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CRITICISM OF THE LIBERAL INTELLECTUAL IN THE POLITICAL FICTION OF MARY McCARTHY

BY

TERRILL HYDE HUNTINGTON

A thesis submitted
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree Master of Arts, Major in
English, South Dakota
State University
1976

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CRITICISM OF THE LIBERAL INTELLECTUAL IN
THE POLITICAL FICTION OF MARY McCARTHY

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Thesis Adviser   Date

Head, English Dept.   Date

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author wishes to express her appreciation to Dr. Karen Kildahl and Dr. Ruth Alexander for their advice and guidance during the preparation of this thesis.

Appreciation is also expressed to Nita Hyde for her assistance in typing this thesis.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

For more than thirty years, Mary McCarthy has served as the conscience of the liberal American intellectual. Arriving in New York during the early years of the Great Depression, she gradually drifted into the leftist political circles frequented by most members of New York's intellectual community during that period. Briefly, she considered joining the Communist Party, but Stalin's purge of Trotsky supporters from the Party transformed her into one of the Party's most vocal critics. McCarthy did not confine her criticism to the Communists, however. With the publication of her first novel in 1942, she also established herself as a critic of the conventional liberal, despite her own personal identification with liberalism.

McCarthy's method of writing is satire, and she treats both her sympathetic and unsympathetic characters satirically. The characters in her fiction are generally liberal intellectuals who follow one of two patterns. The sympathetic characters are those who, despite their flaws, endeavor to be conscientious, objective and truth-seeking. They are plagued by self-doubt and constant awareness of their own limitations. In contrast, her unsympathetic characters are egotistical and self-deluding. Their

intellectual capabilities are bent not toward fulfillment of their professed liberal and humanitarian ideals, but toward self-justification and rationalization of their own actions. The following thesis traces the increasingly pessimistic view of the latter type of liberal intellectual in Mary McCarthy's political fiction.

For the purpose of this thesis, four of McCarthy's fictional works have been classified as primarily political: "Portrait of the Intellectual as a Yale Man" in *The Company She Keeps* (1942), *The Oasis* (1949), *The Groves of Academe* (1951), and *Birds of America* (1971). These four works have been identified as political because the relationships and conflicts between the characters are essentially political rather than social or personal in nature. They conform to Irving Howe's definition of the political novel as "a novel in which *we take to be dominant* political ideas or the political milieu, a novel which permits this assumption without thereby suffering any radical distortion and, it follows, with the possibility of some analytical profit."[1] Because political ideas are not dominant, two of her novels, *A Charmed Life* (1955) and *The Group* (1963), have been excluded from this study.

Nearly all the characters in McCarthy's novels are liberal intellectuals. They can, as previously noted, be divided into two groups. The sympathetic characters are

generally heroines who bear a resemblance to McCarthy herself. They mercilessly examine their own motives, suspecting even those which produce beneficial acts. Highly idealistic, they share a passion for truth, even when that truth provides an unflattering portrait of themselves. Although they possess traits which McCarthy admires, they are by no means flawless. She frequently portrays them as vain and inclined toward snobbishness. Their strength lies in their ability to recognize their own flaws. During a bitter self-analysis, Meg Sargent, the heroine of The Company She Keeps, acknowledges her own imperfections, but contends: "I still know when I lie, I can recognize a frame-up when I make one."[2] This ability to face the truth about herself is the characteristic that redeems the McCarthy heroine and distinguishes her from the less sympathetic characters. (This type of character will be collectively referred to as "heroine," although in Birds of America the role is filled by a male, Peter Levi.)

The unsympathetic characters provide contrast to the McCarthy heroines. McCarthy initially criticizes them for their lack of commitment to liberal goals, gradually enlarging her criticism to encompass their lack of objectivity, their deficiency of conscience, their disregard for truth and their massive ego which precludes self-doubt. In contrast to the McCarthy heroines who critically evaluate

their own motives, they seek to justify their behavior, automatically assuming their actions in a given situation are correct simply because they are theirs; those of anyone who opposes them are in error. Meg Sargent provides a caustic summary of their characteristics in her analysis of her husband Frederick: "Frederick is his own stooge, his own innocent front. He has a vested interest in himself. He is the perfect Protestant pragmatist. 'If I say this, it is true.' 'If I do this, it is justified'" (CSK, p. 285).

This group of liberal intellectuals prides itself on being realistic rather than idealistic, but its realism is simply a mask for expediency. Although its members tend to be highly intelligent, they substitute theories for independent thought. Theories serve as shields protecting them from self-doubt rather than as bridges to fresh approaches and new ideas. They are nominal liberals, but do not attempt to incorporate liberal principles into their personal behavior. Liberalism, instead of shaping their lives, is reduced to a form of club in which they maintain inactive membership.

Many critics contend that Mary McCarthy deals in personalities rather than in substantive criticism of liberal intellectualism. This thesis will demonstrate

that her criticism is based on issues rather than personalities, and that she has consistently developed and expanded her criticism throughout her political fiction.

In order to clarify this thesis, it is necessary to establish definitions of the terms "liberal" and "intellectual" as they apply to the writings of Mary McCarthy. This is not an easy task because both words have acquired a number of connotations and because McCarthy herself has altered her usage of the words during the course of her writing career. It is important to note that she uses the words in both an idealistic and realistic sense. In the idealistic sense, the liberal intellectual practices the political philosophy which McCarthy finds most desirable. In the realistic sense, McCarthy uses the term "liberal intellectual" ironically to refer to a person who fancies himself to be both liberal and intellectual, but who, in truth, has no claim to being either. From her point of view, the world is more heavily populated with the latter type of liberal intellectual than with the former.

The term "liberal" is particularly difficult to deal with because McCarthy's usage of the term has varied so greatly. In her first two novels, _The Company She Keeps_ and _The Oasis_, "liberal" is often used interchangeably with "Marxist," "Communist," Trotskyite," and "socialist." In order to avoid confusion, this

author has restricted the usage of "liberal" in reference to these novels and has substituted the more specific words when appropriate. For the purpose of this thesis, "Marxist" shall mean one who follows the teachings of Marx and Engels but is not a Communist Party member; "Communist" or "Stalinist" shall mean one who is a Party member and a supporter of Soviet leader Josef Stalin; "Trotskyite" shall mean one who has broken with the Party over Stalin's persecution of Trotsky; and "socialist" shall mean one who believes in the principles of redistribution of wealth and worker ownership of the means of production but who is not wedded to Communist or Marxist doctrines.

In her writings, McCarthy is most sympathetic toward the latter point of view, specifically because it is an open rather than a restrictive doctrine. She is staunchly opposed to dogmatic approaches to political thought because they restrict the mind and cause people to ignore common sense in favor of forcing data or events to conform to predefined principles. <u>Webster's Third New International Dictionary</u> defines a "liberal" as one who is "not bound by authoritarianism, orthodoxy, or traditional or established forms in action, attitude or opinion,"[3] and it is in this sense that McCarthy herself is a liberal.

Although a liberal, McCarthy does not necessarily endorse all the tenets of traditional liberalism. Webster's Third defines "liberalism" as "a political philosophy based on belief in progress, the essential goodness of man, and the autonomy of the individual and standing for tolerance and freedom for the individual from arbitrary authority in all spheres of life esp. by the protection of political and civil liberties and for government under law with the consent of the governed."[4] McCarthy certainly endorses the "protection of political and civil liberties," but during the course of her career, she has rejected or modified the other tenets. She has stated that the thesis of The Group is "supposed to be the history of the loss of faith in progress. . .,"[5] and she has gradually lost faith in the essential goodness of man. In her earlier novels, she demonstrated her belief that people have a moral or ethical side to their nature which strives to do good, but that that side must constantly struggle with the darker side which pursues the easier course regardless of its ultimate effects on others. One of her heroines, Martha Sinnott in A Charmed Life, decides to have an abortion "because all her inclinations were the other way. The hardest course was the right one; in her

experience, this was an almost invariable law."[6] In her most recent novel, Birds of America, she implies that the moral part of man's nature has been destroyed.

McCarthy believes a liberal should be motivated by a desire to know the truth, both about himself and about his society. McCarthy heroines are very intense about discovering the truth and they are disturbed by the indifference of others. Martha Sinnott says everyone "pretends to doubt, to be curious, but nobody is really curious because nobody cares what the truth is. As soon as we think something, it occurs to us that the opposite or the contrary might just as well be true. And no one cares."[7]

McCarthy is as concerned with the decline of intellectualism as she is with the decline of liberalism. Christopher Lasch defines an intellectual as "a person for whom thinking fulfills at once the function of work and play; more specifically, as a person whose relationship to society is defined, both in his eyes and in the eyes of the society, principally by his presumed capacity to comment upon it with greater detachment than those more directly caught up in the practical business of production and power."[8] McCarthy would accept this definition as representative of the ideal, but she questions whether a practicing intellectual is any more detached than a practicing politician or corporation executive.

She particularly mocks the system that labels certain people intellectuals because they write for the "right" magazines, teach at prestigious colleges or universities, or belong to certain New York social circles. Although these people possess a high degree of intelligence, they tend to become arrogant. They lose the qualities of objectivity and open-mindedness which McCarthy believes essential to the authentic intellectual. In her most recent novel, Birds of America, her hero Peter Levi asserts that one cannot truly be an intellectual as long as he remains aloof from the social conflicts he studies. Peter comments about the poor yet well-educated French couple who have befriended him and who discuss with him the future of humanity: "And if, in the higher realms, he could observe a little growth in himself, he owed that to the Bonfantes, who were real intellectuals. . . unlike the academics he had been exposed to most of his life."[9]

McCarthy would no doubt group herself with the academics, but she urges them to recognize their own limitations. When an academician allows himself to become too isolated from society, his observations become removed from reality. He begins trying to make people and events conform to his theories instead of expanding his theories to encompass the reality of the social situation. He becomes more interested in advancing and defending his theories than in seeking the truth. In doing this, he

relinquishes his own freedom of thought and is eventually reduced to a dogmatist, unable to consider the relevance of new ideas except insofar as they apply to his own theories. Not all the intellectuals in McCarthy's novels are thus reduced, but a significant proportion of them are. In her fiction, McCarthy raises the question of whether they are worthy of the designation "intellectual."

Mary McCarthy has not fared very well with the critics, perhaps in some measure because they see themselves in the objects of her satire, and perhaps because her fiction does not conform to current literary trends. Irwin Stock notes that "she is a sort of neoclassicist in a country of romantics."[10] Her satiric manner and her ability to "shape a sentence to do a plain task, or else to cut and glitter, quotable, like an epigram"[11] do make her seem more comfortable stylistically with eighteenth century writers than with her contemporaries. However, her facility for depicting the speech and customs of her contemporaries and her treatment of twentieth century themes make her clearly a twentieth century author. Her treatment of twentieth century themes has prompted much of the controversy surrounding her fiction.

The critics who display the greatest hostility toward McCarthy seem guided more by disagreement with opinions she expresses than by concern about the literary merit of her work. Such critics as Norman Mailer, John Aldridge,

Eleanor Widmer and Paul Schleuter regard her as "reflective of the Modern American Bitch."[12] In a review of The Group, Mailer calls her a spoiled little girl whose fiction has finally become as trivial as that of women who write for women's magazines.[13] In "Finally a Lady," Eleanor Widmer makes the same point. J. W. Aldridge is shocked to find her espousing "a form of militant feminism"[14] in The Group. He concludes that his concern is not that "The Group may cost Miss McCarthy her intellectual reputation, but that, in view of some of the novels and stories she has previously written, she should have any intellectual reputation left to lose."[15]

Although McCarthy's fiction has prompted a great deal of emotional criticism, there are a number of critical articles which provide stimulating analyses of her work. The articles which include the best overall assessment of her work are those by D. J. Enright in Conspirators and Poets and by Louis Auchincloss in Pioneers and Caretakers. Articles by her friends Elizabeth Hardwick and John Chamberlain are interesting because they make provocative points about McCarthy. Hardwick says, "She cannot conform" to the prevailing social mores and political philosophies.[16] Chamberlain explains, "The ideas animating Miss McCarthy's novels. . . are fundamentally conservative ideas," because they are based on "common sense" and a skeptical view of human nature.[17] An article by Norman Podhoretz in Doings

and Undoings, although generally unfavorable toward McCarthy, provides interesting perspectives on the McCarthy heroine. Brock Brower in an *Esquire* article describes her political activities and her relationship with her friends, who rate honesty and loyalty as her outstanding characteristics.[18]

The best explanation of McCarthy's relationship to her contemporaries and to the political events that shaped her ideas can be found in C. E. Eisinger's *Fiction of the Forties*. Eisinger identifies her, together with Granville Hicks, John Dos Passos, and Lionel Trilling, as a proponent of the "new liberalism." The "new liberalism" recognizes the "limitations of reason," the insolubility of certain social problems, and the ineffectuality of certain doctrines. "In place of total solutions, the new liberalism returned to the American tradition of improvisation and experimentalism, of exploration and tentative progression."[19] John Lyons in *The College Novel in America* and Michael Millgate in *American Social Fiction: James to Cozzens* help place McCarthy in a similar political and social mileau.

Barbara McKenzie and Irwin Stock have both written book length appraisals of McCarthy's fiction and of these, Stock's is the more successful. McKenzie's *Mary McCarthy*, written for the Twayne United States Author Series, provides

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in-depth plot and character analysis of each of McCarthy's works of fiction prior to 1966 and deals with her non-fiction and criticism as well. Irwin Stock's Mary McCarthy, written for the Minnesota University Pamphlets on American Writers series, is less lengthy but more successful, for it provides a more unified thematic analysis of McCarthy's works as a whole.

Although McCarthy is still living, a biography, The Company She Kept by Doris Grumbach, has already been published. The biography is valuable in that it supplies background material on McCarthy's career and associates; its weakness lies in Grumbach's tendency to fill the gaps in her materials with incidents from McCarthy's fiction. She mistakenly assumes that, because some of the incidents in McCarthy's fiction are based on actual events in McCarthy's life, all of the details in the fictional representation are also true to life. In a review of The Company She Kept, Moers points out another weakness of the biography. She says Grumbach overemphasizes the importance of gossip in McCarthy's fiction while down-playing the importance of McCarthy's political convictions. "What about Miss McCarthy and those who have used their femaleness, even their feminity as a screen for the rage of conscience against political ignorance. . . . Miss

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Grumbach has allowed herself to become overconvinced about the 'unseriousness' of Miss McCarthy's politics to the point where she slights some of the best work her subject has done."[20]

Thus far, much of the criticism of McCarthy's work has been of doubtful value because of the critics' strong emotional bias against the author. Barbara Grumbach says, "the extensions of the facts of a writer's work into the fiction of misinterpretation are more common in what is written about Mary McCarthy than in criticism about many other modern writers, and they seem to proliferate in direct proportion to the relatively modest body of fiction she has produced."[21] This antagonism has no doubt been triggered by the fact that many members of New York's intelligentsia can be readily recognized among the characters portrayed satirically in her fiction, a phenomena which has led Fitch to call her "a traitor to her own class."[22] There seems to be little doubt among the more detached critics that once the emotion has cooled, McCarthy will be accorded a somewhat higher place in American fiction than she now occupies.

FOOTNOTES: CHAPTER I

[1] Politics and the Novel (1957; rpt. New York: Avon Books, 1970), p. 19.

[2] The Company She Keeps (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1942), p. 285. Subsequent page numbers, given parenthetically, refer to this edition, abbreviated as CSK.

[3] Philip B. Grove, ed., Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language (Springfield, Mass.: G. & C. Merriam Company, 1971), p. 1303.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Elisabeth Niebuhr, "Mary McCarthy," in Writers At Work: The Paris Review Interviews, 2nd series, ed. George Plimpton (New York: Viking Press, 1963), p. 288.

[6] A Charmed Life (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955), p. 262.

[7] Ibid., p. 284.

[8] The New Radicalism in America (1889-1963): The Intellectual as a Social Type (New York: Alfred A. Knoff, 1965), p. ix.

[9] Birds of America (1971; rpt. New York: New American Library, 1972), p. 201. Subsequent page numbers given parenthetically, refer to this edition, abbreviated as BOA.

[10] Mary McCarthy, Minnesota University Pamphlets on American Writers, No. 72 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1968), p. 5.

[11] Robert E. Fitch, "The Cold Eye of Mary McCarthy," The New Republic, 5 May 1958, p. 17.

[12] Paul Schleuter, "The Dissections of Mary McCarthy," in Contemporary American Novelists, ed. Henry T. Moore (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1964), p. 55.

[13] "The Case Against McCarthy: A Review of The Group," in Cannibals and Christians (New York: Dial Press, 1966), p. 140.

[14] "Mary McCarthy: Princess Among the Trolls," in Time to Murder and Create: The Contemporary Novel in Crisis (New York: McKay, 1966), p. 126.

[15] Ibid., p. 101.

[16] "Mary McCarthy," in A View of My Own: Essays in Literature and Society (New York: Noonday Press, 1963), p. 235.

[17] "The Novels of Mary McCarthy," in The Creative Present: Notes on Contemporary American Fiction, eds. Nona Balakian and Charles Simmons (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1963), p. 255.

[18] Mary McCarthyism," Esquire, 58 (July 1962), 64.

[19] Fiction of the Forties (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 118.

[20] "Fictions and Facts," New York Times Book Review, 11 June 1967, p. 48.

[21] The Company She Kept (New York: Coward-McCann, 1967), pp. 12-13.

[22] Fitch, p. 19.

CHAPTER II
A POLITICAL BIOGRAPHY

Mary McCarthy possesses a distinctively American ancestry, one that has exposed her to a wide variety of cultural and intellectual influences. Her paternal ancestors were Irish Catholics, descendents of Nova Scotian pirates who accounted for "the wild streak in [her] heredity."[1] Her maternal grandfather was English protestant; her maternal grandmother, Jewish.

Born in Seattle in 1912, Mary was the oldest child of Roy and Tess Preston McCarthy. Her parents were very extravagant, frequently indulging Mary and her three brothers in luxuries beyond their financial means. She remembers them as being very loving and spontaneous; her father "insisted on turning everything into a treat" (MCG, p. 10). The McCarthys were wealthy Minneapolis grain dealers and in 1918, perhaps because of Roy's financial excesses, his family insisted he return to Minneapolis. There appears to have been some urgency in the matter, for the family embarked by train at the height of the great flu epidemic of that year. By the time they arrived in Minneapolis, all members of the family were stricken with the flu and within a week, both parents had died.

The children became wards of their grandparents McCarthy who placed them in the care of their great aunt Margaret and her newly acquired husband Myers. McCarthy describes the couple as having "a positive gift for turning everything sour and ugly" (MCG, p. 17), a sharp contrast to her parents who always inspired beauty. Because the McCarthys were convinced that Mary and her brothers had been spoiled by their over-indulgent parents, they forced them to lead a spartan existence--plain foods, no toys, books or candy. The children "were beaten all the time, as a matter of course, with the hairbrush across the bare legs for ordinary occasions, and with the razor strop across the bare bottom for special occasions. . ." (MCG, p. 64). The children's paternal grandparents were apparently paying a great deal for their care, but they studiously ignored their physical and spiritual misery, regularly returning them to their aunt and uncle after they had run away.

Mary displayed an early aptitude for writing and at age ten won a state essay contest on "The Irish in American History." She received a twenty-five dollar prize at an award ceremony, but her elation was short lived for when she arrived home, her Uncle Myers beat her with a razor strop "to teach me a lesson, he said, lest I become stuck up" (MCG, p. 63). Her brother Kevin says that "something must have congealed right there

within her breast against life as it is and as it has been."[2] The treatment she received during this period of her life led her in later life to identify with 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" (MCG, p. 49).

During this period of her life, Mary was intensely religious, mainly because religious rituals and artifacts provided the only beauty in her otherwise ugly daily life. She writes: "Looking back, I see that it was religion that saved me. Our ugly church and parochial school provided me with my only aesthetic outlet. . ." (MCG, p. 18). Religion rescued her in another manner as well. The parochial school she attended had a highly competitive atmosphere and Mary thrived in it. "There was no idea of equality in the parochial school, and such an idea would have been abhorent to me, if it had existed; equality, a sort of brutal cutting down to size, was what I was treated to at home" (MCG, p. 19).

She believes religion must have been only an escape, because once she was removed from the repressive guardianship of her aunt and uncle, she lost her religion. Her loss of faith did not occur as her McCarthy relatives believed, because her protestant Grandfather Preston discouraged her religious enthusiasm, but because the

external misery which had caused her to seek refuge in religion was no longer present. Although now an atheist, she believes her early religious training was valuable for the cultural enrichment it provided. She no longer concerns herself with the existence of God: "I do not mind if I lose my soul for all eternity [for failing to believe in God]. If the kind of God exists Who would damn me for not working out a deal with Him, then that is unfortunate. I should not care to spend eternity in the company of such a person" (MCG, p. 27).

At age eleven, however, when her Grandfather Preston arrived in Minneapolis for a visit, she was a fanatical anti-Protestant. Outraged to find that she was being punished for breaking her glasses by being denied another pair, he forced her McCarthy grandparents to allow her to return to Seattle with him. He also supervised the placement of her brothers Kevin and Preston in a Catholic boarding school. Only Sheridan, the youngest and their favorite, was left with Uncle Myers and Aunt Margaret, and since they died within five years, he was soon removed from their tutelage as well. Although her grandfather scrupulously made no effort to influence Mary's religious preference, she quickly lost her faith and asked to be removed from the convent school in which she had been placed. Her grandfather finally relented and allowed her to attend public school for a year, then insisted

she return to a boarding school when her grades dropped. She chose to attend an Episcopal school, the Anne Wright Seminary in Tacoma, Washington, and she completed high school there, enrolling in Vassar after her graduation in 1929.

At the seminary, McCarthy's political philosophy began to form. While studying the mandatory Latin, she "fell in love with Caesar!" (MCG, p. 154). She says that "the first piercing contact with an impersonal reality happened to me through Caesar, just, laconic, severe, magnanimous, detached--the bald instrument of empire who wrote not 'I' but "Caesar!'" (MCG, p. 154). A rebellious student who clandestinely smoked and dated, she was surprised by her attraction to Caesar and "the rule of Law" (MCG, p. 166). She later realized that the qualities that attracted her to Caesar were remarkably similar to those of her grandfather Preston: "The injustices my brothers and I had suffered in our childhood had made me rebel against authority, but they had also prepared me to fall in love with justice, the first time I encountered it. I loved my grandfather from the beginning, but the conflicts between us. . . somewhat obscured this feeling, which poured out with a rush on Caesar, who, in real life would have been as strict as my grandfather. . . but whom I did not have to deal with personally" (MCG, p. 167).

In 1929 Mary McCarthy entered Vassar College. Her four years there were valuable not so much for the political ideas she imbibed as for the training her mind received. There the teachers relentlessly prodded the students to examine every aspect of a matter, to be objective: "At Vassar, by and large, the student is almost forbidden to take her direction from the teacher. 'What do *you* think?' is the question that ricochets on the student if she asks the teacher's opinion. . . ."[3] McCarthy believes Vassar's excellence stemmed from the faculty's insistence that students either support their previously formed opinions or relinquish them.

While at Vassar, McCarthy was essentially apolitical; she describes herself as an "aesthete" who was, when pressed, a New Deal Democrat, but who was generally oblivious to the political turmoil engulfing the country.[4] She experienced a brief "flurry of political indignation"[5] when Hitler seized power in Germany and she published a poem sympathetic to the Jews in the college magazine, but her involvement went no further. Literature was her consuming interest and it insulated her from the outside world. Her literary efforts were not encouraged, however: "I had been terribly discouraged when I was at Vassar. . . by being told that I was really a critical mind and that I had no creative talent."[6]

After graduation from Vassar in 1933, McCarthy settled in New York City and there sought employment as a book-reviewer for The New Republic: "I was not drawn there by the magazine's editorial policy--I hardly knew what it was--but because the book-review section seemed to me to possess a certain elegance and independence of thought that would be hospitable to a critical spirit like me."[7] She was soon reviewing books for both The New Republic and Nation, but of even greater consequence to her political development than her association with these two liberal magazines, she got married.

Her husband was Harald Johnsrud, a would-be playwright and actor whom she had met her first year at Vassar. Her marriage to him was of brief duration, lasting only three years, but he was largely responsible for drawing her into the left-wing activity then prevalent in the theater. Although she and Johnsrud remained politically uncommitted, often openly ridiculing the Communists, they attended Communist social functions and participated in Communist rallies and demonstrations. McCarthy writes of this period in her life: "Most ex-Communists nowadays . . . are at pains to point out that their actions were very, very bad and their motives very, very good. I would say the reverse of myself, though without the intensives. I see no reason to disavow my actions, which were perfectly all right, but my motives give me a little

embarrassment, and just because I cannot disavow them: that fevered, contentious, trivial show-off in the May Day parade is still recognizeably me."[8]

In time, her constant social contact with the Communists began to have some effect. Although she despised them for their dogmatism, she was, paradoxically, impressed by them. Perhaps it was their dedication which proved attractive when contrasted with her own lack of purpose. The summer and fall of 1936 marked a turning point in her life. She divorced Johnsrud and, more importantly, she very nearly joined the Communist Party. Her social aims coincided with those of the Party and friends convinced her she would be more effective in criticizing the Party from within. They argued, "If people like you who agree with its main objectives would come in and criticize, we wouldn't be so narrow and sectarian."[9]

When McCarthy returned to New York in September 1936 following her Reno divorce, she was preoccupied with reorienting her life and for a time remained unaware of the momentous event occurring in Russia--the Moscow Trials. The Moscow Trials were Stalin's device to purge the old Bolsheviks from the Party by accusing them of plotting with Trotsky to overthrow the government. McCarthy first learned of the charges against Trotsky at a November party she attended in honor of Communist cartoonist Art Young.

Author James Farrell explained the Moscow situation to her and asked if she thought Trotsky was entitled to a hearing on the charges against him. She replied incredulously, "Were there people who would say that Trotsky was not entitled to a hearing?"[10]

She promptly forgot the incident, but her memory was refreshed when, three days later, she received from the "Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky" a letter demanding "the right of a fair hearing and the right of asylum"[11] for Trotsky. McCarthy's name appeared on the letterhead with, among others, the names of James Farrell, Edmund Wilson, John Chamberlain, Dwight Macdonald, Lionel Trilling and Joseph Wood Krutch.[12] Angered by the unauthorized use of her name, McCarthy at first resolved to have it removed, but she soon began receiving strange calls from her Communist acquaintances quietly warning her to remove her name. Indignant, she resisted their pressure and her name remained on the letterhead while many of the others were removed. Her action placed her firmly in the anti-Communist camp, though she was not, at the time, fully aware of its implications. Later she was to refer to her realignment as a "providential escape. I had been saved from having to decide about the Committee; I did not decide it--the Communists with their pressure tactics took the matter out of my hands. We all have an instinct that

makes us side with the weak, if we do not reason about it. . . such 'decisions' are simple reflexes; they do not require courage; if they did, there would be fewer of them"[13]

After her initial break with the Communists, McCarthy began marshaling facts to support her decision and found, to her amazement, that the facts all supported Trotsky. She soon became a dedicated Trotskyite, arguing his case with every Stalinist she encountered. Soon others joined the Trotsky camp and McCarthy says of them: "On the whole, those of us who became anti-Communists during that year 1936-37, have remained liberals--a thing that is less true of people of our generation who were converted earlier or later. A certain doubt of orthodoxy and independence of mass opinion was riveted into our anti-Communism by the heat of that period."[14] This distrust of orthodoxy was to become a recurrent theme in her writing.

Through the Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky, McCarthy met Philip Rahv who was at that time attempting to revive _Partisan Review_. _Partisan Review_ was a leading Communist publication which competed with the official party organ, _The New Masses_. Rahv and John Philips edited _Partisan Review_ and, in 1936, they openly split with the Party by publishing James T. Farrell's "A Note on Literary Criticism" which challenged the Party's dogmatic approach

to literature. In 1936, Partisan Review ceased publication but was revived by Rahv and Dwight Macdonald in 1937 as a voice for the Communist opposition. Mary McCarthy was at that time having an affair with Philip Rahv,[15] and she joined the staff as theater critic, a job for which, she later ironically noted, her only apparent qualification was having been married to an actor. Partisan Review remained Marxist, although anti-Communist, and McCarthy says, "My early reviews lisp the Marxist Language."[16]

Although Kazin describes her as having "a wholly destructive critical mind, shown in her unerring ability to spot the hidden weakness or inconsistency in any literary effort and every person,"[17] her reviews were more serious attempts at theatrical criticism than others being published in New York at the time, and they received favorable recognition. In particular, they attracted the notice of established critic Edmund Wilson, a classmate of F. Scott Fitzgerald's who had edited Vanity Fair and The New Republic. He was, according to McCarthy, "a domineering individual whom she married largely because he insisted on it."[18] Soon after their marriage, she became pregnant with her only child. During pregnancy, she suffered a near nervous breakdown which resulted in her confinement in the Payne Whitney Psychiatric Clinic.

Although her marriage to Wilson was for the most part unhappy, he was responsible for launching her career as a fiction writer: "After we'd been married about a week, he said, 'I think you have a talent for writing fiction.' And he put me in a little room. He didn't literally lock the door, but he said, 'Stay in there!' And I did."[19] The result of this episode was "Cruel and Barbarous Treatment" which was later combined with other short stories to form her episodic first novel, The Company She Keeps.

The years 1945-46 were also crucial to McCarthy's political thinking. She had originally opposed World War II as being simply a replay of World War I and had objected when Philip Rahv wrote a Partisan Review article calling it "our war."[20] Gradually, she became sympathetic toward the war effort, especially after learning of the Nazi death camps, and in 1945 announced her support of the American involvement. She had just divorced Wilson and she and her son Reuel had retired to a summer home in Connecticut where she became involved with a group of intellectuals deeply concerned about the war's adverse effects on Europe's liberal community. She formed friendships with Nicola Chiarmonte, Dwight Macdonald, Niccolo Tucci and Lionel Abel. That fall, she taught at progressive

Bard College, an experience which provided background material for her novel, The Groves of Academe.

During this period, she met Browden Broadwater whom she married in December 1946. In 1947 he, too, joined the staff of Partisan Review and they became deeply involved in discussions with other New York intellectuals about the future of the war-torn world. They were inspired by Koestler's hope that intellectuals could form small communities, or oases, isolated from the rest of the world. They participated in Europe-America Groups, organizations raising money to aid non-Communist liberal intellectuals in Europe. Rivalry soon developed between various factions and one group even accused another of scheming to steal the organization's treasury.[21] Disillusioned by the intellectual community's inability to cooperate to achieve a common goal, McCarthy began work on The Oasis which was published and won the Horizon prize in 1949. The Oasis stirred a great deal of controversy, not only for its exposure of liberal intellectual posturings, but for the obvious parallels between characters in the novel and prominent intellectuals such as Philip Rahv and Dwight Macdonald. McCarthy says The Oasis was not intended to be a novel, but a "conte philosophique."[22]

McCarthy's political involvement increased in the tense postwar atmosphere. In March 1949 she attended the

Cultural and Scientific Conference for World Peace (The Waldorf Conference) and joined others, among them Norman Mailer, Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Hardwick and Dwight Macdonald in attacking the Communist Party. She turned her attention to the excesses of the right as well as of the left, producing a series of articles and speeches condemning the anti-Communist hysteria sweeping the country. In her articles, she examined the paradoxical American attitude that permits Communist ideas and books to circulate freely but holds that Communists themselves should be prosecuted. (These articles, "My Confession," "No News, *or*, What Killed the Dog," and "The Contagion of Ideas," have been reprinted in *On the Contrary*.)

In 1951 she published *The Groves of Academe* which drew upon her brief experience as a teacher and dealt ironically with the issue of Communist teachers, at the time a major political concern. The novel provides a sharp contrast to other college novels of the period, for the issue is not one of "good" liberals versus "bad" conservatives. In *The Groves of Academe*, the professor claims to be a Communist in order to prevent himself from being fired for incompetence. In *The College Novel In America*, John Lyons remarks that "the situation in *The Groves of Academe* is closer to the usual academic *cause*

célèbre than that in most novels about academic freedom."[23] He also says it "comes closer to being a novel of ideas than any other American novel of academic life."[24]

In 1952, McCarthy began work on another novel, The Group but became discouraged and discontinued the project after the third chapter. She was immersed in politics, particularly the Stevenson campaign, and was also involved in starting a new magazine. The magazine was to be entitled Critic and was to be a joint venture with friends Dwight Macdonald, Richard Rovere, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and Hannah Arendt, with herself as editor. In attempting to find backing for the magazine she renewed her friendship with Philip Rahv which had cooled after the publication of The Oasis. She was unable to raise more than half the required hundred thousand dollars and the project was discontinued. Her growing involvement in the civil rights campaign led her seriously to consider entering Harvard Law School, but her friend Judge Biggs of the Pennsylvania Court of Appeals discouraged her, convincing her that her contribution to the civil rights movement would be more valuable as an author.

Frustrated and out of money, she began work in 1953 on a short story which she later expanded into the novel, A Charmed Life. The novel is based in part on her marriage to Edmund Wilson and on the intellectual community surrounding their summer home in Wellfleet, Connecticut. Critics

generally consider the novel her least successful, no doubt because it consists of long philosophical discussions only occasionally relieved by action. Most agree that it would have been better had it remained a short story. McCarthy says, "The novel is supposed to be about doubt. All the characters in different ways represent doubt. . ."[25]

In the last half of the 1950's, she turned primarily to non-fiction, the area in which most critics believe she excels. In 1957, she published a group of essays interspersed with editorial commentary as an autobiography of her formative years entitled Memories of a Catholic Girlhood. She wrote two travel guide books, Venice Observed (1956) and The Stones of Florence (1959). She also published a collection of short stories, Cast A Cold Eye (1950); a collection of essays and criticism, On the Contrary (1961); and a collection of theater criticism, Sights and Spectacles (1959). In 1959 she resumed work on The Group, but again discontinued it in order to tour Europe as a lecturer for the United States State Department. While in Warsaw, she met James West, a State Department official. In February 1961, she divorced Broadwater and, the following April, married West in Paris. Since her marriage to West, she has lived in Paris, and she finished The Group there in 1963.

The Group achieved great popularity, more than any previous McCarthy novel, but it also received more adverse criticism than any of her other novels. McCarthy says the novel is "supposed to be the history of the loss of faith in progress,"[26] but most critics have failed to detect that theme in the novel. They have instead advanced a more coherent theme, the theme of feminism.

McCarthy's most recent novel, Birds of America, was published in 1971. The novel marks a return to political themes, dealing with the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War. McCarthy says the theme of equality is the basis of the novel. Since the original discovery of the concept of equality, "there's been a continual flight from it. Eventually we're going to have migration into space to escape equality. At the same time any person with a child's fairmindedness cannot help thinking equality's a good idea. If we lose this fairmindedness of children, then we become monsters."[27] Among other ideas, Birds of America explores the ambivalent attitude of Americans toward equality--their endorsement of it, their attraction to it, and their fear of actually attaining it.

After publishing Birds of America, McCarthy became increasingly frustrated with American involvement in the Vietnam War. Her friend Harold Rosenberg describes her

as being "trapped between not knowing what to do and the inability to sit still."[28] Throughout her life, McCarthy has been concerned with the inaction of liberals, their inability to translate their ideas into action. For that reason she eagerly accepted when the New York Review of Books offered her the opportunity to go to Vietnam as their war correspondent. Rosenberg continues: "Going to Vietnam changed her from a frustrated spectator into a member of the cast, though one without a clear-cut role."[29] Her assignment for the New York Review of Books resulted in the publication of four non-fiction works on the Vietnam War: Vietnam (1967), Hanoi (1968), Medina (1972), and The Seventeenth Degree (1974). During this period she also published a collection of essays, The Writing on the Wall, and Other Literary Essays (1970). Her most recent publication grew out of another New York Review of Books assignment, this time to cover the Senate Watergate hearings. Entitled The Mask of State: Watergate Portraits, it was published in 1974.

In a recent interview, McCarthy displayed little optimism about the world's future. She believes the United States and the Soviet Union will grow closer together because "The U. S. is becoming more reactionary, more totalitarian, and there is some slight adoucisement [softening], at least for the consumer in the Soviet

Union. . . . Authoritarianism is very likely to develop in the United States, and in some ways it will be a kind of nonidentical twin with the Soviet Union, with different history, different life-styles, and so on."[30] She opposes a world government because she believes it would almost assuredly be attained through force. "Supposing there had been a world government headed by Hitler!"[31] She says: My advice to anybody who cares about the future is to stop thinking big, thinking 'global,' and try to create free socialism in individual countries."[32]

From her initial involvement in the Anti-Communist movement in the late 1930's to the present, Mary McCarthy's political philosophy has been characterized by her desire to slice through the propaganda to the truth. "I believe there is a truth, and that it's knowable,"[33] she told an interviewer in 1963. She believes that in the political sphere as well as the ethical sphere there are certain moral truths which people must strive to discover, and they must not be distracted by irrelevant arguments. Dismissing military justification for the bombing of North Vietnam, McCarthy states: "Either it is morally wrong for the United States to bomb a small and virtually defenseless country or it is not. . ."[34] Since she first became involved in politics by endorsing Trotsky's right to a hearing, she has argued that the liberal intellectual

must be guided not by political expediency but by a genuine desire to know the truth, both about himself and about his society. Now 63, she continues to write, but she has lost hope in the ability, and even the will, of man to improve the human condition.

FOOTNOTES: CHAPTER II

[1] Mary McCarthy, Memories of a Catholic Girlhood (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1957), p. 166. Subsequent page numbers, given parenthetically, refer to this edition, abbreviated as MCG.

[2] Grumbach, p. 27.

[3] Mary McCarthy, "The Vassar Girl," in On The Contrary (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1961), p. 201.

[4] Ibid., p. 199.

[5] Mary McCarthy, "My Confession," in On The Contrary (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1961), p. 78.

[6] Grumbach, p. 42.

[7] McCarthy, "My Confession," p. 79.

[8] Ibid., p. 84.

[9] Ibid., p. 91.

[10] Ibid., p. 96.

[11] Ibid., p. 97.

[12] Daniel Aaron, Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961), p. 443, n. 10.

[13] McCarthy, "My Confession," p. 99.

[14] Ibid., p. 102.

[15] Grumbach, p. 74.

[16] Sights and Spectacles, 1937-1958 (London: Heinemann, 1959), p. xviii.

[17] Starting out in the Thirties (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1965), p. 155.

[18] Grumbach, p. 83.

[19] Niebuhr, p. 296.

20 Ibid., p. 298.

21 Grumbach, pp. 128-29.

22 Niebuhr, p. 310.

23 The College Novel in America (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962), pp. 170-71.

24 Ibid., p. 173.

25 Niebuhr, pp. 307-8.

26 Ibid., p. 288.

27 Jean-Francois Revel, "Miss McCarthy Explains," The New York Times Book Review, 16 May 1971, p. 24.

28 "Up Against the News," The New York Review of Books, 31 October 1974, p. 17.

29 Ibid.

30 William L. Oltmans, "Mary McCarthy," in On Growth (New York: Capricorn Books, 1974), p. 344.

31 Ibid., p. 343.

32 Ibid., p. 348.

33 Niebuhr, p. 315.

34 Vietnam (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967), p. 95.

CHAPTER III

THE TRAPS OF PRAGMATISM AND IDEOLOGY

Mary McCarthy's first novel, The Company She Keeps, is the story of Margaret Sargent's search for identity, a theme characteristic of novels of the 1940's. It was a theme she discarded after her first novel, however, for she found "that you really must make the self. It's absolutely useless to look for it."[1] The Company She Keeps consists of a series of episodes designed to illustrate Margaret's character through her relationships with various individuals. However, it is more than that. Much of the novel's interest lies in its depiction of the lifestyles and preoccupations of New York's liberal intellectual community during the 1930's. Jim Barnett, the central figure in an episode entitled "Portrait of the Intellectual as a Yale Man," becomes McCarthy's vehicle for expressing her displeasure with the direction the liberal intellectual community was drifting in the 30's.

"Portrait of the Intellectual as a Yale Man" satirizes the left for its remoteness from the object of its concern, the lower class. The offices of Liberal magazine, where most of the action occurs, are peopled by intellectuals who converted to socialism because "they were out of work or lonely or sexually unsatisfied or foreign-born or queer in one of a hundred bitter, irremedial ways" (CSK, p. 170).

Once they are integrated into the Communist hierarchy, they become middle class executives drawing comfortable salaries for spreading the Communist message to those beneath them on the economic scale. This contact with the lower classes is illusory, however, for as McCarthy points out, their intellectual magazine is read only by "a lot of self-appointed delegates for the masses whose principal contact with the working class is a colored maid" (CSK, p. 192). Jim Barnett, a Yale man who prides himself on his "intelligent mediocrity" (CSK, p. 173), is welcomed by the left partly because he contradicts leftist stereotypes: "With his pink cheeks and sparkling brown eyes and reddish brown hair that needed brushing and well-cut brown suit that needed pressing, he might have been any kind of regular young guy anywhere in America" (CSK, p. 167). In his opinion and that of those around him, he represents the "Average Thinking Man to whom in the end all appeals are addressed" (CSK, p. 173). The left is extremely gratified to think that through him it has at last established contact with the average man. The established leftists treat him as "a mascot, a good-luck piece" (CSK, p. 171) but fail to take him or his ideas very seriously.

McCarthy does not make clear the reasons behind Jim's conversion to Marxism, perhaps in order to convey the lack of clarity in Jim's own reasoning. He discovered Marxism

through his roommate at Yale and, since it was a period of economic depression, he was struck by the logic of its message. He decided "capitalism was on the skids, and everybody ought to know about it" (CSK, p. 169), and so began writing for liberal magazines, eventually becoming an editor of the Liberal. Although Jim is nominally a Marxist, he is no dogmatist; in fact, he prides himself on what he believes is his political independence. He rejects some of the tenets of Communism because it is "a point of honor that he should never agree completely with anyone or anything" (CSK, p. 171) and because he fears too close adherence to Communist doctrine will cause him to lose his prized average status, which allows him to function as a "walking Gallup poll" (CSK, p. 173) for the members of the left.

McCarthy dramatizes the self-deception in Jim's belief that he is a political independent simply because he is not a slavish devotee of Marx. Instead of objectively choosing his political stands, he is, in reality, "taking the line of least resistance" (CSK, p. 174). For example, he is vaguely troubled by his inability to reconcile his extravagant bohemian lifestyle with his proletarian principles, but he handles the difficulty by finally ignoring it rather than resolving it through critical analysis. He even prides himself on having

two selves, "a critical principled self, and an easy-going, follow-the-crowd, self-indulgent, adaptable self" (CSK, p. 226)." These two selves hold comfortable debates with each other in order to work out Jim's course of action. Although Jim believes he arrives at carefully reasoned positions as a result of these debates, they tend to be too comfortable and generally end in his pursuing the easier course. However, McCarthy does not wholly condemn Jim. He at least attempts to consider other arguments before rejecting them; the liberals she portrays in later novels do not even bother with the pretense.

McCarthy underscores Jim's lack of carefully reasoned political positions in his conversations with Mr. Wendell, the owner of the _Liberal_. Although the _Liberal_ is staffed largely by Communists, Mr. Wendell is a socialist and humanist. Jim is attracted to Mr. Wendell because he does not indulge him as the other staff members do. Jim finds "something ugly about the fact that these seasoned liberals should go to such lengths to please him. It was like having a girl give in too quickly; you felt that she did not take you as an individual seriously - she only wanted a man" (CSK, 177). By disagreeing with Jim, Mr. Wendell gives him a feeling of importance, but he adds to Jim's mental confusion.

Although Jim does not adhere strictly to the Communist line, his pragmatic view of political events leads him to become the Party's advocate in his arguments with Mr. Wendell. When Mr. Wendell declares that no government plan is "worth a nickel that would sacrifice [human] rights at the first hint of trouble" (CSK, p. 179), Jim disagrees. He believes himself "too much of a realist. . . to imagine that anywhere, at any time, a state could be run on the honor system" (CSK, p. 180), and he accuses Mr. Wendell of "making a fetish out of civil liberties" (CSK, p. 179). As a realist, he supports suspension of civil liberties to protect classified information during wartime, but Mr. Wendell demonstrates the contradiction in his position by pointing out that he does not believe in war. At this point in Jim's career, he becomes deeply troubled by his inability to resolve the inconsistencies in his views, but he again attempts to handle the situation by avoiding careful thought. Although he represents the "Average Thinking Man," he does not think at all. Eventually he comes to realize that in writing his articles he is similar to a salesman who "loses sight of his purpose and sells nothing but himself" (CSK, p. 212).

Jim's doubts about his liberal ideology are reinforced when the novel's heroine, Margaret Sargent, joins the

Liberal staff. The middle section of "Portrait of the Intellectual as a Yale Man" deals with the conflict created within Jim by Margaret's presence on the staff.

It must be noted McCarthy's most flattering portrayal of Margaret Sargent occurs in "Portrait of the Intellectual as a Yale Man." In Margaret's other sexual encounters with men in the sections entitled "Cruel and Barbarous Treatment" and "The Man in the Brooks Brothers Suit," she often appears to disadvantage. In "Cruel and Barbarous Treatment" she playacts the role of the unfaithful young wife who carries on an affair with another man simply in order to relieve the tedium of her uneventful life. She is disengaged from her actions, considering herself an actress who finds it "more amusing and more gratifying to play herself than to interpret any character conceived by a dramatist" (CSK, p. 6).

In "The Man in the Brooks Brothers Suit," she is portrayed as a somewhat shallow young woman pretending to bohemian sophistication. Her affair with Mr. Breen, a middle-aged steel executive, is at one point melodramatically characterized by her as "an incidental atrocity in the long class war" (CSK, p. 117). In the end, she appears a snob, discarding Breen, who seems admirable by comparison, for the same reason she discards the

sentimental telegram of condolences he sends her after her father's death. She throws it in the wastebasket because "it would have been dreadful if anyone had seen it" (CSK, p. 134).

The Margaret Sargent of the encounter with Jim Barnett is made more intense and more idealistic than the Margaret of the earlier episodes in order to provide contrast to Jim's lack of purpose. In this episode Margaret is a Trotskyite and McCarthy no doubt draws on her own experiences in presenting the lack of enthusiasm with which Margaret is greeted by the Communist _Liberal_ staff. Her arguments with the Stalinists illustrate the Stalinist technique of using circular arguments to condemn anyone who disagrees with them. They had refused to allow Trotsky to publish his defense in a Communist-controlled publication, but when he published it in a conservative, high-circulation weekly, they denounced him for selling out to the enemy. Jim endorses this line of reasoning and in doing so illustrates the limitations of his own thinking.

Margaret defends Trotsky, claiming he was justified in publishing in _Liberty_ because he needed a forum to present his case and because far more members of the laboring class read _Liberty_ than read the intellectual _Liberal_. She says, "The reactionaries have furnished

Trotsky with a vehicle by which he can reach the masses. What would you have him do? Hold up his hands like a girl, and say, 'Oh no! Think of my reputation! I can't accept presents from strange gentlemen'" (CSK, p. 193).

Jim is both attracted and repelled by Margaret's defense of Trotsky. He cannot understand what prompts her to defend Trotsky and his reflections show once again his tendency to take the easiest course: "In one way, he was sure, she had not wanted to speak up for Trotsky at all; she had had to force herself to it, and the effort had left her white. You had to admire her courage for undertaking something that cost her so much; but then, he thought, why do it, why drive yourself if it doesn't come easy? Nothing had been gained; Trotsky was no better off for her having spoken; and she herself, if she went on that way, would lose her job" (CSK, p. 197). Jim is originally fascinated with Margaret because she acts recklessly, without thought for future security, a consideration which he is unable to ignore in his own life. This fascination eventually leads to a brief affair with her while his wife Nancy is in the hospital having their first child.

The conflict within Jim is symbolized by the contrast between Margaret and Nancy. Of Jim's two selves, his "Critical principled self and his easy-going, follow-the-crowd, self-indulgent, adaptable self" (CSK, p. 226),

Nancy represents the latter. His marriage to her was intended to protect him from the "critical principled self." To Jim, the "Average Thinking Man," Nancy represents the "Average Intelligent Woman, the Mate," and she prevents him "from losing that precious gift of his, the common touch. . ." (CSK, p. 186). The conventional middle class life he settles into after his marriage to Nancy seems the antithesis of his leftist convictions, but he believes that "many a discord. . . which cannot be resolved in theoretical terms, in real life can be turned into perfect harmony; and his own marriage demonstrated to him once again the superiority of pragmatism to all foreign brands of philosophy" (CSK, pp. 184-85). McCarthy does not here criticize Jim for refusing to become a Communist idealogue, but for disagreeing only with those tenets of Communism which would cause him some personal discomfort.

Until Margaret arrives, Jim has been able to ease his guilt over his middle-class life style through his job on the Liberal, well-paying though it might be. His editorship "constituted a bridge between the opposing forces, a bridge which he strode across placidly every day, but which he nevertheless suspected of insubstantiality" (CSK, p. 188). Margaret exploits that insubstantiality, telling him, "You keep patting yourself on the back because you're not working for Hearst. It's like a lot of kept women feeling virtuous because they're

not streetwalkers. Oh yes, you're being true to your ideals; and the kept women are being true to Daddy. But what if Daddy went broke, or the ideals ceased to pay a hundred and quarter a week? What then?" (CSK, p. 194). She tells him that of all the members of the staff, only Mr. Wendell is dedicated to the cause because he sustains a financial loss each year "--every word cost him something. The good things in life are not free" (CSK, p. 196).

Jim's affair with Margaret lasts only until Nancy returns from the hospital. He continues to be intrigued by her, but he is afraid to exchange his carefully ordered existence with Nancy for a less conventional life with Margaret. He is ashamed of his rejection of Margaret because he equates it with his more serious rejection of the liberal cause. He begins trying "to appease her politically" (CSK, p. 209) and he is extremely grateful when she offers him the chance to redeem himself by signing her petition calling for Trotsky's right to testify in his own behalf during the Moscow Trials.

The signing of this petition marks the beginning of a tortured and pivotal period in Jim's life. He originally signs because he finds the plot and spy stories the Stalinists have circulated about Trotsky too improbable to be believed. For the same reason, he is at first merely amused by his fellow Trotskyites' claims of

persecution by the Stalinists. When at last the evidence of persecution becomes so overwhelming he can no longer ignore it, he is appalled because it becomes clear that the Stalinists have made accusations against everyone but himself. He is so disturbed by what others apparently consider his irrelevance that he feels he must assert himself in some way. "He longed to act, he told himself, yet the vague enormity of his situation furnished an apparently permanent excuse for inaction" (CSK, p. 227). Margaret's voice begins to intrude on his consciousness, mercilessly goading him to act. Jim is finally rescued from his state of limbo when he is requested to fire Margaret. He resigns rather than fire her, and he feels a deep sense of relief for his rescue. Jim's resignation on Margaret's behalf illustrates McCarthy's theory that people will instinctively act in behalf of those less strong than themselves if they do not stop to examine where their interests lie. In this instance, Jim acts instinctively and acts correctly, but he quickly returns to his former state of inertia. His resignation stands as his only assertion in behalf of his beliefs, the only act which "costs" him anything.

The last section of "Portrait of the Intellectual as a Yale Man" deals with Jim's gradual decline into conservatism, in practice if not in name. For a time

after his resignation from the Liberal, he revels in his new-found ability to act and he resolves to write a book on the transportation industry, a book which he believes will be "a second Das Kapital" (CSK, p. 233). The book fails to take shape and as his idealistic fervor cools, he accepts temporary employment with Destiny, a conservative magazine. The temporary employment becomes permanent. He soon acquires a huge salary, a materialistic life style and a select social circle, but deludes himself into believing that his interests still lie with the proletariat. He keeps up appearances by contributing to the Civil Liberties Union and by talking to "the common man" (CSK, p. 245). Eventually he begins to drink heavily, not because, as his friends suspect, his family responsibilities have forced him to give up "a life of dedication and scholarship which he had in reality never been attracted to" (CSK, pp. 243-44), but because he recognizes his own failure as a liberal. Jim's awareness of his own shortcomings causes him to be bitter toward Margaret for having forced that awareness on him: "He had never been free, but until he had tried to love that girl, he had not known he was bound. It was self-knowledge she had taught him; she had showed him the cage of his own nature. He had accommodated himself to it, but he could never forgive her" (CSK, p. 246).

Jim's transition from an eager, idealistic young liberal to a hard-drinking, de facto conservative is typical of the process many members of the left underwent in the late thirties and early forties. When the Communist Party lost credibility as a result of the Moscow Trials and the pact with Hitler, many members of the leftist movement simply dropped out and eventually lost all trace of their former liberalism. The Communist Party had been a unifying force among liberals during the thirties and its disintegration left a void.

After the demise of the Party, McCarthy joined with other dedicated yet skeptical liberals to produce Eisinger's "new liberalism." Others, less dedicated than she, gradually declined into conservatism. Jim Barnett is symbolic of this group of young liberals who displayed promise but lacked the qualities necessary to enable them to withstand the lure of financial success. Their pragmatic view led them to pursue the course which was both easiest and most lucrative and reject the course whose rewards seemed more distant and nebulous. "Portrait of the Intellectual as a Yale Man" is McCarthy's expression of her disappointment in those of her former associates who lacked sufficient dedication and clarity of purpose to continue as liberals.

McCarthy's second novel, The Oasis, displays a more pessimistic view of liberalism than "Portrait of the

Intellectual as a Yale Man." The satire is more direct and more personal, and as a result, somewhat less effective. The Oasis developed from McCarthy's disgust with the members of the Europe-America groups in which she participated during World War II. She describes the novel as her statement of principle and defends it against critics who accuse her of character assassination because the real-life models for her characters are so obvious. She admits she draws characters from life, but insists she is no more guilty of this practice than any other author; it is just that her characters are more recognizable to the members of the New York intellectual establishment who write literary criticism.[2] In The Oasis, she mocks the liberal intellectual establishment for seeking to reform mankind when it cannot even maintain civil relationships within its own groups.

The Oasis describes the establishment, initial success, and ultimate disintegration of Utopia. The founders of Utopia are a group of intellectuals disillusioned by the tense, cold war atmosphere following World War II. They hold little hope for the continuance of Western civilization because they believe the competition between the super powers will lead to the inevitable use of the atomic bomb. They believe humanity's only hope for survival lies in small isolated Utopias, or oases, and accordingly,

they select an abandoned summer resort hotel in the Appalachians as the site for their experiment. The standards they hope to achieve are vaguely defined; one of the members describes Utopia as simply "the right to a human existence."[3]

Utopia's problems begin before its members have even left the city. The intellectuals who comprise its membership are divided into two factions, the "purists" and the "realists." The purists are enthusiastic and idealistic, the primary advocates of the Utopian ideal. The realists pride themselves on their pragmatism. Their leader, Will Taub, declares he is joining Utopia only in order to watch "what *fools* they'll make of themselves" (O, p. 18).

The purists take their direction from the Founder, a saintly man from whom "they had learned certain notions of justice, freedom and sociability which now, long after he had left them, they were endeavoring to illustrate in action" (O, p. 14). At the time of Utopia's establishment, the purists believe the Founder to have been killed during the war, but he reappears after the colony has begun to prosper and sends them a congratulatory telegram telling them, "The only hope . . . is in small insurgent communities, peripheral movements" (O, p. 13). Like the early Christians after Christ's resurrection, the colonists experience a renewed surge of faith but, as McCarthy

illustrates, faith alone is inadequate to maintain Utopia. Faith must be coupled with dedication to humanitarian principles, a dedication which the colonists and, by implication, Christianity lacks.

The purists err because in their enthusiasm, they believe success is achievable through a minimum of sacrifice and effort. The realists do not share their enthusiasm. Although they do nothing overt to cause Utopia's downfall, they feel assured that failure is inherent in the basic premise of the colony. "They shrank from a definition of the colony which committed them to any positive belief" (O, p. 15). Because of their negativism toward commitment, McCarthy is less sympathetic in her treatment of the realists than of the purists. Although she treats both groups ironically, the satire aimed at the realists is more cutting.

Politically, the purists are humanitarian socialists; the realists are Marxists who have lost their philosophical underpinnings. "They based themselves on Marx and Engels and though they had discarded the dialectic and the labor theory of value and repudiated with violence whatever historical process was going on behind the iron curtain, their whole sense of intellectual assurance rested on the fixed belief in the potency of history to settle questions of value" (O, p. 19). They view the Communist dictatorships

as "an excruciating personal humiliation" (O, p. 19) and undertake to avenge themselves by taking as "their historic mission the awakening of the left to the dangers of Red totalitarianism . . ." (O, p. 20). Their mission is negated because the Western world discovers the dangers of Communism without their intercession, but McCarthy portrays them as too blinded by arrogance to perceive their own ineffectuality.

Although the realists have rejected Communism, their voluntary subservience to Marxist doctrine prevents them from searching for new methods by which to solve social problems. "As they patiently searched out the pages of Marx and Engels for precedents . . .others, more reckless than they, hurried on ahead of them to rediscover the blessings of capitalism . . ."(O, p.20). In their caution, they reject the possibility of freedom of choice for the individual, and they feel it necessary to dispel any illusion of freedom others might have.

McCarthy is most critical of the realists for their intellectual caution. She cannot understand what prompts intelligent people to spend their lives seeking to make the reality of experience conform to an artificially contrived ideology. In <u>The Liberal Imagination</u>, Lionel Trilling states, "Ideology is not the product of thought; it is the habit or the ritual of showing respect for

certain formulas to which, for various reasons having to do with emotional safety, we have very strong ties [but] of whose meaning we have no clear understanding."[4] Although nominally leftists, the realists are conservatives who fear, who are indeed incapable of, unrestricted thought.

The realist leader Will Taub is similar to Jim Barnett in that neither are able to reason effectively. But while Jim is confused by theory and discards it when it calls for any personal sacrifice, Taub takes refuge in it. "He was a theorist _faute de mieux_, for what really interested him was the information and the magical properties it contained for the armchair subjugation of experience" (O, p. 35). Taub uses theory as an excuse to avoid experience. Unlike Jim, who is too confused to act, Taub has a clear idea of what he should do but refuses to act because he fears committing himself openly to a project. He shrinks from making a monetary contribution to Utopia although he is aware that the colony is dependent on contributions from its members: "He was physically unable to do so. . . His reluctance to be committed held him aloof financially. . ." (O, p. 93).

Despite Taub's lack of financial commitment, Utopia prospers. By the middle of the first summer, the colony is producing an abundance of food and branching out into

other endeavors as well. It has a real prospect of attaining self sufficiency. The colony's social success does not parallel its material success, however.

The seeds of social dissension are sown prior to the intellectual's arrival in Utopia when a conservative businessman named Joe Lockman applies for admittance. The purists who long for the establishment of a model society, are repelled at the thought of having a crude businessman in their midst. "He is the antithesis of everything we stand for" (O, p. 7), claims Macdougal Macdermott the purist leader. He fails to perceive the irony of establishing a society which is to be a model for world governments but which has restrictive admission requirements. When the realists agree too readily with Macdermott, he begins to suspect the legitimacy of his own reasoning and, in the end, he advocates Lockman's admission because "the man has a right to exist, and Utopia is the "right to a human existence" (O, p. 10).

Joe Lockman fills the part of the token conservative who appears in each of McCarthy's novels. He is similar to Mr. Breen, "The Man in the Brooks Brothers Suit," in The Company She Keeps. He is tasteless in dress and manner and, as such, appalling to the sophisticated intellectuals who make up the majority of the characters. But, in contrast to the posturing intellectuals who often

fail to grasp common sense solutions to problems, the conservative character is refreshingly direct. Joe Lockman sacrifices his business and his career to enter Utopia and he thus has a greater stake in its success than the other members who can simply return to their old haunts in New York and write about their experiences if Utopia fails. Lockman, a compulsive worker, is angered by Will Taub's constant idleness, "being as yet too much of a novice in intellectual circles to distinguish conversation as an authorized branch of labor" (O, p. 55).

It is Lockman who precipitates the colony's first crisis when, returning from a hunt, he spots Taub standing alone on a hill, engaged in no discernible activity. Lockman quietly approaches him and, as a practical joke, points his gun at him and shouts, "State Police reporting" (O, p.56). Taub is shaken and then embarrassed. Once he has regained his composure, he angrily over-reacts. He deceives himself into believing that Lockman has acted with evil intent to remind him of the persecution he might have endured as a result of his leftist political activities. "All the indignities he might have suffered for his beliefs came vividly before his eyes. For all Joe knew, he had undergone them in person, and Joe's ignorance now of the real facts of his history allowed

him to think quite sincerely that this hypothetical case was his own" (O, p. 58). In his ability to convince himself of the righteousness of a hypothetical cause, Taub foreshadows Henry Mulcahy, the central figure of McCarthy's next novel, The Groves of Academe.

Taub immediately begins conspiring with his fellow realists to expel Lockman from Utopia. He calls an emergency meeting of the governing council but does not announce its purpose in hope of confusing the purists and preventing them from launching a counter attack. "Bad conscience. . . that's how we get these moralists. Make each one think it's *him*" (O, p. 81), he tells his co-conspirators. The realists, of course, are scornful of anything as impractical as a conscience.

At the meeting, the council decides to allow Lockman to remain. The crisis is defused when everyone begins to laugh at the absurdity of the incident. Taub joins the laughter, and the meeting ends in a feeling of camaraderie and good will. McCarthy uses this incident to illustrate the propensity of the left to indulge in factionalism. Instead of openly expressing his anger and then accepting the apology Lockman offers, Taub forms a conspiracy and thus enlarges a minor incident out of all proportion to its importance.

Utopia continues smoothly for a time, but the next crisis proves its undoing. Again, Taub, whose physical

cowardice parallels his intellectual cowardice, is the central figure in a crisis which develops from another minor incident. While he and his wife are picking strawberries for a Fourth of July picnic, they discover a local farmer and his family poaching the colony's strawberries. Instead of attempting to reason with the farmer, Taub scurries back to the hotel for help while his wife approaches them. When she is rudely rebuffed, Katy Norell (an idealistic young woman who fills the role of the heroine) marches out to confront the intruders. She, too, fails to drive them away and finally, her husband and another young man appropriate Lockman's hunting gun and use it to frighten the farmer and his family away.

The incident causes a major controversy over whether the colonists have the right to protect property, the strawberries, for which they have no real need, only a desire. Joe Lockman is so outraged by the unwarranted use of force that he threatens to lock his room in order to secure his gun. He is prevented from doing so by Eleanor Macdermott who quotes the Communist slogan, "Property is theft" (O, p. 162). Lockman is appalled that the liberals seem more concerned that he might secure his personal property than that the colonists have threatened another human being with violence.

Ironically, McCarthy shows a conservative businessman advocating humanistic values while the liberals fret over materialistic concerns.

Although Utopia ends in failure, McCarthy does not perceive its failure as inevitable. When Taub insists that "human nature" makes the use of force unavoidable, Katy Norell, who as the heroine may be presumed to express McCarthy's views, argues that Utopia might have succeeded through proper education of the colonists. "The problem for the colony is not to confuse its material triumphs with the triumph of its idea. There is nothing. . .here which the colonists cannot do without" (O, p. 175). By "nothing" she does not refer to necessities, but to the luxuries with which the colonists have surrounded themselves. When Taub responds that education would make no difference, that "historically, man is shaped by his economy and his environment," Katy retorts, "Then let us get out of history" (O, p. 176). With this statement, she expresses McCarthy's view that individuals are not controlled by external forces, but can shape, or "make," their own identities.

Although McCarthy's biographer describes _The Oasis_ as "a declaration of lack of faith, a set of articles of disbelief,"[5] that does not seem to be the case. The novel certainly expresses McCarthy's loss of hope that

the existing liberal intellectual community is capable of reforming society, but it does not mean that she has lost hope in the eventual triumph of liberalism. The novel ends on a mildly optimistic note: if man can learn to place more emphasis on his ethical needs than on his material desires, he will be able to live in harmony both with himself and his society.

FOOTNOTES: CHAPTER III

[1] Niebuhr, p. 314.

[2] Ibid., p. 291.

[3] The Oasis (New York: Random House, 1949), p. 10. Subsequent page numbers, given parenthetically, refer to this edition, abbreviated as O.

[4] The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society (New York: Viking Press, 1951), p. 286.

[5] Grumbach, p. 135.

CHAPTER IV

UNENLIGHTENED SELF-INTEREST

In her third novel, The Groves of Academe, McCarthy shifts her attention from New York's liberal intellectual community to a fictitious progressive college in New England. The novel is a satire both on academia and on liberal causes. Published in 1952, it deals satirically with the most burning campus issues of the decade, the issues of loyalty oaths and academic freedom. Louis Auchincloss is representative of one group of critics in calling The Groves of Academe "the apex of her satirical art."[1] Others such as Helen Vendler disagree. She maintains the novel is limited as satire because the plot hinges on a dated issue, one which is meaningful only from the perspective of the early fifties.[2] Perhaps some of the satire is dated, particularly that on the subject of progressive colleges, but it requires very little knowledge of the period to understand the major thrust of the novel--the subversion of honorable principles to accomplish dishonorable ends, a problem which is perennial.

The plot of The Groves of Academe is extremely complex and hinges on an unusual twist, a professor who proclaims rather than denies his Communist affiliation. The novel's central character, an egomaniacal literary professor named Henry Mulcahy, is fired for incompetency. Mulcahy is

convinced he is an intellectually superior being and, therefore, is not accountable to his inferiors for his actions. Instead of responding to complaints about his teaching, he turns the firing into a political controversy by claiming to be a former member of the Communist Party. Of course, he never has joined the Party, but he knows that the college president, Maynard Hoar, the author of an article entitled "The Witch Hunt in our Universities" will be politically embarrassed if it becomes known that he has fired a Communist professor. He is also aware that the majority of his liberal teaching colleagues will assume he has been fired for his political views, whatever reason Hoar gives publically, and will thus automatically endorse his right to teach. A liberal turned misanthrope, Mulcahy is able to use his knowledge of the liberal mind to manipulate the other characters in the novel, playing them against one another in order to insure his academic survival.

Mulcahy further complicates the situation by claiming his wife Cathy's delicate health will not tolerate the shock of his losing his job. He also claims that President Hoar is aware of her unstable condition and has counted on it to prevent Mulcahy from causing a stir. The majority of his liberal colleagues, particularly an idealistic young Russian expatriot named Domna Rejnev, prove all too receptive to his allegations. McCarthy ironically notes, "Like so many gingerly Thomases, they contented themselves with fingering

the wounds held out to them and attesting their intellectual superiority by their readiness to believe the incredible."[3]

Mulcahy's scheme succeeds at first. Alma Fortune, a respected member of the faculty, resigns on his behalf, and the support of such idealistic young liberals as Domna Rejnev and John Bentkoop forces Hoar to reconsider and reinstate Mulcahy. When parts of Mulcahy's defense crumble he is able to convert each situation to his own advantage. When Domna Rejnev discovers Cathy has known of the firing from the onset, she switches her support to Hoar, but Mulcahy is able to isolate her by turning the other members of the department against her. Finally, when Hoar discovers through a former associate of Mulcahy's that Mulcahy has never been a Communist, Mulcahy accuses him of using informers. Absurdly enough, Hoar is forced to resign. The only hope that remains at the end of his travesty is that a president untainted by past encounters with Mulcahy will be able to remove him from the faculty.

Henry Mulcahy is certainly one of McCarthy's most memorable creations. Even he is aware of his wretched physical appearance: "A tall, soft-bellied lisping man with a tense, mushroom-white face, rimless bifocals, and graying thin hair, he was intermittently aware of a quality of personal unattractiveness that emanated from him like a miasma . . ." (GOA, p. 6). He is an Irish Catholic, a heritage which,

when combined with his literary training and his egotism, heads him to an intense identification with James Joyce. He imitates Stephan Dedalus, the hero of Joyce's _A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man_, by carrying an ash plant stick, and he repeatedly draws parallels between his own family and that of Joyce's.

Although Mulcahy is not a member of the New York establishment, he is an intellectual of some stature. He is "the only Ph. D. in the literature department, contributor to the _Nation_ and _Kenyon Review_, Rhodes scholar, Guggenheim fellow . . ." (COA, p. 5) and a member of Phi Beta Kappa. He is easily the most renowned member of his department and as such lays claim to the admiration, or at least grudging respect, of his departmental colleagues. Although all agree that Mulcahy is extremely capable, they differ on the question of his competence as a teacher. While some defend, even applaud, his defiance of administrative red tape (his failure to turn in achievement sheets, class absences and field-period reports), most are troubled by his attitude toward his students and their work. The field projects he assigns are so uninspiring to the students that few even bother to ask for their return. He deliberately misplaces the thesis of a college trustee's daughter and insists he never received it, and he regularly misses conferences with his students: "His classes were accustomed to broken

appointments, to the typed notice on the door, 'Dr. Mulcahy will not be able to meet his students today. See assignment notice in the coop'" (GOA, p. 32).

Mulcahy is satirized as a liberal as well as an intellectual. He was at one time associated with the Communist Party but he never actually joined because, in a former associate's opinion, he was too cautious, too wary to commit himself. His book reviews for the liberal Nation, an article for the Marxist Quarterly entitled "James Joyce, Dialectical Materialist," and a small contribution to Henry Wallace's Presidential campaign caught the attention of a conservative state senator, however. As a result he was denounced for his "Communistic, atheistic tendencies" (GOA, p. 11) and subsequently fired from a college teaching position.

In fact it was the controversy over his firing that brought him to the attention of Maynard Hoar, the president of Jocelyn College. McCarthy portrays Hoar as a conventional liberal who is far more interested in maintaining his public image as a liberal than in implementing liberal ideals. Mulcahy sarcastically refers to him as "the photogenic, curly-haired evangelist of the right to teach, leader of torch parades against the loyalty oath, [and] vigorous foe of 'thought control' on the Town Meeting of the Air" (GOA, p. 11). Hoar attempts to enhance his own reputation

as a liberal by granting Mulcahy political asylum. He offers him a temporary faculty position created with funds donated by other liberal advocates of academic freedom. But, to his dismay, Hoar soon learns that Mulcahy is more adept at using him than he is at using Mulcahy. Mulcahy claims Hoar promised him the first opening on the permanent faculty. He also brings his wife and four children to Jocelyn in order to furnish Hoar with an everpresent reminder that he has a family to support. He consistently opposes Hoar on campus issues because he understands "you do not fire a man who has challenged you openly at faculty meetings, who has fought, despite you and your cabal, for a program of salary increases and a lightening of the teaching load, who has not feared to point to waste and mismanagement concealed by those in high places . . ." (GOA, p. 4).

The causes Mulcahy supports are commendable, but his motives are not. He supports them only because he is certain Hoar wishes to fire him for incompetence, and because he wishes to make it politically embarrassing for Hoar to do so. This is the same reason he claims to have been a Communist after Hoar has actually fired him. He counts on the president's "reputation as a liberal, which meant something to Maynard that the worldly would not understand" (GOA, p. 100) to force Hoar to reconsider.

Mulcahy's insight into the liberal mind enables him to manipulate his fellow teachers as well. Domna Rejnev and her close friends Alma Fortune and John Bentkoop are most readily swayed by his arguments. Their liberal belief in the essential goodness of man makes them reluctant to suspect that the actions of others might be governed by motives baser than their own. Domna is particularly influenced by Mulcahy and he identifies her liberalism as the major factor in his ability to control her: "At bottom . . . she was conventional, believing in a conventional moral order and shocked by deviations from it into a helpless sense of guilt toward the deviator. In other words, she was a true liberal . . . who could not tolerate in her well-modulated heart that others should be wickeder than she, any more than she could bear that she should be richer, better born, better looking than some statistical median" (GOA, p. 52).

Mulcahy is temporarily able to corrupt Domna, whose beauty, ironically, is initially described as having "the quality, not of radiance or softness, but of incorruptibility; it was the beauty of an absolute or a political theorem" (GOA, p. 37). When Domna attempts to persuade the other faculty members to support Mulcahy, she finds herself barely able to resist the temptation to assert that Hoar is implicated in Mulcahy's Communist past: "Easy to

assert in confidence, and no more in a sense than the truth. As soon as the devilish idea reached her full consciousness, she expelled it as wicked and useless--it could only end in ineffectuality or in both men's losing their jobs. Yet the fact that it could have proposed itself to her so readily, easily and naturally gave her a disturbing shock. What had happened to make her so ready to embark on a course of opportunistic lying?" (GOA, p. 89). During her confrontation with Hoar, she is unable to resist the temptation to lie and tells him that Mulcahy's students respect him. Later she tells Alma she has lied for Mulcahy because she "could not stand to be wrong" (GOA, p. 214) and because she is "ashamed for him" (GOA, p. 208). It is characteristic of Domna and of the liberals of her type that she makes her own motives seem more disreputable than they are while seeking to mitigate those of others. She sincerely believes that the students will profit by exposure to Mulcahy's "first-class mind" (GOA, p. 135) and that Mulcahy has been wronged by Hoar. When she learns that Mulcahy's entire defense has been based on falsehoods, she is badly shaken. She feels guilty because she has been responsible for his reinstatement.

By allowing Mulcahy to manipulate the liberals so easily, McCarthy raises questions about the ability of liberalism to withstand deliberate corruption. There is little sympathy in her portrayal of President Hoar because

he is more concerned with projecting a liberal image than with being a liberal. But Domna Rejnev and her friends Alma Fortune and John Bentkoop are the types of liberals McCarthy admires. They are dedicated and sincere, yet they prove as vulnerable to Mulcahy's machinations as Hoar. In fact, their situation is worse because they are deceived by Mulcahy and Hoar is not. Domna, in particular, is extremely honest and objective about her own motives, but she determinedly avoids recognizing the truth about Mulcahy. Liberalism, McCarthy appears to be saying, must be tempered by skepticism if it is to be a viable force.

Other concerns are also raised in the novel. In The Oasis, McCarthy expresses the hope that, given sufficient knowledge to distinguish between ethical and unethical behavior, man will choose to behave ethically. In The Groves of Academe, she expresses a more pessimistic view. Henry Mulcahy has the knowledge to enable him to distinguish between ethical and unethical behavior. His background in Catholicism, Marxism, liberalism and other philosophical areas has led John Lyons to describe him as "a microcosm of modern Western thought."[4] But his knowledge in all of these areas is never applied to his own standards of behavior. He finds knowledge useful only insofar as it enables him to control the behavior of others. For example, his knowledge of modern psychiatry convinces him that Domna feels personal guilt for her mother's death

and he determines to use that guilt to strengthen his control over her by telling her his wife's life is in danger: "It did not need Freud's insights . . . to sympathize with the youngster who carried such a memory about with her, a veritable nightmare of fantasied aggression and punishment, and to calculate that of all things in the world that Domna would not risk again, the death of an older woman would surely figure first" (GOA, p. 41).

In contrast to Domna Rejnev, the McCarthy heroine who searches painstakingly for the truth, Mulcahy has no interest in truth, only credibility. He claims his behavior is governed by "the eternal law of the artist: Objectify, or as James had put it and as he himself was always urging his students, Dramatize, dramatize!" (GOA, p. 98). This philosophy enables him to evaluate his actions only in terms of their believability. Alma Fortune says: "The criteria of truth and falsity as we know them, don't exist for Hen. He doesn't examine his statements from the point of view of the listener. He listens to himself . . . and asks himself, 'Is it credible?'" (GOA, p. 206).

Because Mulcahy's claims grow out of the kernel of reality (he was connected with the Communist Party and his wife does suffer from ill health), he is able to persuade himself of their essential truthfulness. After he tells Domna of his Communist past, he muses: "It was the artist in him . . . that had taken control and fashioned from

newspaper stories and the usual disjunct fragments of personal experience a persuasive whole which had a figurative truth more impressive than the data of reality, and hence . . . truer in the final analysis, more universal in Aristotle's sense" (GOA, p. 97).

Truth is a totally relative concept for Mulcahy, one which he always subordinates to self-interest. His self-righteousness and egomania are ludicrously evident in his identification with James Joyce and, by extension, with Christ: "Behind Joyce . . . is the identification with Christ. Earwicker was Christ--Henry Mulcahy is Christ in the disguise of Bloom and Earwicker, the family men, the fathers eternal consubstantial with the son" (GOA, p. 211). His image of himself as a Christ-figure convinces him that he is without fault and that others are persecuting him for his beliefs, not for his misdeeds. From his twisted perspective, he _is_ a martyr to the causes of free speech and academic freedom.

Mulcahy's arrogance in proclaiming that he is the wronged party in the face of all the evidence to the contrary prompts President Hoar to ask him if he is "a conscious liar or a self-deluded hypocrite." Mulcahy replies, "I'm not concerned with truth, Maynard . . . I'm concerned with justice. Justice for myself as a superior individual and for my family" (GOA, p. 301). In Mulcahy's mind, justice means nothing more than finding in his favor.

The novel ends with Mulcahy at the zenith of his power: he has succeeded in making Domna and Alma the objects of scorn and ridicule within the department; he has caused Hoar's resignation; he has ambitiously furthered his career by manipulating people.

The unscrupulous Mulcahy triumphs, but McCarthy does not leave the implication that bad will inevitably triumph over good. When Domna and her friends initially discovered Mulcahy's duplicity, they "felt the reluctance to intervene that characterized them as true liberals" (GOA, p. 248). But after Mulcahy threatens to expose the campus to ridicule and disrupt the student body by turning a poetry conference into a forum for his own views, they realize they have a responsibility to remove him from power. There is a suggestion that whether or not they actually succeed in defeating him, they will have gained because they have learned to recognize the vulnerabilities of their liberal position.

Out of the clear perception of these vulnerabilities the major questions of the novel arise: how can a liberal belief in the essential goodness of man be reconciled with the skepticism necessary to function in an unethical world? And even if a liberal develops the skepticism necessary to guard against exploitation, how does he defeat his opponent without stooping to his tactics? These questions are never fully resolved.

The novel serves more as a warning than an answer to questions raised. This warning is that during a period of extreme hostility toward liberals, liberals must choose their stands carefully if they are to survive politically. McCarthy suggests that automatic support of anyone because of his liberal credentials is as dangerous, both to the concept of liberalism and to society, as automatic denunciation of him on the same grounds.

The satire in Mary McCarthy's most recent novel, Birds of America, is less biting than in The Groves of Academe but more pessimistic. The novel portrays the maturation and final total disillusionment of a young American named Peter Levi. In the first portion of the novel, he is in his early teens and is preoccupied with the study of nature, particularly the various species of birds which inhabit the New England coast where he lives with his divorced mother. In the second portion of the novel, he is a college student spending a year in Paris where he is absorbed in examining his own values and those of the other Americans he encounters abroad--the various "birds" of America. The novel is, on one level, an extended analysis of America and Americans during the decade of the sixties. McCarthy's characters, with the exception of Peter, his mother, and some of his friends, are for the most part stereotypical. Their function is to provide McCarthy the opportunity to satirize the forms of Americanism they represent.

Birds of America is in many respects less a novel than a fictional essay. In part one, McCarthy describes the destruction of the earth's natural environment and its replacement by synthetic substances; in part two, she examines the destruction of ethical values and the resultant ethical void. Events are related entirely from Peter's viewpoint and there is little dialogue. Telling the story from Peter's point of view is an effective device because it enables McCarthy to present, without comment, the insanity and hypocrisy of the modern world as they appear to a healthy, sensitive young person. Nothing further is necessary.

Birds of America may bear some resemblance to the new journalism in that actual events (the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement, the 1964 Presidential campaign) determine the actions of the characters. But the novel cannot be accurately classified as new journalism because it deals with fictional characters and their reactions to actual events; in the new journalism of Norman Mailer (Armies of the Night, Of a Fire on the Moon) and Truman Capote (In Cold Blood), actual people and the ways in which they are affected by actual events are presented as if they were fiction. (For example, Mailer calls himself "Mailer" in Armies of the Night; the fastidious attention to detail in In Cold Blood seems closer to superbly written realism than to anything one would expect in the reportage of an actual, grisly event.)

At the heart of Birds of America is the conflict within Peter between his intense love of America and his alarm at the desecration of the American values he cherishes. He is absorbed with the difficulty he encounters in exercising the egalitarian principles which his liberal parents have instilled in him and which he sometimes regards as a curse. He believes deeply in equality arguing, "If the race would try equality once, then we might find out that it worked" (BOA, p. 127). But his attitude, like McCarthy's, is ambivalent, for he fears the cultural leveling that might occur in a society based on absolute equality. Equality is, for him, both an extremely attractive and an extremely undesireable idea, one which he is determined to experience directly in order to evaluate it for himself.

Peter, who is a philosophy major, takes ideas seriously and attempts at all times to square his conduct with his beliefs and values. As the touchstone of his personal philosophy, he has adopted Kant's Categorical Imperative: "Act only on that maxim whereby thou canst at the same time will that it should become a universal law."[5] A corollary of the Categorical Imperative ("For all rational beings come under the law that each of them must treat itself and all others never merely as means, but in every case at the same time as ends in themselves."[6]) is inscribed, in abbreviated form, on a card he carries in his billfold. Of

course, Peter finds it nearly impossible to avoid treating others as means, and his ironical, detached view of his struggles to do so contributes to the humor of the novel.

The initial contrast in the novel is between Peter and his mother, Rosamund Brown, an internationally recognized harpsichord player. The intellectual conflict between them may reflect the conflicts between the older and the younger Mary McCarthy. Peter is similar to the heroines of earlier McCarthy novels--objective and extremely self-critical. Like McCarthy, he believes ideas are important, and he has been influenced by Kant. His mother is gently satirized as a liberal who has begun to lose her objectivity. Peter describes her shortcomings as "exactly those of the country: they could be summed up under the heading of extravagance" (BOA, p. 22).

He finds her extremely arbitrary in the selection of causes she deems worthwhile. During the portion of the novel set in Rocky Port, a New England coastal town, she is obsessed with the need to return to a more traditional form of life. Peter, who is "opposed to progress in any direction, including backwards" (BOA, p. 11), finds her highly selective in what she accepts as traditional. For example, she accepts Monopoly as a family tradition but excludes "ketchup, trick-or-treat, square-dancing, sailing, golf, skiing, bridge, and virtually anything in a can" (BOA, p. 27). When she embarks on a crusade to restore unprocessed

and unpackaged foods to Rocky Port's stores, Peter fears she has begun to lose her objectivity: "For the first time in her life--she did not see herself as others saw her" (BOA, p. 62). Peter is also concerned because he fears a return to unprocessed foods will actually entail more expense and labor for the working classes. "Maybe you're spoiled, Mother," he tells her. "Only a few rich people with cooks can afford the kind of food you like" (BOA, p. 60).

Peter is upset because his mother, despite her professed egalitarianism, is a snob. She counts on her fame to excuse her sometimes eccentric behavior. When she refuses to allow a historic plaque to be placed on her home during the Fourth of July celebration, she and Peter are thrown in jail by a policeman who is unaware of her fame. Peter avoids his first impulse, to compare their jailing to the jailing of civil rights workers in the South. He fears "that in some depressing way the whole thing boiled down to a misunderstanding, which the cop would probably pay for . . . " (BOA, p. 80) while he and his bourgeois mother discuss the excitement of their adventure with their liberal friends.

When he is in Paris, Peter writes his mother a long letter examining the differences in their philosophies. He tells her, "Your ethics is based on <u>style</u>, which never has to give a consistent reason why it is the way it is" (BOA, pp. 122-23). He accuses her of making arbitrary

distinctions: "You don't really want to vote for Johnson, because, you say, he is 'common.' Doesn't that show that your whole way of looking at things is permeated by archaic caste notions? If I argue that Harry Truman was common, you say no, he was ordinary--a fine distinction. I guess an ordinary person is a common person you approve of" (BOA, p. 123).

McCarthy's portrayal of Peter's mother seems to be a form of self-criticism. Rosamund has become overly concerned with superficialities, matters of taste and style, and is no longer concerned with the quest for perfection that characterized the young Mary McCarthy. Her liberalism has become too complacent.

Peter describes her upper middle-class form of liberalism by contrasting two present day King Wenceslases, one a reactionary and one a liberal:

> Today . . . [a reactionary] King Wenceslas would feel guilty because he lived in a palace. It would prey on his mind. . . . He would think he had to justify his accommodations by showing that he had the right to them, that he was superior, either by birth or by get-up-and-go to the peasant down the road. He could argue that there was no use turning his palace over to the peasant, who would only wreck it, keep the coal in the bathtub, etc. In short, he would have to find some social doctrine or "law" that entitled him to be where he was. Appeal to some imaginary tribunal that would award him the palace.
>
> If King Wenceslas today was a liberal, with the peasants solidly behind him, he might become president, like Kennedy, and his wife could make the White House more palatial and have artists,

> like you, Mother, to perform. As long as he was on the peasants' side he could feel OK, relatively, about retaining the palace and furs. And the more royal and dynastic he was, the more, probably, he would argue that Society needs Symbols, etc. A liberal King Wenceslas, strangely enough, seems to sleep better than his reactionary uncle. (BOA, p. 128)

Peter's mother is a white liberal who eases her guilty conscience by vocally and financially supporting liberal causes but who does not alter her life style or perform any act that might require some sacrifice on her part. McCarthy's fear that she was becoming this sort of spectator liberal led her to travel to Vietnam in hope of finding ways to end the war. Although her efforts proved futile, she felt that she had at least become actively involved in the anti-war effort.

Although McCarthy is critical of Rosamund Brown's type of liberalism, she is more tolerant of it than of another type of American liberalism personified by Dr. Beverly F. Small, Peter's college advisor during his year in Paris. Small is a relatively minor character in comparison to Henry Mulcahy of The Groves of Academe, but both, in McCarthy's view, typify the failings of their generation of liberal college professors, and both neglect and abuse their responsibilities and trust as teachers. Small is a sociology professor and, as such, he presents a broader target for satire than other liberals in this study who are all in professions McCarthy herself has occupied at one time or

another. Small is an intellectual lightweight in comparison to Mulcahy and, in contrast to Mulcahy who is engaged in a battle for professional survival, he is concerned only with trivialities.

Small's name is indicative of more than his short physical stature. His banal sociological observations remind Peter of his father's oft-repeated statement that sociologists "only 'discover' things that everybody knew anyway" (BOA, p. 228). Small fancies himself an intellectual, but he is not a member of the intellectual community to which McCarthy's other liberal characters belong.

In addition to being of lesser stature, Small is more one-dimensional than McCarthy's other characters; he is a caricature of a sociology professor, a man totally dependent on theories he has not bothered to examine closely. During his first visit to Small in Paris, Peter attempts to engage him in a conversation regarding the relationship of the human individual to society. Peter compares this relationship to that of individual animals to their societies. "What interests me about birds and animals is that individuals don't count with them" (BOA, p. 197), he explains to Small. As Peter talks, Small ignores him and when he replies, he speaks in clichés that have no relevance to the discussion or to Peter: "You're anxious about the career choices open to you . . . . You're confronted with a bewilderment of choice, the concomitant of an open society.

This naturally produces anxiety and evidently, in your case, a wish to regress to a closed traditional pattern. Your rejection of individual freedom is so extreme that it leads to the fantasy of becoming an animal" (BOA, p. 199).

Like Mulcahy, Small has misdirected his intellectual abilities, and like Mulcahy, he attempts to use others in the process. When Peter encounters him in the Sistine Chapel in Rome, Small divulges that he is there not to contemplate Michelangelo's art but to initiate research on the habits of tourists. Believing the beatniks are setting the trends for the tourists of the future, he hopes to use Peter to establish a relationship with them. Small's attempt to masquerade as a beatnik (he has smoked marijuana and is growing a beard) satirizes college professors who became excessively fascinated with the drug-using counter culture during the sixties to the detriment of their more serious students. Small is obviously more interested in vicarious thrills than in an actual sociological analysis of the beatniks.

Small's study of tourists makes fun of modern sociological surveys, especially those conducted with foundation grants. He tells Peter the study is deliberately unfocused: "As he had explained in a memo to the foundation, the structuring of the study should emerge from the data itself; it was important to avoid methodological traps that determined the findings in advance" (BOA, p. 236). Translated,

this statement means he has not devoted any time to planning the study and has no idea what he is trying to learn claims his interviews are scientific, not "the usual superficial survey made in airports" (BOA, p. 237), but to Peter, Small's questions about background and reasons for traveling are identical to those he has been asked by every other American he has encountered in Europe.

Peter initially hopes Small's study will give him some insight into his own conflict in attitudes toward "class tourist and mass tourism" (BOA, p. 238). He is seriously disturbed by his inability to reconcile his egalitarian principles with his somewhat aristocratic tastes. In theory, he believes everyone ought to be able to travel and enjoy the great works of art, but in practice, he believes "a tourist ought to have to pass an entrance exam to get to see the 'Mona Lisa' or the 'Last Supper' or the Sistine Chapel" (BOA, p. 251). He desires a system based on absolute equality, but he realizes there are massive obstacles to such a society.

Small has no such reservations about the workability of equality. He considers himself a liberal and a social realist. He denounces Peter for being a snob and recites clichés about American democracy, which he makes the common American error of equating with capitalism. Reacting to Peter's qualms about mass tourism, he accuses Peter of believing the common man is "garbage," and he claims that

capitalism, not socialism, is the cure for all the world's ills. He says capitalism, "the best system yet invented" (BOA, p. 252), will eventually develop solutions to all the world's problems: "He began to hold forth about something he called the market mechanism, which worked (with some correction) like the mills of the gods to spread the wealth, remedy social injustices, multiply choices, advance basic research, apply technology to formerly human equations" (BOA, p. 252).

It soon develops that Small's study is designed only to promote the welfare of Small and of American capitalism. His sizeable foundation grant will pay his expenses to the most popular resort areas in the world (in season of course), and provide his living expenses while he studies tourism on location. In addition, he hopes to gain financial support from tourist industries, such as the airlines and from popular vacation countries, such as Spain and Portugal. His aim is not to serve society in general but the tourist industries who he says should be happy to finance him because "whatever he and his students discovered would redound to their advantage in planning and promotion" (BOA, p. 236).

It is Small's unquestioning acceptance of the inequities of capitalist societies that most perplexes Peter. Small even claims slums are beneficial because "out of that miserable crowding, those festering slums, the civil-rights movement was born . . . Capitalism in time will eradicate

the slums because it can't afford them; it's as simple as that. I can promise you that in the forseeable future, with automation and full productivity, the remaining pockets of poverty will be wiped out in the U. S. We will look back on the ghettoes as the inevitable way-stations on the highway of development" (BOA, p. 254). To Peter, Small's "all is for the best" philosophy is reminiscent of Pangloss, Candide's enthusiastic professor, but Peter caustically comments he "would not have cared to go through the Lisbon earthquake with him even to be in on the happy ending of seeing him hanged by the Inquisition" (BOA, p. 255).

McCarthy portrays Small as living in an ethical vacuum as well as being blindly optimistic. He perceives no ethical conflict in maneuvering Peter into splitting a check which he intends to charge, in total, to his foundation. Divulging that he has smoked marijuana, he urges Peter to try "some of the mind-expanding drugs" (BOA, p. 255): they will prove more effective in resolving Peter's problems than psychoanalysis, which he knows Peter distrusts anyway. To Small, pushing drugs is a logical extension of American capitalism. He suggests that eventually the tourist problem will be solved because people will stay home and turn on with drugs. Business will naturally assist by making drugs readily available. "There's your market-mechanism, don't you see, with its inherent thrust forward, to open new vistas, resolve old problems" (BOA, p. 255).

Just as Mulcahy is Mary McCarthy's ironic comment on the "causes" of liberal professors during the fifties, Beverly F. Small represents her concern with the pursuits of liberal professors during the sixties. In Small's preoccupation with the beatniks and his attempt to introduce Peter to drugs, he resembles "drop-out" college professors of the late sixties such as Timothy Leary. In Small's preoccupation with acquiring grant monies to finance pointless studies, he is a comment on the entire contemporary academic community. He represents what is for McCarthy the increasing irrelevance of academic intellectuals. Their concern with comfortable salaries and foundation grants leads them to choose their projects accordingly. Thus, they undertake projects which will profit not mankind, but themselves.

Characters with a conservative bias also come under McCarthy's scrutiny in _Birds of America_, and in this novel as in her former novels, they often seem more sympathetic than the liberal characters. Peter is fond of a retired admiral in Rocky Port, despite his support of Goldwater, because he still cares about America and because he is consistent in his reasoning: "Peter could almost forgive him, in view of his Tennessee origins, for being prejudiced against Negros (which the admiral denied), because he was prejudiced against so many other groups and persons, regardless of race, creed, or color--_e.g._, social workers,

J. Edgar Hoover, and the CIA" (BOA, p. 63). He talks "like a Fascist" (BOA, p. 73) but, paradoxically, he voted for Stevenson instead of Eisenhower and he belongs to a Ban-the-Bomb organization. Peter is impressed by him because he evaluates each situation according to its merits; he is not a doctrinaire conservative. McCarthy's admiration for anyone who rejects stereotypical thinking, party labels and dogma is evident in her sympathetic portrayal of the admiral.

The Vietnam War is the over-riding factor in Peter's final devastating loss of faith in America and in humanity. At a Thanksgiving dinner party at the home of an American general, he threatens to commit suicide if the United States bombs Hanoi because "they can't retaliate . . . And that's _why_ we'd do it. To prove to them how powerful we are. If we thought they could retaliate, we wouldn't" (BOA, p. 182). For the United States to bomb a defenseless country would be, to Peter, a totally immoral act and one which would represent the final debasement of the American idea. On the day he learns of the bombing of Hanoi, he visits a zoo and is bitten by a black swan, a bird which has been spoiled by visitors' teasing. He develops a severe infection and while in a feverish trance, is visited by Kant who tells him, "Nature is dead" (BOA, p. 288).

The ending of _Birds of America_ is McCarthy's as well as Peter's statement of complete loss of hope in the

advancement of civilization. Peter, who has an increasing sense of his own irrelevance, no longer has the will to continue. Although McCarthy's total disillusionment is obvious at the end of the novel, her meaning might have had more impact had she made the basis of Kantian ethics clearer in Peter's discussion of ethics in his letter to his mother. According to Kant, "Everything in nature works according to laws."[7] He defines nature "as the whole object of all possible experience,"[8] and further states that "all knowledge of things merely from pure understanding or pure reason is nothing but sheer illusion, and only in experience is there truth."[9] In McCarthy's interpretation, the destruction of nature results in the destruction of the source of truth.

In an interview after the publication of Birds of America, she explained its implications: "If nature . . . were to disappear, which it's doing, there'd be nothing stable left to stand on, no ground for ethics. Then you'd really be in a Dostoevskian position: why shouldn't I kill an old pawnbroker--because there's no longer a point of reference or a court of appeals. Nature for centuries has been the court of appeals. It will decide one way or another. Not always justly; but nevertheless . . . the appeal is always to the court. And if this is gone, we're lost. And I think we're lost. I'm not an optimist."[10]

McCarthy's earlier novels were optimistic because she still had faith in the ability of the individual to discover truth if that individual had sufficiently high standards and the will to perservere in the search. In a 1963 interview, she said, "I believe there is a truth, and that it's knowable."[11] But in *Birds of America*, she acknowledges she has lost faith. By having Kant tell Peter that "mankind can live without God" (BOA, p. 288) but not without nature, McCarthy implies that without nature, there is no basis for ethics, and without ethics, mankind cannot survive.

FOOTNOTES: CHAPTER IV

[1] Louis Auchincloss, "Mary McCarthy," in Pioneers and Caretakers (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1965), p. 176.

[2] Helen Vendler, "McCarthy's Birds of America," New York Times Book Review, 16 May 1971, p. 1.

[3] The Groves of Academe (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1951), p. 93. Subsequent page numbers, given parenthetically, refer to this edition, abbreviated as GOA.

[4] Lyons, p. 172.

[5] Immanuel Kant, Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals, trans. T. K. Abbott (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1949), p. 38.

[6] Ibid., p. 50.

[7] Ibid., p. 30.

[8] Immanuel Kant, Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics, ed. Lewis White Beck (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1950), p. 45.

[9] Ibid., p. 123.

[10] Revel, p. 2.

[11] Niebuhr, p. 315.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

The political novels of Mary McCarthy reflect her increasingly pessimistic attitude, and her final complete loss of faith in the capacity of liberalism to produce social reform. She has criticized liberals for a number of weaknesses: subservience to theory, lack of objectivity (absence of self-criticism and self-doubt), deficiency of conscience, and disregard for truth. She believes liberals have become too complacent, a condition which reduces liberalism to an institution similar to Christianity in that it no longer has any real capacity for reform.

As has been noted, McCarthy's first two political novels satirize the New York intellectual establishment: The Company She Keeps describes the decline into a self-protective and self-serving conservatism of a young liberal who is too pragmatic to remain committed to liberal reform when self-sacrifice is called for and when other pursuits offer greater financial rewards. In The Oasis, squabbling liberal factions are unable to resolve their personal differences, much less establish a Utopia, a model for world society.

In these novels, the heaviest criticism falls on Jim Barnett and Will Taub. Barnett believes himself a pragmatist, but it is obvious that this is merely a name to

dignify his practice of simply pursuing the easier course. Will Taub also fancies himself a pragmatist, but he is actually a slave to theory, unable to arrive at any decision that has not been foreordained in the writings of Marx and Engels. Both men deny the capacity of individual action to bring about any meaningful reform. They are the type of individuals Lewis Coser classifies as neoconservatives, and he explains the basic defeatism of their position: "The practical men are right when they assert that the utopian imagination attempts the impossible and politics is the art of the possible. But they forget that the key question is precisely: What is possible?"[1]

The sympathetic characters in McCarthy's novels always aim at the impossible in hope of achieving the possible. They believe the individual has the capacity to reform society if he is motivated by a desire to know the truth and to live in an ethical manner. Through them, McCarthy expresses the hope that individual efforts to achieve perfection can lead to a tolerant society based on individual freedom and the protection of civil liberties. Individuals are not merely shaped by external forces, but have the ability to choose or "make the self." When Katy Norell tells Will Taub, "Let us get out of history," she is denying the doctrine of naturalism and asserting the capacity of the individual to choose his own character and thus to shape his own social environment.

In The Groves of Academe and Birds of America, McCarthy projects a more pessimistic view of the capacity of the individual to alter society in a beneficial manner, and these novels reflect her increasing concern with the problem of ethics. The Groves of Academe is, on one level, a witty satire on the absurdities of politics in a college English department, but on another level, it is a serious examination of the implications for society if everyone were to act entirely from self-interest. The more sincere liberals are easily exploited because they frequently doubt the legitimacy of their own motives. The egomaniacal professor, Henry Mulcahy, triumphs because he arrogantly believes that his own interests take precedence over those of society. McCarthy questions whether it is possible to defeat someone who is not motivated by ethical considerations without resorting to the same methods of behavior.

In Birds of America, McCarthy portrays the institutionalization and subsequent ineffectuality of modern liberalism. More importantly, she expresses her own loss of faith in the liberal concepts of progress and the essential goodness of man. The question of the loss of faith in progress, first raised in The Group, is central to Birds of America. The young hero, Peter Levi, rejects the liberal concept of progress because it has come to mean only the accumulation of material goods and no longer carries any promise of improving humanity's social or moral condition.

In Birds of America, McCarthy also expresses her own loss of hope that man will ever learn to give ethical needs priority over material needs, a possibility for which she had expressed some hope in The Oasis and even in The Groves of Academe. In Birds of America, the erosion of ethical values has become so widespread that people no longer seem to have any capacity for right behavior. They are simply indifferent to matters of truth and ethics; they operate outside the moral sphere altogether. Peter, extremely preoccupied with questions of ethics and social reform, perceives himself "as irrelevant to practically anything" (BOA, p. 129). He believes a philosopher must assume a "common world with the rest of humanity" (BOA, p. 130), a common world which he discovers no longer exists. Man's destruction of his natural environment has destroyed this common ground. McCarthy believes the destruction of nature has eliminated the ethical "point of reference" and thus the standards for truth and goodness. Her belief that "if this is gone, we're lost. And I think we're lost. I'm not an optimist," expresses her own bleak social vision, her loss of her former belief in man's capacity to improve himself or his world.

McCarthy has not become a political conservative; she still supports the goals of liberalism. But she may have become, as John Chamberlain contends, a moral conservative. She herself acknowledges the Puritanism of her belief that

man is essentially immoral.[2] But, although she no longer believes in the concepts on which liberalism rests and which, in fact, must exist in order to make the goals of liberalism feasible, she has not altogether given up the struggle. The heroine of A Charmed Life explains that the Shakespearean and Greek tragedies are great because they contain a certain "bitterness" about life as it is. "There's acceptance without resignation--a kind of defiance in the end."[3] McCarthy has not become resigned. She states that she writes because she reaches the point where "I cannot be silent any longer."[4] McCarthy seems to qualify her pessimistic view of the human condition by continuing to write. That writers such as McCarthy continue to resist and continue to write suggests a greater cause for optimism about the future of humanity than McCarthy can allow herself to feel.

FOOTNOTES: CHAPTER V

[1] Lewis A. Coser, "Introduction," in *The New Conservatives: A Critique from the Left*, eds. Coser and Irving Howe (New York: Quadrangle/The New York Times Book Company, 1974), p. 8.

[2] Revel, p. 28.

[3] McCarthy, *A Charmed Life*, p. 189.

[4] Revel, p. 28.

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