novel preoccupied with beauty and truth, and even with her travel guide *The Stones of Florence*, with its focus on Renaissance art and the strong lively city. This is especially evident in the second chapter of McCarthy’s *Hanoi*, “North Vietnamese Bucolic,” where she describes the beauty of the small country and its (in her opinion) efficient Communist government. McCarthy’s political journalism was criticised for its lack of objectivity – instead of exploring new territory, she turned to look for

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<sup>32</sup> Arthur Schlesinger, “Mary McCarthy: The Dove Who Flies Like a Hawk,” *Chicago Tribune Book World*, September 24, 1967, 1, 20, Mary McCarthy Papers, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries, f. 28.5.

familiar topics. Thus her reporting is simultaneously a break from her fictional writing, and a continuation of the ideas which are the intellectual core of it.

Four years after having travelled to North Vietnam, McCarthy attended the trial of Captain Ernest Medina. Medina was one of the leading military figures responsible for the massacre at the Mai Lai hamlet, in which more than one hundred civilians – women, babies, children, and old men – were murdered by American soldiers. “Kill everything that breathes,” is the command that the Captain is said to have given to his soldiers. Captain Medina was acquitted nonetheless, in a trial that never allowed a different outcome.

*Medina* was published in 1972. It is a series of character and portrait sketches, caricatures almost, which foretell in a way *The Mask of State: Watergate Portraits*, a report McCarthy wrote after attending the Watergate hearings. Like *Vietnam* and *Hanoi*, *Medina* analyses the often faulty language used by people to cover up meaning and deny personal responsibility, and presents the little ugly people responsible for horrible deeds in the same light of the *banality of evil* that was the shocking news of Hannah Arendt’s famous report on Eichmann in Jerusalem.<sup>33</sup> Arendt suggested to McCarthy that she make *The Mask of State* into an “Epilogue to the Vietnam-Book.”<sup>34</sup>

McCarthy herself felt that her involvement with Vietnam changed her: “Bit by bit, Vietnam had altered the pattern of our lives. (...) I had turned into a part-time itinerant journalist, with longish absences [and] separation.”<sup>35</sup> In the winter of 1972, when the carpet-bombing of North Vietnam began, she had another project in mind that, luckily, failed to materialise – to assemble a group of “leading Americans,”

<sup>33</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, 1963 (New York: Viking Press, 1969).

<sup>34</sup> Arendt refers to McCarthy’s plans of publishing all three of her Vietnam pieces in one volume – it did appear under the title *The Seventeenth Degree*, but *The Mask of State* was published separately. Hannah Arendt, letter to Mary McCarthy, in: *Between Friends*, 17 Aug. 1973, 342.

<sup>35</sup> McCarthy, “How It Went,” in: *The Seventeenth Degree*, 42.

herself included, “to go to Hanoi and live under the bombs as witnesses – in the Biblical, not the legal sense of the term.”<sup>36</sup> Hanoi did not allow this plan of McCarthy’s to come through – the airport was destroyed by the bombs – a wise decision indeed, for “witness” can mean also “martyr,” and the plan, to be of any value as an act of protest, did imply that some of these witnesses, if not all of them, should not return from under the bombs that were falling on Hanoi in 1972. This willingness to sacrifice one’s life to stop the war is somewhat shocking in its passion, for Mary McCarthy, living a comfortable life in Paris at that time, could easily have stayed aloof and away from the risks of war in a far away country.

In the first part of this chapter I will focus on the details that McCarthy chooses for her description of Saigon and Hanoi – in Saigon it is the prevailing ugliness that gets her attention, in Hanoi the hidden beauty – and point out similar elements in her fictional writing. I will show in the second part of the chapter, that even as a journalist, she does not present a realist view of the events, but writes her account with the “swerve and swoop” of perspective that is the characteristic mark of her fictional writing. While McCarthy’s idiosyncratic view (especially in her account of the visit to Hanoi) was regarded as a great fault by many reviewers, I believe McCarthy’s idealized image of Hanoi to be the logical consequence of the main beliefs found in her prose.

In the third part of the chapter the topic of inadequate language used in war and politics will be in the foreground. I will present parallels to McCarthy’s findings in Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and George Orwell’s essay “Politics and the English Language.” McCarthy’s literary documents of her functioning as a witness in the Vietnam war and the Medina trial are part of the documentation of the period which

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 46.

Shoshana Felman calls “the era of the Holocaust, of Hiroshima, of Vietnam – the age of testimony.”<sup>37</sup>

McCarthy’s ardent participation in the giving of evidence unites her with other female writers such as Rebecca West, Martha Gellhorn and Susan Sontag, whose accounts of the Nuremberg trials and visits to Vietnam can be related to McCarthy’s findings. Yet Mary’s unique position as a factual emigrant – she moved to Paris in 1962 – continuing to be immensely involved in American affairs, makes her stand out once again. The very fact that she chose to live in exile offered some new ground for the critical reception of her journalism with its unforgiving look at American politics. The celebrated American author of a vastly successful novel (*The Group* reached number one on *The Times* bestseller list) turned somewhat suddenly into the émigré author of barely read and heavily criticized political pamphlets.<sup>38</sup> The change is all the more surprising, since the subject matter of the bestseller novel and of the pamphlets remains largely the same – both the novel and the journalistic reports carry McCarthy’s disturbing sense of culture becoming thinner all the time.

### **1. The Devil of Detail – Saigon**

“I confess that when I went to Vietnam early last February I was looking for material damaging to the American interest and that I found it.”<sup>39</sup> The first sentence of *Vietnam* sounds outrageous in the light of the traditionally normative American patriotism. The few reviews that McCarthy’s slim pamphlet received attacked the report for its introductory sentence. “Vietnam Study More Wrath Than Reason,” titles

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<sup>37</sup> Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 53.

<sup>38</sup> Kiernan, *Seeing Mary Plain*, 517.

<sup>39</sup> McCarthy, “Vietnam,” in: *The Seventeenth Degree*, 63.

a snippet from the *Nashville Banner*.<sup>40</sup> It makes one wonder whether the reviewer has read anything of *Vietnam* beyond its first words. The three little newspaper clippings, each of them only a couple of paragraphs, are collected on one piece of paper in the McCarthy Archives of Vassar College – all three clippings are from provincial newspapers, and all three of them seem to represent the angry voice of rural America, distinctly pro-war (and, so it seems, anti-intellectual). Indeed, for the first ten years the majority of the population supported the war in Vietnam. In his *Decade of Shocks*, Tom Shachtman states:

In 1965, a poll taken on campuses reported 91 per cent of the students supported the American participation in the war. (...) By mid-1970, Louis Harris found 91 per cent of the younger population and a majority of the population as a whole to be anti-war.<sup>41</sup>

McCarthy wrote *Vietnam* as early as 1967, almost a decade ahead of the swing in public opinion. However, to oppose the war from the beginning was common among the New York Intellectuals to whom she never ceased to belong. Reviews from that circle struck an entirely different note than provincial criticism: Arthur Schlesinger mentions the provocative first sentence in his review, but views McCarthy's report as "a profoundly sad and moving evocation of the American tragedy."<sup>42</sup> Alistair Cooke from the *Chicago Times* sees McCarthy's report as another "clinical examination of adipose mental tissue [that is] her first and best speciality."<sup>43</sup>

Going to Vietnam, McCarthy saw her role there not only as the one of the "curious – in both senses" novelist, but, perhaps even more importantly, as an intellectual. One of the early crucial points in McCarthy's evolution as an intellectual was her public

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<sup>40</sup> Nicholas Sanders, "Vietnam Study More Wrath Than Reason," review of *Vietnam*, by Mary McCarthy, *Nashville Banner*, September 15, 1967, 29, Mary McCarthy Papers, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries, f.28.5

<sup>41</sup> Shachtman, *Decade of Shocks*, 121.

<sup>42</sup> Schlesinger, "Dove Who Flies Like a Hawk," 1.

<sup>43</sup> Cooke, "Mary McCarthy in Vietnam," 15.

expression of the opinion that Leon Trotsky was entitled to a hearing as described in McCarthy's essay "My Confession" – after this event, the young woman found her name on the letterhead of the "Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky," a life-changing moment for McCarthy. Carol Gelderman notes this in her biography *Mary McCarthy: A Life*:

What the Moscow trials did, actually, was to turn Mary McCarthy into an intellectual in the French sense of the word – a literary person who is concerned with public affairs.<sup>44</sup>

Although political journalism in the form of first-person testimony was a new form for McCarthy, the foundation for her personal concern was laid as early as 1936. Before Vietnam, McCarthy was longing to take political action for some time – after World War II she tried to set up "Europe-America Groups," for the "regular channels of communication between American and European intellectuals."<sup>45</sup> The project failed, and McCarthy wrote to her close friend, the Italian intellectual Nicola Chiaromonte:

I am absolutely sick of the way I am living, the lack of accomplishment and seriousness, and one year succeeding another with nothing's being changed.<sup>46</sup>

McCarthy saw in her report from Saigon, in her own serious involvement, the opportunity to make a change. The moral duty of an intellectual, was, in her opinion, to protest the war, and, perhaps, to end it. "Get out!" is the closing passage of *Vietnam*. Diana Trilling attacked McCarthy for not offering more detailed advice than "to get out":

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<sup>44</sup> Gelderman, *Mary McCarthy*, 77.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

I confront the grim reality that in withdrawing from Vietnam we consign untold numbers of Southeast Asian opponents of Communism to their death (...). And if, unhappily, I have no answer to the torturing question of what can be done to save these distant lives, I don't regard this as proof of my moral purity (...). I hope that everyone, including intellectuals, will keep on trying to find the answer I lack. For without this effort the moral intransigence for which Miss McCarthy speaks is its own kind of callousness.<sup>47</sup>

McCarthy replied in a public letter:

In fact, intellectuals and artists, as is well known, are not especially gifted for practical politics. (...) What we *can* do, perhaps, better than the next man, is smell a rat. That is what has occurred with the war in Vietnam, and our problem is to make others smell it too.<sup>48</sup>

Sabrina Fuchs Abrams sees Trilling's and McCarthy's debate as the one addressing "the question of the responsibility of the intellectual and the role of the public intellectual." She asks the following:

Is the intellectual by definition alienated from society? Should the intellectual be engaged in the disinterested pursuit of truth or should he or she be politically engaged? Can the intellectual be at once disinterested and politically engaged? Should the intellectual act as moral arbiter of society, and if so, is it enough to judge right from wrong, or should the intellectual be engaged in real politik?<sup>49</sup>

McCarthy sees her responsibility as an intellectual fulfilled in the obligation of bearing witness, of providing the reader with insights, of enabling him/her to "smell the rat." Trilling regards this position as a limitation "of the political role of intellectuals wholly to that of dissent," and accuses McCarthy of "apocalypticism, which (...) [is] mere romancing."<sup>50</sup> While the details of McCarthy's feud with Diana Trilling lie not only in the differing views of the two women, but also in their

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<sup>47</sup> Diana Trilling, letter to the editors of *The New York Review of Books*, January 18, 1968, quoted in Kiernan, *Seeing Mary Plain*, 585.

<sup>48</sup> Mary McCarthy, foreword to *Hanoi* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1974), xxv.

<sup>49</sup> Sabrina Fuchs Abrams, "Women on War: Mary McCarthy, Susan Sontag, and Diana Trilling Debate the Vietnam War," *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 37.8 (2008): 988.

<sup>50</sup> Diana Trilling, letters to the editors of *The New York Review of Books*, 5 Nov. 1967 and 15 Jan. 1968, Mary McCarthy Papers, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries, f. 28.3.

occasional antagonism, and are thus not vital for the present discussion, Trilling utters two terms that can be considered key in the understanding of McCarthy's work on *Vietnam*, and, even more so, *Hanoi*. Trilling mentions "dissent" and "romancing," the words that characterise major aspects of McCarthy's views on public affairs. The title of her collections of essays *On the Contrary* is once again an illustration for the position of dissent, which is one of McCarthy's trademarks. Her inclination towards romanticism is brought up several times, as an asset, not a liability, as another detail adding to the outsider position of Mary McCarthy. In "My Confession," she states: "All through college, my official political philosophy was royalism; though I was not much interested in politics, it irritated me to be told that you 'could not turn the clock back.'" <sup>51</sup> McCarthy's romanticism is starkly visible in *Hanoi* (especially interesting in the light of her sympathizing with royalism), which will be discussed later, but her voice of dissent is heard clearly in *Vietnam*.

What is exactly "the rat" of Vietnam war, that intellectuals were to "smell," in McCarthy's opinion? What are the damaging things to American interest, which she found during her trip to Vietnam and which infuriated some of her reviewers? McCarthy visits hospitals in South Vietnam, refugee camps, and even a leprosarium destroyed by American bombs – few German volunteers are trying to rebuild it. It is remarkable how accurately her itinerary follows the main stops reserved for women in war. The outskirts of war, such as refugee camps and hospitals, places of "waiting and recovery," the "temporal and spatial borders of war" were known in the nineteenth century as traditional for the "woman's angle."<sup>52</sup> In spite of their distance from the

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<sup>51</sup> McCarthy, "My Confession," in: *On the Contrary*, 77.

<sup>52</sup> McLoughlin, *Martha Gellhorn*, 105.

front, these places show “the price of war” very clearly.<sup>53</sup> Yet McCarthy’s descriptions do not linger on the human suffering most visible there – she chooses to focus on the more abstract problems of cause and effect instead. She sees schools built and presented by Americans, but the schools remain empty:

A young Vietnamese social worker said sadly that he wished the Americans would stop building schools. ‘They don’t realize – we have no teachers for them.’ Yet the little cream school house is essential to the American dream of what we are doing in Vietnam, and it is essential for the soldiers that in *Viet Cong* hamlets no schooling is permitted.<sup>54</sup>

In the Marine hospital there are Vietnamese children treated for malnutrition, who have to be sent back to their parents as soon as their condition improves, and stories about a small Vietnamese girl who was wounded by Marine bullets and was given many dolls as presents from the soldiers who wounded her. McCarthy writes:

To spoil a child you have injured and send her back to her parents, with her dolls as souvenirs, is pharisee virtue, just as it is pharisaical to fill a child’s stomach and send it home to be hungry again.<sup>55</sup>

She describes in acerbic detail one refugee camp that the German volunteers – the Catholic Knights of Malta – show her as “typical” of South Vietnam; the American soldiers presented her a showcase camp before, Phu Cuong, where everything seemed to function. But the reality of the majority of the camps is different:

As I walked (...) through rows of communal huts, we came to a stagnant duck pond, about ten or fifteen feet wide, in which some ducklings in fact were swimming amid floating tin cans and other refuse. This was the water facility – the *only* water for drinking, washing, and cooking to supply 700 people. (...) There were no sanitary

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<sup>53</sup> “I was a great frequenter of hospitals because that’s where you really see the price of war,” remembers Martha Gellhorn. Quoted in McLoughlin, *Martha Gellhorn*, 106.

<sup>54</sup> McCarthy, *Vietnam*, 29-30.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

facilities of any kind; we saw women and children squatting; garbage was strewn in front of the huts, which had earth floors and inflammable old straw roofing.<sup>56</sup>

The thoughtless sentimentality of American officials makes them look proudly on school houses that nobody needs, and attend to refugee camps which they created with their own hands. The refugees in these camps were created by Americans too, for the rural population of South Vietnam was made homeless by raids on their hamlets, in search of the Viet Cong. It is the American “imperial frame of mind” that McCarthy demonstrates exposing this short-sightedness, this “imperial myopia” bordering on stupidity – this is the main “rat” she “smells.”<sup>57</sup> McCarthy, in her role as an intellectual, acts here as a “moral arbiter,” identifying what is right and wrong, passing moral judgement without the offer of a suggestion for a better course, the aspect that infuriated Diana Trilling.<sup>58</sup>

McCarthy also notices something else, something that reminds us what kind of “American novelist” is doing the war reporting in *Vietnam*. The thing that stinks as badly for her as the rat of the self-made refugees is the literal ugliness that the American presence in Vietnam brings to the country:

At any rate, one thing was clear. Before the Americans came, there could have been no rusty Coca-Cola or beer cans or empty whisky bottles. They had brought them. It was this indestructible mass-production garbage, floating in swamps and creeks, lying about in fields and along the roads that made the country, which must once have been beautiful, hideous.<sup>59</sup>

A review of *Birds of America* titled “Frozen Foods– the New Villain,” mocks McCarthy’s disdain with mass production:

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>57</sup> Schlesinger, “Dove Who Flies Like a Hawk,” 20.

<sup>58</sup> Fuchs Abrams, “Women on War,” 994.

<sup>59</sup> McCarthy, *Vietnam*, 59.

The virtues of old-fashioned cookery, gardening, needlework, and domestic craftsmanship of every kind are not merely extolled in this novel, they are garlanded with lists, inventories, whole catalogues of items from some ideal larder (...).<sup>60</sup>

Yet here the villain is plain and quite deadly – in McCarthy’s inventory of Vietnam it is the American presence. The culture of convenience products functions as its sidekick, making the bad refugee camps worse, adding to the destruction of nature by napalm and bombs the indestructible rusty Coca-Cola cans. Nature, it seems, is an almost personalised concept in McCarthy’s perception, and as much in need of protection and fair treatment as the fragile Vietnamese civilians are.

McCarthy is aesthetically repelled by more than just the things obviously harmful to the environment, as the unrecyclable garbage just mentioned. The American “improvements” of Vietnamese life, the innovations artificially brought into the culture of rice farmers and owners of water cattle, belong for her to the same sickening category as the rusty cans:

The evacuees were learning to make bricks out of mud, water, and a little cement for the support of their future homes, using an American moulding process called Cinvaram – all over Vietnam, whenever the Americans were “pacifying,” there was Cinvaram, a singularly ugly grey brick.<sup>61</sup>

McCarthy sees the “actual results” of the American presence in “uglification, moral and physical.”<sup>62</sup> The idea of progress, never very appealing to her even in its natural environment, the United States (as McCarthy had graphically shown in *The Group*), becomes a distorted monster in the small underdeveloped country such as Vietnam.

Tom Shachtman quotes Ronald Reagan’s line from his “General Electric” speech in 1950 (he was spokesman for this company at the time): “Progress is our most

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<sup>60</sup> Vandler, “Frozen Foods a New Villain.”

<sup>61</sup> McCarthy, *Vietnam*, 46.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

important product.”<sup>63</sup> More than that, Shachtman views progress as “an idea central to the American identity.”<sup>64</sup> McCarthy describes the downside of progress in the American context in *Birds of America*, in the lists of things one cannot get from stores anymore, falsely understood as “a course of home economics”; but the results are similar even in Vietnam – the narrowing of choices, of free will, the inevitable destruction of nature and “bad products driving out good.”<sup>65</sup> Progress might be the most important American product, but it is a bad product, like the frozen turkeys covered in vegetable oil, which McCarthy complained of in her interview with Jean-François Revel:

I don't think there's a natural selective process in masses of people that causes them to choose the better product. Well, I'll take the example of a turkey. I just bought a turkey at the U.S. Commissary. It was a frozen turkey. I don't like frozen food, anyway; but normally American frozen turkeys are better than French fresh turkeys. But I read all this literature on the outside of the turkey, and it explained that this turkey had been "deep basted" with vegetable oil. The corpse had been injected (the word "basted" of course is hilarious in this context) with vegetable oil. Now I'm sure that next year or two years from now you won't be able to buy a turkey that this hasn't happened to. And the reason is not that it tastes better – I thought it was rather poor actually – but that you don't have to baste it in the oven. So people would rather have an inferior turkey and not have to work.<sup>66</sup>

This is a graphic example of McCarthy's good housekeeping, which infuriated her reviewers – so much space and energy given to a frozen turkey – but it is also an example of a typical McCarthyan argument. A change in turkey sales points to the change in American society, the ugly American brick points to the ugly American presence. The turkey and the brick never fully assume the role of the symbol, they do not really stand for something grand, but they show the direction, they work as signals if not symbols, as is usual for McCarthy's objects.

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<sup>63</sup> Shachtman, *Decade of Schocks*, 197.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

<sup>65</sup> Revel, “Miss McCarthy Explains.”

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

The idea of American progress makes not only the countryside of Vietnam ugly, but adds a special ugliness to the war in Vietnam itself:

The absence of austerity that normally accompanies war, of civilian sacrifices, rationing, shortages, blackouts (...) makes this war seem singularly immoral and unheroic to those who are likely to die in it – for what?<sup>67</sup>

Saigon looks like a giant PX store to McCarthy, the people there dressed as if they were on holiday, conversing about the property they might buy and the profits they might get from it. These are small details of the larger picture, of Saigon mutating into a big American city:

Saigon has a smog problem, like New York and Los Angeles, a municipal garbage problem, a traffic problem, power failures, juvenile delinquency. In short, it meets most of the criteria of a modern Western city.<sup>68</sup>

The criteria of a modern Western city in a not modern Asian country, which is also at war, seem grotesquely out of place. The death of nature, a great worry of McCarthy's, seems to have already happened there.

For McCarthy, nature is linked to beauty, and ugliness brings the threat of destruction to both of them. Hannah Arendt, whom McCarthy consulted about the Kantian ideas in *Birds of America*, gave in one of her letters a quote from Kant explaining the connection of nature and beauty – they are seen as one – and stressing the importance of nature for man: “The beautiful things in the world (meaning natural things) indicate that man is made for and fits into the world and that his perception of things agrees with the laws of his perception.”<sup>69</sup>

McCarthy's eye focusing on “singularly ugly grey bricks” and rusty cans afloat on dirty duck ponds is a sign that there is something wrong with human perception and

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<sup>67</sup> McCarthy, *Vietnam*, 19.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>69</sup> Hannah Arendt, postcard to Mary McCarthy, 14 Nov. 1970, in: *Between Friends*, 268.

its laws. The world created by war is not made for man and man cannot fit in it. The absence of the beautiful and natural in this world is thus a logical consequence of this state of things.

But there remains the question how personal this observation actually is – after all, the reader of *Vietnam* gets the very specific view of a writer, not the objective report of a professional journalist. *Vietnam* contains elements that are a staple of *Birds of America* – the importance of nature and civilisation’s threat to it, the time-telling objects and their deterioration, progress obliterating culture. The catalogues of tastes and ideas are just as personal in the political *Vietnam* as they are in *Birds of America* – they are distinctly McCarthyan. McCarthy’s oscillation between the personal and political in her reporting tends to gravitate more towards the personal. In *Vietnam*, the view of the “curious writer” seems to show another interesting angle of the problem of the American presence in South Vietnam. Her look at Hanoi, on the other hand, is an entirely different matter.

## **2. Hanoi – The Locus Amoenus**

Mary McCarthy’s second pamphlet *Hanoi*, written after the trip to Communist North Vietnam, which she considered far more dangerous than her first trip, stands almost in complete contrast to her previous work *Vietnam*. The austerity and the beauty of nature, which she missed so much in South Vietnam, is found amidst the danger of falling bombs and a Communist government. While *Vietnam* was liked for its “sharp, witty, angry look at some of the greater stupidities of the American war machine,” *Hanoi* struck many readers and reviewers as an immensely unrealistic image of the Communist country:

In her own eyes, this trip had something fabulous about it, of a balloonist's expedition or an ascendancy into heaven. Where to Americans of an earlier generation North Vietnam was the incredible country of Ho Chi Minh, Vo Nguen Giap and the hated Cong, to Miss McCarthy North Vietnam was, very simply, dreamland.<sup>70</sup>

Here, the reviewer Ward Just only slightly alters McCarthy's first paragraph of her unflattering essay of Simone de Beauvoir's visit to the United States.<sup>71</sup> It does not seem to be such a witty idea if one actually compares the quotation above to the original paragraph of McCarthy's "Mlle. Gulliver en Amérique." For McCarthy lists de Beauvoir as yet another French person looking for typically American clichés – where de Beauvoir finds "movieland," her predecessors found the novels of Fenimore Cooper and the adventurous land of "redskins". Ward Just's examples of the opinions which "Americans of an earlier generation" held thus turn into the same ungrounded clichés that he blames on McCarthy. "Dreamland" as it may be, McCarthy's image of North Vietnam is free from stereotypes. It is rather made up of deeply personal associations and elements central to McCarthy's sense of herself as a writer.

McCarthy's description of her first ride through Hanoi removes all doubt as to where her sympathies might be:

We were passing pretty rows of small, compact trees – perhaps pruned fruit trees; it was too dark to tell – a pre-alert to the fact that Hanoi is a shady, leafy city, like Minneapolis or Warsaw; like Minneapolis, too, it has lakes, treated as municipal feature, with parks and promenades. The people are proud of the trees, particularly the giant camphor (...). Near the bombed brick house where we waited during the alert, there was a big bare blasted trunk, maybe an oak, which was putting out a few new leaves; my companions eagerly pointed them out, making sure I did not miss the symbol of resistance and rebirth. To the North Vietnamese, I soon became aware,

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<sup>70</sup> Tom Buckley's and Ward Just's reviews of McCarthy's *Hanoi* in *Washington Post*, quoted in Kiernan, *Seeing Mary Plain*, 593-594.

<sup>71</sup> "In her own eyes, this trip had something fabulous about it, of a balloonist's expedition or a descent in a diving bell. Where to Frenchmen of an earlier generation, America was the incredible country of *les peaux rouges* and the novels of Fenimore Cooper, to Mlle de Beauvoir America was, very simply, movieland." Mary McCarthy, "Mlle Gulliver en Amérique," in: *On the Contrary*, 24.

everything is now a symbol, an ideogram, expressing the natural resolve to overcome. All of Nature is with them, not just the “brother socialist countries.”<sup>72</sup>

McCarthy’s associations in this excerpt bring up significant details from her past – Hanoi reminds her of Minneapolis, a city where she spent many years of her childhood. Warsaw is the capital of Poland which McCarthy had loved since she met her husband, the diplomat James West, there (“One catches faint nuances of Darling, they’re playing our country,” quotes Carol Gelderman).<sup>73</sup> The oak with new leaves as a symbol of resistance and rebirth unavoidably reminds one of Leo Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* – a tell-tale title in the context of McCarthy’s mission – and Prince Andrei’s oak. A wink at Leo Tolstoy here appears to be another deeply personal piece from McCarthy’s jewellery box of reminiscences, which she holds up in the passage above – Tolstoy was the writer whom McCarthy had always admired most. In her essay “Characters in Fiction,” McCarthy admits: “I (...) would like, more than anything else, to write like Tolstoy; I imagine that I still see something resembling the world Tolstoy saw.”<sup>74</sup>

The oak, which Prince Andrei sees at first as old and leafless, and then a second time in its fresh green splendour, is an easily decoded symbol of Prince Andrei’s psychological state, and also an image of deep changes in his world view. A little later, McCarthy describes Colonel Ha Van Lau, “a delicate featured, slender, refined officer from Hue, of mandarin ancestry,” and admits that “he reminded [her] strongly of Prince Andrei in *War and Peace*.”<sup>75</sup> This comparison is extremely flattering to the Vietnamese colonel, for Prince Andrei is one of the most admired heroes of world literature – *War and Peace*, it seems, was on McCarthy’s mind a few times in Hanoi.

<sup>72</sup> Mary McCarthy, *Hanoi*, 9.

<sup>73</sup> Gelderman, *Mary McCarthy*, 226-227.

<sup>74</sup> McCarthy, “Characters in Fiction,” in: *On the Contrary*, 275.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

The British correspondent for *The Observer* Gavin Young, whom McCarthy asked of his opinion on *Hanoi*, did find Mary's literary associations questionable:

I thought she took an overly strong unqualified line. When I said that to her at the time, she laughed it off by saying that she'd met a very handsome North Vietnamese officer who took her around – he was so handsome and so charming she had to believe every word he said, how could she not.<sup>76</sup>

“Falling for a pretty face at [her] age” may indeed seem inappropriate for the “first lady of American letters,” but this detail cannot be considered in isolation. Firstly, it is again an instance of heightened visibility of McCarthy's femininity in her role as a female war reporter. Here, McCarthy is once again “the schoolgirl,” as characterized by Carol Brightman. Secondly, it is indeed another illustration of Diana Trilling's remark on McCarthy's “romancing,” which is expressed here much more strongly than in *Vietnam* (if it was there at all). Elizabeth Hardwick remembers McCarthy's plan to sit under the American bombs as a witness in a similar light:

I was actually there when she was planning to go to Hanoi during the Christmas bombings. To sit and be bombed. The infinite romantic playacting, it's so different from what you see from other people in the world. Other people were more realistic. That she could be so analytical and so romantic is bizarre.<sup>77</sup>

Being romantic about Vietnam before going there seemed to be common among intellectuals opposing the war – McCarthy only managed to maintain her romanticism longer, and was willing to risk her own life for it. Susan Sontag, who took her trip to Hanoi two months after McCarthy, admits that during the long crisis of the Vietnam war she had created a “Vietnam of her own” inside herself, as the French-Swiss film director Jean-Luc Godard advised in his movie *Loin de Vietnam* (“Far from

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<sup>76</sup> Kiernan, *Seeing Mary Plain*, 593.

<sup>77</sup> quoted in Kiernan, *Seeing Mary Plain*, 600.

Vietnam”), not unlike the “dreamland” that McCarthy was accused of.<sup>78</sup> This inner image, writes Sontag, made her first acquaintance with the real country resemble meeting a film star of whom one had dreamed of for a long time. The disappointment of such a meeting (the film star turned out to be smaller, less attractive, and generally different) was the logical consequence of the previous idealisation.<sup>79</sup> Sontag complains throughout her report how inaccessible North Vietnam and its people, admirable as they may be, seem to her, how impossible they are to understand – she compares the North Vietnamese society to a two-dimensional “ethnic fairy tale world,” immersed in Communist propaganda.<sup>80</sup>

The journalist Frances Fitzgerald noticed the similarities between Sontag’s report and McCarthy’s *Hanoi*:

[McCarthy] and Sontag had done the same thing. The books were more or less travelogues. Neither of them understood the Vietnamese very well (...). Looking at the books now you find them less than a huge contribution to one’s knowledge of the Vietnamese.<sup>81</sup>

While Susan Sontag was constantly aware of her limitations in the communication with North Vietnamese, making them the tenor of her report, Mary McCarthy did not voice them at all. In *Hanoi* she focuses on nature and objects, and makes them speak to her instead of people. She finds the presence of Nature in the Kantian sense in North Vietnam in folk art – she speaks of being surprised by the classic relief sculptures of “delicate, naturalistic representations of plants, birds, animals and flowers – much more typical of Vietnamese art than grotesque images of gods and the

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<sup>78</sup> Susan Sontag, *Eine Reise nach Hanoi (Trip to Hanoi)*, transl. Anne Uhde (Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1969), 12.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>81</sup> Kiernan, *Seeing Mary Plain*, 595.

Buddha.”<sup>82</sup> It is in Hanoi that she finds true Vietnamese culture; in Saigon street vendors were selling American cigarettes and there was “hardly anything native to buy, except flowers and edibles and firecrackers at Tet time and – oh yes – souvenir dolls.”<sup>83</sup> The North Vietnamese bring Nature even into their military tactics – “the abundant use of camouflage – exuberant springs of plants, fronds, branches, leaves of coconut and banana on helmets.”<sup>84</sup> This stimulates the line of McCarthy’s associations further – she sees the camouflage as “ritual decoration,” “palm” and “laurel,” that remind her of “Palm Sunday in a Catholic country” and “a pre-Easter mood.”<sup>85</sup>

Catholicism is again a personal memory of McCarthy’s – as described in *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, the Catholic religion was an important source of beauty in a miserable routine:

Our ugly church and parochial school provided me with my only aesthetic outlet, in the words of the Mass and the litanies and the old Latin hymns, in the Easter lilies around the altar, rosaries, ornamented prayer books, votive lamps, holy cards in gold (...). I threw myself into it with ardor, this sensuous life (...). (MCG 18)

“There is a good deal in North Vietnam that unexpectedly recalls the past,” admits McCarthy and compares a highway “deeply pitted by pellets” to a “bumpy road in Minnesota” together with the memory of her grandmother in “a motoring hat and duster.”

The old-fashioned school-desks and geometry lesson on the blackboard in an evacuated school, the kerosene lamps in the villages (...) brought back buried fragments of my personal history. I was aware of a psychic upheaval, a sort of identity

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<sup>82</sup> McCarthy, *Hanoi*, 11.

<sup>83</sup> McCarthy, *Vietnam*, 14.

<sup>84</sup> McCarthy, *Hanoi*, 12.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

crisis, as when a bomb lays bare the medieval foundations of a house thought to be modern.<sup>86</sup>

McCarthy sees North Vietnam as “pioneer country,” with unforded streams and a still wild west, and ethnic minorities who recall “American Indians.” “Pioneer country”, for her, is a synonym for *locus amoenus*, including the classical characteristics of trees, water and grass. In *Birds of America*, the harmonious time Peter spends with his mother in Rocky Port makes him imagine “that he and his mother were pioneers, exploring a wilderness unknown to the aborigines.” This notion gains support not only from their lack of friends and of a car and a television set but also from the ghostly music of the clavichord, from an American history course he is taking, and from the meals his mother dishes up.<sup>87</sup> Progress is far away in the Levi household, and McCarthy presents the meals from the “old Fannie Farmer cookbook” – “pot roast and New England boiled dinner and fried chicken, and lobsters and scallops and bluefish” – as significant elements of the “life of virtue” that Peter believes he and his mother lead.

The image of the ideal place is reinforced by McCarthy’s memory of another beloved city she associates with Hanoi – Florence, about which she wrote a guide on history and art, *The Stones of Florence*. The loudspeaker outside her hotel window in Hanoi “recalled the loud-speakers during a spring election campaign,” but just as with *War and Peace*, Florence remains on her mind throughout *Hanoi*.<sup>88</sup> Speaking of Vietnamese people she liked best, the Annamites, she draws Italian parallels:

The Annamites are not well-liked by other Vietnamese, or so I was told in the South. They are the Tuscans of the country, while the people of Tonkin are Milanese, and the Cochin Chinese are the Neapolitans or Sicilians. Annam, like Tuscany, is looked upon

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 15-16.

<sup>87</sup> McCarthy, *Birds of America*, 31.

<sup>88</sup> McCarthy, *Hanoi*, 15.

by its neighbors as a basket of crabs – difficult, self-sufficient, proud, provincial, obstinately ‘local,’ frugal, tradition bound, vain of its past.<sup>89</sup>

The Annamites also often claimed royal, mandarin ancestry, and thus further resemble the Florentines:

The tradition of Rome is palpable in Florence (...). Florence was the ‘daughter’, Rome the ‘mother.’ The Florentines of the Middle Ages boasted of the tradition, claiming descent from noble Roman families. (...) These legends and genealogical fantasies struck a core of truth. The sobriety and decorum of Florence is the *gravitas* of Rome – a pioneer, frontier Rome, set in the wild mountains, on a rushing river.<sup>90</sup>

*Stones of Florence* was written about a decade earlier than *Hanoi* and *Birds of America*, but here too one finds the key words of “pioneer” and “frontier,” the “wild mountains” and “rushing river” – the notion of the ideal place remained unchanged for McCarthy. Nature and culture (“nature being tended and being taken care of by one of nature’s products called man,” as Hannah Arendt defined “culture”) in a working relationship with each other are essential elements composing the ideal place.

Outside Hanoi, McCarthy sees “schools in the fields (...) dispersed over miles of flat landscape, hidden under thatched roofs of coconut palm or straw, so that they are almost invisible from the air,” and gets the feeling “that something marvellous, in the old sense, [is] astir.”<sup>91</sup> Field hospitals, hidden in the mountains, trained doctors dispersed in traditional Thai communities, who successfully teach the “primitive families” to boil their water and keep their pigs in clean pigsties, are other examples of North Vietnamese techniques, which stand in stark contrast to the American “pacifying” and their “singularly ugly grey bricks,” and which impress McCarthy.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 112-113.

<sup>90</sup> Mary McCarthy, *The Stones of Florence and Venice Observed*, 1956 (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 29.

<sup>91</sup> McCarthy, *Hanoi*, 53.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 62-63.

Her sense of “something marvellous” is mainly provided by that industrious relationship of nature and culture.

McCarthy is respectful of the North Vietnamese Communists, but not entirely uncritical of them – she does notice a lack of individualism in the North, the “perfect conduct” of little children strikes her as somewhat artificial, and seeing the geometrically laid out rice-fields, she regrets “the crazy quilt” of “the classic pattern of individual small-scale ownership.”<sup>93</sup> But these are very small scruples. In 1965, two years before going to Vietnam the first time, McCarthy wrote to Arendt: “To me, there is no doubt that in Indochina it would be better for the vast majority to be Red.”<sup>94</sup> In 1967, Senator Fulbright arrived at the same conclusion: “Some countries probably are better off under communist rule than they were under the preceding regimes; (...) some people may even want to live under Communism.”<sup>95</sup>

In the government of North Vietnam, McCarthy sees the “elitism and aristocracy of politics.”<sup>96</sup> She wrote in a letter to Dwight MacDonald in 1969: “A virtuous tyranny (...), the only people’s democracy run on aristocratic principles and largely by aristocratic personals with a traditional code of manners and morals.”<sup>97</sup> McCarthy was criticised for this view, especially since the accusation of elitism was common for the general evaluation of her work. Doris Grumbach, the author of *The Company She Kept*, writes: “McCarthy’s fiction suffers from that insistent voice, which sounds everywhere in her work. It is always elitist.”<sup>98</sup> It seems, the roots for McCarthy’s elitism could be traced back to her romanticism and her early royalist views, supported by the catalogues of choice objects present in most of her novels, and

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>94</sup> Mary McCarthy, letter to Hannah Arendt, 12 Sep. 1967, in: *Between Friends*, 204.

<sup>95</sup> Quoted in Shachtman, *Decade of Schocks*, 176.

<sup>96</sup> Brightman, *Writing Dangerously*, 545-546.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 545.

<sup>98</sup> Quoted in Gelderman, *Mary McCarthy*, 169-170.

overly present in *Birds of America*. Indeed, McCarthy's protagonist Peter Levi is also accused of snobbery:

Both Peter and his mother are characterized as liberal humanitarian (...). Yet all their emotional and aesthetical responses are conservative and what is currently called elitist.<sup>99</sup>

Peter is highly critical of the ideas of equality, especially as Parisians understand it:

I've decided that may be why Parisians are so sullen and why they drink. They thought of equality first. My theory is that equality is a sort of poison; once it got into the human bloodstream, nobody could eliminate it. It just stayed there, corroding us.<sup>100</sup>

Through Peter's words, McCarthy speaks of her own aversion to "everybody being equal."<sup>101</sup> The Women's Liberation Movement, blossoming in the late sixties, did not "say hello to [her] at all" for this very reason, so it seems.<sup>102</sup> In the interview with François Bondy in 1972 McCarthy stated: "My theme is equality."<sup>103</sup> Her dealing with it is less concerned with "equal rights," but more with the reconciliation of the "belief in democracy with a desire to protect what is fundamentally exclusive and elitist."<sup>104</sup>

According to McCarthy's value system, the exclusivity and elitism are mainly the consequence of high moral qualities rather than actual privileges of a particular social position – hence her admiration for the austerity of life of the North Vietnamese whom she perceives as noble and courageous. McCarthy firmly believed in the

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<sup>99</sup> John W. Alridge, "Egalitarian Snobs," review of *Birds of America*, by Mary McCarthy, *SR Book Review*, May 3, 1971, Mary McCarthy Papers, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries, f. 45.2.

<sup>100</sup> McCarthy, *Birds of America*, 147.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Brightman, "Mary, Still Contrary," Vassar College Libraries, f. 45.2.

<sup>103</sup> François Bondy, "Mary McCarthy," in: *Gespräche mit James Baldwin, Carl J. Burckhardt, Mary McCarthy, E.M. Cioran, Witold Gombrowitz, Eugène Ionesco, Karl Jaspers, Hans Mayer, Slawomir Mrozek, Natathalie Sarraute, Ignazio Silone, Jean Starobinski* (Wien/München/Zürich: Europaverlag, 1972), 40.

<sup>104</sup> Kiernan, *Seeing Mary Plain*, 550.

unsurpassable superiority of virtuousness, and regarded vice as “the source of embarrassment” (she chose this quotation from Jean-Jacques Rousseau as the second title of her *conte philosophique* *The Oasis*).<sup>105</sup> Thus, besides equality, McCarthy is concerned – in *Birds of America*, but also clearly in *Hanoi* – with human morality. Towards the end of *Hanoi* she explains why it was so difficult, indeed impossible, for her to ask the North Vietnamese problematic questions – it was not only because of her finding that “knowing the right questions to ask means you know the answer already, and what you want is an *admission*.”<sup>106</sup> The “medieval foundation” of herself, uncovered by the bombs and everything else in North Vietnam, is the quotation from Shakespeare’s *Othello*, the words of Iago about Cassio: “He hath a daily beauty in his life that makes me ugly.” This is one of the ideals of Martha Sinnott from *A Charmed Life*: “I am an absolutist. I want to be a paragon uniting all the virtues.” (CL 117)

What remained from my Catholic training was the idea that it was necessary to be the same person at all times and places. (...) It was the same choral vision of unity and concord on a piping individual scale, that I still wished to see enacted in a free socialist commonwealth, though I had found it only in art, which is probably the only place where it is native. And it was because of such essentially God-fearing scruples that, as I got to know the Vietnamese better, I grew ashamed to write little observations about them in my notebook, for you ought not to be two people, one downstairs, listening and nodding, and the other scribbling in your room.”<sup>107</sup>

This quotation from the ending of *Hanoi* sums up, in a way, the essence of McCarthy’s guiding principles, found throughout her literary work. “Being the same person at all times and places” makes Martha Sinnott drive to the abortion appointment although she actually wants the baby, and makes Peter Levi clean hotel toilets and let a female *clocharde* sleep in his room, because he could not walk away

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<sup>105</sup> Bondy, *Gespräche*, 41.

<sup>106</sup> McCarthy, *The Seventeenth Degree*, 22-23.

<sup>107</sup> McCarthy, *Hanoi*, 128.

once he stumbled upon her inside the entrance to his building: “A Peter Levi law said: Do not do what thou wouldst not be known to have done.”<sup>108</sup> Like McCarthy, unable to write observations about the North Vietnamese, Peter cannot change into his pyjamas and even brush his teeth with the *clocharde* sleeping on the floor “in her dirty ragged coat.”<sup>109</sup> It is interesting that McCarthy brings up art in her “vision of unity and concord” – art, as the ultimate expression of beauty and also truth, of course. Art seems to be the connecting element of the chain of her recollections that Hanoi uncovered – Florence, the Catholic Church, the childhood in Minneapolis – although the only mention of art in *Hanoi* is McCarthy’s description of the delicate naturalistic relief sculpture.

It seems as if in North Vietnam McCarthy would find the sense of culture which she felt to be thinning out in America due to progress, and this feeling was the reason for her elation during the stay in Hanoi, which most critics could not understand. Indeed, how exactly her impressions can be related to an objective image of the North Vietnam of 1968 is a problematic question. McCarthy’s personal projection of general ideas onto the canvas of a foreign country during a national crisis had its consequences. *Hanoi* received few and negative reviews, and did not sell. William Jovanovich, her publisher, tried to explain:

There’s no doubt that the books exuded for some readers a strong sense of Mary McCarthy’s hating her own country. She reinforced this adverse opinion by the act of receiving as a gift from Hanoi officials a ring made of the metal of a downed American airman. This was for most people a terrible thing to do, and her discussing it in Hanoi as if it were a philosophical question made it only worse.<sup>110</sup>

This explanation alone is not a satisfactory answer to the question why McCarthy lost her readership – it does not regard *Hanoi* as a whole and does not take her

<sup>108</sup> McCarthy, *Birds of America*, 327.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 329.

<sup>110</sup> Quoted in Kiernan, *Seeing Mary Plain*, 596.

reputation as an influential author and intellectual, the “lady of American letters,” into account. Furthermore, *Birds of America* shared the fate of *Hanoi*, as did McCarthy’s last novel *Cannibals and Missionaries*. Frances Kiernan, in her biography *Seeing Mary Plain*, sees the reason for the hostile reception in McCarthy’s exile:

With her marriage to a Foreign Service Officer based in Paris, not only had she put herself at a distance from the writers and intellectuals who had provided the inspiration for her best fiction, but she cut herself off from the sort of political discourse she had come to rely on. Worse, she had put herself in a position where such political discourse was potentially reckless. (...) Suddenly, as a U.S. citizen living in Paris, she had much to apologize for.<sup>111</sup>

Although Kiernan’s answer to McCarthy’s loss of popularity lacks nuance, it rings true. McCarthy herself admitted the effects of her emigration on her writing:

I’m incapable of writing at length about anybody except an American, so it’s not only a question of being out of touch with the native speech, but being out of touch with the native subject matter.<sup>112</sup>

Four years after her trips to Saigon and Hanoi, McCarthy attended the trial of Captain Medina for war crimes, and turned it into a book. Her sharp analysis of American military men differed greatly from the vague philosophising of *Hanoi*, but the tone of the reviews was not much different:

Miss McCarthy doesn’t like the plot or the ending, but the weariness of the metaphor infects her own writing. Irony will not sustain itself for long and the book, though there are many passages of fine evocation and reporting, ends up with a sort of tedium, the moral issues somehow *remote*, the immediacy lost in the endless performance, as though Miss McCarthy couldn’t stop yawning, longing for Paris.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Kiernan, *Seeing Mary Plain*, 573-575.

<sup>112</sup> Revel, “Miss McCarthy Explains.”

<sup>113</sup> Robert Kirsch, “Medina Trial as Road Show,” review of *Medina*, by Mary McCarthy, *Los Angeles Times*, June 30, 1972, Mary McCarthy Papers, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries, f. 48.7.

Kirsch's mention of Paris, so sudden and so out of context, together with the accusation of "remoteness," implies that McCarthy's change of address somehow stripped her of the right and the motive to be involved in American matters. It seems all the more unjust, for it is the "native speech" McCarthy encountered during the Medina trial, which gave her the basis for a text comparable to Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* as well as the reports by Martha Gellhorn and Rebecca West from the Nuremberg trials.

### 3. Politics and the English Language

I have another vague thought. Of covering the Medina trial. That is, if he's ever tried and not just declared innocent at the outset and sent back to duty covered with flowers... If he is tried, reporting it might a fresh way of getting at the issue.<sup>114</sup>

McCarthy's "vague thought," mentioned in a letter to Hannah Arendt, materialised into *Medina*, a short volume of "vintage character sketches," a "shadow play of good and evil."<sup>115</sup> Attending an unbearably boring trial (the Lt. Calley trial, also connected with the Mal Lai massacre, was held almost at the same time and, unlike Medina, was a show trial) in which "the issues faded like much washed dirty linen," and which most of the press tended to avoid for there was no hope for a just punishment, McCarthy managed to "make it new."<sup>116</sup> In *Medina*, she pictures the participants of the trial by means of their verbal portraits, which are a composite of physical and intellectual traits:

At the left end, Lt. Col. Bobby Berryhill, Jr., from Decatur, Georgia, double-chinned, pendulous, with large soft brown eyes and a long nose, napped from time to time but when fully awake seemed the most reflective of the jurors and finally, at the close of

<sup>114</sup> Mary McCarthy, letter to Hannah Arendt, 10 Feb. 1971, in: *Between Friends*, 280.

<sup>115</sup> Brightman, *Writing Dangerously*, 547.

<sup>116</sup> Mary McCarthy, *Medina* (London: Wildwood House, 1973), 27.

the testimony, asked the only penetrating questions put to Medina at any point of the trial.<sup>117</sup>

When the Watergate hearings were aired on television, the viewers were able to make up such portraits for themselves, and were greatly entertained by this. McCarthy got a note from a plumber's wife describing people's fascination with the show that Watergate turned into:

Also it has been entertainment; I don't know how to judge that, and it's probably too soon to try to do so. She [the plumber's wife] wrote me a note – about housewives: their soap operas, she said, had trained them to tell the good characters from the bad characters (...).<sup>118</sup>

McCarthy does almost the same in *Medina* – her description of the trial is not quite a soap opera, but the boring procedure is turned into a succession of quirky characters. Their looks, their professions, and their gestures make one almost forget that the people questioned are participants not only in a trial, but also in a massacre. Since the act of speaking (or not speaking) is of utmost importance at a trial, particular attention is paid to what the participants do with their mouths:

Major Dudley L. Buldrich, from Chicago, an airborne ranger, blond, with bangs and weakly drawn cowboy features, sucked his hollow cheek in a rhythmic motion or chewed on a wad of gum and yawned in the same steady cadence, his jaws opening and shutting on their hinges, like a machine beating time.<sup>119</sup>

Buldrich's "weakly drawn cowboy features" can pass for a caricature from the soap opera repertoire – together with his odd mannerisms he does not cut a likeable figure.

But most others at the Medina trial are just as unlikeable:

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>118</sup> Brightman, *Writing Dangerously*, 339.

<sup>119</sup> McCarthy, *Medina*, 13.

Policeman Louis Martin, a former radioman with the command group. (...) He was a flashy nervous type, wearing a mustache and a yellow tie, who kept moving his tongue in his cheek as he testified, seemingly in quest for some bulky food deposit.<sup>120</sup>

Nineteen pages later, McCarthy describes Nick Capezza, “a New York City housing detective, formerly a medic, who kept pausing in his declarations to ruminate on a cud of gum.”<sup>121</sup> The three men, two of them unreliable and unlikeable witnesses, different in their profession and background, are united by McCarthy’s pinpointing the way they speak, or rather what they do with their mouths to obstruct their language, to be “mealy-mouthed” in the literal sense. Major Budrich’s *wad* of gum turns into Nick Capezza’s *cud* of gum – not a *piece* of gum. The *cud* of gum lightly refers to cud-chewing cattle, slow, stupid, unable to focus.

Watching the appearance and the behaviour of those tried very closely is a common feature of the accounts of trials. In the “era of the witness,” the Medina trial was preceded by the well-documented Nuremberg trial and by the show trial of Adolf Eichmann, which brought (questionable) fame to Hannah Arendt and her *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Martha Gellhorn begins her chapter “The Paths of Glory” on Nuremberg in *The Face of War* with short verbal portraits of the twenty one surviving high Nazi officials – not each of them gets a full portrait, but Gellhorn sketches with a few colourful strokes a dozen of the men responsible for twenty two million deaths. “Those were strange faces and they did not tell anything,” she writes in the second sentence of “The Paths of Glory,” and yet proceeds to describe these faces.<sup>122</sup>

Rebecca West, present at the Nuremberg trial as well, starts her first chapter of *A Train of Powder* with a series of portraits of the same men on the same trial, and also remarks on the lack of conclusiveness of their features: “So diminished were their

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>122</sup> Martha Gellhorn, *Das Gesicht des Krieges: Reportagen 1937-1987*, transl. Hans-Ulrich Möhring (München und Hamburg: Albrecht Knaus Verlag, 1989), 221.

personalities, that it was hard to keep in mind which was which, even after one had sat and looked at them for days.”<sup>123</sup> Although the Nuremberg trial was unprecedented in history, its symbol, West recalls, was “a yawn,” the courtroom “a citadel of boredom [and] every person within its walk (...) in the grip of extreme tedium.”<sup>124</sup> Sixteen years later, Martha Gellhorn attended the Eichmann trial and remarked on its boredom as well: “The trial went on and on; people groaned in weariness; protested that the whole thing was useless.” The first paragraph of Gellhorn’s report is, again, a portrait – this time of only one man, Eichmann:

A little man with a thin neck, high shoulders, curiously reptilian eyes, a sharp face, balding dark hair. He changes his glasses frequently, for no explicable reason. He tightens his narrow mouth, purses it. Sometimes there is a slight tic under his left eye.<sup>125</sup>

The description of Eichmann and the Nazi officials at the Nuremberg trial, the understanding that these were only human faces, only men with the normal number of arms and legs and eyes, without any repulsive signs of monstrosity, illustrates the idea most aptly expressed by Hannah Arendt – the banality of evil. Lyndsey Stonebridge explains the “almost obsessive attention to the surface detail” in the following:

[It] does more than simply register a mid-twentieth-century shift to a predominantly visual legal culture. These men’s appearances announce what they believe (...); and what they believe is grotesque, corrupt, and more chillingly, shallow.<sup>126</sup>

Stonebridge also believes that this descriptive writing attempts to “flesh out an absence,” making “what is not there (...) present by what remains.” The absence is

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<sup>123</sup> Rebecca West, *A Train of Powder* (New York: The Viking Press, 1955), 4.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>125</sup> Martha Gellhorn, “Eichmann and the Private Conscience,” *Atlantic Monthly*, February 1962, accessed August 1, 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/issues/62feb/eichmann.htm>.

<sup>126</sup> Lyndsey Stonebridge, *The Judicial Imagination: Writing after Nuremberg* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 27.

that of meaning, of a satisfactory explanation as to how it was possible for the horror to happen.

In *Medina*, McCarthy shows us a similar parade of grotesque little people, but whereas there is dismay and indignation in West's and Gellhorn's reports, McCarthy views her characters with the lively interest of an entomologist. She points out their shortcomings, their poor education and inadequate language – neither pity nor horror move her, and no absence needs to be fleshed out, for the faults she is dissecting are present enough. “An inadequacy with words, shown by nearly everybody connected with the proceedings, came to seem intrinsic to the mentality behind Mai Lai,” observes McCarthy.<sup>127</sup> Bad grammar (“I seen”, “woman laying”), the wrong use of phrases which appeared to be “educated” to the men of Charlie Company (McCarthy notes that most of them were high-school and college graduates) and a general vagueness in most of the participants' utterances gravely interfered with the goal of the prosecution – namely, to find out what exactly happened at Mai Lai.

McCarthy sees one reason for the boredom of the trial in the fact that “so many of the participants were verbose, boring people,” whose inadequate use of language made normal communication impossible.<sup>128</sup> The quality of language heard during a trial becomes even more important if one regards testimony as a “performative speech act,” as Shoshana Felman does:

To testify – to *vow to tell*, to *promise* and *produce* one's own speech as material evidence for truth – is to accomplish a *speech* act, rather than simply formulate a statement.<sup>129</sup>

The obstruction of one's language equals the obstruction of the path to truth, and this seems to be of use for the defendants not only during trials, but also at times of crisis.

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<sup>127</sup> McCarthy, *Medina*, 80.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>129</sup> Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 5.

The language of war generally tries to make the reality of war as hazy as possible. In *Vietnam* McCarthy repeatedly notices the deliberate use of empty phrases and clichés by the American army – the habit of calling any Vietnamese willing to “cooperate” (instead of “collaborate”) with the Americans “an outstanding individual,” reminds her of “the old Indian fighting, where an Indian who liked white men was a good Indian.”<sup>130</sup> Explaining what a “real New Life Hamlet” is, McCarthy takes off layers of nonsensical renaming of Vietnamese hamlets where the inhabitants could not make up their minds to which side they should belong:

A ‘constructed’ hamlet meant not a newly built one but a former VC hamlet that had been worked over politically to the point where it could now be considered pro-government. A ‘reconstructed’ hamlet meant one that had been ‘constructed’ all over again, and then backslid and had had to be ‘constructed’ all over again, but this term, for some reason, had fallen into disfavour, and a ‘reconstructed’ hamlet was now called a ‘consolidated’ hamlet. Finally the goal of each was to become a ‘real New Life Hamlet.’<sup>131</sup>

The Viet Cong hiding places were called “infrastructure” by the American army, and the destruction of Vietnamese hamlets – “pacification.” Especially this last example reminds one of World War II and “the Final Solution,” as the Nazis chose to call the methodical killing of Jews in Europe.

In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Hannah Arendt analyses some of the most common Nazi terms and notices the gap between their terminology and reality:

Eichmann’s task had been defined as ‘forced emigration,’ and the words meant exactly what they said: all Jews, regardless of their desires and regardless of their citizenship, were forced to emigrate – an act which in ordinary language is called expulsion.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> McCarthy, *Vietnam*, 50.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>132</sup> Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 38.

The most garish example of the complete cover-up of reality and factuality, which the language of war is always trying to achieve, is the slogan “the battle of destiny for German people,” used by Nazis for the war they started. Arendt shows that the slogan manages to tell lies in three key aspects – according to the wording, war is not war but an act to retrieve one’s honour; it is started by destiny and not by Germany; it is a matter of life and death for the Germans, “who must annihilate their enemies or be annihilated.”<sup>133</sup> This mix of “self-deception, lies and stupidity,” which the slogan represents and which tainted the majority of the minds of the German people, is, according to Arendt, also part of Eichmann’s mentality. Because of this mentality, he is able to utter things in front of his judges and Holocaust survivors that border on the grotesque:

‘I would like to find peace with my former enemies.’ (...) This outrageous cliché was no longer issued (...) from above, it was a self-fabricated stock-phrase, as devoid of reality as those clichés by which the people had lived for twelve years, and you could almost see what an ‘extraordinary sense of elation’ it gave the speaker the moment it popped out of his mouth.<sup>134</sup>

Arendt’s anger over clichés is justified not only because their use is an insult to the tragedy of outrageous proportions, but also (and more importantly) because of the effect that clichés have on the minds of people who use them. Clichés are a substitute for independent thinking and true responsibility. Ironically, one of the main goals of Eichmann’s trial – perhaps even the most important one – was the problem of the exact determination of Eichmann’s responsibility for the death of a great number of Jews. By using “self-fabricated stock-phrases,” these shells of words devoid of meaning and emotion, Eichmann evaded the core issue of his trial and his guilt. However, Arendt believes that it did not stem from a complex cunning plan that

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 47-48.

Eichmann might have had in mind, but from his being “perfectly incapable of telling right from wrong.”<sup>135</sup> Stonebridge goes further than Arendt, seeing in Eichmann’s incompetence with words the core of his moral character:

For Arendt, (...) [Eichmann’s] verbal thoughtlessness was no mere grating peccadillo, masking the true extent of his evil, but the very direct consequence of the severance between thought, action, and language which distinguishes the structure of his evil self.<sup>136</sup>

In addition, Eichmann as a man is a pathetic spectacle in Arendt’s description – like Martha Gellhorn, she, too, gives a detailed verbal portrait (“medium-sized, slender, middle-aged, with receding hair, ill-fitting teeth and near-sighted eyes”).<sup>137</sup>, The way he speaks makes McCarthy’s cud-chewing cowboys and policemen seem like true intellectuals:

The German text of the taped police examination (...) constitutes a veritable gold mine for a psychologist – provided he is wise enough to understand that the horrible can be not only ludicrous but outright funny. Some of the comedy cannot be conveyed in English, because it lies in Eichmann’s heroic fight with the German language, which invariably defeats him. (...) Dimly aware of a defect that that must have plagued him even in school – it amounted to a mild case of aphasia – he apologized, saying, ‘Officialese (*Amtssprache*) is my only language.’ But the point here is that officialese became his language because he was genuinely incapable of uttering a single sentence that was not a cliché. (...) The longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to *think*, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else. No communication was possible with him.<sup>138</sup>

In his famous essay “Politics and the English Language,” George Orwell explains the mechanisms of the fading of meaning, thought and responsibility in cliché-ridden speech and writing, which result in the fading of the speaker’s humanity:

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>136</sup> Stonebridge, *Judicial Imagination*, 52.

<sup>137</sup> Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 3.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 44-45.

As soon as certain topics are raised, the concrete melts into the abstract and no one seems to think of turns of speech that are not hackneyed (...) The ready-made phrases come crowding in. They will construct your sentences for you – even think your thoughts for you, to a certain extent – and at need they will perform the important service of partially concealing your meaning even from yourself. (...) A speaker who uses that kind of phraseology has gone some distance towards turning himself into a machine. The appropriate noises are coming out of his larynx, but his brain is not involved as it would be if he were choosing his words for himself.<sup>139</sup>

Although Orwell says that the effect of the “ready-made phrases” is somewhat automatic, he does imply that the speaker *chooses* to turn himself “into a machine.”

The speaker’s main motivation for doing so is a willingness to lie, or, at least, a reluctance to face the truth: “The great enemy of clear language is insincerity,” states Orwell.<sup>140</sup> McCarthy found the same behaviour mechanisms at the Watergate hearings:

No wonder there has been so much contradiction in the Watergate testimony as to who said what; they were all bent on not saying anything to each other that could be pinned down to a concrete meaning. Imprecision was the rule, and the cover-up did not begin June 18 but had been practiced on a daily basis in the ordinary transmission of messages.<sup>141</sup>

Here, too, imprecision and incompetence with words is a personal, conscious choice to avoid responsibility, the principle “hear no evil, see no evil” at work.

McCarthy continues this topic in her essay “Language and Politics,” which is almost a sequel to Orwell’s “Politics and the English Language”:

I would guess that our incompetence with words has to do with consciousness-lowering. A reduced consciousness of what is happening, of sights and sounds and textures. But language is a consciousness raiser. The problem there is that the power of using and understanding language, like all power, carries responsibilities with it.

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<sup>139</sup> George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language,” in: *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell: Volume IV. In Front of Your Nose: 1945-1950*, eds. Ian Angus and Sonia Orwell (London: Secker & Warburg, 1968), 135.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>141</sup> Mary McCarthy, “Language and Politics,” in: *Occasional Prose*, 90.

You consent to having it or you don't. And most people today would rather not have it.<sup>142</sup>

Her idea that the chosen consciousness-lowering in inadequate language is a way to avoid responsibility, finds response in the scarce reviews that *Medina* received. "One weak witness can obstruct the persecution's case, but a collection suggests an abdication of responsibility," is the conclusion Fredrica Friedman's positive review.<sup>143</sup>

In a letter to Arendt McCarthy elaborates on the moral dimension of reduced intellectual powers, which agrees with her thoughts of inadequate language as a choice of consciousness-lowering:

Here I rather agree with Kant (...) that stupidity is caused not by brain failure, but by a wicked heart. Insensitiveness, opacity, inability to make connections, often accompanied by low 'animal' cunning. One cannot help feeling that this mental oblivion is *chosen*, by the heart or the moral will – an active preference, and that explains why one is so irritated by stupidity, which is not the case when one is dealing with a truly backward individual. A village idiot may be far less stupid than Eichmann. Hence the old equation between 'simplicity' and goodness of soul and heart.<sup>144</sup>

The banality and stupidity of Eichmann and people like him (the participants of the Medina trial do resemble him) does not excuse his and their evil nature. As a contrast to this, and an example of the goodness of soul and heart in some "truly backward individual," McCarthy's description of the two heroes of Mai Lai – two pilots who landed in the hamlet because they saw piles of bloodied bodies from above, and looked for survivors to help them – shows how true humanity expresses itself in language and countenance:

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>143</sup> Fredrica S. Friedman, "Medina by Mary McCarthy," review of *Medina*, by Mary McCarthy, *Saturday Review*, July 15, 1972, 56, Mary McCarthy Papers, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries, f.48.7.

<sup>144</sup> Mary McCarthy, letter to Hannah Arendt, 9 June 1971, in: *Between Friends*, 296.

Going back in his memory, under the prosecutor's prodding, Thompson kept twisting and pulling down his lower lip, in a lengthy act of reflection. He too was Georgian – from Decatur – blond, slightly adenoidal, slow of speech, and dogged, extremely ordinary (...). In comparison with some of the sharpies of Charlie Company, the pilots seemed rural, almost retarded. (...)

Larry Colburn testified gently and softly, with many pauses for thought. He seemed, if not unwilling to testify, unwilling to remember the scene once more. He had softish clean long hair and a long projecting jaw. When he was asked to describe the crew-men's effort to extricate the live child from the heap of corpses, he volunteered with a sad half-smile: 'Specialist Andreotta [the third crew member], he was covered with blood.'

These mild gentle witnesses seemed to rub on the court's nerves.<sup>145</sup>

But they do not rub on McCarthy's nerves, unlike "the sharpies of Charlie Company."

The "mild gentle witnesses" play with their mouths too, but this motion is a physical expression of the thinking process and not "a time beating machine" like the rhythmically snapping jaws of Major Dudley L. Buldrich. The two rural pilots are truly human and thus are the only witnesses who evoke warmth and sympathy from the observing McCarthy.

Not all her readers were able to see her distinctive approach, and voiced the usual accusation of elitism:

[There] appears to be a smart-aleck tone in her book, (...) letting a thin ribbon of upper-class contempt weave through it all. Medina is Miss McCarthy's sizing up the dumb clods, the liars, the cowards, the dink-haters, and the 'lifers', (the contemptuous GI term for career officers) who can't put into words what they want to say. (...) But who do you think was sucked into the Vietnam war, Miss McCarthy, our Harvard and Princeton boys?<sup>146</sup>

Although McCarthy herself points out that most of the witnesses present at the Medina trial have indeed no more than a high school education, the elite officials questioned during the Watergate hearings, during the Nuremberg and the Eichmann trials, display the very same incompetence as the uneducated American soldiers – the

<sup>145</sup> McCarthy, *Medina*, 73-76.

<sup>146</sup> Gloria Emerson, review of *Medina*, by Mary McCarthy, *New York Times Book Review*, August 13, 1972, quoted in Kiernan, *Seeing Mary Plain*, 599.

same insincerity and unwillingness to think, the same shallowness and the inability to trace one's own thoughts. Higher education and social position did not help them make their evil less banal.

### Conclusion

In the case I don't return from North Vietnam, here is why am I going: In the hope to write a solid and objective account of what it is like there now. So that the reader can imagine being there himself. This is the object of all reporting, to try to show the truth, and some fictional talent helps in the business of making it new. How this can be useful in stopping the war is problematic. But I think that showing the truth, if one can, is useful in itself and sometimes in ways unimaginable at the time of writing.<sup>147</sup>

McCarthy's letter to her husband where she lists her reasons for going to Vietnam contains the grains of her future disappointment with her involvement there. She was not "tactless" enough to be a journalist – there was always a barrier for her to ask the North Vietnamese difficult questions. Even in military slacks and a helmet she was the author Mary McCarthy who remained more interested in questions that accompanied her throughout her fictional writing (what is the self of a person – or a country – made of, the significance and language of objects in this context, for instance), than in investigative journalism. The reader cannot imagine "being there himself," but it is not difficult to imagine what it is like to be McCarthy – not only in North Vietnam.

A reviewer of *Birds of America* notes the close connection of McCarthy's fiction to autobiography:

The suggestion of autobiography here is not irrelevant (there was a certain amount of autobiography in that old Vassar crowd in "The Group"). If one is aware of Miss McCarthy as an intellectual public figure and of her glittering career in American

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<sup>147</sup> Mary McCarthy, letter to James West, 10 Mar. 1968, Mary McCarthy Papers, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries, f. 246.2.

letters one reads this, if only loosely, as personal history, or at least a catalogue of the author's own ideas.<sup>148</sup>

What Hogan writes about *Birds of America*, is also true for *Vietnam* and *Hanoi*, with their interweaving of ideas and views known from McCarthy's other, previously written texts. One can assume that the short memoir "How It Went," the chapter of *The Seventeenth Degree*, is placed as an autobiographical foreword to her Vietnam travelogues with the function of a hint, a hint that for McCarthy the political was personal. In another memoir – "My Confession" – McCarthy remembers the Communist parties of the 1930s, where her "glittering career" started:

(...) I had a curiosity about the Communist men I used to see there, not the actors or writers, but the higher-ups, impresarios and theoreticians – dark, smooth-haired owls with large white lugubrious faces and glasses. These were the spiritual directors of the Communist cultural celebrities and they moved about at these parties like so many monks or abbés in a worldly salon. I had always liked to argue with the clergy, and I used to argue with these men, who had the air, as they stood with folded arms, of listening not to a disagreement, but to a confession.<sup>149</sup>

One finds that McCarthy changed little throughout the years. "My Confession" was written in the early 1950s, and this excerpt contains many elements typical of McCarthy's texts which were either already written or yet to come. There is the ironically sharp portrait of the "Communist men," the reference to the *Catholic Girlhood*, and, interesting in the present context, the link between "discussion" and "confession." The shift of the idea of confession to the idea of witness, the move from private to public history is, in McCarthy's case, not clearly defined, although her different modes of storytelling suggest otherwise.

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<sup>148</sup> William Hogan, "Miss McCarthy's Catalogue of Ideas," review of *Birds of America*, by Mary McCarthy, *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 20, 1971, Mary McCarthy Papers, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries, f.45.2.

<sup>149</sup> McCarthy, "My Confession," in: *On the Contrary*, 85.

Mary McCarthy wrote to Hannah Arendt about what she perceived as the limitations of her creative self:

It is sad to realize that one's fictions, i.e., one's "creative side," cannot learn anything. I have learned, I think, but they, or it, haven't. The reason for this would be interesting to discover, if only one had the time. Those confining boundaries, I suppose, are set by my life-experience, which lies in vaguely upper-middle-class territory lying between those girls [of *The Group*] and Peter [of *Birds of America*]. My mental experience is broader, but that does not seem to count for the imagination. (...) It all leads to the awful recognition that one *is* one's life; God is not mocked.<sup>150</sup>

The sombre tone of this letter excerpt points to the end of McCarthy's writing career. Factually, she never stopped writing until her last illness – her autobiographical project remained unfinished, with only one completed first volume, *Intellectual Memoirs*. After *Birds of America* and *The Mask of State*, McCarthy wrote *Cannibals and Missionaries*, a novel about the hijacking of a plane and the holding hostage of a Vermeer painting, the story line up to date with the reality of the early seventies, when the hijacking of planes as well as the theft of paintings started to occur with worrying regularity. But none of McCarthy's writings after *The Group* could harvest the critical acclaim of her earlier works. Reviews were scarce and very few of them favourable, and McCarthy was deeply affected by this:

I say to myself that perhaps I won't write anymore – what's the use? This must be partly the effect of depressing reviews of *Medina*. There's a limit to how much one can take of that. Especially if one feels, as I do, that the act of writing has something to do with communication.<sup>151</sup>

Her involvement with Vietnam and Watergate received little public attention and did not, obviously, change the course of the war. "I wrote those two books [*Vietnam* and *Hanoi*] and accomplished nothing, doing absolutely no good," she stated bitterly

<sup>150</sup> Mary McCarthy, letter to Hannah Arendt, 17 Feb. 1975, in: *Between Friends*, 373.

<sup>151</sup> Mary McCarthy, letter to Hannah Arendt, 3 Sep. 1972, in: *Between Friends*, 320.

to one of her interviewers.<sup>152</sup> This cannot be true. In the foreword to *The Face of War*, Martha Gellhorn states that her book, a collection of reports spanning the three decades from the Spanish Civil War of 1937 to the war in Israel in 1967, is her own “no” to war.<sup>153</sup> It was a “no” “as effective as one cricket chirp,” she admits, but a “no” nonetheless. Mary McCarthy had written her own “no” with *Vietnam and Hanoi*, and contributed with *Medina* to the “understanding of what turns a legal trial into a historical experience.”<sup>154</sup> Her testimony, personal as it might be, is, like every testimony, “a return of significance” to an event, an “affirmation that [it] was meaningful and that it counted.”<sup>155</sup> Her voice might have been muffled due to her emigration to France and the absence of marketing success of her travelogues, but one cannot say that it was entirely unheard.

Therefore, one can regard McCarthy’s reports from South and North Vietnam, as well as from the Medina trial and Watergate hearings, written with that particular stamp of a curious novelist in the role of the female war reporter, not only as an important part of McCarthy’s oeuvre, complementing her novels in a similar way to her essayistic writing, and communicating the ideas that had been important to her, but also, in spite of all their subjectivity, as vivid documents of American history.

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<sup>152</sup> Revel, “Miss McCarthy Explains.”

<sup>153</sup> Gellhorn, *Das Gesicht des Krieges*, 19.

<sup>154</sup> Stonebridge, *Judicial Imagination*, 24.

<sup>155</sup> Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 54.

## CONCLUSION: STANDING UP FOR MARY MCCARTHY

“This monk will have to speak for me in his dejected way, looking forever out of his window, forever hangdog, the outsider.”<sup>1</sup> McCarthy wrote this on the card depicting a monk, sent to her secret lover, the British publicist John Davenport in 1957.<sup>2</sup> The inscription on the card is simultaneously ironic and to be taken seriously – with her lover, McCarthy is anything but monklike, yet the role of the outsider looking in is, as we have seen, something that McCarthy had been concerned with in her life’s work as well as in her life. In the review of Frances Kiernan’s *Seeing Mary Plain* for *The New York Times*, Larissa MacFarquhar viciously remarks:

One of McCarthy’s most cited claims to historical interest (...) seems misplaced. She is frequently written about because of her association with the New York intellectuals of the 1930’s, particularly those – Philip Rahv, William Phillips and Delmore Schwartz, among others – around *Partisan Review*. But except in a social sense, she was never one of them. ‘I was a source of uneasiness and potential embarrassment to the magazine,’ she admitted in an essay.<sup>3</sup>

Larissa MacFarquhar quite possibly mistakes McCarthy’s coquettishness and irony for a confession. For McCarthy would not only compare herself to a monk during a clandestine affair, she also liked to say that she was hired to write theatre criticism because she was once married to an actor. And she fondly remembered how she woke up in a strange bed after her first alcohol-soaked dinner with Edmund Wilson with the scream: “I have disgraced *Partisan Review*!” (the *Partisan Review* “boys” had asked her to talk the celebrated critic into submitting an article for their little magazine).

Since so much of McCarthy’s prose is candidly autobiographical, it may be an

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Gelderman, *Mary McCarthy*, 202.

<sup>2</sup> Brightman, *Writing Dangerously*, 393.

<sup>3</sup> Larissa MacFarquhar, “Group Therapy,” review of *Seeing Mary Plain*, by Frances Kiernan, *New York Times*, March 26, 2000, accessed August 10, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/books/00/03/26/reviews/000326.26macfart.html>.

interesting question to what extent she could consciously or unconsciously manipulate her critics and biographers into believing that the “swerve and swoop” of her writing would deliver a straight picture.

In his review of *The Group*, “Miss McCarthy and the Leopard’s Spots,” Norman Podhoretz, one of the “boys” from the *Partisan Review* (but already of the “second generation”) seems right to decipher McCarthy’s technique at first, but then succumbs to his first negative impression nonetheless. In the middle of his review, he acknowledges that there is more to “Miss McCarthy’s fixation on trivial details (...) than simple snobbery or feminine gossipiness,” admitting that the catalogues of McCarthy’s objects serve the purpose of deflating “The Thirties,” of cutting them down to size; but then he comes back to his initial accusation that *The Group* is a “flatly written and incoherently structured book, a trivial lady writer’s novel.”<sup>4</sup> He admits that McCarthy’s long lists of objects “enliven a story and provide concreteness; (...) and speak worlds about character, at least for those with ears to hear.” Podhoretz then says that he himself is “mostly deaf to that kind of thing,” ignoring the characterizing and organising function that McCarthy’s objects have in the text and how they actually give *The Group* the structure he misses.<sup>5</sup> But Podhoretz is surprisingly insightful, shortly before he returns to his loutish hectoring:

There is a profoundly conservative side to Mary McCarthy (...). It is a conservatism that takes many forms (...), but it flows ultimately from an ineluctable scepticism about the ability of people to control their own destinies by force of will and idea.<sup>6</sup>

This feature gives McCarthy’s “furniture-describing impulse,” as Podhoretz calls her trademark particularism, a weight that is as substantial as the “worlds” the described objects “speak about character.” For objects in McCarthy’s fiction are not only

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<sup>4</sup> Podhoretz, *Doings and Undoings*, 88, 93.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 91-92.

extensions of identity into the outside, they are also the reflection of identity from the outside into the self, shaping reality and destiny, the leopard's spots that cannot be changed "by force of will and idea." McCarthy proved Podhoretz right fifteen years later, in an interview of 1979, and she was neither ironic nor coquettish:

I believe in humility, in a certain modesty towards what is outside, towards what is not I (...). The assertion of any absolute idea is really a claim on the part of the mind to control the world, to control reality. It's a proclamation of sovereignty, and I don't want that. I don't believe in it; I think one must respect the created world which has its own laws, including unjust laws, and its own harmony.<sup>7</sup>

Her respect for this "created world" – created not by the god of the Catholic church or any other god, as she had lost her faith early in life – but created by something else than the *I* nonetheless, is probably responsible for McCarthy's harsh treatment of her characters, for her "love of reality that is greater than the love of self," as Irvin Stock once said, for the "cold eye" of her narration.

The "cold eye," even in McCarthy's later writing, habitually picks on "the sallow skin" of a former schoolmate, or the "big teeth and a stooping walk" of a former lover, details that make James Wolcott, a reviewer of *How I Grew*, conclude that the book is "eminently creepy."<sup>8</sup> Since "the biggest item in McCarthy's inventory of personal defects is usually the nose," Wolcott suspects McCarthy's "attitude towards Jews" to be responsible if not necessarily for an "anti-Semitism," but for the "book's allround insensitivity."<sup>9</sup> The fact that McCarthy is equally merciless on herself does not seem to count much for Wolcott. And McCarthy indeed writes about her "curious attitude towards Jews" in great detail, remembering, among other things, how she

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<sup>7</sup> Miriam Gross, "A World Out of Joint," *Observer*, October 14, 1979, quoted in Gelderman, *Mary McCarthy*, 50.

<sup>8</sup> James Wolcott, "Nose Jobs," review of *How I Grew*, by Mary McCarthy, *New Republic*, May 11, 1987, 37.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

worried that her friends from Vassar might discover something “Levantine” in her grandmother’s appearance. What she does not write about is a letter from her Irish-Catholic uncle Harold McCarthy, his reaction to the unflattering description of his parents – McCarthy’s grandparents – in *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*. The letter is quoted in Carol Gelderman’s *Mary McCarthy: A Life*, with its original spelling preserved:

You definately are a throwback to the maternal side of your breeding (...), which explains your inability to resist this urge, particularly as you apparently have a ready market, many jews have told me and it is recognized by all who stop to wonder, why all this race and color lament, it is because they most of all owe their present position of advancement to the constant cry of persecution. (...)

You have the nerve to try and look down your subversive schnabel at [your McCarthy relatives].<sup>10</sup>

McCarthy wrote a not unfriendly answer to “Uncle Harry”:

I’m sorry (...), as I told you in New York, that you can’t rid yourself of that terrible anti-Semitism. As I said to you that night, rather drunkenly, “God will not forgive you for that, Uncle Harry.” It is true; such sentiments are un-Christian and un-Catholic, any priest will tell you so. It’s just a frenzy you lash yourself with and unworthy of you; if there is an afterlife, you will have to account for it there.<sup>11</sup>

Her answer to a grotesquely anti-Semitic attack from her own uncle cannot make her “attitude towards the Jews” any clearer, and the treatment she received from her uncle makes it also clear that she was, without any doubt, perceived by others as partly Jewish. The myth of McCarthy’s “curious attitude” and her self-styling as a WASP are thus entirely of her own making, manifest in her partly fictional, partly autobiographical prose. Compared to letters such as these, pure biographical facts like her relationship with Philip Rahv, and her proclaimed “deep love of fact,” the mythmaking of her prose looks outrageously ambiguous. The prose itself reveals this

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Gelderman, *Mary McCarthy*, 31-33.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

ambiguity to be more a literary tool than a “personal attitude,” as was shown in chapter three, discussing the “Jewish presence” in McCarthy’s fiction.

The excerpts from MacFarquhar’s article and Podhoretz’s and Wolcott’s reviews suggest that McCarthy’s subversive techniques are usually taken at face value.

McCarthy was not unaffected by this, and she wrote to Hannah Arendt in 1974 how much she disliked “being on the receiving line” of so much hostility:

Well, it would be better, clearly, if I didn’t mind, but I do and I find it deeply discouraging. The sense that one is not ‘getting through’ to one’s imagined listeners; it is like making a transatlantic call with a bad connection. The fact that it *keeps* happening to me (...) adds a ghostly element of repetition, as if I were condemned to this punishment throughout eternity. (...) And the punishment is somehow mysteriously, arcanelly, related to my external self: the bars of the cell are, so to speak, my own ribs.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps herein lies the reason why her last two works were volumes of autobiography. “The ghostly element of repetition” comes up there in a different context, but it seems that McCarthy was trying to explain herself, to finally “get through,” until the very end of her life. Her habit of searching for a knowable single truth added a new difficulty to the improvement of the connection to her listeners: she recorded very personal versions of reality that sometimes contradicted the public’s picture of the same events, as was the case with the war in Vietnam – in a way it resembled the attempt “to control reality” by an idea, of which McCarthy herself was so very critical. Furthermore, her concept of a strong self and her simultaneous belief in humility and respect for the external reality were bound to create a tension between the inside and the outside.

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<sup>12</sup> Mary McCarthy, letter to Hannah Arendt, 30 Sep.1974, in: *Between Friends*, 368-369.

What you feel when you're older, I think, is that (...) you really must *make* the self. (...) I don't mean in the sense of making a mask, a Yeatsian mask. But you finally begin in some sense to make and to choose the self you want.<sup>13</sup>

The conscious making and choosing of the self is difficult to combine with the “certain modesty and humility” that McCarthy thought necessary for the exchange with the outer world. Perfect balance is impossible, as either the self or the world weighs more, and looking at the frequently unhappy endings of her heroines' lives, or, in fact, the reception of McCarthy's later writings, one must admit that it is usually the world that wins. In this light the perception of the self as an outsider, with the boundary between the inside and the outside being “one's own ribs,” seems only a logical consequence.

The year 2012 was Mary McCarthy's centenary. Vassar College organised a small exhibition and celebration of the author at the American Library in Paris, and *The New York Times* wrote about it. The piece “A Woman of Intellect and Style” by Celia McGee was placed in the paper's “Fashion and Style” section. Briefly noting that McCarthy was an outstanding intellectual and writer, the article centres on her fashionable appearance, listing her Balenciaga and Lanvin dresses, the eight suitcases she brought to Vietnam, and remarking that nowadays *The Group* is “somehow mixed up with our crush on ‘Mad Men.’”<sup>14</sup> A hundred years after McCarthy's birth, it is the exterior – also that of *The Group*, the novel being used as a stylish 1960s prop in the television show – that gets the most attention.

In 2013, the movie “Hannah Arendt” came out, and the results of the first cinematic depiction of friendship between the philosopher and the novelist “are not good,” concludes Michelle Dean in her article “The Formidable Friendship of Mary

<sup>13</sup> Elisabeth Niebuhr, “The Art of Fiction,” 93-94.

<sup>14</sup> Celia McGee, “A Woman of Intellect and Style,” *New York Times*, October 19, 2012, accessed June 23, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/21/fashion/remembering-mary-mccarthys-style.html>.

McCarthy and Hannah Arendt.”<sup>15</sup> McCarthy, played by the actress Janet McTeer, is “blowsily silly” there, and all that the two prominent women do in the movie is giggle about men and love. Dean points out the tendency to depict McCarthy (“when she is remembered, if she is remembered at all”) as a woman “whose talent for insult ultimately did not amount to much,” and reminds the reader that Arendt and McCarthy were able to “assert critical authority” in the twentieth century, while many women still struggle to achieve the same today.

Besides its feminist tenor, there is detectable in Dean’s article a wish to put things right, an attempt at apology to McCarthy. If McCarthy is spoken about at all, she should be spoken about in the right way, Dean feels, not as a model for “that pretty tie-neck blouse from Lanvin” – the consequence of McCarthy’s catalogues of taste – but as a writer and critic whose contribution to American literature is considerable.<sup>16</sup> Elaine Showalter once noted in a similar key how *The Group* is an example of a text by the female writer “struggling against convention to tell her own truth, despite male critics’ contempt for it, and female critics’ suspicion of it.”<sup>17</sup>

It is strange that the “dark lady of American letters” is in need of champions today, that the sharp and merciless McCarthy now evokes an impulse of protection in those who are well acquainted with her life and with her life’s work. The afterlife of writers is usually unpredictable, and McCarthy is by no means the only author to become neglected by literary critics. But the biographies and articles that keep appearing speak to the fact that the attempts at a revaluation of McCarthy will not be abandoned easily.

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<sup>15</sup> Michelle Dean, “The Formidable Friendship of Mary McCarthy and Hannah Arendt,” *New Yorker*, June 4, 2013, accessed June 23, 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-formidable-friendship-of-mary-mccarthy-and-hannah-arendt>.

<sup>16</sup> McGee, “A Woman of Intellect and Style.”

<sup>17</sup> Showalter, “Killing the Angel in the House,” 213.

The fact is that one returns to Mary McCarthy not for her gossip but for herself, or rather for herself, those black shadows cast by the fingers of a very gifted writer on the hard wall of experience.<sup>18</sup>

Ellen Moers alludes to McCarthy's collection of literary essays *The Writing on the Wall*, – the “black shadows” cast by her fingers are nothing other but her texts. The wall of experience is hard not only because of McCarthy's fondness for facts, but also due to her cold eye of observation, the outsider's gaze into a world which is not her own. It is not the image of a monk looking out of his window that one has when reading Mary McCarthy; there is rather the suspicion that the hardness of the gaze was perfected by the orphaned child during her long hours on a dark staircase, waiting for a mother who would never return.

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<sup>18</sup> Ellen Moers, “Fiction and Fact,” *New York Times Book Review*, June 11, 1967, quoted in Kiernan, *Seeing Mary Plain*, 571.

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