

## ANALYSIS

*Cannibals and Missionaries* (1979)

Mary McCarthy

(1912-1989)

"In response to the truly frightful prospect of anarchic terrorism, Mary McCarthy has written one of the most shapely novels to come out in recent years: a well-made book. It is delightful to observe her balancing, winnowing, fitting in the pieces of her plot. The tone of *Cannibals and Missionaries* is a lively pessimism. Its difficult conclusion is that to be a human being at this time is a sad fate: even the revolutionaries have no hope for the future, and virtue is in the hands of the unremarkable, who alone remain unscathed."

Mary Gordon  
*The New York Times Book Review*  
(30 September 1979)

"For this novel, McCarthy assembles, once again, a group, but this time her plot allows her to bring together people who in the normal course of events would not seek each other out. This novel has been called *Canterbury Tales* with machine guns, and there is some justice in the comparison. McCarthy's pilgrims number twenty-four, and they represent clerical, legal, business, and educational callings; like Chaucer's they are portrayed with varying degrees of sympathy.

The story of the chief hijacker, Jeroen, is tragic, save in the fact that Jeroen's assault on the order of things has no effect except pointless destruction; there are no reverberations through the kingdom. McCarthy's world is resistant to change, ineducable, and therefore comic. The publication of this novel, with its improbable but possible act of terrorism, just a few weeks before the seizing of American personnel in Iran seemed a little eerie. Not that the events of recent history parallel those of the novel, or that the novel prophesies the international drama which began in November 1979, but there is enough of the fantastic in the behavior of Khomeini to make Jeroen's act seem less incredible than it might have.

The original slate of hostages is a committee of liberals en route to Iran to investigate the regime of the Shah. The seizing of this 'body of self-appointed just men on an errand of mercy' is intended to strike 'at the core of the West's pious notion of itself.' The rationale is a little soft but not therefore unrealistic. Terrorists are no more logical than the rest of us, and Jeroen is an artist more interested in the form than in the content of the enterprise. Originally the terrorists--including besides the Dutch couple, Jeroen and his girlfriend, Greet, two Germans, three Arabs, and a South American--intended to seek permission to land at an Arab airport, and the use of a farmhouse on a new, sparsely populated polder in Holland was a back-up plan. But the details fell into place, Jeroen came to love the back-up plan and would have been disappointed had a sympathizing Arab nation let the plane land....

During his youth in Amsterdam, Jeroen wanted to be an artist, 'As though to pay back a debt he owed for the joy in his eyes were experiencing in the museums and along the canals.' But when he became involved with his trade union and joined the Communist Party, he came to hate art for art's sake and to consider it as useful only for 'transmitting messages to the people to incite them to action.' Then he turned against the Party as 'merely another part of the system of world-wide oppression' and at last embraced terrorism as 'art for art's sake in the political realm.' A deed, he decided, is the only true work of art, with 'no aim outside itself.' Trotsky was right in the idea of permanent revolution. 'Revolution...should mean revolving, an eternal spinning, the opposite of evolution, so attractive to the bourgeois soul.' The goal of creating a just society may be an 'impurity' in the thought of a revolutionary. Jeroen comes full circle when, in possession of the Vermeer, he loves the painting for its own sake and turns the act of terrorism into a means to an end....

The title of the book refers to a game, or puzzle. Three cannibals and three missionaries want to cross a river. Their boat will hold only two people; the missionaries can row, and one cannibal can. The object is to devise a series of crossings by which all six can be moved without allowing cannibals at any time, on either side, to outnumber (and, of course, eat) the missionaries. The young Arab terrorist who solves the puzzle complains that the idea is racist since the real problem would be to prevent the missionaries from enslaving the cannibals. The puzzle posits and amiable relationship between cannibals and missionaries, aside from the premise that, outnumbered, the missionaries would be eaten. Just why they and the cannibals are fellow travelers is not at issue, and whether the hostages are cannibals or missionaries depends, doubtless, on the point of view. Ahmed's opinion is not without basis, to be sure, and some people might argue that the cannibals and missionaries deserve each other.

The novel begins by acquainting us with the Reverend Mr. Frank Barber, an Episcopal minister from New York, as he takes leave of his family. His narrative voice is the first and last we hear but only one of the many to be heard in the course of events; in this novel McCarthy uses the third-person technique she perfected in *The Group*, and the story is told in the manner of the characters, individually or in choruses. Approached by the Iranian student, Sadegh, Frank was inspired to participate in the mission by the example of the eighty-three-year-old Bishop, Augustus Hurlbut, his old friend and mentor. 'The irony of it was that Gus...had not even been contacted, and when the Iranians did get to him they used Frank's name.'

Always tolerant, Frank is not offended by this deception, but the list of committee members as he glimpses it from time to time seems to him 'protean in the extreme.' Father Hesburgh's name disappears and is replaced by that of Aileen Simmons, president of Lucy Skinner, a woman's college in Massachusetts. Likewise, although the senatorial office remains represented, the name of the occupant changes. More important to Frank is the rabbi.... Frank regrets the absence of the rabbi, and he wonders whether the group is 'truly representative' since it does not include a black either.

During the first stage of the flight--New York to Paris--Aileen's point of view dominates. Fifty and single, Aileen [president of a woman's college] has designs on the Senator, but she cannot compete with the younger woman.... In the McCarthy tradition, Senator James Carey is widowed. An extraordinarily eligible bachelor in his mid-fifties, he resembles Eugene McCarthy in a limited way. He was a leading Dove in opposition to the Vietnam War; he had presidential aspirations which came to nothing; and he is a poet, although unpublished. He is also perceptive and level-headed, and he does not fall in love with Sophie, or with Aileen....

When the hijackers make their move between Tel Aviv and Teheran, the passengers expect to be delayed, inconvenienced, ransomed, and then released.... Just before the airplane lands--in Holland, to everybody's surprise--the drama assumes a grim tone. The hapless Sapphire [pet cat], released from her cage, is shot and killed by the hijackers.... They will be going to the New Polder, an area as yet sparsely inhabited because recently reclaimed from the sea.... The farmhouse to which the hostages are eventually taken has been stocked with food and wired with explosives; the owner and his family have been sent, by an elaborate scheme, on vacation at the hijackers' expense. The hostages settle quickly into a routine of watching television, playing games, and reading what little they have to read, including the committee's materials on the Shah's torture machinery....

The hostages learn that there are four conditions for their release; a ransom of one and a quarter million dollars, the withdrawal of Holland from NATO and its breaking of relations with Israel, the release of 'class-war' prisoners from Dutch jails (the absence of the rabbi undercut the intention of demanding release from Israeli prisons, to the disappointment of the Arab terrorists), and a helicopter to pick up some tape recordings. Jeroen intends to exchange the collectors for their works of art, and they will be required to make tapes giving instructions to their families. He reasons that although the lives of hostages have to be seen 'in the perspective of the greater good for the greater number,' works of art are 'not to be touched with a ten-foot pole by any government... While the little colony awaits the arrival of the pictures, the Bishop dies of a stroke. The terrorists riddle the body with bullets and order it picked up by helicopter as evidence of their displeasure over the delay....

At last only the terrorists and a 'skeleton crew' of hostages remain in the farmhouse to wait; a month after the hijacking they are still waiting.... Holland will not, indeed cannot, yield. Despondent, Jeroen sends them all--hostages and terrorists--for a walk. He wants to think. Only the devoted Ahmed, suspecting his intention, remains hidden in the house with him, but during the walk Greet [Jeroen's girlfriend] has a sudden insight and brings the procession hastening back over protests--'Jeroen said we were to have thirty minutes'--just in time for Jeroen to cry furiously (in Dutch) 'Get out!' before the house explodes.

Aileen and Frank have only 'superficial cuts and bruises.' Henk and Sophie live, but Henk is in a coma from a head injury for a time and Sophie loses her right arm. The others are dead and most of the paintings destroyed, sacrificed by Jeroen because he loved them. Flying together back to the United States, Aileen and Frank read a journal which Sophie kept and has given to Aileen. In it, she muses about art.... Art is central to McCarthy's design as to Jeroen's; it is both a subject of the novel and a device of the plot.... The visual arts in one way or another engages most of the characters. The millionaires 'own' great works of art.... Ahmed, who briefly survives the explosion, attempts to make Frank and Aileen understand that the sacrifice is '*le geste sublime d'und grand revolutionnaire* [the sublime gesture of a great revolutionary]....' By holding a group of 'just men' and a house full of irreplaceable works of art, he challenges the West's commitment to human, material, and cultural values. The fundamental impurity of his sublime gesture, however, is its complicity in reducing art to currency. The Vermeer is the highest price he can imagine, but it is a price and it is turned down. Jeroen nets no more than any ordinary hijacker. Social change does not follow from even the boldest and most imaginative act of terrorism... The mission to Iran is moot.... Most durable of the birds in the novel is Mr. Owl, embodiment of the imperviousness of human institutions....

Carey considers the old Bishop a good man, and nothing in the novel gainsays it. Intimate with God, as the earnestly religious Frank is not, he is also more at ease in the world.... But there is no redemption, only loss.... The hostages are cooperative because resistance would be fatal and because of the tendency that Sophie noted to make common cause.... Carey's manner is detached and playful; his besetting sin is pride. He is Catholic and does not expect much of humanity; God is 'the only person' to whom he can talk and who can anger him....

*Cannibals and Missionaries* is susceptible to the recurring criticism that McCarthy is more essayist than novelist. One reader wonders why she wrote this book as a novel; another finds the long periods of inaction tedious. We may again pass over the question of genre. As the term is commonly used, *Cannibals and Missionaries* is a novel. But to say so does not clear it of the charge that it contains so many monologues, both internal and external, that the subjects of conversations and reflections, rather than action and character, sometimes dominate our attention....

Although she exposes the minds and actions of her characters, she does not often explore their souls and invite us to *feel* with them. Indeed, we hardly even mourn their deaths--fortunately, since their mortality rate is appalling. We like many of them, but amusement and embarrassment are the emotions we are most likely to feel on their behalf, and we do not willingly identify with most of them. We do, however, judge them. We think about them in terms of what they do and ought to do, not of how they fell or why they feel that way. Our attention is directed to how their minds work, what they know, and how they explain themselves. McCarthy believes...that truth is knowable; her characters are prone to err, but not with impunity, and not without presenting their case. They argue and rationalize.... Human nature can be grand, but McCarthy seems not to think so. Decency seems to be the upper limit of human possibility--or, to elaborate, the practice of solid virtues like honor, compassion, sacrifice, and truthfulness. A trim reckoning, but no mean achievement on the personal level. On a larger scale, McCarthy does not offer much hope, but then we do not read her for reassurance....

If a weakness of McCarthy's fiction is its essayistic tendencies, its great strength is the accuracy with which she portrays characters, particularly comic characters, giving new life and individuality to universal types.... McCarthy is generous with physical descriptions of her characters, but often a single feature or gesture is emphasized by repetition until it has almost the effect of caricature.... Similarly, clothing and housing serve to identify characters."

Willene Schaefer Hardy  
*Mary McCarthy*

"*Cannibals and Missionaries* (1979) is Mary McCarthy's most ambitious novel since *The Group*, and in some ways it is more adroit. Yet it returns in its ideology to many of the controversies of the 1950s, between liberals and radicals, and their slightly updated varieties.

In his preface to *The Princess Casamassima*, James speaks of how the novelist should maintain balance between two elements: the intelligence every character needs to be interesting and compelling, and the bewilderment that same character must have to convey surprise and tension. McCarthy does not achieve that balance, for she drives hard on being in command. Only Lily in *Cannibals* seems close to that balance James suggests, her hard insights intermixed with a 'water color' kind of personality. But for her main characters, McCarthy parodies anything less than intelligence, rejecting bewilderment.

*Cannibals and Missionaries* tries very hard to be a 'now' novel. The hijacking of a plane en route from New York to Iran, via Israel, gives McCarthy three converging political elements. First, we meet a mixed group of liberals on their way to Iran to poke around in prisons and similar places to see what kind of shop the Shah is running. Their interest is in preserving the decencies of democracy. This group includes the rector of St. Matthew's, and old retired bishop, a senator, a college president (Aileen Simmons), a Jewish reporter named Sophie, a Dutch government official, Henk, and two others. First-class passengers include twelve millionaires, nearly all of them serious collectors of art. Separated by money and class from the other group, they run their own operation, much disliked by Simmons.

The third element consists of terrorists, who hijack the plane and fly it to Schiphol, in the Netherlands; there, they transfer to a helicopter and fly to a polder, a piece of land reclaimed from the sea by way of dredging and landfill. The terrorists, a mixed group--two Arabs a South American (Carlos, but not *the* Carlos)--are led by a Dutchman named Joeren and a Dutchwoman, Greet. Their aim originally was to barter hostages for jailed terrorists, four of the latter for each one of the former. But when they assess the group, they focus on the art; the barter will be lives for art.

Joeren is a former art student, who sees that 'terrorism was art for art's sake in the political realm.' Disbelieving in the usual slogans, he feels all political solutions are quite temporary; the Palestinian question, for example, 'was merely a parenthesis.' He sees that art can prove transformational: merely take all those miserable millionaires and make them transmute themselves into masterpieces, through the exchange of their lives for their great artworks: 'turn their base substance into pure gold.'

The spatial area chosen for the caper is crucial to the enterprise: the polder is, for McCarthy, a perfect meeting place of terrorists, bourgeois capitalists, contemporary liberals, and that world of art and old masters. Before the group arrives, we are led into Holland as a place that 'no rational mind in this century could believe in...as a real place.' The prime minister is Mr. Owl; Henk is a deputy whose grandfather was a famous popular novelist; and the country--reclaimed land, dikes, a fantasy of anti-nature--is meaningful only to other Dutch. 'Being Dutch was a comical predicament, more grotesque even than being Swiss.' This description is an apt foreshadowing of the hallucinatory quality of the hijacking--a mythical country as backdrop for the twentieth-century fantasy played out in a hijacking. The polder is a nowhere ("Holland's Alaska") which spatially becomes everything.

Part of the problem with the plan, however, lies with the groups themselves, primarily with the liberals out to investigate the Shah's prisons. As McCarthy demonstrated in *The Group* and *Birds of America*, the very idea of grouping suggests a breakdown of the human spirit, which functions best in the individual. Within this group, she has several portraits: portraits rather than characters. Senator Jim Carey is based apparently on Eugene McCarthy, in the details of both his accomplishments and his personal life. Mary McCarthy writes about him fondly, but her insights are familiar to us from the columns of *The New York Times*. Also in the group is one of McCarthy's standbys, a refugee, as it were, from her Vassar College group. This is Aileen Simmons, petty, occasionally venomous, old maidish and yet desirous of some action, a driven liberal whose hatred for the millionaires focuses her. The problem with the Simmons portrait is that McCarthy is uncertain whether to laud or parody her. She is one of the two unharmed survivors, the other being Frank Barber, the energetic rector. Barber is a man driven to see good done--his church--and he

perceives the hijacking as not a tragedy but a test of faith. His Christianity is muscular, full of social substance, politically liberal to its core. He will take consequences. And yet McCarthy edges him with parody; the mere fact of him is comic fodder.

Americans, for McCarthy, are people who cannot be presented without parody. The Dutch Henk, however, who is bourgeois, stolid, a man not above playing around when away from his wife, has a presence McCarthy can take straight. His fantasy sense of Holland dominates our imagination; we accept it through him. His discussions with Joeren are reality itself. Joeren indicates what he wants, and Henk tells him what the Dutch government will give: art, perhaps, but no withdrawal from NATO, no break with Israel, no alignment with the Palestinians. Henk's centrality, unfortunately, turns Simmons and Barber into marginal figures, even as McCarthy devotes space to them.

Among the hijackers, the sole glimpse we get of a real presence is Joeren's. Poor, a struggling artist in his youth, a member of the Party, Joeren became disillusioned with all formal rebellion and turned to terrorism as a display of pure leftism. When the hijacking involves the millionaires, it is natural for him to think of offering their lives as ransom for their Vermeers, El Grecos, Cezannes, Giorgiones, water-colors. To acquire great art is for him the final act of revolution. The bourgeois Vermeer, his *Girl with a Guitar*, becomes for Joeren the focal point of his life, something he can finally love.

The idea is an excellent one, but McCarthy does not fictionally lead us to accept it. Her methods are insufficient; the hijackers escape her explanations. In *A Smuggler's Bible*--not hijacking, but smuggling is close--Joseph McElroy devised internal techniques or substructures which would approximate the subject. McCarthy attempts to locate the point of view in various characters, but otherwise her techniques are external. Yet we are, after all, in the midst of great despair--hijacking must be observed as such, not simply as an accomplishment--and Joeren in an act of despair blows up the house, the art, himself, and most of the remaining hostages and terrorists. The Vermeer, which goes up with him in the explosion, has precipitated the act: his love for it, for the girl situated in it, for the idea of a Vermeer. Here is his true revolutionary act; and yet we do not comprehend it or the despair that went into it.

The world goes out with a bang, but the effect is a whimper. The happening on the polder is over, already replaced in the media with another event, significant only to those who experienced it. McCarthy's novel appeared just when the fifty-two hostages held by the Iranian kidnappers were the focus of world attention, and as the novel faded from view, so did the world's concern for the hostages. Except for their families (and themselves), and the politicians who could make capital from their plight, interest waned.

Here the McCarthy novel reaches for a real contemporary response: our inability to focus attention for more than minutes. We are, she suggests, attuned to the media presentation of events, and we have replaced a sense of historical contexts with two- or three-minute presentations: all news occurs in fragments, or 'cartridges,' to use McElroy's term. The terrorists on the polder, like those in the American embassy in Teheran, could not exist without the insistence of the media. Yet the paradox: although revolutionaries and leftists wish to suppress television and press crews, they have their own dilemma; for without the presence of the media, there may be no revolution.

Although this is not a completely new cultural development, the advent of television in the 1950s created its own political culture, in which those who can least afford exposure are forced to rely on such means of communication to maintain their momentum. Here is an aspect of the novel which McCarthy only suggests; and it is, like so many other elements in *Cannibals and Missionaries*, inchoate matter; the substance of an extremely penetrating intelligence that has not informed its materials. For when we are finished, we do not understand the liberals, nor the millionaires, nor, least of all, the terrorists. All that remains is all that beauty, caught in the eye of the perceiver, for it has been blown sky high, art, cannibals, and missionaries together.... McCarthy seems uncertain of her tone, whether to head openly for satire or to settle for moderate parody."

Frederick R. Karl  
*American Fictions 1940/1980*  
(Harper & Row 1983) 269-71

"As *Cannibals and Missionaries* opens, in 1975, a committee of prominent liberals sets out by air for Iran to investigate torture under the Shah. A party of art collectors on its way to visit Iranian museums and archaeological sites occupies the plane's first-class section. Terrorists hijack the plane over France and divert it to Schiphol in the Netherlands, where they extort a mammoth helicopter from the Dutch government and NATO to take the liberals and millionaires to a deserted Dutch polder (land reclaimed from the sea by dredging and landfill). Most of the novel takes place on the polder, where the terrorists, posing as a television company filming frontier life, have taken over a farm as a hideout.

The list of characters who will live in this enforced community include twelve millionaires, whose Cezannes, El Grecos, and single Vermeer are flown in and exchanged for their lives, the five terrorists--two Arabs, a South American, and two Netherlanders, including Jeroen, their leader; and eight liberals--the relentlessly optimistic Episcopalian rector of Saint Matthew's in New York's Gracie Square; a sweet octogenarian bishop; a U.S. Senator who is an ex-seminarian and poet; a poisonous president of a prominent women's college; and American journalist; a Dutch deputy; and two professors, one English and the other American. Much of this was conceived by McCarthy in her 'Note to Myself on a Possible Novel'....

The novel questions the modern tendency to see human beings as dispensable but art as irreplaceable, a trend that began, perhaps, during World War II with the Allied and German understanding not to bomb certain monuments, and continues to the present day, when political leaders discuss up-to-date weapons that will exterminate people but leave buildings intact. It was the theft of Vermeer's painting 'Young Lady with a Guitar' by Irish terrorists during the winter of 1974 that set Mary McCarthy pondering this point. The terrorists cut off strips of the painting, sent them to newspapers, and threatened to destroy the masterpiece if their demands were not met. That people were more gripped by this than by the 1973 case of J. Paul Getty's grandson, whose ear was cut off by his kidnapers, fascinated McCarthy. 'And the whole question of the value people put on works of art is very interesting, especially for someone who cares about art and beauty in every way as I do,' she said in a 1979 interview....

That pictures were now being kidnapped as if they were people, led directly to *Cannibals and Missionaries*. The genesis for the committee of liberals in the novel was a group that an Iranian in Paris had tried to organize to investigate torture under the Shah.... Her favorite character in the novel is Henk Van Vliet de Jonge, partly modeled on her Dutch friend Cees Nooteboom, who introduced her to several people in Holland--including...a member of Parliament...and the prime minister...and...the *Landdrost* (governor) of the new polder complex, and who advised her in choosing Dutch names and in using Dutch words....

Harcourt Brace Jovanovich printed 50,000 copies of *Cannibals and Missionaries*, but only half that number sold. McCarthy's reading public was shrinking, partly owing to the long intervals between novels--it had been eight years since *Birds of America* and sixteen years since *The Group*. Once again, there were a great many negative reviews. The most enthusiastic reviewer was Mary Gordon, who wrote that *Cannibals and Missionaries* 'would have been impossible without [McCarthy's] experience of traveling to Vietnam as a reporter. Many of the details of that experience, particularly those about physical fear and communal bonding, find their way into this novel in the accounts of the passengers' ordeal.' But most of the other reviewers, though they praised McCarthy for her extraordinary research and bullwhip wit, found the book boring, especially the long-drawn-out business of ransoming the rich hostages and their paintings. The novel is tedious in parts probably because McCarthy deals with more than two dozen characters who are confined to a severely limited space. All they can do is think and talk; and with McCarthy playing the ventriloquist again, they do so in their own voices.

Even though the characters in *Cannibals and Missionaries* have more interesting minds than those of the Vassar girls in *The Group*, the reader grows weary of all the switching back and forth among them. Yet what this novel illustrates more than anything else is the author's keen ear for naturalistic dialogue, passing as it does from one voice to another without warning, like an oral Daumier. Two reviewers thought she failed this point too. Benjamin DeMott wished 'the author were less class-bound,' and Margaret Wimsatt asked, 'Why do all those wealthies speak like Vassar girls, circa 1934?'"

Carol Gelderman  
*Mary McCarthy: A Life*

"*Cannibals and Missionaries*...is the least reflective of McCarthy's novels. Ideas bob on its intricately plotted surface like bright decoys, inviting comparison with the natural world but not quite making the cut.... The politics of terrorism are treated aphoristically: 'Today's arch-revolutionaries had no faith in a future life for their ideas; it was gone, like the Christian faith in God's design.' In extremis, when the terrorist aims at moral instruction, or *de*-instruction, as McCarthy's pet terrorist, Jeroen, the former Dutch art student who commands the hijackers, does, terrorism becomes 'art for art's sake in the political realm.'

Jeroen regards the notion that terrorism will usher in a new society, still believed by his partner, Greet, an ex-KLM hostess, as 'an impurity,' a dream that 'had been dreamed too often.' He thinks Trotsky's notion of 'permanent revolution' was right but insincere--Trotsky's suppression of the Russian sailors at Kronstadt showed his real attitude. The modern revolutionary must expose the hypocrisy behind the West's appropriation of humane values: liberalism and art, in particular....

In form, *Cannibals and Missionaries* is a series of character sketches, harvested from the friendships and associations of the last quarter of McCarthy's life. The model for the old-fashioned liberal who is above reproach, Bishop Gus Hurlbut, is another Episcopal prelate, the retired Bishop of St. Louis, Will Scarlett. 'The 'Red Bishop,' as this close friend of Eleanor Roosevelt was known in Castine, where he also spent his summers, died in 1973. Elizabeth Hardwick can be heard in the talky Arkansas-born college president, Aileen Simmons, whose 'fault was only an unusual degree of mental activity. The curse of intelligence. Stupid people were unconscious of their slow-moving thought processes. But take Charles's plain gold ring: a mind like hers could not fail to perceive immediately that it was on the 'wrong' hand and be aware of what conclusions to draw. Though he must be nearly eighty and queer in every sense, there he was, a man and unmarried. With a fair share of worldly goods.'

As in much of McCarthy's fiction, the weakest characterizations are of people who stand at opposite poles of the social spectrum. 'Henry says a gentleman leaves his financial page to his broker,' prattles a female collector; while the Palestinian militants, 'bewitched by the kulacks' living space' in the farmhouse they are occupying, giggle and splash each other in the shower like the Three Stooges. But the novel's serious failure is one of credibility.

When Jeroen learns that the Dutch government will not meet his political demands, he is left surrounded by his masterpieces (which he has exchanged for their owners), impregnable but powerless, an explosive combination. And so he self-destructs, as McCarthy's heroes often do when excited scruple collides with convention. Even Jeroen's suicide backfires--'He had planned to die alone with the "Girl" he had fallen in love with [Vermeer's *Girl in a Blue Cap with Guitar*],' a wounded Arab commando explains tearfully after the death of his leader--and through a breakdown in the chain of command, Jeroen takes the other commandos and several hostages with him when the Dutch farmhouse (wired for demotion) goes up in smoke.

Dramatically, there is something incongruous about the mayhem in the final pages of what is essentially a novel of manners, a study of how captors and captives react to conditions of confinement and confrontation. The explosion of theories, bodies, and masterpieces comes as a red flag, signaling thin ice in the realm of probability. If 'plausibility is the morality of fiction,' as the novelist A. B. Guthrie remarks, *Cannibals and Missionaries* is a slightly immoral novel, afflicted with several credibility gaps, beginning with the premise that a government would ever surrender its vital interests to save a work of art.

When the most important characters are blown up at the end, the reader is left empty-handed. One doesn't care. 'You're not meant to,' McCarthy insists, 'the emotional depth of the book is extremely shallow ...in terms of the characters,' she concedes, because the 'method, by mimicking each character's interior voice, precludes identification....they're not meant to be real in that sense.' 'If there is anything to get close to here,' McCarthy suggested in 1981, 'it's not people but something like a place-spirit, Holland being understood as "an imaginary country" inhabited by a funny kind of democratic demiurge.' That, at any rate, was her 'provisional defense' after the book came out--to lukewarm reviews and moderate sales, which at least surpassed the poor response to *Birds of America* eight years before.... If Holland was a 'place-spirit'

for Mary McCarthy, it doesn't come alive in the story, whose settings are too contrived, too obviously researched, to ring true.

Two old newspaper friends from Vietnam...had briefed her on Iranian politics, including the Shah's persecution of dissidents which sets the stage for the liberals' fact-finding mission; and no doubt they were caught by surprise when Iranian militants stormed the U.S. embassy in Tehran in November 1979, taking fifty-four Americans hostage... The turnaround in Iran added to the book's credibility problems. Nor was its fragile topicality reinforced by further upsets that year: the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, the Sandinista triumph in Nicaragua, the establishment of diplomatic relations between the United States and China. 'Today people see terrorists differently,' Anjou Levi suggests, apropos the novel's alternately romantic and condescending treatment of the hijackers. The truth is that by the mid-1970s Mary McCarthy's grasp of the underlying political conflicts in the world arena was increasingly circumscribed, not only by a class-bound view of the world...but by a mental life deriving its ideas from books and newspapers more than from direct experience....

Transposed to fiction [her] experiences tended to yield unreal situations, not only because McCarthy's relation to actual political events was remote (Vietnam was an exception), but also because her borrowings reproduce an essentially static vision of public life, in which the leverage for action usually lies with the junta... Revolutionary and liberal alike can only toss a monkey wrench into the wheels of history or launch a rescue operation when the 'slaughter' gets out of hand. Both as fiction and political commentary, *Cannibals and Missionaries* brought Mary McCarthy to a dead end.... Afterwards she resolved never to write another novel.... Her last novel landed her on the Cavett show, where, thanks to her interviewer's nose for trouble, she was rescued from oblivion."

Carol Brightman  
*Writing Dangerously: Mary McCarthy and Her World*  
(Clarkson Potter 1992) 592-96

"For most of her adult life McCarthy remained faithful to a set of liberal intellectual convictions about the moral worth of art and education and about the need for a progressive politics. What makes her last novel, *Cannibals and Missionaries*, remarkable is that in it the satirist turns on these long-held values, systematically revealing them as foolish, futile, even dangerous. After her novel appeared in 1979 to lukewarm reviews, McCarthy defended it against charges that readers don't care about the characters by remarking that 'you're not meant to...the emotional depth of the book is extremely shallow.' (Brightman 594). The defense seems strange if we read the book for realism, but is eminently understandable if we see McCarthy as blending two genres, the thriller and the novel of ideas, neither notable for realistic characterization, in order to explore the responses of liberal intellectuals to actual violence. The novel's 'anointed band of liberals' (*Cannibals and Missionaries* 297) is made up of people closely modeled on her own friends and acquaintances and, one suspects, herself; and their failures, successes, and especially their shallowness embody the author's own responses to her generalization's role in U.S. political life.

The plot comes from the thriller: a committee of high-minded liberals 'in the American sense, i.e., slightly to the left in politics and devoted to human rights,' undertakes a fact-finding mission to the Shah's Iran. They are hijacked along with a tour group of rich art collectors, by pro-Palestinian terrorists, and held hostage in a farmhouse in Flevoland, the new Dutch province reclaimed from the sea. In time the collectors are exchanged for the masterpieces of their collections; thus, in a farmhouse in an obscure corner of Europe, as devoid of European history as Utah, the author assembles people and paintings who represent the West's artistic, intellectual, political, and social elites. McCarthy found such 'isolation' 'crucial' to traditional novels of ideas such as *The Magic Mountain* or *The First Circle*, and for the most part *Cannibals and Missionaries* reads like them: highly articulate people spend hours discussing their theories in the shadow of historical catastrophe (*Ideas and the Novel* 20).

McCarthy's portrait of liberals is all the more devastating in the end because they are allowed many positive characteristics. Detached from their ordinary lives, they work out a group identity, though some are far more likeable than others. The retired bishop from Missouri is a virtual saint; the Dutch poet and parliamentary deputy, Henk Van Vliet de Jonghe, is consistently warm and sympathetic; on the other hand, the college president, Aileen Simmons, talks nonstop in kittenish self-preoccupation, and Frank Barber, the



foolishly optimistic Episcopal rector, is someone whom, as Mary Gordon remarks, one can hate from the first page. Yet all share the historical situation that puts the liberal American intellectual in a position once occupied by the clergy, a point McCarthy underscores by arranging for the bishop to die early. Their kidnappers believe they represent the national conscience, that violating them will provoke the sense of 'sacrilege' essential to terror (220). Engaged on a 'mission,' liberals have inherited from their evangelical predecessors an ambivalent identity as potential martyrs and unconscious colonialists, 'salesm[e]n for Western democratic merchandise' (5).

McCarthy's liberals are remarkably courageous, partly because they are resourceful, able to impose structure and therefore meaning on their captivity. A petulant sense of injustice leads Aileen half advertently to finger the collectors in first class; it is the only significant exception to their general decency and courtesy. They impose on degrading conditions the rituals of upper-class life, so that the reader, hearing their witty conversation or watching them play bridge with cleverly decorated cards cut from magazines, forget how long it has been since they had a change of underwear.

Yet mental worlds can be frighteningly detached from reality. Early in the novel Senator Carey, the Eugene McCarthy clone, notices how a trivial misunderstanding spreads through the group until everyone assumes that it is a fact and reflects on the 'gravity-defying power of ideas to stand unsupported by evidence' (68). Unsupported constructions like Henk's fantasy that Holland is an imaginary country have dangerous consequences; this whimsy leads him to ignore two Dutch-speakers on the plane, and thus to lose a chance to eavesdrop on its hijackers. When the bishop dies of a stroke and their captors pump his body full of bullets in order to pressure the Dutch government, the committee quickly rationalizes the terrorists' action as a humane alternative to killing one of them, almost as if it ensured their safety.

The intellectuals' capacity for detachment makes them adept at self-criticism: Aileen knows that her motives for going to Iran include a desire to cultivate the eligible senator, Frank suspects that he is running away from his pregnant wife, and Victor Lenz, the CIA stringer sent to watch the others, has no illusions of nobility. Yet self-criticism can paralyze, as Jim Carey knows too well: he was 'wary...of his brain.... It had deserted him, too often, from action by showing him the futility of it' (305). Besides, it has its blind spots. Striving for empathy with the Third World, the American intellectuals usually recast it in their own image as easily as their compatriot Charles Tennant does when he compares a SAVAK torturing device to a toaster (239).

But even Henk, who criticizes Americans for 'taking their country for the world' (82), recasts his captors in his image. During his captivity, the married Dutchman falls in love with the American journalist Sophie Weil, but both circumstance and temperament constrain passion. That both agree they will never consummate their love because they do not want it to be 'messy' may help explain why readers find the characters shallow. Yet perhaps the point is that Henk, who can submit his own passion to rational discipline, believes that the terrorists can also do so. Fatally, he urges their leader, Jeroen, to discontinue the siege because the Dutch government cannot possibly give in to the demand that it withdraw from NATO and sever diplomatic ties with Israel. What he cannot feel is the suicidal despair this insight induces.

Perhaps like her own characters McCarthy recasts the terrorist in her image. Brightman may be right to find her portrayal of Jeroen romantic (Brightman 594). But the resemblance is not altogether unconvincing, for terrorists often are well-educated people who have lost faith in conventional politics; as Lenin put it scornfully, 'Terrorism is the violence of intellectuals.' There is an affinity between this man and the committee members; he too is used to thinking in terms of theories and entertaining what may well be delusional notions of changing the world. Jim, at least, thinks so, reflecting on his 1968 challenge to Lyndon Johnson: 'He had been as much of a millennialist in hopes as any "misguided" terrorist...terror was only the kid brother of minority electoral politics' (312). On one Marxist view missionaries and cannibals are much the same species; neither can leave other people alone. However, this rapprochement can only go so far; and oddly we see the critical difference between terrorists and intellectuals in their response to art, rather than in their methods.

As we know, McCarthy was drawn to write about works of art held hostage by the IRA's theft of the 'Kenwood House Vermeer' in 1978 and by a series of physical attacks on artworks, including the Mona

Lisa and Michelangelo's *Pieta*, in the 1970s. McCarthy speculated in a lecture that such attacks were fueled by press reports about inflated art prices, which underscored the Marxist perception that artworks are loot. Mediating on whether being surrounded by beautiful objects improves one's character, she concluded that art, unlike music or poetry, induces possessiveness: 'the eye is a jealous, concupiscent organ...a natural collector, acquisitive, undemocratic, loath to share' ('Living with Beautiful Things' 111). Our subjective experience of joy when we see beauty makes us imagine that we not only feel good but actually are good (122). Yet McCarthy does not need Hermann Goering to discredit this view; look, she says, at museum guards, at art historians, at collectors and critics; look even at people who live in scenic parts of the United States. 'Quite poisonous people...are attracted by the visual arts and can become very knowledgeable about them'; the residents of Carmel Valley are 'vicious' (120, 123).

Why should art, rather than literature, attract poisonous people? The answer for McCarthy lies in the materiality of art, its embodiment in unique objects, in originals. No one minds if other people read Jane Austen; no one expects to be the only person in the audience for Mozart. Yet, as anyone who saw this year's Magritte exhibit can testify, large crowds diminish our pleasure in visual art.

One would expect that *Cannibals and Missionaries*, which incorporates the themes and language of McCarthy's lecture, would be equally negative about art collectors. But from the beginning they are more silly than despicable representatives of 'old money' who seem even in comparison with college presidents and senators to come from a claustrophobic world of privilege, where everybody has known everybody since their undemanding days at Saint Timothy's. Unlike the terrorists and intellectuals, who focus on the world scene, on food supplies and prison conditions and foreign elections, the collectors lead intensely private lives, their minds filled with impractical and useless knowledge, with, for example, the names of dozens of hybrid roses.

If living with their Vermeers and Cezannes hasn't made them charitable to the poor, their passion for these paintings, which 'makes reasoning useless,' goes deeper than a desire to preserve negotiable assets (256). Early on it enables them to grasp intuitively that Jeroen will exchange them for their collections, a 'nutty example of group-think,' to Henk's mind: 'these people had become *possessed* by the notion that their art treasures were in danger, without...considering it aloud as an objective proposition' (248). It leads Helen Potter, at first glance a mildly ridiculous woman with a 'muffin' head, to beg the terrorists to take her whole fortune rather than her Vermeer; when she refuses to comply with their demands, 'her dumpy form seem[s] to...gain a full inch and not only in moral stature' (249, 256). That she relents when the terrorists threaten her husband increases, rather than diminishes, our admiration. Then, too, McCarthy shows the collectors generally growing throughout the siege: 'there was more to [Lily] mentally than had ever been suspected' (287). Freed from the time-consuming tasks of the leisure class--dressing, getting their hair done, having a massage--they finally have the 'leisure' to get to know themselves, 'which was like making a new acquaintance' (287).

The collectors, in other words, learn to acquire some of the more admirable qualities of McCarthy's intellectuals. Unfortunately, at the same time, Jeroen is becoming more like the jealous concupiscent collectors of her lecture. Before he was a terrorist Jeroen was an artist, an electrician with a love of drawing in whom the masterpieces of the Rijksmuseum inspired 'a feeling close to worship' (205). Failing as an artist, he gradually grew to dislike 'art for art's sake' and turned instead to the Communist Party and action. But the aesthetic theory he rejected became a political theory he embraced. Although the text seems to be contradictory, occasionally speaking of the hijacking as though it had a practical goal, much of the time Jeroen thinks of terrorism as the political equivalent of art for art's sake. The bourgeoisie, as he sees it, like 'revolution,' but true revolution describes a circle: 'the purpose served by the capture of the Boeing was simply the continuance of...the original thrust' (226). As committed as any modernist to the autotelic object, he wants nothing from his plot but its perfect embodiment in the world, in 'sheer beauty' (227). Specifically, the hijacking is 'a work of art,' and he is gratified when the 'raw materials of bourgeois life, of their own initiative, spr[ing] forward to collaborate in a revolutionary design' (215).

What undermines this pure commitment to the revolutionary deed is the presence of real art, which McCarthy finds powerful and distinctive. 'You have gone back to your first love,' his formidable lover, Greet, warns when he decides to take the collectors hostage (224). In a sense, the greatest masterpiece,

Helen's beloved Vermeer *Girl*, corrupts this terrorist and sways him from the purity of his design. He falls in love with it, as the Palestinian Ahmed says, 'like a bride,' spending hours staring at it obsessively. And when Henk produces his reasonable argument for negotiating with the government, Joeren chooses to blow himself up with the painting in a classic murder-suicide that Ahmed calls '*le geste sublime d'un grand revolutionnaire*' (358); although he does not mean to, he also kills ten other people.

Ahmed's language tells us what Edmund Burke meant when he treated the sublime as an effect of terror: 'whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the idea of pain, and danger...or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.' Now in choosing a Vermeer as Jeroen's love object, rather than, say, a Munch or even a Turner, McCarthy deliberately chooses a painter who never strives for the effects of the romantic sublime, a painter of domestic tranquility. Yet she suggests that the aura of this original, its rarity and unobtainability--only the very rich or a museum can hope to buy a Vermeer--induces a sublime and terrible gesture in a susceptible man. The Basho poem that Henk, Jim, and Ahmed all know by heart offers a momentary sense of unity, encouraging them to transcend their differences. But the rare original, through no fault of its creator, is a costly object that engenders possessive passion.

Now McCarthy's intellectuals, once the exchange of collectors for paintings takes place, also live in the presence of these beautiful objects. But unlike Helen or Jeroen, they remain singularly unaffected; instead of falling in love, or even seeming deeply moved, they conduct lengthy disquisitions about the moral effects of art. Frank relativizes its value--an African might not admire a Vermeer--and finds a cult of originals problematic. Sophie and Henk develop a theory of why a Vermeer painting resembles a photograph; Jim can't appreciate a Cezanne once someone shows him that a figure's arm is 'out of drawing' (307). The point is not that McCarthy disagrees; they are parroting ideas she had already set forth in her lecture; but she measures their ineffectuality by the distance separating them from the passions of other people.

In the end, the thriller overtakes the novel of ideas, and violence explodes the decorous mental world the character have created. The 'mayhem,' as Brightman notes, seems 'incongruous in what is essentially a novel of manners' (593). But then, of course, terrorism always changes the tone, turning a day of shopping at Harrods or a cruise on the *Achille Lauro* into a lurid scene from an alien world. But this ending also shocks because the emotional 'shallowness' of McCarthy's characters has given them an air of invulnerability.

Liberals, like terrorists, seem in this novel to make nothing happen; Aileen and Frank, the only two to survive unscathed, are also unchanged. In the novel's last paragraph they are flying back to America, entertained by a movie that features David Niven in a tropical helmet, fighting off urban guerrillas. Doubtless this pessimistic ending echoes McCarthy's own disillusionment in the late 1970s. This traveler to Vietnam knew well the missionary impulse that drives her fictional liberals; yet a decade later, disillusioned not only with North Vietnam but with 'politics in general,' she told Miriam Gross that 'America is horribly sad and discouraging'; though she still believed in 'socialism with a human face' she was convinced that 'nobody will ever give it a chance' to work (Gross 174). After this *Gotterdammerung* of progressive politics she wrote no more novels; perhaps there was nothing left to be unfaithful to."

Margaret Scanlan

"Terrorists, Artists, and Intellectuals"

*Twenty-Four Ways of Looking at Mary McCarthy* (1996) 35-41

"Her plot is anything but simple. In early 1975, eight prominent liberals fly to Iran to investigate reports of torture under the Shah. Their group includes Gus Hurlbut, an aged Episcopal bishop; Frank Barber, the rector of a fashionable New York parish; Aileen Simmons, a fifty-year-old college president in search of a husband; Sophie Weil, a young smartly dressed 'new journalist'; Victor Lenz, an American academic who drinks more than is good for him; and Jim Carey, a skeptical and widowed silver-haired senator. In Paris they are joined by a pleasant enough Scottish don and Henk van Vliet de Jonge, a dashing and happily married Dutch deputy. Their plane, which turns out to have a group of wealthy art collectors traveling in first class, is hijacked between Paris and Teheran. Among the collectors is a socialite who owns a world-

famous Vermeer. The hijackers are a mixed lot--Germans and Arabs, a former KLM stewardess and a Dutch giant by the name of Jeroen. Their plan is to hold the liberals for ransom. When their leader, Jeroen, learns of the collectors on board, that plan is scrapped and Jeroen decides to barter the lives of the collectors for their most valuable works of art....

The new novel would be unlike anything she had ever written. In addition, it would offer her a chance to show reviewers she could write a work of fiction whose preoccupations could not be dismissed as the stuff of women's magazines.... In essence she was writing a thriller. As such, it would be held to certain standards by both reviewers and readers.... Her way of dealing with the unwieldy cast of characters was to treat them the way she would in a novel of manners--focusing on social behavior and class conflicts, on petty venalities and small kindnesses, and on dreary details of life with no change of clothing, no food worth mentioning, and no adequate bathroom facilities. Like any good writer, she tried to stick with what she knew, or could extrapolate from her own experience.

Her way of dealing with the death and destruction which are the nuts and bolts of any self-respecting thriller was to pass over that business as quickly as possible. Where another writer might have drawn out the tension once the hijacking reached its crisis, she rushed headlong toward a climax which made up in sheer body count for any violence that had hitherto been lacking. At the end only two characters were permitted to walk away intact.... With the Shah of Iran in exile and hijacking on the wane, her plot was rapidly becoming dated....

From the start there were friends who liked the novel because they had helped with it or saw aspects of themselves in it. But for most of them the novel marked a falling off. Friends tend to hold their tongues when they don't like something, but the same cannot be said for reviewers. '[B]y the time this particular terrorist caper arrives at its dead end, one has long since lost interest in it,' wrote Christopher Lehmann-Haupt in the daily *New York Times*.... *Cannibals and Missionaries* gets fog-bound in the author's good intentions,' wrote *Time's* book critic....

James Merrill: 'The book that really lost me was *Cannibals and Missionaries*, She interrupted it to do Hannah Arendt's volumes. You can't do that to your own work. In the last years was there much energy left for the writing. Had her domestic life taken over? And all her various projects? I don't know.'

John Gross: 'A falling off in the later fiction happens, you know. One of my favorite English novels is *Vanity Fair*. That was virtually Thackeray's first real novel, and then he wrote one or two others which are not nearly as good, and then he went on. I remember Bernard Shaw said that Thackeray imposed his later novels on the public like sentences of penal servitude. You may say that it's an exception, the novelist who follows his or her genius all the way through. A few novelists have gone on burning brightly until the end, but many many--perhaps the majority--have not.'

Frances Kiernan  
*Seeing Mary Plain: A Life of Mary McCarthy*  
(Norton 2000) 648-49, 660-62

Michael Hollister (2020)